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LESLIE FORD

THE SIMPLE WAY OF POISON

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a bubbling baffling brew of murder...

THE SIMPLE WAY OF POISON...

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Her even more beautiful stepmother, desperately pursued by a former lover . . .

And a man both women loved and feared, a man who could make each of their lives either a heaven or a hell . . .

A man who was now a corpse stretched out upon the floor . . . the first in a deadly chain of terror . . .

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THE SIMPLE WAY OF POISON

Leslie Ford

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I love the old way best, the simple way
Of poison, where we too are strong as men.
The Medea of Euripedes,
Gilbert Murray's Translation

THE SIMPLE WAY OF POISON

1

Never in my life had I hoped to see Sergeant Phineas T. Buck in a chintz shop—least of all in Gilbert St. Martin's Ye Olde Colonial Chintz Shoppe in Georgetown on a snowy garland-hung Christmas Eve. And from the sudden congealing behind the fish-eyed, lantern-jawed surface of his granite dead pan I saw he had hoped never to see me again anywhere. However, I knew that already, and of course not all the jolly spirit of a thousand candle-lit Christmas Eves would have helped. For Sergeant Buck (92nd Engineers, U. S. A., Retired) is convinced that I am trying to marry his Colonel. Sergeant Buck is a literal and stubborn man. Given a widow aged thirty-eight, let her lay eyes on a bachelor—no matter if he is fifty-one, and especially if he's as engaging as Colonel John Primrose (92nd Engineers, U. S. A., Retired)—and the answer is as simple as two and two . . . with a long body of precedent behind it. The Sergeant's duty is even plainer, though perhaps not quite so simple.

"Hello, Sergeant Buck," I said cheerfully, to the loud and equally cheerful jingle of the strap of silver sleigh bells that I put in motion as I banged the door behind me. I deposited my bundles on the rubbed pine taproom table that serves as counter in Gilbert St. Martin's shoppe, and shook the snow out of my last year's fur coat. "It's cold outside."

Sergeant Buck touched his hat stiffly, shifted his tall square two hundred and twenty pounds of beef and brawn on the stomach of the Pilgrim Father in the hooked rug underfoot, and cleared his throat uneasily.

"It was *our* understanding you were in Nassau, ma'am," he said, out of the corner of his mouth. The fact that he always speaks that way gives everything he says a slightly sinister quality.

His eyes narrowed so that all I could see of them was a suspicious grey glint.

"I was, but I'm back," I said. I tried to keep an apologetic note out of my voice. After all, I told myself, I'd got as much

right to live in Georgetown as he and his wretched Colonel had. But there was something about him—like an Alp trying, desperately, pathetically, to protect the solitary Edelweiss blooming on its frozen bosom—that got me down. "You see," I found myself adding hurriedly, "my tenant threw up his job in the SEC and took his family back to Chicago—so I had to come home."

I was frightfully annoyed because, in spite of myself, I could hear my voice sounding bright and unconvincing, even though it was the truth I was telling.

Sergeant Buck's dead pan looked deader and more frozen. He didn't quite say "Oh yeah?", but he said "Is that so, ma'am?" so that it amounted to precisely the same thing. I had an almost irresistible desire to say "Yes it is, you big baboon!" which is what my younger son always says under like circumstances. Fortunately I didn't, for just then the handsome languid figure of Gilbert St. Martin came through the blue resist-print curtain at the rear of the shop with Sergeant Buck's parcel. He handed it over with the slightly condescending air that male decorators adopt toward unpromising customers, and turned to me.

"Grace darling! So nice of you to come in!"

Sergeant Buck touched his hat again.

"Good day, ma'am," he said stiffly. The leather strip of silver sleigh bells jingled in false merriment as he closed the door emphatically—without actually banging it—behind him. I saw his broad square back fade, white-spotted, into the night, and realized that neither of us had mentioned Colonel Primrose.

"I mean, darling, why don't those awful people go to Woolworth's? It's such a bore, and my assistant's got flu."

"Maybe you're being investigated, Gil," I said.

Gilbert St. Martin raised his perfect brows (I know he plucks them), and barely glanced out at where Sergeant Buck's granite back would have been if it had still been there. "He has got the general air of a dick," he said. "One of your odd friends, I take it."

He held out a thin gold case full of foul dark chocolate-brown cigarettes he gets from Puerto Rico or some place.

"No thanks," I said.

He flicked a gold lighter out of his bright checked English tweed jacket and held it to the tip of his cigarette. For a moment the tiny yellow flame in the subdued light of the pine-panelled room brought his long handsome face into relief under the perfect lacquer-smooth cap of black hair. I saw his dark eyes fixed intently beyond the flame on mine—so

strangely belying the bored, half-humorous, half-cynical indifference of the rest of his face and the elegant nonchalance of the hand holding the long cigarette that I had a curious feeling of uneasiness. As if, for instance, I'd said something nearer the truth than I knew, and he was wondering whether I knew or not; and more than that, as if it was important to him, really important, some way, to know what it was I knew.

As I look back at it now I realize that this was the first hint I had of the terrible business that was to make Georgetown push its mighty neighbor across Rock Creek completely off the front pages, and make—for a moment anyway—the question of what was happening in the White House unimportant compared to what had happened in the yellow brick house in Beall Street. I don't actually admit that I believe, just a little, in premonitions, or that I'd recognize one if I had it. I'm perfectly aware that the odd feeling of uneasiness I had there in Gil's Chintz Shoppe could be explained quite simply by the sudden calculating intentness in a pair of eyes that I'd never seen intent before. A bird no doubt is uneasy if a cat looks at it too pointedly. And while I'm not pretending to have anything in common with a bird. I'm not so sure that Gilbert St. Martin hasn't a strong strain of cat blood in him.

And I *was* uneasy. For a second I had the curious sense of remoteness that one has in a dream of a strange unfamiliar country, or at night alone in an empty house. I caught myself glancing out of the panelled shop with its hooked rugs and hurricane globes and witches' balls full of tangled multi-colored string at the reassuring fact of two colored women with their noses glued, dirty grey, to the bottle-glass panes of Gilbert St. Martin's show window, gazing at the crêche and tiny lighted tree there on the bed of glittering artificial snow.

He flicked out his lighter and dropped it into his pocket.

"What makes you think anyone would waste time 'investigatin' me?"

He was still looking at me, but the sharpness was veiled now, and his eyes matched his face, bored a little, and a little amused.

"I wouldn't know that," I said. "It just seems more reasonable that you'd be a subject of investigation than it does for Sergeant Buck to be a buyer of chintz—that's all."

He shrugged.

"Then there's always your wife," I said, with a smile just to show I knew that was pretty absurd but recognized his charm and all that.

He smiled his bored smile. "My life's an open book, darling—lived in this goldfish bowl on Wisconsin Avenue."

The colored women had moved on, three children with shining eyes had taken their places. The glass was frosted with their warm breath. Above them the light on the falling snow made it look as if they were being showered with dark grey feathers, except where it lodged on their hats and shoulders and became glittering crystalline white.

He glanced out. "Part of my public now." He got up from where he sat perched on the end of the table and moved lazily over to the panelled fireplace with the moving imitation flames behind the imitation coals in the iron grate. There he turned and looked steadily at me for a moment.

"To be perfectly frank with you, Grace——"

"Don't," I said. "I'm not up to it. All I want is three yards of flowered chintz for the upstairs bathroom and a Cape Cod fire lighter to give my aunt."

He shrugged again.

"O. K.—I just thought I ought to tell somebody. I thought you'd be a good person to tell—since you're a friend of Iris Nash."

I caught a sudden glimpse of an alarmed slightly seasick face in the discolored old convex mirror behind him, and realized with a shock that it was my own.

"Is something wrong with Iris Nash?" I asked, instantly and for many reasons on my guard and determined to be as casual and impersonal about all this as Gilbert St. Martin was being.

He shrugged his broad perfectly tailored (and no doubt well padded) shoulders, moved a red Staffordshire dog an inch closer to the end of the mantel, and turned, facing me again.

"Not really, I suppose. Just—this."

He put his hand inside his jacket. The checked green and red and yellow and brown cloth moved as his hand felt in his pocket. I watched him, disturbed more than I liked to admit by something indefinable in his manner, telling myself, although I hadn't seen Iris for some time, that there was nothing wrong, that she was quite free of Gilbert St. Martin and safely married to Randall Nash.

His hand moved again, and brought out an envelope. He handed it over to me. I took it, trying to be just as casual; but it seems to me now that even before I touched that letter—just in the instant or two it took for it to travel from his hand to mine across the rubbed pine table where my bundles lay—I had a sharp feeling of dread, or horror almost . . . like the feeling you're supposed to have when somebody walks over your grave. Or perhaps it was just the draft under the door that made me seem suddenly cold as my fingers touched that envelope.

It was the ordinary stamped thing, the sort you buy at the post office. The remarkable thing about it was the address. It had Gil's name and shop number on it, but it was printed; not by hand but with one of those printing sets with block letters and inked pad they sell in toy departments. The ink was purple, the letters all askew, the "W" in Wisconsin upside down.

I opened it. The paper inside was an ordinary cheap ruled tablet paper, greyish. Printed on it, in the same haphazard purple block letters, was a message, without the formality of a salutation.

DONT THINK YOURE GETTING AWAY WITH ANYTHING.
EVERYBODY KNOWS WHERE YOU TWO WENT LAST TUESDAY.
THIS ISNT BLACKMAIL EITHER ITS SOMETHING DIFFERENT.
A FRIEND.

It's strange about anonymous letters. You suddenly realize that somewhere round you are malevolent eyes, watching you, that you've never been aware of. Even if it's somebody you know, their eyes are still strange, because they're sharpened with malice and venom that you've not thought about. It's like going into a friendly house in the dark and realizing abruptly that something unclean is there that you can't see but that can see you.

I put the letter back in the envelope and tossed it down on the table.

"You've got lovely friends," I said. "What's it got to do with Iris Nash?"

He picked it up and looked at it a minute. Then he flicked the wheel of his lighter and held the flame to it, over the large pewter basin in the center of the table.

"Nothing, really."

He dropped the envelope just as the sheet of flame licked up over the purple printed letters to the tips of his carefully tended fingers.

"Except that last Tuesday I took Iris out to Great Falls to get a maple corner cupboard I knew about.—And this is the second of these sunshine greetings."

"Where's the other one?"

He pointed to the charred remains writhing and crackling in the pewter dish.

"What did it say?"

"Much the same. Plainer. Something about my wife . . . and Iris's husband. It came the day after we went to Maryland to get a Sully portrait I'd spotted. Up in Frederick.—It may have been Barbara Frietchie."

The clock on the mantel ticked loudly.

"Does Iris know about these letters?"

"Don't be funny, Mrs. Latham."

The sharp edge in his voice startled me a little.

"Or . . . your wife?"

He laughed. "That isn't funny, darling. That's stupid."

"I should have thought both of them ought to know about it immediately."

He didn't say anything. I watched him move the other red dog at the other end of the mantel.

"Have you any notion who they're from, Gil?"

I asked that abruptly, hardly aware what I was thinking until I saw something behind his eyes move sharply.

"Not the foggiest, darling."

"Except possibly who?"

He had turned away and was looking down into the undulating waves of artificial fire behind the red coals in the grate.

"It's too cock-eyed," he said, changed back completely now to his casual bored self.

I was wondering. Not about Iris Nash and him but about his wife; and I thought I knew what he was thinking and why he'd burned the letters. Edith St. Martin is sixteen years older than Gilbert, very rich and not very attractive. He was a decorator in New York doing over her apartment when she married him. She opened the Georgetown shop for him when he began to spend his mornings in bed, his afternoons at various bars and his nights at whosever party he happened to fall down and nobody bothered to pick him up and call a taxi. She doesn't like Iris Nash, and there's no reason, I suppose, why she should, and several very good possible reasons, anyway, why she shouldn't.

I thought of that last line: "This isn't blackmail either; it's something different."

He looked up. "Can you keep something under your hat, Grace?"

"I've never been known to," I said.

"This is your big chance then. I mean—well, it's all so damn ridiculous. But I'd rather like somebody to know, if it should . . . well, happen to get so ridiculous as to be embarrassing. You know, you can't ever tell about this sort of thing."

"All right," I said. "Let's have it."

"I think it's Iris Nash's charming young stepdaughter," he said coolly.

The sight of Sergeant Buck buying chintz ought to have

inured me to any shock, but apparently it hadn't. I'm afraid I stared perfectly open-mouthed at Gilbert St. Martin, leaning there elegantly against the pine mantel. But it wasn't him I was seeing. It was young Lowell Nash. I was seeing her as I always see her when she first comes into my mind—taut, stormy-eyed, white-faced, the night she broke into my house as I was dressing to go out to dinner. I still hear her: "Aunt Grace! Father—*he's married her! She's there!*" And she flung herself on my bed in a passion of uncontrollable sobbing. "I hate her! I hate her!"

That picture faded as it always does into a slim dark curly-haired child of eighteen with a firm pointed little chin and sullen red mouth and fine sensitive nose under wide-set brown eye behind thick black surprised lashes. Which is what one first sees of Lowell Nash.

"Look, Gil," I said. "You may be darned good at interiors, but you don't know much about people."

He raised one neat brow.

"That's odd, you know. I should have said I know a hell of a lot more about people—women especially—than about decorating."

"I wouldn't let that get out," I said. "It might hurt your business."

I didn't mean his wife, of course, but he thought I did, and his lips tightened. That's one of the bad things about marrying somebody for money. You're always on the defensive, always thinking people are being purposely objectionable.

"Anyway," I went on, "—quite apart from character—if you'd ever been a child, and had one of those printing outfits, you'd know it takes hours to print anything as long as that."

We both looked down at the last charred flakes of the letter from a friend.

"And if you knew Lowell Nash you'd know she's hardly got time to take a deep breath, much less go into the printing business."

He blew the ash off his long brown cigarette. "I'm afraid you're not a sympathetic audience," he drawled.

"I'm afraid not," I answered shortly. "I've known Lowell a long time. I know she's unbearably spoiled. She's wilful and impudent and difficult. I know Iris hasn't had an easy job trying to get along with her the last three years, since she married Randall Nash. But I don't think it's been so terribly easy for Lowell either."

"No. I'd say they're neck and neck," he agreed with a judicial nod.

"Then why blame a spiteful malicious thing like this on her?"

"Because, darling, I think that's exactly what she is—a spiteful, malicious little bitch."

"Rot," I said.

He raised his brows.

"I suppose you're aware, of course, that she loathes and despises her stepmother? And that her own mother eggs her on unmercifully?"

"I wouldn't know about that," I said—knowing all about it.

"Really?" He put his hand in his jacket pocket and took out his gold cigarette case. His eyes were fixed on mine, rather in the way a philosophical cat fixes an unpredictable and possibly recalcitrant mouse. "I suppose it wouldn't even interest you to know that Randall Nash was over at Massachusetts Avenue this afternoon, seeing his former wife?"

"It would interest me very much," I said, "if it were true. Which it isn't."

"Oh yes it is. My wife saw him coming out of her place around three. She's got flu or something."

"It must have been three other people, Gil," I said.

Randall and Marie Nash's divorce in 1930 was one of the bitterest domestic battles Washington has ever waged in the white court house at 5th and D. Lowell Nash had stayed with her father, and Angus, who's twenty-two now, had gone with his mother. The bitterness hadn't ended then; it had grown as the children grew. To my certain knowledge neither of them had seen the other since their final meeting at my house in P Street.

Gilbert St. Martin shrugged again.

"A lot of things have been going on this winter, while you've been in Nassau getting that sun tan.—It's stunning, by the way."

He looked me up and down with a critical eye.

"You carry your thirty-four years remarkably well, Mrs. Latham."

"Thirty-eight," I said. "As you know very well. Thanks just the same."

"Not at all. I really thought it was forty and your dressmaker," he replied. It's that sort of thing about Gil that brings cats to mind.

"Well, thanks anyway," I said. I hesitated. I wanted to ask him what, for instance, had been going on while I'd been away. But something in the lift of one dark eyebrow and the sardonic twist to one corner of his mouth made me stop. The stiff charred mass in the pewter basin gave a final crackle and

fell apart, leaving one tiny bit of white that the flame had not touched. It was almost like a warning.

"I just got back yesterday," I said casually. "I haven't seen anybody yet."

"Why don't you drop around?—She'd be glad to see somebody."

That in itself, of course, should have warned me. It did occur to me that it needed explanation. But just then there was a flurry at the door. A uniformed chauffeur opened it, a large lady in a vast quantity of black broadtail with a cascade of purple orchids on her bow steamed in to the jingle of the silver sleigh bells, on an icy wave of one of those heady perfumes made not for ingenues.

It was my chance to escape and I took it—regardless of the chintz and the Cape Cod lighter. But not before I had a final look at Gilbert St. Martin. All trace of the guile that had seemed to me to color his last remarks had vanished. He was too perfect. You knew that the vexing problem of whether the canary-yellow hall should be done in silver stencils with modernist furniture or in white with Empire would be solved with just the proper mixture of gravity and badinage, over a perfect number of champagne cocktails, with money no object —to the lady. I could see—if I'd not already known—why Lowell Nash hated Gilbert; and also, though perhaps it was a little harder, why Iris Nash was supposed to have felt very differently about him, once.

The flakes of snow struck sharp and cold against my face as the bells jingled behind me. A man with a live turkey in one hand, a red kiddie car in the other and several things under his arms barged into me and said "Merry Christmas!" I picked up his bundles while another man picked up mine and said "Merry Christmas, lady!", and we all shook the snow out of our eyes and hurried away with that worried preoccupied air that seizes all family men on Christmas Eve.

2

My preoccupation as I turned into Beall Street was rather different. I don't think I'm more of a busybody than most people, and if it hadn't been for the heap of charred paper back in Gilbert St. Martin's shop I doubt if I would have thought again of what he'd said. It isn't that I dislike Gil; I don't at all, really. It's true he's not the sort of man I'd go mad about. He's too carefully done up for one thing, so that I find myself thinking I ought to be more careful about keeping the dogs out of the living room and wearing gloves when I'm in the garden. Or possibly it's that indefinable malicious faculty he's got for leaving a polite barb—better concealed at some times than at others—in virtually everything he says about women, or men either. But gossip, even apart from Gilbert St. Martin, is one thing; anonymous letters are quite another. They inject a psychopathic element into human relations that has pretty ghastly possibilities.

Even at that, it wasn't the letters actually that bothered me. After all, Iris Nash is old enough to know what it's all about. It was the fact that Gilbert St. Martin thought, or said he thought, that Lowell Nash had written them. Because there's very little doubt that Lowell on occasion can be capable of almost anything, and none whatever that she hates her father's second wife with all the bitter intensity that the Nashes as a family—except young Angus—have a positive flair for. The pity of it is that it might have been so different. If her father had told her, for instance, that he was going to marry again, I think her loyalty and devotion to him would have got the best of a sort of natural jealousy. But he didn't. She came home from Bar Harbor one summer and there was Iris, newly mistress of the house in Beall Street. More than that, Iris was only thirty and quite astonishingly beautiful with her dark burnished-copper hair and grey-green eyes and white skin. Lowell was fifteen, and a little gawky and immature, and black as a darkey from the summer sun.

I knew the hell she'd gone through during her parents' divorce, too, when she'd decided to stay with her father and her brother Angus had gone with Marie Nash. She was twelve then, and I'd known her since she was four and my elder son three and they ran afoul of the law swiping a fine wreath of violets and lilies of the valley, after the captains and the kings had departed, from Senator McGilvray's last caucus in the old cemetery up the hill in Rock Creek Park. That began my acquaintance with her parents too, and I'm quite sure the reason I never liked Marie Nash from the beginning was that she spanked Lowell and took away her liver-and-white spaniel puppy—not so much for taking the flowers as for saying she didn't see what good they did the Senator. Equally I suspect the reason I'd always been fond of Randall Nash—a little, in spite of a lot of things—was that he stalked out of the house slamming the door and returned in half an hour with another liver-and-white spaniel and one of the finest funeral wreaths I've ever seen. Its skeleton still adorns Lowell's bedroom in the house in Beall Street. The spaniel's still there too—not that he adorns anything, but far from it. No fourteen-year-old spaniel is particularly beautiful, and Senator McGilvray is a horrible wheezing ill-tempered little beast . . . and one of the innumerable molehills that became insuperable mountains in the house when Iris Nash came there to live.

I wasn't the only person who liked Randall Nash at times and disliked Marie always. In fact, though she did have friends, and very important ones, I never knew anyone who liked both of them. She was rich and he'd been poor when they married, and she never let him forget it even after he'd made a lot of money himself. Then, when the depression came and Randall lost virtually everything, he came home one day and found she'd moved out practically everything else—everything but his bed and a couple of chairs and Lowell. Lowell was eleven and Angus, aged fifteen, was at St. Paul's. They spent that night at my house—I live just behind them; our back gardens adjoin—and I helped Randall Nash refurnish the old house, antiques being cheap then. Since that day Lowell had meant a lot to me, in spite of times when I could happily have wrung her neck. Especially those first months when Randall brought his second wife there, and Lowell used to spend most of her time at my place.

She quit coming, after a while, and I learned from Iris that she'd taken to seeing her mother. I remember Iris saying "Randall's been chucking his weight about, he's forbidden her to go there. But he's wrong, and he can't stop her anyway. And I'm glad of it. I think a girl ought to have . . . well, a

mother—if possible. Certainly somebody she'll listen to—don't you?"

I hadn't the moral courage to say the less Lowell listened to Marie Nash the better for everybody. I lit a cigarette and said I hoped she was going to like Georgetown.

The result of all of it was a sort of armed truce in the Beall Street house, with a considerable amount of what Sergeant Buck calls gorilla sniping going on. Iris was definitely holding her own, or more, I thought, with Lowell so far as I knew the only completely intractable force. The job of a second wife isn't an easy one at best, however, and like everyone else when they first saw Iris I shook my head. She was too young and too lovely for Randall Nash and Georgetown . . . she must have married just because he was rich and she wasn't.

I didn't learn better than that until one summer night when we two were walking in the garden, breathing in the eerie fragrance of the old boxwood, barely perceptible under the heavy sweetness of the great waxen magnolias, and she suddenly stretched both her cool bare arms to the blue starlit sky.

"I never thought I'd ever be happy again, Grace," she whispered. "I never believed the life I'd mangled so could ever raise its head again and smile. I married Randall feeling that way. He knew it. I told him all there was about me . . . and Gilbert."

She smiled suddenly.

"It sounds like the birds and bees, but it wasn't quite that bad . . . just that I'd been awfully in love with him. He said it didn't matter, he was willing to chance it. And he was right, Grace. It *doesn't* matter. I was terrified at ever seeing him again, afraid it would all come back . . . and last night I did see him."

Her arm resting on mine pressed it to her side.

"I could have died of joy!" she breathed. "*Nothing* happened. We shook hands. There was *nothing*. It was just as if the woman I'd once been had gone out of my body completely, and the woman I am had never been in love with him at all—scarcely knew him to nod to."

She threw back her bright head and laughed. "I came home, Grace. I stepped inside feeling for the first time this *is* my home. I was so happy. Randall asked me why, and I told him, because I'd seen Gil, and then I had to explain quickly what I meant. I'm not sure he understood . . . but it was almost as if I'd drunk a whole bottle of champagne. I'm a new woman, Randall's my man . . . and Lowell—well, maybe

someday I can even convince Lowell that I adore her father and that . . . well, that this is—my life."

I couldn't bear to think that all that had gone sour. Certainly it hadn't when I left Georgetown in June. The people who took my house leased it for a year, and I didn't come back from April Harbor in the Fall except to put the boys on their trains for school. I didn't even go to Georgetown, for fear my tenants would have found seventy-one things the house lacked, the way tenants do. I did, however, run across Marie Nash at Pierre's where she was lunching with some political big-wigs. She waved a heavily beringed hand with bright vermillion nails to me. "My dear, you *must* keep them all from tearing each other's throats out!" she wailed, in a loud voice fairly bristling with delight. "Randall's taken to drink again—would you believe it! After what all the doctors told him. The place must be a madhouse, my dear, from all I hear, and poor dear Lowell, she's such a high spirited child! Really, my dear, you *must* do something, and they say she's seeing a lot of Gilbert St. Martin—oh dear!"

She drained her cocktail, fished the olive out with two fingers and popped it into her heavily rouged mouth.

"I'm afraid I'm awfully old-fashioned! You know of course she was engaged to him a long time, and it was shocking, he jilted her for Edith's money—frightful taste, really! And she's *very* decorative, rather cold but *definitely* decorative, don't you think? Good-bye my dear, do come in and see me!"

As that was on the whole the least spiteful monologue on the subject of her divorced husband I'd ever heard Marie Nash deliver, I thought nothing of it. In fact I'd completely forgotten it until just this very moment, when I'd left Gilbert's shoppe and was going up the snow-carpeted steps between the old-fashioned gas lamps, very dressy with their turbans of snow and their small pencil flames burning darkly at the top, to the Nashes' yellow brick house.

Two great black magnolias with their broad shiny leaves almost free of the snow that weighted down the box and cedars were hung with Christmas lights, two silver candelabra burned in the narrow windows on either side of the cedar wreath on the great white door. Across the street a door opened for a moment and I heard a high sweet voice carolling "Peace on earth, good will to men," and people laughing, before it closed again. I stood looking out over the snow, listening for a moment to the warm Christmas sounds that seemed almost to vibrate through the silent street and glow from candle-lit holly-hung windows. Then I turned back and pressed the bell.

In a moment the door opened. Instead of the friendly grinning Muratogo who'd been there when I left in June, I found myself confronting a sallow moon-faced butler with lank blond hair and pale frog-lidded eyes, who invested the business of crossing the Nash threshold with a special unfamiliar solemnity. I gave him my coat, vaguely noticing his fat white hands in the brown fur, and thinking it a little odd that I should notice him at all. If I had known as much then as I do now, I'd have noticed him a great deal more.

It occurred to me as I went on in that whoever said present fears are less than horrible imaginings was a very wise man. There was certainly nothing ominous or alarming, or unfamiliar even, at first sight, in the gay scene in the Nashes' parchment-and-gold drawing room, with its wood fire crackling and the enormous Christmas tree gleaming in the bow of the front windows. Lowell was at the foot of the tree, her arms full of bright-colored balls and rolls of glittering furry tinsel, handing them up to a young man balanced dangerously on a pair of kitchen steps, both of them having a very good time indeed. Another man I didn't know was cheering from the sidelines, his pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets. Iris Nash in a green brocaded housecoat was sitting on a gold-damask sofa at right angles to the fireplace, with Senator McGilvray's ancient obese old form asleep under the folds of her skirt. But the surprising thing, that seemed pleasantly to belie all the tales of discord I'd been hearing, was the young man with sandy hair and freckled face sitting on the floor in front of the radio. It was the first time since Angus Nash had decided to go with his mother at the time of the divorce six years before that I had seen him in the Beall Street house.

"This is marvelous!" Iris Nash said, as soon as I'd untangled myself from Lowell. "You know everybody, don't you? Mac, of course."

The tall good-looking chap with blue eyes and blond wavy hair had disengaged himself from yards of tinsel and climbed down the ladder. He ambled cheerfully toward me. "Hullo, Mrs. Latham!"

"Hello, Mac. You change so fast I didn't know you. It's grand to see you."

There was something warm and definitely reassuring in the pressure of his strong friendly brown paw. I was surprised to find I still recognized the need of reassurance.

"And you don't change at all," he grinned.

"And Angus you know."

Iris Nash slipped her hand in her stepson's arm and smiled affectionately at him. He blushed and grinned, as if he knew I

must be thinking how odd it was for him to be there. And in fact it was even odder than Gilbert St. Martin's story of Randall Nash seeing Angus's mother, anywhere but in a law court. The concentrated wrath and venom that Randall had poured on his son's head had made my blood run cold. By some curious psychological twist poor Angie had become the viper dwelling at the root of all evil. Nothing he did was tolerable. Randall hadn't even let Lowell go to parties that Angie would be at when he was back for the holidays.

I looked at Iris, smiling, cool and lovely, with her burnished hair and grey-green eyes. It didn't seem strange that if miracles could be worked, she should be the person who worked them. I must have started to say something quite unconsciously, for she gave me a warning smile. Before I had to cover my tracks Lowell broke in.

"And this, Grace, is Stephen Donaldson. He's the most marvellous person in the world. He can get parking tickets cancelled, and seats to the Army-Navy game, and . . . anything."

Stephen Donaldson took his pipe out of his mouth and smiled. He had nice steady grey eyes and thick irregular brows, and a firm quick grip as we shook hands that went very well with his lean hard face and tight jaw. About thirty-six, I thought, thinking he was a bit old for Lowell, and wondering about it because of the way she was smiling up at him, a little flushed, with sparkling eyes.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mrs. Latham," he said. "Weren't you in on a murder, or something, last summer?"

"I'm always in on murders," I said. "It's a form of genius."

"Then stick around," Angie said. He nodded toward Mac. "There's going to be one."

"Shut up, Angie," Lowell said cheerfully. "Don't pay any attention, Grace."

Mac—whose actual name, though you seldom hear it, and I suppose he has dozens of friends who never have heard it, is Trevor McClean—gave the impression of grinning and glowering at the same time. I looked at Iris. She nodded, smiling a little. I gathered there was war of sorts between Mac, who I knew had been Lowell's beau since she was about two, and Stephen Donaldson, about whom I knew nothing at all. As for Lowell, she was being outrageously provocative. With her short almost blue-black curls, dancing dark eyes and red lips, and her slim lithe body in a short dark wool skirt and scarlet wool sweater, I thought she was about the most extraordinarily alive young thing I'd seen for a long long time.

I glanced at Iris. She had turned away and was brushing the

ashes from Angie's cigarette into the fireplace with the hearth broom.

"He's absolutely different from all the other people you meet, Grace," Lowell announced positively. She looked impudently at Mac bringing me a cup of egg nog from the old silver punch bowl on the table in front of the garden windows at the other end of the room. He was a little sore, I thought, but took it remarkably well.

"Why don't you sock her one, Mac?" her brother said, over his shoulder from in front of the radio.

"Mac doesn't care," Lowell retorted promptly. "He'd much rather talk to Iris than me . . . wouldn't you, Mac?"

Iris Nash turned her head. I thought she was going to say something, but she didn't. She simply shook her head at Mac and smiled. He gave her a rueful grin and kicked the log further into the fireplace. Iris came and sat down by me.

"Did you have a grand time in Nassau?" she said. But she didn't listen to my answer. Her whole body in its green brocaded coat stiffened. I could see the muscles of her throat contract sharply. Her eyes were fixed on the hall door.

"Angie," she said. I don't know that if I hadn't been so close to her I should have noticed the sharp edge of alarm in her voice. "Is that someone in the hall?"

Angus Nash leaned away from the radio and looked around the door. I could hear odd shuffling steps myself, now, though how anyone who didn't know they were out there could have done, above the fitful changes Angie was ringing on the radio, I didn't see.

"It's nothing," he said. "Just old Lavinia. Come for her weekly hand-out from the old man, I guess."

Iris took a deep breath. Her slim body relaxed against the back of the sofa. She gave me an ironic little smile.

"I'm nervy, I guess," she said.

"I can't see what the hell Father lets her come around for," Lowell exclaimed, with such sudden and extraordinary violence that everybody started. "She'd make anybody nervy. She's nothing but a horrible prowling old beggar!"

We all looked shocked, I think—all of us, that is, but her brother. He looked at her over his shoulder. "That's the old Christmas spirit, Sis," he said cheerfully.

"You shut up. You don't have to live here and have her sneaking around the house all the time. Why can't they put her away somewhere?"

Iris Nash got up. Her oval finely sculptured face was white. She went over to the small rosewood table on the other side

of the fireplace and took a cigarette out of the tooled leather box.

"She's just old and poor, Lowell," she said quietly, in her rich slightly husky voice. "And it's always a good idea to remember that there but for the grace of God go I."

The silence that followed for an instant was so intense that I could hear the front door closing, very softly.

For a moment Lowell was stunned. Then she picked up her tinsel.

"I suppose that's what you say, Iris, when you see Mrs. Gilbert St. Martin hobbling along the street in three-inch heels and dyed hair," she said coolly, with I think as quiet concentrated cruelty as I've ever heard in anybody's voice. "Come on, Mac, let's finish the tree."

The mother-of-pearl lighter in Iris's hand stopped dead half-way to the tip of her cigarette, for just an instant. It was long enough to light up something pretty dangerous that darkened and snapped in her green eyes. I saw then what must have been fairly obvious—that Iris Nash had a pretty iron control over her temper, in spite of her red hair and her stepdaughter.

Angus Nash looked up from the floor in front of the radio —on which at that moment a boy soprano was singing "Silent Night."

"Don't mind her, she can't help it," he said pleasantly. "The pretty lamb, she's half hellcat."

Lowell whirled round from the tree, her smouldering black eyes burning. She threw the roll of tinsel on the floor. Angie Nash got to his feet and took two swift steps toward her.

"Listen, my pet," he said, in the cool controlled tone that I wish I could manage when I'm boiling with rage. "Iris's affairs are her affairs—not yours . . . or our friends' here."

He waved a hand toward the rest of us.

"Really? It seems to me they're also my father's—or is that too old-fashioned for people who live on Massachusetts Avenue?"

I looked at Iris. A cool smile played in her eyes under their dark curling lashes and deepened in one corner of her scarlet mouth.

"I always say there's nothing like a first-class family row to make guests feel at home on Christmas Eve," she said. "Who'd like a cocktail? Mac, you and Steve go out and make one. Lowell will show you where the vermouth is."

Angie Nash came over to her, put his arm round her shoulders and gave her a rough brotherly sort of hug. "You're

swell, Iris!" he said. "I don't see how the hell you stick her."

I saw the quick tears spring to her eyes. She tossed her cigarette into the fire, her fingers trembling.

"I suppose I've got it coming to me," she said.

"Personally, I'd like to give her a good swift kick," Angie said bitterly. "Incidentally, I guess now's as good a time as any."

Iris laughed. "You just keep Mac busy," she said. "Let's try to hold the bloodshed in the family."

She took another cigarette and held the box out to me.

"And how long," I asked, "in heaven's name has this been going on?"

"Oh, it's like hives. It breaks out any time," she said wearily. "It's worse now because her mother's quite sick and she's upset. Then she's quarrelling with Mac about Steve."

"And who's Steve?"

"He's terribly nice. He's a lawyer. She met him at Gloria Mason's coming-out tea Thanksgiving. She's perfectly mad about him."

"And what about him?"

She threw the cigarette she'd just lighted into the fire and sat down by me, her elbows on her knees, her body hunched forward, staring into the fire. She didn't say anything for a moment. Then she said, in a dead hard voice, "I don't know, really. I suppose that's part of the trouble. I was a damned fool, probably. But with all her lacquer of sophistication she's nothing but a kid, and I . . . well, I suggested—in the most tentative fashion, because she resents so bitterly anything she can possibly take as criticism—that she ought to give him a chance to do a little of the telephoning."

She leaned her head on the back of the damask sofa and closed her eyes. Her face looked tired—not pathetically, but with the kind of disillusioned weariness that comes from perfectly futile and useless effort.

"I thought if she'd understand I was speaking from experience she'd see I wasn't simply being stepmotherish. So I told her about the years I thought I was in love with Gilbert St. Martin, and how I did most of the bothersome things, like standing in line for tickets and all that. And all the thanks I got."

She got up abruptly and stood, looking down into the fire.

"Well, you'd think at my age and with my experience I'd have better sense than to give another . . . another woman a fine hand-turned club to whack me with."

She moved away down the room—straightening things,

anything to absorb the nervous tension from her hands—to the garden windows. The old gold taffeta curtains rustled softly as she held them back and stood there, staring out. I saw her slim green-brocaded shoulders with their old-fashioned puffed sleeves rise as she drew a long deep breath. Past her the lights from the other windows streamed on the snow-shrouded garden so that it looked like a scene in a play. The summer house with its little white-capped dome was there, and beyond it the high brick wall that separates my small garden from their large one.

"The snow's lovely," she said. "It's a shame to shut it out."

She looped the heavy silk into the elaborate gold leaf arrangement there.

"What about Angie?" I asked. "I was dumbfounded seeing him. Has Randall quit being the heavy father?"

She shook her head. "No, no," she said, with something almost like a groan. "I do so wish he would. Angie understands—he's a peach. I . . . just do my best to try to keep them apart. I'd be pretty miserable without him."

She turned back. "I thought Lowell needed a brother's gentle hand. And I thought Angie needed her—she's a marvellous counter-irritant."

We could hear Lowell now, coming back with the three men, and the clinking of ice and glass on silver. Iris drew a sharp breath, perfectly composed again, even managing her cool detached smile. They all came trooping in.

"I don't know why we drink that nauseating bilge just because it's Christmas," Angie said. He took my egg nog cup and replaced it with a cold amber Martini. "It probably won't mix, Mrs. Latham, but that's your problem. We all have our problems."

He looked at his sister. She smiled sweetly. "May I have just one, Iris? A tiny one—please?"

"No," Angie said. He took the glass out of her hand and handed it to Mac. "You're foul enough sober."

I expected her to flare up, but she didn't. "I didn't want it anyway," she retorted, with a couple of dance steps back to where Stephen Donaldson was standing. She gave him a radiant smile and wrinkled her nose pertly at poor Mac. I glanced at Iris. She was looking at the door again, her glass untouched in her hand. Angus had gone back to the radio. I saw Iris move sharply as if something inside hurt her. Her face was absolutely bloodless.

I put my empty glass down and got up. She started quickly. "Oh no, Grace—don't go! Can't you stay for dinner?"

I shook my head. "I'd love to——"

"But please don't go yet! Randall's just coming down—he'll want to see you."

She put her hand on my arm. It was as cold as if she'd held it in the snow. I looked at her, definitely alarmed; as perfectly aware, suddenly, as if she'd told me in so many words that it was Randall Nash's step she'd been listening for out in the hall, and that she dreaded his coming, dreaded it horribly.

I could hear him out there now, crossing the hall toward the library. How she could have heard him sooner I still don't see. Though that's not quite true, for Colonel Primrose tells me fear sharpens people's senses almost miraculously. And Iris Nash was afraid. I recognized it then. What I didn't know was what an unbearable fear it was.

"Please stay!" she said, with a smile. I looked at my watch. It was just six, and I didn't really have to be home until time to tie my younger son's tie for his first formal party. I sat down. As I did, I happened quite accidentally to glance at Steve Donaldson. He was looking at Iris, his teeth gripped so hard on the bit of his pipe that there were ridges on his cheeks, his eyes so completely revealing that I sat there simply staring at him.

3

Mac's voice at my elbow brought me to my senses. "Where's your glass, Mrs. Latham?"

He groaned suddenly. "Don't tell me you've gone screwy too!"

I pulled myself sharply together. "It was that last cocktail, Mac."

"Then you'd certainly better have another."

"No, thanks," I said.

"How about you, Iris?"

He stepped back—and there rose instantly the most ungodly squeal, full of pain and wrath and horror and outrage, with a loud clatter and bang of fire irons. There was a sharp cry of protest from Lowell and a muttered swearing from Mac, and above the din I could hear Angie's pleasant young voice: "Oh, that's all right. Just another of the little sister's oddities. Loyalty to the brute creation—especially if the brute happens to give everybody else the jitters."

Lowell was down on her knees on the floor, trying to pull Senator McGilvray out from under the sofa.

"Oh, poor blessed lamb! Mac didn't mean to step on him! He's just a big clumsy! Come on, baby!"

Mac glowered at her angrily, wiping the gin and vermouth off his trousers. Senator McGilvray snarled and snapped. Lowell was cooing to him. "No, no—he wouldn't bite his mother! *Would* he, precious! There, there, baby!"

"Oh, shut up!" Angie groaned. "If you weren't so damn stubborn you'd let somebody take the aged beast out and give him a nice bone and shoot him."

Lowell got up suddenly, her face white. "You all hate him because he's mine!" she cried passionately. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! He doesn't hurt any of you!"

"Okay, Toots," Angie grinned. "All the same, if he snaps at me again, I'll break his damn neck."

She turned on him, her eyes blazing; but before she could

say anything a deep voice spoke from the hall, so charged with anger and hate that my blood froze. I realized abruptly that much as things may have changed in the Nash household, they hadn't changed enough to help.

"If that's the way you feel about your sister's pets, young man, you can get out of this house and stay out!"

For an instant no one breathed. Then I saw Lowell's taut slim body and angry face crumple like a punctured toy balloon. She ran quickly to Randall Nash in the doorway, gripping his arm with both hands. "Oh no, dad! It was all my fault, really!"

Randall disengaged her hands and pushed her out of his way so abruptly that she almost lost her balance. She stared at him with frightened eyes. He had not even looked at her; his steely grey eyes were fixed coldly on his son.

"What are you doing here anyway?" he said curtly. "Don't you know your mother is sick? That's where your place is."

Iris had moved quickly to where Angie was standing, completely stunned, I think, by the sudden violence of his father's attack. I know the rest of us were. It was so hideously unfair and uncalled-for, so like the Randall Nash that Angus's mother had divorced, and yet so unlike the one Iris had married and believed in, and who had saved her when she needed saving most. What, in heaven's name, I thought, had happened to change him so? I glanced from his angry face to the slim composed figure of his wife, clear-eyed, as unflinchingly protective beside his son as if he were her own. Randall was looking at her too, his face corroded with bitterness. It was almost unbelievable that he could have changed again, back to what he had been, so quickly.

Iris put her arm in Angie's and pressed it to her. He was trembling, not from fear, his mouth set, his brown hard fists clenched, his eyes burning dangerously. As Iris's hand closed over his he gripped it tightly, without taking his eyes off his father.

"*Please,* Randall!" Iris said quietly. "I asked Angie to come. He's been with his mother all week. It's the first afternoon he's been out. She has a nurse; she doesn't need him there every minute of the day."

Randall Nash's thin lips tightened ominously. I'd never noticed before what an arrogant fanatical face he had, with his thin hawk-like nose and cold bloodshot eyes. His glance shifted slowly to his wife.

I tried not to look at him. It was hard to know where to look. I'm afraid Stephen Donaldson and I simply gave up trying to pretend we weren't really there, and just openly

stared. Mac was obviously used to this sort of thing. He flushed, looking desperately miserable.

"It shouldn't surprise me to find you taking his part against me, my dear."

He spoke so curtly that Iris's green eyes winced as if she had been lashed with a whip across the face. Angie's taut body jerked forward, but her hand tightened on his arm. "Don't!" she whispered. I could hear every separate breath drawn in that room . . . and through it all, like a Greek chorus, Senator McGilvray loudly, hideously, licking his wounds under the sofa.

"Well," Randall said icily, "are you going? Or are you hiding behind a woman's skirts until you're kicked out?"

Angus Nash gave Iris's hand a quick hard squeeze and let it drop. He strode across the space that separated him from the door where his father stood. Lowell stared at him with frightened tear-filled eyes, her lips trembling. For a moment I think she thought what I know I did—that Randall Nash would strike him as he passed, and then . . . Angus stopped in the door and turned back to his sister.

"I said next time that beast of yours snapped at me, I'd break his neck," he said coolly. "Well, that goes for all your pet connections, Sis."

Lowell held out her hands. "Oh, I didn't mean it, Angie," she whispered, choking back the scalding tears.

He gave her a quick twisted grin. "I know it. Well, so long. Don't let 'em get you down."

He said it to Lowell, but I knew, and I think everyone else did, that it was Iris he was speaking to.

He turned and walked out, without a glance at his father.

Iris, her face a mask of pale inscrutability, started after him. Randall Nash deliberately closed the door. "You can stay where you are," he said slowly. "And let this be the last time that young man comes into my house. Is that quite clear?"

For a moment Iris stood in front of him, erect and rigid, her eyes meeting his without wavering.

"Quite," she said. Then she shrugged her slim shoulders and turned back to the rest of us with a cool smile.

"I can only offer you my husband's deepest apologies. He is not entirely himself this afternoon."

She came back to the fire and held her hands out to the blaze. Mac had moved around until he was between Lowell and her father.

"I think you're a bit hard on him, sir," he said stolidly. "The whole thing was my fault. I'm very sorry."

Randall Nash jerked his head around, his jaws working,

and gave him a long savage stare. It hadn't occurred to him, apparently, that Mac—or anyone, for that matter, but Iris—would stand up against him. Even Lowell looked alarmed for a moment, and then smiled, proudly, I thought. I glanced at Steve Donaldson. He was leaning against the carved window-trim, his hands in his pockets, teeth tightly clamped on his pipe, his face a little flushed.

Iris turned from the fire.

"You haven't spoken to Grace, Randall."

He started. He hadn't even seen me.

"Hello," I said.

He came forward silently, so without any change in the stony expression on his face that I couldn't for a second decide whether he didn't recognize me, or whether he did and wanted me to get out too. As he gave my hand a cold perfunctory shake it occurred to me suddenly that I wasn't sure that if I'd seen his face close up, separated from his gaunt powerful body, I should have recognized him at once. He had changed unbelievably. His eyes were bloodshot and haunted, his mouth ribbed with bitter grey lines.

"I hope we can get together about the garden wall," he said shortly.

"I noticed this morning it was crumbling again."

"Your tenants wouldn't let me point up your side because of the trumpet vine."

I had followed him to the end of the long room. We stood there looking out over the snow-mantled garden at the slump in the center of the wall. My own house beyond it was warm and friendly with its lighted windows and the wreath of white smoke curling up from the broad chimney above the snowtopped roof. I had a sudden sharp longing to be there—not here beside this bitter old man whom I felt I scarcely knew anymore.

"It'll grow again," I said.

"I'll foot the bill of course.—It's the bit over the vault that's down."

Lowell's voice, suddenly crisp and clear in the room, sent a cold shiver down my spine.

"Do tell Steve what charming people the Nashes used to be, dad," she said.

I turned. She was standing by the Christmas tree with the roll of tinsel again, her smart brittle finish so completely restored that it was hard to believe that not three minutes ago she was a frightened crumpled youngster on the verge of tears. She was feeding the tinsel up to Mac, balanced again precariously on the kitchen steps, waiting for orders.

"Over the big blue one. No, no! Don't you know blue when you see it, stupid? That's swell.—Go on, dad. Tell Steve about the family skeleton—I mean family skeletons."

The cold shiver ran down my spine again. I looked uneasily at Iris, wondering if she knew what was coming. If she did, there was no sign of it in her face, although, when our eyes met briefly, it seemed to me hers were smouldering, a little nearer the blazing point than they had been before. Beyond her Steve Donaldson had taken his pipe out of his mouth.

"I'd like to hear it, sir," he said.

"That's what you think," I said shortly.

Randall Nash glanced at me. He had a thin curious smile on his face.

"It isn't exactly a Christmas story," he said. "But it's interesting . . . just to show how shallow the veneer of civilization is. Even the civilization that produced houses like this."

He looked around the long room with its carved chair rail and handsome cornice, with the broken pediments over balancing doors and the beautifully simple carved overmantel. Iris was still sitting on a low stool by the hearth, staring down into the fire. The flames made her hair a rich burning copper. Her face was as expressionless as if a pale gold mask had been placed there for this scene.

"My great-great-grandfather built this house," Randall Nash said quietly. "He brought the mahogany for the doors from Honduras in his own ships. He was one of Georgetown's leading citizens in the great days, when Georgetown was a seaport, long before they built the Federal City they later called Washington. Washington himself frequently dined here."

His eyes rested, in a kind of cold courtesy, on Stephen Donaldson.

"He married a young woman who'd been his children's governess, after their mother died of what they called then a galloping consumption. He had a secretary, a red-haired young chap not long down from Oxford, who'd come over here to make his fortune. One night they ran off together, his wife and the secretary, and her body servant, a colored girl of sixteen. He moved heaven and earth to find them. You can still read the advertisements in papers as far afield as the London Times and the French Court Circular. They were never found. He became a recluse."

I looked at Lowell. She was calmly engrossed in hanging thin bits of silver foil like icicles on the few remaining bare spots on the tree. Her face had that perfectly blank stare that's

fashionable now. I could gladly have wrung her neck at that moment with every feeling that I'd done a distinct social duty.

"It was not until they graded Beall Street," Randall Nash went on deliberately, "—which is what makes us perch up on a hill—and we had to put in a proper sewage system, that the workmen found a bricked passage. My father had them follow it. They came to a vault just under the wall there. It had a locked iron grill. Hanging to it, its fingerbones still round the iron bars, was the skeleton of a man, a few red hairs still clinging to his skull. Inside on the ground were the skeletons of two women, one a young negress, the other a woman with a wedding band engraved with my great-great-grandfather's initials and the date of his second marriage."

"Oh, *damn!*"

Lowell's expletive punctured the sharp silence. A large red ball fell from the tree and splintered on the polished pine floor with a silvery tinkling crash.

Iris did not move. I saw Steve Donaldson's pipe give a sudden jerk between his clenched teeth. The only sound in the room was the obese obscene snoring of Senator McGilvray under the sofa.

"The ghastliest part of it was putting the poor colored maid in with them, so they couldn't be alone even when they were dying."

