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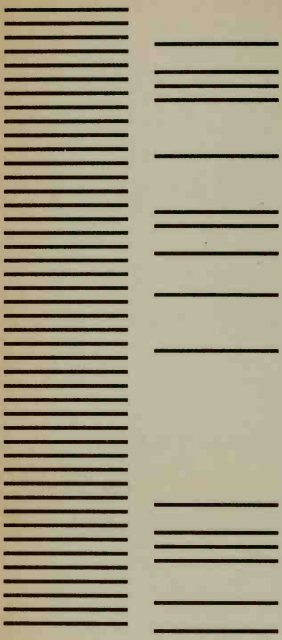

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS

MORE STORIES NOT FOR THE NERVOUS

A DELL BOOK

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ROOM WITH A VIEW

HAL DRESNER

His frail body covered by blankets and cushioned in six of the thickest pillows money could buy, Jacob Bauman watched with disgust as his butler set the bed tray before him and opened the curtains, drenching the room in morning.

"Would you like the windows open, sir?" Charles asked.

"You want I should catch a cold?"

"No, sir. Will there be anything else, sir?"

Jacob shook his head, tucking the napkin into the space between his pajama top and his thin chest. He reached to uncover the breakfast plate, stopped and looked up at Charles, who was standing like a sentinel by the window.

"You waiting for a tip?" Jacob inquired sourly.

"No, sir. I am waiting for Miss Nevins. Doctor Holmes said you were not to be left alone at any time, sir."

"Get out, get out," Jacob said. "If I decide to die in the next five minutes, I'll ring for you. You won't miss a thing."

He watched the butler leave, waited until the door closed and then lifted the silver plate cover, revealing a single poached egg, looking like a membrane-encased eye, resting on a slice of toast. A miserly pat of marmalade and a cup of pale tea completed the menu.

Ach! Jacob regarded the food with distaste and turned to the window. It was a glorious day outside. The great lawn of the Bauman mansion lay green and even as a billiard cloth, inlaid with the gleaming white gravel of the horseshoe driveway and dotted here and there with small bronze statuary, a flirtatious goddess cloistered in cherubs, a wing-footed messenger, a grim lioness in congress with her cubs; all very hideous but all very expensive. At the left end of the horseshoe, outside the small brick caretaker's cottage, Jacob saw his groundsman, Mr. Coveny, kneeling in examination of an azalea bed; to the right of

the driveway, before the prohibitive iron spear gates, the doors of the two-story garage were open and Jacob could see his chauffeur polishing the chromium grill of Mrs. Bauman's blue convertible while talking to Miss Nevins, Jacob's young day nurse. Beyond the gate the outer lawn stretched unbroken to the road, a distance so great that not even Jacob's keen eyes could distinguish the passing cars.

Poor Jacob Bauman, Jacob thought. All the good things in life had come too late. Finally, he owned an impressive estate but he was too sick to enjoy it; finally, he was married to a young woman who was beautiful enough to turn any man's head but he was too old to take pleasure from her; and finally, he had gained a shrewd insight into the mysteries of human nature, but he was bedridden and limited to the company of his servants. Poor rich Jacob Bauman, he thought. With all his wealth, luck and wisdom, his world was bounded by the width of his mattress, the length of driveway he could see from his window and the depth of Miss Nevins' mind.

And where was she? He turned to the clock surrounded by bottles, pills, and vials on the night table. Six minutes after nine. Peering out the window again, he saw the girl in the white uniform look at her watch in dismay, blow a kiss to the chauffeur and start walking, hurriedly, toward the house. She was a robust blonde girl who walked with a gay bounce, arms swinging, an exuberance of energy that tired Jacob vicariously. Still, he watched until she disappeared beneath the porch roof and then turned back to his breakfast. She would stop to say good morning to the cook and the maid, he calculated, and that meant he would just be finishing his egg and toast when she knocked.

He was chewing the last dripping crust of toast when the knock came; he called "Go away" and the nurse entered, smiling.

"Good morning, Mr. Bee," she said cheerily. She put her paperbound novel on the dresser, glancing with no special interest at the chart left by the night nurse. "How are you feeling today?"

"Alive," Jacob said.

"Isn't it a terrific day?" the girl said, walking to the window. "I was standing outside talking to Vic before and it's just like spring out. You want me to open the windows for you?"

"I don't. Your doctor friend warned me about getting a chill."

"Oh, that's right . . . I forgot. I guess I'm really not a very good nurse, am I?" She smiled.

"You're a nurse," Jacob said. "Better you than the kind that never leaves me alone."

"You're just saying that. I know I'm really not dedicated enough."

"Dedicated? You're a pretty young girl, you've got other interests. I understand. You say to yourself, 'I'll be a nurse for a while, the work is easy, the food is good. So I'll save some money until I get married.' "

The girl looked surprised. "You know, that's just what I said to myself when Doctor Holmes offered me this job. You're very smart, you know that, Mr. Bee?"

"Thank you," Jacob said dryly. "You get old, you get smart." He took a sip of his tea and made a bitter face. "Ach. Terrible. Get this away." He kicked feebly under the covers.

"You really should finish it," the girl said.

"Get it away from me," Jacob said impatiently.

"Sometimes you're just like a little boy."

"So I'm a little boy and you're a little girl. But better we should talk about you." He began to re-arrange his pillows but stopped when the girl came to help him. "Tell me, Frances," he said, his face very close to her, "do you have your husband picked out yet?"

"Mr. Bee, that's a very personal question to ask a girl."

"So I'm asking a personal question. If you can't tell me, who can you tell? Am I going to tell anyone? Is there anyone I could tell? Your specialist-doctor won't even let me have a phone by my bed to call my broker once in a while. Too much strain it would be to hear that I lost a few thousand dollars. He doesn't know I can tell what I make and lose to the penny from the newspapers? . . . So tell me," he smiled confidentially, "what's your lover like?"

"Mr. Bee! A prospective husband is one thing but a lover . . . ?" She plumped the last pillow and crossed to the window chair. "I can't imagine what you must think of me."

Jacob shrugged. "I think you're a nice young girl. But nice girls today are a little different from nice girls fifty years ago. I'm not saying worse or better. I'm just saying different. I understand these things. After all, you're just a

few years younger than my wife. I know men like to look at her, so I know they like to look at you, too."

"Oh, but your wife is beautiful. Really. I think she's the most stunning woman I've ever seen."

"Good for her," Jacob said. "So tell me about your lover."

"Well," the girl started, obviously pleased, "it's really not definite yet. I mean, we haven't set the date or anything."

"Yes, you have," Jacob said. "You don't want to tell me because you're afraid I'll fire you before you're ready to leave."

"No, really, Mr. Bauman . . ."

"So you haven't set the day of the week. But the month you've decided on, right?" He waited a moment for contradiction. "Right," he said. "Believe me when I tell you I understand these things. So what month? June?"

"July," the girl said, smiling.

"So shoot me, I'm a month off . . . I won't bother to ask you if he's handsome. I know he is . . . And strong too."

"Yes."

"But gentle."

The girl nodded, beaming.

"That's good," Jacob said. "It's very important to marry a gentle man . . . But not too gentle. The ones that are too gentle let themselves get stepped on. Believe me, I know. I used to be a very gentle man myself and you know where it got me? No place, that's where. So I learned to be different. Not that I still don't make the mistake now and then . . . but every time I do, I pay for it . . . A bad marriage can be a big mistake, maybe the biggest. You've got to know what kind of package you're getting. But you know, don't you?"

"Yes. He's wonderful. Really, he is. You can't tell, Mr. Bauman, because you don't really know him but if you ever sat down and—" she stopped and bit her lip. "Oh, I didn't mean—"

"So he's someone I know," Jacob said. "Now that's very interesting. I would never have guessed. A friend of mine, maybe?"

"No. No, really, I didn't mean to say that. It just came out wrong. It's not anyone—"

"Doctor Holmes?" Jacob guessed.

"Oh, no!"

"Maybe someone who works for me?" Jacob asked slyly, watching the girl's face. "Charles? . . . No, no. It couldn't be Charles. You don't like Charles very much, do you, Frances? You think he looks down on you, right?"

"Yes," said the girl, quite suddenly indignant. "He makes me feel that I'm some kind of a . . . oh, I don't know what. Just because he thinks he's so *elegant.* Well, if you ask me, he's just a *fish.*"

Jacob chuckled. "You're absolutely right. Charles is a fish. A cold pike . . . But then who could it be? Mr. Coveny is much too old for you so that only leaves . . ." He paused, his eyes bright and teasing, his mouth open. Then he looked past her, out the window, and said, "No, I don't know. Give me a hint. Tell me what business he's in . . . Stocks and bonds, maybe? Oil? Textiles?" His voice rose. *"Transportation?"*

"Oh, you're just teasing me now, " the girl said. "You know it's Vic. I bet you knew all the time. I hope you're not mad. Really, I would have told you before but—" A knock on the door interrupted her.

"Go away," Jacob called.

The door opened and Mrs. Bauman, a truly stunning red-haired woman, looking more like twenty than thirty in a daffodil-yellow sweater and provocatively tight tan slacks, came in.

"Good morning, all. No, sit down, dear," she said to Frances. "How's our patient this morning?"

"Terrible," Jacob said.

His wife laughed falsely and patted his cheek. "Did you sleep well?"

"No."

"Isn't he horrid?" Mrs. Bauman said to Frances. "I don't know why you put up with him."

"For the money," Jacob said. "Just like you."

Mrs. Bauman forced a laugh. "He's just like a baby, isn't he? Has he had his orange pill yet?"

"Yes," Jacob said.

"No," said Frances. "Is it nine-fifteen already? Oh, I'm—"

"I'm afraid it's almost nine-twenty," Mrs. Bauman said coolly. "Here, I'll do it." She uncapped a vial from the night table and poured a tumbler full of water from a silver pitcher. "Open wide now."

Jacob turned his head from her. "I can still hold a pill and a glass of water," he said. "You don't even *look* like a

nurse." He popped the capsule in his mouth and swallowed a sip of water. "Where are you going, dressed up like a college girl?"

"Just into town to do a little shopping."

"Vic has your car all ready," Frances said. "He polished it this morning and it looks just like new."

"I'm sure it does, dear."

"If it's not shiny enough, buy a new one," Jacob said.

"I was thinking of doing just that," his wife countered. "But I thought I'd wait until you're up and around again. Then we'll get one of those little sport cars that only have room for two people and we'll go on long drives together, just the two of us."

"I can't wait," Jacob said.

"My!" said Mrs. Bauman. "Isn't it a marvelous day? Why don't you have Charles open the windows?"

"Because I don't want to get a chill and die," Jacob said. "But thank you for suggesting it."

Smiling tartly, Mrs. Bauman touched her fingers to her lips, then pressed them to her husband's forehead.

"You don't even deserve that much of a kiss today," she said coyly. "If he stays this grouchy," she said to Frances, "don't even talk to him. It'll serve him right." Her smile invited the girl into a woman's conspiracy. "I'll be back early," she said to Jacob.

"I'll be here," he said.

" 'Bye," Mrs. Bauman said cutely and left.

"Close the door," Jacob said to Frances.

"Didn't she look beautiful?" the girl said, crossing the room and then coming back. "I wish I could wear slacks like that."

"Do your husband a favor and wear them before you get married," Jacob said.

"Oh, Vic wouldn't mind. He hasn't got a jealous bone in his body. He's told me a hundred times how much he likes it when other men look at me."

"And how do you feel about him looking at other women?"

"Oh, I don't mind. I mean, after all, it's only natural, isn't it? And Vic has had—" she colored slightly. "I don't know how we ever got talking about this again. You're really terrible, Mr. Bauman."

"Let an old man have a little pleasure by talking," Jacob said. "So Vic has had a lot of experience with women, has he?"

"Sometimes it's really embarrassing. I mean, some women will just throw themselves at a man. We were at a nightclub two weeks ago Wednesday. On Vic's night off."

Jacob nodded and again looked past the girl, who was starting to talk more rapidly. His wife had just become visible walking across the lawn toward the garage. She moved in a way quite different from Frances, much more slowly, almost lazily. Under the tan slacks her hips rocked, undulating, but just slightly, like a scale seeking its balance. Even the languid swing of her arms seemed to subtly reserve energy, not expend it profligately as Frances did, but rather save the strength, storing it, for the more important motions.

". . . she was really a frightening-looking girl," Frances was saying. "I mean, I was actually startled when I saw her come over to our table. Her hair was this jet black and looked like she hadn't combed it for weeks and she had so much lipstick on she must have used up a whole tube getting dressed . . ."

Jacob listened absently, his eyes still on his wife. She had reached the convertible now and stood leaning against the door, talking with Vic. Jacob could see her smile widen as she listened and then, tilting her head back, she laughed. He could not hear the laugh but he recalled it, from years before, as being sharp and light, a stimulating, flattering laugh. Vic, one foot contemptuously propped on the car bumper, thick arms crossed, smiled with her.

". . . really think she must have been drunk," Frances said, fully involved in her story. "I mean, I just can't imagine a woman having the nerve to just sit down in a strange man's lap and kiss him. I mean, right in front of his date and all. For all she knew, I could have been his wife."

"So what did Vic do?" Jacob asked, turning from the window.

"Well, nothing. I mean, what could he do? We were in a public place and everything. He just tried to laugh and pretend it was a joke or something. But I couldn't. I mean, I tried to, but the girl didn't move and Vic couldn't just push her off. I mean, everyone was watching and I was getting madder and madder and—well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Bauman, sometimes I've got a terrible temper. I mean, when it comes to personal things like Vic, I just can't control myself."

"Like with Betty?" Jacob said.

Frances sucked in her lower lip. "I didn't think you knew about that," she said. "I'm really awfully sorry about it, Mr. Bauman, but I just walked into the kitchen to get my lunch and she had her arms around Vic and, well, I guess I saw red."

"So I heard," Jacob said smiling. "I didn't see Betty before she left but Charles told me she wasn't so pretty to look at any more."

"I guess I did scratch her up terribly," Frances said, lowering her eyes. "I'm really sorry about it. I tried to apologize to her but she wouldn't even listen to me. As if it were all *my* fault."

"And what did you do to the girl in the nightclub?"

"I pulled her off Vic by her hair," Frances admitted sheepishly. "And if he hadn't stopped me, I probably would have tried to scratch her eyes out, too. I mean, I really went crazy. It was worse than Betty, because she was actually *kissing* Vic. I think, if there was a knife or something around, I would have tried to kill her."

"Really?" Jacob said. His look left the girl and returned to the window. Neither his wife nor Vic was in sight then. His eyes scanned the expanse of lawn, passed the statues glinting dully in the sun, to Mr. Coveny, who was still probing at the azaleas, and back again, resting on the blazing grill of the convertible. He saw an odd shadow on the car's hood and, squinting, defined it as the polishing cloth Vic had been using.

"And how do these little fights affect your feelings about Vic?" he asked casually.

"Oh, they don't. I mean, how could they? It's not his fault that women throw themselves at him. I mean, he certainly doesn't encourage them."

"Of course not," Jacob said. He narrowed his eyes, intently focusing on the dark window above the garage. He thought he had seen a flash of bright yellow there. Or was it just the sun reflecting off the lower pane? No, the window was open; it couldn't have been the sun. There it was again, among moving shadows, a very solid square of bright color, narrowing now and rising slowly, as if it were a piece of fabric, a bright cloth perhaps, being slowly removed from something, someone. And then it was gone and not even the shadows were visible within the frame of

the window. Jacob smiled. "I'm sure Vic is very faithful," he said. "If there's anyone at fault, it's definitely the woman. Your jealousy is very understandable. It's only right to fight to hold on to what you have. Even if it means destroying some other part of your life."

Frances looked puzzled. "Do you think that Vic doesn't love me as much because of what happened? He said he understood."

"I'm sure he does," Jacob said. "In fact he probably loves you even more for showing your devotion. Men like things like that . . . No, I was just talking before. Just an old man's talk. After all, what else can I do besides talk?"

"Oh, you could probably do a lot of things," Frances said. "You're very intelligent. I mean, at least *I* think so. You should find a hobby. Crossword puzzles or something. I bet you'd be great at those."

"Maybe I'll try them sometime," Jacob said. "But right now, I think I'll try to sleep for a while."

"That's a good idea," Frances said. "I brought a new book to read today. I started it on the bus coming over. It's really terrific, all about this Frenchwoman who made a fool of a lot of kings."

"It sounds very good," Jacob said. "But before you start, I'd like you to do me a little favor." He turned and opened the single drawer of his night table. "Now don't be frightened," he cautioned as he withdrew a small gray revolver. "I keep this around in case of burglars. But it's been so long since it's been cleaned that I'm not sure it still works. Would you take it down to Vic and ask him to look it over?"

"Sure," the girl said, rising, taking the gun gingerly. "Hey, it's light. I always thought guns weighed about twenty pounds."

"I think that's a woman's gun," Jacob said. "For women and old men. Now be careful, it's loaded. I'd take out the bullets for you but I'm afraid I don't know very much about those things."

"I'll be careful," Frances said, holding the grip experimentally. "And you try to get some sleep in the meantime. Should I tell Charles to come up while I'm gone?"

"No, don't bother. I'll be fine. You take your time with your fiancé. I think I saw him go upstairs to his room a minute ago."

"He's sleeping," Frances said.

"Why don't you sneak up and surprise him then," Jacob said. "He'd probably like that."

"Well, if he doesn't, I'll tell him that it was your idea."

"Yes," Jacob said. "You tell him that it was all my idea."

He smiled, watching the girl leave, then nestled back in the pillows and closed his eyes. It was very quiet and he was so genuinely tired that he felt himself unwillingly starting to doze when the first shot, immediately followed by the second and then a third, sounded across the lawn. He considered sitting up to watch the activity from the window but it seemed like too great an effort. Also, he reasoned, there was nothing he could do, bedridden as he was.

LEMMINGS

RICHARD MATHESON

"Where do they all come from?" Reordon asked.

"Everywhere," said Carmack.

They were standing on the coast highway. As far as they could see there was nothing but cars. Thousands of cars were jammed bumper to bumper and pressed side to side. The highway was solid with them.

"There come some more," said Carmack.

The two policemen looked at the crowd of people walking toward the beach. Many of them talked and laughed. Some of them were very quiet and serious. But they all walked toward the beach.

Reordon shook his head. "I don't get it," he said for the hundredth time that week. "I just don't get it."

Carmack shrugged.

"Don't think about it," he said. "It's happening. What else is there?"

"But it's *crazy.*"

"Well, there they go," said Carmack.

As the two policemen watched, the crowd of people moved across the gray sands of the beach and walked into the water. Some of them started swimming. Most of them couldn't because of their clothes. Carmack saw a young woman flailing at the water and dragged down by the fur coat she was wearing.

In several minutes they were all gone. The two policemen stared at the place where the people had walked into the water.

"How long does it go on?" Reordon asked.

"Until they're gone, I guess," said Carmack.

"But *why?*"

"You ever read about the lemmings?" Carmack asked.

"No."

"They're rodents who live in the Scandinavian countries. They keep breeding until all their food supply is gone.

Then they move across the country, ravaging everything in their way. When they reach the sea they keep going. They swim until their strength is gone. Millions of them."

"You think that's what *this* is?" asked Reordon.

"Maybe," said Carmack.

"People aren't rodents!" Reordon said angrily.

Carmack didn't answer.

They stood on the edge of the highway waiting but nobody appeared.

"Where are they?" asked Reordon.

"Maybe they've all gone in," Carmack said.

"*All* of them?"

"It's been going on for more than a week," Carmack said. "People could have gotten here from all over. Then there are the lakes."

Reordon shuddered. "All of them," he said.

"I don't know," said Carmack, "but they've been coming right along until now."

"Oh, God," said Reordon.

Carmack took out a cigarette and lit it. "Well," he said, "what now?"

Reordon sighed. "Us?" he said.

"You go," Carmack said. "I'll wait a while and see if there's anyone else."

"All right." Reordon put his hand out. "Good-by, Carmack," he said.

They shook hands. "Good-by, Reordon," Carmack said.

He stood smoking his cigarette and watching his friend walk across the gray sand of the beach and into the water until it was over his head. He saw Reordon swim a few dozen yards before he disappeared.

After a while he put out his cigarette and looked around. Then he walked into the water too.

A million cars stood empty along the beach.

WHITE GODDESS

IDRIS SEABRIGHT

"I don't for an instant suppose you really want my wretched teaspoons," Miss Smith said sharply.

Sharply, yes, but her voice held the rich, throaty, fruity tremulousness of a BBC actress playing an old woman, a young BBC actress; and Carson perceived, alongside of his indignation at being cheated out of his small booty—she must have eyes in the back of her head—the hope that she really was a young woman who for some personally cogent reason had elected to dress and act like a woman advanced in age. It was somehow less nerve-racking to think of her as a young woman in disguise than as an old woman who moved and spoke like somebody in her twenties.

Whoever she was, she was certainly not the gentle, woolly-headed, lovable victim he had intended. Mauve shoulderette and blue-veined hands to the contrary. He had met her on the boardwalk, which had always been one of his best hunting grounds for nice old ladies. He hadn't had to fish any more than usual for the invitation to tea. Now he saw that she was neither old nor a lady. And the name she had adopted was an insult. Miss Mary Smith—anonymity could go no further.

"What are you smirking about?" she demanded. "I want my spoons."

Silently he reached in his overcoat pocket and pulled out five teaspoons. She was right, he didn't need the money. He almost never could sell any of the things he took from people her age, and when he did the money was paid into a separate account and was never touched. It was a neurosis, less creditable than moral masochism, better than a lot of things he could think of. He enjoyed it a little too much to want to be rid of it.

He put the spoons down on the tea table in front of her, and sank back into his chair. She counted. Her foot—bunionless, but in a wide black oxford—began to tap. "That's

only five. There were six. I mean to have the other one."

Reluctantly he gave her the last spoon. It was the best of the six, sterling and old, but so meager in all its proportions that it would never be worth much more than it had been at the time it was made. The bowl was full of fine, small dents, as if some infant, contemporary with Washington and Jefferson, had teethed on it. Wretched infant—the sharp, penurious edges must have finely lacerated his gums.

She snatched the spoon up and gave it a fierce rub on the folds of the tea cloth. She handed it back to him. "Look in the bowl."

Carson did as he was bidden. Miss . . . Smith obviously wasn't going to call the police, and while he was uncomfortable, he wasn't exactly afraid. "Well?" he said, putting the spoon down on the table again.

"Didn't you see anything?"

"Only myself, upside-down. The usual thing."

"Is that all!" She sounded jarred. "Give me back my watercolor, while I'm thinking. It's worth even less than the spoons."

She *couldn't* have seen him pick up the watercolor. She had been making the tea, with her back to him, and there were no mirrors or shiny surfaces. She couldn't even have noticed the gap the watercolor had left, for it had been sitting behind three or four other tasteless pieces of bric-a-brac.

"We might as well have some tea," she said, pulling the restored watercolor over to her side of the table. Even framed, the picture was no bigger than a European postcard. It showed a palm tree, an island, water, all very runny and imitation-Winslow-Homery. No wonder Carson had thought it would be a good thing to steal. "Should you like a little gin in your tea? I find it helps."

"Yes, please."

She poured from the square bottle into the teapot and left the bottle sitting on the table. They drank. The tea was scalding hot, and Carson could only make its burden of spirits tolerable by loading his cup with sugar.

Miss Smith put her own cup down in the saucer. She coughed and then blew her nose into a man's cotton handkerchief. "You'd better get in," she said, tapping the surface of the watercolor with her middle finger, "and see how it fits."

Whooosh, whosh, thud. Carson was inside the watercolor, sitting on the island with the Winslow-Homery palms.

The grass was infernally stickery and the place was as noisy as pandemonium. The waves, blocks of granular blue frozen custard, landed against the beach with the rocky crash of pottery plates, the sea gulls skirled like bagpipes, the serrated palm fronds gave out the cry of sheets of tin.

Yet Carson was not too distracted to perceive that in the Smithian sense of the word the island did fit him rather well. The noise was an insulation; he didn't care whether any old lady's mantelpiece anywhere held bric-a-brac the right size to go into his pocket. He was as muzzy and comfortable as if Miss Smith had cuddled him up nicely in folds of her wooly shoulderette.

Heigh-ho. Must be the gin. He slept.

When he woke up everything was still going on. Gulls, waves and palms contributed their respective noises. Out beyond where the rigid blue freezer-product waves were forming there was a dark blue turbulence in the water. Had it been there before? Must have. He wasn't sure.

Could be caused by lots of things—a surfaced shark, a giant turtle, a Vernean octopus. Could be. Wasn't. *Wasn't.* Carson gave a feeble, frightened yip.

Pop. He was sitting opposite Miss Smith at the tea table again. She had put a cozy over the teapot, but it seemed to be still the same pot of tea.

She buttered a crumpet and put the whole thing in her mouth. "Did you like it on the island?" she asked, chewing.

"It was all right at first," he replied unwillingly. "Later there was something swimming around under the water I didn't like."

"Interesting." She grinned. "You didn't mind the noise, you didn't mind the isolation. It was something swimming around under the water you couldn't see that you . . . didn't like."

What was she up to? Was she trying to perform some sort of divine lay analysis on him? Trying, in approved psychiatric fashion, to find out what he was afraid of so she could rid him of the fear? Nah. More likely, she was mapping out the contours of his fear so she could embed him, fixate him, in it.

"Why are you so interested?" he asked. He tried to but-

ter himself a crumpet, but his hands shook so he had to lay down the knife.

"It isn't often people try to steal things from me."

No. They wouldn't. It took Carson, with all the old ladies in the world to choose from, to get tangled up with somebody who was Isis, Rhea, Cybele—there were lots and lots of divine identities to pick from—Anatha, Dindymene, Astarte. Or Neith.

Carson licked his lips. "How about a little more tea?" he suggested. "And a little more gin in it? It makes a refreshing drink."

"There's plenty of gin in it already."

Nonetheless, she did not protest when he took off the cozy and picked up the square bottle. She didn't seem to be looking. He'd been fooled that way before, and she probably was watching. Yet it might be possible to get even a goddess drunk.

He set the bottle down with the label toward her, so she couldn't see how much was gone. "You pour."

Did the hand that held the teapot over his cup waver? He couldn't be sure. "Goodness, but you've made it strong," she said.

"Refreshing!" He managed a smile. "Do have a crumpet. Vitality is low, this time in the afternoon."

"Yes." She was shaken by a spell of coughing. A crumb seemed to have caught in her windpipe. He hoped she would choke to death.

She washed the crumpet down with the last of her cup of tea. "And now I'll have my paperweight."

It was the last of his booty. He had liked it the best of anything. Sadly he took the globe from his pocket and gave it to her.

She tapped it. Flakes of mimic snow floated up to the zenith of the sphere and then began to settle down on the snow scene at the bottom again.

"Pretty," she said admiringly. "Pretty snow."

"Yes. I admired it."

". . . getting late to try you on anything more. B'sides, I know pretty well what you're like. *You*'re the kind can't stand waiting for anything unpleasant." She upended the teapot over her cup.

Her voice was getting fuzzy. She had spilled a trail of drops over the tea cloth before she set the teapot down. Now was the moment, if there was to be a moment.

"Thank you for a pleasant afternoon," he said, pushing back his chair and rising. "Perhaps we can repeat the occasion at a later date."

Her mouth opened. A film of saliva glinted iridescently between her parted lips and then broke. "What rot. In with you, you stupid fool."

The paperweight received him. It was a little like pushing against a stiff wind, a little like swimming, but he could breathe well enough. He worked his way through the fluid —glycerine?—to the glass wall and peered out.

Miss Smith was snapping her fingers. Her lips moved. She started to get up. She collapsed on the floor. The teacup fell from her limp fingers and settled down beside her cozily.

Miss Smith had drunk herself out. As the moments passed, he began to wonder. He would have expected her to twitch. At last it was borne in on him that she wasn't out. She was dead.

About eight o'clock somebody came in and found her. There was a lot of rushing to and fro before the men with the stretcher came. The teacup stayed on the floor.

They hadn't thought to draw the blinds, either. Moonlight shone in on his glass prison and lit up the snow at the bottom brilliantly. If only it were real snow! He thought longingly of the exquisite little hole he could have scooped for himself in a snowdrift, the warm Steffanson-style slumber he could have enjoyed in his fluffy burrow. As it was, he floated vertically all night, aching with insomnia, as comfortless as an asparagus stalk in a sauce pan.

Day came at last. He didn't know whether he regretted Miss Smith's death or not. Did an irrational belief in her *potential* benevolence still linger in him? After the island and this?

The morning was well advanced when a cleaning woman came in. She was young, her mouth was red, she had flamboyant yellow hair.

She plugged in the vacuum and went over the floor. Tardily she undressed the tea table and washed the tea things. She picked up his paperweight.

She shook it roughly. Snow began to fall around him. She pressed her nose up against the glass in a prodigy of short-focus accommodations. Her eyes were enormous. It seemed impossible that she should not see him.

She grinned. He recognized her. Miss Smith.

He might have known that Neith wouldn't stay dead.

She shook the glass once more. She set it down sharply on the mantel.

For a moment he had thought she was going to throw it against the tiles of the fireplace. But that would come later.

She might let him live on for days. She could set the globe in the sun, freeze it in the fridge, buffet it back and forth until he got as seasick as a resented fetus . . . the possibilities were many. In the end there would be the crash.

She drew her finger across her throat playfully. She unplugged the vacuum and went out.

CALL FOR HELP

ROBERT ARTHUR

For the tenth time that day, in a voice that shook a little, Martha Halsey read aloud the item in the *Dellville Weekly Call:*

> The real estate firm of Boggs and Boggs today announced that it is placing on the market the old Halsey house, directly opposite the courthouse. The house, owned by the Misses Martha and Louise Halsey, daughters of the late Judge Hiram A. Halsey, has been ordered sold by their niece, Mrs. Ellen Halsey Baldwin.

This time Louise, her blue-veined hands fluttering among the scraps of quilt on which she was working in her wheelchair, said nothing. Only the New England wind answered, giving a shrill shriek of glee as it tore around the ivy-hung eaves of the old house, so remote from the noise and bustle of the city.

All that day, since Ellen had brought in the paper from the mailbox, just before breakfast, they had been rereading and discussing the item from every angle. At first Louise had insisted it must be a mistake. But Martha had snorted that to scorn. Then Louise had wanted to call Ellen and ask her about it. But some dormant current of caution deep in her mind had made Martha say no.

And now, after a day of talking, speculating, exhausting themselves with surmises, the answer suddenly dawned on her. It was the only possible answer, and with her unquestioning acceptance of that fact the reason for everything that had happened in these last six months—including poor Queenie's death the previous week—suddenly fitted into place.

Martha caught her breath before she spoke. Then quite slowly and calmly she revealed the truth to Louise.

"Louise, I'm convinced Roger and Ellen want us dead."

"Dead?" Louise stared at her from the wheelchair, a look of shocked disbelief on her face. "Oh, *no,* Martha!"

"There is no other answer," Martha said. Her features, like weathered New England granite, were stern. Despite her eighty years her blue eyes snapped.

"Now I understand why Roger and Ellen were so insistent we give up our house in town and come out here to live with them," she said. "Also why they persuaded us to give them our power of attorney so Ellen could handle what Roger called minor tiresome business details relating to our estate.

"The truth is quite simple when you examine the facts in the proper perspective. First Roger and Ellen isolated us from all our old friends and neighbors. Now they are bold enough to sell our house. Soon, very soon, they undoubtedly expect to inherit our stocks and bonds."

"But they can't do that until we're dead!" Louise gasped.

"That's exactly the point I'm making."

Martha rose and hobbled to the window of the bed-sitting room they shared, favoring her bad hip by refusing to move with too much haste. The New England autumn wind rattled the bare branches of the trees that surrounded the old Colonial house. Martha raised the window, bracing herself against the cold blast.

"Toby, Toby!" she called. "Here, Toby!"

There was no answering *miaow,* no tawny form leaping in. She slammed the window shut, and hobbled back to the circle of brightness cast by the big kerosene lamp on the center table, near her sister's wheelchair.

"First Queenie," she said despairingly, "now Toby! I tell you, Louise, tomorrow or the next day Roger will be bringing Toby in all stiff and cold, and pretend to be grief-stricken—just as he did when he brought in Queenie last week. Poisoned, of course."

Martha stared fiercely at her sister, and Louise's eyes misted.

"Poor Queenie," she whispered. "Roger said she must have found some poisoned bait some farmer set out. It's true, Martha. Farmers do—"

Would Queenie eat something like that, after being fed from your own hands for eight years?" Martha demanded. "Queenie was a very discriminating cat. I'll tell you who poisoned Queenie. Roger, and no one else!"

Louise stared at her as the wind whistled around their wing of the old house.

"But *why?*"

"Think back—all this last month. These spells you've been having. One day you feel weak and sick. The next day you're much better. Then, a couple of days later, you feel wretched again. What explanation do you have for that?"

"After one passes seventy-five—"

"Nonsense. You never had these spells when we were in our own house."

"No . . . That's true. I never did."

"Well then! I'm sure I don't have to remind you that as a pharmacist Roger has access to all kinds of drugs—including poisons."

"Oh, Martha, no!"

"Roger is very clever. He'd do it a little at a time, so that we would just get slowly sicker and one day die—*of natural causes.*" Martha almost hissed the last words. "All your symptoms, Louise, are of chronic poisoning, most likely arsenic. Queenie was fed from your plate. Being so much smaller, she died, while you only got sick. And Roger brought her in with a trumped-up story of eating some farmer's poisoned bait."

Martha breathed deeply, filled with scorn, "Then Roger realized the same thing could happen to Toby. Only Toby might get ill right here with us, and we'd suspect the truth. So he decided he'd have to get rid of Toby for good. And now poor, dear Toby is gone."

"Oh, how horrible," Louise breathed. "But how can you be *sure?*"

"On the basis of the evidence, including the new car Roger bought yesterday."

"But it isn't really a *new* car," Louise demurred. "It's secondhand. And Roger did need one, with winter right on top of us."

"That's the whole point. Need. Roger and Ellen need money badly. You know how little Roger makes in Mr. Jebway's drugstore. You just have to look at all the facts. Two years ago Roger came here out of nowhere—a stranger. He meets Ellen and nothing will do but she must marry him.

"But let's face it, Ellen is very plain. Why should Roger be attracted to her? I wondered at the time. Now I know. It's because she is our only heir, our niece. And we had the big house, and the stocks and bonds father left us. So

Roger saw his chance. He married Ellen figuring someday soon he would get his hands on all of our property—by poisoning us both."

"It's true about Ellen," Louise said, doubt on her small, wrinkled features. "She is very plain. But she has a sweet nature, and men don't always marry a woman for her looks."

Martha pointed a bony finger at her sister. "You know as well as I do that Ellen has changed. Surely you've noticed how secretive she's become? How she avoids talking about the house when we mention it? How she and Roger exchange secret glances when they think we aren't looking? And especially how, when we talk money, they change the subject?"

Martha leaned forward, lowering her voice.

"I forgot. They could be listening outside the door. As I was saying, consider all the facts. We were happy in our home in town. Then last summer Ellen and Roger tried to make us believe they were worried about us. Because of my bad hip and your arthritis, they said we couldn't look after ourselves properly. Nonsense! We could have sold some of the bonds and hired a maid and a cook.

"But no. Like foolish old women we agreed to give Ellen our power of attorney and move out here with them. Now we're completely isolated. We never see anyone, and hardly ever leave the house. We never get any mail. Even Judge Beck hasn't been to see us, and I wrote him three days ago asking him—no, *imploring* him—to visit us. I said we wanted to talk over something important."

"You wrote Judge Beck?" Louise exclaimed. "You didn't tell me."

"Because I didn't want to worry you with my suspicions. But now I'm sure, and I'm going to tell everything to the judge. If we ever see him. I'm pretty sure now Roger never delivered my letter!"

Martha's lips tightened. "We may as well face it. Roger has become impatient. Quite obviously his plan is for you to go first. Then me. And no one will suspect a thing."

"Oh, Martha!" Louise's pale blue eyes blinked with agitation.

"I'm going to call them, and see what they say. Oh, I'm not going to accuse them. But we'll be able to tell by the way they answer my questions just how much they have to conceal."

Martha limped to the door, which led through a short hall to the main part of the house. Opening it she called, "Roger! Ellen!"

"Yes, Auntie?" a young woman's voice answered.

Martha returned to her seat and presently Ellen appeared, a young woman with popping eyes and a receding chin and a worried expression. She came in, wiping her hands on her apron, and smiled.

"Supper in a minute," she said. "Pot roast. Sound good?"

"Very nice, Ellen," Martha said. "But we wanted to speak to Roger."

"Did someone call me?" Heavy footsteps sounded in the hall and Roger appeared behind Ellen. Roger was short, with wiry hair and an appearance that would have been almost jolly if it had not been for the lines around his mouth and the heavy glasses he wore.