I hardly recognized Iris's voice. She didn't turn her head or move her body. Her low husky tones were vibrant with passionate protest, trembling and deep, like a single chord struck suddenly on a cello.

"Isn't that strange," Lowell said quickly; "I never thought of that!"

She looked up from where she was picking up the bright flimsy pieces of the broken ornament.

Steve Donaldson spoke quietly. "You wouldn't," he said. "There are probably lots of things you don't think of, my child."

She looked at him sharply, her lips parted for an instant, I thought for some violent retort. Then she bent her head and picked up the last bits of the red ball, her face flushed.

Randall Nash moved his eyes slowly away from Iris.

"No," he said coldly. "I'm afraid that is a refinement of cruelty that one has to have been—or be—deeply in love to understand."

It was then that I realized with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach what that curious thin smile on his face had meant. He had intended from the beginning to tell that story, even before Lowell had given him that perfect cue.

He lighted a cigar and blew out the match, still smiling a little.

"Well," I said, "I think I'll go home."

It was more abrupt than I'd meant, but I was afraid if I'd stayed there much longer I'd have started taking pot shots at people myself.

Iris got up and followed me out into the wide handsomely designed hall with its hanging staircase rising gracefully to the Palladian window at the broad landing. "Perfect for a wedding, my dear!" as the women invariably say who troop in there every Spring when the house is opened for the Garden Club Pilgrimage. It looked to me riper for a funeral just then.

Iris helped me on with my coat.

"Don't let them get you down, honey," I said, repeating Angie's parting words. "I'll see you tomorrow. Are you going to the Assembly Tuesday?"

"I suppose so," she answered dully. "Why don't you go with us?"

"I'd like to," I said. "I haven't got a beau, unless somebody turns up before then."

I suppose I should have thought more about the Nashes that evening than I did if it hadn't been for the business of getting my two sons' ties tied and having their two pretty blank-faced girls for dinner and getting them off at ten o'clock for their party. The old-fashioned days when parties began at eight-thirty and ended at twelve seemed very remote as I waved good-bye to them and went back into the drawing room to put a last finishing touch on the tree and arrange the presents from distant relatives that Lilac brought out of hiding.

"Ah didn' get a chance to tell you, Mis' Grace, but the Colonel was ovah, this evenin'."

I looked up with a start.

"Colonel Primrose?"

Lilac beamed. "Yas, *ma'am.*"

I felt myself blushing.

"Yas'm, it sho' was. An' 'deed, Mis Grace, he lookin' mighty fine."

She started out, and turned back at the door.

"The Sergeant, he wasn' with him. Ah guess the Sergeant don' lak the Colonel comin' see you all time, Mis' Grace. Law, 'sif you'd marry Colonel Primrose, pretty an' stylish as you is."

I just stopped myself in time from demanding what was wrong with Colonel Primrose, seeing from the wicked look in

her saucer-white old eyes that that was exactly the trap she'd set.

"We'll have hot cakes and that country sausage for breakfast, Lilac," I said with dignity. "Downstairs, about half past nine if the boys are up."

"They'll be up all right, Mis' Grace. That's one consolation. 'Night, Mis' Grace."

Lilac's habit of finding consolation in odd and sometimes quite unconsoling things always manages to cast a grave and sinister aura about the immediate future as well as the immediate past, and in fact to raise doubts about the entire stability of human experience.

I said "Goodnight," put the last gaily wrapped package on the low table by the Christmas tree, and changed a green bulb that had burned out for a red one. I stood there looking at the frosty glittering tree with the vague aching nostalgia I always have for long lost Christmases when the tinsel was brighter silver, when there were reindeer feet in the snow on the roof and soot on the hearth, when the cotton angel at the topmost tip was as far away as the stars and a hallowed breathtaking mystery stole out of the dark and fragrant branches until the child's heart almost broke for the strange loveliness. Nostalgia, I suppose, for lost innocence, when love and death and joy and pain were unknown far-off things, their poignancy yet undreamed.

Outside a car drove slowly by with men and women in it singing carols in the clear frosty air. I turned off the lights and looked out the window. Down the block across the street I could see a corner of the yellow brick house where Colonel John Primrose lives with Sergeant Buck. A Colonel John Primrose attached to Washington's staff built the house, a John Primrose has lived in it ever since. I don't know whether each of them has had his Sergeant Buck, but I know they have all been bachelors—which the present Colonel has assured me is possible to figure out in a perfectly respectable way. I suspect strongly they've all had the same cook, a white kinky-headed Negro, unbelievably old and incredibly good at terrapin and beaten biscuits and syllabub, pottering about with his herbs and his brews. All service, I thought, ranks the same with God . . . and who shall say that Sergeant Buck, trying to preserve all that from the desecrating hand of a woman in the house, isn't as much a handmaid of tradition and art as—for instance—the Rockefellers in Williamsburg?

In spite of Sergeant Buck it was comforting to see that house down there, and know that Colonel Primrose was in it if I should ever need him. The idea brought me back to the

Nashes, and Lowell, and the anonymous letters burned in the pewter basin in Gilbert St. Martin's shoppe. I looked at the telephone. In fact, I went into the hall and picked it up to call him. Then I remembered that he and Randall Nash had known each other a very long time, and that his loyalties would be with Randall. There was no use in letting him know that Iris's loyalties—so somebody thought—were getting mixed up. Heaven knows that if scenes like the one I'd witnessed there that afternoon were frequent, I for one couldn't blame her . . . and yet I knew, as well as I know anything at all, and in spite of those letters, that no loyalties of hers could be questioned. But Colonel Primrose didn't have that summer night to look back on, and he wouldn't understand.

Or so I thought, not remembering that I have a genius for being discreet at the wrong time.

I turned out the light on my dressing table between the two windows overlooking the garden, and put up the shades. For a moment I stood there motionless. I had never noticed before what a clear view I had through the three high arches of the Nashes' Palladian window. Perhaps the white space of our two gardens, I thought, made their house loom darker and more prominently clear in the night. Then I remembered the cherry tree that had been there until the September storm, and realized that that was what had divided us before. There was nothing between us now except the flat gardens and an eight-foot brick wall.

As I looked across there it was exactly as if my window was at the apex of a recumbent isosceles triangle with the Nash staircase forming its two sides. I could see down the longish stairs to the entrance hall on the one hand, and from the landing up the short stairs to the second floor on the other. And then, almost as if some master puppet player was showing me how neatly it all worked, two figures came out of where the living room door would be into the brightly lighted lower hall.

I recognized them even before I'd considered the ethics, if any, of my position. Iris was one, the other was Gilbert St. Martin. He had her hand in his, and I saw him raise it to his lips and keep it there a long moment. Then, before I could move—or at least before I did move—a door opened on the second floor landing. Randall Nash came out. I could see his long dark dressing gown and his gleaming white shirt front and black tie. He came slowly to the edge of the landing and stood, his hands on the dark mahogany rail, listening.

I saw the front door open, and Iris was alone in the lower

hall. She stood there a long time, it seemed to me, both hands at her sides. Then she turned and came slowly up the stairs, almost as if she were too weary even to reach the first landing, much less the second, where her husband was waiting. I looked up at him. The place where he had been was empty, the door behind him closed again.

"That's too bad," I thought. And then I wondered quite suddenly; and it seemed immediately very strange to me that I hadn't wondered before. Was he getting anonymous letters too . . . and did that explain why he had changed so much in so short a time? And was he driving her back to the very hell he'd saved her from?

4

I didn't see Iris Nash the next day. I thought about her several times, a little curious and vaguely disturbed. I did, however, see Lowell. It was after eleven. We had just finished breakfast —stacks of golden brown cakes and sweet fresh country sausage—and the boys had gone upstairs to dress. I could hear the bath water running and their shouts back and forth. I was looking through a stack of telegraph greetings that had just come, and thinking that the company who invented a device that allows you to send greetings Christmas morning to all the people you've forgotten, and still appear specially thoughtful, really deserved the Nobel Peace Prize. I looked up to see Lowell standing in the door.

Her face was white, her stockings were torn where she'd evidently climbed over the broken wall, her feet in suede pumps were covered with snow that was melting and forming in a puddle on the floor.

"Lowell!" I said. "What's the matter?"

She brushed her hair back from her forehead and peeled off the little grey fur cap she wore. Her eyes were wide and burning, her red lips set in a thin tight line.

"She's done it," she said, in a dead brittle voice. "I knew she would."

I put down the telegrams. My hands were shaking too noticeably to hold them.

"Done what, Lowell?" I demanded sharply.

"She's poisoned him."

I steadied myself against the cedar-covered mantel. My heart was in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't for one terrible instant trust myself to speak. My voice when it did come sounded completely detached and half a million miles away.

"Poisoned *who*, Lowell?"

"Senator McGilvray. When I found him this morning he'd been dead for hours."

It took me a long time, even then, to remember that it was

a fourteen year old liver-and-white cocker spaniel with three feet in the grave and the other tottering on the brink that she was talking about, not a human being. My mind struggled back over a long thorny road that I hadn't realized it had journeyed. I stared at her standing there, her grey fur cap in her hand, her face white above the high fur collar of her grey wool suit streaked with red brick dust, with a three-cornered tear over one knee. I tried hard to keep then from a crazy burst of laughter.

"She's always hated him, just as she hates me—because he was mine, and because he didn't like her."

She spoke in the same dry hard voice, her lips scarcely moving to form the words.

"Why do you think he was poisoned, Lowell," I asked. "He was very old. He may have died of old age."

I must have sounded cold and unsympathetic, of course. If it had been my dog I know how I should have felt, no matter how old and infirm he was. On the other hand, I distinctly remembered seeing Senator McGilvray the day before wheezing peacefully away at Iris's feet under the folds of her green brocaded house coat.—Or if she'd been crying—then it would have been different too. But she wasn't. She was perfectly rigid, and terribly, oh terribly like her father.

"He had foam all over his mouth. I took him to the vet.—before breakfast. He said it was poison. I know she did it."

"That's ridiculous, Lowell," I said.

"It isn't. I . . . I saw her do it. I should have known, but I didn't think she was as bad as that, not really. I knew she couldn't bear him, and she's never been even decent to him. Last night after dinner I was just coming in the room when I saw her lean down and pet him and give him a piece of candy. The vet. says that's the way he was poisoned."

I said nothing. I didn't know anything to say. I'd never seen Lowell Nash like this. She hadn't moved since she'd come into the room. All the Christmas trappings, the vine cedar and mistletoe, the crazy presents we'd been laughing at, and the bright litter of hastily torn-off wrappings that Lilac hadn't cleaned up yet, seemed frivolous suddenly and a little unreal.

"I wanted to tell you, because I'm going to get even with her some day. And I don't want you to think I'm just mean and vindictive. She's been asking for it a long time."

My hand was still closed tightly on the mantel, I was still staring stupidly at the wet spot on the floor, long after I heard the garden door slam shut. Lilac's black face and saucer-wide eyes peering at me from the dining room brought me to my senses.

"Law, Mis' Grace, what all's the mattuh with that chil', come bussin' in lak that, lookin' lak death on a pale horse?"

"Her dog died last night," I said.

"'Deed an' it's time," Lilac observed practically. She padded back downstairs to the kitchen to tell Julius, who's her husband. At least I think he is. We have burned biscuits and the furnace fire goes out when they're having one of their divorces, and the house was quite warm when I got home from Nassau.

If the telephone hadn't rung just then, things might have turned out very differently. I might have gone to Iris's that afternoon. I might have seen Colonel Primrose that evening and told him about the poisoned dog. More important, probably, I should have seen Randall Nash when he came to my house on the late afternoon of the 29th. As it was, I saw none of them, and whatever might have happened didn't happen. Which is foolish, of course, for in my heart I'm sure I believe that what is to happen pretty much does happen. The telephone ringing when it did was as much a part of the Destiny that had us all by the scruff of the neck as the poison that put Senator McGilvray's feathered liver-and-white fourth foot in the grave.

Anyway, the phone did ring. It was Mary Lucas on long distance from somewhere this side of Los Angeles, and would I for mercy's sake go with my kids that afternoon to Virginia and pinch hit as chaperone at young Mary's house party, because her plane had been held up and she'd be late, and little Mary would be so disappointed, and anyway it was too late to call it off now because most of the youngsters were coming from New York and New England and would be yammering at the door with nobody to chaperone them. It wasn't her fault California's weather had gone mad, she really had expected to be home in time.

And she did arrive, but not till the afternoon of the 29th—and I got home not half an hour after Randall Nash had come and waited twenty minutes, pacing up and down the living room, so Lilac said, and then finally had gone. The empty glass and half-empty decanter were still on the table.

"That theah was full to the top when Ah took it in, Mis' Grace," Lilac said.

I wasn't surprised, therefore, when Iris called up and said Randall had decided not to go to the Assembly that night, but that Colonel Primrose and Stephen Donaldson were taking the two of us, and we'd meet Lowell and Mac there at Linthicum Hall. The three of them would come, if I didn't mind, to my house around eleven. I gathered she preferred we didn't meet

at her house, even though we'd have to pass it going from my place in P Street to Linthicum Hall in O—Beall Street cutting a wedge-shaped section, as it does, from Wisconsin Avenue to 29th.

Steve Donaldson was the first to come. He looked remarkably well in tails and white tie, said something noncommittal about the weather, admitted he thought Lowell was being pretty dramatic about it when I asked him how the Nashes were making out with the passing of Senator McGilvray, and kept looking at his watch and moving about the room. I watched him with considerable interest, after a couple more desultory attempts at conversation had quietly died on my hands. When the doorbell rang he came to life, and slumped again when it was only Colonel Primrose.

As for myself, I was surprised at how glad I was to see the short, grey-haired, somewhat rotund figure of Sergeant Buck's chief in the door, with Lilac's polished face shining over his shoulder like a full black moon.

"It's grand to see you—how are you? Do you know Mr. Donaldson?"

The two men shook hands. Colonel Primrose, who has a slightly stiff neck from stopping a bullet in the Argonne, cocked his head down and looked up with his bright parrot eyes. "Randall Nash was speaking of you this evening," he said.

But Steve Donaldson was listening to Lilac opening the door again. I doubt if he even heard what Colonel Primrose said. I saw the quick change in his face when Iris came in and his eyes detected before mine did the too bright quality of her greeting.

"It's nice of you to go along with us." She turned to him after she'd spoken to me and Colonel Primrose. "Mac put his foot down. He said if Lowell stood him up again he'd join the Foreign Legion, so she had to go with him."

She turned back to me.

"I hope I'm not terribly late; I was waiting for Randall. He went out and hadn't got back yet. Angie's mother got up and went out to a party last night, and today they took her to the Emergency Hospital. I think she's very sick. I thought maybe Lowell ought to stand by, but Randall said her holiday had been ruined already by her dog's dying, and her mother was probably just putting on anyway, just to spoil Christmas for everybody."

She shrugged unhappily.

"Result is, Lowell doesn't know her mother's ill again.—Not that she'd care very much."

She bit her lower lip suddenly. "Oh what am I saying! I didn't mean that—please forgive me!"

Colonel Primrose's thumb on the trigger of the soda syphon released its pressure sharply. He cocked his head down and looked around at her with intent sparkling black eyes. Then he pressed the trigger again. The charged water swirled into the amber whisky in the tall glass.

The Christmas Assembly, perhaps I should explain, is a traditional Georgetown function, dating from pre-Revolutionary days. The youth and beauty of the Colonies danced at it, George Washington attended it in a tavern in Bridge Street, Dolly Madison and her husband danced at it before the British burned Washington in 1814, the belles of the Forties flirted there. It was discontinued during the Civil War and revived under the gas lights in the smilax-wreathed hall that Mr. Linthicum built in1878 for the education of poor white boys of Georgetown. There are still two gas standards in the corners of the little gallery, but they aren't lighted now, and the gallery is used chiefly for a surreptitious drink out of a bottle—paper cups for ladies—by a generation very alien, somehow, to the shining-pated old gentlemen with their ladies who sit along the wall under the evergreens downstairs, watching the strange gait of the modern dance.

Iris and I pushed through the mob on the staircase into the ladies' room, and then back through the corridor into the gallery. It was empty for the moment except for a young man already finding it difficult to move. Colonel Primrose and Steve Donaldson joined us and we stood looking down on the crowded floor. At the opposite end of the room was the Victorian portrait of the Victorian gentleman who gave the hall. Under it sat Lowell Nash.

"Oh dear!" I said. "That means she's going to be an old maid."

"Which shows," Colonel Primrose observed, "how tradition —even in Georgetown—is garbled in seventy years. It used to mean you simply didn't get any partners for the evening."

"I expect Lowell isn't worrying about either," Iris said, smiling suddenly at Steve.

"Not about the partner end of it," he agreed with a grin. There were at least eight young men standing around her, with Mac, as usual, glowering in a corner.

"Shall we dance?" I heard Steve say. In a moment we saw them below us on the crowded floor.

"I take it," Colonel Primrose remarked casually, "Mr.

Donaldson is head over heels in love with the beautiful Iris. And Iris either thinks or pretends to think it's Lowell."

"Why pretends?"

"Surely, Mrs. Latham, a woman knows when a man's in love with her."

I suppose it was because of Sergeant Buck and Lilac that I avoided looking at him.

"Not necessarily," I said. "She may be too caught up in general complications to sort things out very clearly."

He smiled. "Not to change the subject at all—why didn't you let me know you were home?"

"Didn't Sergeant Buck tell you?—I met him in Gilbert St. Martin's shop."

"He didn't. But I saw something had soured him. And there's no use being a detective of sorts if you can't deduce things to your own advantage from time to time."

"That couldn't have taken a lot of detecting," I said.

"Meaning Buck's damnably transparent?"

"He is, rather, isn't he?" I answered. Then I added, quite on the impulse of the moment and because it had to be said sooner or later, "I only wish he'd get it out of his head that I want to marry you."

Colonel Primrose cocked his head down and looked around at me the way he does.

"You don't want to, I take it."

"No——you're quite safe, Colonel."

"I've been afraid that was what you were going to say," he said with a quick smile.

"And rather relieved on the whole?"

"What do you think?"

He asked it so seriously that I changed the subject, out of sheer sympathy for Sergeant Buck.

"Have you seen much of the Nashes recently?"

He smiled again.

"From time to time."

"I feel terribly sorry for Iris," I said.

"Do you really," he said shortly. I looked at him, a little surprised. He got up abruptly. "Let's dance."

I thought "Oh dear!" And yet, of course, I could have known he'd be stuffy.

It was half-past one when we left Linthicum Hall. I hadn't seen much of Lowell, except to say Hello and find out that she was pretty mad at Angie for not showing up.

"I suppose he's brooding about that silly dust-up with dad Christmas Eve," she said impatiently.

If she had learned that her mother was seriously ill there

was no evidence of it. She and Mac were going, they said, as soon as they'd made a long enough showing to satisfy Mac's uncle, who's by way of being a local big shot—banker and what not. Iris and Steve had joined a crowd of young married people in one corner, Colonel Primrose and I got stymied by a doddering old gentleman who'd attended the ball in 1882 with a famous beauty I'd never heard of and had a duel with her husband out by the Chain Bridge the next day. We'd still be there talking to him if Steve hadn't come and said Iris wanted to go home.

She was in the dressing room getting her white ermine cape when I came in. Her face was almost the color of the fur. She looked desperately unhappy. It occurred to me that she'd probably been having an encounter with her stepdaughter. Heaven knows why I chose that moment to remark casually that I hadn't seen the St. Martins; it came out of my mouth before I was even conscious of thinking it. She gave a sharp hysterical little laugh. I looked quickly at her; she was steadying herself against the end of the cloak rack. "I'm going to be sick," she whispered. "Get me some water."

I got it. Her hands were cold as ice. She stood there a moment with her eyes closed, then gave me a quick sardonic smile as she handed back the cup. "You'd think I had scenes enough at home without staging one in public all by myself."

The Christmas lights were still gleaming in the giant magnolias outside the Nash house. The light in the hall glimmered softly through the elliptical Adam fanlight over the door.

"Why don't you all come in and have a drink?" Iris said.

"That's an excellent idea," Colonel Primrose said promptly, so promptly that I couldn't really say no.

I still wonder what difference it might have made in the days that followed if I'd not been so spineless and had gone home as I should have done. It's impossible to tell, of course, and anyway we did go in. The door into the library, at the foot of the stairs to the right, was half open. The room was dark except for the small circle of white light thrown by the glass-shaded reading lamp on the dark green and gold leather pad on Randall Nash's broad flat mahogany desk at the far side, between the windows. In the circle of light was an open book. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses lay on it, the ear bows extended as if they had just been put there.

But that was not all, nor did any of it explain the sudden, almost imperceptible stiffening in the muscles of Iris's smooth bare back as Steve Donaldson took her ermine cape and she glanced in through the half-open door. On the desk beside the

pad, just out of the circle of light, was a round silver tray, with a decanter of whisky and a soda syphon. Beside the tray an amber highball glass with a silver rim lay on the desk, on its side.

Iris glanced from the spot of light and the overturned glass up the stairs ahead of us, and took a deep controlled breath. I saw Colonel Primrose cock his head down and follow her gaze with his bright sharp black eyes. I thought he shook his head a little.

It took only a second or two, all this, before Iris said, quite normally—and if I hadn't known the danger signals I'd never have noticed anything not perfectly normal about any of this —"Please go in by the fire. I'll bring the decanter."

Colonel Primrose had just taken my coat. He was still standing with it over his arm. We all stood there a moment. Iris went into the library, picked up the glass and put it on the tray, wiped up the spot on the polished mahogany with her handkerchief, and came out again with the tray in her hands.

She handed it to me. "Take it in, Grace, will you? I'll just put this in the kitchen."

She took the glass. I started into the drawing room with the tray.

"Wait a second," she said. "Is there any soda?"

She came back, put the glass under the syphon and pressed the trigger. A hissing spurt of the gas brought out a couple of drops of charged water.

"I'll fill it," she said. She took the syphon and glass, and went out with Colonel Primrose to the kitchen.

I went on into the drawing room where Steve Donaldson was standing in front of the fire, staring down into it. He glanced up, the expectant light in his eyes dying when he saw it was only me. I took a potato chip out of the silver bowl on the low Chippendale table in front of the fire and scooped a little of the fresh caviare from the block of ice in the thermos tub. We didn't seem to have much to say to each other, and were content not to try to make anything up. So we just sat there until Iris and Colonel Primrose came back with the syphon, one of those patent arrangements with cartridges for carbonating your own tap water.

After that it was very pleasant, and when I suddenly looked at the French clock on the mantel it was after three o'clock. I remembered my children.

"Don't go," Iris said.

"I must. They're at the age when they don't approve of me being out after two-thirty."

"Why don't you phone and see if they're in?—My child ought to be in in a moment," she added with a smile at Steve Donaldson. "There's a phone in the library."

I hesitated.

"Nobody wants to go home, Mrs. Latham," Steve said with a grin.

I glanced at Colonel Primrose and got up. He came with me into the hall. The green shaded lamp on the library desk was still on. I pulled up the chair behind the desk and dialed my number. Then, as I waited, my eyes got used to the dark outer rim of the light. And as the book-lined walls and the mahogany mantel became visible, something else became visible too . . . just as I heard Lilac's sleepy voice at the other end. I put the telephone down without speaking, staring in silent terror at the thing on the floor.

When I said "Colonel Primrose!" the first time I couldn't have more than whispered it, for he didn't come. The second time he came quickly. I saw him in the door, saw the alarmed anxious expression on his face as he stopped abruptly and stood looking down at me. I pointed to the floor, my throat too paralyzed to speak. In an instant he was there, down on one knee, his hand on Randall Nash's limp wrist, then moving under his coat to his heart.

Then I realized that that second time I must have screamed, for Iris Nash was there in the room, with Steve Donaldson behind her. I saw Steve reach back to the switch beside the door, and the room was full of light. Colonel Primrose got to his feet, his head cocked down, his bright black eyes moving intently about the room. It seemed an incredible time to me before they came to Iris Nash, staring down in horror at the prone figure, its dead glassy eyes fixed on the ceiling, its teeth bared in a sardonic grin, as if the last laugh was Randall Nash's . . . and a bitter one too.

Steve Donaldson was behind her, holding both her arms close to her, steadying her, giving her his own strength. She seemed unaware of him or of us—only of the dreadful grinning figure of her husband on the floor.

Colonel Primrose came to the desk and took up the telephone.

"I'm going to call the police, Iris," he said gently.

She looked silently at him, her wide-set green eyes dazed and uncomprehending. It was almost as if she had not heard him speaking at all.

Colonel Primrose put the telephone down. He hesitated a moment, and turned toward her again.

"Where is the glass he was drinking from, Iris?" he asked quietly.

Something sharp and sudden cut through the blank dazed expression in her eyes and caught the breath in her bare throat. The words were scarcely audible as her blanched lips moved: "I . . . washed it, and put it away."

5

I can't believe that any of us then—except perhaps Colonel Primrose, used to this sort of thing and prejudiced against Iris Nash from the beginning—realized the full appalling significance of what she had said. If her voice sounded like a death knell in the horrible silence of that room there was reason enough, Heaven knows, in Randall Nash's lifeless figure lying there on the oriental carpet, grinning glassy-eyed into eternity.

It was Steve Donaldson, knowing about the law, who saw the potential danger of her position quicker by far than I did. He released his hold on her arms slowly, looking at Colonel Primrose, his eyes sharpened with a sort of vigilant wariness, his lean jaw set. We all stood there silently for a moment, Colonel Primrose's black parrot eyes deliberately—I thought—not meeting Iris's.

And it was Iris, oddly enough, who broke the silence at last. She raised one hand to her forehead and smoothed back her copper-colored hair, looking frail and tired suddenly, like a hothouse tiger lily exposed too long to the sun.

"What do I do?" she asked, in a dazed unreal voice.

"You don't do anything," Steve Donaldson said brusquely. He started to go on, and stopped. He had not taken his eyes off Colonel Primrose, still standing by the telephone. I saw something flicker in the bright black eyes Colonel Primrose turned to him.

"The fewer conclusions anybody jumps at the better, Mr. Donaldson," he said, with a restrained suavity that I'm sure must have taken some effort.

Steve Donaldson flushed darkly. He took a step closer to Iris. He was behind her, so she could not know, I thought suddenly, how much like a sword and shield he looked, looming there, in spite of his white tie and tails. Nor could Colonel Primrose have known how much to the point what he had just said was going to be.

Outside the sound of a car stopping, followed by heavy feet stamping off the snow on the porch, brought us all sharply to attention. Colonel Primrose went to the door and opened it. I heard a low rumble of voices, and in a moment there were four sober-faced keen-eyed men in the room, two of whom we were to see a lot of before we were through with Randall Nash. I had never seen any of them, so I knew they weren't from the Seventh Precinct Headquarters in Volta Place. They all seemed to know Colonel Primrose.

One of them, the surgeon obviously, came forward with his black bag and knelt beside Randall Nash. He straightened up in a minute, put his stethoscope back in his inside pocket and glanced up at Colonel Primrose, drawing his thin lower lip under his long teeth with an odd sucking sound.

At that point, I suppose, the die was cast already, and nothing could have saved us from any part of the fate that seemed to be hanging on the footsteps of everyone who entered the yellow brick house on Beall Street, dogging it as relentlessly as if the awful crime of that long dead Nash had laid on it a curse for which only blood could atone. And yet . . . I have nothing but admiration and respect for the District of Columbia police. I doubt if anywhere in the world any group of men handed the job that Captain Lamb and his men were handed that night would have done it better, or with more devotion not only to duty but to decency. But if they were human, they couldn't possibly have failed to be affected by the sudden and appallingly dramatic entrance on the scene that happened at the very moment Dr. Maxton folded his stethoscope and looked up, sucking in his lower lip.

We were all so shocked at what was going on in front of us that none of us—except, I suppose, Colonel Primrose, who always notices everything, and perhaps Captain Lamb—heard the front door open and saw Lowell Nash come in. And I doubt if even they saw Mac there behind her. She must have stood in the doorway for a long moment, taking in the dreadful significance of what was going on for instants, before she shot forward, dropping her red velvet evening coat off her shoulders to the floor as she came, sure and swift and razor-sharp, her dark eyes burning and all the color drained from her cheeks, facing her stepmother.

Her voice came out low and hard and cruel: "Then you *did* poison him . . . and you've poisoned my father too!"

Even Colonel Primrose caught his breath sharply. I didn't dare look at any of the others. I couldn't blame them for thinking anything. The seering icy hatred in Lowell Nash's

voice was enough to curdle anyone's blood. And she was almost unbelievably lovely to look at, in a low-cut flame-colored dance frock with a skirt of yards and yards of crisp net swirling about her young body as she moved, and above it each black curl sculptured close to her small elegant head like the locks of a young Medusa. That's what she seemed too, just then: a young Medusa, not knowing her power, turning every one of us to stone.

Then as suddenly she broke away and flung herself down beside her father.

"Dad! Dad! Oh, it's Lowell! Answer me—answer me, daddy!"

She burst into a torrent of weeping, her dark head on the stiff starched bosom of his shirt.

It was then, I think, that we all became aware of Mac. He came forward, knelt down beside her and put his arm around her gently.

"Don't, Lowell. Please don't. Please, honey!"

He looked up helplessly as she shook passionately away from him. Colonel Primrose took a step forward. Suddenly Iris said, in a voice nearly as cool and detached as it had been two hours before, "You take her upstairs, Steve. Grace will show you the way."

Which should, I suppose, have shown that Iris Nash had a surer insight into the complex and I think quite unconscious springs of her stepdaughter's soul than anyone else had. Steve Donaldson picked her up bodily, unresisting, and carried her up the broad stairs. We stood there in her room for a moment, looking down at her, sobbing quietly on the high fourposter bed, her head in her arms.

"Poor little kid!" Steve said gently. He smoothed her dark silky curls. "Buck up, old chap!" he said.

I turned on the light by the mahogany table by the windows and switched off the light by her bed. Steve was still standing there, one of her limp hands in his.

I shook my head involuntarily. "You've given yourself a pretty tough assignment, my friend," I thought . . . not seeing how anybody could possibly be a friend of Lowell and Iris Nash at the same time. It seems to be a characteristic of the Nash difficulties. You've got to be on one side or the other. It was true with Randall and Marie's divorce, it was true of the two children, it seemed to be almost nauseatingly true of Iris Nash and her stepdaughter, though of Iris only because Lowell forced it to be that way.

I was glad when the door opened and the doctor came in.

"This'll quiet her," he said. "Severe shock."

"I'm afraid so," I said.

He jerked his head over his shoulder in the direction of the stair well.

"Other one's holding up all right."

There was a sardonic inflection in his voice that should have told me more than it did. But it seemed to me then that it must have been perfectly apparent to all of them that Iris Nash was going on her nerve . . . and on the sure knowledge that everybody in the place couldn't indulge in the luxury of cracking up and sleeping off the first frightful hours of this with a shot in the arm. That's being rather hard on Lowell, I suppose; but I really didn't feel that her virulent attack on her stepmother before the assembled police had any justification in shock or nerves or anything else. If she'd thought what she said, and I suppose she really did, she should never have said it. This flying to bits every time anything didn't please her was more like her mother, really, than like Lowell. Marie Nash's life with Randall, I knew, had been one stormy scene after another, with a ninety mile gale raging at the drop of a hat. Lowell's scenes had hitherto been like her father's—the product of a carefully designed plan of action that could seize an opportunity and make the most of it, as Randall Nash had done on Christmas Eve when he'd told the story of the Nash vault. The business downstairs fitted in so perfectly with what had gone on at my house after the dog was found dead that I was really alarmed. If Lowell had set out to get even with Iris, she had certainly scored a strike with her first ball. There was no doubt of that.

However, there was also no use wasting moral indignation on anyone so completely and outrageously pagan as a modern eighteen-year-old. The interresting thing to me was seeing how my sympathy, that had been with Lowell since she was four and swiped the funeral wreath, had changed since the Christmas Eve scenes, and veered completely to Iris with her final attack a few minutes before. After all, you don't just go about accusing people you happen to dislike because they married your father of poisoning your dog, much less of poisoning your father. No matter how richly it's deserved—either the poison or the accusation.

And that of course was the point things had got to downstairs—not in so many words, as the men down there were all being strictly non-committal. They had put Iris and Mac out of the library and had closed the door. I could hear their voices as Steve Donaldson and I came down the stairs

after the doctor had left and Lowell was asleep, a yellow satin coverlet thrown over her exotic red figure on the white curtained bed.

Iris and Mac were in the drawing room, Iris sitting erect and detached on the gold damask sofa by the fire, her hands folded in her lap. She looked like someone finding herself alone suddenly in a terrible wasted land, drawing into herself, building up an impenetrable wall, remote and untouchable. Mac on the other hand was pacing back and forth like a caged animal, his hands deep in his trousers' pockets, his black tie slightly cock-eyed, distressed and a little sore too. He gave Steve what my younger kid would call a dirty look, and so should I for want of a better word, and looked appealingly at me. I nodded reassuringly. He blew his nose hard, picked up the decanter and poured himself a drink. Just as he put his thumb on the trigger of the syphon Captain Lamb appeared in the door.

He came quickly across the room as he saw what Mac was doing.

"Sorry," he said. "I'll have to take that along. Is this the set-up your husband had on the desk when you came in, Mrs. Nash?"

"Except that the syphon was empty," Iris said calmly. "I rinsed it out, as much as you can do without taking it apart. I filled it with water from the pantry faucet and recharged it."

Captain Lamb picked it up. It was one of those patent arrangements—dark blue with a yellow stripe round its shoulder, chromium cap and trigger. Iris was looking at it. Her eyes shifted to the decanter on the low table. Captain Lamb picked it up, took Mac's drink out of his hands and poured it back into the decanter.

"I wouldn't drink that if I were you."

Mac looked startled. "You——"

"All the rest of us have been drinking it," Steve Donaldson said evenly. "It seems to me you fellows are jumping to some pretty quick conclusions."

He was repeating, curiously enough, Colonel Primrose's exact admonition to him.

Captain Lamb looked at him steadily. "We aren't jumping to any conclusions. We are following our regular routine in cases where the cause of death is unknown."

It sounded like a sentence from the Coroner's Act, or something.

"Look," Mac said suddenly. "He's been acting darned queer lately, if you ask me. Maybe he . . . killed himself. He——"

Captain Lamb nodded. "That's one of the possibilities we have to consider."

"I think you can save yourselves that trouble," Iris said quietly. "My husband wouldn't possibly have committed suicide. —But the doctors have told him for years that he would kill himself if he didn't stop drinking. Dr. Clem Lewis at Johns Hopkins told him so again last month. I advise you to see him."

Captain Lamb nodded and wrote the name down in his notebook. He took the decanter and syphon. Mac and Steve and I watched him cross the room and go out into the hall, closing the door behind him. Iris was staring into the fire, her hands clenching the edge of the sofa until her knuckles stood out shiny white. Suddenly she got up and stood facing us, her face white and drawn under the burnished copper of her bright hair. She wanted to speak. I thought she was going to, but she didn't. She looked first at Mac, then at Stephen Donaldson, and turned back to the fire. I looked at Steve. His face was drawn. He was staring at her back as she stood there, the flames licking up the dry log on either side of her, lighting up the cloth of gold tissue of her slim sheathed body, bare to the waist in back, her smooth skin only a paler gold than her gown.

"Iris," he said abruptly. "I don't want to alarm you, but——"

She turned, a quick smile in her green eyes.

"I know. You think I ought to get a lawyer."

The smile spread to her red lips. "—A first-rate criminal lawyer," she added coolly.

Steve's face darkened.

"I'm only——"

She interrupted him. "I know, Steve—thanks! You're probably right. I can see, thanks to——"

She paused. She was going to say "Lowell," I thought, but she changed it.

"Thanks to Captain Lamb—that I'm going to need one. And now, if you don't mind . . . and if it's all right with the police . . . I'd like to be alone.—Except you, Grace,—do you mind staying?"

Steve flushed again, started to speak, turned brusquely and went out. Mac came over and held out his hand.

"Gee, Iris," he said lamely. "—If there's anything I can do . . ."

She smiled.

"Thanks, Mac. You sort of stand by—Lowell will want you, a little later."

He looked grateful, and moistened his lips. But after all there wasn't very much that anybody a great deal more articulate than Mac could have said. I followed him over to the door and held it while he went out. One of Lamb's men was coming down the stairs. He had a small brown bottle in his hand. I don't think he liked my looks, for some reason, for he put the bottle behind him quickly, narrowing his eyes the way Sergeant Buck does when he looks at me, and kept his gaze fixed on me until I'd closed the drawing room door. I had a numb cold feeling in the pit of my stomach as I turned back to Iris.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Turn off the lights on that tree, will you?" she said suddenly. Her voice sounded like tearing silk. "They'll drive me out of my mind."

I hadn't noticed they were on. I unscrewed two or three so they all went out.

"You'd better hang on to it," I said. "You're going to need it."

"I know I am." She laughed with sudden bitterness. "Where do you get first-rate criminal lawyers?" she asked, in a caught strangled voice.

"I wouldn't know. Why didn't you ask Steve?"

She shook her head. "No, darling."

Her green eyes met mine squarely. "He thinks I poisoned Randall.—Do you, Grace?"

"I'd rather wait and see if he *was* poisoned, first," I said, in as matter-of-fact a voice as I could manage. "And I'll tell you."

She nodded calmly. Then we were quiet. Out in the hall we could hear the slow labored tread of men carrying a heavy load. I glanced quickly at her. She was standing there in front of the fire, her eyes widened, lips parted. She bent her head and held it there until the door closed and we heard a motor start, whirring in the silent night. I saw the tears on her face as she turned and buried her head in her arms on the carved mantel, her bare pale gold shoulders quivering. I put my handkerchief in her hand, remembering that she had wiped up the spot on the mahogany surface of the desk with hers.

The front door opened and closed again, and the door behind us opened. Colonel Primrose came in. He stood there a moment, his hand on the silver knob, looking at Iris. At the

first sound of the opening door she had raised her head and dried her eyes. When she turned she was in complete control of herself again. I saw the guarded admiration in Colonel Primrose's eyes as he hesitated, changing his tack, plainly, now that he saw her away from Lowell and the rest of them.

"Sit down, Iris," he said quietly. "You too, Mrs. Latham. I want to talk to you both."

I sat down. Iris did not move. Colonel Primrose glanced up at her, cocking his head down and around with a quizzical flicker in his eyes.

"I'm not entirely unofficial, Iris," he said steadily.

She nodded.

"I know you're not—and that's precisely the point, Colonel Primrose. I've been advised this evening to get a first-rate criminal lawyer. I think—if you don't mind—that's what I'll do. And . . . before I talk to anyone—even remotely official."

Colonel Primrose sat down. He looked up at her with sharp steady appraisal.

"It's entirely up to you, my dear.—I hadn't, somehow, expected you to take that attitude."

Their eyes met evenly.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

He sat down, leaning back in the cherry damask fireside chair without taking his eyes off hers.

"Possibly I'm not quite clear. I'd assumed that if, by any change, Randall's death should turn out not to be natural, you'd be the first person who'd want it properly settled."

He hesitated an instant and went coolly on.

"I know, of course, it's the fashion to assume the police are not only fools, but scoundrels who try to hang the first person they lay eyes on."

Iris moved abruptly, her face suddenly hard.

"That's quite false," Colonel Primrose went on placidly. "When they do happen to hang the first person they lay eyes on, it's because that person is guilty. However."

He got up.

"I want to tell you—for your own information—what the situation appears to be, on the face of it. You'd better count on the fact that Randall was poisoned. They'll know definitely in the morning."

He hesitated a moment, looking steadily at her, and went calmly on.

"You were presumably the last person in the house this evening. When we came back you went into the library, and

destroyed what was probably direct evidence as to the means of Randall's death. Those are two very serious points that you'll be called on to answer when the District Attorney's office gets around to it."

He moved toward the door.

"If there's anything I can do to help you at all, I hope you'll call on me."

He glanced at me. "I assume you're staying here until morning, Mrs. Latham."

I nodded furiously. I had never heard anything so brutal in my life . . . or seen anything so marvellous as the way Iris Nash took it squarely on the chin without a quiver.

We heard him go out and close the door behind him.

"Well," I said, "that's that."

She sat down as suddenly as if someone had knocked her feet out from under her. I went over beside her. She gripped my hand. Her own was ice-cold. Her whole body was trembling like a blade of grass.

She closed her eyes.

"I'm afraid, Grace," she whispered suddenly, trembling uncontrollably. "Horribly, horribly afraid!"

I sat there stupidly, saying nothing. I couldn't think of anything at all to say. Then quite suddenly she opened her eyes and looked around at me. "Will you do something for me, Grace?"

"Surely," I said. "What is it?"

"Call up the Emergency Hospital and find out how Angie's mother is. I've *got* to know."

I looked at the clock on the mantel. It was twenty minutes past five.

"Hospitals carry on all night, I suppose," I said, and got up. Then I came to a dead stop.

"There's a phone in the pantry," she said quickly.

The pantry light was still on. There was a tray of ice cubes in the sink, half melted where they'd been left and forgotten. Iris's handkerchief was on the shelf above it. It was quite dry. I put it in the pocket of my lace jacket to give her, picked up the phone book and dialed the hospital number.

"Can you tell me how Mrs. Marie Lowell Nash is this morning?" I asked, trying to sound as casual about calling it morning as if I was just getting out the mop to start the day's work instead of still being in a lace evening gown and silver sandals.

A crisp efficient voice answered me, with just a hint of surprise.

"Who is calling, please?"

"Mrs. Nash's former husband's home," I said, hoping that way to get something more definite than the usual "She's doing very nicely, thank you."

And I did. The voice hesitated, and spoke quietly.

"I'm sorry—Mrs. Nash died this morning at twenty-five minutes past one. Her son has been notified."

6

I stared stupidly into the wall, the telephone still in my hand, the dial tone zinging in my ear. Marie Nash dead . . . It wasn't possible, it couldn't be. But it was. When at last I put down the phone and turned to go back into the drawing room, Iris Nash was in the door looking at me. She knew instantly, without my saying a word.

"Poor Angie," she said softly.

"You'd better go to bed for a couple of hours," I said. It seemed to me—and in spite of the Fifth Commandment—that Angie's difficulties were definitely behind him, Iris's were just beginning.

She shook her head, "I don't want to lie down."

We went back toward the drawing room.

"You'll think I'm pretty ghastly, I suppose. Maybe it's just the effect of shock and I'll come out of it tomorrow. But right now I don't feel any of the things I know I ought to feel. All I really feel is the almost unbearable relief of having Lowell out of my sight, and . . . and Randall."

"Look, darling," I said. "I know—but there are a lot of things you can't say . . . not out loud, you know."

"I know."

She drew a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

"But I've got to tell you this. I've never told anybody—not even myself, really. I only knew it tonight, while I was waiting for Randall to come home."

She looked at me with wide open eyes, like a child.

"I couldn't have carried on here another day, Grace. I couldn't have come into this house tonight, by myself. My father drank too much. I just couldn't have stood it any longer."

She turned away with a faint sudden smile on her lips.

"I would have left before, except—and you'll think this is pretty funny—I couldn't bear to leave Lowell alone here with him. That and another reason that doesn't matter now."

She sat down and spread her hands out before the dying fire.

"I don't know what it's going to be like tomorrow, or next month, but right now I feel just as if I'd been struggling through a horrible nightmare, and had waked up suddenly and found . . . everything quite sane and lovely again."

"Look here," I said. "I'm sure you'd better get a lawyer. I'm going to call up a man I know and find out who to get. You stay here."

She nodded. I went out into the pantry again and closed the door. Then, with only a very faint qualm, I dialed Colonel Primrose.

When he answered I said, "Tell me who to get for Iris."

I'm sure he hadn't been asleep, that he knew I'd call and had just been waiting.

"Call Belden Doyle in New York in the morning," he said calmly. "I'll get in touch with him. He'll be expecting you. Now you go to bed, both of you."

That was simple to say, and it was simpler to do then than it was later, when each time I closed my eyes I opened them to find the net around Iris Nash drawing tighter and tighter, until it seemed there was no human agency that could release its strangling hold—not even Belden Doyle, who was after all too human.

I put down the phone and went back to Iris. She was sitting motionless where I'd left her, staring into the dying fire. Her lips moved. I leaned down. "I never knew what happened to make him change so much," she whispered.

I'm not sure which I dreaded most when I opened my eyes in the Nashes' blue guest room at eight o'clock and remembered all at once why I was there: the morning meeting between Iris and Lowell, or the return of Captain Lamb with the report from the autopsy. I suppose it was the first because it seemed the more imminent. I rang for the maid. When she came in—scared pea-green—she brought me a bag with my daytime clothes that Lilac had sent over.

"Oh, it's horrible, Mrs. Latham," the girl said, in a hushed voice. "But they'll never make me believe she did it. I never believed she poisoned Miss Lowell's dog either. Miss Lowell will never be the lady she is if she lives a hundred years."

I looked at her, a little surprised at her vehemence. She was a large apple-cheeked girl with blue eyes and light hair, vaguely familiar though I couldn't quite place her.

"Where were you last night?" I asked, pouring out a cup of fragrant coffee.

"Mrs. Nash let us all off right after dinner. She's awful nice that way. Except Wilkins—he's the butler except when he drives Mr. Nash."

"He's new, isn't he?"

"Yes, ma'am, pretty new. He came this Fall. I've been here since May. You don't remember me, but I came just before you went away in June. I used to work in the bakery—my name's Molly, I'm Mrs. Murphy's youngest girl."

"I do remember you, very well. Your mother died, didn't she?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mrs. Nash lets me come here and go to school in the afternoons. —Mrs. Latham, can't you make Miss Lowell be nicer to her?"

"Oh dear!" I thought.

She flushed crimson, but went on. "Because Wilkins says when the police find out what a dog fight goes on in this house they'll hang her for sure."

"Is there a dog fight?" I asked.

"Not out loud. It wouldn't be so bad if it was. It's just underneath. Miss Lowell's always doing just what Mrs. Nash doesn't want her to do, and being mean to Mr. Mac all the time."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Molly, if I were you," I said.

"No, ma'am. But . . . maybe you'd talk to Miss Lowell . . ."

I looked at her. There was something pleading, and frightened, in her round wholesome face that startled me.

"What's the matter, Molly?"

She hesitated for a moment, flushing again.

"Oh, it's just that this morning, ma'am, when I took her tray in, she was talking to somebody on the phone, telling them she knew her father had been poisoned, because that dog of hers was poisoned.—She kept calling him A. J. That's Mr. McClean, isn't it?"

"Have you said anything about this in the kitchen?"

"Oh no, Mrs. Latham. I wouldn't do that."

"You see you don't, Molly. I'll talk to Miss Lowell."

"Yes, ma'am."

She went out. I put down my coffee cup and leaned my head back against the cool pillows. Nothing in the house had seemed to me to make sense, this last week, but this made less. The "A. J." Lowell had been talking to was Mac's uncle. He was Randall Nash's oldest and most intimate friend, Angus was named after him. I tried to remember all I knew about him. Mac, who was A. J.'s brother's son, had lived with him since he was a small child and both his parents were killed in

a train wreck in Colorado in 1915 on their way to the San Francisco Exposition. It was usually said in Georgetown that the reason A. J. had remained a bachelor was that he and Randall Nash both wanted to marry Marie Lowell and Randall got her. I wouldn't know how true that was. Certainly if he envied Randall the possession of Marie after a short time it only shows there are some people who don't recognize a break when they get it.

A. J., I knew, was president of the Colonial Trust Company, had rheumatism and indigestion, lived in a crazy rambling house out Foxall Road, was austere and upright, thought the world had gone definitely to hell and didn't approve of lip stick and young people drinking. Just how it happened that he did approve of the idea of Mac's marrying Lowell, when he didn't approve of at least one-half the things Lowell does, is something that's always defeated me. However, that's the way it was. Oddly enough, Lowell and Mac were all for it too, really. The only person who seemed undecided about it had been Randall Nash—not seriously opposed, I think, but certainly not wildly enthusiastic about it. At least not when he'd talked to me in the Spring before I went away.

But that was all beside the point. What concerned me about Angus James McClean as Molly closed the door and left me alone was that with his devotion to Marie Nash and Randall and their daughter Lowell he combined a strong dislike—or mistrust, or suspicion, or more probably a little of all three—for Randall Nash's second wife. Since Iris had come to the house in Beall Street A. J. had come only when he had to, and then usually when he knew she'd be away. It seemed to me, just off-hand, that nothing would please him more, probably, than to have his worst fears realized so . . . and that Lowell Nash, knowing that, was hitting definitely below the belt.

I moved my tray off my lap to the foot of the bed and got up. I'd told Molly I'd talk to Lowell, and while I didn't look forward to it with joy, I knew somebody had to do it. I slipped on the green quilted satin robe Iris had given me, took a deep breath, went out into the silent hall and down to Lowell's door, knocked and went in.