"Here I am, Aunties one and all." He laughed as if he had made a joke. "What can I do for you?"

He put his arm around his wife's waist and beamed at them. Over his smiling lips his magnified eyes seemed to be probing for their secret thoughts.

"My three favorite girls, all in the same house. My own secret little harem." He gave Ellen a squeeze.

"Roger, I was wondering why I hadn't heard from Judge Beck," Martha said. "Did you give him my letter?"

"Well, no." Roger seemed to hesitate. "I left it with his secretary, I was going to tell you tonight. Judge Beck is out of town."

"Out of town?" Louise exclaimed, staring at him.

Roger cleared his throat, and even Louise could not miss the look he and Ellen exchanged.

"He went to Boston on a case. His secretary said it was rather important."

"But the judge has no clients in Boston," Martha said firmly.

"He went for a local client," Roger said, his look of uneasiness becoming more pronounced.

"And when will he be back? The judge hates Boston."

"In a day or two," Roger said quickly. "As soon as he gets back he'll get your letter."

"Mmm." Martha shot Louise a look, and her sister gave a little nod, which said as plain as words that she too could see through Roger's evasions. "There's a story in this week's *Call,* Roger, that says that Ellen has turned our

house over to Boggs to sell. Using, of course, the power of attorney we gave her. Surely that's a mistake."

Again they both saw the swift glance that passed between Roger and Ellen. Roger's air of drummed-up assurance faltered a bit.

"Well, no, Aunt Martha," he said. "The house needs so many repairs. We thought you were happy with us and—well, we felt it should be sold."

"Roger!" Martha rose and leaned on her cane, facing him. He was unable to meet her gaze. "You recall that we agreed to live out here with you and Ellen only if we could move back into our house any time we wished to do so. Isn't that so, Ellen?"

"Yes, of course, Martha," Ellen said, twisting her apron.

"Which means we have no intentions of selling it while we live."

"We want to move back," Louise said, her voice tremulous.

"Oh, but Aunt Louise!" Ellen protested. "You can't!"

"And why not, pray?" Martha demanded.

"Why, winter is here," Roger said, regaining his composure. "The house needs a new heating system, and installing one would be a long, expensive job. Maybe next summer it could be done. But there's nothing worse than a cold house in the winter when you're not too well." His look was almost appealing, though the lines around his mouth seemed to deepen. "Besides, as Ellen says, we want you with us. We thought you were happy *not* living alone."

With a look Martha forestalled Louise from blurting out another protest. "We'll think about it and discuss it with Judge Beck," she said.

"That's my girl. Well, Ellen, let's have supper. I have to go back to the drugstore tonight. Mr. Jebway has a touch of the flu."

Roger and Ellen retreated to their part of the house.

Martha turned to Louise. "Well? Do you agree with me now?"

"Oh, yes," Louise breathed. "Oh dear, he told such lies. Why, the heating system in our house works perfectly. We've never had any trouble with it since Father put it in thirty-seven years ago."

"And what local client would Judge Beck go to Boston for?" Martha asked with fine scorn. She fixed her sister with her gaze. "You noticed how suddenly Roger decided

he had to go back to the store this evening? As though his only thought was to get away before we could ask more questions. As likely as not he needs more poison from Mr. Jebway's stock."

"Martha!" Louise put her fingers to her tremulous lips.

That night the two sisters slept badly. Martha rose several times to put on her robe and hobble to the window to call for Toby. But still no answering *miaow* came.

"Toby is gone," she told Louise next morning. "We'll never see him again."

"Poor Toby." Tears misted Louise's faded blue eyes. "Why, they're monsters. And I used to think Ellen was so sweet."

"She was," Martha said. "Roger has changed her whole character. A woman naturally follows her husband's lead."

"But to be willing to help Roger murder us—"

"So far they have only murdered cats. We will find some way to keep them from murdering us. I have a plan." Martha's tone was grim. "I dislike resorting to it, but I will if I have to."

There were steps in the hall, and Ellen came in with a tray.

"Good morning," she said as she put dishes on the table. She looked as if she had not slept well. "Boiled eggs, hot cakes and tea. Nice and filling. Do you know there was ice on the chickens' pan this morning?"

"We didn't sleep at all well," Martha told her. "We were worrying about Toby."

"Oh, dear, isn't he back?" Ellen seemed genuinely distressed. "I do hope he hasn't been—I mean I hope he hasn't wandered away. But if he has, I'm sure he'll come back."

"I can't eat, really I can't," Louise said miserably after Ellen had gone. She poked listlessly at the hot cakes, golden brown.

"We must keep up our strength," Martha said. "Eat the boiled eggs. They're in the shell, so they're perfectly safe. And drink some tea."

"I'll try." Louise did manage a boiled egg and some tea, though it seemed rather strong. Martha ate all of the hot cakes and eggs on her plate. But she found the tea too strong.

"Do you think you could slip out to the telephone and call Judge Beck?" Louise asked when they had finished.

"You've forgotten!" Martha gave her a look full of meaning. "Last month Roger had the telephone taken out."

"Oh, goodness, yes," Louise exclaimed. "He said it cost too much."

"Even though we offered to pay for it. That was his first step in cutting us off from the world."

"Now we have absolutely no way to get help!" Louise's voice was panicky.

"Yes, we have. As I told you last night, I hate to resort to it, but I will if I have to. Now go on with your quilt. I'll finish reading the paper to you. We must pretend to keep busy. What shall I read first?"

"Oh, the obituaries," Louise said. "See if anyone we know has died." Her face became fretful. "We just don't get any news any more. Mary Thompson used to tell us everything, but she hasn't a car—" Martha's gasp stopped her. "What is it?"

"It's Mary Thompson!"

"She's not dead?" Louise asked, alarmed.

"No," Martha compressed her lips. "But she might as well be. The paper says she has entered the Haven Home."

"Oh, no!" Louise cried.

Martha nodded. "At her own request, the poor thing. Just imagine a woman her age being forced to live at that dreadful old place. It's drafty, decayed and full of rats. The Haven Home, indeed! Fancy names don't make fancy places. It's the county poorhouse, a disgrace to the community! It'll be the death of her."

"Poor Mary," Louise mourned. "Oh, I keep thinking about our teas, with the fire going and the cats sleeping in front of it, and Mary visiting with us."

Her expression became that of an eager child. "If we can get back into our own house Mary can come live with us! We'll hire some help and it'll be just lovely."

"We will," Martha promised. "Mary Thompson is not going to drag out her days at that horrible place as long as we have the means to help her."

The prospect of their own home again with their old friend sharing it brightened Louise's mood for several minutes. Then in the midst of stitching a piece of her woolen Sunday-best dress of twenty years before into the quilt, she paused.

"I—I don't feel well." She waited a moment, then turned stricken eyes to her sister. "I'm sick. I'd better go to bed."

Martha helped her into bed, and massaged her wrists. "Is it any better?" she asked presently.

"I feel so strange," Louise whispered. "Just weak and helpless and—and queer. As if—*as if I had been poisoned!*" The last words came out in a frightened, despairing whisper, and when they were uttered the two sisters stared at each other with realization naked in their eyes.

"The tea," Martha said. "Oh, he's clever, Roger is. But I didn't drink it and you only drank a little—" She gripped Louise's wrists tightly. "I'm sure you're not badly ill. You didn't take enough tea to seriously poison you. Anyway, I'm certain Roger plans to do it slowly, to make it seem like some wasting illness. But we'll insist on having Dr. Roberts. And he'll take a message back to Judge Beck for us!"

"You're so clever, Martha," Louise murmured admiringly.

"Until we see the judge, we mustn't let anyone know we suspect Roger and Ellen," Martha warned. "If Roger guesses that we suspect, he won't wait."

"No, of course not."

But Ellen, when she came in, did not wish to call the doctor. She fussed around Louise and suggested aspirin and bicarbonate and hot water bottles. Martha insisted, however, and at last, reluctantly, Ellen put on her coat and set out for the nearest neighbor, a quarter mile away, where there was a telephone. She returned to say Dr. Roberts was on a maternity case, but would come as soon as he could.

The hours dragged by. Louise did not get any worse. But she remained in bed, moaning from time to time, while Martha massaged her wrists and rubbed her temples with cologne. They both refused to eat lunch, to Ellen's obvious distress.

"But you *must* eat," she scolded. "To keep your strength up."

"I had a big breakfast," Martha said. "And I'm sure Louise will feel worse if she eats anything when she is suffering such distress. It's better to go without eating when your stomach is upset."

Seeming upset and worried, Ellen took the lunch away.

Dr. Roberts came in the afternoon, puffing and wheezing a little. He was a short, rotund man with fluffy white

hair, only a little younger than the two sisters.

"What's this, what's this?" he asked, sitting down and feeling Louise's pulse. "Mmm. Nervous pulse. Let's see your tongue, young lady."

Martha hovered anxiously over them as Dr. Roberts progressed to his stethoscope and listened to Louise's heart.

"Something upset you, Louise?" he asked, stroking his chin. "Ellen tells me you lost your cat."

"She was poisoned," Martha said. "Now Toby is gone. We're afraid he was poisoned too."

"Mmm hmm. That's too bad. I'm afraid you're upset from worrying about your pets. I'm going to give you a prescription which Roger can fill for you. You're fortunate to have a pharmacist in the family. You'll save half the cost. Medicine is very expensive these days."

"Upset!" Louise exclaimed, as he reached for his prescription pad. "Doctor, I've been—"

Martha vigorously motioned her to silence. The doctor, busy with the prescription, paid no attention.

"Doctor," Martha asked as he packed away his stethoscope, "will you give Judge Beck a message for us?"

"Of course, of course, Martha. What message?" He stood up and gently massaged the bald spot on the top of his head.

"Ask him to come see us tonight! Tell him it's vitally important!"

"Vitally important. Hmmm. Hate to ask him to come out at night. He's got quite a cold."

"Then he isn't in Boston?" Louise exclaimed.

"Boston? Whatever gave you that idea? He was quite ill when I saw him last."

"Please ask him to come tonight," Martha begged. "Tell him it's a matter of life and death."

"Life and death? Hmmm." The doctor lifted bushy white eyebrows. "Well, all right, all right, if he's well enough. And don't fret about Toby and Queenie. Get a couple of lively kittens to take care of and you'll be new women."

"When we get back into our house in town, we will," Martha said in a tone of decision. "It will be nice to watch kittens play in front of the fire."

"Your house in town?" The doctor shot her a look. "Now why would you want to go back to that place? Too big for you—much too big. You couldn't take care of it. I'd advise you to stay here where you're well looked after."

After he had marched out, they heard Ellen intercept him in the hall. Martha hobbled to the door to listen. A minute later she limped back to Louise's side.

"He said you were just upset," she whispered. "He's prescribed tranquilizers."

"A tranquilizer! We should have told him it was poison!"

"He wouldn't have listened. Don't you see? Ellen and Roger have everyone on their side. Everyone thinks they are sweet, loving relatives taking good care of two helpless old women."

Martha wrung her hands in despair.

"Louise, even if Judge Beck comes tonight he'll think the same thing. I can see that now. We'll both be in our graves in a month and everyone will be sorry for Roger and Ellen."

"Couldn't we just give our stocks and bonds to Roger and Ellen?" Louise whispered. "Then they wouldn't have any reason to kill us."

"Certainly not." Martha eyes snapped. "Then they'd just send us to the Haven Home. How would you like to end your days in that horrible place?"

"I'd rather die. But if no one will listen to us—"

"There's only one thing to do. We must escape."

"But Martha!" Louise half sat up. "You know we can't. Why, you couldn't possibly walk a quarter mile to the Lamb place, much less push me. We'd freeze to death. Just listen to that wind!"

The wind rattled the windows, as if for emphasis. But Martha was nodding mysteriously now.

"You'll see. I told you I had a plan all worked out. We'll escape, never fear."

"But suppose we do?" Louise asked. "They'll say we're foolish old women and bring us right back here."

"I've thought of that too. We'll escape and they'll let us go back to our old home. But we'll have to wait for Roger to come home first."

Despite Louise's curiosity, she refused to say anything more on the subject. The temperature dropped as the afternoon passed, and when the early darkness came they could feel the cold pressing in through the tall windows. Martha began assembling their personal knickknacks and jewelry into a pile, which she tied into an old shawl.

"We can't take much," she said. "We'll have to leave our

clothes behind. But we can sell a bond, and buy more."

Louise was feeling better and sitting up now. "I wish I knew more about your plan. You certainly can't push me a quarter of a mile. We'll freeze."

"Help will come in time," Martha promised. "Now remember, we mustn't let Roger or Ellen suspect a thing, for they are murderers. They killed Queenie and Toby and they wish to kill us, Just let me do the talking."

"All right," Louise said in resignation. "But of course we don't dare eat any dinner."

"Of course not. Now *shhh*—Roger's here and I think I hear Ellen bringing supper."

There was a rattle of crockery and Ellen came in, bringing a tray laden with dishes and silver. Behind her Roger appeared, his thick glasses glinting in the light.

"Dr. Roberts had me bring some special medicine, Auntie Louise," Roger said. He managed a toothy smile as he took a bottle from his pocket, tossed it up and caught it. "Pure gold dust would be cheaper. But in a week you'll be feeling as skittish as a colt."

"Thank you very much, Roger. I'll take it later."

"Before meals, that's the prescription. Here you are now. Swallow it down."

He held out a red capsule and a glass of water. Louise gave an imploring glance at Martha, then swallowed the pill.

"That's my girl. You must take another one at bedtime."

"Have you seen Toby anywhere?" Martha asked. "He's still gone."

Roger wet his lips and Ellen spoke quickly. "Toby? Why, no, but I'm sure he'll come back. He's just got wanderlust."

"I thought I heard him in the cellar. He sounded so pitifully weak." Martha looked anxious. "Please, Roger, would you go down right now and look?"

"In the cellar?" Ellen and Roger exchanged uneasy glances. "I can't see how he could be down there. We'd have heard him before this."

"Please, Roger. Look anyway. You heard him, didn't you, Louise?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure he's in the cellar," Louise said.

"It will do no harm to look," Ellen suggested. "Perhaps he slipped in when I got the preserves two days ago."

"All right, I'll go." Roger squared his shoulders in an exaggerated gesture. "Off to the cellar to find old Toby."

He marched into the hall and they heard him clump down the stairs. A moment later they heard his muffled voice from beneath them.

"No sign of a cat down here."

"Ellen, please go look too," Martha urged. "Toby may be hiding back in the coal bin where Roger can't see him."

"Well, all right," Ellen said, and went down into the cellar to join Roger. "Here, Toby," they could hear her calling. "Here, Toby, Toby."

Martha hobbled into the hall and quietly closed the cellar door. Then she slid the heavy bolt into place.

"There!" she said in triumph. "Now we can escape."

"But we'll freeze!" Louise wailed as Martha half pulled her out of bed and bundled her into her warm coat. "And they'll just send us back."

"No, they won't."

Martha got her own coat on, with a shawl over her head, and got Louise into the wheelchair. By now Roger and Ellen had discovered that the door had been bolted and were hammering on it.

"Aunt Martha!" Ellen called. "Open the door! Why did you lock it?"

"Hey, Auntie!" Roger cried out. "It's a good joke, but let us out now. Toby isn't down here. We've looked everywhere."

"He's not down there because they killed him," Martha said sternly to Louise.

She pushed her sister out into the hall, and out the front door onto the low stoop. The early evening was pitch dark, and filled with restless murmurings as a chill wind rattled the bare branches of the trees.

Louise cried out in dismay as Martha bumped her down the single step and continued on down the walk for a hundred feet. The she turned the chair about, and locked the wheels.

"Now just wait," she said. "I'll be back in a minute."

Martha hobbled back into the house, ignoring the shouts and pleas of Roger and Ellen from beyond the bolted cellar door. Huddled in her shawl and coat, Louise waited in the outside dark, the wind tugging at her, nipping like little teeth, until Martha reappeared, bearing the shawl that held their jewelry.

"Martha!" Louise wailed. "I'm freezing already. What are you going to do?"

"You'll see." Martha stopped beside her, panting, and leaned on her cane. "You'll see, Louise. Just watch the house."

Louise watched. Behind the windows of the wing that had been their home a flicker of yellow light appeared. It wavered for a moment, then leaped up. Feeding on itself, it grew into a sheet of fire that thrust a finger through a partly opened window and still continued to grow, becoming brighter and stronger with every gust of wind that tore around the heavily-cluttered ivy-hung eaves.

"Fire!" Louise gasped. "The house is on fire!"

"I spread the kerosene from the lamp around the room," Martha said. "Just remember, Ellen and Roger planned to kill us. They did kill our cats. We have to protect ourselves. There was simply no other way."

Martha's voice rose urgently. "But remember. We must never tell anyone what they planned. They're our kin. No one would believe us. Let it be a tragic accident. Do you understand?"

"Oh yes, yes," Louise said, excited. "You're so clever. Now someone will see the flames and call the fire department, won't they?"

"Yes, a fire in the country always brings someone. It was the one way we could call for help, crippled as we are. After this, they'll have to let us go to our old home."

Then in silence they watched. The finger of flame shooting from the window became a tremendous torch. After a moment they heard in the distance the faint wail of the siren on the roof of the volunteer fire company in town.

"It's such a warm fire," Louise murmured, holding out her hands toward the blaze. "It does feel good."

The roof of their wing fell in with a great shower of sparks just as the fire engine with its helmeted volunteers came screaming up. But the rest of the house was engulfed in flame then, and there was nothing the fire company could do.

The fireplace in Judge Beck's living room crackled cheerily. Martha and Louise sat watching it, seeing happy pictures in the flames.

"Soon we'll be in our home again," Louise murmured.

"With kittens playing on the rug and Mary Thompson keeping us company. Mrs. Rogers has a daughter who can sleep in for twenty-five dollars a week. We can easily afford that."

"Our money will certainly last as long as we do," Martha agreed. "I think I hear the judge coming now."

The door opened, but instead of a man, a big Siamese cat slipped through. It leaped into Martha's lap with a satisfied miaow.

"Toby!" Louise exclaimed.

"Toby!" Martha echoed. "Where on earth did you come from?"

"I thought he would be a welcome surprise," said Judge Beck's dry voice. The judge himself, a spare, tall, slightly stooped man of sixty had come into the room. "Something to make brighter a very sad occasion. One of the firemen spotted him last night not far from the ruins."

He gave each of them a firm handclasp, then blew his nose with a vigorous honk.

"Sorry," he said. "I caught a whopper of a cold down in Boston. Terrible city. Drafty, noisy."

"You—were in Boston?" Martha asked. Her mouth seemed suddenly to have become parched.

"Three days. They were wasted, too, I'm sorry to say."

He sat down, shaking his head.

"This is a very sad occasion. Those old houses are terrible firetraps. But we won't talk about that. It's better not to dwell on it. I want to talk about you, now that Roger and Ellen are—well, gone."

"Oh, we'll be all right," Louise said eagerly. "We'll move back into our old house. And we want Mary Thompson to stay with us. She mustn't stay another day in that terrible place."

Judge Beck blew his nose again. He looked unhappy as he fingered the Masonic emblem on his gold watch chain.

"Martha," he said. "Louise—" He paused. They stared at him, two pairs of bright eyes in ancient faces. "It's hard for me to tell you this, but my visit to Boston was about you."

"About us?" They echoed each other.

"About your father's estate, that is. As you know, it consisted of some money—which has been spent—and a number of New England and Toronto Railway bonds."

"Yes?" Martha asked, and they continued to stare at him.

"Well—railroads are having tough sledding these days, and the New England and Toronto went into bankruptcy last summer. That was why Ellen and Roger wanted you to move in with them, so they could look after you. Ellen wanted your power of attorney, to enable her and Roger to handle the remains of the estate without you learning what had happened. I wanted to tell you the truth, but they were afraid it would upset you. That's why we all played along and kept it a secret.

"Unfortunately, now you must know, dear Martha and Louise. I'm sorry, but the old house is uninhabitable. In fact, we can't even find a buyer for it. There's no money to fix it up. There's no money at all left in your father's estate." Judge Beck paused, delicately. "You may have wondered why Roger and Ellen sometimes seemed so hard-pressed and harassed. Now you know. Believe me, they didn't mind. They loved you."

The two sisters looked at each other, in silent, stricken horror.

"The Haven Home." Louise's voice was a tremulous whisper. Martha's voice would not come at all.

VIEW FROM THE TERRACE

MIKE MARMER

The red-orange sun eased its way out of the Jamaican sky, then suspended itself halfway into the Caribbean horizon as though holding still for some divine time exposure. The late-afternoon shadows lengthened, gently splaying a dusky tint over the brilliantly colored bougainvillaea and hibiscus, and finally came to rest against the bright-white façade of Montego Bay's luxurious Hotel Dorando. It somehow seemed an effrontery to this picture-postcard setting when the body of George Farnham, arms flailing wildly, descending scream trailing behind, tore through the coconut palms and plummeted to the patio below.

Twenty minutes later, in the twelfth-floor suite from which the late Mr. Farnham had started his downward flight, his widow sat quietly on the sofa, a portrait of stunned bereavement.

Opposite her, Mr. Tibble, the slight, balding Assistant Manager of the Dorando, perched birdlike on the edge of a chair. He was suitably compassionate, despite feeling uncomfortable for the past quarter hour, since Mr. Farnham's widow had been placed in his charge.

Tibble shook his head. "Terrible," he said in the direction of the widow. "A terrible accident," he said again.

The widow looked up, acknowledged Tibble's commiseration with an almost imperceptible nod, and bowed her head once more.

An *accident*. It had not occurred to her that George's death would be considered an *accident*. In that brief moment on the terrace, she'd thought only of police, courts, a trial. But here, for the umpteenth time in the past fifteen minutes, Mr. Tibble referred to the *accident*.

And earlier, when she'd hastened down to the patio as quickly as the elevator could carry her, everyone had been murmuring about the *accident*. "Tragedy," they'd whispered. "Dreadful accident . . . lovely woman . . . two of

the most beautiful children . . . a terrible accident."

Had no one seen what happened on the terrace?

Priscilla Farnham was a soft, almost-plump woman, still retaining a trace of girlish prettiness. Never having considered herself a particularly strong or resourceful person, she'd been surprised when she'd reached inside herself during these past minutes and discovered hidden iron. She was amazed at her ability to remain calm underneath, while wearing a mask of grief-stricken widowhood.

Her feeling for George had long since gone. She had felt only a touch of remorse, she recalled, when she looked down from the terrace and thought that George appeared strangely like an isolated piece of a jigsaw puzzle, framed on the flagstone.

The jangling of the telephone pierced her retrospection.

Tibble, his eyes apologizing for the desecrating peal of the phone, darted over to answer it. He announced himself, listened, then cupped a thin hand over the mouthpiece.

"It's Constable Edmonds. He says that the man from C.I.D. is in the lobby and, if you're up to it, he'd like to stop up here to make a few inquiries."

Tibble smiled assuringly. "Just routine, I'm sure. You're a visitor to the island, you know. And the Constable had already informed me that someone would be along to investigate."

There must have been a noticeable change in her expression, because Tibble was quick to add: "Of course, if you're not up to it . . ."

"No, it will be all right," she said.

Tibble relayed the answer, then turned back to her. "Five minutes?"

Priscilla nodded.

"Five minutes will do fine," Tibble informed Constable Edmonds, then hung up. Turning to Priscilla: "Is there anything further I can do?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd look in on the children."

Grateful for the opportunity to leave, Tibble scurried into the bedroom.

The children: they were all that mattered now. What would they do without her? She pictured Mark, with his black, curly hair and long lashes. Only nine, but already showing signs of the lean good looks he would possess as a man. And Amy, two years his junior, with Priscilla's own blonde prettiness and saucerlike violet eyes. She couldn't

bear the thought of being apart from them, and her newfound resourcefulness was suddenly edged with fear.

Five minutes. Five minutes to organize a defense. For what? If the inquiry was to be a mere formality, an investigation of an unfortunate accident, as Mr. Tibble had tried to assure her, there would be no need for preparation. But if the C.I.D. man intended to probe deeper, if he had uncovered any intimation of the truth, the investigation would proceed along quite different lines.

Murder!

She shivered at the word, but what else could it be called? Admittedly, George's death was not what might be considered "premeditated"; there had been no long-nurtured, cold-blooded plan. Still, there *had been* some five or ten minutes of thought behind it. *Manslaughter?* Perhaps. There could be many interpretations of degree, but each of them carried its own special punishment. No, she must take another tack. *Justifiable?* Had George's death been justifiable? Not legally; although in a simple, almost primitive way, she supposed it really had been justifiable. In a sense, it had been George's own fault. He had brought it on himself.

Tibble's return from the bedroom interrupted her rationalization. He reported that the children were doing fine. The staff housekeeper, whom he'd sent up earlier to stay with them, said that Mark and Amy were extremely well-behaved.

"They seem concerned only about you," Tibble added with a comforting smile. "I told them you'd be with them soon."

Priscilla nodded gratefully. "We're very close," she told the Assistant Manager as he took his perch on the chair again.

Now to the business at hand, she told herself firmly. The business of getting away with murder.

What would the C.I.D. man ask? Surely he'd look for a motive. Money? No, that would hardly apply here. Jealousy? She dismissed that quickly. Hate? Well, there had been arguments, of course, but didn't they take place in the best of families?

After all, the Farnhams were in a strange country; wouldn't the investigation have to be based on their behavior in Jamaica?

Her hopes sank abruptly. There *had* been an argument.

A bitter argument. And she remembered that, at its climax, she had turned away from George and suddenly seen the children standing there, in the living-room doorway, their faces frozen in expressions of fear and concern. She had tried to caution George, but he'd ranted on, shouting all those perfectly horrible things at her. Then he had stalked off to the terrace, and the children had run to her, pressing close.

She'd needed five or ten minutes alone to collect her thoughts, to figure out some way to dissuade George from what he planned to do. So she suggested the Game. The fear and anxiety immediately disappeared from their faces and they ran into the bedroom to begin playing.

Strange, she thought abstractedly. If George had understood and participated in the Game, everything might have been different. If, in fact, George had participated in *anything* that involved love and sharing, he might not be lying down there, covered by that ridiculously colorful patio tablecloth.

The circumstances leading up to the scene on the terrace had begun, she reasoned, a long time ago, when George changed. He had been gay and considerate when he'd been courting her. But when her father had died, shortly after their marriage, and George took over the management of the many interests and investments Father left behind, the metamorphosis had taken place. George had become all business. No time for fun. No more unexpected gifts. No more unexpected flowers or candy. Not a surprise in a carload; that was George.

She had tried to get him interested in the Game and have him discover in it the joy and romance that her own family had found. George reluctantly agreed to try it once, she remembered. She snuggled up to him and said, "Guess what?" George replied according to the rules of the Game: "What?" And she said: "Guess what I did for you today?" George was then supposed to venture some silly guesses, like: "You found a million dollars in gold, and you're going to put it under my napkin." Or, "You just made the Taj Mahal out of toothpicks, and we're going downtown tomorrow to pick out furniture." Then, the guessing was supposed to get more serious until George eventually discovered what she had done to surprise him; or he'd give up and Priscilla would reveal the surprise.

But, naturally, George had quit right after asking,

"What?" He found the Game "silly" and thought Priscilla even sillier for playing it.

Of course it was silly, Priscilla admitted, but it was fun. It was full of Surprises and Giving and Doing and Loving. And Romance, too, because her surprise that night had been the most diaphanous of negligees.

She and George had continued to drift, and only the arrival of the children had saved their marriage. Mark and Amy had inherited her looks and zest for life. They took to picnics and surprises and the Game and displays of love just as she always had. So, they'd become their mother's children.

Perhaps—she allowed herself a tiny pang of guilt—she'd concentrated too fiercely on Mark and Amy and not enough on George. But still, she felt defensively, if George had *wanted* to be part of it . . . if he'd wanted to share the wonderful understanding . . . if only—

Priscilla got no farther. A discreet knock broke her train of thought and brought Tibble off the edge of his chair. He went to the door, opened it, and admitted Constable Edmonds and a tall man in tropical civvies.

Edmonds, resplendent in his summer uniform with red cummerbund and white "Bobby" helmet, introduced his companion. He then about-faced smartly and stepped back into the corridor, closing the suite door behind him.

An efficient-looking man with piercing blue eyes and graying sandy hair, Detective-Sergeant Waring was ranking C.I.D. investigator for the Montego Bay area.

"Sorry to disturb you at this time, Mrs. Farnham," he said in a clipped British accent. "But if you feel disposed to answering a few questions, I'll try to take up very little of your time."

"I'll give you whatever information I can," she said.

The Sergeant eased into the chair beside Tibble's and removed a small notebook from a jacket pocket. Absently searching for a pencil and finding it, he flipped a few pages in the book, scanned his notes, then addressed her again.

"Perhaps we can start with your telling me, as best you can, what you recall just before . . . it happened."

"I can't remember too much, I'm afraid. I was lying here on the sofa—in a kind of fog. I don't know whether it was the scream that brought me out of it or the children. I just remember their shaking me, and I got up. We went to

the terrace—I looked down"—she managed a little break in her voice—"and saw my husband."

Sergeant Waring rose, walked quickly to the terrace, gazed about for a moment, then returned to his chair.

"Had your husband been unnaturally depressed lately? Had he given you the feeling he might be thinking of taking his own life?"

"Oh, no!" Priscilla blurted, and regretted the denial the second it was uttered. She had not considered the possible deduction of suicide. Now the opportunity was gone.

Waring asked, "Was he all right?"

Priscilla looked puzzled.

"I mean," he explained, "was he in good health? Did he suffer from fainting or dizzy spells or anything of that sort?"

"Yes," she replied. "In fact, that was one of the reasons we took this vactation. My husband worked very hard. Much too hard, we all told him. And he'd mentioned headaches and dizzy spells every once in a while. I felt that he needed to get away for a while . . . to relax. And so we came to Jamaica."

It's amazing, she marveled, how easily one can lie when the stakes are so high.

The C.I.D. man made a note in his black book.

"I realize this is quite a strain for you," he said solicitously. "If you'll bear with me for a few minutes more. I'm certain everything will be cleared up. We must make inquiries in all cases of violent death." He paused for a moment, then continued. "There is, as you know, a three-foot railing that surrounds your terrace. It would seem difficult to conceive of a man just *falling* over a railing of that height . . ."

Priscilla felt the beginning of a nervous gnawing.

". . . unless he had suffered a dizzy spell and toppled over. You see, Mrs. Farnham, one of the waiters . . ." he consulted his notebook again ". . . a chap named Parsons, was setting up the patio tables for dinner. He happened to glance up, or perhaps it was your husband's scream—the one you said you heard—that attracted his attention. And he saw your husband pitch over the railing. But Parsons claims he had a distinct impression that your husband did not fall."

Sudden shock swept through her. Someone *had* seen what happened.

"Naturally," Waring said, "we asked Parsons if he had seen anyone on the terrace besides your husband. He admitted that he had not."

"Certainly you didn't think that—"

"Of course not," Waring cut in with a disarming smile. "But we have to follow up any information of that sort. We soon discovered that there was no substance to Parsons' statement, after all. In the first place, Parsons was almost directly beneath the line of terraces, and, as he was looking virtually straight up, he could not possibly have had a clear view of your terrace. And secondly, Parsons' statement was predicated on his impression that your husband seemed to be trying to catch his balance. His arms were rather clutching for air, as it were . . . as though he were trying to protect himself. It goes without saying that . . ."

Priscilla felt a sudden warm glow of confidence. Perhaps it was possible to get away with murder!

". . . probably mistook your husband's desperate attempt to save himself as something more," the Sergeant was saying. "And now that you've verified your husband's dizzy spells, we can see how he might have just toppled over the railing."

A rapping at the door interrupted him. He stepped to the door, opened it, and Priscilla saw Constable Edmond's white helmet bobbing as he spoke rapidly in a low voice.

Waring poked his head back into the living room. He looked carefully at Priscilla before saying, "Would you excuse me, please? I'll only be a moment. There are, it seems, some other witnesses."

Her confidence ebbing away, she sat tight-lipped, questions tumbling over each other in her mind.

The answer came as Waring re-entered and moved swiftly toward her. He suddenly looked formidable.

"Mrs. Farnham," he said. "Did you and your husband have a row shortly before he died?"

"Yes," she answered in a tiny voice.

Waring pressed on. "The couple in the suite next door —the Rineharts—claim they heard you and your husband involved in a rather violent dispute. Your voices were quite loud, and they are certain they heard your husband say something about . . . dying."

"It seems like a silly argument now—"

The Sergeant looked at her inquiringly.

"I don't mean *silly*, exactly," she continued. "It just seems . . . well . . . unimportant now. My husband wanted to cut our vacation short and go home. The children and I wanted to stay. Our original vacation plans called for us to remain here for another week at least. The argument got out of hand, I'm afraid, and there were some harsh words. Then he said that when he was dead, I could do as I pleased, but right now, while he was head of the family, we were going home." She forced a brief facsimile of a smile. "That was one of his pet expressions."

She looked up at Waring. The silence was the longest she had ever known.

The Sergeant's face softened. "That seems to check in essence with the fragments of the argument which the Rineharts overheard." He consulted his notebook once again.

"There's just one more thing, Mrs. Farnham. You said that you were lying down on the sofa at the time your husband fell."

Priscilla nodded.

"And you also said," he went on, "that your children shook you right after you thought you heard your husband's scream."

She nodded again.

Waring wore the disarming look once more. "Would you mind, then, if we brought your children in here and asked *them* where you were when they called you? It's merely a routine check. Naturally, I can't question them officially; and I must have your permission, of course. But it would clarify my report and end it all right here."

Priscilla drew up her shoulders. "All right," she said. "But, please—"

Waring nodded appreciatively. He gestured to Tibble who went into the bedroom and returned with Mark and Amy.

Priscilla didn't look up as the children entered. Then, as they were led toward the Sergeant, she lifted her head slowly and caressed them with a smile.

Waring resumed his seat, hunching a bit in order to be at eye-level with them. He spoke softly, but directly. "Do you understand what happened today?"

Mark and Amy nodded gravely.

"I'm going to ask you something. Will you answer me?"

Their faces remained grave as they glanced questioningly at their mother.

"You may answer the gentlemen," she instructed gently. As she directed the children to face Waring, she saw that his eyes had been focused intently on her.

He turned his attention to Mark and Amy now, and began gingerly. "A little while ago, when you heard your father—yell . . . Do you remember?"

They returned the Sergeant's gaze.

Waring continued. "You shouted when you heard him. You shouted to your mother . . . and shook her, is that right?"

They nodded solemnly.

"Where was your mother when you shook her, do you remember?"

Mark answered. "She was right there where she is now."

"Are you sure?" said Waring.

"Uh, huh," said Amy. "We were playing the Game."

"The game?"

Priscilla started to explain. "It's just a little game we play—"

She was stopped by the Sergeant's upraised, cautioning hand. This was the moment Priscilla had dreaded. She had somehow known that the final judgment would be found in the Game.

"What about the game?" Waring inquired easily. "What kind of a game?"

Mark took over. "It's a game we play with Mommy. It's a lot of fun. We make up surprises. We buy things . . . or make things . . . or do things. . . . Then we say, 'Guess what?' "

" 'Guess what?' " Sergeant Waring echoed.

"Sure," chimed in Amy. "Mommy says, 'Guess what I did for you,' and we try to guess the surprise."

"Or we say, 'Guess what we did for you,' and Mommy tries to guess," Mark added.

"Go on," urged Waring.

"Well, after Mommy and Daddy"—his voice dropped—"had a fight, Mommy said let's play the Game." His voice brightened again, and he looked toward his sister. "So Amy and me went into the bedroom to figure out a surprise for Mommy. And Mommy stayed here figuring one out for us."

"Then, when you heard your father yell," Waring said carefully "you came right to your mother. And she was right here on the sofa?"

"Oh, yes," trilled Amy. "She was lying down. We came to tell her our surprise. Do you want to know what it was?"

"No," said the Sergeant, laughing. "A secret is a secret. I just wanted to see if you knew where your mother was."

He turned to Priscilla. "I think that takes care of everything, Mrs. Farnham. Of course, there will be an inquest after the postmortem, but it will be routine."

"Must the children be brought into it again?" she asked.

"I hardly think so. It has been a trying enough experience for them as it is."

Waring shook hands with Mark and Amy and thanked them.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Farnham," he said. "I hope this wasn't too much of an inconvenience. I realize that your husband's tragic accident was upsetting enough without my disturbing you with these questions. But, it's my duty."

"I understand, Sergeant Waring," she said, "And thank you for being so considerate with the children."

"Not at all," said Waring. "I'm a father myself." He motioned for Tibble to follow him and they left the suite, softly closing the door behind them.

Priscilla sat still for a long moment, not daring to believe it was all over. Then she smiled at the children, who were standing quietly once again.

Amy, a petulant look on her face, broke the silence. "Mommy," she said. "You didn't tell us your surprise."

Mark added his disappointment. "You never told us what you did. You forgot."

"No, I didn't forget," said Priscilla in a voice touched with sadness.

She would tell them soon what *she* had done. When it was time to sit down with them and explain how the Game had been played wrong that day.

No, she had not forgotten. Nor would she ever forget that moment when Mark and Amy had shaken her and shouted, "Guess what?" In a haze, she'd asked "What?" The children, their beautiful faces beaming with *their* surprise, had pulled her out to the terrace, pointed over the railing and chanted, "Guess what we did for you today!"

SOMETHING SHORT OF MURDER

HENRY SLESAR

Fran came out of Lila's apartment, shoving the green-printed racing sheets into her apron pocket. Lila, that lucky so-and-so! Three winners in a week! Fran shook her head as she went up the sagging stairs to her apartment on the next floor, displeased with her own luck and envying Lila's.

When the door slammed behind her, she hurried over to the kitchen table and shoved the remains of her husband's breakfast to one side. She took out the racing form, her eyes moving up and down the small print to find the listing of tomorrow's fourth race.

"Sonny Boy, County Judge, Chicago Flyer, Marzipan, Goldenrod . . ."

She read the names aloud, running her fingers through the dry brown hair on her forehead. Then she shut her eyes and looked upwards in a gesture. They had to mean something, or it was no good. That was her system. It wasn't much, but that was it.

"Sonny Boy," she whispered. Her husband, Ed, was an admirer of Jolson. "Sonny Boy," she said aloud.

She headed for the telephone and dialed quickly.

"Vito's," the man said.

"Hello, is Mr. Cooney there?"

"Hey, Phil," the man said. "For you."

"Hello?" Cooney said.

"Mr. Cooney? This is Fran Holland. Would you put five dollars for me on the fourth race tomorrow? I like—"

"Hold it, Mrs. Holland. I'm glad you called. You see, I was comin' to see you anyway, Mrs. Holland. After I got my hair cut."

"Coming to see me?" She looked at the instrument strangely.

"Yeah, Mrs. Holland. It's like this, Mrs. Holland. First of all, I ain't allowed to take no more bets from you, not

until you settle up. Second of all, I'm supposed to come over and see maybe if I can collect the money you owe us. That's twenty-five dollars now."

"Twenty-five dollars? But that's not so much. I mean, is it?"

"Yeah, sure, Mrs. Holland. Only you don't understand, Mrs. Holland. This is front office. It wasn't my idea. Too much of this nickel-and-dime stuff around, you know what I mean."

"No! I don't know!" She was honestly indignant, as if the butcher had overcharged her.

"Well, I'll be over to explain it, Mrs. Holland. See you soon."

"No! Wait a minute—"

But the man named Cooney wasn't waiting. The click at his end of the wire was final.

She stared stupidly at the buzzing receiver before putting it back where it belonged. Then the thought of company—any company—sent her into a series of automatic actions. She cleared the breakfast dishes and piled them in the sink. She swept the crumbs from the table into the hollow of her palm and dropped them into the paper bag that was leaning against the stove. Then she untied her apron, and flung it into a closet.

In the bedroom, she stopped to see her face in the vanity mirror. It was a young face still, with all the marks of the years concentrated around her eyes. Her hair was jutting in too many directions, so she ran a comb through it with painful yanks.

She thought of calling Lila, but the idea of seeing that cheery gloating face again was too much. No, she'd talk this over some other time, when they were both commiserating over a tardy horse.

She sat at the kitchen table and smoked a cigarette. In another ten minutes, the doorbell sounded. She walked calmly to the door.

Cooney took his hat off. The band was tight, and left a circular dent in the shiny surface of his fresh-trimmed hair. He looked like an ageing insurance salesman, eager to make good.

"Morning, Mrs. Holland. All right to come in?"

"You know it's all right," Fran said.

He stepped inside, his small eyes probing the three rooms of the apartment. He sat down at the table, and be-

gan jiggling the small pile of ashes in the tray.

"Now what's this all about?" Fran said, like a scolding parent.

"It's nothing personal, Mrs. Holland. You know that. I like doin' business with you people. Only the management is gettin' a little edgy about the accounts receivable."

She almost smiled. "That's a laugh."

"No, seriously." He looked hurt. "How much dough you think we make with this kind of trade? Look, the two-dollar guy is the heart of the business. But when you start raidin' the cookie jar, Mrs. Holland—"

"I use my own money! You can't accuse me of—"

"Who's accusin'? Look, Mrs. Holland, you've owed us this twenty-five bucks since—" He dipped into his jacket and produced a little black ledger. "May 20th," he said. "This is almost two months. Now how do you suppose a big store or somebody would feel about that?"

"Listen, Mr. Cooney. You know I always pay you, sooner or later. Ever since I started—"

"You're a friend of Mrs. Shank, aren't you?" The question was sudden.

"You know I am. It was Lila who told me about—"

"Yeah. Well, she's not much better, Mrs. Holland. If it makes you feel any better."

"But she just won—"

"Very good for her. And when Mrs. Shank wins, we gotta ante up fast, or she's screamin' bloody murder. But when she's on the short end—" He scowled, and Fran no longer felt sure of herself.

"All right," she said bitingly. "If you're going to act that way, I'll just find somebody else."

"Sure. You do that, Mrs. Holland." He slipped the ledger back into his pocket. "Only there's still a matter of twenty-five bucks."

"I'll pay you next week."

"No, Mrs. Holland."

"What do you mean, no? I'll give you the money next week. My husband doesn't get paid until next week."

"Uh-uh, Mrs. Holland."

She stared at him, "What's the matter with you? I can't give you something I haven't got. What do you expect?"

"Twenty-five bucks, Mrs. Holland. That's my orders. You can borrow the money, can't you? From Mrs. Shank, maybe?"

"Not her," Fran said bitterly.

"You must have the dough in the house. Food money."

"No! I have a dollar and fifty cents. That's all! I've been charging everything—"

The man stood up, and either the light in the room had changed, or he had. The meekness was out of his face, and he looked anything but harmless.

"I gotta have that money today, Mrs. Holland. If I don't get it today—"

"You'll what?" She couldn't believe his attitude; he'd always been a gentleman.

"I'll come back at six o'clock, Mrs. Holland."

"Come back?"

"To see your husband."

It was a word Cooney had never mentioned, not once. He'd been dropping by two mornings a week for the past three months. There were always evidences of Eddie's presence around. There were his breakfast dishes, scraped clean by his sizeable appetite. His crusty old pipe might be lying on the drainboard. There might be a shirt in need of mending, draped over a kitchen chair. But Cooney had never used the word before.

"Why?" Fran said. "Why do you have to do that? I told you I'd get the money. He doesn't have to know about this thing, does he?"

"Sure he don't, Mrs. Holland. All you gotta do is pay me what you owe—nothin' more. And he don't have to know a thing."

"It's not that I'm so ashamed of it!" she said loudly. "I haven't lost a fortune or anything!"

"Sure, Mrs. Holland."

"You can't do that to me, Mr. Cooney—"

The hat was being squeezed down over the oil-shiny hair. "I really gotta go, Mrs. Holland. You know where you can find me. At Vito's. If you come down any time before six, we can forget the whole thing."

"But I told you!" Fran's fingers were undoing the work of her comb. "I haven't got it! I can't get it! There isn't any way—"

"You know about hock shops?"

"I've already—" She stopped, and her fingers found their way to her mouth. If Eddie knew!

"So long, Mrs. Holland."

He went out, shutting the door quietly.

She listened to the man's retreating footsteps until the hallway was silent again, and then she thought about Eddie. She looked across the kitchen table as if she could almost see her husband sitting at the opposite end, looking hurt and baffled as he had so many times before, shaking his head and saying: "Why do you do it, Fran? What for?"

How could she face that scene again? After all the promises, the tearful scenes of recrimination and forgiveness? The first time hadn't been so bad; they had been honeymooners still, and anything Eddie's bride did was cute and cockeyed and wonderful—even betting house money on the horses. They had laughed over it, then, and made up, before the argument had gone very far, in that special tender way reserved for newlyweds. But there had been a second time, and a third, and at each discovery, Eddie had looked more hurt and bewildered, until the bewilderment became anger. And then there had been the terrible scene last October, the day when he'd detected the white circle around her finger where Fran's engagement ring should have been . . .

She shivered at the memory. There had been no forgiveness in Eddie that time. She had sworn to him that the habit was broken; she had tried every way possible to convince him that she had learned her lesson. But still Eddie hadn't forgiven; he had merely warned.

"One more time, Fran, so help me. One more time and I walk outa here . . . "

She got up from the kitchen table and ran into the bedroom. She attacked the bureau drawers, scattering clothes and department store boxes filled with buttons and hatpins and scraps of fabric. She foraged through all her purses, her fingers digging into their linings in search of stray coins. She slapped at the pockets of her husband's two suits which hung in the closet, listening for the sound of jingling metal. She flipped open the plastic jewelry box Ed had given her the Christmas before, and was shocked at the scarcity of everything with more than dime-store value.

Even as Fran hurried into the living room, she had the feeling of having done all that she had just done before.

Beneath the pillows of the love seat she found a dime and a black penny. In a small porcelain vase on a bookshelf she found a folded dollar bill.

She brought all the money she had found to the kitchen table, and counted it.

"Two dollars and seventy-eight cents," she whispered.

She put her head between her elbows.

"Oh, God, God," she said.

Twenty-five dollars wasn't so much, she thought. But where would she get it? She had no friends, except Lila. Her family lived miles away. Where would she get it? And before six o'clock. She glanced at her wrist, but the watch she expected to see there she remembered was ticking in a pawnshop on Broadway. She glanced up at the electric clock on the kitchen wall, and gasped when she realized that it was almost eleven-thirty.

Less than seven hours! she thought. Twenty-five dollars! Nickels and dimes, Cooney had called it . . .

Then she had her idea. It was born of a painful memory, of an unpleasant scene on a windy street corner only two weeks before. She had just concluded a day of shopping, and there was an overpriced dress in a fancy striped box beneath her arm. She had been standing on the corner, her feet aching, praying that the Number Five bus would be empty. Then she had clicked open her purse, *this* purse, the one on the table, looking for nickels and dimes . . .

She stood up so fast that the chair scraped the linoleum. She went into the bedroom and did further repairs on her makeup. She put on her best pair of black suedes, and then took the silken thing she called her "evening stole" out of a drawer. The effect in the mirror didn't please her, so she changed her dress too.

When she was through, she looked a lot like the girl Ed used to show off at parties.

Then she went out.

The bus stop was four blocks from her apartment building. The good bus stop, that is, the one where Number Five, and Number Fifteen, and Number Twenty-Three nuzzled one another against the curb during the rush hours. Number Five was just lumbering off now, only half-filled at midday. But there were still people around, waiting for transportation to God-knows-what errand.

They were old people mostly. Old people weren't so good for what she had in mind. But Fran stepped determinedly up to the arrow-shaped stanchion and looked like a woman with a purpose.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she selected her first sub-

ject. She knew the first would be the hardest, so this one had to be good. He wasn't too old, really, maybe a little over fifty. His eyes were puffy, and his shoulders were hunched up as if the July sun, strangely enough, had made him cold. Both hands were in his pockets, and coins within them were making noises.

She sidled up to him, peering down the street for signs of the approaching bus. He looked at her with only mild interest.

Then she saw Number Fifteen heading in. She opened her purse and began to rummage inside it.

"Oh my God!" she said loudly.

The man's eyes widened at her exclamation.

She looked at him helplessly, and the half-humorous, half-worried expression on her face was a skilful blend.

"How do you like that!" she said. "I haven't got a *red cent.*"

He smiled uncertainly, not knowing what to do. And his hands stopped jiggling the coins.

"What in the world should I *do?* I *must* get downtown—"

"I—uh—" The man cleared his throat. "Look, why don't I—uh—"

"Oh, would you? Could you lend me fifteen cents? I feel like such a fool—"

He was smiling now; this was anecdotal material for him. Fran didn't feel badly; she was the one doing the favor.

His hand came out of his pocket filled with silver. He plucked out a nickel and dime and handed them to her.

"Think nothing of it," he said. The bus braked to a halt in front of them. "You can mail it to me," he said. "Hah-hah. Well—here's the bus—"

"Not mine," she smiled. "I take the Number Five. Thank you *very* much."

"You're very welcome!" he said cheerfully, and clambered aboard his bus.

That makes your day, Pops, she thought.

A young man who had just stepped off the departing bus was folding a newspaper in front of her.

"Pardon me—"

"Huh?" He looked up, his pale eyes bewildered.

"I feel like such a fool, but—" She batted her lashes prettily. He was a very young man; he blushed. "But I left

the house without a cent. And I simply must take the next bus downtown—"

"Gosh," he said, grinning with embarrassment. "I know just how you feel. Here—" He dug into his coat pocket. "Only got a quarter—"

"Oh, really—"

"No no. Keep the whole thing. Happens to me all the time." He looked at her face more closely, and seemed to realize she was older than her smile. He nodded and smiled and moved on.

"Pardon me," she said to the elderly lady who was peering myopically down the street. "I feel simply terrible about this, but an awful thing has happened to me—"

"Eyah?" the old lady said.

Fran smiled tightly. "Nothing," she said wryly.

A slim gentleman with glasses, carrying a book under his arm, was walking slowly toward the bus stop. He blinked at her as she approached.

"Pardon me," she said.

An hour later, she could have sworn that there was a blister on her right heel. Funny how simply standing at a bus stop could have done that to her foot. Why, she could walk for miles through a department store, and never . . .

Then she thought of the coins in her purse, and walked rapidly across the street. There was a drug store on the corner, and she entered one of the telephone booths and folded the doors closed.

She counted carefully.

The total was three dollars and fifteen cents. Added to the amount she had started out with, it made five-ninety-three. She sighed. She had a long way to go . . .

A man was standing outside the booth as she opened the doors.

"Pardon me," she said automatically. "I feel like such a fool, but I came out without a *penny*, and I have to get downto—I have to make a call."

The man grinned feebly. "Yeah?" he said. Then he realized what was expected of him, and his hand dove into his change pocket. "Oh, yeah, sure," he said "I gotta dime."

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you very much."

She folded the doors again, and dialed a number without depositing the coin. She talked cheerfully into the dead instrument for a moment, hung up after a musical good-

bye, and smiled winningly at the man who succeeded her in the booth.

Then she went back to the bus stop.

By three o'clock, she had collected almost ten dollars more. At a quarter of four, she returned to the telephone booth for another accounting.

"Fourteen dollars and nine cents," she said aloud.

Her finger poked into the coin-return aperture at the bottom of the telephone, and came out with a dime.

"This is my lucky day!" she laughed

But four o'clock found her more discouraged. The crowd was growing thicker around the bus stanchion, but the increase in traffic didn't help her collect her nickels and dimes.

At four-thirty, she was still far short of her twenty-five dollar goal.

"Pardon me," she said to a fat man with a vacant face. "I feel like such a fool, but I seem to have left my house without any money at all. I wonder if I could impose on you to—"

"Go away," the fat man said, regarding her balefully.

"But you don't understand," she said. "I was simply going to ask if you had—"

"Madam, please go away," the fat man said.

It was her first refusal. She knew better than to argue; it wasn't worth it. But she suddenly felt stubborn.

"Look," Fran said hotly. "It's only fifteen cents. I mean, it's only *busfare—*"

She felt a hand on her arm and whirled angrily.

"Pardon me, lady—"

She looked indignantly at the man whose fingers were lying so firmly on the sleeve of her dress. He was in his early thirties, and his clothes were cut with angular accents. The fat man moved away from them, and that made her even angrier.

"What do *you* want?"

The man smiled. His teeth were long, and his narrow eyes had no part in the smile.

"I think you better come with me, lady."

"What?"

"Please. Do us both a favor and don't make a scene. What do you say?"

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

"Look, lady. I've been watching you for the past half hour. Does that make it any plainer? Now come quietly before I have to get nasty."

A whirlpool began to churn in her empty stomach.

"Why should I come with you? Who do you think you are?"

"If you want to see the badge, I'll flash it. Only we got enough people starin' at us already. So what do you say?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes. Of course."

They walked away from the bus stop, his hand still on her arm, smiling like an old friend who had made a chance meeting. He didn't speak until they reached a gray sedan, parked some thirty yards from the stanchion.

He opened the door for her.

"Inside, please."

"Look, mister, if you'll only let me explain—"

"You'll get your chance. Inside, lady."

She climbed in. He went around to the other door and slid in beside her. They drove off, making a left at the corner.

"You don't understand," she said pleadingly. "I wasn't doing anything wrong. I wasn't *stealing* or anything. I was just asking, you know what I mean? You see, I'm in trouble—"

"You're in trouble, all right." He sneaked through a changing traffic light, and made another left.

She put her face in her hands and started to cry. But the well was dry; the tears wouldn't come.

"No use pullin' that one," the man said. "I've seen your type lots of times, lady. But I'll have to admit—I never seen that particular dodge before. How much money did you think you could make?"

"But I don't *need* much. Only a few dollars! I have to have twenty-five dollars before six o'clock. I *have* to!"

"How much did you get?"

"Not much. Honest. Only a few dollars! You wouldn't arrest me for a few dollars?"

"How much, lady?"

She opened her purse, and stared at the mound of coins at the bottom.

"I don't know exactly," she said dully, "Fifteen or sixteen dollars maybe. But it's not enough . . ."

The car was wheeling down a side street now, away from the busy thoroughfare, toward the warehouse section near the river.

"Please!" Fran cried. "Don't turn me in! I'll never do it again! I was just desperate for that money—"

"How much more do you need, doll-face?"

"What?"

"To make the twenty-five?"

She looked down at her purse again. "I don't know for sure. Another ten would do it. Maybe not even that."

"Is that all?" he grinned.

His foot was pressing harder on the accelerator, as if he were suddenly more anxious to reach his destination. He whipped the car around corners, the wheels squealing in protest, and Fran became alarmed.

"Hey!" She looked out of the window at the strange deserted neighborhood. "What is this? Are you a cop or aren't you?"

"What do you think?"

She stared at him. "Why, you're no cop! You're not arresting me at all—" She edged over to the door, one hand on the handle.

"Uh-uh," he said. "Don't do anything foolish; you'll just hurt yourself. Besides, doll-face, I could still call a cop. I could still tell 'em about your racket—"

"They wouldn't believe you!"

"Maybe. But why take the chance?" He took his right hand off the wheel and reached to put it around her shoulders.

"Be careful!" Fran said shrilly.

"You're not being smart, honey. You gotta have the twenty-five before six. It's almost five now. Where do you think it'll come from?"

"Let me out of here!"

"Maybe I can help, doll-face." He pulled her to him, his eyes still on the road, his grin widening. "If you let me—"

"No," Fran said. "No!"

He slowed to turn another corner, and she saw her opportunity. Her hand hit the door handle upwards, and it swung open. The man cursed and grabbed for her arm.

"Leave me alone!" she screamed, swinging the heavy, coin-laden purse at his head. It thudded against his temple. He cried out in rage, and in grabbing for her, his hand

caught the sleeve of her dress, ripping it. Then his other hand, heedlessly, left the steering wheel, and the car bucked like a wild horse suddenly untethered, throwing Fran against the open door and into the street.

She fell on all fours, sobbing but unhurt, and watched without horror or regret as the car hurtled over the sidewalk and plowed its nose into the stubborn red bricks of a warehouse building.

Her first thought was to run, for there was nobody on the street to see her flight. Then she remembered that her purse was still in the car, and she staggered to the wreckage to recover it.

The door was still open, and the purse was propped up against the side of the unconscious man. She didn't know if he was alive or dead, nor was the difference important to her at the moment. He was folded over the steering wheel, his arms dangling limply. Gasping, she reached for her purse.

Then, the idea occurred so naturally that she went about the business of locating the man's wallet without her fingers showing any sign of nervousness. She found the billfold in the inner breast pocket of his suit. There were many bills inside, but—with an odd sense of justice—she took only ten dollars.

Fran reached Vito's barber shop at ten minutes to six. Vito started a grin, but his face changed when he saw her drawn features and soiled clothing.

"Cooney, huh? Yeah, he's in the back. Hey, Phil! A lady!"

Cooney looked at her curiously when he came out of the back room. He was in shirtsleeves, and holding a poor poker hand. He brightened when he saw her reach for the purse, and laughed at the sight of it full of coins.

"What'd you do, Mrs. Holland, rob a piggy bank?"

"Count it," she said distantly. "Count it for me, Mr. Cooney."

They overturned the bag on the manicure table. Vito helped. When the addition was done, Cooney looked up.

"Thirty dollars and forty-six cents, Mrs. Holland," he said, smiling with satisfaction. "You got change comin'. I'm sorry I had to go lay down the law to you the way I did. But you see, you done okay."

She went up the apartment house stairs slowly. On the third floor, a door opened and a blonde woman, her hair heavy with curlers, looked out.

"Fran! For God's sake, where you been?"

"Shopping," she said wearily.

"You look beat. Buy somethin' nice?"

"No. Nothing much, Lila."

"Well, I got a hot scoop for you, kid. You won't have to make dinner tonight. You can come down and have pot luck with me if you don't feel like cookin' for yourself—"

"What do you mean?"

"You're on the town tonight, kiddo." The blonde woman laughed. "Ed musta called nine times this afternoon. Finally, he calls me up, thinkin' we were in here boozin' or something."

"Ed?" She blinked at the woman.

"Yeah. He called from the office. Wanted to tell you that he wouldn't be coming home, not 'til tomorrow. He had some kind of emergency with a client, or something. Said he had to fly out to Chicago on the five o'clock plane."

"Not coming home?" Fran said stupidly.

"Hey, snap out of it. You heard what I said. He went to Chicago. You can relax tonight, honey."

Fran sighed, and started up the next flight. "Thanks, Lila."

"That's okay," the blonde shrugged. "Hey, you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. I'm just fine."

Upstairs, Fran unlocked her front door and went inside. The breakfast dishes in the sink looked gray in the fading light. She flung her purse on the table, and kicked off her shoes.

In the living room, she flopped heavily into a chair and lit a cigarette. She sat in an attitude of exhaustion, staring at the hazy light outside, smoking silently.

She pulled the evening stole around her shoulders, as if the room had grown cold.

"Chicago," she said bitterly.

Then the name meant something. It *meant* something. She stood up quickly. That was the whole secret of it, she thought. The name had to *mean* something.

She went over to the telephone and dialed the familiar number.

"Hello, is Mr. Cooney there?"

Her stockinged foot tapped impatiently on the linoleum.

"Hello, Mr. Cooney? Listen, this is Fran Holland. On that fourth race tomorrow. I'd like five dollars on Chicago Flyer. That's right. In the fourth race . . ."

THE GOLDEN GIRL

ELLIS PETERS

"Shakespeare," said the purser moodily, over his second beer after the theater, "everything's Shakespeare this year, of course. He did his share of pinching, though. That 'my ducats and my daughter' stuff—there was another fellow did that better, I remember seeing the play once. *The Jew of Malta,* it was called, and Marlowe was the author's name. 'O gold, O girl! Oh, beauty! Oh, my bliss!' Seeing *The Merchant* tonight made me think of it again. And of a real-life case I once knew—only she wasn't his daughter. Not that one.

"I was a raw junior then, under old McLean on the *Aurea,* oh, ten years ago, it would be. I dream about it sometimes, but not so often, now. We were sailing from Liverpool for Bombay, my third trip, and this couple came aboard right in the rush before we sailed, and still you couldn't miss seeing them. It was this girl. She was so blindingly pretty, for one thing, corn-gold hair, smoky eyes. And then, so touchingly pregnant. You know, these loose smocks, and then the very slender arms on the ponderous body. And the careful, faintly clumsy gait, balancing the weight. She went slowly on the companionways, and held on fast to the rail. You could feel every male in sight holding himself back from rushing to help her.

"They were booked through to Bombay, probably going out to some expert advisory job. The husband, he was older, probably forty to the girl's twenty-two or so, but he had something, too. The women got their heads together over him before we were an hour out. Big, good-looking fellow, dark and quiet and experienced-looking, hovering round his missus with such solicitude all the other wives on board turned green with envy. A reformed rake, they had him down for. Don Juan after he met the one girl. Try and get him away from her! Plenty of them did try before we neared Bombay. But no, as far as he was concerned there

was no woman aboard but his wife. He hung over her with that broody look, every day of the seventeen.

"Two days out we had a boat drill. We always did, though we never expected more than half of 'em to show up, not at that time of year, with the sea acting the way it so often does act. I was the officer on their boat, and I took care to show up near their cabin when the first siren sounded. He wasn't there, he'd gone to get her some library books. I had the pleasure of helping her on with her life-jacket. Like most women, she hadn't a clue how to put the thing on, instructions or no instructions.

"She didn't seem so big, under that loose tunic of hers. Just a bit of a thing she must have been, normal times, I thought. And the way she thanked me, I'd have jumped overboard for her. Yes, she felt fine, yes, she'd go up on deck and report properly, like the others. And she did, too. Like a kid playing a game, the gayest person around. Her husband soon came on the run, wild to snatch her away from the rest of us and look after her himself. There wasn't a man who didn't grudge him his rights.

"Like that, all the way. At our film-shows they held hands in a quiet corner. The women reckoned they hadn't been married all that long, and he hadn't got over the happy shock of getting her, and couldn't quite believe in his luck.

"We dropped about half our passengers off at Karachi, and made across for Bombay a bit subdued and quiet, as usual. And that night, round about midnight, the fire broke out.

"There was a ball going on at the time, we usually staged something gay to cushion the partings. So we never did find out how it started. All I know is, suddenly there were alarm sirens below decks, and unaccountably none up in the saloons and bars, and the music went on, and up on the boat-deck there were still people in the pool long after there was near-panic below. Communications went west because the whole loudspeaker system collapsed. And before you could say 'knife' there was smoke everywhere, and in ten minutes more, chaos. Nobody could give orders beyond the reach of his own voice. And once people got frightened, the range of a voice wasn't much.

"It wasn't a panic. They were a pretty decent lot, they'd have been all right if there'd been any way of telling 'em

all just what to do. But there wasn't, except in small groups, and there weren't enough of us to go round the groups. And sometimes confusion and bewilderment can produce just the same results as panic. The best of 'em, the ones who're game and try to do something, do the wrong things for want of instructions. And the others get in their way and ours. What can you do? Thank God it was dead calm, and two or three ships had got our calls, and were moving in to pick up the pieces.

"It had to come to that. The fire spread like mad, and she began to list. We shoved everybody up on deck, got 'em into their life-jackets, and started getting the boats lowered. The din was something I'll never forget. Nobody was screaming, but everybody was shouting.

"I was clawing my way along B Deck in the smoke, opening cabin doors and fielding the stragglers, with one of the women on one arm, and a Goanese steward towing two more behind me. I shoved open the door of 56, and there was our golden girl, clinging to her husband, her eyes like big gray lakes of stupefied terror. They were fumbling her life-jacket awkwardly between them. His lay on the lower berth. I bellowed at him furiously to get the thing on her, quick, and got hold of her with my free hand as soon as he'd bundled her into it. She toiled up the companionways after me, panting, her gait as labored and painful as an old woman's. I even had time to bleed a little, inwardly, at the thought of hustling her, but, man, we were in a hurry. The *Aurea* was lurching under us, shuddering on the dead-calm sea. She wasn't going to last all that much longer.

"Well, I got them up to their boat, into that pandemonium on deck. There was a westbound tanker standing off by then, with boats out for us, searchlights quivering along the black water. And then the deck heeled under us and started to stand erect, sliding us down toward the rail. The women screamed and clung to whatever was nearest. I thought we were going, so did we all, but she partly righted herself again. But the boat slid down by the stern, and jammed, and I knew we were never going to launch that one. Some of the others were safely away already, standing well off and waiting to salvage what they could when we foundered. Other boats were moving in from the tanker off in the dark there. One had come close, and was hailing us. I bellowed back at them, and they nosed in nearer. I

grabbed hold of the golden girl. Two lives—you know how it is!

"Her husband yelled at me like a fury, and held on to her like grim death, screaming hoarsely something I couldn't even distinguish in the general hell. There wasn't time for convincing anybody of anything. I hooked my palm under his chin and shoved him off hard, and his grip of her broke. I picked her up in my arms and swung her over the rail, and dropped her gently and carefully into what I knew was the safest place for her, into the sea a few yards from the bows of the hovering boat. The officer I'd hailed was already leaning over to reach for her.

"And two things happened that I still dream about now and then, when I'm out of sorts. Her husband let out a shriek like a damned soul, a sound I'll never forget, and tore his way screaming to the rail, and hurled himself over it. And the girl, the golden girl—my God, she hit the water and she sank like a stone!

"Her face was turned up, mute, staring at me with those lost, terrified eyes, right to the second when the water closed over it. She vanished, and she didn't reappear.

"I was a whole minute grasping it. Can you imagine that? Then I dived after her, down and down, hunting for her, time after time after time, until they hauled me aboard the boat by force. I didn't find her. But once, I think, I glimpsed him, deep down there plunging as I was plunging. I seem to remember a face with hair torn erect, frantic eyes, mouth howling soundlessly. Her name? It would be nice to think I only imagined it. Better still to forget it. I can't do either.

"There was nothing left of him, either, by that time, except his life-jacket washing about aimlessly, where he'd torn if off and discarded it to dive for her. We never should have found either of them, if the vortex as the *Aurea* finally went under hadn't churned up everything from the depths and flung it to the rim of the area. The tanker still had boats out, and one of them fielded the girl's body, by a sheer fluke, as it showed for an instant before plunging again. We never did find him.

"It was finding her, and what we found on her, that brought Interpol into the story.

"She wasn't his wife, of course. She was a photographer's model and small-part actress he'd picked up at some

club. She wasn't pregnant, either. Only the way he felt about her, I'll swear, was no fake. He'd never used her before. All his previous cargoes had been smuggled in by air, with other carriers, and this last one was to have been an easy stake, a pleasure cruise with a nice pay-off at the end of it. It was very profitable business. I think they weren't coming back.

"All the stuff she'd brought aboard in the padded bodice under her maternity smock they'd hidden, once the initial boat-drill was safely over, in that life-jacket of hers. A daft place? Well, look, I'll tell you something. Nobody ever believes they're going to need those damned life-jackets in earnest—nobody. It wasn't so daft a place. And she could make herself comfortable until she had to resume the burden at Bombay, and carry it tenderly ashore and through the Customs. Only they left the job of transferring it again until the last night, and the fire caught them unprepared.

"Of course, he could have worn the thing himself and given her the other. Maybe he would have, if I hadn't barged in on them and forced his hand. Or maybe he wouldn't. She was, after all, a professional doing a job for him. Once in the boat she'd have been safe enough. And whatever followed, it was she, with her disarming beauty and her interesting condition, who would have had the special V.I.P. treatment, and the best chance of retrieving their stake, and getting it safely into India.

"I still wonder which he was really diving for, the girl, or the thirty pounds' weight of thin bar gold that drowned her."

THE BOY WHO PREDICTED EARTHQUAKES

MARGARET ST. CLAIR

"Naturally, you're skeptical," Wellman said. He poured water from a carafe, put a pill on his tongue, washed the pill down. "Naturally, understandably. I don't blame you, wouldn't dream of blaming you. A good many of us here at the studio had your attitude, I'm afraid, when we started programing this boy Herbert. I don't mind telling you, just between ourselves, that I myself was pretty doubtful that a show of that sort would be good television."

Wellman scratched behind an ear while Read looked on with scientific interest. "Well, I was wrong," Wellman said, putting the hand down again. "I'm pleased to say that I was 1,000 percent wrong. The kid's first, unannounced, unadvertised show brought nearly 1,400 pieces of mail. And his rating nowadays . . ." He leaned toward Read and whispered a figure.

"Oh," Read said.

"We haven't given it out yet, because those buzzards at Purple simply wouldn't believe us. But it's the plain simple truth. There isn't another TV personality today who has the following the kid has. He's on short wave, too, and people tune him in all over the globe. Every time he has a show the post office has to send two special trucks with his mail. I can't tell you how happy I am, Read, that you scientists are thinking about making a study of him at last. I'm terrifically sincere about this."

"What's he like personally?" Read asked.

"The kid? Oh, very simple, very quiet, very very sincere. I like him tremendously. His father—well, he's a real character."

"How does the program work?"

"You mean, how does Herbert do it? Frankly, Read, that's something for you researchers to find out. We haven't the faintest idea what happens, really.

"I can tell you the program details, of course. The kid has a show twice a week, Mondays and Fridays. He won't use a script"—Wellman grimaced—"which is pretty much a headache for us. He says a script dries him up. He's on the air for twelve minutes. Most of that time he just talks, telling the viewers about what he's been doing in school, the books he's been reading, and so on. The kind of stuff you'd hear from any nice, quiet boy. But he always makes one or two predictions, always at least one, and never more than three. They are always things that will happen within forty-eight hours. Herbert says he can't see any farther ahead than that."

"And they do happen?" Read said. It was less a question than statement.

"They do," Wellman replied, somewhat heavily. He puffed out his lips. "Herbert predicted the stratosphere liner wreck off Guam last April, the Gulf States hurricane, the election results. He predicted the submarine disaster in the Tortugas. Do you realize that the FBI has an agent sitting in the studio with him during every show out of range of the scanners? That's so he can be taken off the air immediately if he says anything that might be contrary to public policy. They take him that seriously.

"I went over the kid's record yesterday when I heard the University was thinking of studying him. His show has been going out now for a year and a half, twice a week. He's made 106 predictions during that time. And every one of them, every single one of them, has come true. By now the general public has such confidence in him that"—Wellman licked his lips and hunted for a comparison—"that they'd believe him if he predicted the end of the world or the winner of the Irish Sweepstakes.

"I'm sincere about this, Read, terrifically sincere. Herbert is the biggest thing in TV since the invention of the selenium cell. You can't overestimate him or his importance. And now, shall we go take in his show? It's just about time for him to go on."

Wellman got up from his desk chair, smoothing the design of pink and purple penguins on his necktie into place. He led Read through the corridors of the station to the observation room of sudio 8G, where Herbert Pinner was.

Herbert looked, Read thought, like a nice, quiet boy. He was about 15, tall for his age, with a pleasant, intelligent,

somewhat careworn face. He went about the preparation for his show with perfect composure which might hide a touch of distaste.

". . . I have been reading a very interesting book," Herbert said to the TV audience. "Its name is *The Count of Monte Cristo.* I think almost anybody might enjoy it." He held up the book for the viewers to see. "I have also begun a book on astronomy by a man named Duncan. Reading that book has made me want a telescope. My father says that if I work hard and get good grades in school, I can have a small telescope at the end of the term. I will tell you what I can see with the telescope after we buy it.

"There will be an earthquake, not a bad one, in the north Atlantic States tonight. There will be considerable property damage, but no one will be killed. Tomorrow morning about ten o'clock they will find Gwendolyn Box, who has been lost in the Sierras since Thursday. Her leg is broken but she will still be alive.

"After I get the telescope I hope to become a member of the society of variable star observers. Variable stars are stars whose brightness varies either because of internal changes or because of external causes . . ."

At the end of the program Read was introduced to young Pinner. He found the boy polite and co-operative, but a little remote.

"I don't know just how I do do it, Mr. Read," Herbert said when a number of preliminary questions had been put. "It isn't pictures, the way you suggested, and it isn't words. It's just—it just comes into my mind.

"One thing I've noticed is that I can't predict anything unless I more or less know what it is. I could predict about the earthquake because everybody knows what a quake is, pretty much. But I couldn't have predicted about Gwendolyn Box if I hadn't known she was missing. I'd just have had a feeling that somebody or something was going to be found."

"You mean you can't make predictions about anything unless it's in your consciousness previously?" Read asked intently.

Herbert hesitated. "I guess so," he said. "It makes a . . . a spot in my mind, but I can't identify it. It's like looking at a light with your eyes shut. You know a light is there, but that's all you know about it. That's the reason why I

read so many books. The more things I know about, the more things I can predict.

"Sometimes I miss important things, too. I don't know why that is. There was the time the atomic pile exploded and so many people were killed. All I had for that day was an increase in employment.

"I don't know how it works, really, Mr. Read. I just know it does."

Herbert's father came up. He was a small, bouncing man with the extrovert's persuasive personality. "So you're going to investigate Herbie, hum?" he said when the introductions had been performed. "Well, that's fine. It's time he was investigated."

"I believe we are," Read answered with a touch of caution. "I'll have to have the appropriation for the project approved first."

Mr. Pinner looked at him shrewdly. "You want to see whether there's an earthquake first, isn't that it? It's different when you hear him saying it himself. Well, there will be. It's a terrible thing, an earthquake." He clicked his tongue deprecatingly. "But nobody will be killed, that's one good thing. And they'll find that Miss Box the way Herbie says they will."

The earthquake arrived about 9:15, when Read was sitting under the bridge lamp reading a report from the Society for Psychical Research. There was an ominous muttering rumble and then a long, swaying, seasick roll.