She was curled up in a wretched sullen ball on an Empire chaise longue, her breakfast tray untouched on the floor beside her. The morning paper was spread out on top of it. She looked up at me. There was no trace of tears in her dark thick-fringed eyes or in the last night's makeup still on her face. And that was going to make it harder, I saw at once. If

she ever really had a soft edge to her valiant little spirit no one could guess it.

I sat down at her feet. I saw the guarded look come into her eyes that should have told me I was about to waste an awful lot of breath.

"Lowell," I said. I must have sounded insufferably stuffy to her. "There are a lot of ways of fighting . . . and some of them aren't very sporting."

"Was it very sporting to poison a helpless dog—or my father?" she said bitterly.

"Listen, darling. Until you *know* your father was poisoned it's stupid to say that."

"I do know he was poisoned."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. That's all."

"Listen, Lowell," I said. "If he was poisoned, it means he was murdered. Do you seriously believe, honestly, in your heart, that Iris murdered him?"

Her lips closed in a tight red line to keep from quivering. Her dark eyes faltered ever so imperceptibly. Then she nodded her head stubbornly.

"Nobody else would want to," she said dully.

"Why do you think she did want to?"

"She hates all of us—she wants to marry Gilbert St. Martin."

I caught my breath for an instant.

"Isn't divorce the more usual procedure, in that event?"

She flushed. "Father wouldn't divorce her. Edith St. Martin tried to get him to, but he wouldn't."

I tried not to gape like an idiot.

"What are you talking about!" I exclaimed, in spite of myself.

"That's right. And maybe I'm old-fashioned . . ."

My heart sank. That was Marie Nash's opening gambit every time she set in to flay the hide off some poor woman who'd done anything from drinking a cocktail to hijacking somebody else's marriage. I had the upsetting feeling that I was seeing an exhibition of dual personality, or some unearthly terrifying survival—looking at Lowell, hearing her mother.

". . . She's always with Gilbert St. Martin. And——"

I interrupted her.

"You're not being old-fashioned, Lowell. You're being unintelligent. You're certainly not going to tell me that when you marry Mac you couldn't go out to lunch with Steve Donaldson, say, without planning to murder Mac——"

"I'm not going to marry Mac."

I stared again.

"Did you tell A. J. that?"

That was a mistake. Her cheeks flushed hotly. "So my phone calls are tapped! And this morning I woke up early and went down to the kitchen to get a glass of milk, and I found a note saying 'Please don't take Miss Lowell the morning paper.' —She thinks she can make it so unbearable here that I'll go live with my mother. I'll just show her."

My heart sank. I stared at her, speechless. She picked up the paper.

"I'll just show her."

Then I saw her whole body tense and her lips part suddenly. She was staring at the paper with wide incredulous eyes. I looked down at it. On the back page was a picture of her mother. It was quite a long "Flash." "Well-known Divorcee Dies Here. Socially Prominent Figure in Depression. Divorcée Succumbs to Pneumonia at Emergency Hospital."

I've never known how much Marie Nash meant to her daughter, and I didn't find out now. Just then Molly tapped on the door. I opened it.

"Mrs. Nash says to tell Miss Lowell that Mr. Angus is downstairs."

Lowell got up. What little color there had been in her face before was gone. I watched her dress with slow automatic movements and slash a bright lip stick across her lips. At the door she stopped.

"Did she know my mother was dead?" she asked slowly.

I nodded. "Last night, when you were asleep. That's why she told them not to bring you the paper."

Anybody could have seen that. Anybody but Lowell in her present state.

"Wanted the pleasure of telling me herself, I guess," she said coldly, and went out.

I simply put my head in my hands and sat there, completely and utterly mute, thanking the Lord my offspring were distressingly dull, normal, uncomplicated boys. I believe anything anybody tells me now about adolescent girls, no matter how completely unbelievable it sounds.

It occurred to me then, as soon as I could think, that I was supposed to call Belden Doyle. I went back to my room and put in a call. Colonel Primrose had spoken to him; he would come about ten. I got dressed and went down stairs. Angus had gone, taking Lowell with him.

"He's terribly cut up, poor kid," Iris said. She had on a

dark brown frock, high at the throat, with long tight sleeves—she never wore black—and looked surprisingly fresh considering the ordeal she must have been through with Angus and Lowell.

"I called Mr. Doyle, he'll be here at ten," I said. "I'm going home. I'll be back."

"I wish you'd stay until after Mr. McClean comes," she said.

I was hesitating when the doorbell rang.

"That's him now, probably."

She took a deep breath and waited, as Wilkins announced him with the slightly oleaginous air that is what makes it so difficult for strangers in Washington to tell the butler from a second-term Congressman.

A. J. McClean is a neat, precise, dry man in the late fifties, I suppose, not quite middle height, bald except for a fringe of gray hair under his hat line. A pair of rimless nose glasses pinched into his straight thin nose have made two deep perpendicular lines between his grey eyebrows and given him a severe schoolmasterish air that his thin lips accentuate. He greeted me with a formal bow—I've known him fairly well a long time—and shook hands with Iris, who can scarcely know him at all. I suppose he felt Randall's death, no doubt, but he's definitely the kind of a man who would be still more troubled by the circumstances of it. It gave him an odd appearance now of taking the fact of death quite for granted.

"I have come in the spirit of friendship, Mrs. Nash," he said simply. Knowing as I did what young Lowell had been giving him not an hour before, I couldn't help but be slightly skeptical about that. I knew, however, that he has the name of being most definitely a man of his word.

"I have every faith that the autopsy will prove our present fears to be quite groundless," he went on earnestly. "Randall has been warned repeatedly that he can't drink. His system wouldn't stand it. When he came to my house last night I tried to reason with him."

Iris looked up. "Did he come to your house?"

"Yes. He came there shortly after ten-thirty o'clock. He telephoned you from there."

She nodded.

"I . . . I have been to Marie's. Angus and Lowell are there."

He paused, as if approaching a difficult situation.

"I would like to suggest, Mrs. Nash—and I hope you won't think it premature, so to speak . . ."

He came to a stop, and began again.

"It's about Lowell. I think she's taking this much harder than any of us realize . . . coming together this way, of course. I'm sure both her father and mother would approve of my idea."

"What is your idea, Mr. McClean?" Iris asked. She seemed disturbed and on her guard.

"All Lowell's family that meant anything to her is . . . gone," he went on quietly. "My nephew is the only person left at all close to her. I'm wondering now, Mrs. Nash, if it wouldn't be a wise thing for them to marry, as soon as possible, and go abroad."

Iris's eyes widened.

"Is this Mac's idea?"

"No, no. It is my own entirely."

Iris got up.

"I'm glad of that.—I'm afraid I can't approve of it, Mr. McClean, at all. But you know, of course, that I have no influence of any kind over Lowell. She's entirely her own mistress."

A. J. shook his head. "Fortunately or not, Mrs. Nash," he said deliberately, "that is not the case. Her father's will specifies that your consent is necessary if she marries before she is twenty-one."

Iris looked at him incredulously. "Are you . . . quite sure of that?"

A. J. nodded.

She sat down mechanically, I thought more upset by this than she had been by anything else.

"There's another point, incidentally, in his will that you should be prepared for, Mrs. Nash. The settlement made with his first wife at the time of their divorce was that in case he predeceased her she should receive what would have been her dower right had they not separated—one-third of his property. This arrangement was entered into in lieu of alimony. At the time of the divorce, as you may know, Randall was practically bankrupt, and Marie did not want to be a burden to him in his efforts to recover."

"Why should she have wanted alimony at all? Wasn't she a very rich woman?"

A dry light flickered behind A. J.'s pince nez.

"She had a strongly developed money sense," he said.

"Did he predecease her?" I asked practically.

Iris looked surprised. The idea had already occurred to A. J. He nodded with some approval.

"It's a vital point," he said. "I've asked the police to help us determine it.—I'm doing this, you understand, Mrs. Nash, in

my capacity as executor. Randall felt it would be less irksome to you to have everything taken off your hands."

"Out of them" seemed more to the point, I thought.

"You have of course been very adequately provided for."

"Thank you."

I thought for a moment A. J. had missed the ironic inflection, but he hadn't.

"I think, Mrs. Nash," he said, a dry barely noticeable hint of reproach in his voice, "that the best policy for all of us at this time is to curb our natural feelings, and work together in at least outward harmony."

She smiled quickly. "I'm sure you're perfectly right, Mr. McClean."

"I'll do my best to impress that fact on Lowell also," he added.

I began to realize for the first time at about this point that for Mr. A. J. McClean to come, as he had said, in friendship, had been more of a job than it had appeared, and that no doubt he really had put aside his natural inclination to accept Lowell's condemnation of her stepmother in an effort to perform his duty to his dead friend. There's a lot to be said for old-fashioned discipline, and A. J. had it. Maybe it was the Scot in him; or maybe, I thought, just that in the years he'd known Randall Nash he must have got well used to concealing what he called his private feelings. It was just that quality in him, I suppose, that made the Colonial Trust Company like Gibraltar when other banks were crashing all over the place, and made him accept the responsibility of a three-year-old child and carry it out himself when he could have shipped him off to a school and paid somebody else to do it for him. They might theoretically have done it better . . . but I doubt if Mac would have been any better if Madame Montessori had raised him personally.

A. J. looked at his watch. "My nephew can leave the bank at noon, if there's anything you want him to do for you, Mrs. Nash. Otherwise, I thought it was best for him to keep on with his regular routine."

The drawing room door opened, and Wilkins appeared.

"Mrs. St. Martin to see you, madame."

A. J. stiffened and got up, wincing as he straightened his knees.

"I'll wait upstairs," he said shortly.

7

Don't they like each other?" I asked.

Iris shrugged. "I don't know about these things."

Edith St. Martin had changed in the six months since I'd seen her last. She'd had her face lifted, and her hair dyed black except for two glistening white wings that made a sort of bright coronet above her prominent dark eyes. She'd lost twenty pounds and got herself a lorgnette, and if I hadn't known she was fifty-one I'd have thought she was in her late thirties. I should have, that is, until I saw her forget the plastic smile she wore, and saw the weary background behind the animated footlight in her eyes.

"My dear, I'm so sorry—I can't believe Randall was himself, I really can't. You mustn't take it too hard, I'm sure he didn't blame you, my dear, he was too *big* a man."

Both Iris and I looked so blank that Edith glanced sharply from one of us to the other.

"Have I said something wrong?—But surely . . . Gilbert told me he'd . . . committed suicide—he'd drunk something? You don't think it was accidental, my dear?"

There are two schools of thought about Edith St. Martin. One is that she's a silly, vague and weak-kneed woman, the victim of any persuasive scoundrel, who occasionally by the merest chance does something brilliantly shrewd. The other is that she's as shrewd as the devil and is vague and weak-kneed by the carefullest possible design. Each school explains Gilbert St. Martin in its own way. Her first husband I'm told belonged to the latter school, and left her in complete charge of a large fortune that's now larger by half. Her second husband I suspect belonged to the first school when he married her, and now heads the second—though I don't think he'd ever admit it.

"I mean . . . well, it's hard to see how an accident like that could happen, but then, of course, odd things do happen. My own cousin Admiral Forbes Lawton had a British naval

officer visiting him one night and he died the next morning—the British naval officer—and everyone was horribly worried for fear it was the gin and Forbes would die too, but it wasn't because he's still alive, as far as that goes. That's a lovely dress, Iris, and isn't it nice you're here, Grace, to sort of stand by as they say in the service. Really, Iris, it's too dreadful. Now I don't suppose Lowell will come out this winter, and the cards out and all. It really seems a shame."

Edith's gentle vague patter flowed on and on. If her listeners had to jump like grasshoppers to keep track of what she was saying, the lack of connection was in subject only, never in cadence.

"You went to the Assembly last night, didn't you. We didn't go, poor dear Gilbert had a frightful afternoon with the wife of a new member of some legation, she has the most bizarre taste, and Gilbert's doing over two rooms for her, and I know the reason he's there all the time is she's got the most ravishing daughter I've ever seen. Gilbert's utterly mad about her, I'm sure if I were to die tomorrow he'd marry her before I was cold in my grave . . . but dear me, I oughtn't to talk about . . . Darling, I'm *so* distressed about poor dear Randall, and to think of Marie going out, just like a candle my dear!"

We both waited patiently—knowing Edith very well. She inserted a thin Russian cigarette in a long jewelled holder and lighted it.

"I'm really *too* upset, to think when I saw her at Count Luigi's the other evening she was quite well—oh, she said she felt a bit rocky but you know how dear Marie was always feeling worst when she looked most like a fire horse. It just shows, my dear, we should never judge people, and I'm sure she caught cold looking at the night-blooming cereus with old General Ashburton, or maybe they were dancing too long—I always told Marie a woman of her age simply had to draw the line somewhere. She hadn't a thing on above the waist, and it's been cold you know, dear, it really has. I suppose you'll go back to New York to live now, Iris darling, Washington must be an awful bore really, when you don't really belong, and I'm simply making Gilbert take a six months' vacation, we're going to the Orient. I've been down to see about reservations this morning. Dear Gilbert wants to go immediately, tomorrow —he's so impulsive when he makes up his mind, nothing can stop him. I know poor dear Randall won't mind my not going to his funeral."

"I'm sure he won't," Iris said.

I wondered vaguely at this flinging of the gauntlet. So she

was keeping Gilbert then, even at the expense—which must have been a good deal to Edith—of taking him away for six months at the very beginning of the Season. Still, it wasn't surprising at all except in view of the astonishing information Lowell had thought she had, that Edith had tried to get Randall to divorce Iris so she and Gilbert could marry. However, that hadn't made sense from the beginning, so I discarded it promptly for the more realistic statement of her case that Edith had just finished, or at any rate was well into.

She blew the burned stub of her cigarette out of its jewel-encrusted holder, and put the holder in her bag. She powdered her nose, repaired the slight dent in the thick coating of her lip stick, put her vanity back in her bag and got up.

"Dear Iris—it's so marvellous to see you bearing up so wonderfully. You must see she gets out for a little walk, Grace, and a facial, darling; a facial will take that haggard look out of your face, dear, and I don't think it pays to let yourself go, even in time like these. If dear Gilbert weren't so rushed I know he'd be glad to take you for a little drive, he's so wonderful that way, he took my great-aunt Sophie to a movie the other day and she's so frightfully deaf. I'll see if I can't persuade him to come around, dear."

"Don't bother, please, Edith," Iris said. She got up. "It was sweet of you to come. I know how busy you must be getting ready to leave. I'll understand your not having time to come in again before you go. Good-bye, my dear."

She came back from the door.

"What is it Mr. McClean says about not letting our private feelings complicate matters? It's wonderful to have your private feelings so well under your thumb."

She walked down to the garden windows and stood looking out. I saw her body stiffen suddenly, and her hand tighten on the looped folds of the gold taffeta curtain. She turned back toward me, and stood there, looking silently at me, her face utterly white.

I hurried down to her, and looked out. Across the garden, where the snow lay in dirty patches on the sodden grass, were three men. One of them had a spade, and he was digging a hole by the wall. Thrown to one side, trampled in the mud, was a wreath of holly and mistletoe.

It seemed a strange place to be digging. I looked at Iris, bewildered.

She stood there very erect and rigid, straightening her shoulders, her face still deathly white, the pupils of her green eyes contracted to pin points in the bright light.

"It's the dog," she whispered. "They're digging up Senator McGilvray."

Her hand tightened until it was white on the curtain.

"Oh my God, Grace—then he *was* poisoned . . . and they know it! How awful! How awful!"

She stopped abruptly and we both turned at the sound of a voice behind us. Wilkins was standing there. Neither of us had heard him come in.

"The police are in the garden, madame."

His soft voice made my spine curl.

"Captain Lamb is in the library—will you see him, madame? There's another gentleman, a Mr. Doyle, with him. He says you expect him. Shall I show him in, madame?"

"Yes."

"Very good, madame.—How many will there be to lunch, madame?"

"Prepare for six, please."

He bowed and went out.

"Why don't you sack that man?" I demanded.

"I'm afraid to."

"Then I'll do it for you. He gives me the creeps."

She shook her head.

It happens to be absolutely infuriating to me the way servants and head waiters and hairdressers can and do intimidate women. I couldn't say definitely what it was about Wilkins that affected me as a snake affects a horse on a country bridle path. It may have been his too steady eyes, his moon-like face and white fat hands, or his silent padded feet. It was something, certainly. I may of course have only fancied there was a veiled insolence in his manner when he spoke to Iris; I can fancy astonishingly unreal things. However, the mere fact that Iris was afraid to fire him was alarming, if all my feeling about him was the result of too little sleep.

Iris's cold fingers tightened on my arm.

"Don't leave me yet," she whispered.

Wilkins opened the door. Captain Lamb came in—tall, lanky, hard blue eyes, long upper lip. Behind him was Belden Doyle, New York criminal lawyer who gets off all his women clients and three-fourths of his men, who prides himself—or so they say—on never having taken a customer he believed was innocent, or cheated the gallows of one he finally believed was guilty. The point, I suppose, being that if he could convince himself he was wrong the jury would be a pushover. I'd known all this, vaguely, but I hadn't really realized its significance until Belden Doyle came forward silently past

Captain Lamb, took Iris's chin in his hand and looked down penetratingly into her stricken face for a long full moment. It struck me with a horrible sudden clearness that if Colonel Primrose had suggested this man of all possible people, then Iris Nash's position was just about as dangerous as it was possible for it to be. I think she must have realized it too, just at that moment; she shrank away from him, less in control of herself than I'd yet seen her.

Doyle turned to Captain Lamb—grave, easy and competent, with his high bulging forehead and huge nose, and the almost hypnotic eyes and long mobile mouth that suggested a supreme actor on a desperate stage.

"My client understands, Captain, that her husband was poisoned with cyanide of potassium," he said.

His voice was mobile too, and even in a sentence like that, spoken with no judge or jury present, evenly and directly and without a sideways glance at anyone, it ranged a whole gamut of theatrical effects, rich and compelling. I couldn't help but see that stagey as it was, it was awfully, awfully good—for its purpose. But the clear sharp realization of what its purpose was sent a thrill of horror down my spine . . . for nobody could fail to come to the obvious conclusion, that an innocent person had no need of so superb a defender.

Iris Nash gasped. I saw her hands grip the arm of the cherry damask wing chair as she steadied herself against it. Captain Lamb could not have seen her, for Belden Doyle was standing just in front of her and very close, quite obviously for the purpose of keeping Captain Lamb from seeing her. And that was a mistake, for unless Iris is a far better actress than I should have thought—or unless Captain Lamb had eyes that could see further into human duplicity than mine—I could have sworn it would have been as obvious to him as to me that that information came to her as a dreadful surprise.

"It has not as yet been determined—as I understand it—whether that poison was administered by his own hand . . . or even that it was administered in this house."

Doyle moved away, towards Captain Lamb.

"My client understands of course, Captain, that she will have an opportunity of talking with the District Attorney at the earliest possible moment . . . as she is of course laboring under the greatest possible anguish in her desire to know what led up to the circumstances of last night. And now, if I may talk to Mrs. Nash in private a few moments . . ."

I think Captain Lamb and I were outside in the hall, propelled there with the most extraordinary finesse, before either of us had clearly realized what was about to happen.

Not, however, before I'd caught the agonized appeal in Iris Nash's face as she realized she was about to be left alone with him.

Captain Lamb, outside in the hall, favored me with a brief saturnine grin.

"Next time they want a gentleman bouncer for the White House . . ." he said.

I hardly heard him, for through the open library door I could hear A. J.'s dry precise voice.

"It's inconceivable, Mr. Yates. Utterly inconceivable. He was a man of the strongest moral fibre. Oh, I grant you he had a weakness for liquor. That was something apart—like an abscessed limb."

It sounded like a convenient sophistry to me. I tried to picture A. J. admitting that a bank robber had fine moral qualities entirely extraneous from his general character as an abscessed limb.

"He had everything to live for, sir."

There was genuine emotion in his voice at that moment. No one, hearing that, could have doubted his devotion to the dead man, or his repugnance at the thought, apparently advanced, that he could have taken his own life.

My heart sank . . . and then it sank even lower, for the large and burly figure of Sergeant Phineas T. Buck appeared in the door. The stolid gaze he bent on me was an extraordinary blend of virtually every emotion except the tenderer ones. Disgust, I should think, was paramount, but there was a large dash of resignation and a considerable amount of grim dogged determination. I hadn't then, and haven't now, the faintest doubt that Sergeant Buck seriously entertained the notion that I had myself, with my own hand, murdered Randall Nash just for the purpose of having Colonel Primrose in and out of the house when I would be also in and out.

And to prove that Sergeant Buck's general air of suspicion was not just my own guilty conscience, Captain Lamb glanced from him to me with blue eyes sharpening warily.

"I understood you're a friend of the family, Mrs. . . ."

"Latham," I said.

"Mrs. Latham?—You were here when they found the body?"

"Yes.—With Colonel Primrose. I . . . found it."

"You actually found the body?"

I nodded.

"But it must have been there for a long time," I said. "I mean, I really didn't bring it with me."

Sergeant Buck cleared his throat. I don't know how disapproval could be more effectively expressed. "They'd like to speak to you, ma'am," he said, of course out of one corner of his mouth.

Just then Colonel Primrose came out.

"Oh, good morning, Mrs. Latham," he said. He looked disgustingly fit, some way . . . like one of the fire horses Edith St. Martin talks about, suddenly put in to harness with the bells for a six alarm fire ringing in his ears. For a moment the awful idea occurred to me that it ought to surprise people he hadn't done in Randall Nash himself, just to liven the place up a bit. I recognized, however, that I was slightly jaundiced, with Sergeant Buck suddenly added to far too little sleep . . . and my breakfast curdled, absolutely, by Lowell's spleen.

"Good morning," I said. His sharp black eyes twinkled and snapped as if they'd had an overcharge of electricity. It occurred to me that I'd better step warily or I'd get bogged before I knew it . . . for somewhere in the few steps I'd taken across the hall into the library where Randall Nash's outline in broad white chalk still lay on the floor, I had made up my mind that even if Iris Nash, by some awful chance, was —as they say in crime books—guilty as hell, I was on her side; I would do everything in my power to help her. I don't know whether it was Lowell's venom, or Belden Doyle's melodrama, Captain Lamb's steely eye, or Sergeant Buck's fishy one, or just Colonel Primrose's maddening rosy well-being, that made me decide that. Maybe it was all five. It might have been A. J.'s dry precise casuistry, or even simply Iris's own slim green-eyed anguish . . . or possibly the hideous memory of those men out by the garden wall digging up Senator McGilvray. Whatever it was, it was very definite, and it coalesced suddenly, just then, in my stomach—where my emotional convictions seem always to lodge. I didn't then, naturally, know that I myself held, at that very time, the one tangible, physical clue that was eventually to turn the scales against Iris as decisively and violently as if Sergeant Buck had planted his great two hundred and twenty pounds squarely in one of them, with nothing in the other but a fragile tragic wisp of a green-and-copper lady.

"This is the District Attorney, Mr. Selman Yates . . . Mrs. Latham," Colonel Primrose said. I saw a handsome black-haired man with a tanned face, about forty-five; and I drew a freer breath. There was something about him that radiated a sort of vital confidence. My idea of district attorneys being gleaned entirely from the films, it was a happy surprise to see

his hat on the table, not on the back of his head, and while he did have a cigar in his mouth—which he took out when we were introduced—the end of it wasn't chewed to tatters that he had to keep spitting out on the floor. Furthermore it smelled like a good cigar.

"You came in to telephone, I understand, Mrs. Latham."

I nodded. "It was about three. I didn't see him at first. The light there was on and the rest of the room dark. That's why Mrs. Nash hadn't seen him, I suppose."

"Had you been in the room before?"

"No. I stood in the doorway there, watching her get the things off the table."

"She came in, as you stood there, and got . . ."

"She got the decanter, the syphon and the glass."

"Which were just here, on the table?"

I nodded.

"It didn't strike you at all then that anything was . . . odd?"

I hesitated. "Not really. I concluded—as I suppose everyone did—from the general set-up that Mr. Nash had probably cut loose again. He didn't drink like most people. He'd been drinking heavily already that afternoon, at my house."

There was a little stir in the room.

"At your house?" Mr. Yates said quickly.

"He came there while I was away, and said he'd wait. The maid brought him in a tray with a decanter and glass. He drank quite a lot—the decanter was about half-emptied when I got there. I was later than I'd phoned I'd be. He didn't wait longer."

"I see, Mrs. Latham.—To get back here. When Mrs. Nash came in, what did she do, exactly?"

"She slipped off her wrap. The door of this room was ajar. She pushed it open."

"She seemed surprised not to find her husband in here?"

"No. She seemed distressed—I thought—at the sight of the decanter and the overturned glass."

"What overturned glass, Mrs. Latham?"

"The highball glass he'd been drinking from. It was tipped over on the desk. The chair was pushed back."

"What did she do?"

"She made the best of it. She went in and picked up the glass, and brought the tray out. The rest of us were waiting in the hall—that is, Colonel Primrose and I were. Mr. Donaldson had gone into the drawing room. She started out to the kitchen, and came back to see if there was any soda left in the syphon. There wasn't. She took the syphon and glass

out to the kitchen. I took the tray with the decanter into the drawing room."

He nodded. "Mrs. Latham—would you say she was perfectly composed, quite normal?"

"No," I said sharply. "Of course she wasn't. For the perfectly swell reason that she thought her husband had staggered off upstairs . . . and that—if I may say so—hell might break loose at any minute. I assure you alcohol affected Mr. Nash in a very violent fashion."

"He was . . . apt to be unpleasant?"

"Definitely."

"And you put her . . . her perturbation down to the fact that she thought he was drunk—not that she knew he was dead?"

"I did, certainly."

"What if I tell you, Mrs. Latham, that no one could stand at the corner of the desk there, with that light on, without seeing a body lying where Mr. Nash's was lying?"

"I'd say you were wrong. I didn't see it, not for some time, when I came in. It's perfectly possible to stare at something right in front of your nose without seeing it."

He smiled.

"What about this?—Mrs. Nash did see him there. She thought he had passed out, from liquor—didn't know he was dead. She went back to the rest of you, knowing he was there and planning to get him to bed later, without letting her guests know about it."

I shook my head.

"In that case, she would have suggested I go to the pantry phone, instead of coming in here."

"And how did that incident of your telephoning come up, Mrs. Latham."

"It was getting late. I thought my youngsters would be wondering where I was if they came in from a party and found I wasn't home in bed. The rest of them didn't want to go—it was very pleasant by the fire there."

I could feel Sergeant Buck's mountainous glowering at what no doubt was perfectly clear to him as a perversion of the fact. I've not the slightest doubt Colonel Primrose had told him he'd been kept against his will.

"Somebody suggested I phone home and say I'd be along later."

"Who suggested that?"

"I don't remember. I think it was Colonel Primrose."

I knew it was Iris, but I thought Sergeant Buck had it coming.

"It wasn't Mrs. Nash?"

"I don't remember."

"And you don't think Mrs. Nash was waiting for the opportunity of sending someone else in there to find her husband's body?"

My stomach felt as if it were going through a wringer. "No. I don't think that at all."

"You know, Mrs. Latham," he said quietly, "we have found a large quantity—five grains—of cyanide of potassium in Randall Nash's body. Death took place within a very short time after he took that poison into his system."

"I have no reason to doubt it, if you tell me it's true, Mr. Yates," I said. "That's a matter of fact that I wouldn't know anything about."

He smiled faintly.

"One other matter, Mrs. Latham. I have interviewed Miss Lowell Nash this morning."

I looked at A. J. He gave me instantly the impression of an old and desiccated cat licking the canary's feathers off its chin. Poor Iris, I thought.

"I understand from her there has been considerable dissension in the house recently."

"I trust you've also understood that she's been largely responsible for it," I said acidly, and was sorry the moment the words were out of my mouth.

"Are you referring to the dog, Mrs. Latham?"

"No. To a general lack of cooperation rather."

He nodded. "You're staying on here with Mrs. Nash?"

"No. I'm going home. I live directly behind here. If she wants me to come back this evening I'll be glad to."

"Thank you, Mrs. Latham."

Colonel Primrose followed me to the door.

"I want to talk to you," he said. "May I come in for lunch?"

"If the Sergeant thinks it's safe," I answered. "A lot of people are being poisoned, you know."

"I'll leave him at home and take the chance myself."

8

I didn't expect, when I opened my front door, to find Steve Donaldson pacing up and down as if this was the circus wagon and he a panther fresh from the jungle.

"For God's sake Mrs. Latham, what's happening?—And why did they get Belden Doyle?"

I took off my coat and galoshes.

"I *think* someone recommended a first-class criminal lawyer," I said. "Don't tell me you hadn't heard."

"Yes—but Doyle, for God's sake! You might as well paint Guilty all across her forehead."

"That seems to have been done—very effectively—some time before Mr. Doyle entered on the scene," I said. "I'd thought you were one of the people who first recognized it."

He started pacing up and down again.

"Can't you stand still?" I said. "You make me dizzy."

He stopped abruptly and looked at me. Then he came over to where I was standing by the windows looking out into the sodden garden toward the Palladian window and yellow brick pediment of the Nash house showing above the wall.

"I'm sorry!" he said. His face was drawn and tense and he hadn't shaved. His blue eyes looked as if they'd traversed a half-acre of hell since I'd first met him.

"Look here!" he went on, abruptly. "Will you tell me something?"

"I don't know much," I said.

"Was it . . . cyanide they found . . . ?"

I nodded. "How did you know?"

He looked like a fighter who'd just taken a frightful blow just on the jaw from an invisible antagonist—should that be conceivable—and taken it standing. I stared at him open-mouthed.

"Why?" I whispered at last. "Do you . . ."

He didn't answer. He just looked past me out of the windows a long time.

"Look," I said. "Somebody's got to start making sense, or I'm going mad. The point about it is that he *was* poisoned—not what he was poisoned with. Or is it?"

"Skip it," he said abruptly.

"I'm glad to.—If there's anything in it, I don't think Mr. Selman Yates will."

He felt in his pocket and brought out his pipe automatically, still staring at the house across the gardens.

"I used to see her around last winter when I was here," he said suddenly. "Always across the room, with a thousand people in between us. I never tried to meet her, because . . . well, somebody told me she was married—to some rich guy. And I guess——"

"My God," I said, "don't tell me *you* guess you're just old-fashioned."

He looked at me, a little hurt, not understanding what I meant. There was no reason why he should, of course.

"I suppose it does sound like tripe.—Anyway, that's the way it was. And I saw her every place I went. Even when she wasn't there, after a while. When I came back this Fall I kept looking for her every place. But I didn't see her. I kept thinking something must have happened to her, or she was sick, or something. I nearly went crazy. Then I met Lowell at a tea the day after Thanksgiving and she asked me to come in for a cocktail next day. And there she was."

"And . . . you kept coming back."

"She didn't know it," he said doggedly. He lighted his pipe and put the match back in the box. My husband used to do that. You could take a dozen burnt sticks out before you got to a live one. It always seemed to me legitimate grounds for divorce.

"She didn't know I was on earth."

He laughed, but there wasn't much mirth in it, if any. His pipe had gone out, of course. He chewed the bit a few moments, standing in front of the empty hearth, completely sunk.

"Well," I said, "she's a widow, now."

He raised his head and looked at me for a moment without saying anything. Perhaps he was going to speak. I don't know. But he didn't get the chance. Lilac came in.

"Mr. St. Martin, he's in the hall, Mis' Grace," she said. "No he ain', he's right here."

And he was.—In his camel's hair coat and brown hat with the bright little feather at the side. The contrast between his glowing fresh-shaven face and Steve Donaldson's day-old beard was amazing.

He saw Steve. "Oh," he said. "I didn't know you were busy."

He tossed his hat on the table.

If there's anything in the business of elective affinities, or certain people having chemical reactions when they meet certain other people, then the whole table of valence was in violent flux in my house just then. In the first place, Lilac doesn't like either of the St. Martins. She burns the roast virtually to ashes if they're in for dinner. In the second place, Steve Donaldson and Gilbert oxidized the moment they laid eyes on each other. They glared and bristled when I introduced them—of course in a highly civilized way—like a couple of stray dogs.

"I guess I'll shove," Steve said, in a kind of an angry growl.

Gilbert raised those too perfect eyebrows of his, sauntered over to the garden windows and stood there, insolently tapping a cigarette on his gold case.

"You've got a nice little place here, Grace," he drawled. "Too bad you don't do something with it."

Steve flushed angrily. I pushed him out of the room hastily and nodded to Lilac.

And then an odd thing happened. The minute the outside door closed, Gilbert St. Martin dropped his elaborate nonchalance as if it had been swept violently off him by some major cataclysm.

"Grace," he said desperately, coming down the room toward me; "what in God's name was she thinking of?"

I stared at him open-mouthed. I'd never thought he was capable of any emotion—certainly none as strong as this. He threw himself down on the sofa and buried his face in his hands.

I went to the door and pressed the bell.

"Bring some Scotch and soda, Lilac," I said.

She looked oddly at me. "Wouldn' you prefer *sherry*, Mis' Grace—this time in th' mornin'?" she said tentatively.

"Scotch and soda," I said. "Immediately."

I should have known enough—or known Lilac enough—to see this translated for that excellent man Sergeant Buck into Gilbert St. Martin arriving at my house in a state of complete collapse, at a time when any collapse was suspicious. As a matter of fact I poured myself a drink, when it came, and pushed the low table over in front of Gil.

"I take it you think Iris has murdered her husband," I said.

He poured a double peg of whiskey and tossed it off, and shot a little soda into the glass as a chaser.

"I'm a fool about that woman."

"It's too bad you're leaving for the Orient so soon," I said deliberately.

His head jerked up.

"Who says—"

"Your wife, darling."

There was no doubt from the sudden change of expression in his handsome face that this was news.

"She was over at Iris's this morning, telling her about it."

"Really?"

He poured himself another drink and lengthened it with soda—an indication, I took it, of a definite sort of pulling himself together. His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly as he tapped the yellow ash off his cigarette.

"It mightn't be such a bad idea at that," he said, after a long silence. "Then people couldn't say . . . I mean, if I went away, by the time I came back all this would have blown over."

"Unless, of course," I said practically, "they hang her."

He glanced at me sharply. Then he shook his perfectly groomed head.

"No. She'd stand a better chance of getting off if I'm not around. Of course, I hate to pull out and leave her. Who's her lawyer, by the way?"

"Belden Doyle."

He whistled, raising his neat dark eyebrows.

"Was that this Donaldson's idea?" he asked, more casually than he felt, I thought.

I shook my head. "It wasn't," I said.

He pressed out his cigarette in the ash tray. "Look here, Grace," he said abruptly. "I want to see Iris . . . but I don't think it would look good if I went over there. I wonder if you'd get her here, so we could have a talk, before I . . . leave?—I wouldn't want her to get the wrong idea . . ."

"No—I can see that," I said.

"Then, when I come back, we could get married and go abroad a year."

"And what," I asked, "are you planning to do with Edith? —Dump her into the Yellow Sea, some dark night?"

"She'll give me a divorce."

"I wonder," I thought. I didn't say anything.

"Even a year wouldn't seem long. Not after all the time we've waited."

"Well," I said, "I guess I'm old-fashioned like everybody else around here. It hadn't appeared to me, somehow, that either of you had waited."

He looked at me quickly—not understanding, I thought, but not quite liking to ask what I meant.

"It was my fault," he said. "But I've told her all that. And I've paid for all I got. I . . . I took her too much for granted. I nearly dropped dead one night at a dance at the Sulgrave Club. Somebody said 'Here comes the ravishing Mrs. Nash'—and I looked up, and by God it was Iris, in shimmering green lamé, with that hair. I'd known I'd made a mistake, but I didn't know what a mistake. Men around her like flies, and she wasn't having any."

He lighted another cigarette out of his thin gold case.

"She's a one-man woman—I know that now. I guess we've both learned our lesson.—Funny, isn't it."

"It seems pretty funny to me," I said, which was not the truth. "But maybe that's the way it is. There's no accounting for tastes."

He got up and looked out of the windows again toward the Nash house beyond the garden wall.

"I should think tonight about ten would do."

"For what?"

"To get Iris over."

"Oh," I said.

"And by the way, Grace—I wouldn't mention those letters. There's no use complicating things."

He put on his luxurious camel's hair overcoat and picked up his hat.

"Well, so long. I may be a little late. Edith's having some stuffed shirt from some minor legation . . . greasing the Oriental Limited, I imagine."

I heard him open the front door and close it, and saw Lilac's disapproving face in the door.

"Colonel Primrose is coming to lunch," I said.

A momentary light dawned, and faded.

"Mr. Angus, he's been callin' up. Wants you come ovah to his mother's place right away.—'Deed, Mis' Grace, an' Ah hopes you ain' gettin' mixed up in no mo' murders. 'Deed, Julius an' me *both* hopes you ain'. Not if we got to have trash like that Mistah St. Martin in an' out of the house all time."

"There's something in what you say, Lilac," I said. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to twelve. "Did Mr. Angus say how long he'd be at home?"

"No, ma'am. He jus' said he wished you'd come as soon as you could. Ah sen' fo' the car, case you'd be needin' it."

I nodded. She helped me on with my coat and handed me my gloves and car keys.

" 'Deed an' Ah hope Mis' Nash ain' gone an' killed that man lak they say. Seems lak a funny way fo' intelligent people t' act.—Sendin' all th' servants out the house an' puttin' pizen in his drink."

Lilac's sources of information are unknown to me, but they're always up to the moment and generally pretty accurate.

"They got plenty money t' bury him with, an' that's one consolation," she added, opening the door for me. "Seems funny, both of 'em goin' out same time—lak the Lawd he didn' have no use fo' one of 'em 'thout the othah."

Marie Nash's house is the ornate Renaissance stone mansion just above Rock Creek Drive on the left hand of Massachusetts Avenue. Its terraced gardens in the back run down into the narrow valley and overlook the opposite hills of Montrose at the upper end of Georgetown where R Street curves into 28th. As the crow flies it's a short minute from my house in P Street to hers. Not being a crow I had to turn off P Street, drive down under the P and Q Street Bridges along the tiny river and come up into Massachusetts Avenue, which took about six minutes, actually, as I didn't have to wait for the light at the top of the park drive.

Henry the Japanese butler opened the elaborate iron grilled door and let me in. "Mr. Angus is in the drawing room, madame."

"I'll go up," I said. I gave him my coat and went up the Italian marble staircase with its walls lined with modern French watercolors. At the top I turned into the small elegantly furnished room at the right, with silk panelled walls and carved rose marble fireplace.

Angus was sitting hunched down on the small of his back in a cushioned divan between the windows. There were cigarette ashes all over the gorgeous carpet at his feet. Lowell was lying on her stomach on a long Empire sofa, her chin in her hands. Angus got to his feet and came to meet me. Lowell didn't move.

"The police have been here," he said shortly. "They say my father was poisoned."

"I could have told them that." Lowell's voice was strained, hard-surfaced.

"They're asking a lot of questions about Mother."

"About your mother?" I demanded.

His lips twitched as he turned quickly away.

"That's rot," Lowell said bitterly. "She had flu, she went out

in the snow without any clothes on to speak of, and she got pneumonia. She wasn't poisoned.—The lovely Iris hasn't been around here, has she?"

Lowell flushed. She sat up quickly. "Or *has* she?"

"She hasn't."

He hesitated, and added deliberately, "Father has. He was here before they took her to the hospital."

Lowell swung her feet to the floor and sat, her taut body erect, red lips set.

"Can you tell me what that's got to do with anything?"

Angie Nash whirled toward her, his freckled face white.

"Listen," I said quickly. "When you two young idiots stop jumping down each other's throats maybe we can make some sense out of all this."

I downed a maddening desire to poison both of them.

"I know," Lowell said hotly. "But he's trying to pretend Father came over here and murdered my mother and went home and killed himself—that's what he's doing, and I won't stand it!"

"Just because you happen to hate Iris, you're doing your damndest to make every body believe she did it, just because you're a spiteful, jealous little rat!"

They stared at each other furiously for an instant, Lowell speechless for one of the few times in her life. Then she rallied.

"You're in love with her too," she said. Her voice was dreadful with contempt and hatred. "She makes a fool of every man that comes near her. My father, you and Mac, everybody. Steve Donaldson's the only one of you that can see through her. He knows she's nothing but a . . . a mercenary gold digger. That's what she is!"

"Well," I said, "I'm going home."

She caught me at the door.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Grace! I didn't mean that . . . quite. But don't you see—she *must* have done it! Nobody else wanted Father out of the way . . . and if anybody'd poison a dog they'd just as soon poison a person!"

"You don't know she poisoned your dog!" Angie said. He'd got control of himself. "You don't even know he *was* poisoned in the first place."

I suppose it would have begun all over again if Mac hadn't come in just then. He went straight over to Lowell. "Gee, I'm sorry about your mother!" He took her hand.

Her face flushed. Suddenly she held out her free hand to Angie. "I'm sorry!" she said quickly. "I'm . . . I guess I'm upset."

She went over to him and put her arms around him. Mac looked on awkwardly, pretty much upset himself. A plain indication of it that must have annoyed his uncle, I thought, was a nice yellow tie he had on with an otherwise quite sober dark blue suit. It gave his troubled earnest face an irresistibly comic air of spurious gaiety.

"Are you two staying here, or are you going over to Beall Street?" I asked practically.

Angie hesitated. Lowell wiped her eyes with her sleeve and blew her nose. "She doesn't want me over there."

"Odd of her," I said. "Considering what a pleasant sweet-tempered little thing you are. Still, she'll probably put up with you. You can come to my place if you want to."

Colonel Primrose was waiting in the drawing room when I came in. He was sitting in a straight chair he'd pulled up to the small table in front of the sofa where Gilbert St. Martin had been sitting.

"What is this nonsense about Marie?" I demanded.

He got up, straightening his rheumatic knee with a deprecatory grin.

"No importance. Somebody at Headquarters who doesn't believe in coincidences figured it was odd that both of them should cash in at the same time. Marie died of acute lobar pneumonia. Nothing in her stomach but calves foot jelly and milk toast. It looks as if she was just put in to make it harder."

"That's a relief," I said. I pressed the bell by the door.

"I told Lilac to make some dry Martinis, by the way. She said you'd gone to see Angus and Lowell. I figured you'd need a bracer."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," I said, and regretted it instantly, of course.

He smiled. Then his face sobered instantly. Lilac set the tray on the table and tiptoed out. Colonel Primrose poured two cocktails, held up his glass and emptied it at a swallow. He set it down.

"The dog, however," he said deliberately, "—*was* poisoned."

I felt for just a moment as if a cold hand was closing in on my heart.

"Not . . . really?"

He nodded.

"Oh, how *awful!*"

"And by cyanide of potassium, Mrs. Latham. Given in

candy, apparently. They can't tell exactly yet. They've sent the carcass to the laboratory for analysis."

He poured another cocktail and sipped it.

"In fact, Mrs. Latham—as you can't help but see too—it all looks peculiarly bad. Captain Lamb's been very much on the job, of course, and Lowell's contributed very handsomely. Many choice items out of the daily life of the family."

"Is everything she blurts out taken as gospel?" I demanded hotly.

"No, no. Lamb's got a daughter of the same age. However—as I've heard at least two dozen times this morning—it shows which way the wind blows. Also which way the cat jumps."

"I can see it does that—up to a point."

He nodded very soberly.

"You see, Mrs. Latham, it's generally known—just to begin with—that Randall Nash went all to pieces suddenly, about something, and took to drink again. When he was drunk he was violent and dangerous. There's no doubt he made life little short of hell for his second wife. Now all this seems to have started round midsummer—after Iris came back from a month at Cape Cod and began doing the house over. It corresponds closely—which is bad too—with her renewed association with Gilbert St. Martin, who helped to do the house."

He paused deliberately and surveyed me with placid composure.

"It seems to correspond also with a series of anonymous letters."

I looked as blank as I could, but it wasn't blank enough.

"Hello!" he said quietly. "You know about them?"

I shook my head quickly. His face went a shade soberer, so I realized I'd been pretty transparent. However, he has X-Ray eyes anyway, as I've known for some time.

"Well, there are such letters. They're printed with a toy printing set. But I see you know all this . . ."

"No, I don't," I said. "Not really. I mean, I didn't know Randall Nash had been getting them . . . Are there many?"

"About one a week since September," he said drily. "Maybe before that. The first two or three are crumpled—as if his first impulse had been to tear them up. It would appear to indicate he had destroyed some."

"What did they say?"

"They suggested—strongly—that she was conducting a clandestine affair with St. Martin. Lamb's trying to track them down. They were in a manila envelope in the wall safe in

Randall's dressing room—together with a batch of old letters from Iris to St. Martin, written before he married Edith.—He was apparently insanely jealous."

"I'd gathered that," I said. I told him about the story of the vault. "It seemed so gratuitous, somehow," I said. "As if he was warning her . . . Gilbert wasn't there, of course, and I don't suppose it had occurred to him that Steve Donaldson was interested in Iris. He was Lowell's friend."

An idea struck me suddenly.

"Listen, Colonel Primrose. Do you suppose he could have killed himself in a jealous rage, just to hurt Iris? That Christmas Eve when he told the story about the vault he talked about refinements of cruelty known only to people in love."

He poured a watery Martini and looked at it for a long time, shaking his head slowly. "It . . . would be very hard to prove, Mrs. Latham."

"Isn't it going to be hard to prove Iris poisoned him too?"

He downed his cocktail and looked at me steadily, a sardonic glint in his black eyes.

"I . . . hope so," he said at last. "I dare say Mr. Belden Doyle is counting on it—together with a beautiful face. But my dear Mrs. Latham—it must be perfectly clear to you that just now it looks as if it's going to be very simple. In fact it's so simple that Lamb's a little puzzled. There's a chain of circumstantial evidence against her that's going to take a lot of explaining."

He went on over the fat juicy Lynhavens Lilac had provided for her favorite guest—while I had my clear soup with a slice of lemon in it.

"Her motive is very plain. Fear, of course, plus the desire to be free to go back to Gilbert St. Martin. Furthermore, she gains handsomely by Randall's death, financially. She gets a third of his property if he died before Marie, half of it if Marie died first. The point's not determined yet. Anyway, Randall has paid income tax on $49,900 the last three years. McClean told us that this morning. They lived comparatively simply."

Lilac came in with country ham steak and spoon bread. I suffered, watching him, while I consumed a vegetable salad and melba toast.

He went on slowly, almost painfully, I thought; and a chill seemed to me to settle down over my dining room as he did.

"That isn't important, really, Mrs. Latham, compared with what seems actually to have happened last night. They had a scene—reported by both Lowell and Wilkins, who I take it

listens at keyholes when he hasn't anything else to do. Randall, according to the two of them independently, told Iris he'd never give her freeedom as long as he lived. He left the house. We don't know just where he went yet. He got to A. J.'s house about 10:30. He phoned you, some time later. He came home after twelve. There was a tray on his desk, with whiskey and soda on it. Wilkins expresses great surprise at Iris for leaving it there. She'd let all the servants go; she was herself the last person to leave the house. Wilkins returned shortly before Randall got in, and saw him make a definite effort to resist drinking—in fact he ordered the tray taken away, and then rang for it to be brought back. Sometime between the time Wilkins returned with the tray and the time we came in, he consumed enough cyanide of potassium to kill him."

"Couldn't he have taken it of his own accord?" I asked earnestly.

He nodded.

"It's possible of course. Consider the rest of Lamb's case. —Iris went into the library, when we got back; you and I standing there in the hall waiting for her. Donaldson going on into the drawing room. She says she didn't see Randall's body lying there—but the fact that she was badly upset when she was in the kitchen with me, a little later, is suggestive. In fact she was upset all the evening—particularly when she first came to your house if you'll remember."

I avoided meeting his glance. I remembered it very clearly.

"At any rate, she did go into the library, picked up the glass, put it on the tray and brought the tray, with the whiskey and the soda syphon, out into the hall. She took the glass and syphon out to the kitchen. I went with her. She washed the glass, dried it and put it away. She then rinsed the syphon out, filled it with fresh water and charged it. We came back and joined you two in front of the fire, and Iris spent the next couple of hours having a drink or two out of the decanter she'd taken from Randall's desk. —The point being sufficiently clear, I take it, that the whiskey in the decanter was not poisoned."

He stopped for a moment and went on still more gravely, looking at me across the table.

"And that, unfortunately, is not all. Wilkins says he has never known Iris to wash a glass in the evening before. The syphon she had herself prepared earlier—before she came over here. He saw her do that. She sent him into the living room while she was doing it, telling him she was bringing

back some guests after the Assembly and to leave a tray for them."

He took another large helping of spoon bread and watched the enormous golden piece of butter melt slowly on it.

"And Iris doesn't deny a single one of all these statements, Mrs. Latham. She told Belden Doyle, in my presence, that they are all true and correct. —And even that, unfortunately, isn't all. There is no trace of poison in any of Randall's pockets, or on the skin of his hands, and there is no sign of any around the desk, to point to suicide."

I stirred uneasily. "And Iris, I suppose," I inquired caustically, or so I intended, "has large quantities of cyanide all over the place?"