Next morning Read had his secretary put through a call to Haffner, a seismologist with whom he had a casual acquaintanceship. Haffner, over the phone, was definite and brusque.

"Certainly there's no way of foretelling a quake," he snapped. "Not even an hour in advance. If there were, we'd issue warnings and get people out in time. There'd never be any loss of life. We can tell in a general way where a quake is likely, yes. We've known for years that this area was in for one. But as for setting the exact time—you might as well ask an astronomer to predict a nova for you. He doesn't know, and neither do we. What brought this up, anyway? The prediction made by that Pinner kid?"

"Yes. We're thinking of observing him."

"Thinking of it? You mean you're only just now getting around to him? Lord, what ivory towers you research psychologists must live in!"

"You think he's genuine?"

"The answer is an unqualified yes."

Read hung up. When he went out to lunch he saw by the headlines that Miss Box had been found as Herbert had predicted on his radio program.

Still he hesitated. It was not until Thursday that he realized that he was hesitating not because he was afraid of wasting the university's money on a fake, but because he was all too sure that Herbert Pinner was genuine. He didn't at bottom want to start this study. He was afraid.

The realization shocked him. He got the dean on the phone at once, asked for his appropriation, and was told there would be no difficulty about it. Friday morning he selected his two assistants for the project, and by the time Herbert's program was nearly due to go out, they were at the station.

They found Herbert sitting tensely on a chair in studio 8G with Wellman and five or six other station executives clustered around him. His father was dancing about excitedly, wringing his hands. Even the FBI man had abandoned his usual detachment and impassivity, and was joining warmly in the argument. And Herbert, in the middle, was shaking his head and saying, "No, no, I can't," over and over again doggedly.

"But why not, Herbie?" his father wailed. "Please tell me why not. Why won't you give your show?"

"I can't," Herbert said. "Please don't ask me. I just can't." Read noticed how white the boy was around the mouth.

"But, Herbie, you can have anything you want, anything, if you only will! That telescope—I'll buy it for you tomorrow. I'll buy it tonight!"

"I don't want a telescope," young Pinner said wanly. "I don't want to look through it."

"I'll get you a pony, a motorboat, a swimming pool! Herbie, I'll get you anything!"

"No," Herbert said.

Mr. Pinner looked around him desperately. His eyes fell on Read, standing in the corner, and he hurried over to him. "See what you can do with him, Mr. Read," he panted.

Read chewed his lower lip. In a sense it was his business. He pushed his way through the crowd to Herbert, and put his hand on his shoulder. "What's this I hear about you not

wanting to give your show today, Herbert?" he asked.

Herbert looked up at him. The harassed expression in his eyes made Read feel guilty and contrite. "I just can't," he said. "Don't you start asking me too, Mr. Read."

Once more Read chewed his lip. Part of the technique of parapsychology lies in getting subjects to co-operate. "If you don't go on the air, Herbert," he said, "a lot of people are going to be disappointed."

Herbert's face took on a tinge of sullenness. "I can't help it," he said.

"More than that, a lot of people are going to be frightened. They won't know why you aren't going on the air, and they'll imagine things. All sorts of things. If they don't view you an awful lot of people are going to be scared."

"I—" Herbert said. He rubbed his cheek. "Maybe that's right," he answered slowly. "Only . . ."

"You've got to go on with your show."

Herbert capitulated suddenly. "All right," he said, "I'll try."

Everyone in the studio sighed deeply. There was a general motion toward the door of the observation room. Voices were raised in high-pitched, rather nervous chatter. The crisis was over, the worst would not occur.

The first part of Herbert's show was much like the others had been. The boy's voice was a trifle unsteady and his hands had a tendency to shake, but these abnormalities would have passed the average viewer unnoticed. When perhaps five minutes of the show had gone, Herbert put aside the books and drawings (he had been discussing mechanical drawing) he had been showing his audience, and began to speak with great seriousness.

"I want to tell you about tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow"—he stopped and swallowed—"tomorrow is going to be different from what anything in the past has been. Tomorrow is going to be the start of a new and better world for all of us."

Read, listening in the glass-enclosed room, felt an incredulous thrill race over him at the words. He glanced around at the faces of the others and saw that they were listening intently, their faces strained and rapt. Wellman's lower jaw dropped a little, and he absently fingered the unicorns on his tie.

"In the past," young Pinner said, "we've had a pretty

bad time. We've had wars—so many wars—and famines and pestilences. We've had depressions and haven't known what caused them, we've had people starving when there was food and dying of diseases for which we knew the cure. We've seen the wealth of the world wasted shamelessly, the rivers running black with the washed-off soil, while hunger for all of us got surer and nearer every day. We've suffered, we've had a hard time.

"Beginning tomorrow"—his voice grew louder and more deep—"all that is going to be changed. There won't be any more wars. We're going to live side by side like brothers. We're going to forget about killing and breaking and bombs. From pole to pole the world will be one great garden, full of richness and fruit, and it will be for all of us to have and use and enjoy. People will live a long time and live happily, and when they die it will be from old age. Nobody will be afraid any more. For the first time since human beings lived on earth, we're going to live the way human beings should.

"The cities will be full of the richness of culture, full of art and music and books. And every race on earth will contribute to that culture, each in its degree. We're going to be wiser and happier and richer than any people have ever been. And pretty soon"—he hesitated for a moment, as if his thought had stumbled—"pretty soon we're going to send out rocket ships.

"We'll go to Mars and Venus and Jupiter. We'll go to the limits of our solar system to see what Uranus and Pluto are like. And maybe from there—it's possible—we'll go on and visit the stars.

"Tomorrow is going to be the beginning of all that. That's all for now. Good-by. Good night."

For a moment after he had ceased no one moved or spoke. Then voices began to babble deliriously. Read, glancing around, noticed how white their faces were and how dilated their eyes.

"Wonder what effect the new setup will have on TV?" Wellman said, as if to himself. His tie was flopping wildly about. "There'll be TV, that's certain—it's part of the good life." And then, to Pinner, who was blowing his nose and wiping his eyes, "Get him out of here, Pinner, right away. He'll be mobbed if he stays here."

Herbert's father nodded. He dashed into the studio after

Herbert, who was already surrounded, and came back with him. With Read running interference, they fought their way through the corridor and down to the street level at the station's back.

Read got into the car uninvited and sat down opposite Herbert on one of the folding seats. The boy looked quite exhausted, but his lips wore a faint smile. "You'd better have the chauffeur take you to some quiet hotel," Read said to the senior Pinner. "You'd be besieged if you went to your usual place."

Pinner nodded. "Hotel Triller," he said to the driver of the car. "Go slow, cabby. We want to think."

He slipped his arm around his son and hugged him. His eyes were shining. "I'm proud of you, Herbie," he declared solemnly, "as proud as can be. What you said—those were wonderful, wonderful things."

The driver had made no move to start the car. Now he turned round and spoke. "It's young Mr. Pinner, isn't it? I was watching you just now. Could I shake your hand?"

After a moment Herbert leaned forward and extended it. The chauffeur accepted it almost reverently. "I just want to thank you—just want to thank you—Oh, hell! Excuse me, Mr. Herbert. But what you said meant a lot to me. I was in the last war."

The car slid away from the curb. As it moved downtown, Read saw that Pinner's injunction to the driver to go slow had been unnecessary. People were thronging the streets already. The sidewalks were choked. People began to spill over onto the pavements. The car slowed to a walk, to a crawl, and still they poured out. Read snapped the blinds down for fear Herbert should be recognized.

Newsboys were screaming on the corners in raucous hysteria. As the car came to a halt Pinner opened the door and slipped out. He came scrambling back with an armload of papers he had bought.

"NEW WORLD COMING!" one read, another "MILLENNIUM TOMORROW!" and another quite simply, "JOY TO THE WORLD!" Read spread the papers out and began to read the story in one of them.

"A 15-year-old boy told the world that its troubles were over beginning tomorrow, and the world went wild with joy. The boy, Herbert Pinner, whose uncannily accurate predictions have won him a world-wide following, predict-

ed an era of peace, abundance and prosperity such as the world has never known before . . ."

"Isn't it wonderful, Herbert?" Pinner panted. His eyes were blazing. He shook Herbert's arm. "Isn't it wonderful? Aren't you glad?"

"Yes," Herbert said.

They got to the hotel at last and registered. They were given a suite on the sixteenth floor. Even at this height they could faintly hear the excitement of the crowd below.

"Lie down and rest, Herbert," Mr. Pinner said. "You look worn out. Telling all that—it was hard on you." He bounced around the room for a moment and then turned to Herbert apologetically. "You'll excuse me if I go out, son, won't you? I'm too excited to be quiet. I want to see what's going on outside." His hand was on the knob of the door.

"Yes, go ahead," Herbert answered. He had sunk down in a chair.

Read and Herbert were alone in the room. There was silence for a moment. Herbert laced his fingers over his forehead and sighed.

"Herbert," Read said softly, "I thought you couldn't see into the future for more than forty-eight hours ahead."

"That's right," Herbert replied without looking up.

WALKING ALONE

MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

John Larsen stood waiting for the bus to take him to work. It was only the middle of March, but spring had sent out a feeler; the air had a hint of warmth in it and the sky was a deeper blue than winter had known. Across the street little green spikes of leafbuds dotted the poplar trees flanking a billboard.

All at once he remembered sharply springlike mornings in his boyhood, forty years ago. He would wake and see a sky like this through the open window, and his heart would be filled with a strange, nameless emotion, made up of a yearning for something unknown, a longing for something not yet experienced.

The bus was not in sight. If it was late, he would be late too, and Sims would put on his sour face and say, "Busy day, Larsen. Can't you ever get here on time?" But it wouldn't be a busy day—it seldom was. People don't buy rugs and carpets the way they buy vegetables and paper napkins.

"Fed up," Larsen muttered to himself, waiting alone on the dreary corner. "Just fed up." His mind went back to the hour before, and Kate's peevish voice. "For heaven's sake, John, wake up! You want to be late for work? Next thing you know, they'll fire you, and then where'll we be? Hurry up! Think I like having to get up at all hours to cook your breakfast? Least you can do is eat it when I make it."

It was the same old monologue. When he'd left she would crawl back into bed, in her unappetizing curlers, and goodness knew when she'd crawl out again to dawdle through the day. He could fix breakfast himself in half the time she took, but then she wouldn't be a martyr to an inefficient, dreamy failure of a husband.

He shivered in his worn topcoat; it wasn't as springlike as he first thought, although the sun would warm things

soon. His mind flitted to the woods and fields of his childhood, to the freedom and irresponsibility of those far-off years. He peered down the street; there was no sign of the bus.

Abruptly he crossed to the corner drug store, before common sense could change his mind. He fished for a dime in his pocket and went into the phone booth.

"Mr. Sims? This is Larsen. Look, I'm awfully sorry, but I just can't make it today. It's my back; I'm going to the doctor about it. I'll be there tomorrow, no matter how I feel. No, I couldn't hold out till lunchtime—my back's like a toothache. Yes, I know, but— Well, thanks, Mr. Sims. I'll do that, yes, sir. I'm sorry too."

Sims would wonder why he hadn't had Kate phone for him, if he felt so bad. Maybe he'd say it took a younger man to handle the job. Oh, to hell with it; it was too late now to reconsider.

He stayed on that side of the street, and the bus he took was one going in the other direction, away from the city. He rode to the end of the line.

Just to be alone—it was wonderful. Nobody nagging at him, no need to watch the time. He'd never been in the suburb where the bus landed him. For a while he just walked around, admiring houses and gardens—the sort of places he'd once dreamed of living in himself, when he and Kate were first married. Perhaps if they'd had any kids to be ambitious for, or if Kate hadn't turned into the slatternly shrew she'd become—

By noon he was tired of walking. He went back to the little business district and had a hamburger and coffee at a half-deserted lunch room. While he was there he asked about the bus schedule. Just so he got back home at the regular time, Kate would never know and have something new to yell at him about. No danger she'd phone him at the store; she knew they wouldn't call him off the floor except for an emergency. He bought a pack of cigarettes and a magazine and struck off along a promising road leading beyond the town.

It was more than an hour before he found what he wanted—a friendly little wood with a brook running through it and a sunny clearing by the side of an unfrequented road where he coud sit on a fallen tree-stump and read and smoke and let the peace and silence seep into his nerves. Dotted around in the near distance were the tops of

tree-hidden houses on the hill, but none of them was near enough to matter. Only an occasional car passed in either direction, and nobody noticed him in his snug sanctuary. It was very quiet; presently he dozed off.

He awoke with a start, and looked first at the sun and then at his watch. It was 4:40; he had plenty of time to catch the bus. He stood up and stretched, debating whether to walk on a bit farther or turn around and saunter slowly back to the bus stop.

Up the road, in the silence, he heard a shuffling in dry leaves. He peered out, and saw a girl in her early teens coming toward him on the opposite side of the road. He stood back, waiting till she had passed; it might scare the kid to see a strange man suddenly emerge from the woods. Leaning against a tree, he stood watching her.

She was a pretty girl, with long golden hair falling over the collar of her red sweater. She wore a dark blue skirt, red socks, and brown leather scuffs, and under her arm were a few schoolbooks. She was singing to herself as she walked, in a clear, thin, childish voice. Pretty late for her to be coming home from school, but she might have stayed for some student get-together. Probably she lived in one of the houses whose roofs showed above the trees; there must be short cuts up to the hill to them.

She passed him now and he waited for her to go out of sight around a curve in the road. Then he heard a car coming, slowly, from behind them, in the same direction she was walking.

It was a rattletrap old black coupe, with only the driver in it. Larsen caught a glimpse of him—a heavy-set man of about his own age, with a shock of dark hair, and no hat. The car passed him too, and Larsen stepped out onto the road and turned toward the town. Belatedly he thought he could have hailed the car and perhaps got a lift to the bus stop.

The girl was now about a hundred feet away, just nearing the curve. The car had caught up with her. It stopped.

Everything happened so suddenly Larsen could not collect his wits, which were dulled from his unaccustomed nap.

The driver jumped out, said something to the girl, and she shook her head. He grabbed her by the shoulder, hustled her toward the car. She struggled and started to

scream; he clamped one hand over her mouth. He dragged her in, got in after, slammed the door. She jumped up—perhaps she saw Larsen now, where he stood paralyzed with bewilderment—reached for the door handle, tried again to scream. The man struck her twice, knocking her to the floor. Then he took the wheel and drove rapidly away. By the time Larsen, shaking himself from his stupor, had run to the curve, the car and its occupants were out of sight. He had not noticed the license number.

All the way back to the suburban town he pondered what he should do. It was his duty, he knew, to hunt out whatever police the town possessed and report what he had seen. But that would involve explaining why he himself was there, giving his name and address, appearing later as a witness if he had seen a crime committed and the man were caught. Then Sims would know he had lied about his absence from work. Kate would know too. Sims would probably fire him. Kate would make his life an even worse hell on earth. He might never get another job, even one as poor as this one, at his age. He had no money saved, and they were in debt for half the things in the house.

John Larsen had a clear, horrifying view of what he would be letting himself in for if he reported the incident.

He didn't really know the circumstances. The man might even be the girl's father. She might have been playing hooky, just as he had done, or have been disobeying some parental command. What he had witnessed might have been only severe but lawful punishment for some youthful misdemeanor.

Besides, what good could he do? He couldn't actually identify the man—he'd caught just a passing glimpse of him, could never pick him out in any assortment of heavy middle-aged men with thick dark hair. He would only be getting himself into a mess he'd never get out of, and for nothing at all.

He reached the town with time to spare, without catching sight or sound again of the black car; there were byroads all the way, any of which it could have taken. To pacify his conscience, he looked around for a policeman in the business district, but there was no sign of one. Stifling his uneasiness, he took the next bus, found it would land him in the city too early, got off about halfway, and waited for the following one. He reached home at the usual time, and, as usual, found that Kate didn't have dinner ready.

He sat grumpily reading the evening paper, while she complained and scolded at him from the kitchen. They never asked each other for news of their day; there was never anything to tell that would interest either of them.

He had sense enough the next morning to tell Sims that the doctor had said it was merely a touch of lumbago, and that the rest had about fixed it. When he saw Sims' eyes on him he remembered occasionally to grimace and rub his back. By luck he sold a woman a big length of old-fashioned stair-carpeting they'd been trying to get rid of for months. Sims showed his gratification by saying good night and hoping Larsen's back would be better soon. He didn't, however, forget to dock him for the day off. That meant Larsen would have to skip lunches all next week; he couldn't let Kate know his pay was short.

When he stopped to get the paper, two evenings later, there was a picture on the first page. *Have You Seen This Girl?* the caption said. He recognized her instantly. The clothing they described was the same she had worn.

Her name was Diane Morrison, and she was the daughter of the principal of Belleville Consolidated Junior High School, where she was a first-year student. Usually her father drove her to and from school. On Tuesday she had waited for him till half-past four, then he found he would be tied up for another hour at least; so, as had sometimes happened in the past, the father told her she'd better walk the mile or so home and tell her mother he'd be late. When he got there about six she hadn't appeared. She was a reliable child who would have phoned if she had stopped off anywhere. Her parents had searched all the way back to the school and had called all her friends. But nobody had seen Diane. And nobody had seen her since.

Because there was a possibility of kidnaping, the F.B.I. had come into the case. They and the state and county police were combing the woods and hills around Belleville. So far they had found no trace or clue.

"For mercy's sake," Kate snapped, "can't you open your mouth except to eat? Never a word out of you, just wool-gathering. Here I am, cooped up all day long, and you come home and act like I was a piece of furniture or something. How do you think I—"

He let her rave. He was trying to decide. Should he or shouldn't he? Would it help at all if he did? They might spot the man if he described him. But then where would John Larsen be? In the worst trouble of his life.

He glanced at Kate and almost considered telling her the truth and asking her advice. Then he reconsidered, quailing at how she would take it. And he knew what her advice would be—keep out of it and don't get us into an even deeper jam than you've risked getting us into already. Let the police do their work—that's what they're paid for.

He began buying a morning paper as well as an evening one, forcing himself, with a cold fear at the pit of his stomach, to search them for news.

A week later, under a covering of gravel in an abandoned quarry, they found her body. Her skull had been fractured in three places by some heavy instrument like a tire iron. She was covered with cuts and bruises, and she had been violated. Clutched in her right hand was a man's handkerchief, red-and-white checked.

John Larsen lay awake all night, with Kate breathing heavily beside him. By the time the window was turning gray, he had decided to let it go a while longer. He recalled crime stories he had read; there would be fragments of flesh under the girl's fingernails, the scientific cops would find minute threads and hairs on her clothing, they would go over the cars of all possible suspects for fingerprints. In a little place like Belleville they would soon get on to the dark-haired man, unless he was a stranger from some other place.

It was the purest chance that Larsen had witnessed the abduction. Suppose he *hadn't* been there—then they would have had to investigate just as they were doing now. He saw himself trying to explain to some incredulous F.B.I. man just what he was doing on a road near Belleville when he ought to have been at work in the city. Looking back now, his whole day of playing hooky seemed unbelievable childishness. Nobody would understand; they'd be sure he was lying. Why, they might think he'd made up the story just to protect himself. They might put him through a third degree. Lying there in bed, his flesh crawled. And he'd be ruined. The only thing to do was to pretend to himself that that day had never happened. They'd find the man soon, anyway—they always did. And then he'd be glad he'd had the sense to let bad enough alone.

When, three days later, he saw the headline, *Morrison Suspect Captured,* his relief was so great that tears came to his eyes. Standing in the bus, he read the story avidly.

The man arrested was an assistant janitor at the high

school. His name was Joseph Kennelly. He had been under suspicion from the beginning, the story said. He knew the girl by sight, of course. He was unmarried, and lived alone in a two-room shack near the quarry where the body had been found. And he had a police record—not involving sex crimes, but a long series of arrests for disorderly conduct and for driving while drunk. He had spent part of his boyhood in a home for retarded children.

The police theory was that he had seen the girl leave school late, when his own hours of duty were over. There was no question that he had shown an unwholesome interest in her; now, when it was too late, boy students related how Joe had made vulgar cracks about Diane's golden hair and budding figure. He was a slipshod worker, on bad terms with the school principal, and had been in trouble more than once for drinking on the job; Mr. Morrison had threatened to have him fired. So the motives for the crime were clear—revenge and lust.

And the handkerchief was his—a laundry mark proved it. Moreover, he had a deep scratch, a week or two old, on the left side of his jaw.

He denied everything heatedly, of course. He had driven home that day as always, he said, and hadn't left his shack till he went to work the next morning. He hadn't even seen Diane—or anyone else. A nearly empty bottle of whiskey was found in the broom closet at the school, and Kennelly acknowledged he'd been feeling pretty high by the time he left. At home he'd gone on drinking, had passed out about ten o'clock, and hadn't wakened till dawn. Nobody could be found who had noticed him, at the school or elsewhere, between four o'clock Tuesday afternoon and nine Wednesday morning.

As for the handkerchief, he admitted it was his, but he claimed he had lost it somewhere, weeks before. The murderer must have been the one who found it. The scratch? Why, the morning after that big drunk he had been so shaky that he had done it himself while he was trying to shave.

So far, so good: John Larsen read the account with thankfulness that he had let things take their course. Then his heart plummeted like a cannon ball.

Joseph Kennelly was twenty-six years old. His picture showed a tall, skinny young man with lightish hair receding at the temples. And his car was a dark blue sedan.

Larsen reached his home, walking from the bus like an automaton. He threw the paper and his hat on the nearest chair, went into the bathroom, and locked the door: it was the only room in the house where he could be alone to think. "That you, John?" Kate called; then she saw where he had gone and returned to the kitchen. Dinner was just begun, as usual; he often wondered what on earth she did with herself all day. Sat glued to the TV set, probably, just as she used to sit glued to the radio.

Perched on the toilet seat, Larsen wrestled with his conscience. There was no use telling himself any more that his evidence didn't matter. He had seen Diane Morrison kidnaped, he had seen her kidnaper, and it was not Joseph Kennelly. He couldn't phone from home—Kate would be on his neck at once. He must make some kind of excuse to call from outside. He played again with the idea of telling her. No, that was hopeless; he knew Kate.

She tried the doorknob.

"For gosh sake," she called, "what you got the door locked for? You sick or something?"

"I'm all right," he mumbled, and turned the key.

"I never saw such a man! Never a word out of you when you come home—you might think you didn't have a wife. I'm just a servant around here, to make your meals and look after you. Locking yourself in, like I was a stranger! Here I am, all day alone, working my fingers off—"

"What do you want me to talk about? I'm tired."

"And maybe *I'm* not, huh?"

"Let's not fight, Kate," he said wearily. An inspiration came to him. "I've got a fierce headache. If dinner isn't ready, I think I'll walk down to the drug store and get something for it."

"Wait till you've eaten," she said, placated. "That'll make you feel better." She made a conscious effort to achieve a friendly tone. "I was just looking at the paper. Gee, that's awful about that kid, isn't it? I'm glad they got the man. People like that ought to be fried in oil."

"How do you know he's the right one?" he couldn't keep himself from asking.

Kate flared up instantly.

"Well, so I guess you know more than the police, Mr. Smarty! If he wasn't the one did it, why'd they arrest him? They don't arrest anybody till they've got the goods on 'em —anybody can tell you that."

"I guess so," he said feebly, and started to set the table before she told him to.

He did have a headache, and no wonder. Kate's words started him thinking again. She was wrong; they *had* arrested an innocent man. But by that very token, they could never convict him. His mind flitted to the police laboratories he had read about. The hairs and fibers from the girl's clothing would belong to another man, a burly middle-aged man with thick dark hair, whoever he was. There were doubtless lots of other scientific findings he knew nothing about, and they'd all point away from Kennelly. The janitor might be indicted by the grand jury on what they got, but he'd never come to trial—they were sure to find the man who really did it.

And without John Larsen's sticking his fool neck out, to no end but his own ruin.

He didn't go out to phone.

The grand jury did indict Kennelly, and he was held without bail in the county jail. Larsen thought about him a good deal, though the sharp impact of that terrible day was growing dimmer. Tough luck for the guy, to be in prison all this time for something he didn't do. But from all accounts he was no good anyway, and a good scare might straighten him out. Any time now they would find they didn't have enough to try him on, or something would turn up that would lead them to the real criminal—though Larsen realized they wouldn't be looking very hard for any other suspect while they thought they had the guilty man.

Kennelly had a good lawyer—a prosperous uncle had turned up from somewhere and was paying the bill. Lawrence Prather, the lawyer's name was; he'd been defense attorney in a number of local murder cases and nearly always got his client off. Kennelly would be sure to be acquitted, if he was ever tried.

The date was set for the trial.

Larsen persuaded himself that if there had been the slightest doubt in his mind of the man's acquittal he would have sacrificed himself and gone to Prather with his story. But there wasn't any doubt. He heard the fellows talking about the case in the store, heard people sometimes in the bus; it was exciting a lot of interest. Everybody predicted Kennelly would go free, though everybody took it for granted he was guilty. Some of them were just cynical

about justice; some of them thought you couldn't get a conviction on circumstantial evidence alone.

Sometimes, shivering, John Larsen imagined his interview with the defense lawyer. There would be no point in his going to him if he weren't willing to be a witness. And he could hear the prosecutor cross-examining him at the trial.

"And just how did you happen to be at that particular spot at that particular moment, Mr. Larsen?"

There'd be nobody to back him up; it would be just his word against everybody's. The prosecution might make it out that he was a friend of Kennelly's, or had been bribed to toss in this red herring; that he'd made the whole thing up. They might even suspect, or pretend to suspect, that he was covering up not for Kennelly but for himself. The people in that lunch room could identify him; he'd been in Belleville that afternoon. He'd be cleared, of course; but by that time, with all the notoriety, his goose would be cooked.

He stayed away from Prather's office. Kennelly's trial began in October.

Larsen couldn't go, naturally; he had to work. But he followed every word in print. He couldn't keep his mind on anything else. Sims caught him talking about it to a customer, and got angry. "We want people to think about rugs in here, not murders," he said. "If you can't attend your work, Larsen—" Larsen apologized humbly and watched his step.

He was amazed and frightened by the public excitement. It took almost a week to get a jury. Kennelly was booed and yelled at as he was taken to and from court. The sex murder of a young girl was the worst crime imaginable, and people wanted somebody punished for it. Larsen shuddered at the thought of daring to deprive them of their prey. It wasn't safe even to say aloud that he believed Joseph Kennelly might be innocent.

As the trial progressed, Larsen began having nightmares. He couldn't eat and was losing weight. Even Kate noticed and nagged him about it. Like everyone else, she was following the trial closely, and every night she wanted to talk it over. She *knew* Kennelly was guilty, and the electric chair was too good for him. If he went free, he ought to be lynched.

"Oh, shut up!" her husband finally shouted at her.

"I suppose you're sorry for him!" she retorted. "Maybe you wish *you* could do something like that and get away with it!"

Larsen went into the bathroom to keep from answering her.

He waited in vain, during the prosecution, for any mention of hairs or textile fibers; apparently either none had been found or they were being ignored because they did not implicate Kennelly. Nobody said anything about fingerprints or bloodstains in the car, either—doubtless for the same reason. An expert witness did prove that fragments of gravel taken from the seams of the defendant's shoes had come from the quarry, but then Kennelly had often visited the place, which was near his own home. If there were no witnesses to prove Kennelly's alibi, neither were there any to disprove it. The boys from the school who testified to his remarks about Diane had only vague generalities to offer. Larsen began to feel the load lifting from him.

But the defense was little more than a formality. Kennelly himself was his only witness, and he made a poor one —confessedly drunk all through the crucial period. No attempt was made to claim Kennelly was insane, as Larsen had hoped for. Prather gave a strong closing speech, pointing out the lack of direct evidence, pleading that no testimony had actually proved his client's guilt.

But then District Attorney Holcombe pulled out all the stops—denouncing the janitor, exposing his sorry record, calling him "a creature in human form, a vile, vicious rat." The most damning thing of all was that handkerchief. "I just don't believe in coincidences like that," said Holcombe sarcastically. "I'll tell you what I do believe—I believe that poor girl pulled the handkerchief out of Kennelly's pocket while she struggled with him for her honor and her life. And I believe she scratched his face in her feeble attempt to fight back, to escape from the monster who was attacking her."

The audience in the courtroom applauded, and had to be threatened with eviction.

In his charge to the jury Judge Stith tried to be neutral, but the jury could see which way he leaned. They leaned the same way; they remembered vividly the photographs of Diane's pitiful little corpse. Many of them had daughters of their own. Somebody had to be punished for the fiend-

ish crime. They brought in a verdict of guilty on both counts, kidnaping and murder. It took only three ballots, the foreman told reporters afterward, to bring to their senses a couple of sentimental old fools holding out for a reasonable doubt.

But the judge *can't* condemn him to death, Larsen thought wildly. He can't, just on circumstantial evidence. The man will be given a life sentence at the most, and that means he'll be out on parole eventually. That much won't hurt him, a ne'er-do-well like him.

The judge sentenced Kennelly to the electric chair. He had daughters too.

But there's always an appeal, thought Larsen desperately. The appeal would be granted. Kennelly would have another trial, and by that time the truth would surely have come out.

"For heaven's sake, stop *fussing!*" Kate said a dozen times an evening. "What on earth's the matter with you lately? And you're smoking too much, John. I won't have it—you're spending a fortune on cigarettes!"

The appeal was denied.

The district attorney told the papers he was pleased. "Death is too good for a human snake like Kennelly," he said.

Prather did not carry the appeal to the state Supreme Court. "No grounds," he explained.

There *were* grounds. Larsen could furnish them.

Twice he got as far as starting to dial Prather's office. Then he realized all that it would mean, and hung up. Wait and see, he told himself. These things drag on for years, one reprieve after another.

"And why have you delayed so long in bringing me this information, Mr. Larsen?" he could hear the defense lawyer saying.

It would be useless to throw himself on the man's mercy, to beg him to follow up the clue and leave John Larsen out of it. Without his testimony the new evidence would mean nothing. It might mean nothing now, anyway. At the very beginning, when Kennelly was first arrested—or before that—it would have been of use. Now he would only involve himself, he kept telling himself, with small chance of helping Kennelly.

If only there were somebody—anybody in the world—to

whom he could tell everything, who would advise him and protect him and make things come out right!

Kennelly was in the death row at the state penitentiary. The date for his execution was set for three months away.

Then it was two months.

Then one.

Prather took Kennelly's uncle, his only relative, to the governor. The governor was running for re-election the next November. He wasn't reprieving a man convicted of the sex murder of a teen-age girl.

Then it was one week.

Then it was two days.

John Larsen had lost twenty pounds. He was afraid to sleep; once he screamed in a nightmare and woke Kate. He hardly noticed her nagging any more.

"If you're sick, go to a doctor."

"I'm not sick."

"You think I'm a fool? There's *something* wrong with you. What have you been doing, John?" She cast about for possibilities. "John, you tell me!" Suddenly she burst into tears. "I know what it is, and I ain't going to stand for it. You've got some other woman on your mind! If you think, after twenty-seven years, I'll let you—"

Larsen laughed. It wasn't a pretty sound.

Crazy plans flitted through his brain. He would go to Belleville, he would hunt until he found the dark-haired man, he would force the murderer to confess.

All nonsense.

There was no last-minute reprieve. In his heart Larsen knew he hadn't really expected one. Kennelly went to the chair on schedule, shouting his innocence with his last breath.

Reading every painful word of the newspaper story, John Larsen stood at last face to face with the bare truth.

Perhaps he could not have prevented the murder of the girl—though he might have if he had acted at once. But he had done enough.

He had let a man die, in order to hold on to a job he loathed and a wife he hated. He, John Larsen, had murdered Joseph Kennelly, whom he had never seen, as surely as that unknown man had murdered Diane Morrison.

He was a murderer, and murderers ought to die. But he hadn't had the courage to save Kennelly, and he didn't be-

gin to have the courage to die himself. All he could do was to endure, to the last limit of endurance.

At the sight of his face that evening, Kate's words froze on her lips. He picked at his dinner in silence. Immediately after he went to bed. He slept the clock around in the heavy, dreamless sleep of an exhausted animal.

In the middle of the next morning he was displaying a rug to a customer. Suddenly he dropped it and stiffened.

He began to scream: "I did it! I did it! I did it!"

It took two men to subdue him until the ambulance came . . .

And near Belleville a heavy man with a shock of dark hair, a harmless "character" whom everybody knew and nobody ever noticed, prowled the lonely country roads in his old black car, his eyes alert for a good-looking girl walking alone . . .

FOR ALL THE RUDE PEOPLE

JACK RITCHIE

"How old are you?" I asked!

His eyes were on the revolver I was holding. "Look, mister, there's not much in the cash register, but take it all. I won't make no trouble."

"I am not interested in your filthy money. How old are you?"

He was puzzled. "Forty-two."

I clicked my tongue. "What a pity. From your point of view, at least. You might have lived another twenty or thirty years if you had just taken the very slight pains to be polite."

He didn't understand.

"I am going to kill you," I said, "because of the four-cent stamp and because of the cherry candy."

He did not know what I meant by the cherry candy, but he did know about the stamp.

Panic raced into his face. "You must be crazy. You can't kill me just because of that."

"But I can."

And I did.

When Dr. Briller told me that I had but four months to live, I was, of course, perturbed. "Are you positive you haven't mixed up the X-rays? I've heard of such things."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Turner."

I gave it more earnest thought. "The laboratory reports. Perhaps my name was accidentally attached to the wrong . . ."

He shook his head slowly. "I double-checked. I always do that in cases like these. Sound medical practice, you know."

It was late afternoon and the time when the sun is tired. I rather hoped that when my time came to actually die, it might be in the morning. Certainly more cheerful.

"In cases like this," Dr. Briller said, "a doctor is faced with a dilemma. Shall he or shall he not tell his patient? I always tell mine. That enables them to settle their affairs and to have a fling, so to speak." He pulled a pad of paper toward him. "Also I'm writing a book. What do you intend doing with your remaining time?"

"I really don't know. I've just been thinking about it for a minute or two, you know."

"Of course," Briller said. "No immediate rush. But when you do decide, you will let me know, won't you? My book concerns the things that people do with their remaining time when they know just when they're going to die."

He pushed aside the pad. "See me every two or three weeks. That way we'll be able to measure the progress of your decline."

Briller saw me to the door. "I already have written up twenty-two cases like yours." He seemed to gaze into the future. "Could be a best seller, you know."

I have always lived a bland life. Not an unintelligent one, but bland.

I have contributed nothing to the world—and in that I have much in common with almost every soul on earth—but on the other hand I have not taken away anything either. I have, in short, asked merely to be left alone. Life is difficult enough without undue association with people.

What can one do with the remaining four months of a bland life?

I have no idea how long I walked and thought on that subject, but eventually I found myself on the long curving bridge that sweeps down to join the lake drive. The sounds of mechanical music intruded themselves upon my mind and I looked down.

A circus, or very large carnival, lay below.

It was the world of shabby magic, where the gold is gilt, where the top-hatted ringmaster is as much a gentleman as the medals on his chest are authentic, and where the pink ladies on horseback are hard-faced and narrow-eyed. It was the domain of the harsh-voiced vendors and the short-change.

I have always felt that the demise of the big circus may be counted as one of the cultural advances of the twentieth century, yet I found myself descending the footbridge and in a few moments I was on the midway between the rows

of stands where human mutations are exploited and exhibited for the entertainment of all children.

Eventually, I reached the big top and idly watched the bored ticket-taker in his elevated box at one side of the main entrance.

A pleasant-faced man leading two little girls approached him and presented several cardboard rectangles which appeared to be passes.

The ticket-taker ran his finger down a printed list at his side. His eyes hardened and he scowled down at the man and the children for a moment. Then slowly and deliberately he tore the passes to bits and let the fragments drift to the ground. "These are no damn good," he said.

The man below him flushed. "I don't understand."

"You didn't leave the posters up," the ticket-taker snapped. "Beat it, crumb!"

The children looked up at their father, their faces puzzled. Would he do something about this?

He stood there and the white of anger appeared on his face. He seemed about to say something, but then he looked down at the children. He closed his eyes for a moment as though to control his anger, and then he said, "Come on, kids. Let's go home."

He led them away, down the midway, and the children looked back, bewildered, but saying nothing.

I approached the ticket-taker. "Why did you do that?"

He glanced down. "What's it to you?"

"Perhaps a great deal."

He studied me irritably. "Because he didn't leave up the posters."

"I heard that before. Now explain it."

He exhaled as though it cost him money. "Our advance man goes through a town two weeks before we get there. He leaves posters advertising the show any place he can—grocery stores, shoe shops, meat markets—any place that will paste them in the window and keep them there until the show comes to town. He hands out two or three passes for that. But what some of these jokers don't know is that we check up. If the posters aren't still up when we hit town, the passes are no good."

"I see," I said dryly. "And so you tear up the passes in their faces and in front of their children. Evidently that man removed the posters from the window of his little

shop too soon. Or perhaps he had those passes *given* to him by a man who removed the posters from his window."

"What's the difference? The passes are no good."

"Perhaps there is no difference in that respect. But do you realize what you have done?"

His eyes were narrow, trying to estimate me and any power I might have.

"You have committed one of the most cruel of human acts," I said stiffly. "You have humiliated a man before his children. You have inflicted a scar that will remain with him and them as long as they live. He will take those children home and it will be a long, long way. And what can he say to them?"

"Are you a cop?"

"I am not a cop. Children of that age regard their father as the finest man in the world. The kindest, the bravest. And now they will remember that a man had been bad to their father—and he had been unable to do anything about it."

"So I tore up his passes. Why didn't he buy tickets? Are you a city inspector?"

"I am not a city inspector. Did you expect him to *buy* tickets after that humiliation? You left the man with no recourse whatsoever. He could not *buy* tickets and he could not create a well-justified scene because the children were with him. He could do nothing. Nothing at all, but retreat with two children who wanted to see your miserable circus and now they cannot."

I looked down at the foot of his stand. There were the fragments of many more dreams—the debris of other men who had committed the capital crime of not leaving their posters up long enough. "You could at least have said, 'I'm sorry, sir. But your passes are not valid.' And then you could have explained politely and quietly why."

"I'm not paid to be polite." He showed yellow teeth. "And mister, I *like* tearing up passes. It gives me a kick."

And there it was. He was a little man who had been given a little power and he used it like a Caesar.

He half rose. "Now get the hell out of here, *mister,* before I come down there and chase you all over the lot."

Yes. He was a man of cruelty, a two-dimensional animal born without feeling and sensitivity and fated to do harm as long as he existed. He was a creature who should be eliminated from the face of the earth.

If only I had the power to . . .

I stared up at the twisted face for a moment more and then turned on my heel and left. At the top of the bridge I got a bus and rode to the sports shop at Thirty-seventh.

I purchased a .32 caliber revolver and a box of cartridges.

Why do we *not* murder? Is it because we do not feel the moral justification for such a final act? Or is it more because we fear the consequences if we are caught—the cost to us, to our families, to our children?

And so we suffer wrongs with meekness, we endure them because to eliminate them might cause us even more pain than we already have.

But I had no family, no close friends. And four months to live.

The sun had set and the carnival lights were bright when I got off the bus at the bridge. I looked down at the midway and he was still in his box.

How should I do it? I wondered. Just march up to him and shoot him as he sat on his little throne?

The problem was solved for me. I saw him replaced by another man—apparently his relief. He lit a cigarette and strolled off the midway toward the dark lake front.

I caught up with him around a bend concealed by bushes. It was a lonely place, but close enough to the carnival so that its sounds could still reach me.

He heard my footsteps and turned. A tight smile came to his lips and he rubbed the knuckles of one hand. "You're asking for it, mister."

His eyes widened when he saw my revolver.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Look, mister," he said swiftly. "I only got a couple of tens in my pocket."

"How old are you?" I repeated.

His eyes flicked nervously. "Thirty-two."

I shook my head sadly. "You could have lived into your seventies. Perhaps forty more years of life, if only you had taken the simple trouble to act like a human being."

His face whitened. "Are you off your rocker, or something?"

"A possibility."

I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was not as loud as I had expected, or perhaps it was lost against the background of the carnival noises.

He staggered and dropped to the edge of the path and he was quite dead.

I sat down on a nearby park bench and waited.

Five minutes. Ten. Had no one heard the shot?

I became suddenly conscious of hunger. I hadn't eaten since noon. The thought of being taken to a police station and being questioned for any length of time seemed unbearable. And I had a headache, too.

I tore a page from my pocket notebook and began writing:

A careless word may be forgiven. But a lifetime of cruel rudeness cannot. This man deserves to die.

I was about to sign my name, but then I decided that my initials would be sufficient for the time being. I did not want to be apprehended before I had a good meal and some aspirins.

I folded the page and put it into the dead ticket-taker's breast pocket.

I met no one as I returned up the path and ascended the footbridge. I walked to Weschler's, probably the finest restaurant in the city. The prices are, under normal circumstances, beyond me, but I thought that this time I could indulge myself.

After dinner, I decided an evening bus ride might be in order. I rather enjoyed that form of city excursion and, after all, my freedom of movement would soon become restricted.

The driver of the bus was an impatient man and clearly his passengers were his enemies. However, it was a beautiful night and the bus was not crowded.

At Sixty-eighth Street, a fragile white-haired woman with cameo features waited at the curb. The driver grudgingly brought his vehicle to a stop and opened the door.

She smiled and nodded to the passengers as she put her foot on the first step, and one could see that her life was one of gentle happiness and very few bus rides.

"Well!" the driver snapped. "Is it going to take you all day to get in?"

She flushed and stammered. "I'm sorry." She presented him with a five-dollar bill.

He glared. "Don't you have any change?"

The flush deepened. "I don't think so. But I'll look."

The driver was evidently ahead of his schedule and he waited.

And one other thing was clear. He was enjoying this.

She found a quarter and held it up timorously.

"In the box!" he snapped.

She dropped it into the box.

The driver moved his vehicle forward jerkily and she almost fell. Just in time, she managed to catch hold of a strap.

Her eyes went to the passengers, as though to apologize for herself—for not having moved faster, for not having immediate change, for almost falling. The smile trembled and she sat down.

At Eighty-second, she pulled the buzzer cord, rose, and made her way forward.

The driver scowled over his shoulder as he came to a stop. "Use the rear door. Don't you people ever learn to use the rear door?"

I am all in favor of using the rear door. Especially when a bus is crowded. But there were only a half a dozen passengers on this bus and they read their newspapers with frightened neutrality.

She turned, her face pale, and left by the rear door.

The evening she had had, or the evening she was going to have, had now been ruined. Perhaps many more evenings, with the thought of it.

I rode the bus to the end of the line.

I was the only passenger when the driver turned it around and parked.

It was a deserted, dimly lit corner, and there were no waiting passengers at the small shelter at the curb. The driver glanced at his watch, lit a cigarette, and then noticed me. "If you're taking the ride back, mister, put another quarter in the box. No free riders here."

I rose from my seat and walked slowly to the front of the bus. "How old are you?"

His eyes narrowed. "That's none of your business."

"About thirty-five, I'd imagine," I said. "You'd have had another thirty years or more ahead of you." I produced the revolver.

He dropped the cigarette. "Take the money," he said.

"I'm not interested in money. I'm thinking about a gentle lady and perhaps the hundreds of other gentle ladies and the kind harmless men and the smiling children. You are a criminal. There is no justification for what you do to them. There is no justification for your existence."

And I killed him.

I sat down and waited.

After ten minutes, I was still alone with the corpse.

I realized that I was sleepy. Incredibly sleepy. It might be better if I turned myself in to the police after a good night's sleep.

I wrote my justification for the driver's demise on a sheet of note paper, added my initials, and put the page in his pocket.

I walked four blocks before I found a taxi and took it to my apartment building.

I slept soundly and perhaps I dreamed. But if I did, my dreams were pleasant and innocuous, and it was almost nine before I woke.

After a shower and a leisurely breakfast, I selected my best suit. I remembered I had not yet paid that month's telephone bill. I made out a check and addressed an envelope. I discovered that I was out of stamps. But no matter, I would get one on the way to the police station.

I was almost there when I remembered the stamp. I stopped in at a corner drugstore. It was a place I had never entered before.

The proprietor, in a semi-medical jacket, sat behind the soda fountain reading a newspaper and a salesman was making notations in a large order book.

The proprietor did not look up when I entered and he spoke to the salesman. "They've got his fingerprints on the notes, they've got his handwriting, and they've got his initials. What's wrong with the police?"

The salesman shrugged. "What good are fingerprints if the murderer doesn't have his in the police files? The same goes for the handwriting if you got nothing to compare it with. And how many thousand people in the city got the initials L. T.?" He closed his book. "I'll be back next week."

When he was gone, the druggist continued reading the newspaper.

I cleared my throat.

He finished reading a long paragraph and then looked up. "Well?"

"I'd like a four-cent stamp, please."

It appeared almost as though I had struck him. He stared at me for fifteen seconds and then he left his stool

and slowly made his way to the rear of the store toward a small barred window.

I was about to follow him, but a display of pipes at my elbow caught my attention.

After a while I felt eyes upon me and looked up.

The druggist stood at the far end of the store, one hand on his hip and the other disdainfully holding the single stamp. "Do you expect me to bring it to you?"

And now I remembered a small boy of six who had had five pennies. Not just one this time, but five, and this was in the days of penny candies.

He had been entranced by the display in the showcase—the fifty varieties of sweet things, and his mind had revolved in a pleasant indecision. The red whips? The licorice? The grab bags? But not the candy cherries. He didn't like those.

And then he had become conscious of the druggist standing beside the display case—tapping one foot. The druggist's eyes had smouldered with irritation—no, more than that—with anger. "Are you going to take all day for your lousy nickel?"

He had been a sensitive boy and he had felt as though he had received a blow. His precious five pennies were now nothing. This man despised them. And this man despised him.

He pointed numbly and blindly. "Five cents of that."

When he left the store he had found that he had the candy cherries.

But that didn't really matter. Whatever it had been, he couldn't have eaten it.

Now I stared at the druggist and the four-cent stamp and the narrow hatred for anyone who did not contribute directly to his profits. I had no doubt that he would fawn if I purchased one of his pipes.

But I thought of the four-cent stamp, and the bag of cherry candy I had thrown away so many years ago.

I moved toward the rear of the store and took the revolver out of my pocket. "How old are you?"

When he was dead, I did not wait longer than necessary to write a note. I had killed for myself this time and I felt the need of a drink.

I went several doors down the street and entered a small bar. I ordered a brandy and water.

After ten minutes, I heard the siren of a squad car.

The bartender went to the window. "It's just down the street." He took off his jacket. "Got to see what this is all about. If anybody comes in, tell them I'll be right back." He put the bottle of brandy on the bar. "Help yourself, but tell me how many."

I sipped the brandy slowly and watched the additional squad cars and finally the ambulance appear.

The bartender returned after ten minutes and a customer followed at his heels. "A short beer, Joe."

"This is my second brandy," I said.

Joe collected my change. "The druggist down the street got himself murdered. Looks like it was by the man who kills people because they're not polite."

The customer watched him draw a beer. "How do you figure that? Could have been just a holdup."

Joe shook his head. "No. Fred Masters—he's got the TV shop across the street—found the body and he read the note."

The customer put a dime on the bar. "I'm not going to cry about it. I always took my business someplace else. He acted as though he was doing you a favor every time he waited on you."

Joe nodded. "I don't think anybody in the neighborhood's going to miss him. He always made a lot of trouble."

I had been about to leave and return to the drugstore to give myself up, but now I ordered another brandy and took out my notebook. I began making a list of names.

It was surprising how one followed another. They were bitter memories, some large, some small, some I had experienced and many more that I had witnessed—perhaps felt more than the victims.

Names. And that warehouseman. I didn't know his name, but I must include him.

I remembered the day and Miss Newman. We were her sixth-graders and she had taken us on another one of her excursions—this time to the warehouses along the river, where she was going to show us "how industry works."

She always planned her tours and she always asked permission of the places we visited, but this time she strayed or became lost and we arrived at the warehouse—she and the thirty children who adored her.

And the warehouseman had ordered her out. He had used language which we did not understand, but we sensed its intent, and he had directed it against us and Miss Newman.

She was small and she had been frightened and we retreated. And Miss Newman did not report to school the next day or any day after that and we learned that she had asked for a transfer.

And I, who loved her, too, knew why. She could not face us after that.

Was he still alive? He had been in his twenties then, I imagined.

When I left the bar a half an hour later, I realized I had a great deal of work to do.

The succeeding days were busy ones and, among others, I found the warehouseman. I told him why he was dying, because he did not even remember.

And when that was done, I dropped into a restaurant not far away.

The waitress eventually broke off her conversation with the cashier and strode to my table. "What do you want?"

I ordered a steak and tomatoes.

The steak proved to be just about what one could expect in such a neighborhood. As I reached for my coffee spoon, I accidentally dropped it to the floor. I picked it up. "Waitress, would you mind bringing me another spoon, please?"

She stalked angrily to my table and snatched the spoon from my hand. "You got the shakes, or something?"

She returned in a few moments and was about to deposit a spoon, with considerable emphasis, upon my table.

But then a sudden thought altered the harsh expression of her face. The descent of the arm diminuendoed, and when the spoon touched the tablecloth, it touched gently. Very gently.

She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry if I was sharp, mister."

It was an apology, and so I said, "That's quite all right."

"I mean that you can drop a spoon anytime you want to. I'll be glad to get you another."

"Thank you." I turned to my coffee.

"You're not offended, are you, mister?" she asked eagerly.

"No. Not at all."

She snatched a newspaper from an empty neighboring table. "Here, sir, you can read this while you eat. I mean, it's on the house. Free."

When she left me, the wide-eyed cashier stared at her. "What's with all that, Mable?"

Mable glanced back at me with a trace of uneasiness. "You can never tell who he might be. You better be polite these days."

As I ate I read, and an item caught my eye. A grown man had heated pennies in a frying pan and tossed them out to some children who were making trick-or-treat rounds before Halloween. He had been fined a miserable twenty dollars.

I made a note of his name and address.

Dr. Briller finished his examination. "You can get dressed now, Mr. Turner."

I picked up my shirt. "I don't suppose some new miracle drug has been developed since I was here last?"

He laughed with self-enjoyed good nature. "No, I'm afraid not." He watched me button the shirt. "By the way, have you decided what you're going to do with your remaining time?"

I had, but I thought I'd say, "Not yet."

He was faintly perturbed. "You really should, you know. Only about three months left. And be sure to let me know when you do."

While I finished dressing, he sat down at his desk and glanced at the newspaper lying there. "The killer seems to be rather busy, doesn't he?"

He turned a page. "But really the most surprising thing about the crimes seems to be the public's reaction. Have you read the Letters from the People column recently?"

"No."

"These murders appear to be meeting with almost universal approval. Some of the letter writers even hint that they might be able to supply the murderer with a few choice names themselves."

I would have to get a paper.

"Not only that," Dr. Briller said, "but a wave of politeness has struck the city."

I put on my coat. "Shall I come back in two weeks?"

He put aside the paper. "Yes. And try to look at this

whole thing as cheerfully as possible. We all have to go some day."

But his day was indeterminate and presumably in the distant future.

My appointment with Dr. Briller had been in the evening, and it was nearly ten by the time I left my bus and began the short walk to my apartment building.

As I approached the last corner, I heard a shot. I turned into Milding Lane and found a little man with a revolver standing over a newly dead body on the quiet and deserted sidewalk.

I looked down at the corpse. "Goodness. A policeman."

The little man nodded. "Yes, what I've done does seem a little extreme, but you see he was using a variety of language that was entirely unnecessary."

"Ah," I said.

The litte man nodded. "I'd parked my car in front of this fire hydrant. Entirely inadvertently, I assure you. And this policeman was waiting when I returned to my car. And also he discovered that I'd forgotten my driver's license. I would not have acted as I did if he had simply written out a ticket—for I was guilty, sir, and I readily admit it—but he was not content with that. He made embarrassing observations concerning my intelligence, my eyesight, the possibility that I'd stolen the car, and finally on the legitimacy of my birth." He blinked at a fond memory. "And my mother was an angel, sir. An angel."

I remembered a time when I'd been apprehended while absentmindedly jaywalking. I would contritely have accepted the customary warning, or even a ticket, but the officer insisted upon a profane lecture before a grinning assemblage of interested pedestrians. Most humiliating.

The litte man looked at the gun in his hand. "I bought this just today and actually I'd intended to use it on the superintendent of my apartment building. A bully."

I agreed. "Surly fellows."

He sighed. "But now I suppose I'll have to turn myself over to the police?"

I gave it thought. He watched me.

He cleared his throat. "Or perhaps I should just leave a note? You see I've been reading in the newspapers about . . ."

I lent him my notebook.

He wrote a few lines, signed his initials, and deposited the slip of paper between two buttons of the dead officer's jacket.

He handed the notebook back to me. "I must remember to get one of these."

He opened the door of his car. "Can I drop you off anywhere?"

"No, thank you," I said. "It's a nice evening. I'd rather walk."

Pleasant fellow, I reflected, as I left him.

Too bad there weren't more like him.

SORRY, WRONG NUMBER

LUCILLE FLETCHER AND ALLAN ULLMAN

She reached for the telephone on the night table once more, spinning the dial with unnecessary force. The light from the bed lamp—the only light glowing in the darkened room—caught in flashing pinpoints the jewels on her moving hand. On her face, softly beautiful in the flattering half-light beyond the lamp's white circle, a frown of annoyance matched her swift, over-energetic manipulation of the clicking dial.

The dialing completed, she sat tensely for a moment, feeling the uncomfortable strain on her back from sitting unsupported in the bed. Then the pulsing of the busy signal squawked in her ear and she slammed the phone back into place, saying aloud, "It can't be. It can't be."

She flounced back against the piled pillows, closing her eyes, shutting out the shadows of the room and the rectangle of hazy night she could have seen through the open window. As she lay there on top of the thin, summer coverlet, she could feel the evening breeze lightly fingering the folds of her nightgown. She could still hear the night sounds floating up from the river and from the streets three stories below.

In a fury of concentration she considered the aggravation that was making that hour one of torment. Where *was* the man? What was keeping him? Why had he picked this night of all nights to leave her alone, to vanish without a call, without word of any kind? That was not like him. Not like him at all. He knew only too well the effect such behavior might have on her. And on him, too. It was unbelievable that he'd deliberately provoke the kind of scene that had nearly done for her once or twice in the past. But if his absence now was not deliberate—what then? Had he been hurt? How unlikely that he'd been hurt without someone notifying her instantly!

There were other aggravations, all stemming from the

larger aggravation of his unexplained absence. There was the matter of the telephone. In many ways that was the most infuriating thing of all—the telephone. She'd been ringing and ringing his office for more than a half hour. Or at least she'd tried to ring his office. Each time she'd dialed the number she'd got a busy signal. Not a "don't answer," which would have been a little more reassuring. But a busy signal. If he was there—and obviously someone was there —was it possible that he'd be on the telephone for a full half hour? Possible? Yes. Probable? No.

She ran over in her mind the things he might be doing, resolutely facing *all* the things he might be doing. Perhaps at last the impediments of illness—her illness—had cracked the reservoir of his patience. He had never seemed to mind the ever-lengthening periods in which she had been unable to respond to him. Although he was a man of intense passion—a vigorous, healthy animal—his self-control had always been inexhaustible. In other words, if she wanted to be plain about it, she'd never dreamed that there could be another woman—or women! But now . . . ?

Somehow that obvious possibility didn't seem to fit the circumstances. Not after she'd driven it out in the open and examined it thoroughly. He was a cautious man. Everything he did was carefully planned and neatly executed. He'd never in a million years be so stupid—or so careless—as to brand himself in so flagrant a manner.

And the milder prospects didn't fit either. He preferred everything on a large scale to match his own boldness, the boldness so perfectly reflected in his powerful, brooding good looks.

Thinking of him, she opened her eyes for a moment, glancing toward the wedding picture in its sleek frame on the night table. Dimly seen, except in the sharp clarity of her mind's eye, were her own ivory-satined magnificence and his towering, broad-shouldered, smiling presence. Nothing about him had changed, she thought. In ten years nothing had altered the clean, muscular lines of his body, or the rare, fleeting smile on his smooth, unlined face.

But she had changed. Only the utmost care controlled the little evidences that time and her now chronic invalidism left behind. Soon, unless she was able to regain her strength, to take advantage of the youth that still remained, even the utmost in art would no longer conceal the deepening network of wrinkles around her eyes, the puckering at

the corners of her mouth, the sagging flesh under her chin. Had he perhaps noticed something more than illness in her aversion to daylight?

She returned to his likes—the things she knew he prized. After ten years of marriage—a marriage she'd planned with almost military thoroughness—she knew perfectly well that her father's fortune had been a mighty bulwark against any restlessness on his part. He had a profound respect for that mountain of money. It was hardly to be expected that he'd ever do anything to place himself out of reach of the Cotterell millions.

That was the way she wanted things, she reminded herself. Let there be no mistake about it. She had always wanted it that way. For the practical relationship with him that now flourished gave her what she wanted most—a man who above all gave force to the illusion she had created, the illusion of a happy marriage. She was envied by her friends, and to be envied was the most desirable state of affairs life had to offer.

The consideration of her tailor-made marriage palled, and once more the irritation of unwanted solitude boiled within her. That damned telephone! There was something fishy about that telephone—about that recurrent busy signal.

It occurred to her that there might be a mechanical defect of some kind in the dialing system. She sat up, reaching for the phone, impatient with herself for having failed to think of it before. She whipped the dial around to "Operator" and waited.

The intermittent purring in the phone was followed by a click and a pleasant voice saying, "Your call, please?"

"Operator," she said, "will you get me Murray Hill 3:0093?"

"You may make that call by dialing," the operator told her.

"But I can't," she said with annoyance. "That's why I called you."

"What is the trouble, madam?"

"Well, I've been dialing Murray Hill 3:0093 for the last half hour and the line is always busy. Which is too incredible."

"Murray Hill 3:0093?" the operator repeated. "I will try it for you. One moment, please."

"It's my husband's office," she said, listening to the oper-

ator dialing. "He should have been home hours ago. And I can't think what's keeping him—or why that ridiculous wire should be busy. His office is usually closed at six o'clock."

"Ringing Murray Hill 3:0093," the operator said mechanically.

Again the busy signal! The confounded, stupid, eternal busy signal. She was about to take the phone from her ear when, miraculously, the signal ended and a man said, *"Hullo?"*

"Hello!" she cried eagerly. "Mr. Stevenson, please."

Again the man said, stupidly, *"Hullo?"*

He had a deep, hoarse, thickly accented voice, a voice easily distinguished though but one word had been spoken.

She moved her mouth closer to the telephone, saying carefully, crisply, "I want to talk to Mr. Stevenson, please. This is Mrs. Stevenson calling."

And the hoarse voice said, *"Hullo, George?"*

Crazily, out of nowhere, a second voice—flat, nasal—answered, *"Speaking."*

In desperation she cried, "Who's this? What number is this, please?"

"I got your message, George," the deep voice rumbled. *"Is everything okay for tonight?"*

"Yeah. Everything's okay. I am with our client now. He says the coast is clear."

It was fantastic. It was unbelievable and impossible. Icily she said, "Excuse me. What's going on here? *I'm* using this wire, if you please."

Even as she spoke she knew they could not hear her. Neither "George" nor the man with the deep voice could hear her. She'd blundered on a crossed wire. She'd have to hang up, dial the operator again, and go through the whole rigamarole once more. At least that was what she ought to do. But she couldn't. The strange men were talking, and what she heard froze her to the phone.

"Okay," the deep voice rumbled. *"Is it still at 11:15, George?"*

"Eleven-fifteen is right. You got it all straight now, I hope."

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well, run it down once more so I know you got it right."

"Okay, George. At 11:00 o'clock the private cop makes

the bar on Second Avenue for a beer. I go in the kitchen window at the back. Then I wait for a train to go over the bridge—in case her window is open and she should scream."

"Right."

"Say, I forgot to ask you, George. Is a knife okay?"

"Okay," the nasal voice of George said flatly. *"But make it quick. Our client does not wish to make her suffer long."*

"I get it, George."

"And don't forget to take the rings and bracelets—and the jewelry out of the bureau drawer," George continued. *"Our client wishes it to look like simple robbery. Simple robbery. That's very important."*

"There won't be no slip-up, George. You know me."

"Yeah. Now once more. . . ."

"Okay. When the cop knocks off for a beer I go in the back window—the kitchen, that is. Then I wait for a train. After I'm through I take the jewelry."

"Right. Now you're sure you know the address?"

"Yeah," the hoarse voice grated. *"It's—"*

Rigid with fear and excitement she pressed the phone to her ear until it hurt her temple. But at that instant the line went dead, followed in a second or two by the steady monotony of the dial tone.

She gasped in horror, crying aloud, "How awful! How unspeakably awful!" Could there be any doubt about the meaning of those queer, unemotional, business-like remarks? A knife! A *knife!* He had said it as blandly as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world to talk of knives and open windows and women screaming.

9:35

She held the phone, staring at it, staring in horror at the cluttered night table. What had she just heard? It couldn't be—it just couldn't be. It was some trick of her imagination—a brief pause in time in which reality faded and a dream swept through the caverns of the mind. But the calm, impersonal tones of George and the man with the deep voice returned with unmistakable clarity the instant she tried to recall them. No dream ever had these sharp outlines. She *had* heard them. As sure as there was substance in that cool black instrument she held in her hand, she had heard those men. She had heard their different voices

synopsizing the death of some poor woman—someone alone, unprotected, someone whose murder had been ordered as one might order the delivery of vegetables from the market.

But what could she do? For that matter, what *should* she do? She had heard all this accidentally, a mechanical slip in the telephone system. She had heard nothing that might lead directly to those awful men. Perhaps it might be best to force from her mind the remembrance of that curious conversation. But, no, there was that woman—perhaps a woman like herself, lonely and friendless—who might be warned if only there was a way. She could *not* stand idly by—she had to do something at once to ease her conscience. With shaking fingers she picked up the telephone and dialed the operator.

"Operator," she said nervously, "I've just been cut off."

"I'm sorry, madam. What number were you calling?"

"Why," she said, "it was supposed to be Murray Hill 3:0093. But it wasn't. Some wires must have been crossed, and I was cut into a wrong number and I—I've just heard the most dreadful thing—a murder—" She raised her voice imperiously. "And now I want you to get that number back for me."

"I'm sorry, madam, I do not understand."

"Oh!" she said impatiently. "I know it was a wrong number and I had no business listening, but these two men—cold-blooded fiends, they were—are going to murder somebody. Some poor innocent woman—who is all alone—in a house by a bridge. And we've got to stop them—we've got to."

"What number were you calling, madam?" the operator asked patiently.

"That doesn't matter," she snapped. "This was a wrong number. A number you dialed yourself. And we've got to find out what is was immediately."

"But—madam—"

"Why are you so stupid?" she raged. "Look. It was obviously some little slip of the finger. I told you to try Murray Hill 3:0093 for me. You dialed it. But your finger must have slipped—and I was connected with some other number—and I could hear them but they couldn't hear me. Now, I simply fail to see why you couldn't make the same mistake again, on purpose. Couldn't you try to dial Murray Hill 3:0093 in the same sort of careless way?"

"Murray Hill 3:0093," the operator said quickly. "One moment, please."

As she waited, her free hand moved over the medicine bottles on the night table, picking up the tiny lace handkerchief that lay crumpled among them. She was dabbing at her forehead with it when the busy signal sounded, the operator cut in to say, "That line is busy, madam."

In her anger she punched the side of the bed with her fist. "Operator!" she called. "Operator! You didn't try to get that wrong number at all. I asked you explicitly. And all you did was dial correctly. Now I want you to trace that call. It's your duty to trace that call!"

"One moment," said the operator pleasantly, if resignedly. "I will connect you with the Chief Operator."

"Please," she said, settling back indignantly against the pillows. Then another soothing, calmly efficient voice said, "Chief Operator," and once more she concentrated on the mouthpiece of the phone, talking with exaggerated care, her voice strained with annoyance.

"I'm an invalid, and I've just had a dreadful shock—over the telephone—and I'm very anxious to trace a call. It was about a murder—a terrible cold-blooded murder of some poor woman, tonight—at 11:15. You see, I was trying to reach my husband's office. I'm all alone—my maid is off and the other servants sleep out. My husband promised to be home at six—so when he didn't get home by nine I started to call him. I kept getting a busy signal. Then I thought something might be wrong with the dial and I asked the operator to try the number for me. And when she did I got on a crossed wire and heard this ghastly conversation between two killers. Then I was cut off again before I could find out who they were, and I thought if you could connect me again with that wrong number, or trace it, or something. . . ."

The Chief Operator was gentle and understanding—almost maddeningly so. She explained that only live calls could be traced. Calls that had been disconnected couldn't be, of course.

"I know they must have stopped talking by now," she said sharply. "They weren't exactly gossiping. That's why I asked your operator to try to get them back right away. You'd think a simple thing like that . . ."

The bitter criticism in her voice failed to ruffle the Chief

Operator. "What is your reason for having this call traced, madam?"

"Reason!" she exclaimed. "Do I have to have any more reason than I've already given you? I overheard two *murderers.* The murder they were talking about is going to take place tonight—at 11:15. A woman's going to be killed —somewhere in this city. . . ."

The Chief Operator was sympathetic—and reasonable. "I quite understand, madam," she said. "I would suggest that you turn this information over to the police. If you will dial the operator and ask . . . "

She hung up for an instant, then picked up the receiver, waiting for the dial tone. Fury rose within her, flushing her pale cheeks, shutting her off from everything but the feverish twirling of the dial. She heard nothing of the whispering noises of ships cutting through the black river, or the rush, rush, rush of traffic slipping steadily along the express highway that skirted the river's edge. She heard nothing of the clanking and groaning of steel on steel, of the *cluckety-cluck, cluckety-cluck* of the train's approach to the bridge. She didn't notice the trembling of the window frames in her room—the vibrations transmitted molecularly from the shivering bridge. Not until the train had reached the roaring peak of its crescendo did she hear it, and by then the operator was saying, "Your call, please?"

"Give me the police," she said, wincing as the scream of tortured steel echoed in the night and then slowly died away.

While the phone purred she became once more aware of the oppressive warmth. She touched her forehead and the damp flesh under her eyes with her handkerchief. Then a tired voice said, "Police Station. Seventeenth Precinct. Sergeant Duffy speaking."

"This is Mrs. Stevenson—Mrs. Henry Stevenson—of 43 Sutton Place," she said. "I'm calling to report a murder . . ."

"*What* was that, ma'am?"

"I said I want to report a murder . . . "

"A *murder,* ma'am?"

"If you will only let me finish, please . . . "

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's a murder that hasn't been committed yet, but it's going to be. . . . I just overheard plans for it over the telephone."

"You say you heard this over the telephone, ma'am?"

"Yes. Over a wrong number the operator gave me. I've been trying to get them to trace that number myself—but everybody is so stupid. . . ."

"Suppose you tell me where this murder is supposed to happen, ma'am."

"It was a perfectly *definite* murder," she said witheringly, sensing the policeman's doubt. "I heard the plans distinctly. Two men were talking. They were going to murder some woman at 11:15 tonight. She lived in a house near a bridge."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And there was a private policeman on the street. He goes some place on Second Avenue for a glass of beer and then this killer is supposed to climb in a window and murder this woman with a knife."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"And there was some third man there—a client—that's what they called him—who was paying to have this—this terrible thing done. He wanted the woman's jewelry taken so it would look like a burglary."

"Yes, ma'am. Is that all, ma'am?"

"Well, it's unnerved me dreadfully—I'm not well . . . "

"I see. And when did all this take place, ma'am?"

"About eight minutes ago."

"And what is your name, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Henry Stevenson."

"And your address?"

"Forty-three Sutton Place. That's near a bridge. The Queensboro Bridge, you know. And we have a private patrolman on our street—and Second Avenue . . . "

"What was that number you were calling, ma'am?"

"Murray Hill 3:0093. But that wasn't the number I overheard. Murray Hill 3:0093 is my husband's number. I was trying to call him to find out why he hadn't come home—"

"Well," the policeman said dully, "we'll look into it, Mrs. Stevenson. We'll try to check it with the telephone company."

"But the telephone company said they couldn't check the call if the parties stopped talking. Personally I think you ought to do something far more immediate and drastic than just checking the call. By the time you track it down —they'll already have committed the murder."

"Well—we'll take care of it, lady," Duffy sighed. "Don't worry."

"But I *am* worried, officer," she complained. "You've got to do something to protect this person. I'd feel a lot safer myself—if you sent a radio car to this neighborhood."

Duffy sighed again. "Look, lady, do you know how long Second Avenue is?"

"Yes, but . . . "

"And do you know how many bridges there are in Manhattan?"

"Of course, but I . . . "

"Now what makes you think this murder is going to happen in your block, if it happens at all? Maybe it wasn't even a New York call you heard. Maybe you were cut into a long-distance line."

"I should think you'd want to try," she said bitterly. "You're supposed to be there for the protection of decent people. But when I tell you about a murder that's going to happen you talk as though I were playing some kind of prank."

"I'm sorry, lady," Duffy said calmly. "A lot of murders happen in this city. If we could stop 'em all, we would. But a clue like you've given me—well, it's vague, see? It isn't much more use than no clue at all. Now, look," he added brightly. "Maybe what you heard was one of them freak radio receptions. Maybe you somehow got hooked up with one of them crime programs. Maybe it was even coming in the window and you thought you heard it on the phone."

"No," she said coldly. "Not at all. I tell you I heard it on the telephone. Why must you be so perverse about this?"

"I want to help you if I can, lady," he assured her. "You don't think there could be something phony about this call —that maybe somebody's planning to murder you?"

She laughed, nervously. "Me?" Why—of course not. That would be ridiculous. I mean—why should anybody? I don't know a soul in New York. I've only been here a few months and I see nobody except my servants and my husband."

"Well, ma'am, then there's nothing for you to worry about," he told her matter-of-factly. "And now—if you'll excuse me, ma'am, I've got some other things needing my attention. Good night, ma'am."

With an exclamation of disgust she dropped the phone

back on its hook. From the night table she took a tiny vial of smelling salts, uncorked it and passed it under her nose. She inhaled the sharp fumes with relief, then replaced the stopper in the bottle, and put the bottle on the table. She returned to the pillows once more, wondering what next to do. Her anger at the casual attitude of the policeman subsided somewhat. After all, it was unlikely that those men could be traced directly. But still, they should do something—they could at least have offered to send out a radio alarm of some kind, to alert the police of the city to this danger that threatened someone—no matter where.

In a little while the urgency that was born of the murder call began to blur. Not that she could put completely out of her mind the memory of that shocking conversation—or the thought of that poor, doomed woman. But her own loneliness became again the most immediately disturbing fact. It was absolutely unforgivable for Henry to have left her this way. If only she had known, she could have insisted that the maid remain.

Now everything around her began to rasp her nerves. The dimly lit room, so richly, so splendidly furnished, became a hateful cocoon from which there was no escape. The expensive array of jars and bottles, boxes and atomizers, glowing dully on the vanity against the wall reminded her only of her ebbing beauty. The plumply upholstered chaise longue, the chairs and gayly covered little benches, the daintily painted boudoir tables—all planted in ankle-deep gray carpeting that matched the walls—looked as though they had been set there by an unimaginative stagehand. The room had no life. It was a cell. The bright chintz drapes and gently moving curtains that framed the windows might as well have been iron bars. She despised the place. She despised her inability to cope with loneliness. Again she snatched up the telephone and dialed the operator.

"Operator," she said, "will you for heaven's sake ring that Murray Hill 3:0093 number again? I can't think what's keeping him so long."

This time no busy signal! Instead the purring ring continued, until the operator broke in to say, "They do not answer."

"I know," she said tartly. "I know. You don't have to tell me. I can hear it for myself." And she hung up.

Now she lay back again, glancing at the half-open door

to the room, listening with that intentness with which lonely people try to draw from the surrounding quiet some sound, some evidence of movement, some sign that the emptiness is at an end. But there was nothing. Her glance fell on the night table, with its clutter of medicine bottles, its clock, its crumpled handkerchief—all grouped around the telephone. Rather absently she reached out, opening the little drawer in the night table, taking out a jeweled comb and a small hand mirror. She began combing her hair, pulling the flashing comb swiftly through it, turning her head from side to side to study it in the mirror. Satisfied that she had restored the elegance of her hairdo, she took a lipstick from the drawer, carefully refreshing the crimson arcs that slashed across her face.

Henry had never failed to show his appreciation of her beauty, she thought. Lately, perhaps, his laconic comments had become a bit less spontaneous, a bit more mechanical. Or did they seem so now in the light of his present unexplained delay? Which reminded her that his whereabouts was still the problem of the moment, the annoying situation about which something had yet to be done.

From the same night-table drawer she took a small, black-covered loose-leaf notebook. She had opened it to the letter "J" when the telephone rang. Swiftly, eagerly she snatched it up, crying musically, "Hello-o-o."

Her gaiety collapsed when she heard, "This is Long Distance. I have a person-to-person call for Mrs. Henry Stevenson. Chicago is calling."

"Yes," she said. "This is Mrs. Stevenson." And a few seconds later, "Hello, Daddy, how are you?"

"Just fine," Jim Cotterell boomed. "Just fine, Leona. And—how's my girl tonight?"

All her life Leona Stevenson had heard and resented the modified bellow with which her bull-like father customarily conducted his customarily one-sided conversations. Usually he was telling someone what to do. And usually what was done had something to do with big Jim Cotterell's personal comfort or prodigious bank account, or both. His blustering energy and blistering tongue had rolled a pill formula into one of the world's largest pharmaceutical manufacturing businesses. No chemist himself, he'd spotted the vein of pure platinum that streaked the public's passion for self-medication. Chemists—as he liked to say whenever there were no chemists present, and sometimes

when there were—chemists came a dime a dozen. But good salesmen were scarce and worth their weight in gold.