"No," he said. "Just a small quantity. She had a solution of cyanide of potassium, labelled 'Metal Cleaner,' in the medicine chest in her bathroom. Her fingerprints and nobody else's are on it. They are quite fresh prints, Mrs. Latham."

He stopped again.

"And moreover, my dear . . . that bottle with its contents was given to her less than a week ago.—You'll be surprised to know, by Mr. Stephen Donaldson."

9

The picture of Stephen Donaldson, gaunt-eyed and intense, asking me if it was cyanide Randall Nash was poisoned with, flashed into my mind.

"What on earth would he be giving her cyanide of potassium for?" I demanded.

"It's a point the police are interested in," Colonel Primrose said.

We had left the lunch table and were back in the sitting room that opens into the garden. Beyond the wall the white-corniced pediment of the Nash house in Beall Street loomed, its slate roof glistening silver in the winter sun.

"Iris says he gave it to her to clean an evening bag made of plaited gold braid that had got badly tarnished."

"That sounds reasonable enough to me," I said. "She does have a bag made out of gold braid. Where did Steve Donaldson get it?"

"He's attorney for a chemical combine that keeps a few smart legal chaps sitting around the Capitol—watching its interests, so to speak. He got it from their Baltimore laboratories. It is used in cleaning, you know."

I did know, recalling a case at one of the Navy bases. A colored man working in a pressing plant where it was used for cleaning gold decorations on officers' uniforms got it mixed up with a bottle of gin he had parked near it, and was carried out feet first a minute later.

"Did Iris know it was poison?"

He shrugged. "She says not. That oddly repulsive butler—Wilkins?—says he was in the drawing room taking away the tea tray when Donaldson gave it to her. He heard him say very distinctly 'Be careful of this, it's a deadly poison.' "

"So that the oddly repulsive Wilkins," I observed, "knew it was in the house too—and also knew it was poison."

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"That fact, you'll be surprised to hear, has not entirely escaped the keen eye of the law," he said with a chuckle. He put his coffee cup on the tray and sat down, fixing his sharp old parrot's eyes on me.

"However, Mrs. Latham . . . let's clear up one important point before we get on to the matter of the anonymous letters."

"Very well," I said. "What is it?"

"Just the little matter of where you stand in all this . . . business."

He waved a hand in the air.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," I said. It occurred to me then, as it's done several times before, that I really had to learn to knit. It would have been most convenient to have something to look at and study intently just then, instead of having either to face him down, as it were, or gaze shifty-eyed about the room.

"Then I'd better make myself clearer."

He exhaled a full fragrant cloud of cigar smoke.

"There's no doubt, Mrs. Latham, that Randall Nash was murdered. There's equally no doubt that—at present—everything points to Iris Nash as the poisoner."

"I don't believe it, Colonel Primrose," I said. "It's too easy, for one thing."

He looked at me with a quizzical smile.

"That's one of the surprising things about detective work, Mrs. Latham. It usually is too easy. The lay idea that people who commit murders are clever is entirely erroneous. If you're clever you can work out your problems without resorting to murder. I don't suppose there's more than one murder out of a hundred that the police don't solve. —The proof is harder sometimes, of course. And usually, my dear, it's the person with the strongest motive, emotional and pecuniary, and with the best opportunity—in other words, the obvious person—who does the job."

"Have you examined," I asked, "into the motives that anybody else may conceivably had had for wanting Randall Nash out of the way?"

"You mean, I presume, that if we figure Iris wanted to marry someone else badly enough to murder Randall, then it's possible that that someone else may have wanted to marry her —with a fortune—badly enough to have done it himself."

"That's rather involved," I said, "but roughly correct."

He smiled.

"It's evading my question, however. —I want to know just how far I can count on you. Are you, in this instance—in

other words—hunting with the hounds, Mrs. Latham, or . . . running with the hare?"

"I'm afraid," I said, "that I'm constitutionally on the side of the hare. Especially when the pack's in full cry."

"But if the pack happens to be not after the hare, but after the wolf in hare's clothing, so to speak . . . ?"

He went on when I didn't say anything.

"I have some sympathy for anybody who gets to the end of his tether and picks up a fire iron and bashes somebody over the head. Or even takes a knife or gun to them. Sometimes the primitive instincts boil over, and drown all the civilized things we've learned. That doesn't explain the poisoner, Mrs. Latham. Poison is a furtive, cowardly, evil thing."

"Wherein woman is as strong as man," I said, remembering Euripides, and Medea's passionate cry.

"Exactly," he said, looking steadily into my eyes.

I looked down. He always manages to make me feel rather self-conscious, as if he was reminding me some way that there were a lot of things between us we hadn't settled yet.

"Then maybe I'd better tell you how I feel about Iris Nash," I said.

"I wish you would. I'd really like to know."

"Well, in the first place then, and in spite of all your anonymous letters, and in spite of Edith St. Martin's obvious fears, I don't really, honestly, believe Iris is any longer in love with Gilbert St. Martin. He's really nothing, of course, but a crashing bounder!"

He chuckled.

"No doubt, Mrs. Latham. —He was that, you know, all the years before he married Edith. Iris was in love with him then."

"I know," I admitted ruefully. "But that was before she married Randall, and had a chance to orientate herself. Randall knew all about Gil from the beginning—it was his faith in her that enabled Iris to forget Gil. Oh, I'm sure—just as sure as I can be, Colonel Primrose—that she's played the game fairly and squarely with Randall, and that Gil wasn't nearly as hard to get over as she'd thought he was going to be."

"Then why has she gone back to him?"

"Are you sure she has?"

He shrugged.

"There are two possible explanations, besides that one," I said. "One is that she's merely taken up a casual friendly relation with a man she was once in business with and who's

certainly in a position to give her a lot of help doing over her house . . . and it's just that series of jaundiced letters that's given everybody a totally wrong slant. It's just what anybody who'd write an anonymous letter would think, without having any real truth to go on."

He smiled dubiously.

"What's the other one?" he asked.

"The other one is what I think is true, and it explains everything. —I may be naive, and maybe the wool is pulled an inch thick over my eyes, but there it is."

"What?"

"It's that Gilbert St. Martin has made his bed and he doesn't want to lie in it. —I'm speaking in the *most* figurative sense, Colonel Primrose. He married Edith and came down here, and found he hadn't been quite as smart as he thought he was. Edith wasn't just handing him the purse strings, or even letting him touch them. Then along comes Iris, and knocks everybody's eye out, and dear Gilbert has the nauseating pleasure of finding himself the base Indian who's thrown a pearl away richer than all his tribe."

Colonel Primrose smiled gently.

"In Gil's business it's like trading a dusty tarnished vase you've had stuck away on a back shelf for a fine piece of 1880 decalcomania and then seeing it in somebody else's window, a genuine Cellini worth a quarter of a million . . . and all the painted roses are flaking off your piece."

"I don't think Edith would like that," he said, chuckling.

"Maybe not," I admitted. "But it's true. I'm not pretending I'm so naive I don't know there are black spots all over the place. I just don't think Iris is one of them."

I put my coffee cup down on the tray.

"Even at that, Colonel Primrose—and I suppose this just shows how perverse and contradictory a woman is—Iris has had a pretty rotten time, with Randall drinking, and Lowell constantly sinking depth bombs around her, in addition to all the aerial sniping she's had time for. I'm not sure I'd blame Iris for falling for anybody who's making a big play for her. I'm not saying she has. I'm saying that if my house were as much of a shambles as hers was Christmas Eve I'd take up with anybody who came along, just to keep sane. I *like* Iris. I think she's as good as they come, and so much better than Randall or Lowell deserves that it isn't funny."

"So that if she murdered the lot of them it's all right with you?"

I laughed.

"I'd hoped we wouldn't have to go that far."

I was about to meet that when Lilac's shining black face in the door cut me short.

"Th' Sergeant at th' telephone, Colonel," she said. "He wants t'know, is you comin' t' Mis' Nash's, or is you not?"

Colonel Primrose looked at me.

"Tell him I'm coming right away," he said to Lilac.

He put his cigar in the ashtray and looked at me with an inscrutable smile. "There's only one thing I have to say to all this, my dear. —When I murder Sergeant Buck, I do hope you'll be on my side."

"Oh, you can *definitely* count on it," I said.

He got up.

"Now tell me about those letters. Has Iris been getting them?"

"I don't know it if she has," I said. "And I'm not free just now to tell you anything I do know."

"Then I'll be getting back before Buck sends Captain Lamb for me."

He turned at the door, came back and took my hand.

"Just one thing I'd like you to remember," he said seriously. "People murder people for a number of reasons. One of them is to keep incriminating information from getting out. Don't forget you may have information you don't know you've got. And—annoying as you are—I'd hate to see anything happen to you, and I haven't time just now to look after you.—And Buck wouldn't, you know."

"Oh, I know," I said.

He chuckled suddenly, then looked at me very seriously again.

"Then think it over . . . and don't be a sentimental fool, my dear. Good-bye—thanks for lunch."

At the corner he turned and waved to me with a smile. I waved back and closed the door, hearing Lilac's jungle giggle as she took the coffee tray.

I had to take a Biedermeier chair down to a shop on M Street that afternoon to have the back glued together—it had got mixed up somehow in one of the boys' scuffles. I was just pulling it out of the back of the car when I saw Lavinia Fawcett across the street, coming out of A. J. McClean's bank. She spotted me at the same time and started over. Fortunately the light changed just then and the flow of traffic blocked her while I escaped into Mr. Myers's shop, with its smell of hot glue and varnish remover and old musty

furniture. It was a relief, even though I knew it wouldn't be for long.

I hadn't seen Lavinia since I came home. I'd only heard her out in the hall, leaving Randall Nash's house on Christmas Eve—the event, I remembered suddenly, that precipitated that first big scene, with Iris's remark about the grace of God and Lowell's stingingly cruel inquiry if Iris thought about the grace of God when she saw Edith St. Martin. I thought suddenly too, waiting for Mr. Myers, how much more pointed and significant everything that had happened that afternoon was than I'd known. Through the arrow window I could see the traffic stopping again on M Street. Lavinia would be crossing now, I thought, and looked for the back door. Then I thought "There but for the grace of God go I," and stayed.

Most old towns have their Lavinia Fawcett, I suppose. Lavinia's father had been a prominent merchant of Georgetown in the middle years of the last century. As a young man he was so close-fisted that each morning before he went to business he measured out the coal his family could use for the day, people said, with a tablespoon. His wife and elder daughter died of malnutrition, his son ran away at eighteen, his younger daughter Lavinia lived on in the house in Corcoran Street, doing the work. One day a spellbinder with a new fanatical religion got hold of Eleazer Fawcett and persuaded him for his sins that a rich man could not enter the kingdom of Heaven . . . and all of a sudden Eleazer Fawcett started throwing his money to the four winds, supporting odd sects, giving large amounts to the most unlikely people, until one morning when they dragged his body out of the C. and O. Canal just below M and Wisconsin they found he hadn't a penny to his name.

Randall Nash and A. J. McClean had both worked for him at one time, and Randall—or so Lilac, who's an old Georgetonian, tells me—was supposed to have been engaged to Lavinia. He may of course have had a weather eye out from the beginning. At any rate, he didn't marry her. At first she lived, a shadowy wraith, in the old house. Then the mortgage was foreclosed and Lavinia got odd jobs around the shops, and giving music lessons, and at last helping in the kitchen at parties. Then she got sick and spent a couple of years in a charity hospital. When she got out she couldn't get anything to do . . . and somewhere in the course of her career she'd taken to tippling. The people who'd helped her out with odd jobs did their best to keep her fed and decently clothed. Mr. Hofnagel the photographer gave her a room

over his studio until she nearly burned the place down one night. After that the Ladies Guild of St. Timothy's got her a room over another store, and arranged with Randall and A. J. to give her enough for her food each week, so she didn't have to cook there. She still cleaned Mr. Hofnagel's studio every morning, and a doctor's office in Wisconsin Avenue, and after hours she cleaned A. J.'s bank.

The chief trouble with Lavinia was that along with her tippling she'd become a general moocher. She had also forgotten pretty largely that soap and water existed except for floors and doorsteps. In fact, to put it bluntly, she was by now a most obnoxious and unpleasant person, and one to be avoided as you would the devil—except that it's virtually impossible to go on M Street without running into her. I could see her ragged figure now, coming in the door, and was torn, as I'm always torn, between sympathy and disgust. She came up to me with a breath that would sway the Washington Monument.

"Mrs. Latham," she said, in her sing-song whine, "—they won't let me in to see poor Mr. Nash."

"I don't think he's there now, Miss Lavinia," I said.

"But you could find out how much he left me."

She leered up at me with furtive toothless cunning and babbled on.

"I wouldn't want to make any trouble for anybody, only he always said he'd do the right thing. You could tell her I don't want to make trouble if she'll do like he always said, and do the right thing."

The first time I ever saw Lavinia Fawcett came into my mind. She was working in Mr. Hofnagel's Studio of Expert Photography . . . a receptionist, I suppose we'd call it today. Pale and thin and pathetically shy. "I geep her," Mr. Hofnagel said to me one day when I went there to get a passport picture taken, "becoss . . . vell, becoss she remind me off a brown doe dot in the forest near München vass, dot by the hunters killed vass." He looked at me with his big melting eyes. I hoped he'd marry her, not knowing then that he had a wife and fine child that in the forest near München were.

That was the year before the War. Things didn't go well for Mr. Hofnagel in the next years—he was a German and a photographer near the Capitol—and Lavinia got other jobs until she was sick and went away.

She was a long way from a brown doe now, as she leered at me there in Mr. Myers's shop, bleating about Randall Nash doing the right thing.

"I wouldn't want to make trouble for her if I could help it,"

she repeated, in that dreadful whine, fixing my eye and fastening her claws on my arm.

I don't know why it hadn't registered the first time she said it. It hadn't—but it did now.

"What do you mean by not making trouble, Miss Lavinia?" I asked.

"She understands what I mean. That's why she gave orders to them not to let me in. Mr. Nash found it out and made them stop persecuting me. Now I'm afraid she won't let them give me the money he left me."

"I don't think you need to worry," I said.

"It won't be me that'll do the worrying."

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and was suddenly ingratiating. "All I want is her to do the right thing. Well, you just tell her that."

She sidled out of the shop in her curious bent shuffle and closed the door, giving me a backward leer that made me shudder, it had so much drunken cunning in it.

Mr. Myers came up, shaking his head. "They'll have to do something about her. It isn't right for poor Hofnagel to have all the care of her."

He wiped his dusty paint-smeared hands on his leather apron.

"Is it true Randall Nash once courted her?" I asked. Mr. Myers has lived in Georgetown, repairing old mahogany and rosewood lovingly, for seventy years.

He nodded his white bushy head.

"When she had plenty of money, before her pa went crazy. It's right pitiful these cold mornings, seeing her in her rags. But they say she's got trunks full of warm clothes the ladies give her. Sometimes she sells 'em to buy her brandy."

He picked up my chair and looked at it frowning. "You can have it Friday, ma'am." He rubbed his hand caressingly over the slender polished frame.

"I'll be in toward evening then," I said.

I went on out. Miss Lavinia was waiting along the block, huddled in a dingy Georgian doorway. I got into my car and closed the door. Just as I'd switched on the ignition I heard my name. Mr. Hofnagel, with his black handlebar mustaches, bald dome of a head and prominent abject eyes, came scurrying out of his shop next door to Mr. Myers, in his high wing collar and alpaca coat frayed at the elbows. I opened the window and leaned over.

"Could you for a few minutes gome in, ma'am?" he said. "I've got the droubles to talk aboud."

I found myself starting instinctively to say I had the troubles

of my own, but that sounded pretty specious, my troubles being practically non-existent. On the other hand, I knew from years of experience that a few minutes of Mr. Hofnagel's troubles stretched into hours, usually, and always ended with my having a lot of pictures taken that later piled up in the attic, collecting dust, or landed on the wall in Lilac and Julius's room, which is at present virtually papered with them.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Hofnagel. I'm late now, or I'd be more than glad to."

"Then vill you tomorrow maybe gome in, for sure, ma'am?"

He was so earnest about it, his big sad eyes so pleading, that I almost broke down then and there. But I didn't. "Tomorrow morning, for sure, Mr. Hofnagel," I said.

"Tank you, tank you!" He bobbed his head up and down, tears in his eyes. I started off—more than a little puzzled at all this. I saw Miss Lavina scuttle out from her doorway and scoot down the street, with the speed almost, if not the grace, of the brown doe in the forest. She obviously hadn't liked the idea of her benefactor talking to me. I was glad for an instant that I hadn't gone in.

I threw in my clutch and put up my hand to straighten the mirror over the windshield, which had got knocked awry. Quite suddenly I saw A. J. in it, hurrying out of the bank. He glanced up at the lights and made a dash for the street just as traffic started against him. I closed my eyes and held my breath. The loud screech of grinding brakes tore at my eardrums, people shouted, a policeman's whistle blew. I opened my eyes again to see A. J. back on the sidewalk, standing, not hurt. A policeman was holding his arm, a few people had gathered around him. Out in the street was the car that had nearly run him down, a man in it staring angrily out the window and mopping his forehead.

"That was a close squeak," I heard a truck driver along me say.

"Old bird must be blind," his mate said. "I saw a guy killed——"

I didn't hear any more. It would have been dreadful if A. J. had been killed then, I thought—following so close after Marie Nash's death in the hospital and the poisoning of Randall Nash. Then I wondered irrelevantly if they'd arrested Iris.

10

Several cars were parked in front of the house in Beall Street. I nosed in between a couple and went up the brick steps. The multi-colored Christmas bulbs still decking the dark magnolia trees looked strangely like evening makeup at ten in the morning. I rang the bell, expecting automatically to see Wilkins, and rather taken aback at seeing the square granite bulk of Sergeant Buck framed in the fluted white door posts, regarding me with very fishy eyes.

"May I see Mrs. Nash?" I asked.

I think he was about to say no when Colonel Primrose came out of the library with Captain Lamb.

"Come in," he said. "Iris was just telephoning you."

He opened the drawing room door. Iris was sitting alone in front of the fire. She had a white leather-topped bridge table in front of her with papers on it. She put down her pen and got up, took my hand and squeezed it.

"Thanks for coming!" she said.

Her face had got thinner, it seemed to me, and more transparent, so that her finely modelled bones almost showed through. Her eyes were grey; all the green fire had gone out of them. She looked very tired.

"Would you like me to stay on?" I asked.

"I'd love it. I didn't like to ask you."

She smiled ironically. "—Not knowing my present status."

She turned to Colonel Primrose.

"I understand from Mr. Doyle that I'm not supposed to talk unless he's here . . ."

There was the trace of a smile on her lips as she twisted her handkerchief in her hands. "But I do want to say this. It probably sounds very odd . . . but that accusation that I poisoned Lowell's dog offends me more than . . . than that I poisoned my husband."

I looked up at Colonel Primrose, and as I did my eyes went to the great stone face immediately behind him. Sergeant

Buck always, in normal circumstances, stood immediately behind him. It gave the general air of an oddly respectful but protective subordination, the Colonel being in front but the Sergeant standing a whole head and half a neck higher and bulging out at least three inches beyond him on either side—and always appealed to me as having something rather nice about it, someway, and also as being irresistibly comic. I wondered suddenly how Sergeant Buck was taking all this. I remembered Colonel Primrose telling me once that his guard, philosopher and friend had at some time in his life been trussed up by Nature and dipped into a vat of liquid granite . . . and no one but Colonel Primrose had ever guessed how thin the coating had dried, especially around the heart, or how easy it was for large fissures to gape when the Sergeant was confronted—for instance—with a lovely woman in distress. Knowing everything about the perfidy and untrustworthiness of women as a whole, Sergeant Buck was a pushover for any one in particular—as long as matrimony for Colonel Primrose—or himself—was definitely out.

So I wondered a little. He was looking down at Iris Nash as I glanced up, and I thought I could detect the molten lava of sentiment welling up in the fishy grey eyes and the rock-ribbed countenance. I wondered suddenly how he was going to manage when he saw Lowell.

"It was my understanding you didn't like the dog," Captain Lamb said stolidly.

"I loathed the beast. He was old and obese and crochety. But Lowell adored him—she'd had him since he was a satiny little pup—and I understood exactly how she felt. Anyway, I just can't imagine *poisoning* a dog—no matter how old and horrible he was."

"Lowell maintains," Colonel Primrose said quietly, "that she saw you feeding him candy. Is——"

"That's quite true. I shouldn't have. But he kept looking up at me, and touching my dress ever so lightly with his paw, and sneezing softly to remind me I was forgetting him, so I . . . I gave him a piece of chocolate. He and I weren't really as great enemies as both of us pretended. When Lowell wasn't here he spent all his time, when he wasn't sleeping, waddling around after me."

She smiled and shrugged her slim dark shoulders.

"It's rather paradoxical, but, objecting to him as I did, I'd got sort of attached to him. We understood each other perfectly. He had a nice sense of humor—spaniels do, you know. He knew all about the feud between his mistress and me."

"You admit there is one?" Captain Lamb said suddenly.

"Oh, it's too obvious to try to conceal."

"When did you last see the dog, Iris?" Colonel Primrose asked. Under Sergeant Buck's grim frozen face he looked pleasantly and amiably tropical, in some way—as if he ought to be wearing a panama and sipping a mint julep.

"I've been trying to remember. I think it was after dinner. Mac and Mr. Donaldson stayed, and the two of them and Lowell went somewhere about nine o'clock. It seems to me I remember hearing Lowell say he wasn't to go, and Mac bringing him back inside. I was on my way upstairs. Wilkins was coming down; he picked him up, and I thought he put him in here, with my husband and Mrs. St. Martin, who'd come in a few minutes before."

"That would be just around nine o'clock?"

She nodded.

"You don't remember seeing him again?"

"No. I thought I heard him wheezing later that evening here in this room. I remember getting up and looking back there behind the Christmas tree, because he was getting on my nerves. But I didn't see him. I supposed he was under a chair somewhere. I turned on the radio to drown him out."

"And no one else was here that night?"

I waited . . . holding my breath. Iris's grey eyes went a little green, and met Colonel Primrose's as frankly as the summer dawn.

"No one," she said.

The picture of her and Gilbert St. Martin standing at the foot of the stairs, and her husband leaning over the upstairs bannister, listening, and Gilbert raising her hand to his lips, went through my memory in slow motion.

"And the servants?" Colonel Primrose inquired.

"They were all out that night."

"You let them off a good deal, Mrs. Nash?" Captain Lamb said.

"They're on duty from seven-thirty every morning. Their evenings are their own, except the nights they relieve Wilkins. That's very seldom; he prefers staying in."

I noticed them, as I'd noticed before, that every time she mentioned the butler her eyes sharpened to green and her lips tightened.

"Ah yes," Colonel Primrose said. "The butler."

He took an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"Does this mean anything to you?"

His eyes fixed sharply on her face. The dark pupils of her eyes contracted suddenly as she looked at it.

"A great deal," she said quietly.

"Well . . . would you mind explaining why you thought it necessary to take the rather unusual step—surely—of having a detective watch Wilkins, Iris?"

I caught my breath sharply. She nodded. "I suppose it is unusual," she said steadily. "But . . . I didn't understand him, and I didn't trust him. I tried twice to have my husband discharge him. He refused. I came to the conclusion that Wilkins had some kind of fantastic influence over him, or . . . or something. So I simply wanted to know what it was."

"It was not simply because Wilkins was keeping your husband informed about your own movements?"

Her eyes blazed green as emeralds. Her pale gold skin went deeper gold.

A sudden harsh voice, oddly anxious, spoke hastily.

"You don't need to talk without that lawyer here, miss!"

I think we all started, especially Colonel Primrose. He cocked his head down and shot a bright glance up at his rock-visaged Sergeant. It must have been as near as mutiny had ever come to rearing its ugly head in their long association.

"Mrs. Nash knows that, Sergeant."

"Thank you, Sergeant!" Iris said. Her voice crackled like an electric spark along a naked copper wire. I felt grateful to him myself, almost.

"I did know Wilkins was following me everywhere I went, Colonel Primrose."

She met his gaze squarely.

"I knew also that my husband never believed me when I told him quite truthfully where I'd been. I gathered from that that Wilkins—or somebody—was giving him false information about me. I hadn't any proof of it—only a sudden terrible change in his whole mental and emotional outlook."

She was leaning forward, and talking, I noticed, to Sergeant Buck, not to Colonel Primrose at all.

"I didn't realize what was happening, not even one day when I asked him to get rid of Wilkins and he froze up and said he'd been expecting that. When I asked him what on earth he meant he said he'd become used to having his wishes and rights ignored. I thought at first he simply meant he wanted to hire and fire the servants himself. It seemed so incredible . . . and then I began to be more and more conscious of a sort of insolence in Wilkins. I asked Randall again to let him go, and it was then I began to realize the full extent of what was going on. That's when I hired the detective. I met a young man who's with the Federal Bureau of Investigation

at a tea one afternoon. He told me a man to go to. It sounds ridiculous, I suppose, but . . . I was frightened, Colonel Primrose. Randall kept encouraging me to go out evenings without him; he quit going anywhere himself. Whenever I came back, even from cocktails in the afternoon, I'd hear Wilkins come in a few minutes later and go to the library where Randall was. If I happened to be there too he would stop short at the door, look surprised, say 'Beg pardon, sir,' and go. I'd see Randall simply writhing, waiting for me to go so he could hear Wilkins's report.

"And that wasn't the worst of it. Several times at night Wilkins knocked on my door. When I opened it he'd say 'Did you ring, madame?', with a look on his face as if he was surprised at seeing me there. He phoned me once that Molly, one of the maids, was ill in the servants' quarters and would I come. The girl was perfectly well. When I came back Randall had been in my room. I know he didn't believe I'd been to see Molly."

She threw her cigarette into the fire. Colonel Primrose's eyes rested steadily on her face.

"Then recently I've been simply terrified. He's been talking constantly about that horrible vault, and his ancestor who locked a faithless wife with her lover and her maid in it, to die there."

She shuddered, her face white and frozen with remembered fear.

"I'd just got so I couldn't bear being here alone—I never knew half the time whether the nightmares I had every time I closed my eyes were real or false. I could see myself locked in that vault, under the wall, with Wilkins there . . . watching me die. I never saw my lover, whoever he was supposed to be. Just Wilkins. And then, when I began to lock my door at night, somebody took the key."

Her voice throbbed, passionate with resentment. I glanced at Sergeant Buck. It was impossible to tell about Colonel Primrose, though I thought even he was impressed. But one look at the Sergeant was enough to tell me she'd made one convert, at least.

"Why did you stay on, Iris?" Colonel Primrose asked quietly.

She smiled a little.

"There were two reasons. I don't expect you to believe either of them. One was that I didn't want to leave Lowell here. None of this had touched her, but I was afraid it would. —I've seen Wilkins look at her at the table. I could see him in the glass over the mantle. Once or twice when she happened

to catch him she'd smile, perfectly frank and friendly and unconscious of how really lovely she is. I had the feeling that if I went something might happen to her. He . . . he so definitely seemed to have an influence over Randall."

She leaned forward, took the short cocoa fibre broom mechanically and brushed back a coal that had fallen on the marble hearth.

"The other reason was my husband. I thought he was being . . . deluded, and . . . I got the notion, demented I suppose, that if I could unmask this man . . ."

She laughed. "It sounds like fifth-rate melodrama. But that's what I thought. He might be himself again."

Captain Lamb spoke abruptly. "Why didn't you fire the man first thing this morning?"

"Oh, it would just have given him a chance to say the obvious thing—I was kicking him out because he knew too much. I should think that's what he wanted. And then, I'm still afraid of him, but . . . in a different way, now."

Colonel Primrose cocked his head down and looked around at Sergeant Buck. He jerked his thumb toward the door. Sergeant Buck strode out. It's always curious to me how he manages to give the air of a complicated but decisive military manoeuvre even to that. You got the impression of a whole line of marching men, on the double quick.

We sat silently, waiting. Something flickered in Iris's green eyes. I saw Colonel Primrose watching her. After a moment he looked at his watch, and around at Captain Lamb, who scowled and looked at his own watch. Then we heard Sergeant Buck returning. He had the butler's black coat and trousers in his hands. "Looks like he'd pulled out, sir."

Captain Lamb went out into the hall. I could hear his heavy voice rapping out orders.

11

Iris took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. She looked like a woman with an unbearable load taken off her back. She put down the hearth broom and got up. Captain Lamb returned; he and Colonel Primrose went down to the garden windows, talking in low tones.

Iris looked at the French clock on the mantel, then at the Sergeant. "Do you think Colonel Primrose would like a whiskey and soda?"

The granite surface of Sergeant Buck's visage crumbled still more.

"Sure, miss. I never knew him when he wouldn't."

She pressed the bell at the side of the fireplace, looking up at me. "I suppose one of the maids is there."

A door closed somewhere in the back and in another moment we heard steps across the dining room floor. The door opened, and in it stood Wilkins, in mufti . . . if you can call brown herringbone worsted and bright tan shoes mufti. There was an oddly indefinable expression on his plump white face. I thought he looked more startled and embarrassed than anything else.

"I'm sorry, madame, but my clothes have . . ."

His voice died out as he spotted his black suit and starched white dickey on the chair where the Sergeant had put them. He blinked down at them. Sergeant Buck's face congealed ten degrees; his great hands closed ominously as he moved a step toward the man. I was greatly relieved when Colonel Primrose, coming quickly from the end of the room, coughed significantly. Sergeant Buck, in spite of some twenty-five years in the Army, is still as rugged as individualists come. Perhaps because of it, having been a top sergeant and a heavyweight champion, and at present owning, so Colonel Primrose told me, by virtue of thrift plus skill at various well-known Army games, sufficient rows of houses, stores and filling stations in California to bring him well into the ranks of the economic

royalists. I remembered Colonel Primrose's telling me once that at the beginning of the depression he'd tried to go into the accounts of their joint household, and that Sergeant Buck had been so deeply offended at what he regarded as conduct unworthy an officer and a gentleman that the Colonel was forced to apologize in the most abject fashion and go on living at a rate he knew he couldn't possibly afford.

Sergeant Buck proceeded to the door and planted himself massively in front of it.

"We were just looking for you, Wilkins," Colonel Primrose said pleasantly.

"I stepped out to post a letter, sir. Mr. Nash gave it to me last night, with express instructions that it must be posted at all costs."

He cast an almost imperceptible glance at Iris. It was just the sort of thing that Colonel Primrose would catch without looking.

"Without anyone knowing about it, sir."

"I see.—Who was the letter addressed to, please?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I am not in the habit of prying into my employer's affairs."

I heard a subdued snarl from the doorway, and Colonel Primrose cleared his throat again, hastily. Not until Wilkins had moved at least a foot nearer Captain Lamb.

"Very proper," Colonel Primrose said politely. "Now, there are one or two little questions . . . You say in your evidence, which I have been reading, that you left the house with Mr. Nash at four o'clock yesterday afternoon."

My head whirled a little. It seemed so infinitely longer ago than yesterday that all this had begun to happen that I thought at first he must be talking about something else.

"Yes, sir. I left the house about four. Mr. Nash didn't keep a regular driver, as Madame and Miss Nash both preferred to drive their own cars."

"And you went . . ."

"We went at once to Mrs. Lowell Nash's house on Massachusetts Avenue, sir. I waited in the car while Mr. Nash went in. He was gone twenty-five minutes, and when he came out he got in the car without telling me where to go. I waited a few moments, and asked him. He looked startled and said to drive through the park. I did so. We had just crossed the ford on the other side when he leaned forward and said to go to 2491 P Street."

I stared open-mouthed at Colonel Primrose—for that's his address. His face was inscrutable. The police may have known this, of course, but it was a surprise to me.

"He was there for ten minutes, I should say, sir. He came out and told me to go home. He had one more call to make, but he'd walk."

"That would be when he went to your house, Grace?" Iris said.

I nodded. "Lilac said he came a little after five."

"And waited twenty minutes, pacing up and down the floor, telephoning his former wife's house three times while he was there," Colonel Primrose said, with a smile at me. I'd forgot he'd been alone with Lilac that noon while I was with Angie and Lowell. I wondered what other information he'd got that she hadn't considered it worth while to tell me.

"And yesterday evening?"

"He sent for the car shortly after half-past nine, sir," Wilkins went on. "We went again to Mrs. Lowell Nash's. He was in there fifteen minutes or so. When he came out he said to go to the nearest drug store. I went up Massachusetts Avenue to Wisconsin and waited at the corner while he went in."

He turned quietly to Captain Lamb. "I believe I forgot to mention that in my statement before, sir. It . . . simply escaped my mind."

I had already noticed the quickening interest in both their faces, and wondered about it. Colonel Primrose cocked his head down and shot a glance at Sergeant Buck. They must have had an extraordinary set of signals, for the Sergeant, not actually giving a smart salute but giving every impression of doing so, made an about-face and disappeared instantly. I wondered idly if Colonel Primrose kept him about to be constantly reminded of the evils of military regimentation and so not to regret his retirement into genial civil life . . . or if the Sergeant, as was equally tenable, kept Colonel Primrose about as a horrible example of sloth and indolence, to keep himself on his square-booted military toes. Perhaps neither was true . . . but there ought to be some explanation for two such opposite poles living in close harmony without the slightest effect on each other.

Captain Lamb followed the Sergeant out. I could hear their low voices—what I once heard Marie Nash coyly describe as "male tones", only she was speaking about a bishop—in the hall. Then the front door closed, and I could hear Captain Lamb rumbling by himself back somewhere toward the pantry.

"How long was Mr. Nash in the drug store?"

"About ten minutes, sir."

I glanced at Iris. Her face was pale, with a strange almost mother-of-pearl opacity to it, her eyes green again, her slim

lithe body curiously quiescent. And we were all thinking the same thing, I suppose . . . except, as I learned later, Colonel Primrose, who had not forgotten at that moment that Senator McGilvray was already dead when Randall Nash went into that drugstore—and had been dead for four days.

"Yes. What did you do then?"

"We started home. Mr. Nash said he thought he would go to the Assembly with madame. He asked me if I knew Madame's plans. I said I understood Madame had planned to meet some friends at Mrs. Latham's and go with them. He wanted to know who the friends were. I was unable to give him that information."

"You mean," Iris said coolly, "you didn't want to give it to him. I had told you myself, just in case he should ask you."

There was an instant's sharp silence. Colonel Primrose glanced from one of them to the other. I thought his face was almost as granite, for a moment, as his familiar's . . . using the word in its purely medieval sense. In its modern meaning it would be a gross calumny.

"I didn't consider it my duty to discuss your arrangements with anyone else, madame," Wilkins said.

Her cheeks flushed, her eyes were as green as a cat's. I looked again at Colonel Primrose, and saw that Wilkins had made a terrible mistake . . . for up to that time I'm sure Colonel Primrose had not believed a word of Iris Nash's story. I tried to keep the pleased smile off my face. Nothing could have been more obvious than that whatever Wilkins may have said or not said to Randall Nash, he had implied that Iris was meeting her friends away from home to avoid her husband, and he had deliberately refrained from telling Randall that Colonel Primrose was one of those friends. I thought suddenly that by not telling Randall Nash that, Wilkins had possibly sealed his death as effectively as if he had then and there put a knife between his shoulders.

"What happened then?" Colonel Primrose asked quietly.

"We came as far down Wisconsin Avenue as Reservoir Road. Mr. Nash tapped on the window and said he had decided to go to Mr. McClean's house in Foxhall Road. We went there. He didn't go in at once, he stayed in the car. Then he changed his mind and told me to drive to Mrs. St. Martin's house, just off Massachusetts Avenue. I took him there. He went in, and came out about twenty minutes past ten. He said to take him back to Foxall Road. We got there at ten-thirty or so, sir. I waited outside in the car as usual. He came out at possibly a quarter of twelve, with Mr. McClean. I drove them

to Linthicum Hall. Mr. McClean got out, but Mr. Nash refused to do so, and came home."

Colonel Primrose took out his notebook.

"All right. Now let's have the rest of it."

Wilkins nodded respectfully.

"Yes, sir. I came in with Mr. Nash and turned on the light in the library. I was surprised to see a tray on the desk with a glass, syphon and decanter. I have always been given explicit directions to keep liquor away from Mr. Nash as much as possible. I took Mr. Nash's overcoat. He took the stopper out of the decanter. Perhaps I should say that at some place—or places—he had already had considerable to drink. Then he put the stopper back and told me to take it out. I took the tray out to the pantry, went out and took the car back to the garage. When I came in to put out the pantry light, I saw he had changed his mind and got the liquor himself."

"The tray was gone?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, sir.—I had expected it. He couldn't resist drink, sir."

Colonel Primrose consulted his notebook again. "What is this about *two* decanters, Wilkins."

I pricked up my ears instantly. I think both Iris and I stirred uneasily.

"It was merely a suggestion of mine, sir, when Captain Lamb told me the whiskey in the decanter on the tray was not poisoned. I am very certain there was nothing in the glass when I took it out. Captain Lamb said cyanide is a rapid poison, that he must have died within a few moments of taking it. The only explanation I could think of is that the decanters were changed."

He studiously avoided meeting Iris's eye.

"You know decanters come in pairs, sir. That on the tray was one of a Waterford pair that is usually in the cellaret in the dining room. They were both full in the evening. I saw Madame fill them . . . when she explained to me she would be bringing guests back after the ball."

Something in Colonel Primrose's eyes flickered as if it were alive.

"I noticed this morning that the mate to it—the one that I had put in the cellaret—was empty. I assumed the possibility of someone exchanging them, so that no poison would be present in the one on the table . . . as soon as the glass from which it had been drunk was washed out."

His bland expressionless face, the blankly innocent look in his pale blue eyes, made what he was saying seem incredibly awful, like a child describing some terrible occurrence that had no meaning for it.

"And of course whoever changed them would empty out the poisoned one and put it back in the cellaret."

Colonel Primrose nodded curtly. "Bring them both in," he said.

"The police have taken both of them, sir."

The cigarette in Iris's hand trembled, the ash fell unnoticed in a little grey cylinder on her dark dress.

Colonel Primrose looked at her, waiting, I think, for some simple explanation of the empty decanter in the cellaret, which she had filled before she had gone out.

"Wilkins is quite right," she said. "I did fill both of them, and gave him one to put in the chest. Nobody told me it was empty. I don't——"

Colonel Primrose cut her off. "That's all, Wilkins."

The butler bowed. "May I take these now, sir?"

He indicated the clothes on the chair. Colonel Primrose nodded. Wilkins picked them up and went out.

He had no sooner closed the door than Iris stood up suddenly, all color gone from her face. I thought for a moment she was going to faint.

"What . . . if I'd poisoned all of you!"

Her voice was a strangled whisper.

"I've thought of that several times, my dear lady," Colonel Primrose said pleasantly.

She stood there for a moment looking at him. "I think I'll go lie down—if you don't mind," she said then. "Will you ring for anything you want, Grace. No—don't come. I'll be all right."

She went quickly out.

"That seems to have gone home," Colonel Primrose said, more to himself than me. He shook his head a little. I didn't say anything.

"Randall's itinerary last night was interesting," he went on placidly.

I happened to glance up then. He was looking intently at me.

"What did he go to your house for, Mrs. Latham?"

I looked perfectly blank.

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said. "I wasn't home."

"Sure?"

"Of course.—And for that matter what did he go to your house for? You were in, weren't you?"

He nodded slowly. Then he looked at me, hesitating a little.

"Have you got a hat you can keep this under for a while?" he asked.

"Oh dear!" I said. "I'm not good at it."

He chuckled.

"You'd think I was old enough to know better than give secret information to a woman, wouldn't you?"

"That's what *I'd* think," I said. "But do go on."

He hesitated again, and did go on, very deliberately.

"I thought at first—as you may have noticed—that this was all too simple," he said placidly. "It appears to me now, Mrs. Latham, that possibly there's more in it than meets the eye. I'm going to tell you this—if you'll promise definitely, for your own safety, not to mention it to a soul.—Three years ago, just after he married Iris, Randall Nash came to see me one night with something on his mind. I thought for a while he was going to go away without getting it out. But just as he was leaving he took an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to me. He said 'I'd like you to keep this for me, until I collect it. If I should die before I come for it, give it to my daughter. Not to anybody else under any circumstances. Will you do that for me?' . . . And by the way, Mrs. Latham, didn't I hear Iris ask the Sergeant if I wouldn't like a drink?"

I nodded and rang the bell. "You don't miss much, do you."

"Nothing important," he agreed modestly.

"Wilkins," I said, "please bring Scotch and soda."

And when he did I said, "If it poisons you don't blame Iris —or me."

He shot a stream of soda into the tall glass. I noticed that they had the old-fashioned type of syphon with the metal fishnet all over it, now that the police had taken the new-fangled one that Lowell had given her father for Christmas.

"I only wanted to know how far away our bland friend was," he said with a chuckle. "You know, of course, how I disapprove of strong waters. Well, to go on.—I knew he'd just married, naturally. I didn't know what might be in his mind. So I took the letter and put it away. I never thought of it again, except when I was with him, and I finally quit even then—until yesterday afternoon. He came in then and asked for it."

Colonel Primrose put down his empty glass.

"I got it for him. He put it in his pocket, and left . . . and went to your house. Now—what for?"

His sparkling black eyes surveyed me intently.

"I wouldn't know," I said.

"He didn't leave it there?"

"Not that I know of."

"I couldn't find it, in the short time I had to examine your premises this noon," he said with a smile.

Then the smile faded, and he leaned forward.

"That letter is the real clue to Randall Nash's murder, Mrs. Latham," he said very seriously.

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"Well," I said philosophically, "your sergeant told me once, I remember, that you've never made a mistake.—And you don't know what was in it?"

"I have no idea at all. Except, of course, that it vitally concerns Lowell. Perhaps other people as well, but certainly Lowell."

"Why not ask her? Hasn't she come home yet?"

He shook his head.

"She and Angus are coming in time for dinner. Captain Lamb has talked to her. She doesn't know what it could be, or so she says. Her story is that since his marriage Randall Nash quit confiding in her. Days went by without her seeing him at all except at the dinner table."

"Since she doesn't get up for breakfast, he isn't home for lunch and she's out virtually every night in the week, that isn't as surprising as you'd think," I said. "I don't think I've seen my boys but three times, except Christmas, since they've been home. And once then they were sound asleep. I've taken it for granted we are still friends."

"Lowell doesn't take anything for granted, I'm afraid. Even poor Mac.—You know, I sometimes think the biggest break Mac could get would be Lowell's deciding to marry somebody else."

"I thought she had," I said.

"Who?"

"Steve Donaldson."

Colonel Primrose smiled, "She's just the girl who could do it."

"Unless," I said ironically, "it turns out that he and Iris were in a conspiracy to murder Randall."

He shook his head.

"Sergeant Buck has a fine old adage, Mrs. Latham—'Many's the true word spoke in jest.' "

He got to his feet and looked at his watch. "Where the devil is the man, by the way?"

The door opened. Wilkins came in. "The Sergeant would like to speak with you, sir—on the telephone."

Colonel Primrose went out hastily. Wilkins took his glass, and returned shortly with a fresh one. "Is there anything else, madame?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Shall you be in for dinner, madame?"

I nodded. I think I almost discharged him at that moment, for no immediate reason except that I didn't like his pale moon face and pale blue eyes and didn't have any serious moral responsibility, it not being my house I was in. I rather wish now I had. But I didn't have time. Colonel Primrose came back. He waited until Wilkins had gone out.

"Buck says the clerk at the drug store remembers Randall coming in. He got change for a quarter and went into the telephone booth. He stayed there a while and went out. He left a nickel in the little trough and the next customer brought it out. That's why the clerk remembered him, that and the fact that he was dressed."

"Well," I said, "then he didn't buy rat poison to kill himself with."

"Did you think he had?"

"I hoped so."

"There seems to have been plenty about."

I heard the door open just then, and Lowell and Angus came in. Angie put down his pigskin bag covered with the labels of practically every hotel with a palm tree in its garden on the Riviera, and took off his coat. Lowell threw her hat on a chair and came over to the fire.

"Where's the beautiful Iris?"

Angie groaned.

"At it before you've got your coat off. Can't you stow it for five minutes, for God's sake?"

Lowell lighted a cigarette and hunched down on the small of her back, her elegantly shod feet sticking straight out toward the fire.

"What's this about a letter my father gave you to keep, Colonel Primrose?"

His eyes rested on hers.

"That's all there is to it, Lowell. Except that he got it yesterday afternoon, a little after five.—Do you know anything about it?"

"Just that," she said tersely. "Doesn't Wilkins?"

"He hasn't said so."

"Why don't you jog his memory?"

She gave us one of her most hard-boiled smiles, reached out and pressed the bell. Wilkins came.

"Look here, Wilkins. Didn't my father have a letter——"

"One that he asked me to post, miss, which I did."

"Who was it to? Now don't say you don't know. Anybody looks at the address on a letter. It's like your Ceszinsky reflex."

Wilkins hesitated only an instant, feeling at his white tie.

"It was to Mr. A. J. McClean, miss."

"There you are. You see how simple it is to be honest. You have posted it?"

"Yes, miss."

"How big was it?"

"It was on the regular stationery, miss."

"And when did he give it to you?"

"In the evening, just before dinner."

There was a moment's silence. I saw that it surprised her a little.

"He didn't give it to you . . . last night?"

"No, miss."

"Thanks. Bring us some toasted crackers and cheese."

"Yes, miss."

"Then . . . that couldn't be the letter he got from you?"

She looked at Colonel Primrose. He shook his head.

"No. That was in a long envelope."

"Have you asked Iris?"

"Not yet."

She threw her cigarette into the fireplace and laughed bitterly.

"God, it must be marvellous to be beautiful! Even the police approach you with velvet gloves . . . and the rest of us have to jump out of the way when you barge in with the mailed hoof."

She lighted another cigarette. Angie got up and walked down to the garden windows.

"What's the pit doing? Are we having a barbecue?" he inquired.

Lowell sauntered down and looked over his shoulder. She turned back, her face white. Colonel Primrose glanced at me.

"Can't they even let a poor dog rest in peace?" she asked quietly.

We said nothing. Angie came back. "Lowell wants to know if she can leave, Colonel Primrose. After . . . tomorrow."

I hadn't known, till then, that they'd set the time for the services.

"You'll have to ask the District Attorney, Angus."

Lowell spoke flatly from the windows. "I'm not going till I find that letter."

Angie shrugged. "O. K., Toots.—Ten minutes ago you were going to marry Mac, or Steve, or somebody, and wash your hands of the whole business. Personally, I'd miss you. I like that. I've had a bum tooth for a year and I can't bear to have it pulled. I'd never get a good night's sleep."

Lowell smiled.

"Shut up," she said. "Well, if you don't mind a small point, I'm going up stairs and wash my face."

Her brother grinned ironically after her. "Hurry back, darling, won't you."

He turned to us as she closed the door.

"I don't know what in hell's the matter with that woman. Mac says she's been like this for a couple of weeks. Only she's worse now. She was crazy about dad, and all that . . ."

He took a deep breath.

"Well, it's getting me down. She was all right till noon. Steve phoned to ask if he could do anything and didn't ask to speak to her. You'd have thought Mac and I put him up to it. I told Mac I wouldn't marry her if she kidnaped me and took me to Elkton. What he sees in that bad-tempered, wall-eyed little . . . hussy is beyond me."

Angus did not see the iron-surfaced monument of disapproval who had come in and was standing in the door. Colonel Primrose and I both did. He shot me a quick glance of amusement. Sergeant Buck cleared his brass-bound vocal cords.

"There's a bird outside wants to know," he said, very seriously, out of one corner of his mouth, "if they've got a list of the pall buriers to give the press for the first Mrs. Nash, sir."

Angie's face paled.

"Just a second," he said quickly. "I'll see him out there."

He poured a small drink of whiskey, splashed a good deal of soda in it and poured it down his throat. I could see from the expression, or lack of it, on Sergeant Buck's grim lantern-jawed face that it was not the correct thing to have done.

He looked at me significantly as Angie went out.

"I got a report to make to the Colonel, if you don't mind, ma'am."

I went out hastily and up to my room, the blue guest room overlooking the garden, and sat down. I was just thinking suddenly that I hadn't told Colonel Primrose a good many things I knew that might very conceivably have a good deal of

importance. I hadn't, for instance, told him about A. J.—nor, I thought suddenly, had I told him about Lavinia and her drunken threats. I hadn't told him that Gilbert St. Martin had been here—in spite of what Iris had said—on Christmas Eve when Senator McGilvray had been poisoned. And then I remembered that I hadn't told Iris that Gilbert wanted to see her that night at ten o'clock.

I heard a door open then, got up and looked out into the hall. If Iris had got up, I thought—and I doubted how well she could sleep at the moment—I would have a chance to talk to her. I went to the door of her room. It was slightly ajar, so I went in. She wasn't in there. I could hear her voice from her dressing room. She was talking slowly and quietly and very intensely, and every word in her low husky voice came as clear as if she was speaking to me. Before I realized it, and before I could overcome the shocked inertia of my legs, I heard her:

"And listen, Lowell . . . I've stood more from you in the last three years than I've stood from anyone in my entire life. I made the mistake in thinking, when I first came here, that you acted as you did because you resented anyone your father was fond of. And I understood that perfectly. I thought you'd see as you grew up that there are different kinds of affection possible in people's lives, and eventually we'd understand each other. But I was wrong. And now I'm going to tell you something. Your father didn't tell me when I married him that he had a sixteen year old daughter. He called you his baby girl, and I thought of you as that. It was as much a shock to me as it was to you when I saw you the night you came.