Thirty years ago Jim Cotterell had bullied a corner druggist into selling him for a song the formula for a harmless, and occasionally effective, headache remedy. Today his pills, powders and soothing syrups flowed from a dozen giant plants to every corner of the globe. He ruled this vast corporate network with an iron hand, the same hand that trembled with agitation whenever his daughter, Leona, chose to frown. It was strange about Jim and Leona, and no one knew it better than Jim and Leona.

Leona's mother, who had not survived her daughter's birth, had had a great beauty and a gentle pride. But she had been no match for the hustling demon who had swept her off her feet. Her death had been Jim Cotterell's first defeat, and a major one at that. It had left him empty of all tenderness, of all respect for the pleasanter, less acquisitive instincts. Except in those things that concerned Leona. Leona became not so much an object of love as a kind of souvenir of love. He tended her as a lost and shivering hunter would tend a flame. And as she grew he began to be afraid. Not that the flame would consume him, but that it would die.

Leona, inheriting beauty from her mother, had within her a queer mixture of her mother's pride and her father's stubbornness. As the years went by she developed no particular strength of character from this lopsided brew. Instead she became overly shrewd, overly calculating, determined to have her own way whatever the issue. And at whoever's expense.

Jim, for reasons carefully concealed in the depths of his aggressive nature, encouraged his daughter's excesses of temperament. In some twisted manner it pleased him—or satisfied some need in him—to have this one shrine before which he might abase himself. On the surface he had excused his indulgence by attributing to Leona a delicacy of health that threatened her life. His fears in this regard had been conveniently supported by the family physician who, frankly puzzled by Leona's tantrums, had advised a policy of appeasement. The ease with which she had, in childhood, made both sword and shield of an imaginary affliction had encouraged her, until in later years a pattern of illness established itself with all the manifestations of the real thing. The memories of childhood sank below the sur-

face of her consciousness—only the alarming physical symptoms appearing at moments of extreme stress remained. So that now, in her thirties, she believed herself hopelessly at the mercy of a weak heart. Her physician, still puzzled, thought this might be so. There were certainly plenty of indications to support his judgment. He had continued to treat her accordingly. Only when she had determined to go to New York did he suggest she consult another heart specialist.

"How's my little girl tonight?" Jim had asked.

"I'm terribly upset," she said, pouting.

"Upset?"

"Well, who wouldn't be upset?" she asked. "Wondering where Henry is, and—hearing a murder being planned right over the telephone!"

"For heaven's sake, honey, what in blue blazes are you talking about?"

"I was trying to get Henry at the office. And somehow I got on a crossed wire and I heard these two men talking about killing some woman . . . "

"Now wait a minute," Jim said hoarsely. "Let me get this straight. Why were you trying to get Henry at the office—at this time of night?"

"Because he simply hasn't come home. I don't know what's happened. I tried him at the office, and I kept getting a busy signal. Until these two men got on, that is."

"Really, dear," her father roared, "this thing gets my cork. This guy hasn't another responsibility in the world and he pulls a trick like this. Even if he went to that meeting in Boston, he should have . . . "

"Boston?" she cried. "What about Boston?"

"Didn't Henry say?" he asked. "There's a druggists' convention in Boston and in his last report Henry wrote that he was thinking about running up there. But even if he made up his mind at the last minute, he had no right to go without letting you know."

"Maybe he's tried," she said doubtfully. "Maybe he's been trying to get me at the same time I've tried to get him. If he had to catch a train he might . . . "

"He might, my eye! Nothing should have kept him from getting word to you."

"I know."

"Well, no need to worry, dear. I'll straighten Henry . . ."

"The trouble is," Leona broke in, "I can't help worrying. That phone call I heard . . . "

"Relax, honey. It was probably a gag—a couple of clowns. Who'd talk about a real murder over the phone?"

"It *was* real," she assured him sullenly. "And I don't feel at all right about it—alone in this house."

"Alone! You mean even your servants . . . ?"

"Of course," she said.

"Well, if that doesn't beat . . . Did you call the police?"

"Certainly. They weren't much interested. It's a crazy sort of thing."

"Well, you've done all you could under the circumstances. So don't let it bother you any more, honey. And tomorrow," he added, his voice heavy with the weight of his anger, "tomorrow we'll have a little talk with Henry—wherever he is."

"All right, Dad. Good night."

"Good night," he said, "and I wish you'd come home, dammit. The place is like a morgue. I don't know why I ever let Henry talk me into . . . Well, take care of yourself and don't worry. I'll call you tomorrow."

Leona hung up, the faintest trace of a wry smile on her face, thinking how Henry hated those calls to, or from, his father-in-law. Not that Henry ever said anything, but his hate was something you could feel rather than see, or hear.

9:51

She was somewhat appeased by her father's concern, and by the thought of scorching retribution awaiting Henry. Nevertheless she was unable to persuade herself to relax and permit time to answer her questions. Of the ominous talk between "George" and that other knife-wielding fiend, she had done everything she could to bring it to the attention of the police. There was no reason why in all honesty she could blame herself if some tragedy occurred. Tomorrow's papers would probably reveal the end of that story—if end there was. And if some innocent soul *was* found stabbed to death, and robbed, she'd have Henry write to the newspapers, and to the Police Commissioner, and perhaps to the Mayor, disclosing the casual, disinterested manner in which the Police Department treated information of so vital a nature. Then, too, she thought,

they would have to investigate a real mystery, since her testimony would prove the robbery was only a fake and that someone had hired the poor woman's murderer. Such a thing would be a sensation in the press, and her unselfish attempt to forestall the crime would certainly make headlines. Her friends in Chicago would be amazed at her daring. And she an invalid—or very nearly one.

But where was Henry? She had interrupted her thoughts several times to listen again to the tiny sounds—amplified by the raptness of her attention—that might mean someone's presence in the house. A board creaked, or a bit of paper fluttered in the gentle breeze, and for a moment she'd fancy she'd heard a step, or a human breath. Each time her heart would beat faster in anticipation; each time disappointment fed the flame of her resentment. She couldn't lie there just *waiting*. She could, at least, make some efforts to get news of Henry.

She remembered the little black notebook and fished it out of the night-table drawer, turning again to the J's. There was an entry for a "Miss Jennings," and next to it the number: Main 4:4500.

This she dialed.

The birdlike ladies who nested in the Elizabeth Pratt Hotel for Women were twittering madly in the main lounge. It was Bingo night, and perched around a score of tables—bridge tables, library tables and just plain tables borrowed from the dinning room—the ladies concentrated their attention on the cards in front of them, clucking, chirruping, occasionally crowing as the numbers were called.

It was a fusty room, ancient, threadbare, smelling of old velvet and respectability. Dim and dusty paintings in enormous gilt frames hung on the fading brown walls. Overstuffed settees and chairs, separated by tables holding an assortment of pottery lamps with fringed shades, stood against the walls in stiff array. Overhead a tortured brass chandelier, on which the substitute illuminating gas cocks spoke the age of skepticism in which it had been manufactured, shed a kind of light from clusters of shaded electric bulbs. There was nothing in or about the room to disturb the illusion of the past in which most of the hotel's guests lived.

At one end of the room a large bony woman in rusty

black peered through her pince-nez at the numbers she was drawing from the drum before her. As each number revealed itself to her close inspection she would cock her head on one side, look out across the lounge, and call the number in a loud, high, piercing voice. Then her thin face would crack in a smile, and she'd prepare to draw another number. The process had been going on for some time with monotonous regularity, when an unprecedented interruption threw the lady with the pince-nez completely off balance.

A wispy little woman in gray, with starched collar and cuffs, had crept into the lounge and raised a hesitant hand toward the number-caller. "H-s-s-s-t!" she said. "Miss Jennings—!"

The lady addressed, startled and outraged, glared at the intruder. "Please!" she said sharply, and began once more to select a number from the drum. But the intruder, although visibly intimidated, was not to be put off. "It's the phone," she murmured apologetically. "For you . . . Miss Jennings . . . a Mrs. Stevenson . . . "

Miss Jennings, holding the cardboard slip in midair, looked sharply at the nervous little woman. "Who?" she asked, startled.

"A Mrs. Stevenson . . . If she's still holding on . . . "

Miss Jennings' eyes widened, and the pince-nez on her beak trembled. "Oh!" she cried. "Tell her I'll be right there." Then, rotating her head with its dyed black topknot toward her audience, she said excitedly, "I'm terribly sorry, ladies. I hope you won't mind. It's an urgent call from Mrs. Stevenson . . . You know—Mr. Cotterell's daughter . . . Mr. Cotterell who owns the Cotterell Company . . . My company . . . " And off she flew.

Sailing out of the lobby, past the desk behind which the switchboard was located, she called out to have Mrs. Stevenson put through to her room. This was at the end of a long, narrow corridor on the first floor—a distance she seemed to negotiate without once setting foot on the carpeted stairs or the corridor's bare boards. She unlocked her door, flung herself into the monstrous green velour chair next to her brass bedstead and swooped up the telephone—all in one continuous motion. "Hel—hello. Hello, Mrs. Stevenson," she puffed, her beady eyes more birdlike than ever now that the pince-nez lay at the end of its silken cord in her lap. "So nice of you to call."

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you," Leona said.

"Why, not at all," Mrs. Jennings cried. "I was just participating in a bit of entertainment here at the hotel. I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"No," Leona told her, "you haven't. I only wanted to ask you if you knew where Mr. Stevenson might be. My phone—has been busy so much this evening that I—I'm afraid he may not have been able to call me. And I'm most anxious. . . ."

Miss Jennings clutched the phone tighter to her bony bosom. A gleam of unholy interest awoke in her eyes. This *was* exciting.

"Why, no," she said breathlessly, "I haven't any idea. It's odd that he hasn't reached home yet."

"Would he have had some reason for working late?" Leona asked.

"N-no. I don't think so. He wasn't there when I left at six."

"He wasn't?"

"No. As a matter of fact he was only there for a few minutes during the day. That was around noon. He went out with that woman then and that was the last I saw of him."

"Woman—?"

"Why, yes," Miss Jennings said, the gleam brighter than ever. "There was a woman who waited more than an hour for Mr. Stevenson to come in. Very anxious, she was."

Leona hesitated a moment. Then she asked, tremulously, "Was—was it—someone Mr. Stevenson knew? Someone who'd been there before?"

"N-n-n-no. She'd never been there before. I don't believe. And Mr. Stevenson didn't seem to—to want to recognize her. At first, that is."

"Do you remember her name, Miss Jennings?"

"It was Lord—L-O-R-D, *Mrs.* Lord. I believe her first name was Sally.

"Well, what did they do?" Leona demanded.

Miss Jennings cast her glance at the ceiling, recalling just what had happened that day.

"Mr. Stevenson seemed a bit embarrassed. I could tell he was trying to make the best of the situation, though. He told Mrs. Lord he had an appointment, and asked her if she would care to see him another day. She said, no, it was important. So Mr. Stevenson suggested that she have a bite

to eat with him before his appointment. Then they went out."

"And he didn't come back at all?"

"No, Mrs. Stevenson. I left at six, as I told you, and he hadn't come back. There was only one message for him during the afternoon."

"A message? From whom?"

"Oh, it was from that Mr. Evans—the man who calls Mr. Stevenson every week. A regular pest he is too."

"Well," Leona said falteringly, "this is all very strange. But I'm sure if it were anything important Mr. Stevenson would have told me. He's always telling me the things that happen at the office."

"Yes, Mrs. Stevenson." There was a faint, mocking smile on her face as she said it.

"Tell me," Leona continued, "did Mr. Stevenson say anything about a trip to Boston? He—he mentioned something to me . . . "

"Oh, that!" Miss Jennings said. "He did report to Mr. Cotterell that he might go to the convention in Boston. But if he went today—I wouldn't know."

"Well, thank you," Leona said as brightly as she could. "Thank you very much, Miss Jennings. I won't keep you any longer."

"Thank *you*, Mrs. Stevenson. It's been a pleasure. I hope I've been helpful. Most of us in the office—well—we sort of envy you, Mrs. Stevenson. Mr. Stevenson is so devoted to you."

"Yes," Leona said, "he is—"

"I hope you liked the flowers today," Miss Jennings went on. "I thought camellias would be nice, for a change. . . . "

"Very nice," Leona said. "Good-bye, Miss Jennings."

Miss Jennings said "Good-bye" and hung up. She leaned back, staring contentedly at the brass ceiling fixture from which three naked bulbs sprayed light. She saw neither the harsh light nor anything else. Her eyes were turned inward, inspecting what promised to be a startling, juicy secret. She had no doubt that it was a secret, or something that had been a secret. Any simple explanation of Mr. Stevenson's strange actions she rejected at once. There had always been something a little odd about Mr. Stevenson. An atmosphere of conflict that his rugged, handsome face and reserved bearing did not dispel. He certainly spent little

enough time in the office, when you came to think of it. And Miss Jennings, with her devious mind spinning along in high, was coming to think of everything.

Pale and shaken, Leona fell back against the pillows. So that *was* it! What could not happen had happened! The fool! The utter damned fool! To get himself trapped in a shoddy affair with a wench he'd known years ago. To get caught at it almost instantly. To expose the casual way he'd treated his duty to her father's company. To force upon her a choice that in one direction meant public disgrace—the shattering of her life's pleasant illusion—or in the other to live a life of private shame, forever defeated by Henry's knowledge that she no longer could destroy him. It was unthinkable! Why had all this happened tonight? Was someone trying to drive her out of her mind? Was someone—Henry perhaps—trying to bring on another heart attack?

Something caught in her memory. . . . That woman's name—Lord. She'd heard that before. Or seen it. Today. Some time today she'd come across that name. It was difficult, in her anxiety, to recall where she'd seen it. She *had* seen it, she was certain. And in an instant she remembered where. Swinging her feet off the bed she stood up, shakily at first. She walked toward her vanity table, switching on one of the lamps that stood at either end of it. Her eye fell upon the white card by the flower bowl—the card that had come with the camellias Henry had sent today. "All my love, Henry," he had written. She snatched it up, tearing it to shreds, strewing them on the floor. She began to rummage among the litter on the vanity, until behind a row of perfume bottles she saw it—a slip of paper with a few lines on it in the maid's heavy scrawl. As she picked it up the telephone rang.

She scuttled back to the bed, the paper clutched in her hand, and picked up the phone. A man's voice—hollow, tired, elderly, with an unmistakable British accent, said, "Mr. Stevenson, please."

"He's not in," she snapped. "Who's calling?"

"This is Mr. Evans. When do you expect him? It's very urgent. I've been telephoning his office, and he doesn't seem to be there."

"I'm sure I don't know where Mr. Stevenson is," she replied. "You'd better call back later."

"In about fifteen minutes?" the man asked. "I haven't much time. I'm leaving the city at midnight."

"All right," she said. "In about fifteen minutes."

"Thank you," he murmured, "I will. And—you'll tell him that I called, please? In case he does come in? The name is Evans—E-V-A-N-S. It's very important."

Evans and his call drifted out of her mind the moment she had hung up. She moved the slip of paper she'd taken from the vanity under the light. It was headed: "Calls for Mr. Stevenson." Underneath were three brief entries:

3:10 P.M. Mr. Evans. Richmond 8:1112.

4:35 P.M. Mr. Evans. Richmond 8:1112.

4:50 P.M. Mrs. Lord. Jackson Heights 5:9964.

There it was. Mrs. Lord! Calling Henry right in his own home—in *her* home. It was ridiculous. There were limits to that sort of thing, and one had been reached now. She reached for the telephone, dialing the Jackson Heights number, her face frozen, jealous, hard as flint. The fingers of her free hand flickered in a nervous, silent tattoo on the edge of the bed as she waited. Then the call signal clicked off and, incongruously, a child's reedy voice said, "Hello, this is the Lord residence."

Puzzled, Leona said, "I'd like to speak to Mrs. Lord, please."

"One moment," the child said. "I'll see if she's in."

She could hear the jar as the phone was set down. Faintly a man's voice said, "Is that for me, son?" She heard the child say, "Mommy," and then there was a confused murmur of male voices, not quite near enough to the telephone to be distinguishable. She strained to listen, to recognize, if possible, the men speaking. But there was nothing familiar about either of their voices. Suddenly she tensed, grinding the phone into her ear in her desire to strengthen the sounds she heard. For distinctly she had heard the name "Stevenson" emerge from the blur of talk. And "Cotterell Corporation"! And "Staten Island." After that someone—a woman—moved close to the phone, cautioning the child to get back into bed, saying to one of the men, "Fred—how could you? He was out on the sidewalk in his bare feet." Then there was a grating sound as the phone was picked up, and the woman said, "Hello?"

Leona's mouth had suddenly filled with cotton. She paused for a second to swallow. "Hello," she managed to say. "Mrs. Lord?"

"This is she."

"This is Mrs. Henry Stevenson, Mrs. Lord. I—I don't believe we have met—but I understand you saw my husband this afternoon?"

"Oh—why—yes," the other replied with some hesitancy.

The woman's obvious nervousness released Leona's tongue.

"Ordinarily, of course, I wouldn't dream of bothering you, Mrs. Lord," she said with heavy sarcasm. "But—as it happens—my husband hasn't come home this evening. I can't seem to locate him at all. And I thought perhaps you might give me some idea . . ."

"Oh—why—yes," the woman said again, faintly.

"I can't hear you, Mrs. Lord. Will you please speak up a little?"

"Certainly—I—"

"Is there anything wrong?" Leona asked icily. "You're not keeping something from me, I hope."

"Oh, no . . . Could I call you back?"

"Call me back? Why?"

"Because I . . ." The woman's voice suddenly changed from quiet desperation to an odd, strained gaiety. "It's my bridge day, you know."

"What's that?" Leona demanded. "What has bridge got to do with it? Excuse me, but I don't understand you at all, Mrs. Lord!"

"And then there's that trip to Roton Point," the woman went on idiotically.

"Look here," Leona said harshly, "are you trying to make fun of me, Mrs. Lord? Just in case you don't happen to know, I'm an invalid. I can't stand very much aggravation. Now tell me: Is my husband there with you? Is he? Tell me the truth!"

"It's three eggs separated," the woman babbled, "two measuring cups of milk, a third of a cup of shortening. Cream the shortening with a little sugar, then add a level tablespoon of flour . . ." For a second there was silence, than the woman whispered into the phone. "Leona . . . Leona . . . it's Sally Hunt, Leona. Remember? I'm sorry to be so ridiculous, but my husband was standing so near. I can't talk here. I'll call you back as soon as I can. Wait for me . . ." And she was gone.

Leona lay back in the bed, relaxing a little. She was completely bewildered by this latest revelation. How

strange that Sally should re-enter her life at this time!

Sally Hunt!

Sally had been in love with Henry, probably was still, although she seemed to be married and a mother. She'd been in love with him when she'd invited him to that dance at college. That was the night Leona had picked him out of the crowd. It was so long ago. But she found it easy to remember that night.

Dance music had been blasting from the phonograph perched on the Assembly Hall stage. Below, in the large room hung with banners and paper streamers, couples danced, or stood and talked, or wandered off to the refreshment table. Most of the boys looked alike—crew haircuts, baggy slacks, tweed jackets. And the girls had their own uniform—sloppy sweaters and skirts, hair worn long and knotted at the nape of the neck.

But there were two who were different.

The man dancing with Sally was certainly no college lad. His clothes matched, his hair was cut conventionally and carefully groomed, his dancing was definitely on the unimaginative, nonviolent side. He was tall, solidly knit, darkly handsome. It was easy to see from the adoring way Sally looked up at him that something more than festival spirit had brightened her glance.

There was nothing particularly revealing in the young man's face. He looked over Sally's head at the rest of the dancers with an air of indifference that came close to being patronizing.

Leona, a sophisticated, pallid beauty in black faille with her shining hair in a shoulder bob, was as noticeable in that crowd of youngsters as an ocean liner in a fleet of tugs. Everything about her was almost too obviously different. That her difference had been achieved at no small cost was plain. Girls didn't dress that way on pin money.

She watched Sally dancing for a few moments, then marched across the floor, making for Sally's partner's broad back. She tapped him on the shoulders and said, smiling, "May I cut?"

They had been startled, had stood apart, Sally bewildered, the man looking at Leona with unabashed curiosity.

"You don't mind, do you, Sally?" Leona said.

Sally recovered quickly, saying, "You've made a conquest, Henry. Congratulations."

Leona turned her languid gaze full on Sally's partner. "I'm Leona Cotterell. What's your name?"

Before he could answer, Sally swiftly introduced him. "This is Henry Stevenson, Leona."

Leona smiled, tossed her shining head gaily, and moved toward him. "Shall we dance?" she said. That was all there was to it.

They danced, and Leona had been dazzling. There had been no indifference in Henry's expression after that. He had been frankly enchanted, and though there had been nothing flashing in his talk, he had managed to convey a sense of appreciation of her charm, of the gulf that separated her from her schoolmates, that separated her, for example, from girls like Sally.

He guessed right away that her father was Jim Cotterell. "That's the kind of man I admire," he said, "knows what he wants. Has the brains to go out and get it. Money. You can do anything with money. Some day . . ." And he stopped, smiling boyishly.

Leona liked his smile. It did not sprawl all over his face like the toothy contortions of some of the other boys. Rather it seemed as though candles lit in his eyes, and attractive arcs deepened at the upturned corners of his mouth. It added strength to his expression. It was a candid smile, neither naïve nor superior.

As they continued to move slowly about the floor Leona found that there were other things about this self-possessed young man that appealed to her. He made no bones about not being a college man himself.

"Too poor," he said, not smiling now. "My family's too poor. I have to help out as much as I can."

Leona picked that up smoothly. "Some of the most interesting men I know don't go to college. My father isn't a college man."

"Oh?" Henry said in amusement. "Then there's hope for me. To be successful, I mean."

"My father always says," she replied, "if a man hasn't any talent for making money, college won't knock it into him. And if he has a talent for making money, why waste time in college?"

That had pleased Henry. "Hurrah for Father!" he said.

The music stopped and Henry took his arm from her waist, dropped the hand he had been holding. "Thanks," he said, "many thanks."

Leona smiled at him, almost mischievously. "Let's sit the next one out?"

"Now wait a minute," he said in mock horror. "What about Sally? After all, Sally's my—my escort—if she hadn't invited me . . ."

Leona pointed across the floor to Sally talking animatedly to a crew haircut. "Sally's taken care of, and we'll only be a few minutes. Come on out and I'll show you my car—it's a honey."

She took his hand and led him out of the hall. They crossed the moonlit lawn to the road that ran past it. Dozens of cars were parked along the curb, but one was lower and longer and twice as rakish as any of those near it.

"Isn't it *beautiful?*" she crowed. "No one's got one like it. It'll do a hundred and ten, the man said who sold it to Daddy. Daddy thought it was too much car for me, but after I saw it there just weren't any other cars."

"It's something, all right," Henry said. "A Bugatti! Not bad! Not bad at all!"

Leona took his arm. "How'd you like to drive it?" she urged. "Just down the road a bit. No one will miss us."

He'd agreed quickly enough, and she could clearly remember now how he had loped back across the lawn to get her fur jacket and his own overcoat. In a matter of minutes they had been roaring down the road, top down, the Bugatti trembling with impatient power. The sharp winter air sliced at their faces, stirring them with tingling exhilaration. She knew now—as she thought about it—that it wasn't herself, or the outlandish car, that accounted for Henry's almost frenzied pleasure in that drive. It was what she and the throbbing car represented—not seen always from afar, not dreamed about, but here under his hand. That was why his face, as he drove, was alight. That was why he had cast aside the reserve of the dance floor.

She had sensed most of what later she knew for fact, and her mind had begun even then to scheme, to plan, to fix a pattern for the future. There was already in this brief encounter an element of certainty growing within her. She directed him to make a turn which brought them shortly to a dead-end.

"Some car," he said, slowing reluctantly to a halt. "This baby can really roll. I'd like to take it out some day and turn it loose."

"You will," she answered slowly. She reached out and turned off the ignition. "Let's sit for a minute. I want to talk."

"Say," he said laughing, "I hardly know you. I'm afraid you'll have to take me home. Or must I get out and walk?"

Leona leaned back against the roadster's cushion to look at the night sky, black velvet strewn with stars, torn in one place by a cold blade of moon.

"Sally Hunt," she said, dreamily. "I'd never put the two of you together in a million years."

He turned from the wheel to face her, his arm across the back of the seat. "Why not?"

"Oh—just a feeling. I've been around a good deal. My father's taken me everywhere—abroad and so forth—and I've met a lot of people. You begin to classify people after a while—after you've traveled like that. You and Sally just aren't in the same class. You're worlds apart."

"You mean money," he said bitterly. "You mean her family's got money and I oughtn't to try to cut in on that kind of setup?"

"You're completely wrong," she said hastily. "I wasn't thinking of that at all."

"No? What then?"

"I was thinking that Sally's right for that small town you both come from. But you're different."

"I'm different, am I? You can tell all that—now?" His little laugh was derisive.

"Why not?" she asked. "Look at those kids back at the dance. College boys from nice, rich, respectable families. But you made them look like babies. And most of them will be babies all their lives."

"And me?"

"You're not a baby, Henry. Maybe you've never been a baby."

That was when he had leaned over and kissed her—roughly, expertly, long enough to start little shivers of ecstasy racing along every nerve in her body.

Then he'd settled back, looking at her like a craftsman inspecting the product of his art. "I've always wanted to kiss a million dollars," he said.

She smiled slyly. "Would you like to try for two million?"

She'd caught him off balance, forcing him to grin in spite of himself. She'd drawn his claws—for a moment, anyway—and his eyes had sparkled with amusement.

"Ouch!" he'd said, and then, "Maybe I am a little dryer behind the ears than those punks back at the dance. But it's only because I've had to make my own way so far—and not so far at that."

"You'll go far. I know you will. It's in the way you look. The way you affect other people. People like me."

His expression had grown cold and cynical again. "This is really funny," he said. "Me sitting here soaking up flattery from a girl whose millions of dollars and fur coats and Bugatti roadsters I'll never see again."

"You don't know," she said. "You don't know—anything."

"I don't get it."

"You will," she said softly, "by-and-by. Tell me about yourself, Henry. Where do you come from? Who're your people?"

He laughed cynically. "That's an easy story to tell. I come from what is usually referred to as 'the wrong side of the tracks.' My old man delivers coal when he's sober, and speeches about poverty when he's drunk. My mother would have been all right if she hadn't fallen for Father. She had some education, and wanted more. Instead she's worn herself out raising six kids, keeping them alive and out of trouble, with a roof—a leaky roof—over their heads and something or other to go in their stomachs. That's all. The American dream."

"But what about you?" she asked. "You don't look exactly as though—as though—"

"As though the seat was out of my pants? As though I broke cigaretttes in half to make them last longer? No," he said, "it isn't that bad. My mother made me go to high school, instead of going to work after I'd finished the eighth grade. In high school they found out I could run fast with a football under my arm. I was big stuff. Sally Hunt took me around to meet her family—in our town the Hunts are considered pretty fancy—and her old man took a liking to me. He got me a job in the town's biggest drugstore."

"A drugstore!" she exclaimed. "Why, Henry, it's fate!"

"Sure," he grinned, accepting her sarcasm, "I thought you'd feel that way."

"Tell me more," she cried gaily. "Are we still in the same business?"

"Of course," he said. "I'm now the manager of everything except the prescription department. Local boy makes good. Good sodas, good sandwiches . . ."

"What about Sally?" she asked.

The brief, silly moment was gone. He hesitated, the brooding look that seemed most natural to him returning to his face.

"Sally's a good kid," he said. "We're good friends. Nothing more. Her family's been swell to me. Helped me out when things got too tough at home. But I don't know. Sometimes I feel as though . . ."

He wasn't looking at her now. His eyes were fixed on something distant, something as far away as the black woods beyond the fields at the far side of the road, something much farther than either of them could see.

"Yes?" she prompted gently. "As though . . .?"

"As though I'm trapped. As though no matter what I do —how hard I work—I'll never get what I want because I want too much."

They sat in silence. Henry offered her a cigarette, took one himself and lit them both. His outburst seemed to have left him charged with unspoken anger. Finally he exhaled a huge plume of smoke, turned toward her with a grin on his face and said, "You and your damned Bugatti! Let's get back to the dance."

They drove back swiftly, saying nothing until he'd parked the car and opened the door for her to step out. Then she caught his sleeve. "How'd you like to meet my father, Henry?"

"Sure," he said. "That would be fine. We have a lot in common. We're both in the drug business." He laughed, not bitterly this time, but to show her that he thought the situation quite funny.

"I mean it," she said. "I think he'd like you. Especially if I told him to. He's coming to New York next week-end and I'm going to cut classes next Saturday. Why not meet us?"

"You know," he said slowly. "Why not? What've I got to lose?"

That had been the beginning. Henry, like a restive colt, hadn't been too easy to handle at first. Pride, his independence, his knowledge that one of the richest girls in America took a special interest in him, a very special interest in him, made him suspicious. But she could wait. Henry had said that maybe he wanted too much. That was the key with which she'd unlock his heart. With the world in his grasp, his pride couldn't hold out. And when that had crumbled she'd have what she wanted.

She remembered that almost comical scene with Sally Hunt, not long after the dance. Sally had come to her room one afternoon, somewhat hesitant, but with determination clouding her pretty, usually cheerful face.

"Leona, there's something I've got talk to you about."

Leona was bending over a couple of suitcases on her bed. She looked up at Sally, saying peevishly, "Well—say it, for goodness' sake, and get it over with. I'm leaving for Chicago in a few minutes."

Sally had stared at the floor for a moment, then abruptly lifted her eyes and leveled them at Leona. "You've been seeing a lot of Henry these past few weeks, Leona, and there's something . . ." She hesitated.

"Yes?" Leona was obviously scornful.

"There's something I felt—I thought—I ought to tell you."

"You said that before. And I say, out with it."

"He's not the type—to play around with, Leona. Don't play around with him any more—please."

"And who says I'm playing around with him?" Leona wanted to know, stalking to her closet for another armful of clothes.

"Oh—Leona—he's not your kind—any more than the others . . ."

Leona stopped dead in her tracks. "I like your nerve . . ."

But Sally went on earnestly, "If you don't stop now, you'll regret it, Leona. Henry's not right for you. I've known him almost all my life. My father's helped him. My whole family has treated him almost as though he were one of us. And he's all right when one of us is near him—to sort of look after him. But he's—he's all sort of twisted up inside. He's sweet and kind and gentle—for a while, and then he has—moods. He wants things he can't get. And deep down inside of him it drives him wild. That's when he needs—us. Oh, I suppose I do love him. But the

understanding is more important than the love. He isn't safe with someone who doesn't understand him. He's done things that—that would get him into all kinds of trouble if people didn't know about him."

Leona laughed recklessly. "It's a nice trick, but it'll get you nowhere, Sally. You just can't stand the competition. As a matter of fact, I think a great deal of Henry Stevenson. And I understand him. And I happen to think he's much too good for that town of yours. If I want to show him a good time, introduce him to certain people, that's my business. If I want to marry him—that's my business, too."

"Marry him!" Sally gasped. "You don't mean that. You're kidding."

Leona smiled complacently. "Is there any good reason why I shouldn't?"

Sally had folded up after that, she remembered as she stirred restlessly on the bed. There hadn't been much fight in Sally. And a lot of good it would have done her if there had been.

Fight hadn't done Jim Cotterell much good, either, although he'd struggled like a steer at branding time.

"But the fellow has nothing," Jim had said a year later, a hint of pleading in his rumbling voice. "Sure, he's a well set-up lad. But he's an ordinary kid—common as rocks—a dime a dozen. After all the money I've spent on your education—taken you abroad—given you everything you've ever wanted—why do you want to throw yourself away?"

"I love him," Leona said clearly, staring her father in the eye.

"Rubbish!" Jim bellowed. "You're just being stubborn."

She argued with him stubbornly to establish once and for all that she wasn't being stubborn. She loved Henry. She said it repeatedly. But Jim knew better. She loved Henry the same way she'd loved that Bugatti roadster, he'd roared.

"The trouble with you," Leona blazed, "is that you don't want me to marry anybody. You only want me to say here, and stay home—with you."

Defiance stiffened her whole body as she stood there. Jim, looking miserable, walked up and down the length of

his den, his beefy face almost purple with dismay and displeasure.

"It's not true—not at all," he said, halting before her. "You know I'd give you anything in this world. I've always given you what you wanted—let you do what you wanted to do, without any thought of my own feelings. But this time it's different. Marriage is a big thing for a girl in your position. I've worked hard. I've built a big business. For me? No! First for your mother, now for you. When I die, you'll get it all. And I wouldn't want to see some dumb cluck get his hands on it just because you'd saddled yourself with him. At a time when you were too wrought up to think properly, too.

"Listen to me, honey," he went on. "You must think about this some more. Give yourself a year—say—to see if this lad wears well. See him as much as you want. And then, if you still want him . . ."

His reasonableness only fueled her impatience.

"You're hateful!" she cried. "Selfish and hateful. You don't care about me. You're thinking only of yourself and that hateful old business. You've taken a dislike to Henry simply because you think he'll interfere with your selfish plans. Suppose he *is* a country boy. What were you when you started—down there in Texas?"

She was trembling with rage. She gloated at the immediate concern that spread swiftly over Jim's face.

"Take it easy, honey," he begged. "You'll make yourself sick."

"Sick!" she shouted. "Make myself sick! You're the only one who's making me sick. You and your wonderful business and your wonderful money. You don't care if they drive me into my grave, just so they're safe and nobody takes them away from you."

She began to sob, and Jim tried to put his arm around her. She moved away from him, sinking dejectedly into a chair. "I—I don't want to talk about it any more," she said sadly through the tears. "I don't feel very well . . ." And then, with furious concentration, she had managed to faint, hearing, as she approached the welcome dark, her father frantically summoning the butler.

The wedding had been a well-oiled, richly caparisoned triumph. She recalled readily the exultant, passionately pos-

sessive vibrance with which she had uttered, "I—Leona—take thee—Henry—"

And Henry's bearing had measured up to her hopes. Neither nervous—nor overly relaxed—his manner had charmed the wedding guests. Already he had begun to absorb the soothing, emollient effects of contact with endless luxury. If within himself there were any lingering doubts, any reservations, she'd quickly disperse them. For the present he carried himself perfectly, and she was proud.

Even Jim had seemed, for a few moments at least, to warm to the scene. But she knew his smiling, tired face hid much misery. Jim would never completely accept Henry. Never. No matter how hard he tried.

All of this had occupied her thoughts during the wedding and after at the breakfast in Jim's great house. To her Henry was a project undertaken, an equation to be solved. She intended to solve the equation, complete the project at any cost. In the end Jim would have to admit his mistake. The pleasure of that victory not yet won bubbled merrily in her brain as she deftly—unseen by anyone—guided Henry's hand through the maze of silverware that gleamed on the breakfast table.

During the long European honeymoon that followed she had been pleased by the unembarrassed ease with which Henry submitted to her teaching. There was no doubt that the limitless offering of luxury she made to him, coupled with her lacquered good looks and the exceptional willingness of her body, had disarmed him. He accepted her teaching with good grace, even with appreciation. If she insisted upon choosing his clothes, and the way in which he was to wear them, it was a matter for delight rather than annoyance or indifference. He seemed quick to realize how important these things really were in her world, how much more comfortable he could feel if his appearance was correct, his manner beyond reproach. And he was not unaware of the way his rugged, husky handsomeness was set off by all this careful grooming.

Leona watched him settle into a life in which the past—whatever it had been—vanished, or so she thought. It didn't really matter. The important thing was that he would in time become so entranced with the life she sketched for him that no power would ever be strong enough to challenge its values. Which was the way she wanted things to be.

A look of triumph—a smile of smug satisfaction—played over her worn and fretful features as she lay there thinking of what had happened since the night Sally Hunt introduced her to Henry.

Just then she heard a throaty blast from one of the ships in the river. The smile faded as she started up, glancing at the medicine bottles on the night table, at the clock next to them. As she did so the telephone came to life, startling her.

9:55

It was Sally.

"I'm sorry I had to be so silly and mysterious just now," she said. "I couldn't talk. I was afraid my husband would overhear me. So I found an excuse to slip out to this phone booth."

"Well," Leona said, "it certainly was odd, to say the least."

"You'll probably think the whole thing is peculiar, Leona—hearing from me after all these years. But I had to see Henry again today. I've been so terribly worried about him."

"Worried? Why, may I ask, should you be worried about Henry? I hope you'll remember, Sally, it never was much use trying to pull the wool over my eyes."

"I'm not trying to do anything—but help. This may be very serious—deadly serious for Henry. It's a little difficult to explain. I'll try to tell you as quickly as I can."

"Please do," Leona said brusquely.