"And there's another thing. I'm not going to tell you that I didn't or that I did murder your father. You can figure that out for yourself. But there's one thing I will tell you . . . and that is, I did not poison your dog. And now this is chiefly what I want to say to you. I haven't told Colonel Primrose, or Captain Lamb, or Mr. Doyle, or anybody, that you came home from the Assembly last night, and were in this house *after* I left it . . . and *after* Wilkins left your father in the library. And I know you did come, and were here—because you had on your white evening coat when you went out, and when you came in and put on your scene in the library you had on your red velvet coat with the white fox collar."

I heard Lowell gasp, and Iris go on.

"I assume you've got your reasons for not wanting it known you were here . . . and that in some way I don't understand they include an empty decanter in the cellaret. So far as I'm

concerned I shall continue to assume they are good reasons and say nothing about it . . . and further more I want you to understand I ask nothing of you in return. And I want you to understand this, Lowell . . ."

I got out at that point. I'm not sure how I got back to my room.

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Iris's low taut voice still vibrated in my astonished ears. I sat down on the padded window seat and stared unseeing past the garden wall at my own house. The only thing I was conscious of was the shattering fact that Lowell Nash had been in the house the night her father was killed, and had said nothing about it—Lowell, who whatever her faults I would have bet my last sous was as passionately honest as anyone in all the world. Why? Why? It kept beating in my brain, and I had no answer. The idea that Lowell could have had anything to do with her father's death by poison was unthinkable . . . even more unthinkable than for Iris to have had. And yet . . . My eye fell on the broken spot in the wall between our two gardens. Lowell was still a Nash . . . a direct descendant of the General Nash on whose immortal soul that dark burden lay.

"It is not possible!" I said sharply to myself. I got up and turned on the light. Some simple explanation would turn up, I told myself. I powdered my nose and went downstairs.

Halfway down I heard the sound of Mac's voice from the drawing room, and stopped dead in my tracks. If Lowell had come to the house, then Mac must have come too. I don't know why that struck me so forcibly just then, or why it hadn't occurred to me before. I remembered now that they'd left the dance early.

I listened again. Someone else was speaking. I recognized Steve Donaldson's voice. He was saying, "But if they can prove anybody else at all was here Doyle can get her off. He doesn't even need that if he puts her on the stand."

I waited for Mac to say something, but he didn't. All I heard was the tinkling of ice in a glass, and the crackling of the fire. Not even Colonel Primrose's voice. I glanced quickly down to where his coat and hat had been when I went upstairs. They were gone.

I went on down and into the drawing room. Mac and Steve

were there alone. They got up, both looking pretty washed-out. Mac for the moment had evidently buried the hatchet, or maybe, I thought, he'd realized by this time that Steve was not trying to cut him out with Lowell.

"Where's Angus?" I asked.

"Somebody called up for Colonel Primrose," Mac said. "They beat it out of here hell for leather. Angie and that guy with the iron mug."

Stephen Donaldson said nothing . . . but no sky writer ever had a question more plainly written in the air all around him.

"Iris is holding up marvellously," I said.

"Then I guess I'll go along. Tell her if there's anything I can do . . ." he said lamely. When he'd gone I turned to Mac.

"Didn't you and Lowell come by the house after the Assembly?" I asked casually.

"No," he said . . . too promptly. "Why?"

"I just wondered."

He got up from where he was sprawling on the sofa and wandered around the room for a minute. Then he came and sat down again, his head in his hands.

"Well," I said, "that's your story and you're sticking to it. I'm not interested . . . except that, as Steve just said to you, if they can show anybody at all was here, Doyle can get Iris off."

"They don't have to prove that," he said doggedly. "They can't prove there was poison in that glass she washed up. They can't prove that's how he was poisoned."

He stared down at the toe of his pebbled leather shoe. Then he said, "Has anybody been saying Lowell was . . . that we were here, after the Assembly?"

"Nobody's told the police—or Colonel Primrose," I said. "Maybe somebody ought to—you or Lowell, for instance. I mean, I don't see why Iris hasn't got a right to one decent break."

"Well—Lowell didn't do it," he said abruptly. "She didn't go in the library. I sat on the bottom step waiting for her to run upstairs. She went straight up, and came straight down again."

"Why don't you tell the police that?"

"Because the whole business has knocked her cock-eyed already, without having them hounding her out of her wits."

"What about yourself? —Perhaps you went in the library while she was upstairs. Has all this knocked you cock-eyed too?"

"I'd just as soon tell 'em I did, if it wasn't for Lowell," he said dully. "But honest, Mrs. Latham, she's taken an awful beating, with her mother going out like that, and all."

"I know," I said. "It's a grand thing, being in love. I suppose it's quite impossible for you to see that somebody else is taking a worse beating."

I was about to go on when there was a clatter at the door. Angie looked in, a sort of holy joy on his lean freckled face.

"Iris!" he shouted. "Where's Iris?"

Then I heard him dashing up the stairs three at a time. Mac and I looked blankly at each other, and at Colonel Primrose, who came in alone, rubbing his hands together, a faint ironical smile on his face.

"What's happened?" I demanded.

He looked at us queerly.

"Nothing for Angus to be quite so happy about," he said drily. "As he'll discover when he stops to think."

"What is it?"

"It is Dr. Kavanaugh's report on Senator McGilvray's entrails," he said deliberately. "It . . . rather changes things."

"Then he wasn't poisoned at all!"

I think we both blurted it out together.

Colonel Primrose shook his head.

"He was poisoned, all right. That's not the point. He was poisoned in a rather novel way. They found two enteric capsules in his colon.—Dear, dear."

He shook his head in some annoyance.

I looked at Mac, he looked at me.

"I don't get the point," I said.

"I didn't either, till Kavanaugh explained it. He's a consulting pharmacologist for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We've been going on the assumption that potassium cyanide is a rapid acting poison, which it is . . . as soon as the body absorbs it. And that's where the enteric capsules come in."

I was still completely mystified. We waited patiently.

"An enteric capsule, my dear Mrs. Latham," he went on slowly, "is a capsule with an enteric coating. And an enteric coating is an alkaline coating that won't dissolve in the juices of the stomach. It doesn't dissolve, in other words, until it gets into the colon. It's the way they take the sting out of castor oil."

"They never bothered when they used to give it to me," Mac said.

"But they can. It's also the way they give any medicine

taken orally that they don't want to act till it reaches the colon. —And the point here is simple, of course. You get a delayed action."

He looked at us with a grim smile.

"So that when Lowell's dog was given cyanide of potassium in enteric capsules, the absorption of the poison into the system was postponed . . . I wouldn't know just how long, but very definitely."

I tried to think.

"How does one get enteric capsules?" I asked. "I mean, do you just go to a drug store and buy them?"

He shook his head.

"No, but they can be made. Those that Senator McGilvray was poisoned with were made quite simply. A pellet of sweetened bread and cyanide dipped in a melted tablet of salol, which you can get from a drug store as easily as aspirin. It's used for relief of pain from rheumatism quite commonly, and it melts at a very low heat—over a double boiler, for example."

He took his old pipe that had been mended with a silver foot under the bowl, knocked the dottle out in the palm of his hand and tossed it into the fire.

"The only trouble with enteric capsules," he went on at last —neither Mac nor I had spoken; my mind was slipping rapidly through the new and startling vistas this had opened— "is that they don't always dissolve. They may be eliminated, in that case, or they may simply stay undissolved . . . depending on a number of conditions. That's what happened with Senator McGilvray. When Kavanaugh opened him, he found three small pellets, about the size of orange pips. He examined them . . . and that's how we learned about it. Somebody had fed the animal several of them—four at any rate—apparently in a piece of chocolate candy."

The silence in the room for an instant was appalling. In my mind I could hear Iris's husky voice: "I'm not going to tell you that I didn't or that I did murder your father . . . but there's one thing I will tell you—I did not poison your dog."

"The point, however," Colonel Primrose went on deliberately, "is not Senator McGilvray. Except of course as we have to consider all the people who could possibly have given him that candy."

I liked Mac a lot, just then, for not saying what I'm sure he must have been thinking.

"The point is this: Randall Nash was not necessarily poisoned by the highball he was drinking here last night. We'd

assumed that, because of the rapidity with which cyanide acts. But if those enteric capsules were tried out on the dog, and used again . . . then Randall may have taken that poison into his system at any time in the evening. Or, of course, at any place in the evening. From nine-thirty, say, when he visited his former wife's house in Massachusetts Avenue, to twelve o'clock or so when he left A. J. at Linthicum Hall."

I stared at him, comprehension gradually breaking in on my befogged brain. I think I could have wept. "—Then it doesn't mean that Iris . . . ?"

He shook his head.

"No person who was here that evening necessarily had any hand in it at all."

I leaned back in my chair. Mac suddenly dropped his head in his hands. "Gee," he said, "I . . ."

I felt just about as articulate. Colonel Primrose chuckled.

"Your alibi, incidentally—if you'd got around to giving it, was O. K.", he said, looking down at him. "Mr. Chatfield next door vouches that you waited in the car while Lowell went in to change her wrap."

Mac glanced guiltily at me, his homely good-looking face flushing.

"Well," he said stolidly, "it just goes to show you shouldn't judge people by appearances."

Colonel Primrose chuckled again. I suppose he was thinking, as I did, that it sounded more like one of Sergeant Buck's moralistic gems than anything else. However, I'd noticed that most young men are very serious—more so at Mac's age than at any other time in their lives, fortunately. It had always seemed to me a curious example of the mysterious workings of nature that Mac and Lowell should have picked each other out, one vitally needing a balance-wheel, the other the sharp spur of stimulus to urge him on. I knew A. J. had been worried about the spark to set him off for a long time. He tried practically everything, from jerking soda in a corner drug store to playing the saxophone at Ocean City, before he finished a very scattered college course and went into his uncle's bank so he could marry Lowell. And that, I suppose, explained quite sufficiently A. J.'s desire for him to marry her . . . quite apart from her money. A. J. was much too upright a man to think of that very deeply, considering furthermore his own very ample means.

I was thinking of that when Angie came down.

Mac got up hastily. "I guess Lowell wouldn't want to talk to anybody," he said hopefully.

"How would she know what she wants?" Angie said cheerfully. "You know her, don't you? Why don't you go and talk to her anyway?"

Mac hesitated, and ambled out, indecision written all over him. We heard him go upstairs and call her name softly.

"My God, that guy's a fiend for punishment," Angie said. "But better him than us. How about a drink?"

"Just a minute, Angus. There's a point I'd like to talk about with you."

I don't know whether it was the look in Colonel Primrose's eyes, or the fact that he interrupted someone offering him a drink; but I do know that my heart tightened as if it had been dipped in a sudden astringent. And for the first time the meaning of what he had said about Angus having no reason to be quite as happy as he was occurred sharply to me.

His eyes were fixed quietly on Angie's surprised face.

"You see, Angus," he said imperturbably, "we now have to reconsider this whole business in the light of our new information. We've got to examine into everything that happened to your father from the time he left the house about twenty minutes past nine to the time he returned to it. If he was given the cyanide in the manner suggested by the examination of Senator McGilvray, then . . . several new possibilities are brought up."

Angie sat down between us. He looked calmly at Colonel Primrose, his freckled face flushed slightly.

"I begin to . . . get your idea," he said. "Go ahead."

"First: it is almost unthinkable, in that case, that your father and the dog were poisoned by different people. Let's take, therefore, the people who were in this house Christmas Eve. We have:

"Randall Nash himself.
Iris Nash.
Lowell Nash.
Mac.
Stephen Donaldson.
Angus Nash.
Mrs. Edith St. Martin.
The servants."

"And me," I said, being much too well up in crime fiction not to know that the person the detective fails to mention is invariably the guilty man.

"And Mrs. Latham."

"And what about Lavinia Fawcett?" I added. "And remind me, by the way, to tell you something about her."

He nodded.

"As far as I know the only people it leaves out whom he saw Tuesday evening are A. J. McClean, and Gilbert St. Martin—neither of whom, as far as we know, had any opportunity to feed the dog poison at any time Christmas Eve."

I couldn't help a little shudder of just plain physical revulsion.

"What an unpleasant lot you make us sound, Colonel Primrose," I said.

"One of you is *damned* unpleasant," he answered drily. "I'm trying to find out which it is . . . so he won't do it again, sometime."

Angus Nash spoke, slowly and carefully, his eyes steadily on Colonel Primrose, as if he wanted to say just exactly what he meant and no more or less.

"Several of those people, however, my father didn't see after nine-thirty Tuesday night. Iris, for instance. So . . . while they could have poisoned the dog, they couldn't have poisoned my father. Iris of course is quite out—she didn't see him after dinner at all. I know that, because when he came over that night, I asked him if Iris had told him they were taking Mother to the hospital; he said then he hadn't seen her since dinner. I'd phoned about eight o'clock."

Colonel Primrose nodded, eyeing him rather oddly, I thought.

"It also lets Lowell out," Angie went on coolly. "It lets Mac and Steve out, and Mrs. Latham. None of them saw him Tuesday evening . . . from dinner time to the time of his death after twelve. In fact, Colonel, it leaves just two people in—me, and Edith St. Martin. And that's the idea, I guess."

There was no sign in Colonel Primrose's sparkling black parrot's eyes. I looked at the two of them open-mouthed, I suppose; with a feeling of dreadful dismay, anyway.

"Well, you can come out with it, if it is. You don't have to give it an enteric coating. I guess I can take it straight."

Colonel Primrose smiled, with a sort of patient politeness. I could see his gaze, direct, unfaltering and probing, rest on the sandy-haired, freckle-faced young man by my side.

He nodded. "You see, of course, what line the police are likely to take, when they figure it out."

"I see," Angie said. "What's my motive? Have you figured that out?"

Colonel Primrose nodded again. "Yes. There are two possi-

ble motives . . . at least. The first is, obviously, that you and your father didn't get along."

Angie smiled bitterly.

"If I'd been going to kill him for that, I could have done it any time in the last ten years."

"You hadn't the added incentive of protecting a woman—not until recently."

"Meaning . . . what, Colonel Primrose?"

"I think you know what I mean, Angus," Colonel Primrose said gently. "I don't think you need to resent anyone's seeing that you adore the ground your father's second wife walks on."

Angus's face was quite white.

"Well," he said "—what of it?"

He spoke with a controlled intensity more dangerous than a thousand of his sister's violent tempests.

"Nothing," Colonel Primrose said. "I'm merely pointing it out to you . . . before going on to the second motive."

He hesitated a moment.

"—The motive that many people not knowing you—including the police, I'm afraid—will certainly think the stronger of the two."

"And what's that?"

Colonel Primrose looked at him quietly for an instant. He spoke then very slowly, and very gently.

"You knew your mother was seriously ill, didn't you."

Angie nodded.

"In fact, you knew she couldn't last the night except for a miracle—which doesn't happen often, even in these days. Is that true?"

"Yes. That's true. She was running a temperature of a hundred and one when she went out. Nothing could stop her. I knew when she went to the hospital that night there was no chance for her."

"And . . . you also knew the settlement that she and your father made when they were divorced—when your father was almost wiped out?"

Angie looked at him, puzzled. "You mean about her getting a third of the estate? Sure . . . but what of it?"

Colonel Primrose's bushy grey brows raised slightly.

"If your father died before your mother, you would get one-third of his estate. If he died afterward, you would get nothing."

"I don't follow you," Angie said quietly. "I never expected him to leave me a bean. I wouldn't have taken it if he had."

"Your mother had been ill for some time," Colonel

Primrose said evenly. "Last night she was mortally ill, which you knew. If your father died before she did, she got one-third of his estate, which would automatically go to you on her death. You are her sole heir. Lowell gets two thousand dollars and her mink coat. If, on the other hand, she predeceased Randall——"

"I get you," Angie said shortly. He stared from one of us to the other, unseeing, and whistled. "Well, what do you know about that."

Then he grinned unhappily at me. "And wouldn't that have burned him up! Jeez, does that give me a laugh! Ha, ha!"

If the idea had ever occurred to him before, I thought when he gave that dreadfully mirthless burst of merriment, then Angie Nash was wasting his life. He should be telling lies for a living.

He looked at Colonel Primrose abruptly. "Then that's why they're so damned anxious about the time all this happened?"

"That's why the executor is so damned anxious about it," Colonel Primrose said coolly. "Precisely."

"And wouldn't that burn my little sister up."

"I imagine it would. As Iris gets one-third of the estate, and any bequests have to be paid out of what's left."

I had long since abandoned my relaxed air and was sitting bolt upright, dreadfully anxious. It was plain that we were now getting a motive for the murder of Randall Nash that was far more tenable than Iris's fear of him. And still—just as in Iris's case—it was utterly unbelievable, to my mind at least. It was simply impossible. Angie couldn't conceivably . . .

At just that moment Sergeant Buck appeared, grimly frozen-faced, bringing with him A. J. McClean . . . and another and as it turned out terribly important element was introduced abruptly into the drama of Randall Nash's murder.

"He was over at the house acting like a crazy guy," Sergeant Buck whispered behind his hand. He could have been heard in the White House, I suppose.

A. J. was not acting exactly like a crazy guy then, but he was plainly upset. He bowed to us, formal as usual, and sat down, his face grey, his hands shaking.

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"I've got some very disturbing information, Colonel Primrose," he said jerkily. "Very disturbing indeed. In fact I may say——"

He stopped short.

"Perhaps I should go directly to the District Attorney. But . . . there is a curious angle that I thought I should discuss with you first. Er . . . I think . . ."

He looked significantly at Angie and me. Colonel Primrose nodded Angie toward the door. I started to go too. He said crisply, "Take notes, Mrs. Latham. —Have you got your notebook?"

I had just started to say "No," I suppose, when a great hand appeared over my shoulder with a bridge pad and pencil in it.

"You left it on the table," Sergeant Buck said gruffly, without turning a hair. I caught myself from staring open-mouthed at him, thinking what an amazing instance it was of forebearance, as well as presence of mind, and rallied as quickly as I could.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go on, Mr. McClean."

A. J. McClean looked a little doubtful at this, not being anybody's fool, as I knew, and undoubtedly knowing that I have no knowledge remotely as useful as shorthand. However, there wasn't much he could say.

"It's a delicate situation, Colonel Primrose," he began rather pointedly. Colonel Primrose nodded placidly. He gave me a sideways glance again, and went on.

"We have been going into Randall Nash's affairs, Colonel—his attorney Sam Lehrmann and myself—at the request of the District Attorney and Captain Lamb. And we have found a very queer set of circumstances indeed. We knew, of course—Lehrmann and myself—that for the last three years he has paid income tax on, roughly, some forty-five to fifty thousand dollars."

"I understood that," Colonel Primrose said. I wrote down "45-50,000 dollars."

A. J. McClean leaned forward, his face working convulsively.

"And . . . we have been through his bank deposits and securities. He kept only his current household account with us. —And . . . we can't find anything!—Anything at all, Colonel Primrose!"

His thin hands shook as he waved them in the air, his voice rose almost to a scream. The expression of merely polite interest on Colonel Primrose's face vanished sharply; my pencil stopped motionless on the pad.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Colonel?—We can't find any assets, of any kind! We find that every dividend he's received in the last three years has been converted into cash, every asset—over and above those that brought in his mere living expenses—has been liquidated . . . and the proceeds have vanished!"

Colonel Primrose shifted forward to the edge of his chair, bolt upright, listening intently, his eyes sharp and sparkling with interest. "He couldn't spend that much money in the course of a year——"

"No, no, no!"

A. J. shook his head impatiently.

"He never spent more than twenty thousand dollars in a year. We should, in normal invested savings, have at least sixty thousand dollars somewhere; and more than that, we have evidence of one property sale alone, in this past year, of over fifty thousand."

A. J. leaned back in his chair, wiping the beads of perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief. He cast me another sideways glance, and leaned forward again.

"And this is the very delicate point I want to talk over with you," he said, more calmly. "—Without going into the rights or wrongs of it—merely the cold facts—Randall had the most violent feelings against his first wife. I am not going any farther into that. I merely ask you to believe that it was so."

"I've always understood so," Colonel Primrose said.

A. J. clasped his bony hands between his knees, and looked very deliberately at him for a long moment, hesitating. He was still upset, but he was much more his dry, precise self than he had been a moment before.

"And this," he said at last, "is my explanation—in view of that, and all the circumstances,—of what has happened. The settlement that Marie demanded, and that he was forced to give, because liquidating any of his assets at that time would

have ruined him, was most irksome to him. —I wish to emphasize that as strongly as possible, to explain—if possible —what otherwise would appear nothing but monomania."

Colonel Primrose nodded. I could see that he was profoundly interested in what A. J. was saying; and unless I was mistaken there was an odd expression on his face, as if he was not entirely surprised by all this, and knew pretty well what was coming. As I hadn't the faintest idea of it, I listened completely engrossed.

"It is my belief," A. J. went on slowly, with a quietly dry emphasis, "that Randall determined never to allow Marie to have one cent of his money. He . . . loathed and hated her, Colonel Primrose. But when it became impossible to conceal assets as readily as it could once be done, he began a program of liquidation.—I come now to the time of his second marriage—to which, incidentally, I was unalterably opposed, on Lowell's account. And . . . this is what I have to tell you. You will understand, of course, that up to this time I had not thought it of the least importance.

"Randall came to me, shortly after his second marriage, and explained to me, at great length, what I had already heard many times—his antagonism to his first wife. He told me that he was going to make a proposition that he knew I would disapprove of, at the outset, but that he hoped I would consent to, in view of our friendship of many years standing.

"I listened to his proposal, Colonel Primrose. It was this: he planned to convert all his assets into cash, and turn that cash over to me. I was to put it away, or use it, or do anything with it, as steward, secretly . . . so that in event of his pre-deceasing Marie Lowell Nash, none of it would fall into her hands. —I needn't say, Colonel, that I refused, flatly and finally. It was of course dishonest and . . . and illegal."

Any pretence at taking notes that I may have made had long since been forgotten in my gaping fascination at this story, so unfolded by the dry, meticulous president of the Colonial Trust Company. And Colonel Primrose sat there, looking placidly at him, nodding his head absently.

"The object, obviously, being that Marie's legal one-third of his estate, should he pre-decease her, would amount to nothing.—He was not offended, and we said no more of it for some time. Then, some months later, I spoke to him about it. He said to forget it, that he must have been out of his mind to consider such a course. And I agreed with him. But . . . Colonel Primrose, it is now evident that he had not abandoned his plan at all! He merely gave the execution of it to more

complaisant—and, if I may say so, less honest—hands.—And somewhere, Colonel Primrose, in someone's hands, held in the way that he wished me to hold it, is the bulk of Randall Nash's fortune . . . and that, sir, is—I really believe—the reason he was killed here last night!"

Colonel Primrose continued to nod his head absently. Sergeant Buck nodded his head also, and—I suppose by way of additional emphasis—turned and spat neatly into the fireplace. He then turned abruptly to answer a tap on the door, and turned back from it. "The kid says Captain Lamb and Sylvester are waiting in the other room, sir."

Colonel Primrose got up.

"We'd better have a talk with them, Mr. McClean. Will you go on with the Sergeant? I'll join you."

He came over to me and took the bridge pad out of my hands. All I had on it was "45-50,000 dollars."

He smiled.

"I had to keep you here some way," he said. He chuckled suddenly, looking at me intently with his black old eyes.

"I admit I wouldn't have done it if I'd known what was coming. But I didn't want you to go out and have a heart to heart talk with someone."

His face became abruptly sober.

"Listen, my dear. Believe me when I tell you that it isn't safe to talk to anybody . . . won't you? I don't know what you know that you haven't told me—but you've heard plenty here just now. And anything you've heard may be exactly what somebody's trying desperately to keep from getting out . . . and somebody could easily get the idea that you know too much to stay above ground."

He gave me a politely sardonic grin.

"Will you get that through your lovely but impulsive head, Mrs. Latham? And that means everybody around here. Just because you don't like to think some body you know has committed murder, and has still got murder in his or her heart, is no sign it isn't terribly true.—You and I know a lot of people who'd murder their parents and their grandparents for three or four hundred thousand dollars."

He tore off the sheet of paper with my note on it, crumpled it up and threw it in the fire.

"You realize, of course," he said slowly, "that the minute Randall Nash knew Marie was dying he began taking steps to get that money of his back into his own hands. That explains his visits to his wife. It wasn't because he'd stopped hating her —it was simply so he could find out how ill she was."

He shook his head. "When did you first hear Marie was sick?"

"Christmas Eve. Gilbert St. Martin told me. Edith phoned him she'd seen Randall going to Marie's house that afternoon."

He walked over to the fireplace and stood there, looking down into it, for a long time, tapping his forefinger on the mantel.

"That's the night the dog was poisoned," he said. "I wonder——"

"What do you wonder?" I demanded, after a while.

"I wonder whether the dog was a . . . a trial flight, so to speak—or whether the poison Senator McGilvray got was meant for Randall and miscarried. Did Randall eat candy? I can't remember."

I shook my head.

"I wouldn't know. Certainly not the way A. J. eats it, for instance. He doesn't smoke or drink, of course. But surely it must have taken some time to fix those capsules—unless Marie had been sick for some time . . ."

He shook his head impatiently.

"That's what I've been trying so hard to tell you, Mrs. Latham," he said reproachfully, with a despairing shrug. "This isn't any hit and run business, and you've got to get it out of your head that it is. It's a carefully planned killing, worked out in detail and in absolute cold blood. The murderer has probably been hatching it for—how long ago did McClean say Randall came to him?—for three years, even. Months, at any rate. Such ideas grow, like an ugly weed in a dark cellar. You can't tell what happened. The money was probably taken in good faith at first . . . and then, as it grew, its custodian became obsessed with the idea that, if anything happened to Marie, or Randall changed his mind, why, he'd have to give it up. And the moment that thought occurred . . . that was when Randall's death warrant began to be written."

"And the letter you had was the key to it, then."

"I imagine so. Randall was too shrewd, of course, not to give himself some safeguard. I expect that was it. A statement in it, of course, that there was that money somewhere . . . and who had it."

I had another idea. "In the event of his death you were to give it to Lowell. That lets her out, then."

There was a tap on the door. Sergeant Buck's grim face appeared. It must have gratified him to the very heart to have

seen Colonel Primrose on his way out turn and shake his finger at me.

"Remember, please, Mrs. Latham. I haven't got time to bother with you. You keep out of this.—Just coming, Buck."

I don't know how soon it was after he went out that I was conscious of Wilkin's presence, quietly picking up the used glass and refilling the thermos ice tub. I do know that I suddenly had the odd sensation that he had been there a long time. It was a sort of psychological atmospheric continuity—if, as Edith St. Martin always says, you know what I mean—in which no element as foreign as the suety butler had suddenly or newly introduced itself.

"Is Mr. McClean senior staying for dinner, madame?" he inquired politely.

"I don't know," I said. "He doesn't normally, does he?"

"No, madame. But I heard Miss Lowell call down and ask him to stay as he went into the library. He said he would."

"Then I fancy he will," I said.

"I didn't know if madame would object . . ."

I wasn't sure for a moment whether he meant I would, or Iris.

He picked up the tray. Then he set it down and cleared his throat.

"I wonder if I might be so bold as to ask your advice, madame," he said quietly.

I suppose there's nothing any woman likes so much as to have her advice asked. Who asks it doesn't matter . . . and it's never till it's been given that she even suspects that her leg, in a manner of speaking, has been pulled. So I quite forgot Colonel Primrose's elaborate instructions about minding my own business.

"I don't know whether you have heard that Mr. Nash had been receiving anonymous letters . . . for some time now," he said.

I nodded.

"Then perhaps you will advise me what to do with this one, which came in the usual way this morning."

He put his hand inside his coat and brought out an envelope that I recognized instantly, with a sudden warping of my heart, as a mate to the one I'd seen Gilbert St. Martin take from his pocket.

He handed it to me. I took it without looking up at him . . . knowing as I took it that I shouldn't, that of course I should have said "Go get Colonel Primrose, we'll give it to

him." Either that, or got up myself at once and taken it to him. I knew it then, I know it far better now. And yet . . . if I were put in the same position again, I've no doubt at all I'd do exactly what I did then; not from reason—far from it—but just from a sort of plain primitive fear. The black shadow in which Iris Nash had stood had moved away a little. I couldn't bear the idea of jerking it back; and even before I read the letter I held in my hand I knew that that was what it must do. There's no use in my trying to find a rational explanation for that moment. Distrusting Wilkins as I did, with his pale moon face and fat white hands, I still must have believed his "No, madame—certainly not," when I asked him if he had read the letter. And that surely must be the great trouble of a conspiracy, knowing who's in it and who isn't, and who's on which side or both.

"Where did you find it?" I asked. It was a stamped envelope like the other one, but there was no cancellation mark.

"On the front door step under the mat, madame. This morning when I brought in the milk."

"Is that where the others have been?"

"Except those that came in the post, madame."

As Gilbert St. Martin's had done, I remembered. I sat there with this one in my hand for a long time. It was so easy to see the shadowy figure creeping through the night, slipping this thing under the mat, creeping away again. If I couldn't see the figure plainly enough to tell whether it was man or woman, I could see, so clearly, the mask of hatred and malice it would wear, under cover of the dark, when there was no need to dissemble and hide what lay in the tortuous alleys of its soul.

"You can leave it with me," I said.

"Very good, madame."

He picked up the tray and went out. I opened the envelope. I noticed as I did that the edge of the flap was thin, as if it had been opened carefully and pasted back again. And that, of course, was my second chance to stop all this like a sensible woman and go at once to Colonel Primrose . . . and I funked it a second time.

My hand shook a little as I unfolded the cheap greyish paper and saw the same purple block letters, laboriously and unevenly printed there.

MAKE MR MCCLEAN TELL WHAT HE KNOWS ABOUT HER CARRYING ON WITH SOMEBODY

A FRIEND

If I'd known as much about anonymous letters then as I've found out since, I'd have known, of course, that this particular one was so true to form as to be virtually stereotyped, and that there's hardly ever a murder case that doesn't precipitate from one to a hundred of them onto the already heavy-laden hands of the police. I wouldn't have been so bothered by it, perhaps, if I hadn't seen the letter Gilbert St. Martin had got. As it was, it seemed to me nothing but a cruel psycopathic reiteration of something the police already believed—something I had no doubt A. J. McClean was at that very moment laying, thoroughly and in detail, in front of Captain Lamb and Colonel Primrose in the library just across the hall.

However, I was merely trying, I suppose, to find some justification for the fact that I did not give Colonel Primrose the letter. I folded it and put it back in the envelope, and when I heard the door open, and heard Steve Donaldson and Angie coming in, with Mac close behind them, I calmly put it in my sweater pocket.

"Thought somebody said you went home," Angie was saying.

"I did," Steve Donaldson said—a little curtly, I thought. "I came back."

"You'd better watch your step. They'll be dragging you out in irons as a murderer hanging round the scene of the crime."

I looked up in surprise. The words were all right—I mean, just what you would expect Angie Nash to be saying—but the tone was wrong. It was neither lighthearted nor friendly; and if the appalling events of the last day or so could explain, easily enough, why it wasn't lighthearted, they didn't explain the unfriendliness.

Mac grinned. "It goes for a lot of us," he said. "Even A. J. He hasn't been here so much since . . ."

He came to an uncomfortable halt. "—I mean, for a long time."

He looked even more uncomfortable then, for at that moment his uncle walked in. A. J. McClean looked twenty years older, it seemed to me, than he had fifteen minutes before. It couldn't have been all my imagination, for the expression on Mac's face changed instantly.

He even took a quick step toward him. "Are you sick, sir?"

A. J. shook his head shortly.

"Colonel Primrose wants to speak to you, Grace." He turned back to Mac. "I have something very serious to tell you young men."

I closed the door behind me, realizing with something of a

start that neither Mac nor Angie, who were in various ways among the people most interested, knew anything of the disappearance of Randall Nash's fortune.

I crossed the hall and knocked at the library door. No one answered, so I pushed it open and looked in. Lowell Nash was standing by the window. She didn't turn, not until I said "A. J. said Colonel Primrose wanted me. Where is he?"

When she did turn then I was shocked at the sullen frozen face, small and tense and white against the deep wine colored curtains.

"I don't know," she said, in her hardest and most brittle voice. "Except that he and that . . . that policeman are going over the house—as if they expect to find a million dollars stowed away in a dresser drawer."

I gathered she knew about her father's money being gone. I drew a deep breath and tried to rally myself, knowing just how she was going to feel about it before she spoke another word. And I was quite right.

"She's a lot smarter even than I thought she was," she said, with a kind of controlled quiet bitterness.

I didn't say anything. It was too ridiculous, all this going round and round the narrow angry circle of Lowell's feeling against her stepmother. Nothing anybody could say would change it, and obviously this new business was only bound to make it worse.

"She's probably given it to Gilbert St. Martin to stow away for her. We'll never see a penny of it."

"What makes you think she's got it, in the first place?" I asked wearily.

"I'm not the only one who thinks so," she answered, with a sort of subdued violence. "A. J. thinks so. He ought to know. Anyway, she's the logical person to have it. It was her my father was cheating my mother for."

"Are you sure of that, darling?" I asked, as patiently as I could.

She looked at me with dark burning eyes.

"I was under the impression he was 'cheating your mother' for his own satisfaction, and nobody else's," I said quietly. "Because he couldn't bear for your mother to have his money when he died. You and Iris were quite secondary."

"Me? And just where do I come in?"

"You come in for half of it," I said. "Iris for the other. — I'm afraid you've entirely forgotten that when all this happened you and your mother were about as friendly as two stray wildcats, and as far as your father knew—because he

seems to have known amazingly little about fundamental human nature—your mother would have been delighted for you to starve in Rock Creek Park."

"She would not! She——"

"I know," I said. "Your father didn't know it. Three years ago you didn't know it. And whatever you think about the ethics of what your father did, nobody can deny he was trying to make his money available for you and Iris."

"With the result that she's got the works and little Lowell gets a job in a department store."

"She won't keep it long," I said.

"Why not?"

"Haven't you ever heard about service with a smile?"

She looked at me with wide stormy eyes, caught her full under lip in her even white teeth and turned abruptly away, staring out of the window. I could see the outline of her firm little chin trembling. It occurred to me that a few tears were exactly what Lowell Nash needed to wash down the hard salty wall that had grown up around her heart. So I turned my back too and sat down on the sofa. And that was a mistake. I'd forgotten how young she really was, under all her brittle veneer . . . and I didn't realize then how lonely, and how proud.

I closed my eyes. If I could only have time to think, it occurred to me, perhaps I could straighten out all this tangled mess, and put each strand in place. So many questions beat against my mind . . . and the last one was Why was Colonel Primrose going through the house now? He couldn't possibly, as Lowell thought he was, be hunting Randall Nash's lost treasure. That was the plainest nonsense.

Then I heard him and Sergeant Buck, in the back hall, coming up from the cellar. I sat up and looked at Lowell. I saw her jaw tighten as she turned, more sullen and stony-faced than ever.

"I suppose you know Mac isn't interested in marrying me so quickly, now," she said shortly, staring straight at me.

Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck were coming in before I could recover . . . and Lowell was standing there, her dark perfectly arched brows raised just a little, looking as bored and unconcerned as a movie queen in a corner drug store. I don't know exactly when I gave up, but I imagine it was just then, if it wasn't the moment before, when she'd turned round more icily sullen than ever when I'd thought she was set for a good cry.

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Her brows raised still more as they came on into the library.

"What on earth have you got there?"

She pointed to the pasteboard carton Sergeant Buck had in his hand. The Sergeant looked down at it, and scratched his head.

"Why, it's the box my father's Christmas present came in!"

She answered her own question abruptly, looking with puzzled eyes from the carton to Colonel Primrose. "I don't see . . ."

"I don't either, really," Colonel Primrose said. "It's just one of the things detectives do when they're licked. They go around picking up match sticks and stowing them away. That sort of thing."

He took the carton from Buck. It was a regular manilla box with a picture of a patent syphon on it. It was called, apparently, "Johnny Mixer." On the bottom of the carton I could read "Blue. One quart."

The angry color seeped into Lowell's cheeks.

"You're not trying to make out . . . ?" she began furiously.

"No, no, no," Colonel Primrose said cheerfully. "I'm not trying to make anything out."

He shook his forefinger under her nose in half-comical annoyance.

"If you could only get it into your pretty but incredibly stubborn little head that we're after the truth, and not a general airing of private grievances, maybe we'd get along somewhere. You know, every crack you and A. J. take at Iris simply slows us up that much more."

He sat down on the sofa by me, Sergeant Buck taking his usual sentry post at the door. Lowell blinked her dark eyes angrily.

"Don't you see, my dear, that even when we're pretty sure this statement or that comes from just sheer personal spite,

we've got to stop and run it down, just on the off chance there's something in it? If you would only in Heaven's name give all that up, no matter what you think about your stepmother, and limit your spoken testimony to facts, we'd get along faster. Is that clear?"

Lowell looked down at him steadily. "She did poison my dog."

"So far," Colonel Primrose said evenly, "that's your major contribution."

His eyes were harder than I personally liked to see them. So were Lowell's . . . but I'd got used to that.

"You know," he went on slowly, "you may not know it, and you'll probably be distressed to hear it—but that charge of yours is probably the single factor that's kept your stepmother from being arrested and taken to jail."

Lowell's jaw dropped for an instant, and clamped shut again. She stared at him silently.

"If they hadn't performed an autopsy on Senator McGilvray, and they only did it because you kept insisting she'd fed him poisoned candy, then they'd never have doubted for a minute that your father drank poisoned liquor . . . here in this room five minutes before his death. And now they're not sure at all. And there's no evidence that Iris had dry potassium cyanide in her possession, or that she had salol tablets, or that she'd know what to do with them if she had."

"She did, I believe, have poison upstairs?" Lowell demanded icily.

Colonel Primrose nodded patiently.

"The point—as you've insisted on over and over again—is that your dog was also poisoned. The police now know—thanks to your insistence—that Senator McGilvray was poisoned with dry potassium, administered in enteric capsules. Not with a solution . . . which is what Iris had upstairs."

Lowell's face was a blank expressionless mask. Which meant nothing, of course, being the prevailing fashion in faces of her contemporaries. It was admirable for the present purpose, however. I couldn't possibly have told how any of this affected her.

"Your implication—if that isn't altogether too polite a word for it—was that because Iris had poison, and used it on McGilvray, she also used it on Randall. Well, it cuts two ways. You yourself pointed out—rather heatedly—the parallel between the two cases. And if the poison she had was not used on McGilvray, then it wasn't necessarily that used to poison your father. In the one case, as you see—or as the police see at any rate—the kind of poison she had was definitely not

used. And so, as it worked out . . . Iris ought to be very grateful to you."

The color rose in Lowell's face again. Her red lips tightened.

"She needn't be—it was my mistake," she said. "But you'll never make me believe it."

"I wouldn't try to, Lowell."

Colonel Primrose spoke very politely, but I noticed the sardonic lift of one bushy eyebrow.

"I gave up beating my head against stone walls when I was a year or so older than you are."

Her face was perfectly expressionless.

"However," he went on coolly, "that's really neither here nor there. What I'd like to know is this. When your father brought me that envelope to keep for him, he said if anything happened to him before he came to get it back, I was to give it to you."

He looked at her steadily.

"Have you no memory, of anything he ever said to you, at any time, that bears on that, in any way at all?"

I don't of course pretend I can read anything on the faces of the young. If Lowell was thinking, trying to recall the three past years, there was no evidence of it. She shook her head at last.

Colonel Primrose was watching her with a guarded intensity.

"Nothing occurs to you?"

She looked at him queerly. "Oh yes. Lots of things. I'm afraid they wouldn't interest you. Just . . . more airing of private grievances, Colonel Primrose."

He smiled suddenly. "Go on, Lowell."

She came toward us and sat down in a chair by the desk, her face quite inscrutable.

"Well, in the first place, if as you say my father was planning to divide his estate equally between Iris and me, it stands to reason he'd want the two of us to know it. Not anybody else—if secrecy was so important. And of course it was . . . doing it the way he did."

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"And so . . . if he told you to give the letter to me, wouldn't it seem to follow that he was telling me because . . . because Iris already knew?"

The smile that had lingered in Colonel Primrose's eyes vanished in a flash. Sergeant Buck's hard face froze into solid granite. A faint smile lighted Lowell's dark eyes for an instant.

"And if you think that's just a crack at my stepmother," she

went on coolly, "you'll probably have me hurled from the battlements for the next thing that occurs to me . . . since you've asked for it."

"And what is that?" Colonel Primrose said politely.

"It is . . . this. As I understand the situation, from Mr. McClean, my father was turning his assets into cash, and trying to find somebody he trusted sufficiently to keep it for him . . . in order to defraud my mother of what he'd agreed to give her."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Sergeant Buck's involuntary gesture of shocked protest. Colonel Primrose nodded calmly.

"And Mr. McClean was first choice, of course. He had a bank to keep it in, and all that. And he refused to do it, because he's an honest man."

Colonel Primrose nodded again. His sharp sparkling black eyes rested on hers, steadily probing.

"Then Iris would be the next person, of course, he'd be likely to turn to, if it had to be so completely sub rosa."

She paused for a moment, looking quietly at each of us.

"And if we let the beautiful Iris out—as everybody insists on doing—then there's only one other person that my father ever had the least confidence in . . . I mean to the point of giving him *anything* to keep for him. And that's the only person—outside of Iris—that he'd be likely to have given that money to."

"And . . . who is that?" I asked.

"One John Primrose," Lowell said quietly.

There was a curious silence, integrated into three definite parts, each of us contributing. Sergeant Buck's was simply hideously stony. Mine was a sort of "Bravo! Touché!" And Colonel Primrose's was an oddly mingled annoyed and at the same time sardonically appreciative acceptance of a perfectly brilliant pronouncement of poetic justice. There was no possible doubt that Lowell had scored . . . twice.

She got up, tensely cool and composed. "And if that's all you want of me, I think I'll go."

"By all means," Colonel Primrose said, with a wry smile.

Sergeant Buck to my mind's eye executed a sharp platoon right and opened the door, standing by at a smart and somewhat menacing Present Arms as she went out . . . colors flying.

"Well," I said. "So it was you, all the time."

He looked at me for a moment. Then his face cleared suddenly and he chuckled.

"We needn't forget, Mrs. Latham, that Randall Nash went

directly to your house from mine," he said imperturbably. "And stayed there for twenty minutes. However, there's a more important point at the moment.—I understand Gilbert St. Martin came to your house also, this morning, at eleven o'clock, in a state bordering on collapse."

"Eleven-ten, sir," Sergeant Buck said tersely, out of the corner of his mouth. "By the kitchen clock according to my information received."

"No mention," I asked, as blandly as I could, "of the fact that Mr. Steve Donaldson arrived somewhat earlier by the kitchen clock, in a somewhat similar state?"

"I haven't figgered Mr. Donaldson as mixed up in this, ma'am," Sergeant Buck answered briefly.

"Oh," I said.

Colonel Primrose shot me a warning glance. I had already seen the door move, but I couldn't at first see behind the massive rocky bulk of the Sergeant that Iris Nash was in the room. When I did I realized that she must have been there several moments. Her face was strained and white and shocked. I remembered then, with a guilty sinking in my stomach, that I hadn't told her Gilbert St. Martin had come to my house, and why he hadn't come here. And Colonel Primrose's statement that he had come to my place in a state bordering on collapse would be the first news she had had of him . . . except, of course, that he was going away for a long trip to the Orient.

She moistened her lips, looking at us for an instant, trying to get back the composure that must have been literally shocked out of her. And I could have saved her this, I thought wretchedly, and hadn't done it, just because I'd preferred to think she couldn't be in love with the man she'd obviously been in love with all her life.

"Colonel Primrose," she said. Her voice sounded like ripping satin. "Mr. McClean has been upstairs. Is it true . . . what he says about Randall's estate? They . . . can't find it?"

"It seems to be," Colonel Primrose said impassively. "He . . . ought to know."

She stood there, stock still, for a long time. Then she said slowly, "I don't understand it."

Colonel Primrose's black eyes sharpened. "What don't you understand, Iris?"

"Any of it. It doesn't make sense."

Colonel Primrose glanced at his Sergeant. The old signal system must have been in operation, though I couldn't see any. Sergeant Buck left the room abruptly.

"Sit down, Iris," Colonel Primrose said. He pulled a chair near the sofa where I was sitting.

She sat down, her hands folded in her lap, looking up at him, her eyes suddenly green under her glorious copper hair.

"Iris—did Randall give you his money to keep hidden for him?"

"No. He did not."

"Did he ever suggest doing it?"

She shook her head.

"Never, at any time. I've told Mr. McClean that, as forcibly as I know how."

She returned his steady appraising gaze.

"I must not sound convincing."

There was more than a trace of bitterness in her voice. I gathered the interview between her and her husband's executor had not been perfectly amicable.

"Did you know anything at all about this?"

"You mean the settlement with his first wife?"

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"I knew he'd made some arrangement with her, when his back was to the wall and he had to do anything she wanted to keep in the game at all."

"You didn't know he was planning to defraud her?"

"My husband never discussed his affairs with me, Colonel Primrose."

"I didn't ask you that, Iris. I asked you if you knew he was planning to . . . double-cross Marie?"

"I didn't . . . know it."

"You suspected——"

"Perhaps I did. At least I'm not surprised to find he did."

"Why?" Colonel Primrose asked, very placidly.

"Shortly after we came back from Europe I saw a telegram on his dresser stating the price he'd got for some Chicago property. Things were obviously picking up; I asked why he was selling. He said he wanted his money where Marie couldn't get her hands on it. He was going to 'show her'."

"That's all he said?"

"At that time. Once some time later he told me that if anything happened to him I was to sit tight and wait for developments, that he'd arranged things for me and Lowell."

"Did he tell you who to look to for advice?"

She got up abruptly, her eyes smouldering green, and went to the window where Lowell had stood, looking out for a moment before she turned and came back.

"He did tell me, Colonel Primrose—but I'm not sure it meant what it seems to me now he must have meant."

She hesitated, an ironic smile flickering in her eyes.

"Anyway, it sounds definitely phony for both me and Mr. McClean to start shouting 'Wolf! Wolf!' everytime the other appears on the scene."

Colonel Primrose looked at her oddly. "It was A. J.——"

"Randall said that in case anything happened to him before he had set his house completely in order, I was to wait patiently until Mr. McClean arranged things for me."

She laughed shortly.

"That's why it's so superbly amusing when Mr. McClean comes and practically accuses me of having Randall's money. Well, I suppose it has the simple virtue of a sharp offensive before your unsuspecting enemy gets set. It's an obvious advantage. It leaves me in the childish position of saying it isn't me, it's you. Sounds as if I was unprepared and caught out and that's the only comeback I could think of, just off-hand."

Colonel Primrose shook his head soberly. "You ought to be awfully sure of yourself, Iris, before you make an accusation of that sort. A. J.'s reputation for honesty and fair dealing . . ."

"Oh, I know," she said quietly. She sat down beside me on the sofa. "And I have none, and what little I might have had has been stripped off me by no less a person than the same honorable and upright McClean."

"Don't forget your stepdaughter," Colonel Primrose said amiably.

"Great Heavens, how could I. But she's not responsible for what she says. Mr. McClean is . . . You know, the day I came to this house he was here. My husband introduced us. I held out my hand . . . Mr. McClean didn't see it. He's never spoken to me directly once in the five times I can remember meeting him, in this room or in the hall, just leaving as I came home. And since my husband died he's been here steadily, limping through this house like a lame buzzard round a stricken sheep enclosure. And I'm sick of it! I can stand Lowell—at least she's got the courage to come out and say she knows I murdered her father and stole her money. Mr. McClean polishes his pince nez and says 'My dear lady, you are after all the most obvious person for Randall to have deposited his funds with.' "

Her eyes were blazing, two passionate red spots burned in her cheeks.

"He doesn't care if Randall's dead . . . and I'll bet you anything he doesn't insist now on Lowell's marrying Mac immediately—and the reason he'll give is that *I'm* opposed to

it, and he wouldn't want to run against my wishes since his dead friend reposed so much confidence in them!"

She turned abruptly to Colonel Primrose.

"I'm sick to death of upright men! I'll take a plain open-work scoundrel any day. Then I'll know I've got to lock the doors and watch the family plate. More people have been ruined by their upright friends than ever have been by their enemies!"

I thought, sitting there, of an old saying of Lilac's: "It's you' friends that do you—you' enemies cain' get to you."

Colonel Primrose was watching her with sober compassionate eyes.

"We'll try to find that money, Iris," he said quietly. "Half of it is yours when we do find it. The other half is Lowell's. They have determined that Marie Nash's death preceded Randall's. Her lawyers, and Angus as her heir, have accepted it."

"Didn't she leave Lowell . . . anything?" Iris asked sharply.

"Two thousand dollars, a little jewelry, a mink coat, I think is all."

"Then—if you don't find the money, she'll have nothing at all . . ."

"Half of this house. The other half is yours."

Iris smiled. "She can have it all, I don't want it. But don't tell her—or Mr. McClean—I said that. They'll be sure then I've got all the rest of it stowed away somewhere, just waiting a chance to use it."

Sergeant Buck put his head in the door.

"Mrs. St. Martin is here, ma'am," he said, menacingly.

Iris's lips tightened.

"Tell her I'm busy, please, Sergeant."

"You can run along, Iris," Colonel Primrose said.

"I don't want to see her. Tell her I'm lying down. Tell her anything!"

The Sergeant looked at his Colonel.

"She's already in, Iris," Colonel Primrose said.

Iris laughed. "Oh, all right." She pressed her cigarette out with sudden violent fingers and went out.

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I turned to Colonel Primrose. "You don't think she has that money, do you—really?"

His face was sober.

"I don't know, Mrs. Latham."

"I wish she hadn't said that about Lowell's having the house."

He gave me a quizzical smile.

"You're almost as tenaciously stubborn as Lowell, you know?" he observed.

"Of course, it *is* reasonable—with A. J. holding up his hands in pious horror at Randall's proposal to rook Marie out of a large sum of money—that Iris was the next logical person . . . hate to admit it as I do. And Lowell's point seems eminently sound. If she and Iris were to profit, you'd think they'd be the ones to know about the arrangement."

He shook his head . . . to my great relief.

"To the mind of a man who didn't make his wife even a co-executor of his estate? McClean, you recall, is sole executor. The bond was waived too, by the way."

I didn't think for an instant or two that there was anything queer about the way he said that. Then I looked sharply at him. He was sitting there placidly, gazing into the empty grate, beating a slow noiseless tattoo with his fingers on his knee. My look gradually evolved into a downright open-mouthed stare.

"Colonel Primrose!" I said. "Are you . . . actually, by any chance, suggesting that A. J. might have . . ."

I put my hand up over my mouth exactly the way Lilac does when the butcher tells her how much a pound porterhouse steak is, and continued to stare at him, absolutely aghast. His tattoo slowed down to a finale. He cocked his head down and around and looked up at me with that shrewd quizzical glint in his black sparkling eyes. He chuckled suddenly.

"I thought Iris's denunciation of the upright man was sufficiently stirring to convince even you, Mrs. Latham."

"Any upright man but A. J., maybe. But not . . . Why, my dear——"

He chuckled again.

"Listen to me, Grace Latham. Randall Nash put an unbearable temptation in somebody's way. McClean figures he succeeded in liquidating—and secreting somewhere—something between two and three hundred thousand dollars. And there's the strongest presumption, of course, that the sum was just handed to somebody to hold. He was obsessed, blinded, crazed, by hatred of Marie, and just corroded by bitterness, or he'd have seen the folly of it. He did anyway, in a sense. That explains the letter he left with me. And there's no doubt he saw the folly of it well enough too to tell his custodian that there was that letter . . . or I'll wager this would have happened before now."

"*Not* A. J. McClean," I said.

He smiled.

"All right, my dear. Let me tell you a few things. Lamb and the District Attorney are at the bank now. Don't look so shocked. The man's human. He could—possibly—give in to temptation as well as . . . well, let's say Gilbert St. Martin. You wouldn't be surprised to hear we were investigating him, would you?"

"But that's *very* different," I said.

"I wonder. A. J. and Randall Nash started out together. Randall tried to get a certain wealthy girl. Her father lost his money, Randall dropped her. Meanwhile A. J. was doing the same thing, with the difference that his girl had a lot of money and hung on to it. And Randall walked in and took the girl *and* the money. Marie, of course. Well, looking at A. J., with his long reputation—and a very well deserved one too—for square dealing, what would you think he'd thought of that?"

"I don't suppose he liked it at all," I said.

"And you're probably right, for once."

He smiled.

"Everybody's got to be right once in his life," I said philosophically.

"You'd be surprised, Mrs. Latham. Anyway. Then came Nash's disagreements that ended in divorce. A. J. is supposed to have remained neutral, and did, as far as I remember. Until Randall married again, that is. And A. J. never married at all. Now, you heard Iris say he didn't see her hand when she first met him.—You don't think that was the result of any sudden feeling against *her*, do you?"

"No," I admitted. "It would seem to be letting off a bit of old spleen."

"Old steam is the idiom, I believe. But I see what you mean. Well, let's say A. J. had been nursing some sort of an inverted grievance a good many years, and along comes Randall Nash . . . and adds horrible insult to horrible injury by asking him to be a party to cheating the only woman he's ever known to have been in love with. Though, as you say, it's hard to see how he could have been."

"I don't say things like that," I said. "Well, it does seem pretty shortsighted. Or something."

He grinned.

"You don't normally go in for such admirable understatement, Mrs. Latham. Nevertheless, and supposing you *are* an upright man, what do you do when such a proposition is put to you? Remember, you're torn between conflicting loyalties, to your friend, to your old love, to your duty as a man of integrity. What do you do?"

I saw then what he was getting at.

"Oh dear!" I said. "I suppose I forget I'm an upright citizen and man of integrity, and I take the money to keep, with the idea in mind that I see my old love gets her rights. Not, of course, that anybody's ever thought of me as being an upright man. If I went into a phone booth and found a nickel I'd keep it, probably. A. J. 'd never think of doing it."

Colonel Primrose nodded calmly. "No—but he might very easily let his private feelings for Marie, and his definitely integrated hatred of this red-headed interloper, make him do a thing that in the end would right the wrong that Randall was trying to do. And he wouldn't be the first honorable man who held that the end justified the means."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't," I agreed.

"All right, then. Suppose you had a large sum of money in your possession, and you needed a little of it. You know, of course, that you can put it back again almost immediately. That's the way it always starts, Mrs. Latham . . . with any number of perfectly well-meaning people. I don't suppose one embezzler out of ten admits he isn't just borrowing that money for a few days."

"No doubt," I said. "And that's where I stop. I'll go with you as far as admitting there's a faint possibility that A. J. might have taken the money, thinking of Marie and hating Iris. But no further."

"You won't have gone as far, then," he said calmly, "as Captain Lamb has gone."

I stared at him in blank amazement. He'd got up and was facing me, his face sober and a little hard.

I tried to pull myself together. "He can't think . . ." I began. "—A. J. has certainly got more than all the money he needs?"

He nodded. "Apparently so, certainly." Then he chuckled suddenly at the expression on my face.

"I don't myself go as far as Lamb," he said placidly. "But if Marie dies, part of that money rightfully belongs to Marie's daughter. Marie's daughter is unhappy and downtrodden, or that's her story. Why should she share it with this other woman? Why should Randall, having cheated Marie and got away with it, be allowed to cheat her daughter . . . who, as you may know, is going to marry A. J.'s nephew."

He looked at me with a sardonic glint in his eyes, shaking his head a little. "However, my dear Mrs. Latham, I don't——"

The telephone rang sharply. I thought from the alacrity with which he answered that he had probably been waiting for it. I watched him, listening calmly; and as I saw his eyes harden suddenly and his face become intensely serious my heart was strangely heavy, so that it pounded when it beat.

"Right," he said quietly. "I'll bring him along."

He put the phone down.

"What . . . is it?" I said.

"Something I haven't expected," he answered slowly. He was looking straight down at the phone still. I waited until I couldn't bear it any longer.

"What *is* it?" I demanded.

"Captain Lamb," he said. "They've . . . discovered that A. J. is accustomed to take salol tablets. For his rheumatism."

I stared, hardly understanding what he was saying. "And that means——?"

He shook his head quickly.

"It may not mean anything, my dear.—Beyond the fact that Lowell's dog was definitely poisoned with potassium cyanide coated with salol . . . and that Randall Nash spent almost an hour at A. J.'s home last night and came here and died."

He crossed the room and opened the door. Sergeant Buck was in the hall, talking with Wilkins—whose face seemed to me unusually waxen.

"Tell Mr. McClean I'd like to speak to him."

As the sergeant opened the drawing room door across the hall I could see the group gathered round the tea table: Angus and Steve and Mac, and Iris behind it, green-eyed and taut

but smiling and outwardly entirely calm. Edith St. Martin was sitting on the sofa, her Pekinese in her lap, that fixed lifted smile on her face under her black dyed hair with the two white wings, but not in her eyes. A. J. was not there, neither was Lowell.

"Mr. McClean, ma'am?" I heard Sergeant Buck say, and I heard Angie's answer: "He's gone home. My sister drove him."

When Sergeant Buck came back to the hall Colonel Primrose nodded curtly before he spoke. "Go tell Captain Lamb I've gone out to Foxall Road. Bring him out."

He turned to me. "Have you got your car here?"

I nodded.

"Can you drive me out to McClean's?"

"Surely."

I glanced surreptitiously at Sergeant Buck. He was not beaming with satisfaction . . . since I'm apparently going in for understatement.

It was dark outside. Colonel Primrose got in the car beside me and I started the engine. I crossed Wisconsin Avenue into Reservoir Road, passed the High School and the Medical School, and turned down Foxall Road and into A. J. McClean's gravelled driveway at just the instant that the tail-lights of Lowell's blue roadster disappeared down the hill, making at least sixty miles an hour.

"Oh," I said, "—I should have given you this before, by the way."

I stopped the car in front of the two stone dogs that guard A. J.'s Victorian dwelling and put on the brake. I reached under my fur coat and fished the letter Wilkins had given me out of my pocket. I suppose it was remembering the sight of Sergeant Buck talking to Wilkins in the hall that must have made me think suddenly that of course it was bound to come out sooner or later. At any rate, I gave it to him. He opened it under the light on the dash.

"You're very annoying," he said seriously, putting it in his pocket. "And this, I should say, is just about one of the silliest things you've ever done."

He got out of the car and hurried up the steps. I followed meekly.

"You'd better stay here," he said. He pressed the bell and pressed it again, hardly waiting until the far-off buzz had died out of our ears. He turned the knob. The door was locked. He looked at me for an instant, sharply and very queerly. I stood there beside him, stupidly I'm afraid. I have never seen him like this before.

Then somewhere in the house I could hear a door open and close. We waited, Colonel Primrose pressing the bell again and again. At last I saw a door open at the top of the stairs, visible through the glass in front of us, and a light swinging, pendulum-fashion, back and forth across it—now light, now dark. An old colored woman came hobbling down the stairs. It seemed ten minutes before she got to the bottom and across the hall to let us in.

"Good evenin', Cunnel—'deed it's mighty nice t' see you all.—Mistuh A. J. he ain' home."

"Didn't he just come?" Colonel Primrose asked sharply.

" 'Deed he might have. Ah's gettin' a little deaf. Ah don't heah lak Ah use' to."

We went on in. Colonel Primrose stood for a second in the hall, and went directly across it and through the parlor to the room that A. J. always called his den. I followed him, and got to the door just after he'd opened it. A. J.'s chair behind his desk was empty. Colonel Primrose stepped into the room, and I saw him start suddenly and stand there, frozen rigid.

I took two quick steps and looked past him. A. J. McClean was lying on his leather buttoned couch, his head rolled to one side. On his face was the same ghastly bitter grin that I had already seen, only last night, on the dead face of Randall Nash.

17

We both stood there, Colonel Primrose and I, in the dark little Victorian room, speechless, all motion frozen in our limbs, staring at that dreadful grin on A. J. McClean's grey lifeless face. It was so hideously ironic that death should make him do that, when life had never got more than a cold smile from him, and that seldom. But of course it was not his own. We had both seen that grimace before, on Randall Nash's face, and there was no mistaking it.

It was I who spoke first, oddly enough—or so I thought till I realized that Colonel Primrose was struck silent not so much with A. J.'s death as with the fear that he might have been able to prevent it. Whether he could have done I'm not sure now, nor is he. He thought so then.

"Is it suicide?" I whispered. My voice reverberated in the unearthly silence of the room. I saw him shake his head slowly, and I saw rather than heard him say, "No. It's murder."

"Then it wasn't——"

He shook his head impatiently. "No, no."

In the silence I could hear a queer shuffling sound somewhere behind me. I must have felt it long before I heard it, for I had a curious cold prickling sensation along my spine—a vestigial remnant, I suppose, of the reaction that makes the hair on a dog's back stand when he senses an unfriendly presence. I turned around slowly, as if a magnet was drawing me against my own will.

Standing in the dim half-light of the parlor, decked in rags, rubbing her nose with the back of her dirty toil-worn hand, was Miss Lavinia, blinking, peering bleary-eyed, with her terrible drooping lips, past me into the room where A. J. lay, endlessly grinning.

I think for a moment I didn't actually think of it as being Lavinia Fawcett, but rather as some incredibly repulsive

witch-like being, profaning the corridors of death where a bewildered soul was learning its first new steps.

She shuffled closer, her mouth working.

I lost control of myself completely. "Go away!" I cried. "Oh, go away!"

I recoiled with sudden unbearable revulsion, and then stood simply aghast at my hysteria. I was shaking like a leaf.

Colonel Primrose whirled around, the astonishment on his face changing to dismay as he saw her there.

Lavinia stared at me uncomprehendingly, with that brandy-drugged stare of hers, and started shuffling backward, blinking her watery colorless eyes, moving her mouth but making no sound, casting furtive glances past us into A. J.'s room.

Colonel Primrose took a step toward her. "What are you doing here, Lavinia?" he asked quietly. She stopped, almost to the door. She had hardly seemed to me to be moving, yet the distance between us had grown perceptibly.

She shook her head and began edging backward again.

"Where's the servant?" Colonel Primrose snapped.

"I guess she went upstairs again," I said. I'd recovered. I was almost ashamed to look at him, knowing how he disliked women who go to pieces at the drop of a hat.

"Get her," he said curtly. "Have her keep Lavinia in the kitchen until I talk to her. How long have you been here, Lavinia?"

"I just came, sir, I came to see Mr. McClean. I ain't doing anybody any harm. All I want's my rights, Colonel Primrose . . ."

I heard her old sing-song whine, punctuated by sniffles, going along as I hurried upstairs to find Annie. She was in a little room at the back of the third floor, reading the comic section we'd no doubt interrupted her at. Not many people came to that house; none in the daytime. Most people thought of it as being empty all day. Old Annie seldom came out of her room, except to get breakfast. Her nephew came in around five to get dinner if A. J. was to be at home.

She looked up.

"Listen, Annie," I said. "Old Miss Lavinia's downstairs. You take her in the kitchen and give her something to eat and some strong coffee, and keep her there. And now listen to this in particular, Annie, so you'll understand what I'm saying. You're not to start carrying on till later, because we need you now—do you hear? Mr. A. J. is dead."

She dropped the brightly colored paper and blinked at me. I didn't know whether I'd made any impression on her, or

whether she'd start wailing and weeping then and there. Very slowly her black old face went putty-grey. "Lawd a' mercy!" she breathed at last. "Oh, Lawd a' mercy!" Then she wet her lips suddenly. "An' Ah been up heah alone all th' time!" she added, terror overcoming her piety.

"Go down and make some coffee for Miss Lavinia," I said sharply. "She's waiting."

She nodded, dazed and grey, and hobbled out. As I heard her go heavily down the back stairs I drew a deep breath of fervent relief. I hadn't dared to hope it would be so simple, for even if I'd been able to keep her from instantaneous and protracted mourning, I hadn't been at all sure I could get her to go and make coffee for Lavinia Fawcett. Her own respectability would come in there. Perhaps she hadn't understood me, I thought, and waited, half expecting to hear her hobbling back upstairs. Then, after a bit, I heard water running, and heard her call "Miss Lavinny!" and I knew it was all right.

I hurried down. Colonel Primrose was in the den, waiting, the telephone in his hand, his face set. I didn't find out who he was trying to call, for just as I heard his sharp "Hello!" a car drew up out in the drive. I heard a door bang, and another, and running feet in the gravel driveway, and a frantic key in the lock. Then the front door flung open and Lowell Nash burst into the hall, and stopped dead, her body contracted like a steel spring, her face white and taut, staring wild-eyed at me. Behind her I saw a tall grey-haired man, a hat two sizes too small perched on the top of his head, an overcoat three sizes too big slipped on over a surgeon's white uniform. I stared at them and they at me. Lowell's lips moved.

"Are we . . . too late?" she whispered.

I nodded. Her red mouth drooped, she closed her eyes, her body sagged like a young plant in the noonday sun.

"It's too late," she said in a dull voice. She was speaking without turning to the man behind her. "I was afraid we'd be too late. I'm sorry I dragged you out. He's . . . in there."

She pointed past me to the den. He came forward, slipping off his overcoat. I took it from him as he passed me and put it on the table, picked up his hat and put it there too. Lowell came into the room and sat down on the horsehair chair by the door, staring at the floor. After a moment she raised her hand in a slow dazed gesture, peeled the peaked suede cap off her short black curls and dropped it beside her on the worn flowered Brussels carpet.

"Isn't it ever going to end, Grace?" she whispered. "It's so . . . so horrible!"

Colonel Primrose and the doctor came out of the den.

"It *looks* like cyanide. The risus sardonicus. Have to be a post mortem to tell conclusively. I can't understand how it could take so long. The young lady said he was all right at first, then started feeling bad, but she hadn't seen him take anything. Cyanide acts very quickly, you know."

Colonel Primrose nodded. "I know," he said grimly. "I've called the police. They'll be here in a moment."

He turned to Lowell.

"What happened?"

"I drove him here, from tea," she said, in a broken little voice. "He wouldn't stay to dinner. He knew she didn't want him. I said I'd drive him, because I . . . I wanted to talk to him, alone. I wouldn't let Mac come, either."

"When did you leave, Lowell?"

"About quarter past five."

"You came directly here?"

She shook her head.

"He had to stop at Hofnagel's. He didn't say what for. He was only there a few minutes."

I looked at Colonel Primrose. It seemed to me all of a sudden as if I could feel the sinister squalid figure of Lavinia Fawcett crouching in the shadows of the lives of both these men who had been murdered.

"You came here then?"

"No. He asked me to stop in Gil St. Martin's shop. There wasn't any place to park there, so I drove around the block twice. The second time he was waiting. Then we came here. He let us in and we sat down in there to have a talk."

She looked toward the door of the little room.

"I must have been thinking about something and not looking at him, because all of a sudden I did look, and he was staring straight ahead of him, looking perfectly dreadful. His face was grey and he had perspiration all over his forehead, and his eyes were terrible—just as if he knew he was being . . . killed, just like my father. I jumped up and helped him to the sofa. He was dreadfully ill. I grabbed the phone, but I knew I could never get a doctor in time. I dashed out and drove to the Medical School in Reservoir Road."

She nodded at the doctor.

"He came with me.—I don't know his name."

A smile flickered faintly for an instant in the doctor's dark intelligent eyes. I didn't know then that his name was very well known indeed, that he was one of the leading abdominal surgeons in the United States, or that Lowell had literally hijacked him in the hospital corridor on his way to the operating theatre and rushed him into her car. The overcoat

and hat that she'd grabbed for him belonged to a couple of his students.

She put her hand into the pocket of her beaver coat and took out her car keys. She handed them to him.

"I don't feel like driving you back," she said simply. "You can just leave them at the office there. I'll get the car tonight. Thanks, very much, for coming with me."

There was a glint of admiration in his eyes as he took the keys. He nodded, put on the overcoat, looked at the hat with a sudden whimsical smile that was gone again immediately, and followed Colonel Primrose to the door. I heard them talking for a moment, and Colonel Primrose saying, "Thank you, I'll be in touch with you," and the door closed. He came back into the room.

"She must have put it in his tea," Lowell said with a quiet dreadful bitterness. Colonel Primrose's glance cut short what I was on the point of saying hotly. I closed my mouth, with an effort. Lowell was staring straight in front of her, her dark brooding eyes burning in her white face. I gazed at her, an aching wonder in my heart at so much bitter hate; and as I did her face changed slowly. Her lips parted, she shrank back in the tufted horsehair chair, her eyes sharpening to pinpoints of terror as she stared directly in front of her. Suddenly she threw her arm up in front of her face, protecting herself from some dreadful sight.

I whirled about, my blood curdling. The window next to the fireplace was in the direct line of her vision . . . and my eyes were riveted on it as I stared at the leering thing there, brought into ghastly relief against the night, its face pressed gray against the glass, its claws raised, making hurried frantic signs. For an instant I couldn't move. Then I ran to the window. It was gone. I ran to the door and out onto the porch, and saw it streaking across the lawn toward the gate.

Behind me I heard Colonel Primrose coming out of the kitchen hall.

"I thought I asked you to tell Annie to keep Lavinia here until I could talk to her, Mrs. Latham?" he was saying curtly.

I rallied myself from that sight.

"I did," I said. "I don't suppose Annie could keep her if she didn't want to stay. She's just gone."

I went back into the parlor. Lowell was still crouching in her chair, staring ahead of her again, unseeing and bewildered. Colonel Primrose glanced at me with sharp interrogation in his eyes.

"Lowell and I both got a nasty jolt, seeing Lavinia peering through that window under the curtain, like a . . .

malevolent scarecrow," I said, as casually as I could. My heart was still beating like a triphammer. The crafty-eyed, loose-lipped face of Lavinia Fawcett was more than just a face; it had become a symbol of something violent and horrible that was tracking the lives of people I knew.

I gave an involuntary shudder. Colonel Primrose put his hand on mine and steadied it. His grip was warm and reassuring and confident . . . more confident than the troubled questioning smile he backed it up with.

I managed a sorry grin.

"I'm getting nervy, I guess."

"Don't," he said gently.

He looked at Lowell again. She had moved like somebody coming out of a trance. She rubbed her hand over her forehead, pushing her dark hair back the way she did when she was troubled or angry—the difference showing only in the tempo of the gesture. She looked like someone going through a hard struggle, though no sign of any showed, really, in her blank pointed little face with its flaming lipstick and wide clear forehead. Then she stood up, swift and straight, looking first at me and then at Colonel Primrose.

"I told you I wasn't at home last night. But that's not true. I was."

She looked squarely at Colonel Primrose and waited, a little defiant, expecting obviously that some sort of a minor cataclysm was to come.

He nodded. "I knew you were."

Her eyes contracted sharply.

"Then she did tell you?"

"Who?"

"Iris, of course!"

Colonel Primrose raised his eyebrows, and shook his head.

"No, she didn't. I didn't know she knew it. I happened to know it myself, because when I saw you leave the Assembly you wore a white coat, and when you came into the library with Mac you had on a red one. I had a man look into it. He found out that you and Mac had come home. Mac stayed down in the car because he had to double-park. Cars were going back and forth so he couldn't risk leaving it there. He was out there between fifteen and twenty minutes."

Her face was blanker than ever. Genuinely this time, I thought—not the product of conscious art.

"Oh," she said.

"I'm supposed to know such things, Lowell—sooner or later. Go on."

"Maybe you know all the rest of it then."

"That's all I know."

I doubt if Lowell got the ever so slight emphasis on that last word, or realized its significance, coming from a man who was used to filling in large gaps so shrewdly that it was awfully hard most of the time to know what he knew and what he had guessed.

"Well . . . I went up the steps and remembered my bag with my key in it was still in Mac's pocket. So I started down again. But I had my hand on the door knob when I thought of that, and it turned, so I didn't need the key. I thought that was funny, but I didn't pay any attention to it. I was too busy trying to keep my heels from making any noise, so I wouldn't . . . I mean, disturb my father in . . . in the library."

She still wore the perfectly formal stereotyped mask of contemporary youth, but she couldn't help the sudden guarded look in her eyes.

"Why didn't you want to see your father, Lowell?" Colonel Primrose cut in as she started on.

The color rose faintly on her high sharply modelled cheekbones. She looked at him, compressing her red lips stubbornly, like a small wilful child.

"It's quite true that your relations with your father hadn't been as smooth as they might have been, for some time, isn't it?"

"Then she *has* been talking to you!" she said furiously.

Colonel Primrose's black eyes snapped fire.

"Lowell—listen to me! I don't want to hear that again, do you hear? Iris hasn't said one word against you . . . not one single word! If you weren't such a sickening little egotist you could understand it. Even if you can't, just *get* it—it's true! And get this too: every bit of the mud-slinging that's been done has been done by Lowell Nash . . . not by Iris. And every bit of the information I have about you I either had before this began or I've got from *you*, without your knowing how transparent you really are."

She stared down at the ground. Then she went on, with a kind of sullen meekness.

"Well, it wasn't my fault. My father hadn't been himself at all, not since she . . . not since summer. Nothing anybody could do pleased him. He'd never been very keen about Mac, and when Steve Donaldson first came to the house he said there was the kind of chap he'd like me to marry. Then there was always trouble about Angie. But that has nothing to do with it. I just didn't want to have to stop and explain that I

was with Mac, and going out again. He'd think I ought to be in bed by half-past twelve, not just starting out."

Colonel Primrose lifted a quizzical brow. "Odd of him," he said.

"Well, I got up stairs all right, but I was too scared to risk it again, so I sneaked down the back stairs into the kitchen hall."

She moistened her lips.

"I heard something, scratching at the door. First I thought it was Senator, and then I remembered he was . . . dead. I . . . well, I don't know. I had a funny feeling all of a sudden that maybe he was . . . cold, out there in the ground, and his ghost was trying to get in where it was warm. I guess it sounds crazy, but . . ."

She rubbed the tip of her nose with the back of her hand and blinked her eyes.

"No. It doesn't," Colonel Primrose said quietly. "Go on."

"I guess it does, but it didn't then. Well, I ran over and opened the door."

Her eyes widened.

"It was Lavinia. And before I could slam the door shut and lock it she was inside. And I'm so afraid of her! I've always been afraid of her!"

Not all the fashions in faces of a century could have kept the memory of fear from living in her eyes and etching itself on her wide mobile mouth. That scene on Christmas Eve flashed into my mind again with a new and rather terrifying significance.

Colonel Primrose was watching her with puzzled intentness.

"Sit down, Lowell."

He pushed a chair closer to her. She sat down stiffly, like an obedient child.

"Why are you so afraid of Lavinia?"

"My father sent me down to Hofnagel's once when I was about ten, to take her some money," she said in quick colorless tones. "She wasn't there, I had to go to her room. I was afraid to, but I knew he'd be angry if I didn't. So I went. It was dark, and dirty, going up the stairs, but I went. I was going to put the money under the door and run, but she heard me coming, and looked out and made me come in. I was afraid not to. Then she made me sit down."

She shuddered suddenly.

"She gave me some candy. It was chocolate, all grey and funny-looking, the way it gets when it's kept where it's too hot, but I didn't know that then. I was afraid not to eat it, and

all the time she kept saying 'You should have been my little girl—I should have been your mother' . . . over and over again. And then she got a ragged old letter out of a drawer and read it to me. I didn't understand much of it, but I understood it was from my father. It was about how young and pretty she was and when they were married they'd go to Paris.

"I guess I fainted, I don't know. I don't know how I got out, but I ran all the way home. And the door was locked and I couldn't get in. I kept feeling she was behind me. When they did let me in I tried to tell my father, but he wouldn't listen . . . he just lectured me on the poor and needy and said I'd have to take her money to her every week so I'd learn to be kind."

She rubbed her hand over her forehead with a dazed tired gesture.

"I dreamed about her—all my life I've dreamed about beating on that door with her behind me. I've tried not to be silly about it, but . . ."

She raised a pale frightened face. For the first time since I'd been home I saw the child I'd known for fourteen years with the bright lacquer peeled off, the sting gone from the tongue.

"And last night, Lowell?"

She looked down, a slow flush mantling her cheek and creeping up under her short thick black lashes.

"Well, I was scared," she said sullenly. "I wanted to scream, but I knew my father would come. And then he'd probably make me shake hands with her and tell her I was sorry, the way he did once. I . . . couldn't bear it. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any money to give her."

She looked steadily down at her feet. The dark flush burned deeper in her cheeks.

"I tried to be sensible. I even tried to tell myself what *she* said, about there but for the grace of God go I. But I couldn't. And she knew I was afraid of her. Well, I didn't know what to do—honestly I didn't. So . . . well, I did a . . . an *awful* thing."

I stole a bewildered glance at Colonel Primrose, not having the faintest idea, of course, that a very important tangle in the affairs of the yellow house in Beall Street was about to be straightened out.

"I said . . . 'If I give you some whiskey, will you go?' And she nodded right away.—Well, that's what I did. I'm not proud of it, but I did it. I took an empty milk bottle off the kitchen sink, and I went into the dining room and emptied the

decanter in the cellarette into it. I took it back. She wasn't in the kitchen. That scared me worse. Then I found her, in the pantry. She was eating something out of the small ice box in there. She reached for the milk bottle, but I didn't give it to her, not till I'd got the door opened and her outside. Then I gave it to her and slammed the door shut and locked it.

"Well, I know it was dreadful to give it to her. My father and . . . A. J. would have killed me if they knew it. They tried to keep her from drinking. That's one of the chief things my father had against poor Mac. During Prohibition once, when drinking was pretty smart, Mac gave Lavinia a drink, just to be funny. Father caught him and raised hell."

She stopped abruptly. Neither Colonel Primrose nor I said anything for a moment. He was looking at her with some kind of odd interest that I couldn't fathom.

When he did speak he changed the subject abruptly.

"Old Annie says there were two letters on the hall table when she went upstairs. Did you see them?"

Lowell nodded. "A. J. picked them up when he came in."

"There's only one on his desk now—a bill. Did you see what happened to the other?"

She looked from one of us to the other. "I never thought of that," she said slowly. "He threw it into the grate and held a match to it.—Would that be the one Wilkins posted . . . from my father?"

"I suppose so," Colonel Primrose said. He had just opened his mouth to go on when a general racket outside announced the approach of Captain Lamb and the rest of them. To say nothing of Sergeant Buck. The sight of Lowell, white-faced again and scared, stifled, I imagine what Julius calls the hard-named look he was about to give me. It wasn't stifled for long. There was a low-voiced conference in the next room, and Colonel Primrose came back.

"If you'll take Lowell, and drop me along, Mrs. Latham, Buck can bring Lowell's car when he's through here," he said.

Lowell picked up her ridiculous hat and put it on. She turned to Sergeant Buck, holding the colonel's coat, his dead pan carved out of some peculiarly rugged marble.

A sudden irrepressible light flashed in her eyes. "It'll be all right, Sergeant. Don't worry. I'll chaperone them."

I thought I could hear Captain Lamb, or somebody, choking down a guffaw. Colonel Primrose certainly turned a mild peony, and looked around very emphatically at his general manager—functotum, as Sergeant Buck calls it himself. And Sergeant Buck's lantern-jawed visage turned the color, and

about the consistency, of a very tarnished brass bucket. It was one of the few situations of the sort that I ever found amusing.

And when we were out in the crisp cold air, looking down on the misty halo lying along the broad winding ribbon of the Potomac, Lowell demanded abruptly, "What does that pleasant-faced guy think you're going to do to the Colonel—marry him, for gosh sakes?"

I caught an amused chuckle behind me, and said I guessed she was imagining all of it.

"Oh yes?" she said. "Well, I'd hate to have him get a grudge against me, that's all. You watch your step."

18

I let Lowell out where Beall Street comes into Wisconsin Avenue. It was quite time, I decided, to tell Colonel Primrose about my encounter with Lavinia Fawcett at Mr. Myers's, and about Mr. Hofnagel. He listened intently. I could see him nodding his head, but he said nothing until we'd turned left on M Street at the foot of the hill. Below us, past the C. & O. Canal where Lavinia's father had made a period of his troubled days, lay the river. It's odd to think that where there's nothing but trucks and freight sheds now, and chimneys belching smoke to blacken the white tracery of Georgian fanlights, wild swans once came in flocks of hundreds, and canvas back ducks—called white backs then—fed on the small white celery that grew along the flats and swamps of the Potomac. On dark October nights when ortolan settled to feed on the wild oats, Georgetown hunters kindled fires of lightwood in the prows of their boats, blinding them, taking as many as thirty or forty dozen in one boat. And shad and rockfish were landed by hundreds there. And on Bridge Street, when Washington was still a muddle of taverns and gambling houses, a city of many streets and few buildings, colored peddlers in apron and cap called out their wares—hot corn, English muffins, baked pears, apple butter from Pennsylvania; and what they now call Roosevelt Island was a romantic paradise. Bridge Street is M Street now, dingy and dirty, its glory faded, visible only to the eye that can see the purity of its line behind the barbarous fronts of struggling shops.

We stopped in front of one of them. Across the street was A. J.'s bank, with its big burglar alarm over the window.

"That's where A. J. nearly got killed a few hours sooner," I said. "Barging out against a red light. He must have just discovered about Randall's missing fortune."

Colonel Primrose glanced at me, shaking his head. "He did?" he said. Then he nodded toward Mr. Hofnagel's Studio of High-Class Photography.

"Is this fellow a friend of yours?"

"He ought to be," I said. "My children and I have been practically his only customers for nineteen years."

We'd come to the dingy window with its rusty black velvet curtain against which were displayed, in cheap grey folders, three photographs of young ladies with tight-crimped permanent waves, hard-faced and self-conscious against a background that looked like the side of a dappled grey with the heaves.

"Devoted as I am to Mr. Hofnagel," I said, "he's really a peculiarly rotten photographer."

The bell over the door clanged as we opened it and stepped into the small reception room with a few pale-faced specimens of the proprietor's art hanging around it. I was there, and my sons, and A. J., grim-visaged and upright, and Mac, and Lowell in her white graduation dress.

Mr. Hofnagel came out of the back room with an anticipatory professional beam in his big sad eyes that faded when he saw Colonel Primrose and brightened again when he saw me.

Well, if I took a beautiful photograph I wouldn't mind so much, I was thinking; and then I thought again . . . and—because nothing I could ever do to Colonel Primrose would in any way approximate what Sergeant Buck has done to me—I said, brightly, "This is Colonel Primrose, Mr. Hofnagel. He wants his picture taken. Four dozen of the largest size, and a dozen of them tinted—didn't you say? Or was it two dozen?"

I think Colonel Primrose may be conservatively described as rocked back on his heels, and by the time he had recovered his wind sufficiently to deny this monstrous proposition the glory in Mr. Hofnagel's sad-eyed, sunken-cheeked face had filled the room and was just too luminously bright for him to withstand. He cleared his throat and moistened his lips, and smiled savagely at me.

"Certainly," he said. "Of course. I . . . I want them all tinted."

Mr. Hofnagel bowed, and bowed again, trying vainly to find words, beaming with speechless joy. He backed through the old monks' cloth curtain and held it up for us to enter . . . and Colonel Primrose, led by a silken strand of Fate, entered the room where he was to come upon a major clue in the problem of the violent death of two old men. It was a clue so vitally important that he's regarded me ever since as the ancients regarded the village idiot—a special instrument in the hands of God.

I didn't, of course, know that then. All I knew was that Colonel Primrose, looking steadily at me with a green

apoplectic malignity, was sitting under the purplish glare of Mr. Hofnagel's mercury lamp, and Mr. Hofnagel was saying, "Look bleasant, bleese! Looka at dot bretty lady, dot vill bleasant doughts gif you, sir! You stand ofer dere, Mis' Ladam!"

He pushed me over in front of the open door of his dark room, and spread out his hands.

"So, so! Now your fader can see you!"

For a moment I thought Colonel Primrose was going to die.

"I do so wish Sergeant Buck was here, Colonel Primrose," I said sweetly . . . and then my heart sank. For there in the doorway behind Mr. Hofnagel's moist bald dome stood that granite mountain of appalled disapproval in person. I put my hand over my mouth the way Lilac does, and turned away. Lowell's words "I'd hate to have that guy down on me," or something to that effect, and the Sergeant's own saying that many a true word was spoke in jest, were twin warnings written in acid on my brain.

Fortunately Sergeant Buck is a man of few words. I only heard one come out of the corner of his iron-ribbed jaw. It sounded like something no one would say in front of a lady. I looked anxiously at Colonel Primrose. He had completely regained his amiable composure.

"That will be splendid, Mr. Hofnagel," he said. "And tomorrow I want you to do my friend Sergeant Buck here."

We both stared at him. He had taken out his billfold and was handing a twenty dollar bill over. Mr. Hofnagel's great eyes were popping out of his head.

I stole a glance at Sergeant Buck. No words could describe the look on that face. And then as his glance rested for an instant on Mr. Hofnagel's pathetically beaming countenance, his face changed suddenly, and—I could scarcely credit my ears—it seemed to me I was hearing Sergeant Buck say, "Sure. Nine o'clock's Okay for me, mister."

I turned quickly to Colonel Primrose. He was as bland-faced as the Buddha on my garden wall.

"I've been waiting for a long time to get this done," he was saying affably to Mr. Hofnagel, who was bobbing up and down like an apple in a tub of water, still speechless with delight. He seized Colonel Primrose's coat, but Sergeant Buck quietly took it away from him and held it himself. I went out, with something of the unpleasant feeling I'd had once when I was a child and got caught breaking the pink sugar rosebuds off the Bishop's birthday cake and was made to break off and eat all the rest of them.

The cool air of M Street was grateful to my burning face.

"It's straight in front, sir," Sergeant Buck said.

I was walking beside the colonel, Sergeant Buck about two steps behind us. People kept turning and looking at us. I know they thought he was taking us to jail. I glanced up at Colonel Primrose. He had an infuriating smile on his face.

"Are we going somewhere?" I inquired icily. The situation was obviously out of my hands.

He nodded.

We walked along a couple of blocks.

"On the right, sir," Sergeant Buck said menacingly. "There's Frelson by the plug."

I followed the direction of their eyes. A man smoking a cigarette by the fire plug under the street lamp in front of a saddle store tossed it into the gutter and ambled over to a dingy doorway with carved fluted pillars, painted dark brown so it was hard to see how lovely they were. The exquisite tracery of the fan light was brown too. A tattered sign nailed to the slender columns said "Rooms by the Day or Week."

The door was open. A mangy fox terrier sat blinking in it, up beyond him yawned a dark ill-smelling stairway lit by a single naked bulb, its delicate rail grimy with dirt and lumpy with wads of chewing gum.

I followed Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck. They trod softly on the creaking stairs. The fox terrier yapped half-heartedly a couple of times and gave it up, obviously not really caring who came or went out of that dismal place. I had realized, of course, that we were coming to see Lavinia Fawcett. I don't know just when it dawned on me, or why it hadn't sooner, after what I'd told Colonel Primrose when Lowell left us. But then I realized that this expedition had nothing to do with what I'd told him. It didn't take half an eye to see, for one thing, that Mr. Frelson had been leaning on that fire plug for years—or so you'd think, he looked so much a part of it. So it was apparent then that even before I'd told him, Colonel Primrose, and no doubt Captain Lamb, had seen that Lavinia was in some way mixed up in this. I was vaguely disturbed, for some reason. Possibly it was a sort of conceit; I didn't like to think Colonel Primrose had a whole body of information he wasn't hinting at to me. If I had known then how much information he really had, and that I could have had too if I'd been as clever as I thought—or rather that I really did have without knowing it—I probably would have been more than disturbed, I'd have been definitely chagrined.

At the last step before the first landing they stopped, and I stopped too. And then I saw, somewhat to my dismay, that they hadn't brought me along because they liked the color of

my hair at all. I, it appeared, was to be a sort of copper's nark. That was apparent the moment Sergeant Buck stood ominously aside so I could see Colonel Primrose's beckoning finger and respond to it.

"I want you to go in and talk to her," he said quietly. "Try to get her to go out with you if you can. You may not be able to do it. But find out anything you can. Keep your eyes open. We'll be right here."

"Say, listen!" I said, in the exact idiom of my younger son. Then I saw the fishy eyes of Sergeant Buck on me, and gave in. "Oh, all right," I said. "Thank you for the——"

"It's the second door back," Mr. Frelson said. I hadn't noticed till then that he'd followed us up. He talked out of the corner of his mouth too, but I saw that was possibly because he had a scar painted on it. Heaven only knew why they thought poor old Lavinia was worth all that artistry. I'm afraid I still didn't see, in spite of the fact that two men had died of poison, that this was a ghastly and terrible crime we were dealing with, and that the stake was high enough, the criminal bold enough—and desperate enough by this time—to stop at nothing. If later no one of us that was left ever put a bite of food in his mouth, for some time at least, without sending up a prayer on swift small wings, it wasn't because we were cowards as because we'd learned the lesson that Colonel Primrose had been patiently trying to teach me since the night I found Randall Nash lying grinning-dead on the floor of the house in Beall Street.

I went down the dark evil-smelling hall, damp with the mists from the Potomac and black with the smoke and coal dust of half a century. A single drop light with a fly-specked bulb hung in the center. I tapped on the next to the last door and waited. A little of what a terrified ten-year-old girl must have felt, shaking there in the dim cold passage, came over me. I thought how strange it would seem to Randall Nash if he could know that sending his child on an errand of mercy to salve his own troubled conscience had stained a thin sharp wedge of her life so deeply and terribly that she'd never in all her days be free of it . . . so that he who loved her probably more than anyone ever would again had hurt her the most.

I was thinking that, and hearing at the same time behind the dark brown, grease-spotted door the curious shuffling that I associated with Lavinia and a pair of snakes my older son used to keep in a box by the garden wall. I never worked in the rock garden by the little pool without hearing them slithering back and forth, and feeling sorry for the birds who came to drink and flew away after one short cool sip had trickled

down their throbbing feathered throats. I could hear her plainly now, inside there, slithering about, sniffling. I guessed she must be putting something away—her bottle, probably, thinking it might be a lady from St. Timothy's. It seemed a very long time that I stood there. It may not have been; time is such a subjective thing. At last I knew she was close to me, just on the other side. I stepped back a little. In the dim strip of light under the door I could see her shadow. She must have been bending down, listening.

"It's Mrs. Latham, Miss Lavinia," I called.

The shadow at the bottom disappeared. I could hear her shuffle away. I tapped again. I heard a door close, and wondered about it; I'd thought she had only one room. It might be a cupboard, of course. I tapped again, and then I heard her voice. "I'm coming, as fast as I can." She was at the door again. I heard a key rattle in the lock, the loose brown crockery handle turned, and the door opened, about an inch.

"What do you want?" she asked suspiciously.

For a moment I couldn't think of anything at all to say, not wanting anything, and furthermore being so used to the fawning ingratiating manner she'd always had when we met on the street.

"I just wanted to see you," I said, scrabbling desperately in my mind to think of something. "—About Mrs. Nash. What would you like her to do for you?"

She was peering out at me through the crack between door and trim, for all the world like a Cyclops just returned from the witches' Sabbath. But in that single eye I saw I'd hit the proper note.

"So she sent you, did she?" Miss Lavinia whined. She opened the door. "Come in. It's always a pleasure to see people that'd be my friends if I'd had my rights."

I stepped inside.

"I thought she'd come back herself. She can't expect me to stay here waiting on her. She said she'd come back at half-past four, but she didn't. She must have come when I was out."

I must have looked as astonished as I felt. She grinned cunningly. "She didn't tell you she'd been here. She's too fine to let people know, is she. Well, what does she say?—She thinks nobody'll take care of me now Mr. A. J.'s dead. But she's wrong about that."

"Oh dear!" I thought dismally. What on earth could Iris Nash, cool, lovely and detached, have to do here? I looked about the room. It was cleaner than I'd thought it would be, except that every available place was piled with old clothes. I

recognized a tweed coat I'd got in Edinburgh just after the war, and a print dress I'd spilled ink on so that the color came out when it was cleaned. I recognized lots of my friends' clothes too. None of them obviously had ever been worn by Lavinia. In fact the room looked exactly like a private rummage sale.

"Sit down," she said. She started to clear a chair.

"Don't bother, I'll sit here."

I perched on the edge of the table, covered with a white oilcloth and quite clean under the drop light with its red fringed shade.

"I thought you might like to go out and go over to see Mrs. Nash with me," I said, rather craftily. I told myself there wasn't much more harm I could do at this point, and I might get her away and intercept Iris before she came back here and ran into the grim triumvirate on the stairs.

She looked at me more craftily still.

"Is that what she wants?"

I couldn't look her squarely in the face. She was standing there, her back to a medicine chest nailed crookedly over a cheap white wash stand with a hole where the hot water tap should have been. I looked down and started to say "Yes."

And just as I did my eye caught a mark on the white oil cloth, and the word froze on my lips. Staring at me from that table was a blur of purple ink, and in it I saw "Wis—", printed in block letters . . . the "W" upside down.

I looked up, open-mouthed. Lavinia's eyes had followed mine; they were fixed there on the telltale letters on the white oil cloth; and I could see dawning slowly in her drink-befogged mind the awful meaning they had for me. We were motionless there for a moment in that little room with the clothes piled about everywhere . . . and then, while I sat there petrified, staring at her, unable to move or speak, she screamed hideously and darted across the room and leaped at me, frantically, scratching, snarling, clawing. I hadn't been able to get down from the table, and it was probably a good thing, for just in the most involuntary self-defense I raised my foot and gave her a lunge in the stomach that sent her winding, off balance, against a chair covered with clothes.

I couldn't scream or shout. My throat seemed to be tied in paralysed knots. I'd got halfway to the door when she was up again. She picked up the chair and raised it, her face contorted with horrible fury. I dodged as the chair came hurtling across the room. It struck the door with a splintering crash, and after it Lavinia came, shuffling like some obscene

beast in the jungle stalking its prey. As I look back on it now I wasn't terrified really as much as nauseated. Then I could hear steps pounding toward me—they couldn't help but hear—and then they were in the room just as Miss Lavinia was on me again, and I saw Sergeant Buck's great ham-like hands close on her arms as she kicked and scratched at him.

I closed my eyes and turned my head away, just next to being very sick. I knew without looking that it was Colonel Primrose's shoulder my head was buried against, and he was saying, "My dear, my dear! I'm so terribly sorry! Please forgive me!" and there was an intensity in his voice that I hadn't heard there before. I felt very secure—too secure, I'm afraid, for Sergeant Buck's good. So I raised my head promptly and smiled.

"Oh, it's *quite* all right! Anytime I can do anything else for you . . ."

Colonel Primrose looked at me very earnestly, and shook his head. "Please don't!" he said.

"Oh, I'm only doing it for Sergeant Buck," I answered—quite truthfully, I'm afraid.

We were alone in Miss Lavinia's room. I could still hear her screeching and kicking outside as they took her down the stairs.

Colonel Primrose still looked at me. "I am *terribly* sorry, my dear," he said. "I . . . I didn't want her to know she was being watched. That's why I thought you could help us. I never dreamed . . . What happened?"

"It would have been all right except for that," I said. "I couldn't help letting her know I'd seen it."

I led him over to the table and pointed to the purple smudge and the printed letters on the white oil cloth. I saw his sparkling black eyes rest on them.

"You've probably never had children printing with one of those toy sets," I said, "or you'd know that odd letters turn up in the strangest places. On the bathroom walls, usually, and the backs of books. If they're doing a whole newspaper you get the notion you're living in a bowl of alphabet soup. She probably was trying out the letters to see if they were right side foremost."

He nodded, and looked around the ill-furnished little room with a puzzled expression on his face.

"I thought she was putting something away," I said. "It took her so long to let me in. It sounded as if she was closing a door."

I went over and turned the handle of the tinny white

medicine chest and opened the flimsy door. An envelope fell out into the bowl in front of me. I was conscious of all the rest of the familiar paraphernalia of a toy hand printing set inside on the shelves: the tin box with the inked pad, the little stamping block, the piece of wood with the rubber letters fitted in grooves in it to keep them straight. They were all there, piled in a jumbled heap in the crowded chest. But it was the envelope that had fallen out that my eyes were fixed on. I knew with a cold feeling in my stomach that it contained the letter Lavinia had rushed back from A. J.'s house to print, and that I'd interrupted her printing it. What it would say I dared not guess. I only knew that it must be about Iris. I reached my hand down to pick it up, knowing of course that I oughtn't to do it, that what I was about to do was obstructing the police and all the rest of it. I didn't care. I also didn't remember what I've often observed, that Colonel Primrose has eyes in the back of his head.

He turned from a pile of clothes at the other end of the room. "Don't do it, Mrs. Latham," he said pleasantly. He was beside me in an instant, and took the envelope out of my hand.

"My mistake," I said.

He opened it and took out the familiar cheap grey lined paper, took one look at it, and shook his head. "It was my mistake," he said.

He handed it to me. My heart rose as I saw there were only two full words printed on an otherwise blank sheet.

WHY DID M

That was all.

"I didn't give her enough tine," Colonel Primrose said. He took it back and kept looking at it, frowning a little. I turned away so he wouldn't see the expression of heartfelt relief on my face.

My tweed coat was lying on one of the chairs that had got knocked over in our free-for-all. I looked at it with the affection one has for old clothes bought in *temps perdus*. I'd got it one cold summer after the war in Edinburgh, when my husband and I had gone up with some friends who'd taken a grouse moor for the 12th, and the air crash that ended all those days was still years ahead of us. I picked it up, wishing I hadn't given it to the friend who'd said poor Lavinia had got to have a warm coat, and put my hand in the side pocket, not for any reason—I mean I didn't think I'd left the Star of India

or anything in it—but just because I'd always liked the feel of those pockets . . . rough tweed on the back of my hand, satin on my palm.