"Well—Fred, my husband, is an investigator for the District Attorney's office . . ."

"How cozy!" Leona murmured.

"About three weeks ago he showed me a newspaper clipping about you and Henry. It was something or other from the Society page . . ."

"I remember."

". . . and he wanted to know if that wasn't the Henry Stevenson who'd once been my beau."

"Your beau?" Leona said. "How quaint!"

"I told him it was, and Fred laughed and said, 'Well, what d'y' know.' Then he stuffed the clipping in his pocket. I asked him what was so unusual about seeing Henry's name

in the paper. He just smiled and said it was a coincidence—something to do with a case he was on."

"A case!"

"Yes. He said it wasn't anything he could talk about—just a hunch. I tried to worm some more out of him. But he started kidding me about still being in love with Henry . . ."

"Which, of course, you denied," Leona said sarcastically.

"Why, of course—" Sally sputtered. "What a ridiculous thing to say after all these years!"

"Do go on—"

"We were almost finished breakfast by that time. The phone rang. It was one of Fred's men—one of the men from the D.A.'s office. I heard Fred say something about 'Stevenson' and someone who sounded like 'Harpootlian.' Fred said, 'Well, sure we'll go. Tell Harpootlian to set it up. Make it Thursday, around 11:30, at the South Ferry change booth.' "

Sally paused for a moment, and Leona blurted angrily, "Look, Sally. This is all very interesting. But can't you get to the point? Henry may be trying to call me at this very moment. Anyway, what possible connection can there be between Henry and all this rubbish about your husband?"

"I'm telling you as quickly as I can," Sally wailed. "But it's sort of complicated and I've got to tell you the whole story. I wouldn't bother you, Leona, if it wasn't important."

"Well—" Leona sighed in resignation, "what next?"

"I—I followed them—"

"You what—?"

"I followed them. That Thursday morning. I know it's hard to believe—it sounds so crazy—but I was frightened. I wanted to know what was going on. After all, I'd known Henry almost all his life. I—well—there are things about him that are rather strange. I tried to tell you once, years ago."

Leona made impatient little noises. "Really," she said. "But really—is all this necessary? If you're trying to alarm me, Sally, you might as well stop right now."

Sally's reply was even more forlorn. "Please don't be so suspicious of me," she pleaded. "I'm only telling you what happened because it may have something to do with Hen-

ry's absence tonight. I don't know for sure. But let me finish . . ."

"By all means," Leona said. "As quickly as you can."

"It was drizzling that morning. I was carrying an umbrella, so that it shielded my face most of the time, although I don't think that made much difference. It's not hard to follow people—especially in the rain.

"I saw Fred meet two men—one of them was Joe Harris who works with Fred most of the time, the other was a dark, heavy-set fellow with wavy white hair. I suppose he was this man, Harpootlian, Fred had mentioned.

"I waited in the distance until they had moved with the crowd toward the ferry. Then I bought a ticket and followed. It wasn't hard to keep out sight on the ferry. I spent most of the trip in the john, anyway."

"How lovely!" Leona sneered.

"Well, it was the best place . . . Oh, well," Sally continued doggedly, "after they left the ferry at Staten Island they got on the train. I was right behind them. Not in the same car, of course . . ."

"Of course!" Leona echoed.

". . . but a couple of cars away. I watched for them to get off, and when they did I did too. It was still drizzling and nobody paid any attention to me. Most people were hurrying along, anxious to get out of the rain, I imagine."

"Very observant—" Leona said.

"This place was a sort of beach colony, Leona. It looked terribly run down and empty. The streets were all crooked and badly paved. They were covered in spots with drifts of sand. The houses were mostly shacks and right in the center of them was a boarded-up casino. After Fred and the two men had walked off toward the beach I went over to the casino and watched from a corner of the porch. I had a good view from there. And nobody was likely to notice me in the shadows."

"Really!" Leona said, "am I really expected to . . . ?"

"It's true! It's true!" Sally exclaimed. "I told you it would sound crazy . . ."

"Crazy is hardly the word . . ."

"There was only one person besides Fred and the two men in sight—a boy digging clams by the water's edge. The man with the white hair seemed to stop for a moment and stare at the boy, and the boy moved his head just a

trifle toward something in the distance. Then he went on digging, and the men walked over to a luncheonette and went inside."

Leona, fuming with indignation, interrupted, crying, "For heaven's sake, Sally, must you go on like this? Can't you tell me what it's all about without dragging me all over Staten Island? Or are you deliberately keeping me on the phone for some other reason?"

Sally reassured her. "You've got to hear it all. Do you think I like being cooped up in this stuffy booth? The man who owns the store keeps looking over here all the time. He's angry because he wants to close up.

"Anyway," she continued, "I waited there in the drizzle for about an hour and nothing happened. Then, just as I was thinking I'd been a terrible fool for taking that awful trip. I saw something very strange. The boy who'd been digging clams stood up and stretched his arms as though he were yawning. A little while after that I heard a motor boat roaring off the shore, and soon I could see the boat speeding toward the land. When it got near it slowed down and headed for a broken-down wharf next to one of the weirdest houses in the whole place.

"I wish you could have seen that house, Leona. Old as the hills, and slightly lopsided. I suppose its foundation has been sinking for years. It's a scary-looking, scroll-work sort of place, like one of those Charles Addams houses—in the *New Yorker,* you know."

"Please," Leona said, "*will* you get to the point!"

"Well, the boat went to this wharf and a little hunchbacked man hopped out and tied it up. Then a tall, heavy, middle-aged man climbed out of the boat. He was dressed all in black except for a Panama hat, and he was carrying a brief case under his arm. The minute he was safely off the boat the little hunchback started up the motor and raced away.

"The man in black walked down the wharf and into the old house. A moment later the clam-digger picked up his pail and shovel and started toward the luncheonette. I noticed that when he passed there he stumbled, knocking the pail of clams against the luncheonette door. It must have been a signal. He went on down the beach, and Fred and the others slipped out of the luncheonette and walked up to the old house. The man with the white hair knocked, the door opened, and in they went.

"I still don't understand any of it, Leona—who those people were, or what was happening in that house . . ."

"A brothel, no doubt," Leona suggested sarcastically.

". . . but I know they were in there for a good half hour. When they came out, Fred was carrying that brief case—the one the man in black had brought!"

"All right," Leona said, "Fred was carrying a brief case. What next?"

"I don't know," Sally said feebly. "After that I had to hurry to get home—ahead of Fred, of course. But I know," she added vigorously, "that we've got to do something . . . before it's too late!"

Before Leona could reply, a coin clunked to the bottom of the box and the operator interrupted. Sally's five minutes were up. Leona could hear her muttering as she ransacked her purse. Finally she said, "Here it is, operator." And then, "Leona, Leona—are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here," Leona said suspiciously. "This is all very strange, I must say."

"I know," Sally agreed. "It's very strange to me. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't connect Henry with—with the kinds of crimes Fred investigates. That's why I went to see him today—to find out the truth from him."

"And did you?" Leona asked grimly.

"I saw him—you know that—but I couldn't find out anything. I didn't have a chance."

"But you went out with him," Leona said. "His secretary saw you."

"Yes, I went out with him. He wasn't very enthused about it either. Of course I didn't exactly expect him to jump for joy. But he was—hardly civil. He seemed terribly preoccupied. I'd known him to be that way as a boy, and it was usually when he was—well—going through some sort of conflict with himself.

"He asked me if I'd like a bite of lunch with him, and we went to the Georgian Room at the Metropolis. Almost as soon as we sat down a man named Freeman—Bill Freeman—a prosperous-looking elderly man—came over and started to talk stock market with Henry."

"Freeman?" Leona said. "I'm sure we don't know any Mr. Freeman—"

"Henry didn't seem to want to talk about it. But Mr. Freeman kept right on. I got the idea that something very serious had occurred in some stock or other that morning.

Henry said, 'You've got to be wrong some time,' and Freeman laughed and said, *'Some time,* Stevenson? You've had more than a little tough luck, I'd say. But a man in your position can take plenty of punishment. Now me, I've got to be careful. I'm just a small potato.'

"Henry didn't eat much, and neither did I. What bothered me was that with Mr. Freeman there, talking about his troubles, I couldn't say a word. Finally we got up to go, and Freeman left. Henry and I walked into the lobby of the hotel. Henry said he was sorry, he had an appointment in a few minutes, and why didn't I call *you*, Leona, some time and perhaps we could all get together. He didn't seem to mean it, though. Not really. We were standing near the entrance of a broker's branch office in the hotel, and a dried-up little man came out and called to Henry, 'Oh, Mr. Stevenson, I'd like to see you as soon as possible.' Henry turned very pale, it seemed to me, and he said to the little man, 'All right, Mr. Hanshaw, I'll be with you directly.' He said good-bye to me rather hurriedly and I watched him walk into the broker's office. On the door it said, T. F. Hanshaw, Manager."

"Well—he must—he must have said *something* to you," Leona sputtered. "I'm sure he didn't sit there and talk stocks and bonds—about which he knows nothing—every single solitary minute."

"Oh," Sally said, "I *did* ask him if he was happy, and how he enjoyed his work. He said, 'Fine—fine. I'm a big vice-president now. I push more buttons than anybody—except all the other vice-presidents.' He was trying to be funny, but I could tell the bitterness that he really felt. I started to ask him something about it, and that was when Mr. Freeman came over."

"I don't understand this at all." Leona's sneering skepticism was plain. "When Henry left me this morning he was quite his usual self, I assure you. We've been awfully happy for more than ten years—awfully happy. Henry hasn't had a care in the world. Daddy saw to that. And as far as his business association is concerned, I'm quite sure it's most suitable for Henry. You must have mistaken his remarks—if he made them at all. I'm still not so certain this isn't some kind of game you're trying to play with me, Sally."

Again, before Sally could reply, the operator said,

brightly, "Your five minutes are up, madam. Please deposit five cents for the next five minutes."

Sally fished in her bag, saying at last, despairingly, "I haven't another nickel. I'll have to call you back when I get change." Then she added in a rush, "I only want to say—I know now—that Henry *is* in trouble. Fred's working on some kind of report tonight. The case, whatever it is, seems to be coming to a head. He's been telephoning. I've heard Henry's name over and over again. And there's somebody else in it, too—somebody named Evans."

"Your five minutes are up, madam," said the operator.

"Waldo Evans," Sally hurried on breathlessly. "I think that's the name I saw on that Staten Island house . . ."

"Your five minutes are *up*, madam."

10:05

As soon as Sally had hung up, Leona reached for the crumpled bit of paper on which she'd found Sally's phone number. There it was. "Mr. Evans. Richmond 8:1112." She carefully dialed the number, surprised when the operator interrupted after a brief interval to ask, "Are you calling W. Evans, Richmond 8:1112?"

"Why, yes," Leona said apprehensively. "That's right."

"That number . . . has been disconnected."

She sat bolt upright in bed, laying the phone down on its cradle, staring into space—her eyes wide and bewildered. The events of this strange evening chased each other madly through her brain. Henry's absence, the killers on the telephone, Miss Jennings, Sally's crazy tale—none of it made sense. And yet, somehow, there was disaster, danger in the air. Perhaps Henry *was* in trouble. Perhaps there *were* things she'd never suspected going on. The thought that she should be alone in this nerveracking quandary encouraged a rising tide of self-pity. Why had all this to happen tonight—the one night when she had no one—not even a servant—near her? It was too much. Entirely too much for an invalid to bear. Her lips quivering, she dialed the Long Distance Operator and placed a call for Jim Cotterell in Chicago.

The Chicago operator repeated the number, and soon Leona could hear the phone in Jim Cotterell's house ringing. Someone picked it up, and Leona called, "Hello," but

she was instantly cut off. The silence angered her and she made little sounds of exasperation. Seconds went by and then the operator said smoothly, "Mr. Cotterell is not at the Lake Forest number, madam. I will try to locate him for you."

"What?" Leona asked irritably.

"I will call you back, madam," the operator replied, and rang off.

Defeated by her father's habit of running off to night clubs, or all-night card games, she cast about again for someone in whom she could confide her anxiety. It was difficult—being almost a total stranger in New York—to select someone close at hand. The paucity of choice was maddening.

At last she thought of the doctor—Doctor Alexander. Just the person. He'd examined her several times. He'd made several tests, the results of which she still didn't know. She could send for him, and he'd have to come. At least she'd have someone near her for a while.

She groped for the phone, halting the action while another train rolled noisily over the bridge. It was awful—that confounded racket. How foolish, she thought, to live in a city where no one, no matter who he might be, could find peace and quiet. She thought, too, of the train the killer had mentioned (How like this one it must be!) and she shuddered. It was best not to remind herself of that horrible thing.

The noise of the train died away and she made another movement toward the telephone. It chose that moment to ring and she picked it up.

It was the man Evans. She had no difficulty in recognizing immediately the weary, hollow, cultured voice.

"Is Mr. Stevenson there?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Is this Mr. Evans?"

"Yes, Mrs. Stevenson."

She said crisply, "First of all—I want to know the truth about this Staten Island business. I've just heard about it tonight—and I'm nervous enough as it is—what with Mr. Stevenson not being here—and then getting all sorts of strange calls—including two murderers—" She broke off, mystified.

As she talked, she had become increasingly aware of a far-off, whining sound in the telephone. It came from wherever Mr. Evans was. As she listened its volume grew.

It sounded like something she heard many times before—whenever fire apparatus or police cars careened along the city streets. Nervously she called, "Are you still there, Mr. Evans?"

The sound grew louder and again she cried, "Mr. Evans—? Are you still there?"

There was no reply save the whining sound, and in despair she hung up. Immediately the phone rang.

"Hello? Mr. Evans?" she asked quickly. There was no answer. Instead she heard a rushing, grinding roar more frightening than before.

"Mr. Evans—" she called again, loudly, to be answered only by rolling thunder.

Almost hysterically she cried, "Hello! Who's there? Who's calling?" She paused a moment, then cried, "Why don't you answer me?" Again she paused. Then, as no voice arose over the mysterious din, the floodgates of hysteria broke and she screamed, "ANSWER ME!"

From far off, almost buried by the continuous roar, she heard a faint voice say, "Leona—?"

Frightened, Leona asked, "Who's *that*?"

The noise seemed to retreat now and, more distinctly, the voice said, "It's Sally. I'm phoning from a subway station. All the stores close in this neighborhood at ten o'clock. I had to speak to you, so I came down here. I've been home, Leona—since I spoke to you—and *more* has happened."

Leona, her face strained and tense, said, "This time, Sally, please get it all out, or don't bother me any more. I've listened to just about enough tonight."

"There was a police car standing in front of the house when I got home," Sally told her in a rush. "That house on Staten Island burned down this afternoon. The police surrounded it. They captured three men. But this Evans man escaped."

"But who is Evans? What's his connection with Henry?" Leona asked.

"I still haven't found out, Leona. But I do know the whole thing has something to do with your father's company . . ."

"My father's company? But—that's absurd. My father called me from Chicago tonight and he never mentioned a thing."

She stopped, waiting for the noise of another train to

subside. Then she continued, "Now look, let's get this thing straight. Who's been arrested? And why?"

"Three men," Sally answered. "I don't know why."

"And why do you think Henry's one of them?"

"I didn't say he was," Sally said. "I only know he's terribly involved."

Leona's exasperation grew. "Did they say he'd been arrested—or was going to be?"

"No, not exactly."

"Then—what are you talking about?" Leona asked furiously. "Why are you calling me like this? Don't you realize you're frightening me to death?"

"I know, but—"

". . . first I picked up my phone and overheard two horrible murderers . . ."

"Murderers—!"

". . . planning to kill a woman . . . then this creature, Evans, calls me, sounding as though he was talking from the grave . . . then everybody else is either busy or disconnected . . . and now you—for no good reason at all . . ."

"I'm sorry—"

". . . for no good reason at all . . ." She paused for breath. "Are you jealous that I took him away from you? Can't you bear to see me happy?"

"Really, Leona . . ."

"Can't you stop telling lies and making trouble even now? I don't believe a word of it—do you hear?—not a word of it. He's innocent. He's on his way home to me—right now!"

Before she could say any more, Sally hung up.

She lay there fluttering her fingers, wondering if she had been right in allowing herself the luxury of that screaming moment. Despite everything, Sally might really know something that involved danger for Henry. But what? Money? All that talk about the stock market? It was hard to understand. She knew that no one dabbled in the market without money. Henry had no money. His salary as a vice-president of the Cotterell Company was not large, and most of it went into the household expenses which he insisted on paying. His pride made him do that, just as his pride had been responsible for that silly episode of the apartment—the apartment he had wanted to rent for her when they were living with her father in Chicago. No,

Henry really had nothing. It was all right for him to keep the house going. But the heavy expenses were still borne by Jim Cotterell.

She couldn't see any opportunity Henry might have had to play the financier. Even the investments Jim kept turning over to her—to reduce the death taxes that some day would be levied against his estate—were registered in her name, untouchable as far as Henry was concerned. Unless, of course, she died. If she died they'd be Henry's. Her will took care of that—and she was glad for Henry's sake. But what a morbid thought—at this time! She'd put that out of her mind at once. It was too frightening.

But there must be some reason behind Sally's outlandish tale. Unless it was pure fantasy on Sally's part. Unless Sally had some obscure, demented idea of hurting her because of the past. Suppose she had. Was she capable of concocting the story she'd just told? And if she was, why tell it on this particular night?

The mystery grew in her mind, swirling about in clouds of conjecture. Tiny, frightful suspicions blossomed and refused to die. Each hideous thought bred another, and her imagination became a screen across which flashed a succession of fiendishly logical possibilities. Suppose! Suppose! Like nightmares, their overpowering terror brought about sharp physical reaction. Her heart began to beat faster, painfully faster. In breathing she found it was only with effort that she could force the air from her lungs. Trembling, she found her handkerchief and mopped hurriedly at the clammy evidences of fright on her face. She no longer tried to understand what had happened to Henry—or what might have happened. Her concern for herself outweighed all else. The thought of chaos to come, of the toppling of her little edifice of deceit, was unbearable. She had started to rock in agony on the bed when the telephone again shrilled into action.

"Is this Plaza 9:2265?" a man asked.

"Yes, what is it?" she said shakily, almost in a whisper.

"This is Western Union. I have a message for Mrs. Henry Stevenson. Is there any one there to receive the message?"

"This is Mrs. Stevenson."

"The telegram is as follows: 'Mrs. Henry Stevenson, 43 Sutton Place, New York, New York. Darling, terribly sorry, but decided attend Boston meeting at last minute. Stop.

Taking train out. Stop. Back Sunday morning. Stop. Tried to call you but line always busy. Stop. Keep well, happy. Love. Henry.' "

10:15

Dumbfounded, she sat there, her hand moving toward her mouth in a gesture of despair. The Western Union operator wanted to know if a copy of the message was to be delivered and she said, "No, it's—not—necessary," in a faint voice and mechanically replaced the phone. Now she could hear another grinding roar from the bridge and, as in a dream, she slipped from the bed and tottered to the window. One hand on the casement, she looked out at the great Gothic outlines of the bridge silhouetted against the night. Now she could see the train, a long column of segmented light, moving wormlike on to the bridge, its clatter growing louder as it swung toward her, louder and louder and louder, then diminishing as it swung back and away. She could feel the window casement tremble under her hand. She stood there as though hypnotized. Shreds of talk drifted through her mind, *"Then I wait . . . until the train goes over the bridge . . . our client says the coast is clear . . . got your message, George, everything okay for tonight? . . . Where's Henry? Business. What business? . . . sometimes days have gone by when Mr. Stevenson hasn't come in . . . Henry is in trouble . . . desperate trouble . . . darling, terribly sorry, taking next train out . . . then I wait until a train goes over the bridge . . . then I wait until a train goes over the bridge . . .*

With a moan she wrenched herself back to reality, weaving back to the bed, clutching at the impersonal coolness of the telephone. The depth of her urgency was translated into the nervous force with which she spun the dial.

Over the babble of voices in the apartment's small, bare living room a fan droned steadily, its blast directed at the telephone switchboard that lined one wall. It offered comfort to the four girls seated at the board busily working telephone plugs, pressing keys, swiftly writing down the messages that later would be relayed to the Answering Service's customers. On a couch near the open windows a fifth operator was resting. If she turned her head toward the windows she could look out on the stark fire escape,

with one bedraggled geranium tilting crazily in a pot in one corner. Not being a nature-lover, however, the girl lay and watched the others working out their tours of duty. At a signal, she stood up and slid into a seat at the switchboard as the other operator slid out. She slipped the tape of a suspension mouthpiece around her neck and adjusted the receiver over her hair. Her eye caught the first winking light, and she went to work, saying, "No, madam, Doctor Alexander is not in. May I take the message?"

She listened for a moment, her face a picture of alarm. "What is that, madam? No—I couldn't say . . . If you'll give me your name and telephone number? Yes, madam. Yes—Mrs. Stevenson. Mrs. Henry Stevenson. Plaza 9:2265. I'll certainly try to reach him."

Dr. Alexander laid his cards down, arranging them in long, neat rows with his long, neat hands.

"There you are, partner," he said, smiling across the table. "See what you can do with that."

"Perfect!"

"I thought it would be—if I understood your bidding." He turned to his hostess, who sat at his left. "Excuse me for a couple of minutes, will you, Mona? I'd like to call—"

"Of course, Philip," she said. "You know where the phone is—?"

"I'm afraid . . ." he said, rising.

"Right across the hall in the den. You'll see the phone on Harry's desk. Can't miss it."

"Now I remember," he said, "how stupid of me . . ."

Long strides took his erect figure swiftly out of the room. The two women at the bridge table involuntarily turned to watch him go. He commanded much attention from women. As a consequence he also commanded fat fees—deservedly fat, for his skill was at least the equal of his imposing personality.

As he sat now at the desk, the telephone in front of him, the lamplight cut attractive shadows under the lean planes of his face. It was a hawklike face, vigorous, healthy, with lines deepened by time and humor at the corners of his gray eyes and around his thin lips. His hair was a thick dark shock neatly graying at the temples. He was, as so many prosaic husbands had remarked when prosaically footing the bills, an Arrow Collar medico—a screen character armed with a scalpel instead of a script. But they had to admit he was good—even though their wives often ac-

quired a dreamy, beyond-the-horizon kind of look along with the look of health.

Mechanically he dialed the Answering Service, thinking how pleasant it would be if nothing were to disturb his evening. He was enjoying himself—a rare thing for even successful medical men.

"Doctor Alexander," he said to the girl who answered. "Anything for me—and I hope there isn't?"

"Oh—there *is* Doctor," she told him. "A Mrs. Stevenson. Mrs. Henry Stevenson. Very ill and worried, she said. One of your heart patients, she said. She sounded kind of frantic to me."

"Anything else?" he asked.

"No, Doctor, just Mrs. Stevenson."

"Fine," he said. "I'll call Mrs. Stevenson right away."

He took a small, beautifully bound notebook from a pocket of his dinner jacket and picked out Leona's telephone number. He hesitated before dialing, thinking despairingly that this might be a bothersome call. Mrs. Stevenson was inclined to be imperious. She was also inclined to be imperious at great length, and he had no desire now to listen to her interminable elaborations of her condition. Evidently she had frightened the girl at the Answering Service, although there was little chance— Well, grin and bear it, he thought. It can't be too bad, since by this time she must know the real state of affairs.

He dialed the number.

Leona answered the phone in the instant of its first ring. Whimpering one moment, belligerent the next, she flooded his ear with her troubles.

"I'm terribly, terribly frightened," she said weakly. "My heart feels as though it had a clamp around it. The palpitation is so painful—I—I can't bear it. My lungs feel as though they'll burst if I take a deep breath. And I can't stop trembling. I can hardly hold this phone, it's so bad."

"Oh—come—come, Mrs. Stevenson," he said soothingly. "I'm sure it's not that bad. Where's your maid tonight? Can't she sit with you? I'm sure that if someone were there with you you wouldn't be suffering."

"There's no one here—no one," Leona cried. "And I'm not well. I know I'm not well. I want you to come here tonight. You're my doctor and I need you now—tonight."

"Why—I'm afraid I can't," he told her, still professionally silken. "I'd come if I thought it was necessary—but I

know that it isn't. You're just having a bad case of nerves, that's all. If you'll force yourself to relax and sit quietly for a few minutes you'll see how much better you'll feel. If you wish, take a couple of bromides. They'll help quiet your nerves."

Leona cried, "But you know I'm a sick woman. What have I been coming to you for all these months? How can you refuse to see me now, when I need you? What kind of a doctor are you, anyway?"

His jaw set grimly. This was going a bit too far, even for the rich Mrs. Stevenson. "Look here, Mrs. Stevenson," he said briskly. "Don't you think it's about time you faced this thing squarely and began to co-operate with your husband and me?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "What do you mean—co-operate?"

Her question took him aback. "What am I talking about? Why, Mrs. Stevenson, you know as well as I do. I explained it all to your husband—a week ago."

"My husband? You must be trying to aggravate me like all the rest of them. I assure you my husband hasn't said a word to me . . ."

Doctor Alexander was becoming more and more puzzled. "Surely your husband . . . I told him the whole story . . . He promised . . . And he hasn't said a *thing?*"

"What whole story?" Leona demanded. "What story? What is all this mystery?"

Doctor Alexander paused. This was rather confusing.

"Well, that's very, very strange indeed, Mrs. Stevenson. I discussed your case with him—completely—about ten days ago. He came to my office."

"And what did you tell him, Doctor?"

"Really, dear lady, there's hardly time to go into all that now. If you will compose yourself—get some sleep—perhaps we can discuss it tomorrow."

"You'll discuss it now—NOW! Do you hear me!" Leona shrieked. "How do you suppose I could get through this night not knowing—wondering what kind of terrible thing is going to happen to me next? I won't hear of you . . ."

Doctor Alexander shrugged his shoulders, and arched a cynical eyebrow at the telephone.

"All right, Mrs. Stevenson. If you will hold the phone for one moment . . ."

He laid the phone on the desk and walked out of the den

back to the living room. In the doorway he stopped. The hand had been played and they were waiting for him.

"I'm sorry," he told them. "I'm going to be a few minutes longer . . ."

"Another of your conquests, Philip?" his partner said with a shade too much gaiety in her voice.

"Of course. But I'll only be a little while. Hate to hold up the rubber this way, though."

He returned to the den. "Thank you for waiting, Mrs. Stevenson," he said.

"I hope you'll clear up this mystery at once," she demanded, sulkily. "I had no idea that my husband had been consulting you."

"He came to my office to hear my diagnosis of your condition. He told me that he had been warned by your father about your heart—that you were subject to attacks, had been since childhood. He said, in response to my questions, that you had long periods of good health, that he didn't know anything about a heart condition before he married you. Your father told him on your wedding day. It was quite a shock."

"My father is inclined to be—rather blunt."

"Your husband said that you hadn't had any attack until about a month after your return from the honeymoon. Is that right, Mrs. Stevenson?"

"Yes," she said. "I remember that. I was sorry it happened."

"Your husband told me that it had happened because he wanted to break away from your father's firm, and you wouldn't hear of it."

"I—I suppose it was that," Leona agreed. "Henry wanted—quite foolishly, of course—to get out on his own. He's impetuous that way—at times."

"According to him it was more than that, Mrs. Stevenson."

"Oh? More?"

"Yes, I believe there had been some friction with your father—hadn't there?"

"Well, yes . . ." she admitted grudgingly. "Henry had the idea that Dad was not giving him sufficient responsibility. A ridiculous notion."

"Your husband didn't seem to think so."

"Just the same, it was ridiculous. Why, Dad even made

Henry a vice-president and gave him one of the most beautiful offices . . ."

"At any rate, he quarreled with your father and then with you. And you became gravely ill."

"Yes," she said. "I can't stand quarrels."

"Your husband apparently guessed that," the doctor said dryly. "He didn't care for them either—after that. He seems to be a pretty strong man—and shrewd, if I may say so. At any rate he said there were no further attacks until he surprised you with that apartment—the one he wanted you to live in."

"Oh—yes," she said. "He was very foolish. He wanted to take me away from my father's home and live in a place he had rented. Poor Henry. He knew nothing about such things. He hadn't begun to appreciate how wonderful it was living with my father, with no problems of making a home. Dad never bothered us. It was just that Henry had some silly idea about being the man of the house—like some ordinary bookkeeper or salesman in the suburbs."

"You quarreled about that too, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "And, although I tried not to be, I was terribly sick."

"That coincides with your husband's story," Doctor Alexander said. "It made him determined not to cross you again. But you went into a decline after that, and you've got worse—he says—until now you're almost a permanent invalid. Naturally he wanted to know what to expect in the future."

"I'm sure he was upset," Leona said. "He's always watched over me. He's very much in love with me."

Doctor Alexander coughed. "I agreed with him that he hadn't any picnic. I asked him if he had ever thought of leaving you." He heard Leona gasp, and hurried on. "He looked up as though shocked. Said he hadn't considered it. I told him that in my view that was what you needed, Mrs. Stevenson. Obviously he'd been the cause of all your emotional disturbances for these past ten years. If he dropped out of the picture you might improve at once."

"That's—that's horrible of you—just horrible," she whispered tearfully.

"He thought it might kill you," the doctor went on calmly. "But of course I reassured him on that point. I told him you'd probably make a pretty frightening scene, but in the

long run you'd pull out of it—as you would, I'm sure. In other words, I told him the truth, dear lady. There's nothing wrong with your heart . . ."

"What!"

"That's right, Mrs. Stevenson. Organically your heart is as sound as a bell."

"How can you say such a thing?" she raged. "You know I'm a sick woman . . ."

"It's not the kind of sickness you thought," he said. "It's in your mind . . ."

"My *mind!* I think you're in league with—with those others to *wreck* my mind."

"Please, Mrs. Stevenson, you must be reasonable. Nobody is trying to harm you."

"They are!" she cried. "They are!"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," he said easily. "May I suggest that you discuss this whole thing with Mr. Stevenson . . .?"

"Discuss it? How can I discuss it? He isn't here. I don't know where he is."

"Perhaps tomorrow will be time. . . ."

"Oh, you . . ."

He could almost feel the shock as she banged the receiver back in place. The dial tone hummed in his ear for an instant. He lowered the phone part way, his hand poised over the dial on the desk. Call her back? No. He smiled cynically, shrugged his shoulders, gently replaced the phone in its cradle. As he started for the door a voice floated in from the other room. "Philip! You've been long enough, darling."

Leona—stunned, incredulous—stared at the telephone instrument, an infernal machine especially designed to torture her beyond endurance. Anger, hurt pride, doubt fought within her. It couldn't be so! Perhaps in her childhood she had exaggerated the seriousness of her illness. But now she was sick! She wasn't pretending! She was sick! She was sick! Her hand went to her heart, pressing it close where the hurt was. She took a deep breath, feeling the sharp, stabbing pain. Alexander was a fool. A brutal fool. The idea of telling her all those terrible things, suggesting that she had caused Henry any real unhappiness. Was he deliberately trying to upset her, to bring on some kind of a

crisis? She'd see that he was reported to the Medical Association.

And his lies about Henry! They were lies, all right, and she'd make Henry face the doctor with them. They *were* lies. She was a sick woman. And Henry loved her and wanted to help her. It *must* be that way. It couldn't be any other way. It couldn't.

Suddenly her eyes blazed defiantly. She tossed aside the coverlet, swinging one foot to the floor, then the other. She rose to her feet, holding her breath, taking a shaky step toward the window. Her heart was beating crazily. She clutched at her breast as if she could still its fluttering with the pressure of her fingers. And once more the telephone rang!

It was too much! She toppled back upon the bed, gasping for breath, racked with the intensity of her anguish. "Liars!" she sobbed. "Liars . . . liars . . . liars!"

The phone continued to ring, and she turned her stricken face toward it, crying, "I won't talk to anybody. I hate you all!"

But the measured rings mocked her anger. Then, above the ringing she heard a familiar sound. She could feel the faint trembling of the building as another train crossed the bridge. Its closeness restored her to her senses, choked off the feverish impulses that sprang from jangled nerves. Meanwhile the phone rang and rang. She picked it up.

10:30

"Hello," she said, her voice emerging weakly, tearfully.

"Mrs. Stevenson?"

She had no difficulty this time in recognizing his voice. "Yes, Mr. Evans," she said, "this is Mrs. Stevenson."

"Has Mr. Stevenson come in yet?"

"No," she said tautly, "he hasn't. He won't be home until tomorrow." Then explosively she added, "Will you please—please, for goodness' sake, Mr. Evans, tell me what this is all about? Why are you calling him every five minutes?"

Evans said apologetically, "I'm very sorry. I haven't meant to annoy you."

"Well, you are annoying me," she cried. "I insist that you—"

"It's rather a precarious moment—for Mr. Stevenson, that is," Evans said mournfully. "I thought that if you could tell him . . ."

"I can't take any messages now," Leona broke in wildly. "I'm too upset . . ."

"I'm afraid you must try, Mrs. Stevenson. It's very important."

"What right have you . . .?" she started to ask.

But Evans went on imperturbably, "Please tell Mr. Stevenson that the house at 20 Dunham Terrace—that's D-U-N-H-A-M—20 Dunham Terrace—has been burned down. I burned it down this afternoon."

"What? What's that?" she cried, startled.

"Also—please tell Mr. Stevenson," he continued calmly, "that I do not believe Mr. Morano—the name is spelled M-O-R-A-N-O—betrayed us to the police, as Mr. Morano has already been arrested. And so it is no use trying to raise the money now."

"And—who's Morano?" Leona asked shakily.

Evans ignored her question as he had the others. "Thirdly," he said, "will you please tell Mr. Stevenson that I escaped and am now at the Manhattan address? However I do not expect to be here after midnight—and if he wishes to find me—he may call Caledonia 5:1133. Will you write that down correctly, please? Caledonia 5:1133."

"But—what is this all about?" she protested.

"And now I believe that is all," Evans said smoothly. "If you will be so good as to repeat it to me—"

"Repeat it to you! I'll do no such thing," she shrilled. "Do you realize that I'm an invalid, Mr. Evans? Dangerously ill? I—I can't stand much more of this . . ."

There was a touch of pity, a quality of understanding in Evans' weary voice as he said, "I am well aware of your unfortunate position, Mrs. Stevenson. In fact I've known all about you for some time."

"You know all about *me?"* Leona said furiously. "Well —I've never in my life heard of *you* before—never!"

With some deference Evans said, "I am very sorry for you, Mrs. Stevenson. But I can assure you the whole affair has not been—ah—entirely Mr. Stevenson's fault."

"For heaven's sake will you stop talking in riddles, please? What has happened?" she demanded.

"Perhaps it *would* be better to tell you," Evans said

thoughtfully, "before the true facts are garbled by the—ah—police."

"The—*police . . . !*"

Evans paused for an instant, then said slowly, "Do you have a pencil, Mrs. Stevenson? There are names and places in what I am about to tell you that might prove helpful—if you—ah—were to write them down . . ."

I shall begin with the night when I first became acquainted with Mr. Stevenson (said Evans). I believe the exact date of the meeting was October 2, 1946. The place was your father's factory at Cicero, Illinois. Things had been rather busy, and I was working late in my laboratory—checking through some of the formulae records. A slight sound behind me attracted my attention and I turned to see someone staring at me through the glass pane in the door to my room. A moment later the door opened and a young man came in.

"Good evening," he said. "Late for you, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Stevenson," I replied. "Necessarily so."

I explained that it was my custom to work late at night.

"I've wondered about this place," he told me, roaming about the laboratory. "First time I've had a chance to look it over."

I was pleased at this. I seldom had visitors who were interested in my work, and the opportunity to show off was, I must confess, most welcome. Since Mr. Stevenson was Mr. Cotterell's son-in-law, the visit was doubly interesting.

The laboratory was a pleasant place. I had the very best equipment with which to work, and all of it had been placed in the best possible arrangement under the batteries of fluorescent lights that gleamed from the ceilings and reflected off the softly colored wall tiles.

"Is there anything in particular I can show you?" I asked.

"No—no—just curious," he said. "Always been curious about this department. What do you do here?"

"Our work here," I said, "involves the chemistry of narcotics. Narcotics are not always the harmful things we read about. Many of them are boons to mankind when taken in the proper dosage—such as in some of the Cotterell products."

I suppose my somewhat pedantic manner amused him. He smiled at me. "Look, Evans," he said, "I've been

around drugs most of my life. Now, tell me, just what goes on here?"

"Well," I replied, "in this laboratory we break down raw opium into its various alkaloids. I suppose you know that opium has twenty-four alkaloids—morphine, codeine . . ."

"Fine," he said, interrupting me. "Dope. Must be a lot of it in here."

"There certainly is," I agreed. "It's quite a responsibility, if I may say so, sir."

"What do you do with the various alkaloids?" he asked.

"Why, they're used in Cotterell products, of course."

"No, no," he said. "I mean, what do you do with them before they're needed by the factory? You don't just keep them around in jars on a shelf."

"Well—that's rather a secret," I told him.