But there was something in the pocket now. I knew Lavinia had never had it on, probably, so my curiosity was more pardonable than it usually is. I drew my hand out, and stood there looking at what was in it.

"For mercy's sake!" I gasped. "Look!"

Colonel Primrose turned away from his examination of the medicine chest and came to where I stood with my hand out. In it was a rolled wad of bills, bound tightly together with a thick white rubber band. He took it and opened it, and spread out three ten dollar bills. I reached into the other side pocket. There was another roll there, containing two very ancient one dollar bills. The inside breast pocket produced five dollars.

Colonel Primrose stood there for a moment, chewing his lower lip. He picked up another garment off the pile, a tan sports jacket that once belonged to a near neighbor of mine, and went quickly through its pockets, netting two tight little wads amounting to eighteen dollars.

"Is there money in all these pockets?" I demanded.

"I wouldn't be surprised. We'll leave that to the Sergeant. I hear him coming."

The heavy square-toed boots pounded briskly along the hall, and Sergeant Buck entered. We both stared at him. His jaw, which I'd always thought was granite at least, was practically in ribbons.

"Good God, Buck," Colonel Primrose said.

Sergeant Buck patted his bloody face with his handkerchief, and looked at the blotched white cloth with great composure.

"She's worse than Little Mamie, out in Honolulu," he said, out of one bleeding corner of his mouth.

"Why didn't you crack her over the head?"

"You said to make as little stink as possible, sir."

Sergeant Buck shook his head. Then his eye fell on the little pile of wadded and unwadded bank notes. He glanced at the Colonel.

"Is something off color, sir?"

Colonel Primrose chuckled. Sergeant Buck's use of idiom has strong personal variations. He wasn't, I knew, implying at all that anyone had committed a breach of good taste.

"Decidedly, I suspect," Colonel Primrose said. "We've found this much in two coats. Go through the room, will you, and clean up on this."

"Okay, sir."

"If you'll wait outside on the landing, Mrs. Latham, I'll join you in just a minute, and get you to drive me to the Nashes'."

The gratified smirk on Sergeant Buck's bloody face at my being shut out of their private conference should have been compensation for a year's exile.

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We didn't go at once to the Nashes', however; we stopped at a Greek restaurant on Wisconsin Avenue, and settled ourselves at a cold marble-topped table with a large bouquet of fly-speckled red and yellow paper roses on it, with festoons of more paper roses over the grey unflattering mirror on the wall beside us. I couldn't, I thought, look as bad as all that, but perhaps I did. I thought suddenly of how much worse I could have looked if it had been my face instead of Sergeant Buck's that Miss Lavinia had clawed to shreds.

"Did you know Lavinia was writing those letters?" I demanded, when we'd ordered him and eggs and coffee.

"What do you think the police are for, Mrs. Latham?" he asked dryly. "I assure you Lamb has been on the job for twenty-four hours without closing his eyes."

"How did you know about her?"

He smiled.

"The police depend to a large degree, Mrs. Latham, on certain knowledge of a lot of fundamental norms that practically all human beings conform to . . . with individual variations, of course."

"That," I said, "sounds as if you're planning a fifteen-minute talk to our radio neighbors, on the cause and cure of crime. All I want to know about is Lavinia."

"Like a woman," he said with a chuckle. "No patience with the larger life. No interest in abstract ideas."

"All right," I said. "Go on. I'll listen."

He laughed.

"We found Lavinia wrote the letters by keeping a watch on the Nash house, and seeing her slip the one you and Wilkins tried to hide under the door mat.—It's quite simple."

"Very," I said. "Especially when compared with the larger life, and abstract ideas, and fundamental——"

"That's how we arrived at the conclusion that it probably

was Lavinia, even earlier," he said imperturbably. "It was someone who was jealous and envious and was trying to turn Randall Nash against his wife. We figured whoever it was wouldn't stop now that Randall was dead—there was still Iris. There was some kind of an idea of giving her as much rope as she wanted."

"Oh," I said. "And did you know about the money?"

He shook his head.

"And . . . A. J.? Do you think——"

He stopped me. "There will be a post mortem directly, Mrs. Latham. We have to wait till Dr. Kavanaugh reports. It's the same situation we're up against in the case of Randall Nash."

"You mean——"

"That if autopsy shows A. J. *was* poisoned with cyanide of potassium—and it looks like it—we have to determine how it was administered. If he took it directly into his stomach, then he got it after he left the Nash house at quarter past five. And some time after, Mrs. Latham, in fact just before he died. It acts very quickly."

"And if he didn't . . . ?"

"If he didn't, then it was given as it was given to Senator McGilvray, and as it may have been given to Randall: in the form of enteric capsules."

He looked steadily at me over the marble-topped table.

"Which means, of course, that he was poisoned in Beall Street . . . while he was having tea."

"I see," I said. "The enteric capsule retards the action."

"For some time, Mrs. Latham. An hour, or more; it's almost impossible to tell."

I nodded, trying to think. "And if he did take it at tea, it means that he was poisoned by one of us, there."

"Iris, Lowell, Angus, Mac, Steve Donaldson——"

"Wilkins," I put in.

"Wilkins, and Edith St. Martin. They are the possibilities."

"But if he got it after he left there . . . He went to Mr. Hofnagel's . . . and to Gilbert St. Martin."

He nodded.

"Well," I said, "I hope they find it in his stomach."

He looked at me queerly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Mr. Hofnagel obviously wouldn't have any reason to poison him . . . and that just leaves dear Gilbert."

There was a faint smile around his eyes.

"It leaves someone else, my dear."

"Who?"

"Lowell Nash."

"Oh dear!" I said. I hadn't thought of that. And I saw now that he had been thinking of it, for some time.

"You know," he said, "I don't want to seem brutal, but somebody probably ought to tell Lowell that her position in all this is becoming . . . well, let's say damned ambiguous."

I put down my fork. My fingers were suddenly too weak to hold it.

"When Lowell tells the District Attorney and Captain Lamb her story about Lavinia coming there last night, and her terror, and all that," he went on deliberately, "they're going to be sorry for the poor kid . . . until Mr. Belden Doyle gets hold of it. And when he does, then he'll get hold of her in a jiffy. And he'll ask her if she doesn't hate her stepmother, if she hasn't quarrelled with her father, if the reason she left Mac down in the car wasn't to be alone with her father for twenty minutes in the house, with nobody else there. If Lavinia's coming in didn't terrify her not because she was afraid of the poor half-mad old woman her father had set on the road to ruin but because the old woman caught her just as she had poisoned her own father . . . and that fear and no other was what drove her to catch up the decanter of whiskey that she knew was this poor old derelict's mortal weakness and thrust her out with it into the night . . . while she fled and danced, danced and drank champagne punch, while her father lay dead and her mother lay dying—was already dead, as a matter of fact, though she didn't know it."

He sat back in his chair and drew a long breath.

"Belden Doyle is a very dramatic fellow," he remarked dryly. "And damnably plausible. And has he got something to go on?"

I sat staring at him, utterly aghast.

"But what for?" I cried.

"For a lot of money that she's been so determined her stepmother was trying to steal."

"But where," I said, "in Heaven's name would Lowell Nash be getting cyanide of potassium?"

The network of wrinkles round his black sparkling eyes deepened, but there was no laughter in them. "I know where the poison came from, Mrs. Latham."

I didn't eat the rest of my ham and eggs. I couldn't. I watched Colonel Primrose finish his in silence. He paid the check and helped me on with my coat. He looked at his watch.

"Lamb's going to phone me at nine. Shall we go back and look at Buck's loot?"

I nodded.

"Let's walk," he said.

We went down Wisconsin Avenue and turned on M Street, neither of us speaking. When we crossed at the intersection where A. J. had nearly been run down he took my arm.

"I didn't realize that such an idea would be so much of a blow to you," he said. "I thought you'd have seen it by now. You would have, of course, if Lavinia hadn't scared you out of your wits . . . or if you weren't so determined to think well of your friends."

I shook my head. "It wouldn't have occurred to me in a thousand years," I said. "And anyway, I *wasn't* scared of Lavinia. I was . . . just sick."

The little knot of people that had been hanging around the brown columned door when we came out had gone. The terrier was still there, and still less interested. We stepped over him and went up the stairs. At the first narrow landing Colonel Primrose stopped suddenly and gave me a warning glance. I could see his black eyes snap as he went on lightly, on his toes, up the last few steps and a little way along the corridor. He stopped there, listening. I followed cautiously and listened too, just as the door opened. He pushed me across the hall into a dark indentation in the wall.

We heard quick light steps coming from Miss Lavinia's room, and spacing them, the heavy brisk tread of Sergeant Buck's army boots. At the head of the stairs they stopped, both pairs of feet, and I heard the Sergeant's hard ominous voice.

"Now you run home and don't let on to nobody you came here. There's people hangin' around would give their left leg to catch you in an uncompromising position like this here. You scram and leave it to me. I'll get them letters."

Colonel Primrose's hand closed on my arm. My heart sank to my boots.

We heard a swift breath caught abruptly, and quick steps on the stairs. We both looked out. The dark figure of a slender woman passed rapidly down the stairs, the dingy gleam of the single drop bulb lighting up for an instant as she went under it the unmistakable glory of her burnished copper hair. But I'd known before that it was Iris Nash that Sergeant Buck had caught in what he'd called so perfectly, with quite unexpected literalness, an uncompromising position.

I looked at Colonel Primrose, expecting him to follow Sergeant Buck back to Lavinia's room and lay down the law. But he didn't. As soon as the Sergeant had closed the door again he said, "Let's go to Beall Street, Mrs. Latham."

I was glad my car was back on Wisconsin Avenue . . .

Iris could get home before we got there, and be saved the embarrassment of coming in on us cold. And she was there when Wilkins let us in. At least I hoped she was. Madame had not been feeling well, and had retired immediately after dinner, he said when Colonel Primrose asked for her.

Colonel Primrose took my coat. "Would you go up and ask her to come down, please, Mrs. Latham."

He turned back to the butler. "Who else is here?"

"Miss Lowell, Mr. Angus and Mr. Donaldson are in the drawing room, sir. Mr. Mac left as soon as he heard the tragic news of his uncle."

He took Colonel Primrose's coat and hat. Halfway up the stairs I turned and looked back. Colonel Primrose was standing in the middle of the hall, looking at his watch. I saw him hold it to his ear to see if it was still running. It was the first evidence I'd had that the time until he heard from Captain Lamb and knew what was to be known about A. J.'s death was lying heavily on his hands. He would know at nine o'clock. I remembered with a start that ten o'clock was when Gilbert St. Martin was to be at my house to see Iris, and I'd still not told her about it.

On the landing by the great Palladian window I looked back again. Colonel Primrose was just going into the drawing room. It was too bad, I thought, that someone couldn't put poor Lowell on her guard, tell her that every word she said against Iris now would be used dreadfully against her when Belden Doyle got into action.

I hurried on up the stairs and turned the handle of Iris's door. It was locked. I rapped gently and called. "It's Grace, Iris." After a moment I heard her light steps on the carpeted floor, and heard the big key turning in the old-fashioned brass lock.

"Come in," she said. I looked at her. She had on a green lace negligée with long tight sleeves . . . but she still had an outdoor air about her. Even if I hadn't known she'd been out I think I would have felt the negligée and mules a little unconvincing. I didn't say anything, thinking for once that I'd let nature and Sergeant Buck take their course. And, of course, I didn't know . . . and I suddenly felt a little chill. I could protest until I was black in the face that Iris Nash was innocent of all this—not only of the murder of her husband, but of the liaison with Gilbert St. Martin, of taking and keeping Randall Nash's money, of poisoning A. J. McClean because he knew, and all the rest of it; but could I go on doing it in the face of such conduct as I'd just witnessed, and was witnessing now in the green negligée?

"Colonel Primrose wants to see you downstairs," I said.

A quick smile lighted her grey eyes for the barest instant.

"Does he know I've been out?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Did Sergeant Buck tell him?"

"No. He saw you."

"I suppose it was stupid of me to go there."

"I'm afraid it was," I said. "And by the way . . ."

I'd closed the hall door behind me and was standing in the door of her dressing room while she put her street clothes on again.

"I didn't tell you this morning that Gilbert came to see me. But you heard us in the library."

She nodded.

"Did he want to know why I did it?"

The delicate irony in her voice left me rather gaping.

"He would, of course. He probably thinks I murdered Randall just so I could marry him."

"Something of the sort," I admitted.

"He must be glad he's getting out in the morning," she said, with a queer little laugh. There was nothing bitter in it, as I must have expected there would be . . . I noticed so instantly there wasn't.

"Well, the point is," I said, "that he's horribly anxious to see you before he goes."

"And probably doesn't think it would look well for him to come here?"

She looked at me with a quick amused smile. "So I'm to go to your house and meet him, tonight—after it's dark. Is that it?"

"You've been talking to him?"

She slipped her foot into a brown suede pump, her face hidden from me for a moment as she leaned down to brush a speck of powder off the toe. She straightened up, a strange inscrutable smile in her eyes as green as emeralds, and came over to where I was standing. She put her hands on my shoulders and looked at me, still with that strange complex smile.

"I haven't talked to him, Grace. I know Gilbert St. Martin so well that I know everything he thinks, and everything he's going to say or isn't going to say. I knew everything he's been thinking ever since he heard Randall was dead."

"He's going to be at my place at ten," I said.

"Unless detained by his wife's guests."

She burst into a merry little gust of laughter as fresh as a summer breeze.

"Listen, Grace," she said. "Don't you understand that I got past Gil as a significant fact of life a long time ago, and that Gil as an emotional prop that I'd rush to in trouble just doesn't exist at all? You see, Grace, all the years I knew him, and was in love with him, I knew—in my mind—what he was like. That he was vain, and a snob, and using me as a general door mat, and all the rest of it. I knew it in my head, but my heart denied all of it to the very end. It even tried to find an excuse for his marrying Edith and her money and her pekes."

She picked up a handkerchief off her desk. "Love that's dead is deader than that gardenia, Grace."

I looked down at the brown withered blossom she picked up off the long table in front of the mirror. It was dry and unlovely, all its waxen dewiness gone, and all its strong perfume; even the silver ribbon that had tied it was stringy and tarnished. She held it in her hand an instant, dropped it into the waste basket beside the chair, and wiped off her hands with a quick delicate gesture.

"The trouble with Gil is the trouble with a lot of spoiled pampered people," she said quietly. "He's never learned that life goes on without him. I thought I'd explained sufficiently to him that mine had gone on, the other night when I told him that even if Edith did divorce him—which she talks about from time to time and doesn't mean—it wouldn't concern me at all. I thought he'd understood it . . . we certainly had a touching enough farewell, sealing it.—He's been grand about helping me do over the house, and leading me to odd lovely bits he's heard about in the country. Though I've paid their full Park Avenue value."

I looked at her in astonishment. Her eyes were perfectly frank, a clear velvet-grey, no green fire serpents guarding them. Could it possibly be, I thought, that she didn't know about all the letters . . . ? Like a flash the scene I'd had with Gil in his pine-panelled shoppe on Christmas Eve came back to me. "Does Iris know about these letters?"—"Don't be funny, Mrs. Latham." . . . and the sudden tightening of his lips and hardening of his eyes.

It seemed incredible. And, if it was true, and she didn't know about Lavinia's compositions, then why had she been at Lavinia's? Why, and how, and for what, was Lavinia forcing her to terms?

There was also the scene I'd witnessed—and that her husband had heard—through the Palladian window from my own window Christmas Eve, when Gilbert St. Martin was there . . . and that she'd denied to the police. Or was that the touching farewell?

I think I'd started to ask her bluntly, when a tap on the door brought us to the awareness that Colonel Primrose was waiting downstairs. "Just coming," I called. Chiming in with my voice the blue Sèvres clock on Iris's mantel struck nine tiny silver notes. Downstairs I could hear the telephone ringing urgently.

Colonel Primrose was just coming out of the library. I tried to read in his face which message he had got, but I couldn't.

"I want to talk to you, Iris," he said quietly. "Let's go into the dining room."

I went too. He didn't tell me not to, and Iris caught my hand as she followed him.

We went into the long room with windows opening on the garden, and sat at one end of a Chinese Chippendale table with a low silver urn filled with a fairy shower of sweet-smelling mimosa. Facing me, between two of the three windows, was the mahogany cellarette where Lowell had got the decanter of whiskey to give Lavinia. Over the lovely Hepplewhite sideboard with its gleaming silver service and tall ornate candelabra at either end was the mirror in which Iris had watched the silent suety figure of the butler move from place to place.

"I suppose Mrs. Latham has told you we saw you at Lavinia's just now," Colonel Primrose said pleasantly.

"I asked her if you had," Iris answered. "She said yes."

"Why did you go there?"

He had a way of looking at people that made it awfully difficult to tell anything but the truth.

"I can't tell you, Colonel Primrose," Iris said. She met his glance with straightforward composure.

"You mean you won't?" he said politely.

"That's just what I mean."

He beat a muffled tattoo on the polished surface of the table with his fingertips, regarding her with steady appraising eyes.

"Does Belden Doyle know you went there?" he asked abruptly.

"No . . . nor why I went. And I couldn't tell him, either. It's a private matter."

"I see." He leaned forward. "Iris, I think I ought to tell you that they have found out that A. J. was poisoned."

She nodded. "Lowell told me. I'm sorry."

"Lowell was . . . guessing," Colonel Primrose said steadily. "She was right, however. And I think we may take it for granted that he was poisoned because he had found out—

or because somebody thought he had found out—who has Randall's money."

"Then for God's sake why don't you let him keep the money!" Iris said passionately. "It isn't worth it . . . not all the money in the world is worth all this!"

Something flickered for an instant in his eyes.

"The second point about it is this," he went on impassively; "Mr. McClean was poisoned with cyanide of potassium, administered just as it was administered to Senator McGilvray, in enteric capsules, in chocolate candy. He died at approximately five minutes to six. He took that poison into his system sometime between four and five o'clock this afternoon."

She looked at him, the smooth gold mask of her face changing to a tragic bewilderment.

"But . . . he couldn't have! He was here, in . . . in this house, having tea!"

The horror dawned in her face as she turned from Colonel Primrose to me, and back again. Her lips parted, her face drained of all its warm golden glow. She gripped the edge of the table with her hands, and got some way to her feet.

"That means that some one . . . some one here at tea . . ."

The words came out of her lips in controlled jerking monosyllables.

Colonel Primrose nodded.

She looked at him without speaking. I could see each name as it went through her mind. Lowell, Angus, Mac, Edith St. Martin, Steve Donaldson, Wilkins.

"—and A. J. himself," she said softly. "Couldn't he have done it himself . . . knowing some one knew where the money was . . . or had been?"

"Does some one know, Iris?"

"Well," I said cheerfully, "some one *must* know."

He shot me an annoyed glance. She was still standing there, her fingers tips pressed hard against the table, steadying herself, when the door opened and Wilkins's pale moon face appeared. He paused perceptibly, taking in the scene with motionless eyes. Colonel Primrose noticed it, I think, because he said "What is it?" rather curtly.

"Mr. Belden Doyle has come, madame. He wants to know if he can see you at once."

The muscles of her throat contracted, her body swayed ever so slightly, her finger tips were white against the velvet patina of the old mahogany. She looked at Colonel Primrose, and

then, the color of her eyes changing faintly, at the plump white face of the butler in the doorway.

"I beg pardon, madame. Captain Lamb and Mr. Yates are also here. They wish to see Colonel Primrose."

Colonel Primrose pushed his chair back. "You have an upstairs sitting room where you can see Doyle, haven't you?"

Iris nodded.

"Take Mr. Doyle upstairs, Wilkins. Tell Captain Lamb and the District Attorney I'll see them in the library."

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He got up and stood aside for Iris to pass him. She didn't move. It seemed almost as if her feet refused to obey. She stood rooted there, pale and helpless. Then without warning her body crumpled and she sank into her chair, her head on her arms thrown across the table, shaken with sobs. Colonel Primrose started, and looked at me helplessly. I motioned him out, and went round the table to Iris and put my arms around her.

"Please, Iris," I said. "You can't do this—not now. Wait . . . please."

"Oh, I don't care, Grace," she whispered. "It's too terrible. Don't you see what it means? I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

"That's the funny thing about it, darling," I said. "You've got to bear it. And it's time to start."

Her body was quiet a moment. Then she raised her head, and stood up.

"I can bear any of it, except . . . except that man."

I thought of course she meant Wilkins.

"Then why don't you fire him?" I said.

"Can I, do you think?" she asked quickly.

"I don't see why not."

"Then I will. I don't want him to save me, if he has to do it at . . . at somebody else's expense—somebody he knows didn't do it, when he thinks I did."

I stared at her as it dawned on me it was Belden Doyle she was talking about.

"And . . . Grace! You *must* believe me, Grace! I didn't! I really, *really* didn't!"

I went to the sideboard and poured her a stiff drink, brought it back and handed it to her. "Here," I said. "Drink this, and go up and talk to him. *Tell* him you didn't do it."

She pushed the glass away.

"I don't want that, and I have told him. He just nods, as if he were . . . John Barrymore, or somebody, and says 'Of

course you didn't, my dear—but everybody *thinks* you did.'—And I can't bear the way he says that 'thinks'."

"He probably hadn't heard about the enteric capsules when you saw him," I said, more hopefully—I hope—than I felt. "That means any one of half a dozen people could have done it."

"But they can't prove Randall was poisoned that way."

"No," I admitted. "But they can't prove he wasn't. And in view of the two other deaths, the assumption that he was is perfectly good."

She looked at me for a while.

"It's funny, isn't it," she said abruptly, "how you can get all tangled up without ever knowing it? For a long time—a year, I guess,—after I married Randall, and he was so marvellous, and all the kinks Gil had left in me were smoothing out, I kept thinking I hadn't any right to all this. I ought to be punished, some way, for taking it . . . not loving him . . ."

She drew a long breath and pushed her hair back from her forehead.

"Then that changed, and I realized all of a sudden that I did love him, in a mature, grown-up way. And when men round about who sort of go in for making love to willing ladies made love to me, because I had an older husband, I always thought it was pretty funny and explained they'd made a mistake . . . I decided perhaps I'd done penance enough in my old life. But I guess I hadn't. I guess I'm just beginning . . . all over again. Life has a quaint way of pulling out an extra ace just after you've finessed a king."

"Well," I said, "you'd better keep Belden Doyle, my dear. He knows more of the local conventions than you do."

She looked at me and smiled. "I'll see." She went out.

I could hear Mr. Doyle somewhere outside asking Wilkins, I suppose, where the hell Mrs. Nash was. He wasn't used to being kept waiting, I imagine. I sort of wandered about the room aimlessly. I ate a couple of grapes off the elaborate arrangement in an old silver soup tureen on the serving table, and had started to eat another when I saw Wilkins in the door. I hadn't known that his suety face could express so polite but firm a rebuff for vandalism. That's the nice thing about colored servants, incidentally; they don't regard their handiwork as too sacred to touch.

"I beg pardon, madame. Colonel Primrose asks you to join them in the library."

"All right," I said. "You might take them some whiskey and soda."

"Thank you, madame. And madame . . . if I may be so

bold . . . I shall be free here at the end of the week. I shall be wanting another situation . . . If you have any need for my services, or any of your friends . . ."

I nodded.

"I'll keep it in mind, Wilkins.—I know several people I'd be glad to recommend you to."

"Thank you, madame."

"If nobody hangs you first," I said to myself as I went through the door he held open for me. Then I turned back . . . just for fun.

"Oh, by the way," I said. "Captain Lamb had a man watching the house. He saw that letter put under the door, and saw you bring it in. They . . . have it, now."

I couldn't see his face. I heard a slightly choked "Thank you, madame," and went in to join the police force.

Colonel Primrose held a chair for me in the library there, Captain Lamb looked at me over the top of his horn-rimmed spectacles, Mr. Selman Yates the District Attorney nodded.

"Glad to see you aren't all torn up, ma'am," Captain Lamb said. "She was a holy terror till we showed her all her money and let her count it. We're hanging on to it for a while. There's any number of people walking around would cave in her skull for a tenth of it."

"How much was it?" I asked.

"Fifteen hundred and three dollars," Mr. Yates said. "She says it's what she's been saving. There's more of it somewhere. You could tell that by the way she kept asking if that's all we'd found."

"Is she . . . locked up?"

He shook his head with a smile, seeing, I suppose, what I was thinking.

"A lot of crackpots around write letters, Mrs. Latham," he said. "Most of them send them in to the newspapers. She didn't, of course. But don't you worry about it. Lamb's keeping an eye on her. Ah—there are much more important matters."

He picked up a sheaf of papers on the desk.

"I've just been talking to the Commissioner," he went on. "He's interested in this enteric capsule business."

He smiled suddenly.

"So am I . . . and so is Belden Doyle."

He turned to Colonel Primrose.

"As I understand it, if the poison that Randall Nash took in this room was administered as it was to the dog, and to Mr. A. J. McClean, then it's evident he took it some time between

the time he left this house, yesterday, and the time he came back."

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"When he left here, he went to his wife's house on Massachusetts Avenue, to that drug store, to the St. Martins' place, to McClean's. If he was given that delayed-action poison, and he did not take it in the house here—and there'd seem to be no point in his doing so—then the *obvious* people who could have given it to him are Angus Nash, Mr. or Mrs. St. Martin, A. J. McClean, and the butler Wilkins."

He looked up from the typed notes. Colonel Primrose was looking at me with a quizzical smile. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Thought of something?"

I shook my head. "Just that the St. Martins are leaving in the morning."

"They've changed their plans," Mr. Yates said.

I said "Oh."

He went on deliberately.

"We happen to know definitely that A. J. McClean *was* poisoned by means of enteric capsules. In some cases—Randall Nash's, unfortunately—it's not possible to tell; post mortem doesn't detect. In Mr. McClean's case, we know. And there's no getting away from the fact that the *obvious* persons who could have given him that poison, at the correct time, are those who were here this afternoon at tea. Iris Nash, Lowell Nash, Angus Nash; Mrs. St. Martin; Mr. Trevor (Mac) McClean; Stephen Donaldson; the butler Wilkins.

"Well, it's like the old game of cancelling names. There are just three people in both lists. Edith St. Martin, Angus Nash, Wilkins."

He stopped for a moment, staring down at the typed papers on the desk in front of him.

"And that doesn't make sense, to my mind, Colonel. You get down immediately to Angus Nash. I'd say you could rule out the St. Martin tribe just offhand. Neither of them could keep an idea in his head long enough to follow it around the block. Unless you're springing another motive on us . . ."

He looked at the blank Buddha face of Sergeant Buck's chief. Colonel Primrose shook his head.

"Randall Nash's cash," he said. "I see no other motive."

Yates nodded.

"I agree. And God knows he'd never have trusted that male flyweight with it, or that female flyweight either. That leaves Wilkins, and Randall Nash's son. And they're out too, to my mind. We've not been able, so far, to find any sign of a

connection between Wilkins and Nash prior to a few months ago. It seems just silly to think he would be the illicit custodian of a large sum of money. But Angus Nash is still more out. He and his father fought like wild boars every time they met, which I understand was seldom."

"That quarrelling could have been a blind," Captain Lamb said suddenly.

The Assistant District Attorney nodded his head, without much conviction. I couldn't help shaking mine. If it was a blind, it was the very best blind I'd ever seen.

"So . . . it just doesn't make sense."

"Murder often doesn't," Colonel Primrose said. "Well, the alternative then. Let's assume the enteric capsules were not used in the murder of Randall Nash. The poison was in his whiskey . . . somehow. He drank it here, when he got back to the house after twelve o'clock last night. He died within a few minutes. You then have other possibilities."

Yates nodded. "They are more reasonable, furthermore, from the point of view of the money. They are—eliminating Wilkins again, for the same reason—Iris Nash, and Lowell Nash. Lowell Nash could have known about that metal cleaner, of course."

"There is one other possibility," Colonel Primrose said placidly. "It doesn't make much sense if we rest on the money motive. But it's a very definite possibility. Miss Lavinia Fawcett."

He glanced around at me and chuckled at the expression on my face.

"Miss Lavinia has been watched, of course. She came here this afternoon, about twenty minutes past four. Edith St. Martin had just come. A. J. left the room and went out to the kitchen. Wilkins says he talked to her, alone, for a few minutes in the back entry. We know also, on Lowell's word, and I imagine it's true, that she was here last night."

"She'd hardly, however, have access to cyanide of potassium?"

Colonel Primrose nodded coolly.

"She's just the person who seems to have had," he said. "She had an envelope of it, with a skull and crossbones inked on it, in her medicine cupboard. I've sent it along to Kavanaugh to make sure."

Mr. Selman Yates looked at him intently. "The other stuff, for the enteric capsules—the salol?"

"You can buy it in any drug store. However, A. J. took it for rheumatism. Miss Lavinia worked in his bank, she had the free run of his house.—However, it's just an idea."

He turned to me, his black eyes sparkling.

"And this is where you come in, Mrs. Latham."

I'd never seen him so blandly suave. In fact, it was all so smooth indeed that I should have suspected something long before I did.

"We want you to help us out here. You see, of course, that it's vitally important to make out, if we can, just how Randall Nash was poisoned. Well, all we've got to go on, outside of motive and theory and such abstractions—I suppose you could call them—is what actually happened here."

He paused an instant, looking at me, and went on cheerfully.

"Now it's my theory that I slipped up badly, perhaps, last night, on just that point—the point of what happened. I was somewhat mixed up in it myself, I didn't realize what had occurred, and so on. Now, we've got the idea that we might try to reconstruct—go through the business again, from the time you and Iris and Donaldson and I came in the outside door there when we got back from the Assembly."

Mr. Yates reached under the desk and brought out a black leather satchel. I watched him, understanding about half of this. He opened it, and brought out, to my astonishment, the four objects that had been on that desk the night before, when Iris came into the room, and when Randall Nash lay sprawled lifeless on the rug in the dark periphery of the light cast by the reading lamp: the silver tray, the Waterford decanter, still half-full of Scotch, the amber glass with the silver rim, and the blue patent syphon with the chromium top and the gold band round its shoulder.

"Now then, Mrs. Latham. Will you put them just where they were when Iris came in?"

Mr. Yates had switched off the table lamp between the windows. The only light in the room was the round yellow disk on the desk under the green porcelain shade.

"Surely," I said. I got up and went to the desk. They stood across from me, watching intently.

I put the tray on the edge of the polished surface, a little outside the light. "As nearly as I can recall," I said, "this was just here. The decanter was on it, and the syphon."

I put them in place, and looked at Colonel Primrose. He nodded. And again, looking into those sparkling parrot's eyes of his, I should have known. And it was all so simple . . . and so dreadful.

"The syphon was just in the edge of the light. And this"—I took the amber glass—"was lying in the light, like this, on its

side, as though it had been knocked over when Randall got up."

I went to the door and looked back, and nodded. "I think that's about it."

I'd kept my eyes steadfastly off the chalked outline of Randall Nash's body, still visible on the rug. I didn't, somehow, want to know if Iris *should* have seen it when she went in there.

"Very good, Mrs. Latham," Colonel Primrose said briskly. He came around the desk and across the room. "Now then. I want you to show us exactly what Iris did, and tell us what the rest of us did, when we came in. I'll go out to the door with you."

I hesitated.

"Iris could show you a lot better than I can," I said.

He shook his head. "Doyle won't let her, in the first place. We don't want to upset her unnecessarily. Anyway, it's your evidence we're taking. Not Iris's."

"All right," I said. We went out into the hall. Captain Lamb and Mr. Yates followed, standing back by the library door. We went on to the front door.

"You remember when we came in," I said. "I was just behind Iris. Then you, and Steve Donaldson. We came on down here."

We walked back up the hall. I stopped just short of the library door. The two men there moved past it, Mr. Yates closing the door three-quarters to. I nodded as he looked at me inquiringly.

"We stopped here," I said. "Iris a step ahead of me. She saw the light through the door there. She sort of drew herself together, as if she'd got to face something that was pretty hard going."

I felt, rather than saw from any visible thing, that that sounded quite differently from the way I'd meant it.

"I may have imagined that," I said hastily. "I wouldn't swear to it. Anyway, she stepped over to the door, and pushed it farther open."

I swung the door open and stepped back.

"Just a minute," Mr. Yates said. The three of them went into the library, and stood there to the left of the desk. "Go ahead, please."

"I was still just behind her. The two of us looked in, and saw first that Randall wasn't there, and second that that overturned glass was there on the desk. That's when she gave a start. I'm sure it was the fact of the liquor being here at all, and the glass of course."

Mr. Yates nodded. "She then came in . . . to where, exactly? Please do precisely what she did, do you mind?"

I wasn't sure that I didn't mind very much. But of course, I thought, if I did it she wouldn't have to.

"All right," I said. It was all as clear in my mind as if it had happened five minutes before.

I turned slowly and looked up the stairs, as she'd done, and turned back to an imaginary three people in the hall. "Please go on in," I said. "I'll bring the decanter."

I walked from the door to the corner of the desk, picked up the glass and put it on the tray, took out my handkerchief and wiped up an imaginary spot on the mahogany surface, took the tray, turned to go back into the hall . . . and stopped short as three voices spoke almost simultaneously behind me.

I turned back to them. All three of them were staring at me as I'd gone mad. I stared at them the same way, still holding the tray there.

Colonel Primrose came over to me. There was a very odd expression on his face.

"Mrs. Latham," he said. "Just where was I, all this time?"

I thought.

"You were out in the hall. You'd just taken my coat."

He nodded, his black eyes snapping with intense interest.

"And . . . she did that?"

I stared at him.

"She wiped off the table with her handkerchief?"

"Why, yes," I said. "It's a natural thing to do. She wiped up the whiskey that was spilled there. You expect things to spill when a glass is knocked over, don't you?"

He nodded slowly. "It was certainly very stupid of me not to have."

"Well," I said. "*I* must be awfully stupid, but I don't see . . ."

Then I went back to the table and put the tray down on it, and sat down abruptly in the chair there. I did see. And I saw that I'd contributed another stone to the terrible edifice of guilt they were raising against Iris Nash. She had washed the glass Randall had drunk out of—they knew that. But she had also wiped up the spilled liquor that would still have shown whether or not the potassium cyanide had been in that glass; and—I could easily hear Colonel Primrose and all of them stating it quite clearly—neither she nor I had mentioned the fact.

"What did she do with that handkerchief, Mrs. Latham?" Colonel Primrose asked quietly. "Do you remember?"

"Yes," I said. "She took it out into the pantry with the tray and the syphon, and left it on the shelf over the sink. It was sopping wet."

"And where would it be now?"

I shrugged. "I suppose it's in the laund——"

And I stopped dead.

His eyes were fixed calmly on me, waiting, and I knew at once I didn't dare say I didn't know. I hadn't thought quickly enough.

"Where is it, Mrs. Latham?"

"It's . . . upstairs," I said. "In the blue room closet, in the pocket of my evening jacket."

The two policemen stirred together. "Would you mind getting it, Mrs. Latham?" Mr. Yates said.

"I'll send Buck," Colonel Primrose said calmly. He went to the door. I saw the Sergeant there in an instant, his iron mask heavily adorned with court plaster in pastel strips.

"Have Wilkins show you the blue room, that Mrs. Latham was in," Colonel Primrose said. "Bring down an ivory lace evening gown and jacket hanging there in the closet."

I'd often wondered what color that gown was.

We waited. If only the maid had gone through the pockets and taken out the soiled handkerchiefs, I thought, the way Lilac does . . .

Colonel Primrose looked at me.

"You don't seem to realize," he said placidly, "that if the liquor in Randall's glass was not poisoned, you're clearing Iris of his murder—absolutely?"

There was complete silence in the room.

"I . . . suppose so," I said.

Sergeant Buck's square frame entered the room. He was holding my dress at arm's length on a blue satin hanger. In the pleated pocket of the short jacket I saw a slight bulge, and knew the handkerchief was there. No maid had taken it to the wash.

Colonel Primrose pulled the crumpled white square out. Sergeant Buck handed my dress through the door to Wilkins, closed the door, and stood firmly planted in front of it.

"Is this Iris's handkerchief, Mrs. Latham?"

I nodded, watching him fold it carefully, put it in an envelope he got out of the desk, moisten the flap, seal it. It was more than a handkerchief, more than a fragile wisp of lace and lawn. It was a woman's innocence, her life, her soul . . . depending on what substance was held there inexorably in its cobweb threads.

"Take this to Dr. Kavanaugh, Buck. Ask him to test it for cyanide of potassium. We'll wait here."

We waited, while forty-three leaden minutes dragged by. Colonel Primrose and Mr. Selman Yates talked at first. I couldn't have told what they were saying if my life depended on it.

There was one odd interlude. It was nearly ten o'clock when the door opened suddenly. We all turned, expecting the Sergeant. But it wasn't him. It was Lowell.

"So sorry to interrupt," she said. "I wonder if I . . ."

She stopped suddenly as her eyes fell on the exhibit on Randall Nash's desk—the tray, the decanter, the syphon and the glass, there in the single yellow disk of light, almost as they had been the night before, except that the glass was upright now.

"Hullo!" she said.

She walked calmly over to the desk.

"Brilliant," she said. "Reconstructing the scene——"

Her voice stopped as abruptly as if she had been struck in the face. Her lips parted suddenly, she caught her breath in a quick gasp, staring down as if hypnotised by the glaring spot in the darkened room, her eyes widening, her slim dark little figure shrinking back toward the white door frame. And suddenly she raised her hand to her mouth, turned and ran out of the room.

We all stared after her. I looked at Colonel Primrose. He had an oddly bewildered expression on his face. After a moment he got up and went out into the hall. He came back in a few moments, still troubled and as bewildered as before, I thought. He came in as Lowell had done, stood there a while in front of the desk, looking down at it as if to see, if he could, what she had seen, shook his head and sat down again. He sat there looking straight ahead of him, rubbing his chin until I thought he would wear a hole in it or I would go crazy, one or the other.

Sergeant Buck came in just when I'd decided I'd leave, I couldn't stand it any longer. He took off his overcoat, laid it on a chair and put his hat on top of it. Then he came over to Colonel Primrose and handed him an envelope he took out of his inside pocket.

Colonel Primrose handed it to the Assistant District Attorney.

Mr. Selman Yates opened it, read the one short sentence on the sheet of note paper inside, and looked up.

"Mrs. Nash's handkerchief," he said quietly, "was saturated

with a strong solution of whiskey and cyanide of potassium."

No one spoke. What that meant was perfectly apparent. The whiskey in the decanter had not been poisoned. The cyanide must therefore have been in the patent syphon. And Iris had prepared the syphon herself, before she went to the Assembly; and Iris had rinsed it out and recharged it when she returned.

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Sergeant Buck followed me out of the library and closed the door. Colonel Primrose was still standing in front of Randall Nash's desk, staring down intently at the instruments of death gathered there on it . . . trying, I knew, to penetrate to the heart of whatever had caused Lowell to act as she'd done.

Sergeant Buck cleared his throat.

"Maybe it ain't as bad as it looks, ma'am," he said stiffly.

"I hope not," I said. I put on my hat, picked up my coat that I'd laid across the arm of the cherry damask love seat in the hall, and started to put it on.

He cleared his throat again, in his usual sinister way.

"You planning on going somewheres, ma'am?"

I was planning on going over to my house to tell Gilbert St. Martin that Iris was not keeping his proposed rendez-vous. But I wasn't telling Sergeant Buck.

"I'm going for a walk," I said. I added sweetly, "Do you mind, Sergeant?"

I meant, of course, that it was none of his business, but I didn't quite like to say so. After all, the court plaster striped up and down his face was there so it wouldn't be on mine. But he understood me perfectly.

He turned the curious molten brassy hue he gets. "It ain't that *I* mind what you do, ma'am," he said, with feeling. "It's my orders. The Colonel says I'm to watch out nothing happens to you. I just thought I'd tell you in case you might be wondering."

I took off my hat.

"I don't suppose you want to go for a walk," I said.

"No, ma'am. Not just now."

"Then I'll go upstairs. You can tell Mrs. Nash if she asks for me."

I went up. He stood there in the hall watching me as impersonally and with as evident distaste as if I were a lap dog he'd been given to hold. I went into my room and partly closed the door. I waited by it, listening, until I'd heard him go back into

the library. Then I put on my coat and hat again and tiptoed across the hall to the back stairs. It was after ten, and I didn't want Gilbert St. Martin making a scene on my front steps . . . or coming here—not if I could head him off.

I'd got across the hall but not quite to the steps when I heard the drawing room door open. Reflected in the darkish tilted panes of the Palladian window I could see Lowell and Steve Donaldson. Steve had his overcoat on and his hat in his hand. The library door opened at that moment, and Sergeant Buck looked out.

"Okay," he said. "I thought it was Mrs. Latham."

"Where is she?"

It was Steve's voice.

"Upstairs," Sergeant Buck said gruffly.

I slipped down the back steps, grinning to myself. I was half-way down when it occurred to me all of a sudden that if I could see Lowell and Steve reflected in that window, then Randall Nash could have seen Gilbert and Iris there . . . and undoubtedly had seen them, Christmas Eve when I watched from my bedroom window and saw Gil raise her hand to his lips. "He must have been wild," I thought.

The kitchen was empty, and the little passage between it and the servants' wing. I unlatched the back door and crept outside. It was as dark as pitch. The garden wall and my own house loomed dimly, a darker darkness in the starless night. For a moment I hesitated. It was very much nearer across the wall, and I might meet one of Captain Lamb's men if I tried to get out into Beall Street through the servants' entrance. On the other hand, I've never been much of a climber. Still, the wall was partly broken down, and Lowell had done it.

I glanced back. Whatever I was going to do had better be done quickly, I thought. I scooted across the soggy lawn to the broken-down place above the old Nash vault, stepping warily there for fear I might conceivably cave it in. I'm not quite sure, now, how I got over that wall. I couldn't possibly have done it in the daylight, when I could see how high it really was. The sharp broken brick cut my hands and tore my stockings to ribbons. However, I made it. My eyes were getting used to the dark now, and it wasn't too bad, except that everything was strange and unreal. Even the urn on my side of the wall loomed pale and unfamiliar and a little frightening.

I jumped down on the other side, clinging to the bare ropey branches of the trumpet vine, got to my feet and brushed myself off. Suddenly my hands stopped short as something white and ghostly moving beyond my tiny orangery made my

blood turn to water and my feet freeze in their muddy tracks. Then I took a deep breath. It wasn't moving, obviously, being a white fluted marble column, broken at the top, that so far as I know has never done anything but stand there. It shook me, however, because it made me realize how jumpy I was. Perhaps I really needed Sergeant Buck to look out for me after all, I thought.

I let go the trumpet vine that I'd caught hold of again and ran quickly across the grass. And I stopped short a second time. The venetian blinds in the living room were pulled flat, the velvet hangings were drawn. That was strange, I thought, because Lilac never draws them unless I'm in the house and tell her to. The garden's completely enclosed, and like another room in the house, as a matter of fact, so there's no need to, really, except that it is cosier when the fire's burning to have them drawn.

Then I realized what had happened. Gilbert St. Martin had come, of course—it was after ten—and he'd be just the person who'd want to shut himself in so no one could see him . . . so he wouldn't get caught, I thought suddenly, in one of Sergeant Buck's uncompromising positions.

I went quickly along the narrow herring-bone path to the garden door. I felt in my pocket for my keys, counted them off in the dark till I came to the fourth from the left, and put it in the lock. As I did, the path of light from the living room door across the hall was abruptly blotted out; the place was in utter and total darkness.

I stood stock-still on the threshold, for a long time, my heart a cold lump in my throat. I called "Lilac!" and waited. There was no answer. "Julius!" I called. I waited again, but still there was no answer, no sound of any kind, in all the pitchy blackness, except, from somewhere downstairs, my Irish setter Sheila's deep-throated bark and her claws scratching against a door.

I stood there with my hand on the brass knob. Somebody was in my house . . . for what reason I didn't know, but I did have the most instant and complete conviction that whoever it was it was a murderer, a man—or a woman—on whose hands already lay the blood of Randall Nash and of old A. J. McClean . . . and that my blood couldn't dye those hands a great deal redder, or sear the scar on that immortal soul one whit deeper.

For a moment—for one *awful* moment—I nearly turned tail and ran. But I didn't. There was no use. There was no place to run to. I'd be trapped there in the garden . . . I couldn't possibly get back over the wall, the bricks I'd used as

stepping stones were all piled on the other side. And there was another reason. I can't pretend that I'm brave. I'm a most frightful coward. But even a frightful coward couldn't go away and leave two old colored people sleeping in that house, as I knew they must be, alone with murder. If I could make a dash, I thought, for the light switch at the end of the hall, or the one by the door leading down to the kitchen—or even the one inside the dining room . . . The darkness worked two ways. I was as used to it in itself as whoever was inside there, and I was more used to the house.

I reached down and slipped off my soggy shoes. My hands weren't shaking now, but my knees were. I threw my shoes out on the grass and took a step forward, and another—only my pounding heart would give me away, I thought—and another, my hand running along the wall, past the picture of the red vase of gentians that I could almost see, I knew it so well, and the pembroke table with the terrarium with the lone yellow lady slipper in it, to the door frame. But the door had been closed, closed since the light had been turned off, just while I was standing there . . . we were so close to each other, this murderer and I. I could hear a sharp intake of breath, or so I thought—whether it was mine or his I couldn't tell.

I slipped past that door, my heart almost bursting. I knew now that I had to make the switch by the kitchen stairs. I started to run, even in the dark there. It was only a few steps. But I didn't make it. I could hear the door open behind me, and a quick step, and then a cold kid-gloved hand came over my mouth as I screamed and something crashed against the back of my head, and that was all except for a blinding pyrotechnic flash through all my being . . .

When I opened my eyes I was moving in great giddy circles in a sort of universal wind tunnel, in which I got nowhere. Through the haze and the roar I could dimly hear some one swearing at me, and it occurred to me crazily that I was in France, then, and hadn't tipped the driver enough. However, he was swearing in English, and so I closed my eyes again, knowing it was Sergeant Buck and that he had every right to swear as roundly as he chose and in whatever language.

Then I was aware of another voice—cool, bored, drawling. "Good Lord, I nearly broke my neck falling over her. The front door was wide open, all the lights off. I say, they've certainly ripped the place up."

I opened my eyes, with an effort, and tried to raise my pounding beating head.

"Stay where you are, ma'am," Sergeant Buck growled.

I couldn't have lifted my head anyway, even if I'd dared to try, but I could roll it to one side and open my bursting eyes. I couldn't believe they were seeing straight. The living room was torn to bits; pictures down, books on the floor, chairs with the upholstery ripped off, boxes dumped out and left.

I closed my eyes again, and felt Sheila's wet comforting nose in my face and her feet in the pit of my stomach, and heard Sergeant Buck saying "Get off there, pup," and then Colonel Primrose was beside me, my hands in his. I knew without caring that the tears were rolling down my cheeks like rain out of a broken eave trough. I knew he'd be angry, and I tried to explain, but he put his hand under my chin and closed my mouth.

"I imagine she wouldn't have seen who it was," I heard him say.

"She came in the back, sir, over the garden wall," the Sergeant's brassy voice said. "Look at her feet. The house was pitch black. She was laying in the hall with that there ribbon clerk kneeling down by her, holding his cigarette lighter over his head. Scared to go look for anybody, I guess. Good thing she's got a thick skull or she'd be dead as hell."

Colonel Primrose's hands tightened on mine.

"Where are Julius and Lilac?"

"Don't know, sir. They ain't around any place I can find."

"Then keep Mr. St. Martin in the other room. Don't let him go prowling around the house."

"Okay, sir."

"You stay just here for a minute, Mrs. Latham, till we see if you've got a fracture. I hope you have if it'll teach you a little sense . . . but I'm afraid it won't so I hope you haven't."

Something warm brushed my aching forehead. I thought for a moment he'd kissed me, but I was awfully muddle-headed, so I can't be sure. Anyway, I was alone with Sheila after that, and Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck were with Gilbert St. Martin in the dining room, and all I knew was that somebody thought I had something he wanted very badly . . . and would much rather kill me than have me know who he was . . . and that Lilac and Julius hadn't been found . . .

The most immediate result of all this was that Headquarters, so to speak, moved from the yellow brick house in Beall Street across the garden wall to my red brick house in P Street.

"You don't know what it is somebody's hunting so frantically, I suppose?" Colonel Primrose asked me, the next morning.

My head still hurt, especially when I turned it or tried to open my eyes very wide, and worst of all when I closed my teeth together quickly, all of which I seemed constantly to do.

"The only thing I can possibly think of is that somebody thinks Randall Nash left that letter he got from you here, when he waited for me after he'd left your house with it."

It was early in the morning, and I was downstairs propped up on the sofa because I was too curious to stay properly in bed. The sun was out. It looked more like April than December, except that it was still cold. Through the long windows I could look out into the garden and see my heel tracks zigzagging drunkenly from the wall to the brick walk, and my shoes were still lying there where I'd thrown them.

Lilac brought in my tray and put it on the table. Her eyes were like saucers.

" 'Deed an' I'd nevah fo'gived mahself if they'd killed you, Mis' Grace!"

"What happened to you?" I asked. I'd been doped and put to bed before she and Julius had turned up the night before.

"Mistah St. Mahtin, he come and asked was you heah, an' Ah says No. So he says he go get a pack a' cigarettes, an' come back. 'Bout three minutes, the telephone 'menced ringin', an' a man said he was callin' fo' you, an' me an' Julius was t' go right away ovah t' Mistah Angus's house on Massachusetts Avenue, an' you was goin' t'stay theah all night, an' we should get some things you had, an' bring 'em home."

"But . . . Lilac," I said weakly. "That just doesn't make sense."

She nodded vigorously. " 'An that's jus' what Ah tol' Julius, but he say a lot a' things Mis' Grace does don' make no sense —mo' that doesn' than does."

I nodded a feeble and painful agreement, and Sergeant Buck, standing in his usual position behind the Colonel, nodded too, very vigorously, and spat sizzlingly into the fire. Colonel Primrose smiled, but very briefly. I'd never seen him quite so depressed and grim about anything before.

Neither had Buck, I think, because a few minutes before, when Colonel Primrose had gone down to the kitchen to see Julius and Lilac, he made, in his usual curt manner, the only comment he's ever made to me about the state of his chief's psyche. It sounded peculiarly sinister, coming out of one corner of his own grimly depressed dead pan. "Lower'n a snake's belly," he said, jerking his head toward Colonel Primrose's retreating figure.

Then he said, "Are you staying here, the rest of the winter?"

I nodded in spite of my bursting head. "I have to," I said. "I haven't got a tenant, and I can't afford to keep up two houses."

It was the only interest he'd ever evinced in my personal affairs, and perfunctory as it was I was rather touched. I needn't have been, of course, as I could have known. I suppose it showed my head was hurt worse than I'd realized.

When Colonel Primrose came back Sergeant Buck looked at his watch.

"You want me to ask him a few questions, sir?"

"No, no," Colonel Primrose said hastily. "You let him alone, Buck."

I knew what he meant. Sergeant Buck had mysterious, or perhaps not so mysterious, ways of his own for extracting information from people he didn't like.

Buck nodded curtly. "Then I got a date to get my picture shot, sir," he said, a little self-consciously I'm happy to say.

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Colonel Primrose pulled up a chair and sat down beside me.

"What did Gilbert St. Martin come here for last night?" he asked, with intense seriousness. "The truth, please—for your own sake, my dear."

"He wanted to see Iris," I replied. "He didn't want to go to Beall Street. He asked me to tell her to come here, at ten o'clock."

"And did you?"

"Yes. She said she didn't have any interest in seeing him. I came back to tell him so. Somebody was here."

"You didn't see him?"

I shook my head.

"The lights were out. He came out of the dining room behind me. It was a man, I'm sure. Strong as steel, and tall—taller than I am. I felt that by the leverage of his arm and hand over my mouth. How did he get in?"

"He broke a window in the front area after Julius and Lilac left."

"How did the Sergeant know I'd gone?"

Colonel Primrose thought a long time.

"It's all very interesting," he said deliberately, his eyes sparkling as he looked down at me. "Just as Steve Donaldson left, Edith St. Martin came. Buck was out in the hall. Lowell let her in. Buck says she stewed around a few minutes with Iris and Lowell in the drawing room, then asked where you were. Lowell said you were upstairs. Mrs. St. Martin said wasn't it nice to have you around all the time, and Lowell, for some reason I can't make out—I can't make that girl out anyway—decided to get you to come down. So she went up. Now, the thing nobody's quite sure of is whether Edith St. Martin went to the telephone and called your house *before* Lowell came back and said you were gone, or *after*. Anyway—as soon as she did say it, Buck dashed out and over here . . . and I'd say just got here in time.

"I came out to see Yates off, and saw Lowell at the phone

on the upstairs landing. Now Buck says when he got here the phone was ringing, and when he answered it nobody was on it —they'd hung up.—Back in Beall Street, Iris was the only person not rushing around telephoning. She was sitting in the drawing room looking at Edith's pekintese. When I came in she said, 'You know, they're really very engaging animals—look at its little tongue . . . and can't you get its mistress to take it home and stay there permanently with it?' Well, its mistress came in just then and said she'd have to go home, dear Gilbert would be worried if she was out too late you know, he's so protective you know, I really feel sometimes he thinks I'm as helpless as precious little Golden Bells here. She picked the peke up and kissed it and got out.

"Well—I didn't realize, until Lowell came down, that you and Buck had dashed off separately. I thought of course he was with you, now knowing you'd run out on him."

"Well," I said, "on my part, I don't quite see, exactly—or nearly, what all that has got to do with anything."

He shook his head. "I don't either. Not till we find out who Lowell and Edith were telephoning so frantically to."

"But . . . what happened to me?"

"You nearly got killed, Mrs. Latham."

"I know that very well," I said. "But . . . who, and why, and——"

"That's something else I don't quite understand. It . . . doesn't seem to fit in, some way."

"Fit in with what?" I asked wearily.

"With what else I know."

He hesitated a moment, and moved his chair closer.

"I know," he said slowly, "—for instance—who killed Randall Nash, and A. J. McClean. Not to mention Senator McGilvray."

I was too worn out, emotionally and physically, to do anything but lean back against my pillows.

"Really," I said.

He nodded placidly.

"And do you know who put me on to it, eventually?"

I shook my head.

"It was you, Mrs. Latham. You and your friend Lowell. Her——"

He broke off abruptly as Lilac stuck her head in the door.

"That Mistah St. Mahtin's heah, Mis' Grace."

Colonel Primrose moved his chair back.

For once Gilbert wasn't just behind her. He'd waited with a new formality in the hall. When he did come he didn't look as glowingly immaculate and self-confident as usual, though for

the life of me I couldn't have said at what point in particular he was less so. His black hair was as glossy and smooth as ever, his clothes as expensively debonair, his face as handsome and perfectly shaved, his manner toned with just the proper sympathy, as he came forward with a heavenly bunch of white calla lilies and laid them whimsically on my recumbent form.

"Darling! I got them just in case you didn't pull through!"

"They're lovely. Thanks!"

"As a matter of fact they are damned decorative, you know," he said. It was precisely, I remembered, what Marie Nash had once said about her husband's second wife.

He peeled off his chamois gloves and took out his thin gold cigarette case. "You know, it's a funny thing, about last night, Colonel Primrose. I came here, Lilac said Grace wasn't home. Still, I've told you all this."

"Mrs. Latham would like to hear it," Colonel Primrose said politely. I don't know if Gilbert got the frozen sub-stratum under his formal courtesy. It was there, all right. Perhaps Gil is so used to meeting it in most men that he doesn't mind it.

"Well," he said, "there wasn't much point in hanging about in the street . . ."

I hadn't thought of that. Of course Lilac, disliking him very much, would never ask him in. I should have thought of that when I saw the curtains drawn in the garden windows.

"I said I'd come back, and walked along to Wisconsin Avenue. I got a pack of cigarettes at the drug store."

"And telephoned, I think?" Colonel Primrose asked urbanely.

"Yes. That's right. I did telephone. I'd forgot it. To the Nashes' house to see if Grace had left. She had. So I wandered back. I saw the door sitting open, when I got here—no light in the house. It looked damned odd, you know. I called and knocked. No answer. Then I stepped in, and kicked the poor girl in the stomach."

He raised one perfect eyebrow with a whimsical smile.

"I realized it was a . . . body, so to speak. I lighted my lighter, and saw it was Grace just as that wood-faced ruffian came barging in. The phone was ringing. I said 'You watch her and I'll answer it.' He said, 'I'll answer it myself and you'll come along,' and went on acting as if it was me that bashed the poor child. We found the light . . ."

He shrugged.

"Well, it *was* a mess. However, it'll give you a good excuse for doing something decent with the place, Gracie."

He looked about with that marvellous patronizing air of his.

"It's got possibilities. Oh, it's not bad! Just needs polishing

up a bit. I could sell that highboy for you for a lot of money, darling."

I think if Captain Lamb hadn't come in just then Gilbert might easily have found himself in an undignified heap on the garden wall, with the print of a militaty toe on the seat of his pants and his calla lilies marking the spot. As it was, they all adjourned into the dining room and closed the door. As they did so, the hall door opened a few inches and Lowell Nash's dark head peeped in around its white edge.

"Can I come in?" she whispered.

She came in. I couldn't tell for a moment whether it was my bleary eyes and throbbing head that made her look so strange or not.

She looked around the room. "Angie said it was a shambles," she remarked shortly. Then she came quickly over to me, pushed the box of pills the doctor had left me off the cricket and sat down.

"How are you, Grace?"

Her dark eyes bored intently into mine, her hands grasping mine were cold as ice.

"I'm fine," I said.

Suddenly she buried her head against my shoulder and held it there . . . not crying, just holding it there a long time. At last she raised it.

"I'd never have got over it if . . . if anything had happened to you, Grace," she said quietly. "Never."

"It seems to me I'm the one that wouldn't have got over it," I said.

She looked at me again; and I looked at her curiously. Her eyes had a quality of sheer pain in them that I'd never seen. They travelled slowly around the room. Lilac had put it back into fair shape, but it still looked a little rocky, as if it hadn't really got its wind back yet.

She didn't say anything. She just sat there holding my hands. At last she said, "Maybe I'm all wrong about Iris."

I tried to get my reeling brain and jaundiced eyes focussed on her. I couldn't stand many more of these violent blows—this one, I thought suddenly, coming just after the terrible discovery last night that Randall Nash had been poisoned in his own home, by means of the syphon that Iris had charged. The memory of that scene in which I'd walked through her part whirled through my brain.

"I know it sounds crazy," she went on. "But maybe . . . Angie's right, and I'm nothing but a beastly jealous little cat."

"Rat, wasn't it?" I asked.

"All right, rat. It's all the same."

She'd dropped my hands and was sitting there on the cricket, her heavily-red lips set, her eyes brooding into space, her voice a dull monotone.

"I guess I got off on the wrong foot from the start. It never occurred to me that everything wasn't all set, with my mother gone and me and my father left together. *I* thought it was perfect. I was so proud of keeping house for him . . . even if it was the housekeeper that did it. I thought it was me."

Her lips twitched in a mirthless smile.

"I'd . . . missed him so all that summer, and counted the hours and minutes till I'd be in Washington again, and then counted the street lamps from the bridge to the house, each one bringing me closer to him . . . and there she was, staring at me. I . . . never realized she was as astonished to see me as I was to see her. All I knew was my father was there with his arm around her, saying 'This is your new mother, my dear,' . . . and I hated her. You don't know how I hated her, Grace!"

She'd forgotten coming bursting over to my house and sobbing all that night, and I didn't remind her.

"She was so . . . so beautiful! Everywhere I'd go people would say, 'Not the lovely Iris Nash's daughter?', and somebody would say 'Oh, no, her stepdaughter,' and look at me, and I'd nearly die. I was scrawny and ugly and black as a nigger where I wasn't peeling. Then Angie fell for her, and . . . Mac. Only A. J. didn't, and I knew, even if I wouldn't admit it, that he was jealous of her too. And I used to make up awful things just to make it worse."

She pushed her short black curls off her forehead.

"Then once she said, 'Lowell, do you know you'd be a very lovely girl if you'd hold up straight and eat properly and give your skin a break.' I told my mother that. She said 'Don't let her make fun of you, Lowell. You've got the Nash features and there's not much you can do but spend a lot of time on the right clothes when you get out of the gawky stage.' "

She laughed bitterly.

"Instead of hating my mother and seeing she was jealous of Iris and too busy to care what I looked like, I just hated Iris worse. You don't mind my boring you with all this, do you, Grace? I've never . . . put it in words before."

I shook my head, painfully. She didn't need that.

"Maybe if I'd ever been able to get under her skin I'd have felt better . . . but I couldn't, and I hated myself for trying, and then I'd try again, and never get any further than seeing her eyes turn green, as if she could kill me—and I knew I deserved it. Then she'd just let it go, and I'd hate myself, and

the more I hated myself the worse I hated her. I . . . I guess that's what people do."

I nodded.

"Well . . . I'm sorry," she said humbly. "Lots of times I've wanted to stop being mean when she'd give me some perfectly swell build-up. Like once when she didn't know I was around she said 'Lowell's not only beautiful to look at, she's a perfectly grand girl, Mrs. Somebody or other'—I don't know who it was. 'If she's going on that picnic you can be perfectly sure nothing will happen that you'll need to have the slightest worry about.' And she said it all as if she really meant it. No buts and ifs."

She blinked back the sudden tears in her eyes.

"I wanted to go in and tell her I was sorry, and all that, but I . . . I didn't know how. Then mother called me up and said she did hope I'd persuade my father to get me some new riding togs, she didn't see how even a stepmother as self-centered as Iris could tolerate me riding in the park looking like a scarecrow. I guess mother didn't mean it, really . . . she was just sort of taking it out on my father."

"Well," I said gently, "why don't you go tell her now?"

"I . . . maybe I will.—You couldn't go with me . . . could you?"

I would have gone with her if I'd had to be carried on a rush litter. And I've wondered ever since if some poltergeist was dogging my footsteps, or just Iris's, that made that trip turn out as horribly as it did.

Lilac helped me dress. When I came back down stairs, Colonel Primrose was there, disturbed and anxious. I thought for a moment it was on my account, but I saw it wasn't. He was looking at Lowell, standing by the fireplace, hard-eyed and tight-lipped, every vestige of color gone from her face. My heart sank. I could have slain him. Heaven only knew, I thought, when she'd get back in the mood I'd left her in. But I was wrong. She came quickly across the room into the hall and took my arm. Colonel Primrose saw me, and gave a surprised start. I shook my head so sharply that it nearly cracked, and he didn't make any attempt to stop me.

Lowell took my car keys and got in behind the wheel. Her face was drawn, even more than it had been.

"Do you want to wait, Lowell?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I can't wait," she whispered. "I . . . might be too . . . late."

I gaped at her.

"What do you mean, Lowell?"

"Nothing . . . really. Please don't ask me."

I said nothing. She manoeuvred my car in between the butcher boy's bicycle and a laundry truck in front of the house in Beall Street, and opened the door for me. Neither of us spoke as we crossed the walk and went up the steps. Lowell put her key in the lock and turned it. We stepped inside . . . not meaning to be quiet, either of us, though Lowell had on rubber sport shoes and I'd put on a pair too, to lessen the jar of high heels on my numb aching head that no pill could entirely deaden.

The door into the drawing room was open. Lowell stood aside for me to go in, and I started to, and stopped dead in my tracks, Lowell just behind me. We couldn't help hear the low throbbing words that beat against our ears, paralysing our feet and eyes and brains.

"I must, Iris. I love you . . . I can't keep it to myself any longer. You do know it, you couldn't help but know it . . . and you do love me . . . I do know it, you can't pretend you don't!"

And then in a blind uncontrollable instant Iris was in Steve Donaldson's arms, and . . . I had closed the door.

Lowell stood rooted to the spot, completely and utterly paralyzed, her mouth open, her eyes fixed rigidly on the solid wood, hardly breathing. It seemed hours, though it couldn't have been a long moment, I suppose, that she was unconscious of my hand pulling her away. Then she came, still dazed, still uncomprehending. And then suddenly she looked at me, her dark eyes clearing.

"Why don't we go back to your place, Grace?" she said steadily.

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She switched on the engine and let in the clutch.

"I don't feel like going inside," she said shortly. "Could we go for a drive?"

I nodded. I'd much rather have been at home with a witch hazel pad on my head, but it seemed unimportant now. Whether my head ached or didn't, it could never match the ache in Lowell's heart. She went through to Wisconsin Avenue and down until we came to the water front, and left until we turned along the parkway to the Lincoln Memorial, glistening white in the sun. We crossed the bridge with Arlington above us, its sturdy Doric columns set in the winter hills, the radio towers like great mosquito legs behind it. We turned then by the Memorial Parkway and went silently along the blue river bank, until we'd left the bridge and airport behind us, and the Capitol dome far to our left, out toward Mount Vernon.

Lowell said nothing, not one word, during the drive, nor when we turned and came back, the Capitol dome rising on our right now, across the river, and the white marble city beyond it. I didn't say a word either. I didn't know what there was to say. I couldn't say, 'Well, you ought to have seen it.' That wouldn't help any.

At last, as we came back past the airport and a great transport plane zoomed up and on its way over the Virginia hills, I said "Why don't we go and see if there's anything we can do for Mac?"

She shook her head.

"Not just . . . just yet."

"All right. Then let's go back to my house."

"Okay."

I unlocked my door and we went in. Even before we'd got properly inside I knew Sergeant Buck was back from Mr. Hofnagel's. I could tell it by the way Lilac and Julius were stepping around, getting things further back in order.

I heard Colonel Primrose in the dining room. His voice was quite distinct.

"When did you first meet Randall Nash, Donaldson?"

"Four years ago," I could hear Steve Donaldson saying calmly. "The firm I was with did quite a bit of business for him. I had charge of some of it."

"You knew him fairly well?"

"Quite well. I went on a couple of fishing parties to Quebec when he was along."

I looked at Lowell. She was taking off her coat and hat. She caught my eye in the mirror, and the question in my face, and nodded. "Yes, I knew that," she said quietly.

"That's how you came to renew acquaintance, last fall?"

"I didn't renew his acquaintance, exactly, Colonel Primrose. I met his daughter at some party. She asked me for cocktails. I thought at first Mr. Nash didn't recognize me. I mentioned I hadn't seen him for two or three years. He said he'd been doing his business elsewhere. He didn't seem to object to my coming; when we met he was as cordial as he was to anybody."

"You wouldn't remember if he ever gave you any of his property to keep, Donaldson?"

"If you mean his money, you're barking up the wrong tree, Colonel."

I took off my own things and put them on the chair by Lowell's. I was worried, badly—worried about the look in Lowell's eye and the dejected droop of her shoulders as she went along the hall in front of me. I wished Steve Donaldson hadn't come here just now. And I wondered if Iris had meant not to tell me Steve was an old acquaintance of Randall's, or if she hadn't known it. It seemed odd in either case, and odder when I thought about the scene we'd just witnessed, Lowell and I, in the Beall Street house.

Then the terrible thought shot into my mind that it was Steve Donaldson who'd given Iris the poison metal cleaner.

I followed Lowell down the short hallway. She hadn't gone into the living room but on out into the garden. I saw her out there, in the leafless orangery, with a man I didn't recognize for a moment. Then I saw it was her brother Angus. They were standing face to face, talking earnestly. I saw her shake her head and turn away. He took hold of her arm and pulled her back.

"Well," I thought, "just another friendly little row."

I pushed open the living room door.

Mac stopped prowling up and down like a worried executive.

"Hullo," he said. "How's your head? Where's Lowell?"

"My head's fine," I said. "Lowell's out there with her

brother. Why don't you join them? Keep them peaceful for a while."

Then I remembered.

"I'm so sorry about your uncle, Mac."

We shook hands. He didn't say anything, for a moment. Then he said, "Well, I've got to go back. I just wanted to see Lowell a minute."

"Don't go—there's nothing you can do," I said, thinking how desperately empty that big old house must feel now, that always felt empty no matter how many people were in it.

"Thanks. I guess I'd better."

He looked out of the window, like a lonesome child not knowing whether the others would let it play with them, and being afraid to go out and see.

"Go on out, Mac," I said. "Don't be so stupid. Don't you know the old thing about the nettle? Stings you if you touch it gently, but grasp it like a man of mettle."

He gave me a sardonic grin, but he went, and I went to the dining room door and looked in. Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck were there, with Mr. Selman Yates. I blinked my eyes, not sure whether I was seeing what I thought I saw or not. On the table in front of them the Sergeant was just finishing unwrapping three patent soda syphons, of the type the Nashes had had. He set them out in a neat row.

Colonel Primrose's hat and coat were on the chair by the door. He looked up and smiled briefly. "You'd better sit down, you look shaky. Have a nice drive?"

"It's pleasanter in the spring and summer," I said.

I glanced at Sergeant Buck, monumentally calm. It's too bad you couldn't have been in the Nashes' hall with us too, my friend, I thought. Then Colonel Primrose wouldn't be quite so smug about it. But maybe he wasn't, it occurred to me suddenly when I saw him watching me intently out of the corner of his eye.

"Where'd they come from, and what are they for?" I asked, pointing to the syphons.

Colonel Primrose smiled again. "Oh, just a little stunt," he said calmly. He took a fourth one out of a satchel that Mr. Yates put on the table. I recognized it—I couldn't have done it any other way—from the police identification label pasted on it as the one that had been on the tray on Randall Nash's desk, the one that Lowell had given him for Christmas.

I must have looked even more blank than ever, for Colonel Primrose gave me an amused glance as he set it alongside the others. One of the three was just like it, blue with a gold band around the shoulder. The others were blue too, one with a

grey band, one with a light blue band. They all had chromium tops.

He stood back and looked at them.

"You see, Mrs. Latham," he said, "Randall Nash was poisoned at home, not with the enteric capsules but with cyanide in his whiskey and soda. We know the whiskey in the decanter wasn't poisoned, or we'd all have been dead too, as we drank out of the same decanter. It's hard to see how the poison could have just been in the glass, unless on the much too simple hypothesis that the butler Wilkins put it there and poured the drink out for Nash himself."

"Which wouldn't surprise *me* in the least," I said promptly.

"It would me," he replied dryly. "I can't think that highly of him. He's a sneak, not a killer."

"You said yourself that cowards and sneaks—and women—are just the people who use poison to kill with."

Mr. Yates smiled.

"We'll see," Colonel Primrose said patiently . . . obviously unable, I thought, to think of a come back. "According to Wilkins, at any rate, the tray was on the desk, he took it away, Nash went and got it back himself. I assume that's true. With the motive we've established we'd be hard put to it to figure out how Wilkins—a butler in Nash's service not six months, hired through a good agency with a good record in Newport and Long Island—could have persuaded anybody as hard-boiled as Randall Nash to make him the custodian of a large sum of money."

"That's true, I'm afraid," I said.

"It's also true, I dare say—from looking over Wilkins's bank account—that he made a pretty good thing out of Nash. For value received, I imagine."

He moved his row of syphons like a chess player arranging his pieces more evenly in place.

"I think, however, there's no doubt that the poison Randall Nash got came from this little engine."

He put his hand on the blue syphon with the gold shoulderband and pasted label.

"The only way you could possibly put poison in it is of course to do it when you fill it with water, before you charge it with the capsule of carbon dioxide."

I looked at him, my breath coming more quickly, knowing what had to follow.

"And Iris admits she filled this syphon before she came over here to go to the Assembly," he went on. "Well, there are consequently three possible assumptions we can make. The first is this: Iris poisoned the water before she charged it. She

had a solution of cyanide of potassium in her possession at the time. She sent Wilkins out of the pantry while she filled and charged the syphon. She took the syphon off the desk in the library, when we came back, after Randall Nash was dead, though we—at least—didn't know it. She took it out into the kitchen, she let the water run into it for a long time . . . presumably so that any dregs of poison remaining in it would wash out."

He chuckled a little.

"Very lucky she did, from whatever motive; for the four of us had soda that she then recharged it with. We might all have got a small dose of prussic acid at that, and probably did.—Well, we all know the initial motives. There is the additional one that A. J. apparently believed, firmly, that it is Iris who has Randall Nash's money in her possession."

"Maybe," I said. "It wasn't Iris who bashed me over the head."

"No. It wasn't. It could, however, Mrs. Latham, conceivably have been the man who gave her the poison in the first place . . . and who, you may not know, left the Beall Street house a few moments before you did, and asked Buck where you were on his way out."

"You mean Steve Donaldson . . . ?" I asked.

He nodded coolly.

I lapsed into a sort of dreary trance . . . thinking of all the other things I knew about Steve.

Even if you counted Iris out, I thought, you could still have Steve Donaldson . . . except that he wasn't around when the syphon was being filled. Almost as if he was answering my unstated objection, Colonel Primrose went on.

"The second assumption is this. After Iris filled and charged the syphon and put it on the tray, someone came in, emptied it out, refilled it—including cyanide—and recharged it."

"Belden Doyle's point," Mr. Yates said quietly. "He says Lowell did that during the twenty minutes she admits she was there, alone with her father. That's why she was so upset by Lavinia."

I looked helplessly at Colonel Primrose.

"There's one other assumption. A substitution took place. Another syphon just like this one"—he put one hand on the marked syphon, the other on the one like it that Buck had unpacked—"was poisoned, and substituted for a perfectly harmless syphon, by some one familiar with the family life and possessions of the Nash household."

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes.

"It's interesting," he went on, "that Lowell says when she came back from the dance to change her wrap, she found the front door unlocked. Doyle, by the way, asks why Lowell took this night of all nights to come back and change her wrap. Lowell says, quite reasonably, it seems to me, that she was cold, they were driving out to a house in Virginia, and she wanted a heavier wrap."

He straightened the battery of syphons again.

"It opens up a considerable avenue of conjecture," he said.

Whether we would have wandered interminably down it or not, if Lowell, Angus, Mac and Steve Donaldson hadn't been heard in the next room, I don't know. Colonel Primrose stopped abruptly, and threw a cloth over the things on the table, indicating apparently that the session was closed for the moment. Then he sat there, his head sunk on his chest, his eyes fixed straight ahead of him.

I got up and wandered back into the living room. Lowell was viewing the remnants of our Christmas tree that I'd got so used to seeing after seven days that I didn't see it any more. My last night's visitor, as a matter of fact, hadn't left a great deal of it.

"Grace, why don't you let us dismantle this sorry object?" she said.

"I'd be delighted."

"You're going to have to buy a lot of new ornaments next year," Angus Nash said. "Got a step ladder?"

"Down in the kitchen," I said. "And if nobody minds, I'm going to collapse a few minutes."

I sank down on the sofa, rested my head on a pillow and closed my eyes. Then I opened them again and watched Lowell.

"Hello, Colonel Primrose," she was saying. "Don't look at me like that. I know Iris's fancy spellbinder has convinced everybody I did it.—There's the ladder. Mac, you get up, Angie'll break his neck if he does."

She flashed Mac a gay friendly smile, and he, poor dear, had got so used not to being smiled at that he could only look at her with what my sons call a brook trout expression and do as he was told in an unquestioning haze.

Steve Donaldson looked on, standing there with his back to the mantel, his hands in his pockets, smoking his pipe, glancing from time to time because his eyes were drawn that way out the windows at the yellow brick house beyond the garden wall. He was waiting for Iris. I wondered if she knew it and would come. Then suddenly, quite like a gift from the

gods to him, I heard Angie Nash's voice from the other side of the tree.

"Say, Mrs. Latham, why don't you call Iris and ask her to come over? She must be pretty sunk, over there all alone.—If the baby panda here'll keep her shirt on."

Lowell didn't look around. "Sure, go on," she said. "Ask her."

But I could see her drawing into herself. I didn't know then that the drive we had taken, the hour and ten minutes during which she hadn't opened her mouth or made any sign she was thinking or feeling, had been a long long trek for her through the wilderness of indecision . . . with all the instruments of revenge lying within her grasp, to seize upon—or to cast away. If I'd known that I still would not have known what path out of her wilderness she had chosen. But I could have guessed easily enough, heaven knows, from the set of her jaw and the tilt of her head, and the steadfast way she avoided Steve's all unconscious eye and the way she played up to Mac all of a sudden.

Then Iris came, with a new radiance—subdued but still so electric that everything in the room was instantly keyed up to the most extraordinary degree. She didn't look at Steve, and I saw the dogged aching look in his eye as he leaned down and knocked out his pipe on the polished fire irons to keep from looking at her. We all sat there, watching Mac and Lowell undeck the Christmas tree, nobody saying much of anything, while Angie fiddled at the radio in the corner. And suddenly I heard Lowell say, "All right, now give me the big blue one, up there," . . . and all of a sudden it flashed into my mind with the most astonishing clarity that we'd been through all this before.

For a moment I confused it with that psychological phenomenon we all experience, in which it seems that one has been in this place, hearing precisely this conversation, doing precisely these things, yet knowing of course that it isn't true, that one has never been there or heard that conversation, no matter how real it may seem. Then I realized that this wasn't any psychological phenomenon, that we had been in precisely this pattern, all of us, before . . . except that like Alice Through the Looking Glass it was just backward. It was on my side of the garden wall, not the Nashes'. We were untrimming the Christmas tree, not trimming it. Lowell was asking Mac to hand the blue ball down to her, not to put it up . . . and I thought suddenly that they realized it too, because she took the gold ball he handed her and they looked at each other, rather surprised.

In a moment now Mac is going to step back, I thought, and Senator McGilvray's ghost is going to squeal, and Randall Nash's ghost is going to come in the door and whisper the story of the vault so that Iris and Steve Donaldson will have to listen to it. . . .

Then quite suddenly I realized that my head ached and that I was quite giddy, as if I was going to faint, and that it was Colonel Primrose standing in the door, not Randall Nash, and Sergeant Buck there with the two syphons, not Wilkins and me seeing double. Colonel Primrose was looking at Lowell. It came to me abruptly then that he had been watching her all this time; he hadn't taken his mind or his eyes off her since they had begun to dismantle the tree.

Just then Lilac came in, and all this oddly backward scene was shattered. "Mis' St. Mahtin, she's at the doah—says can she come in?"

The golden ball in Lowell's hand dropped to the floor, splintering like the crashing of a thousand dainty silver cymbals. It wasn't Lowell that spoke, it was Angie. "Can't somebody give that woman a tent so she can stay in it?"

Edith came in.

"Oh Grace, your poor precious head—my dear, does it ache awfully? Hello, everybody, isn't it funny you're all over here. I went to see Iris and Wilkins said you were all here.—Iris, I hope you're not going to be furious with me, but Wilkins is such a pet, he said you were letting him out at the end of the week, I do hope you won't mind my taking him on."

"I think it's fine," Iris said.

Lowell turned around for an instant. "Do you need him to keep an eye on dear Gilbert?" she asked sweetly. "They say he's awfully good at that sort of thing."

She looked across at Iris. Iris smiled. And Lowell smiled too, quite suddenly, and then, for some utterly incredible and incomprehensible reason, they both laughed . . . for the first time I'd heard either of them laugh, except with dreadful bitterness, since I'd come home from Nassau.

24

Then Lowell looked away, and her eyes happened on Steve Donaldson, watching Iris like a hungry dog watching a bone he knows he can't have, and the magic moment was gone. Her hard brittle little mask slipped back into place. She turned back to the tree and started singing, perversely, to the effect that a policeman's lot is not a happy one, and stopped abruptly when Angie said to shut up for cripe's sake.

Through all this Colonel Primrose was standing in the doorway, with Sergeant Buck behind him, something in the expression in his sharp black eyes so horribly, grimly depressing that I thought I couldn't endure it another second. I saw Sergeant Buck looking at Iris. Colonel Primrose said, "Iris, where is Belden Doyle?"

She took a quick breath.

"He's gone back to New York . . . for good," she said. "He . . . still thinks I murdered my husband."

"I thought so too," Colonel Primrose said quietly. "It's what we were meant to think, from the beginning. I happen to know now that you didn't. That I happen to know that is the oddest and sheerest chance."

He looked around the silent room, and went on slowly.

"And yet I know that's not true. It isn't chance that brings the murderer to book. It isn't chance, those infinitesmal things that ninety-nine murderers out of a hundred do that trip them up. Call it God, Fate, Necessity . . . something . . . whatever it was that made the lime eat every shred of the pajamas that Dr. Crippen wrapped the body of his poisoned wife in, except the tiny merchant's label that sent him to the gallows."

We sat there rigidly silent, not daring to look at each other, not knowing where to look. In the periphery of my awareness I knew that Lowell had moved, that she was holding on to the back of the chair she'd been piling the Christmas ornaments in, her hands ivory-white against the dark wood.

"Something of that sort was working in this case . . . something the murderer of these people knew, and in another

sense could never know . . . not to be sure of."

Angus Nash had turned away from the radio. He was still sitting there on the floor, marking the design in my great-grandmother's aubusson carpet with his thumb nail, apparently absorbed in the process.

"Last night, when three women were together in that house across there, one watching the other two, I realized the possibility that we had what might be called a conspiracy on our hands. I take it you all know that Randall Nash hated his first wife with bitter intensity, compounded out of outraged pride and terrible resentment of a woman's demanding a pound of flesh she had no need of. That feeling was superposed on a temperament that had to throw back only a century and a half to come to an ancestor who could bury three people to die a slow anguished death in an underground vault. So Randall Nash could hate, and hate he did . . . though he could hardly do more than see that Marie Nash would never get a penny of his money, and bring his daughter up to hate her too. He failed in that, because his daughter turned to her mother, and I suppose found a sort of comfort there that nature allows all human beings, no matter how shallow the source."

Lowell's eyes rested steadily on the brightly colored ornaments in the chair.

"So Randall Nash put his money where Marie could not get it. Marie died . . . and the custodian of that money had come to the simple decision that he did not care to return it. Randall Nash died, in a sense because he had tempted another human being too far, even though he had figured out, very carefully, that he was not tempting anyone. Which was the second mistake he made about his daughter."

Angus Nash had quit marking out the pattern in the carpet, but he had not raised his eyes.

"Randall Nash had taken one step to protect himself. He had written a letter, or obtained a receipt, that stated, naturally, who the person was who held his money for him. I held that letter for three years. He got it from me on the evening of the 28th—it was a demented thing for him to do, of curse, till he'd got the money, but he was arrogant and cocksure and had no suspicions—and came on to this house. There was a possibility, in the mind of someone, that he had left it here.—So it occurred to me last night, with those three women together there, in the Nash drawing room, that perhaps one of them was keeping an eye on the other two . . . so that a man could be free to come here, and try desperately to find that letter, left here perhaps by Randall Nash, that put the finger

on him. If it was here, if he did find it—I don't know. It doesn't matter. Chance, if you will, or Fate, or God, had already put the finger on him.

"I'm not going to show you how each of you in turn came up, and how we rejected each of you. Each, I suppose, in his own mind, has done that for all the others. I don't know how much information you may have . . . such for instance as that next to A. J. McClean, to whom Randall Nash went originally with his proposition, the person whose financial sense he had the most respect for—in spite of the smoke screen she puts up constantly—was Edith St. Martin."

I looked at Edith. Her face was drawn and haggard. The thin line around her throat where the plastic surgeon had done his job was livid red . . . almost, I thought with a shudder, as if the hangman's rope had already bitten there.

"He did not, however, have the same respect for her sense of human values—rightly or wrongly. And, of course, he was laboring under the bitter delusion that his wife was in love with Edith St. Martin's husband. That delusion was fostered and fed by the mad letters of a jealous half-mad woman, and the dishonest spying and reporting of an unscrupulous and complaisant tool. I think you all understand that Iris Nash was an innocent victim in all this."

Then why, I thought painfully, had she gone to Lavinia?

Colonel Primrose looked at me, smiling faintly, and turned to the doorway then as if he had read my mind.

"You have something to give Mrs. Nash, I believe, Sergeant?"

It was the only time in my life I had ever seen such great fissures rent in the solid granite front of Sergeant Buck's frozen pan. He opened his mouth, and closed it, and turned a slow dull red.

"Let's have it, Sergeant."

Sergeant Buck cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. He reached silently in his pocket, brought out a stamped envelope, and handed it to Colonel Primrose. Colonel Primrose crossed the room and gave it to Iris.

"I don't know whether you'd care to say what's in this," he said quietly. "You don't have to."

She opened it, and took out three ragged filthy envelopes. She got up and went to the fire place, paused there and turned toward Lowell and Angus.

"It's very simple," she said. "A reporter who covers M Street found out that Lavinia had . . . what he thought was a swell human interest story. For a couple of years he's been trying to get these letters from her. They are letters your fa-

ther wrote Lavinia when she was young . . . and he was young. She wouldn't give them up, but when Randall . . . died, he offered her what was a lot of money, to her, for them, and she telephoned me she was selling them, unless I came to terms. I tried to get them, twice, and here they are. I thought that he—and you and I, Lowell, who cared the most for him—and you, Angus, wouldn't want them glaring out from the pages of a Sunday supplement."

She tossed them down into the flames, and turned to Sergeant Buck. "Thank you!" she said softly.

Sergeant Buck turned a still deeper brick-red. "Okay, miss," he said.

Colonel Primrose smiled a little.

"To get back to the night of the 29th, when Randall Nash was poisoned. The custodian of his money had seen, as soon as he knew how desperately ill Marie Nash was, that the financial arrangement was through. He had made up his mind before, possibly a long time before, that he was not going to return Randall Nash's money, and he had no doubt planned Randall Nash's death, carefully and . .. . with a kind of cold, shrewd cunning. From Christmas day, perhaps even earlier, he had planned it exactly, and in detail.—The first step in his plan was to kill Lowell's dog. It had two reasons. The first: to point the subsequent murder of Randall—with Lowell's expert and ungrudging assistance—to Iris Nash. The second: to try out the salol, which could be used if it turned out to be the best way of doing that crime to bring it to Iris's door.

"The night of the Assembly, the 29th, it was put directly up to him. He had, I am sure, talked with Randall; he knew, I'm also sure, that Randall had got that letter from me. He knew Marie Nash was dying. He knew Randall Nash could not help but drink if liquor was near him. He knew that on that night everybody was to be away from the house. He knew Randall would probably be in no mood, or in no condition, to go to the Assembly himself."

Colonel Primrose paused, looking from face to face in the silent room with a kind of grim urbanity.

"He knew one other thing, too. He knew that Lowell had given Randall a patent soda syphon as a Christmas present."

My eyes were drawn irresistibly to the two that Sergeant Buck was again holding in his two great hands.

Colonel Primrose glanced around at them himself.

"They're made by thousands, of course, in a few simple patterns, and those in each pattern are identical. And on the night of the 29th the murderer came to the house with a syphon he had already prepared, containing a small amount of

charged water and a fatal amount of cyanide of potassium, and calmly substituted it for the one that Iris had prepared for her guests. He put it on a tray on Randall Nash's desk, with a glass and a decanter, knowing that Randall could not resist it. And he went away, taking the other syphon with him, leaving the door unlocked because he could not afford to be seen going down those steps and he did not dare to stop outside there, even for so short a time."

I looked at Lowell. She was hardly breathing, still staring down at the chair, her face bloodless and set, not with fear so much as with a sense of inexorable inevitability.

"Well, it was a terrible set-up . . . for Iris, of course, as it was planned to be. As you all know, it pointed—everything pointed—directly to her. She admitted, freely—and erroneously, as it happened—that she had charged that syphon herself; and with her actions when we came back from the Assembly that night, perfectly natural but fitting with deadly preciseness into a pattern of apparent overwhelming guilt, it appeared irresistibly that she had poisoned Randall Nash. If it had not been for a blunder of the most unusual sort on the part of the actual poisoner, a blunder that only one person out of ten thousand could make . . . that the poisoner does not yet even know he did make . . . then Iris's act of sending Belden Doyle back to New York might easily have been a folly that would have convicted her of the murder of her husband and A. J. McClean.—Fortunately for her, and for all of us, that blunder *was* made."

He turned deliberately to Sergeant Buck and took the blue syphon with the lighter blue band around its shoulder.

"The poisoner found a syphon of this kind, in the Nashes' house—the syphon that Lowell had given her father for Christmas, and that Iris had charged before she left the house that night. And he took that syphon away with him."

He turned back to Sergeant Buck, gave the syphon to him, and took the other one held out in the Sergeant's great left hand.

"Iris had seen that syphon only a few times," he went on calmly. "When she returned to the house that night, after the Assembly, she did not notice that the syphon on Randall Nash's desk was . . . not the one that she had charged. But when, last night as we were trying to reconstruct just what had happened, and had this syphon on the desk there, Lowell Nash came into the library, and saw it for the first time, she . . . knew. The murderer of Randall Nash had substituted a poisoned syphon that was identical with the other . . . as far as he knew. But the murderer of Randall

Nash is . . . color blind, in a very unusual way. He does not have the ordinary and very common red-green color blindness at all. He has the extremely rare form of color blindness that cannot distinguish between blue and yellow. To his eyes they are both grey."

I looked for just one instant at the blue syphon with the gold band, as he held the two of them out together, and closed my eyes.

"For Randall Nash had entrusted his money to the man whom he thought would have the greatest interest in preserving it . . . for his own interest as well as Lowell's. But that man had realized that Lowell Nash was not in love with him, and was not going to marry him. He is furthermore the man who would know most quickly that A. J. McClean had guessed the truth of it; he is the man who is in charge of the safety deposit boxes in his uncle's bank, and had the safest and most effective means of concealing the money.—As Lowell has realized . . . for some time before she asked him, just now, to hand her the blue ball from the top of the tree."

I had opened my eyes and was staring, as I suppose we all were, at Mac, standing there by himself at the foot of the step ladder, his eyes resting dumbly, helplessly, on the two syphons, his face so dreadfully white . . . and I suppose we were all trying, as I was, to readjust the meaning of his strong, determined, inarticulte face, and realizing, with a cold shocked thrill of horror, that we had never known him, really, at all . . . never known the turbulent complex man under the boy we had always known. . . .

It was Lowell we looked at, a few minutes later. Mac had dropped through our lives with such cataclysmic force that we were too numb to think of him. She stood there, white and rigid, in front of the denuded Christmas tree, the broken ball at her feet, still holding to the back of the chair. Her eyes had not raised until she spoke now.

"It's my father's fault. He killed himself and A. J. . . . and Mac. Mac never knew this would happen to him when he took that money to keep. I know he didn't."

"I'm sure he didn't, Lowell," Colonel Primrose said.

No one else spoke, not even Edith St. Martin. And then she did the one tactful thing I've ever seen her do; she picked up her mink coat and went out, without a word. And after a little time Iris, who had been standing by the garden window, the sun on her hair making it like another sun in the room, turned to Angus.

"Let's go home, Angie," she said.

I saw the startled look in Lowell's eyes as she turned to where Steve Donaldson stood in front of the fireplace, his cold pipe gripped between his teeth until white ridges stood out in his lean sun-tanned cheeks, not moving.

Angie got up off the floor and stood there, looking quietly at his sister, waiting.

Lowell raised a hand to her forehead and pushed back her short black curls.

"Angie can't go, Iris," she said. "He . . . he just bet me we couldn't go around the world together without having a single row . . . and if I win he's . . . he's going to give me half the money mother left him."

Angie Nash took two steps to her side, put his arm around her and grinned at everybody.

"This is the one bet I've ever made," he said cheerfully, "that's really foolproof. I can't lose. Honey, you couldn't be decent twenty-four hours to save your neck. The only thing I don't see is what I want to go off to . . . to China for to find it out."

Lowell was still looking at Iris.

"We're going alone," she said. "—Unless you and Steve would come with us. To . . . to keep him from ditching me in the desert of Tibet."

And Iris looked at her, her face suddenly quite pale, and started to speak. But Lowell had gone to her.

"Don't be crazy," she said. "Steve never knew I was on earth, and I'll be just as mad about him for a stepfather, anyway. And . . . you told me yourself I oughtn't to marry till I'd had some fun, and seen more than one man . . . and I know it . . . and please, Iris, don't think I'm as bad as . . ."

But the rest of that sentence was lost in her stepmother's arms that bridged, in one brief instant, the gap of those bitter years. The tears streamed down Iris's face. She held out her hand to Steve Donaldson.

"My God," said Angie Nash, "the little armadillo's cast her shell!"

"You shut up!" Lowell said.

"You see? And I'm going to China with that!"

Lowell raised her head and wiped her nose. "It doesn't count till we get on the boat, does it, Iris?"

They laughed at each other. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my eyes, for some reason, and Colonel Primrose was smiling that quiet placid smile of his, and Sergeant Buck was beaming like the great stone face with the morning sun on it.

25

It was after lunch a couple of days later that Colonel Primrose and I were having coffee in my living room overlooking the garden. He was tying up a few loose ends for me—such as Mac's having Lowell's keys, and how easy it was for him to slip away unnoticed from the Assembly, before he and Lowell went back to the Beall Street house together. I remembered our discussion in the little gallery of Linthicum Hall, when Lowell was sitting under Mr. Linthicum's portrait, surrounded by young men, with Mac completely crowded out. And I told Colonel Primrose about Mac's obviously not distinguishing the blue Christmas ornaments from the yellow when they were doing the tree there Christmas Eve—obviously, that is, when you got to thinking about it—and showing up at Marie Nash's home on Massachusetts Avenue the morning I went there to see Angus and Lowell in a dark blue suit and yellow tie.

"I put it down to his being distraught and upset over what poor Lowell was going through."

"You know," he said, "it was you who put me on to that, originally."

"I did?" It was a mystery to me.

"When you told me about A. J. going out against the traffic light. There's no doubt, from that and other things I've turned up, that A. J. was red-green color blind, in the ordinary way. Well, they don't know much about blue-yellow color blindness, but apparently any kind of color blindness is pretty apt to be congenital. It got me to thinking, eventually . . . Well, let's see. Oh, the dismantling of your place here. Mac, of course, looking for that letter—and I don't know whether he found it or not. He won't speak. Anything else?"

"Yes," I said. "The poison Lavinia had. Where——"

He chuckled.

"I'll tell you, some time," he said calmly. "Well, I'm glad Iris is going along with Lowell and Angus. For Lowell's sake

too—she needs a chance to make up a little for the last few years. Donaldson's meeting them in France at the end of the summer. He's a good sort."

"Iris deserved a break," I said.

"Yates thinks he's found the money, by the way. There's a little over a quarter of a million stowed away in a safety deposit box at the Colonial Trust Company, leased—in Mac's hand writing—to a T. J. McClelland. They haven't been able so far to turn up a Mr. McClelland. I imagine that's Randall's cache. You know, there's a certain extenuation, to my mind, in the fact that he didn't do any of this to cover up just vulgar defalcation. He hadn't been using the money to play the horses or the market. It was a major operation, a grand coup."

"You've got an odd notion of extenuating circumstances," I said.

He smiled. "No, I'm merely saying he did it in a big way. The stake was worth so much that obstacles had to be pushed aside, perfectly ruthlessly."

He smiled at me again, through a cloud of fragrant cigar smoke.

"Possibly I'm merely trying to explain my own defence, if anything should happen to—say—Sergeant Buck. Because you know, my dear . . ."

That was as far as he got, for at that moment Lilac put her head in the door.

"Mis' Grace, they's a lady an' gennelman at th' do' say can they see you? Majo' an' Mis' Albright is th' name."

I looked at Colonel Primrose. He shrugged his shoulders, I thought a trifle shortly.

"No friends of mine," he said.

"Show them in, Lilac," I said. And they came—Mrs. Albright a fluffy pleasant little woman tripping along, followed by a tall military-looking man with grey eyes and an eagle nose.

"Oh, I do hope I'm not intruding," Mrs. Albright said. "But an old friend of my husband's told us you would consider letting your house, and we're so anxious to get settled! He said you wanted to get away immediately. It would be heavenly . . . !"

Colonel Primrose looked at me, I looked at him. A little shadow crossed his face.

"Who . . . is your friend?" he asked.

"I'm not sure you know him, Mrs. Latham, as a matter of fact," Major Albright said. "He said he was merely a friend of a friend of yours. He's an old Army sergeant——"

"Named . . . Phineas T. Buck?" Colonel Primrose asked evenly.

"Then you do know him!" Mrs. Albright said delightedly.

"Oh, very well," Colonel Primrose said, with a certain ominous calm perceptible only to me.

The Palm Castle pulled out of New York harbor, and I waved good-bye to Colonel Primrose, who'd come up to see me off to resume my interrupted winter in Nassau. When the white ship passed the squat greenish figure of the Statue of Liberty, glistening in the winter sun, I left the rail and went to my stateroom to straighten out the litter of flowers and books and what-not deposited there by kind friends. Tucked in one side of a mammoth basket of fruit and comestibles was a large red folder. I opened it.

Mr. Hofnagel had really outdone himself. Staring up at me on one side, from a dappled grey background, was a highly—and indescribably—tinted portrait of Colonel John Primrose. Facing it—and me—and even more indescribably tinted, was the rockbound granite façade of Sergeant Buck. And there was something in the fishy grey eyes that I couldn't quite make out. It may have been caused, that look, by the large bottle plainly visible through the open door of Mr. Hofnagel's closet laboratory that Colonel Primrose had recognized as a legitimate accessory of the photographer's art and the illegitimate source of the cyanide of potassium that had killed two men and Senator McGilvray. It may have been that, since that was the real reason Colonel Primrose had sent him there the next day to have his picture taken. Or more likely still, it may have been just at that moment that Sergeant Buck thought up the small but decisive expedient by means of which he got me out of Georgetown, and gave his Colonel the chance to elude once more a fate far worse than death.

THE SIMPLE WAY OF POISON

He lay on the floor, a spilled drink by his hand. Around him stood family and friends, any one of whom had reason enough to kill him. The mansion was quiet, but now in the still air hovered the hatred of a murderer who had struck once and would strike again...

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