"As it should be," he said. "I suppose I could ask Mr. Cotterell . . ."

"Nonsense," I assured him. "I was only impressing upon you how carefully we guard this information. Of course there's no reason why Mr. Cotterell's son-in-law should not know about it."

I walked over to the tiled wall facing the door and inserted a key into a small aperture just above the light switch. Part of the wall slid aside, revealing the huge safe in which our narcotic supply was kept. Mr. Stevenson seemed much impressed.

"Worry you?" he wanted to know. "Having all that human dynamite around?"

"As I said before," I assured him, "it's a responsibility, but that vault is not likely to yield to anything except the right combination."

"What I mean," he continued, "is: what about mistakes? Suppose you made a mistake in the amount that you released for one of the products. Couldn't it do a lot of harm?"

"It's most unlikely that such a thing could happen," I assured him. "Our measures are exact, and conform to the formulae involved. I've been here fifteen years, and nothing untoward has happened."

"Of course," he said with a smile, "I was just curious."

He dropped into the laboratory a few times after that—always very friendly and decent to me. I showed him the various processes in action, and he seemed to have from his years of drugstore experience a basic grasp of what was

fairly complicated terminology. I was flattered that so important a figure in the company was so cordial to me.

You haven't told me anything I don't know, she thought. *Henry is like that. Curious. Thorough. Makes it his business to know everything about the company. What Dad calls snooping. That's one of the things they argue about. Henry thinks Dad resents him, is trying to hold him down. He even told Doctor Alexander about it. Maybe Dad's too severe.*

About a month after my first meeting with Mr. Stevenson I was outside the plant waiting for a bus to take me to my home. It was a bitter evening, with a high wind driving a cold rain almost horizontally across the city streets. My umbrella was not very much protection, as you can imagine. I was utterly miserable, waiting on that corner. But not for long. A most magnificent black sedan stopped directly in front of me, and someone called, "Evans!"

I peered through the rain and saw it was Mr. Stevenson. "Hop in," he said. "Give you a lift."

"Very kind of you," I said. "But I'd not like to trouble you. Perhaps you could help me pick up a bus farther down. I own I've no wish to stand in the rain any more."

"Forget it," he said. "Glad to take you home. As a matter of fact, I hate driving alone."

We rolled smoothly along, and I couldn't help admiring the beauty of that automobile.

"My wife's," Mr. Stevenson said, when I mentioned it.

"I've never owned a car," I told him. "They've always seemed a bit too—well—mechanical. Personally I'd rather have a brace of spanking horses and a good carriage."

Mr. Stevenson didn't stop me, so I suppose I rattled on for quite some time about—horses. You see, I was brought up around horses. In Surrey, that is. And I suppose no one ever gets it out of his blood.

"Horses are fine creatures," I said, "so powerful—and at the same time, so gentle. I've often wished I owned hundreds of them."

At this Mr. Stevenson looked at me rather oddly. "You don't say . . . ?"

"Yes," I assured him. "Nothing I'd like better. Like to have my own little place. Good clean stables. Plenty of pasture. And the best stock in all England."

"England?" asked Mr. Stevenson.

"Oh, yes," I replied. "I fancy every Englishman living abroad hopes to spend his old age at home. There's something that tugs at you no matter how long you've been away."

He looked at me again, with the hint of a smile on his lips. "There's nothing wrong with wanting a thing," he said. "The wrong is in not doing anything about it."

"It's easy to say that, if you'll forgive the impertinence." I said, "but not everyone can back his desire with the requisite energy—and coin of the realm. Sometimes one doesn't know what one wants until it is too late. For instance—I play a little game with myself."

"You do . . . ?" he said with a hint of amusement.

"Yes," I replied. "I went back to England for a holiday a few years ago, and I picked out a spot near Dorking. A perfect spot. A bit of land there, all green grass and shade trees, and a beautiful brook. Horses do love a brook. Every now and then I price that place—just for the fun of it, you know—but I know I shall never be able to buy it. I do get pleasure out of planning what I'd do with the place if I could."

"You're right," Mr. Stevenson said rather cynically. "You'll never get that place working for my father-in-law."

This rather embarrassed me. "No," I admitted, "I suppose not."

Again he glanced at me, and I noticed his look at this time was a bit on the speculative side, as though he were making up his mind to tell—or not to tell—me something. What he said, finally, nearly bowled me over.

"You and I, Evans, have a lot in common."

Fantastic! she thought. *Henry and this weary old man! Why would Henry link himself with a tiresome drudge? He sounds as if he might be a little queer.*

"But—but—Mr. Stevenson, sir, what rot! I thought . . ."

"Don't think, Evans, unless it's about your job and about that farm in England." He said that rather grimly. For a while neither of us spoke. When we reached my house, I opened the car door to step out. Suddenly I felt his hand on my arm. "Wait a minute, Evans, I want to talk to you."

"Certainly, Mr. Stevenson," I said and closed the door.

"Evans," he began, "I've got a little idea. If it's a good one, it'll mean that place in England for you. For me, it'll mean—well, never mind what it'll mean for me. You can tell me if it's a good idea, Evans. Nobody else but you can tell me." He wasn't smiling now. There was a look on his face as black as night. His eyes were drilling into mine. His grip on my arm tightened until it was almost painful.

"What do you mean?" I asked hastily, for his manner was certainly frightening.

"I mean you can buy your way to England, or anywhere else, by just making a few mistakes."

"Mistakes?" I gasped. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Mistakes," he said evenly, "in the amount of dope you put into Cotterell products. Not more, Evans—less. Much less."

"Good heavens, no," I said, trembling. "I never heard—"

"No one but you—and me—would know, Evans," he said. "You know as well as I do that those cheap nostrums would really be better for suffering humanity if there were less dope in them. Nobody—certainly not the Cotterell Company—would ever know the difference. And the dope you held out, Evans, would buy that farm you were talking about—in England."

No! she cried inwardly. *It's impossible. This man is a lunatic. What's he trying to do? Who does he think will believe his ravings? To suggest that Henry would do such a thing! He's crazy. That's what he is. Crazy! But there must be something underneath all this nonsense. Henry must have had some dealings with the man. Miss Jennings mentioned that he'd called Henry several times.*

I was horrified—and fascinated. He'd struck so swiftly that I hardly could think. I wanted a bit of time to collect my wits.

"I'm not so sure it could be done as easy as all that," I said.

"What!" he said. "For a fine chemist like you it would be simple."

His flattery warmed me, I must admit. No one had ever bothered to show any appreciation or understanding of the miracles of chemistry that were so carefully produced under my direction in the Cotterell laboratory. Least of all, Mr. Cotterell himself!

"You really believe I'm a good chemist," I asked, foolishly.

"I know you're the best around," he said quickly, "I've watched you work. I've looked up your record. And I've hated seeing them pick your brains for peanuts."

I didn't know what to do. Temptation is a terrible thing, especially when what was wanted of me was so easy to do—for a good chemist. I hesitated, fumbling with the handle of the car door. But Mr. Stevenson had more to say.

"Come on—Evans, don't be a fool. I've already talked the whole thing over with someone else."

I was aghast. "Someone else?" I cried. "Good heavens, man, what folly!"

"Not folly," he said, grimly smiling. "Good sense. Someone has to sell the stuff after we get it. I wouldn't know what to do with it. Not yet—anyway. But the man I spoke to does. Name's Morano. He'll take everything we can give him—and split three ways."

Insane, she thought. *No doubt of it now. Perhaps a discharged employee whose mind has broken down. This crazy tale. Sounds like a movie.*

The cold-blooded enormity of the thing finally rang a warning bell in my mind. Had it been anyone but Mr. Stevenson, I would not have been quite so shocked. But that this handsome, powerful young man, living in the bosom of a millionaire family, could broach such a scheme was incredible.

"You—you've been pulling my leg, Mr. Stevenson," I said weakly. "Why would you—of all men—want to embroil yourself in the kind of tawdry affair you suggest? I do believe you've been testing my integrity—and I resent it, sir."

His lip curled, and the sneer on his face was not pleasant. "Evans," he said, *"you* want something—that farm. *I* want something, too. Money. My own money. I'm going to get it. And the sooner, the better. And the easier, the better. That's all. I want it. I get it. Now let's go up to that room of yours and talk it over."

"But wait," I pleaded. "What if we're caught?"

"We won't be," he said. "Let's go."

And we were not caught, Mrs. Stevenson. From the

15th of December, 1946, to the 30th of April, 1947, we were not caught. I carried out my part of the bargain with surprising ease. It was a simple matter to substitute harmless powders and liquids for considerable quantities of morphine alkaloids. I did it at night, usually, when my staff was away. No one paid me the slightest attention. And the packages of illicit drugs I turned over to Mr. Stevenson every Friday. He, in turn, gave them to Mr. Morano. Where, I don't know. I never saw Mr. Morano at any time.

By the 30th of April I had saved nearly fifteen thousand dollars. It was incredible. It was my dream coming true. Then, one day, I received a notice from the Cotterell Company telling me that I was to be transferred to the Bayonne, New Jersey, plant. Although, according to the notice, I also was to be in charge of the narcotics laboratory there, I was frightened. It seemed so unnecessary to move me to a place where I would do the same work, for the same pay. I went to see Mr. Stevenson at the first possible opportunity.

When we were safely alone in his office, I showed him my notice of transfer.

"You asked to be transferred?" he said sharply.

"No, never," I assured him. "That's why I'm rather upset about it. I'm sure something is suspected."

"Nonsense," he said. "You'd have been picked up by the police long ago if anything was wrong. This transfer must be a routine matter. I'd check on it myself, but why draw attention to it? There's nothing to worry about."

I wasn't entirely calmed by his cool assurance. Mr. Stevenson has a core of iron in his character, but not I.

"It's a sign," I said nervously, "a portent. I'm sure of it."

"A sign—of what?" he asked.

"To stop," I said. "This—this is a terrible business, Mr. Stevenson. I can't go on much longer. I'm not young, for one thing. I've almost enough money to quit now and go back to England. Perhaps I can do that after the transfer to Bayonne becomes effective."

Mr. Stevenson looked at me with that sly little smile of his. Not a very cheerful thing to behold, I assure you. "Evans," he said softly, "you'll stop when I say you stop. Let us be perfectly clear about that—when *I* say you stop. Not before."

He got up from his desk and walked to the door to make certain no one was within earshot. Then he came back, and

sat on the edge of the desk close to my chair. He was still smiling, but his eyes were cold as ice.

"I need you, Evans, and I don't intend to let you go. Maybe you're interested in the chicken feed we've collected. But not me. I want more. A lot more, Evans, and I'm going to get it. And I think I know how to get it—fast. Faster than we've been getting it lately."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You've given me an idea, Evans, a big idea—the kind of idea that appeals to me. You were right when you said the transfer was a sign. It's the biggest sign you ever saw. And it's pointing right at the biggest pile of money you ever saw. When I get that pile—you can have out, Evans. It shouldn't be too long a wait—if you do as you're told."

He was talking in a low voice, but there was no mistaking his determination. His eyes were alight with a burning intensity that had something almost maniacal in it.

"Please, Mr. Stevenson," I begged, "are you sure it would be wise to carry this thing along any further? I'll admit it's been rather a simple thing so far. But aren't you permitting this initial success to topple your judgment? After all, how far can you trust Mr. Morano?"

He snorted. "Morano. A small-time gangster. He's been using us like a couple of stooges, Evans. We take all the risk, and he gets a fat share of the profits."

He got up and walked to the window, looking out over the huge plant. With his back to me, he said, "I don't see Morano in this picture any more. No, I don't see him at all —the little chiseler." He turned to face me. "With you in Bayonne, Evans, I think Mr. Morano will have to find someone else to supply him."

I hadn't any idea what he was talking about. "It's not too easy to stop dealing with such a man as Morano, I should imagine," I said. "These men work in groups, and are generally supposed to be rather difficult—rather *physical*—about such matters."

"I'll handle Morano," he said. "When he learns that you've been transferred to Bayonne, cutting off my source of supply, he'll never give it a second thought. He's a stupid man, Evans. And his whole mob hasn't got a brain among them. He'll make no trouble."

"Now," he said, sitting down at his desk once more, "here's the set-up. This narcotics racket is a big one. I've never realized how big until I saw what a small-time gun-

man like Morano draws down just from us. And he's dealing with others, too, don't forget. All right. We close up shop here, getting rid of Morano and his one-third cut. We start our own business out of Bayonne, peddling in New York, the richest market in the country. We'll do more business, at a larger profit, with larger shares for each of us. All you have to do is just what you've been doing right along. Except perhaps warehouse the stuff some safe place. We find another place for our—showroom. And we're in business!"

"But Mr. Stevenson," I said, "it's fantastic. Suppose, for the sake of argument, I were able to help you this way. How would you be able to—to contact the purchasers of our products? It's too risky, I tell you. It's better to stay small, and safe, than to tempt Providence."

"Look, Evans," he said, "when I was a kid, jerking sodas and wrapping up packages in a drugstore, I always managed to stache away a few compacts, bottles of perfume, all kinds of small things. There was always someone who would buy things from me, cheap, and no questions asked. I only got caught once. And an old guy named Dodge, who liked me and knew I was poor and had to help my family, got me out of it. I got caught because I didn't watch my step—and that taught me a lesson. You can get away with anything if you're smart and watch your step. Well, Evans, I'm smart enough to establish the right connections in New York. You leave that to me. And believe me, no one will ever dream that either you or I have anything to do with the business."

Good heavens, it was insidious! She was actually beginning to believe him. He made it all seem so real. Everything fit together so neatly. But she must not, she dare not, give in to him. It could not be true. She would not let it be true.

One and a half months later we began operations on Staten Island, New York. Our headquarters were in an old house at 20 Dunham Terrace. I bought the house for Mr. Stevenson. I managed to hire a couple of local lads—not too bright, you understand—who thought I was working on a scientific project for the government. One of the lads acted as a sort of lookout for me, warning me of strangers and so forth. The other, a hunchback, kept the house fairly tidy and ran the small motor launch I bought to carry me

by water to the house. Both were very loyal and very close mouthed, although I had little to fear, for nothing was kept in the house for them to see. It was only a distribution point—the "showroom" Mr. Stevenson mentioned—and the drugs were brought there from the "warehouse" and instantly disposed of.

The warehouse has been my room, the room from which I'm calling you now. It is an eminently respectable private home—my landlord is a retired minister of great simplicity. My trunk has served well as a repository for the various substances we sold. It seems unlikely that a place could have been found safer than this pleasant room.

I traveled to Staten Island several times a week, where I would be met by clients whom Mr. Stevenson sent. How he solicited them I do not know. We had a code word to identify the clients until I got to know most of them by sight. These men—and a few women—were small dealers. They bought in quantity and redistributed the products to the—ah—ultimate consumer.

You might suppose that I was banking considerable sums of money each week and you'd be correct. But apparently Mr. Stevenson was not satisfied with my progress.

Several months ago—as you know—Mr. Stevenson arrived in New York, having somehow effected his own transfer to the New York office of the Cotterell Company. His real objective, as you may surmise, was to take over the supervision of our drug sales, for he believed that the mounting volume of our little business could be further stimulated if he were close at hand. I discovered a short while after that there was a far greater urgency than merely Mr. Stevenson's desire to make as much money as quickly as he could. The truth was that Mr. Stevenson had been quietly playing the stock market, using the proceeds of his less honorable pursuit as capital. Unfortunately he was less astute in his stock-market speculations than he had been in his unlawful enterprise. He was in rather difficult straits. What was even more unfortunate was that he continued, as soon as he reached New York, to pour more of his money into futile market operations, so that every penny he got from me was turned over immediately to his brokers.

Sally! Sally had mentioned a brokerage office. And that man—Freeman or whatever his name was—commiserating

with Henry over losses. This was no coincidence. Evans hadn't made this part of it up. More and more the whole story was becoming rational, terrifyingly rational. Perhaps Evans was not insane . . .

This was all very shocking to me, for I could see no opportunity to free myself from Mr. Stevenson's grasp. His overwhelming vanity—which was really at the root of his anxiety to succeed in a legitimate field—drove him to repeated attempts to recoup his losses. When I suggested that he stop and simply accumulate funds while our business was in such excellent shape, he would stare at me with that cold contempt I'd learned to know so well, and tell me to save my breath.

One day I asked him, "Mr. Stevenson, why do you insist upon gambling in the stock market? Surely in these days the opportunites to make substantial profits on the exchanges are limited—compared to our own business, that is."

He smiled at me queerly. "You know I want money. Not any money. But money I can show around—money that will buy me a little respect. I want lots of it. And I don't want to wait all my life for it. Okay— How can I explain the money I get from this racket? The answer is—I can't. All I can do is use it to get me going in something respectable. So I play the market. When I hit it right, nobody'll know what it cost me to start. I can tell them I saved some of the dough old man Cotterell paid me for warming the bench. Then, when I've got this thing licked, I'm rich, respectable, a smart operator—and I can tell Cotterell what he can do with his tailor-made vice-presidency."

Mr. Stevenson was, as you can see, very bitter—and very vain. His desire to be thought well of would have been perfectly natural in another young man. But another young man would have been content to work honestly toward his goal, whereas Mr. Stevenson intended to reach the goal without the work. I can moralize tonight about Mr. Stevenson's lack of morals, because—as you must now suspect—I have finally extricated myself from bondage. I do not belong to him any longer. I don't excuse my own conduct. But mine was the weakness of a hopeless old man sorely tempted. His, on the other hand, was the unhappy product of a warped, degenerate mind in a strong and

beautiful body. In other words: I am a bad man—he is a dangerous one.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it—the final chaper of our story was being written even as Mr. Stevenson set about improving the sales of the drugs I was supplying. About a month ago we had a visitor.

10:40

I was to meet Mr. Stevenson at the Dunham Terrace house one evening. I arrived a bit later than usual. This time I'd come by ferry from Manhattan, and fog on the river caused some delay. I hurried up the steps of the old house, and entered the living room. Mr. Stevenson was seated in one of the rickety chairs with which the room was furnished. An oil lamp stood on the table near him, and in its light I could see his face plainly. He was white as a sheet, and that queer halting little smile of his flickered about his face. He looked at me, then looked away toward the corner of the room behind the door which I was holding open. I stepped in, closed the door—and saw the man in the corner!

He was straddling a kitchen chair, his arms folded across the chair's back. In the rather dim light of the lamp I couldn't make him out too clearly. But I knew I had never seen him before. He seemed to be a small man, carefully dressed. His oily black hair reflected the lamp's beam. He was looking at me, and what I could make out of his face was not pleasant—sharp, regular features, swarthy complexion, tiny eyes that did not blink. For a second after I'd closed the door no one spoke. Then the little man turned his head toward Mr. Stevenson. "Him?" he asked.

Mr. Stevenson said, "Him." And then to me, "Evans, meet an old friend—Morano."

The small man looked over at me. "Siddown," he said.

I sat down—with relief, I might add. The shock of this unexpected meeting had unnerved me. I was thoroughly alarmed.

"Morano is not pleased with us," Mr. Stevenson said mockingly. "He is hurt to think that we have voted him off the board of directors."

I looked anxiously at Morano to note the effect of Mr. Stevenson's gibe. If there was any, I couldn't see it. He sat

there in silence, waiting for Mr. Stevenson to finish.

"I have just advised Mr. Morano that we cannot consider his application for re-instatement," Mr. Stevenson continued. "He was about to comment on this when you joined us." He put the tips of his fingers together, pursed his lips, and looked at Morano with exaggerated politeness.

Morano stared a moment longer as though making up his mind about something. Then he began to talk. His words slurred a little as he slid them out between almost motionless lips. Nevertheless I'm sure both Mr. Stevenson and myself had no difficulty in understanding them.

"Climb down," he said. "Maybe this ain't so funny. Maybe if you button up and listen you'll learn something, Stevenson. Even a very smart gentleman like you can sometimes learn something. Something like f'r instance how to keep alive." He paused for a moment.

"What kind of business you think this is? The grocery business? Anybody can open a store? Anybody can just move in and go to work? Did that fancy brain of yours tell you that, Stevenson? Like it told you to cross me up? I wouldn't know to keep an eye on you?"

"One for you," Mr. Stevenson said lazily. "I misjudged you, Morano."

"That ain't all you misjudged," Morano snapped. "If it wasn't for me you'd probably be very dead right now. Every mob in the business knows what you're doing. Or maybe you thought they didn't? You were a cinch to be knocked off as soon as they figured how to get to the professor here. They wanted him. As soon as they had him in line, so they could keep the stuff coming in, something would happen to you, Stevenson. Something very sad. But I fixed that. I got plenty friends here. So they let you alone —for only a small cut."

Mr. Stevenson was no longer smiling. "I don't think we're interested, Morano. I think we'll carry on without your help. When we have to make a deal, we'll make it direct. You've got your Chicago business. That ought to be enough."

"It's funny," Morano said, "but it ain't enough. You are being very foolish, Stevenson. I don't think you have much choice in this deal. It looks like you ain't got any choice at all."

"Which means what?"

"Which means either I move in—or I blow the whistle

on this joint. It's as easy as that. I take over—now—or there ain't any business."

Mr. Stevenson sat bolt upright. "You wouldn't do that, Morano. You were in the Chicago deal yourself. You'd go down with us."

"Na—" Morano said, "nobody'll bother me. Nobody's got anything on me that would stick. I never saw you guys before in my life, see? What's more, nobody's going to know who done the singing about old man Cotterell's drug-running son-in-law. A tip like that buys plenty protection."

Then it happened.

Mr. Stevenson sprang from his chair, livid with rage, and lunged at Morano. His fist hit the little man on the side of the head, sending him reeling backward. Like a crazed animal Mr. Stevenson followed him, flinging himself on Morano, clawing at his throat as they both fell to the floor. I have no doubt he would have killed Morano then and there—all things being equal. But as I had already discovered, where Morano was concerned, nothing was equal. As the two men hit the floor, the door opened and in an instant Mr. Stevenson was standing upright, his arms locked in the grasp of a couple of Morano's men. Savage-looking desperadoes, they were, and I feared they would beat Mr. Stevenson to a pulp. But Morano said from the floor. "Leave him alone, boys. I don't want him marked up. I don't want he should have to explain anything to anybody."

Morano got up from the floor, brushing off his natty clothes, straightening his necktie. From his pocket he took a comb and carefully restored his shiny black hair to its gleaming perfection. Then he said, "Sit him in that chair—and scram."

They hustled Mr. Stevenson back to his chair. I noticed one of the men run his hands over Mr. Stevenson's clothing—searching for a weapon, I suppose. Mr. Stevenson, white and shaken, sat down and the men went out of the room. Morano walked over and stood before Mr. Stevenson. "See what I mean?" he said.

Mr. Stevenson nodded sullenly.

"Okay. Now we understand each other. No need we should get in each other's hair any more. You do like I say, and I'll take care of you. That goes for the professor, too." He grinned evilly at me.

"Now," he went on, "from here on I run this show. We

split fifty-fifty, half for me, half for the two of you. Not so good for you as before—but I got heavy expenses."

"It—it's not fair," Mr. Stevenson said weakly. "There won't be enough . . ."

"It's fair," Morano snapped. "It's fair because I say it's fair. If you don't like it you can always get out, just so long as the professor stays." He turned to me. "Maybe the professor would like that? A full share? The professor would not try to cross anybody—except maybe you, Stevenson."

But Morano's cocky humor didn't last very long. His cold gaze returned to Mr. Stevenson. "Now we know where we stand from here on. So there's only one more little matter to settle—a little matter of a hundred grand."

Mr. Stevenson stiffened in his chair. "A hundred grand? For what?"

"For the time between now and when you walked out on me."

"You're out of your mind," Mr. Stevenson cried. "I don't have that kind of money. I've lost every cent I made in this racket."

"That's too bad," Morano said sorrowfully. "That's really what you call too bad." Then his face froze. "You'll get it up. And you'll get it up in a month."

Mr. Stevenson paled. "You're insane, Morano. I couldn't raise that much in that time. I need a lot more time. Then maybe my wife . . ."

Morano said with contempt, "Your wife! You couldn't get a nickel from your wife."

"You don't understand," Mr. Stevenson said hoarsely. "She's a sick woman. She's going to die . . . in a little while. She's leaving me everything . . . It's in her will. Wait just a few months . . . That's all, I'm sure . . ."

"I don't wait for nobody to die—ever," Morano said, "and you don't either—if you're smart. If somebody is supposed to die—they die."

"Good God!" Mr. Stevenson cried, "I can't . . ."

"Never mind what you can or you can't," Morano barked. "You get that dough up in thiry days."

"But—"

"Look—" Morano grinned. "I don't want to be too hard on you, Stevenson . . ."

"Yes?" Mr. Stevenson asked hopefully.

"You have too much trouble, you come to me. Maybe I give you—some help."

That was on the night of July 17th. I haven't seen either Mr. Morano or Mr. Stevenson since. And now—as I've already given you the final message, I believe the rest explains itself quite simply . . .

The phone shook in Leona's hand. Frightened tears started in her eyes. Her body felt drained and empty and she could scarcely control the trembling of her jaw. "Explains itself—how?" she managed to ask. "Where's my husband? Where's Mr. Stevenson now?"

"I wish I knew, Mrs. Stevenson," the weary voice replied. "Perhaps if you were to try the Caledonia number . . ."

"The—Caledonia—number?" she asked.

"The number I gave you in the message," he told her. "And now—if you will check it all over with me . . ."

"I can't," she cried, "I can't. I've forgotten."

"Then I will repeat it for you once more, Mrs. Stevenson. Point one: the house at 20 Dunham Terrace was burned down this afternoon by Mr. Evans. Point two: Mr. Evans escaped. Point three: Mr. Morano was arrested. Point four: it is not necessary to raise the money as it was not Mr. Morano who tipped off the police."

"It doesn't matter," Leona mumbled. "It doesn't matter. Just give me that Caledonia number—the one for Mr. Stevenson."

"Point five," Mr. Evans said evenly. "Point five: Mr. Evans is at the Manhattan address, but he is leaving now and may be found at Caledonia 5:1133."

"Caledonia 5:1133," Leona repeated, scrawling the number on the bit of memo paper with her lipstick.

"After midnight—" Evans said quietly. Then, with something that might have been a sigh, he added, "Thank you very much, Mrs. Stevenson. And good-bye."

After Evans had hung up, she continued to stare at the scarlet numbers streaming across the paper, as though if she took her eyes away they might disappear. Mechanically, numbly, she dialed. The first time she tried, the trembling of her fingers made her slip and she had to start over again. As she moved the dial, the tension within her mounted so that every breath was a painful effort. This time she completed the call, and after two purring rings the phone was picked up at the other end.

A man said, "Caledonia 5:1133."

Fear, fright, the approach of hysteria pitched her voice unnaturally high. "Caledonia 5:1133?" she asked. "Is Mr. Stevenson there?"

"Who, lady?"

"Mr. Stevenson. Mr. Henry Stevenson. I was told to call by—by a Mr. Evans."

"Stevenson, you say? Just a minute—I'll see."

She heard the thud as he laid the phone down. Straining to listen, she could hear his departing footsteps. Then silence. The seconds slowly passed. Her heart beat wildly as though it were struggling to fly from her breast. She clenched and unclenched her free hand, squeezing until her long nails bit into the flesh of her palm. Outside a low, moaning whistle drifted up from the river, and somewhere below someone—a policeman, perhaps?—rattled wood against an iron fence.

Suddenly the man was back. "Nope. He's not here, ma'am."

"Oh," she said, "Mr. Evans said he might be expected. Could I leave a message?"

"A message? We don't take no messages here, lady." The man seemed puzzled—and a little amused. "They wouldn't do no good here, lady."

"No?" she asked. "What number is this? Who—? What am I calling?"

"Caledonia 5:1133," the man said. "The City Morgue."

Now she sat motionless in the bed, desperately trying to piece together the macabre jigsaw of that night's happenings. Out of the dreamlike chaos of shock piled on shock she began to shape the truth. And as the stark outline grew more distinct, its enormity made her shudder. That such a thing could happen to her! That such evil could have found her out!

That awful phone call, she thought. Why had she been the one to hear those terrible criminals? Why had all her calls to Henry's office—the calls before she'd asked the operator to help—been answered by a busy signal? Who had been in Henry's office, if not Henry? And if someone, no matter who, had been using the phone in Henry's office, could one end of that mysterious crossed wire have been . . . ? No—she wouldn't think of it. She'd force it from her

mind. There were other things to think about.

What about Sally's story? That Henry was involved in some kind of trouble with the authorities? She had to believe that—or at least part of it—for Evans had established the truth of it. If any of it was truth, that is, and not a plot to drive her out of her mind. Suppose Evans *was* telling the truth. Henry would then be hard pressed to find that money, that hundred thousand dollars. And he couldn't. Unless he told the whole sordid story to Jim Cotterell! Which he'd never do! She marveled at the way Henry had managed to seem so—so normal these past few weeks. And as she did, she found herself recalling Sally's talk, the talk of years ago, when Sally had tried to tell her about the strange depths of Henry's character. Sally hadn't been lying!

What then was left for Henry to do? She knew the answer, of course. She had known it ever since Evans had finished talking with her. She could no longer exclude it from her thoughts, any more than she could exclude the real meaning of those crossed telephone wires.

And as the awful realization tore at the foundation of her reason, she heard again the grinding, clanking progress of a train across the bridge. Wisps of remembered conversation now floated freely across her consciousness . . . *our client . . . Then I wait until the train goes over the bridge . . . in case she should scream . . . is a knife okay . . . our client . . . our client . . . she's going to die . . . I don't wait for nobody to die . . . our client . . . our client . . .*

Frantic with fear she snatched up the phone again and dialed the operator.

"Your call, please?" How smooth! How impersonal!

"Give me the police," she cried brokenly.

"Ringing the Police Department."

In a few seconds the phone was picked up. "Police Station. Seventeenth Precinct. Sergeant Duffy speaking."

"This is Mrs. Stevenson again," she said. "I called you a little while ago . . ."

"Yes, ma'am. Mrs. Stevenson did you say?"

"Mrs. Henry Stevenson, at 43 Sutton Place. I called you about a phone call I overheard."

"Why, yes, ma'am. I remember it very well."

"Well, I wondered what—what you'd done about it?"

"It's right here on the blotter, ma'am," Duffy said cautiously.

"But—haven't you . . . ?

"We'll do everything we can, ma'am. If anything happens—"

"If anything *happens?*" she echoed. "Do you mean to say a thing has to happen before you do anything?"

"I told you before, ma'am, that when the information is vague there isn't much we can do."

"But . . ." She paused. She *couldn't* tell him. Even though it might be true, she couldn't. For in spite of everything, it might *not* be true. And if she told now, it would be irrevocable. She could never take it back. It would be the end of her dream. She couldn't tell the police. She'd have to find another way. . . .

"I'm sorry to trouble you," she said faintly. "I thought perhaps you might at least have sent out a radio call . . ."

"That's up to Headquarters," Duffy said. "We pass along the tip, and it's up to them to take care of it. So far there hasn't been a call."

"Thank you," she said. "I—I hope it's all a mistake."

She hung up, thinking fearfully of her next step. She must do something, something to protect herself in case . . .

A detective agency? That might be one way of getting someone to watch over her, someone who could be sworn to secrecy. She glanced at the clock on her night table. Eleven! She didn't have much time. Trembling, she dialed the operator.

"I want a detective agency," she said nervously.

"You will find all detective agencies listed in the Classified Directory, madam."

"I haven't a Classified Directory—I mean—I don't have time—to look anything up—it—it's getting late."

"I will connect you with Information."

"No!" Leona shouted angrily. "You don't care what happens to me, do you? I could die—and you wouldn't care . . .!"

"I beg your pardon . . .?"

"Give me a hospital," Leona said.

"Is there a particular hospital?"

"Any hospital!" she shouted. "Any hospital at all—do you hear?"

"One moment, please."

11:00

She waited while the phone rang, looking uneasily about the room, glancing nervously at the half-open door, the shadowy pictures on the wall, the elegant debris on her night table and vanity. Soon the ringing stopped and a woman said, "Bellevue."

Leona said, "I want the Nurses' Registry, please."

"Whom do you wish to speak to?"

"I want the Nurses' Registry. I want a trained nurse. I want to hire her immediately for the night."

"I see," the woman said. "I will transfer your call."

"Nurses' Home," another voice murmured.

"I want to hire a nurse," Leona repeated. "I need one right away. It's very important that I get one right away."

"What is the nature of the case, madam?"

"The case? Why—I—I'm an invalid—and I'm all alone—I—don't know anyone in the city—and I've just had a frightful shock—I just can't be alone tonight."

"Have you been instructed to call by one of our doctors, madam?"

"No," Leona said, her voice rising peevishly, "but I fail to see why all this—this catechizing is necessary. After all, I expect to pay this person . . ."

"We quite understand that, madam," the voice went on calmly. "But this is a city hospital. It isn't private. We don't send nurses on cases unless an emergency is certified by one of our staff physicians. I'd suggest that you call one of the regular Nurses' Registries."

"But I don't know any," she wailed. "I can't wait. I'm desperately in need of help."

"I'll give you a number you may call. Schuyler 2:1037. Perhaps someone there will be able to assist you."

"Schuyler 2:1037. Thank you."

Again she worked the dial, its clicking beating like little hammers in her head. The phone's ringing seemed interminable, although it was only a matter of seconds before she got her answer.

"Center Registry for Nurses. Miss Jordan speaking."

"I want to hire a nurse—at once."

"And who is this calling, please?"

"Mrs. Stevenson. Mrs. Henry Stevenson, 43 Sutton Place. And it's very urgent."

"Have you been recommended to us by a doctor, Mrs. Stevenson?"

"No," she said impatiently. "But I'm a stranger here—and I'm ill—and I've been going through the most awful night. I can't be alone any longer."

"Well," Miss Jordan said doubtfully, "nurses are very scarce now. It's most unusual to send one out unless the doctor in charge has specifically stated that it's absolutely necessary."

"But it is necessary," she pleaded. "It is. I'm a sick woman. I'm alone in this house—I don't know where my husband is—I can't reach him. And I'm terribly frightened. If someone doesn't come at once—if something isn't done, I'm afraid I'll go out of my mind."

"I see," the woman said reflectively. "Well—I'll leave a message for Miss Phillips to call you as soon as she comes in."

"Miss Phillips? And when do you expect her?"

"Sometime around 11:30 or so. . . ."

"Eleven-*thirty!*"

And then she heard the click. It was a tiny click, a click in the phone. It was a sound she thought she had heard many times before.

"What was *that?*" she cried.

"What was what, madam?"

"That—click—just now—in my telephone. As though someone had lifted the receiver off the hook of the extension downstairs . . ."

"I didn't hear anything, madam."

"But *I* did!" she gasped in a voice almost suffocated by fear. "There's someone in this house . . . someone downstairs in the kitchen . . . and they're listening to me now. They're . . ." Terror gripped her and she screamed, hanging up the phone with a mechanical movement.

Clutching the bedclothes in an agony of fright she concentrated on the silence around her. Suddenly she heard a quiet tapping along the floor—slowly—steadily. She started up with a shudder, eyes wild, her hand raised to her contorted face.

"Who is it?" she called frantically. "Who's there?"

She was like a creature at bay. As the tapping continued —slowly—relentlessly, she stared in horrified fascination at the door to her room—waiting—waiting. Suddenly she yelled, hoarsely, "Henry—! HENRY!"

No answer. The steady, remorseless tapping went on. She threw back the coverlet, trying to get out of the bed. But paralyzing fear sapped her strength. She stretched and strained, then collapsed against the pillows—frozen with terror—unable to move. Her wild gaze roamed the room, fastening for an instant on the half-open door, then darting past it for fear of what she might see. The sound of a roaring motor truck rolled up from the street, and looking toward the window she discovered at last the source of the tapping—the weighted window drapes stirring in the freshening breeze!

For a while she knew relief. The pounding of her heart subsided. Doctor Alexander must be right, she thought. It's sound as a bell. And suddenly she was tearfully glad. If she lived through this night, she'd never stay in bed again, never. She'd get strong as quickly as she could. But the odor of danger was everywhere. She must do something quickly. How could she escape that room!

Automatically she reached for the telephone. But in mid-air her hand froze. Whom should she call? Who would help her now? The silent listener somewhere in the house had heard her talking to that nurse. What chance had she of avoiding his frightful presence now?

She lay there in a mist of indecision, terror strangling her ability to sort out the teeming product of her brain. Then, as so often before, the brooding, massive silence was shattered by the telephone's sharp ring. She snatched it up quickly, clutching at any straw.

"Hello?" she said with pitiful expectancy.

The maddening, unconcerned voice of an operator greeted her. "New Haven is calling Mrs. Henry Stevenson. Is Mrs. Stevenson there?"

"Yes," Leona cried, adding with sinking heart. "But I haven't any time now . . . call back later. I can't talk—"

"I have a person-to-person call for Mrs. Henry Stevenson from Mr. Henry Stevenson. You do not wish to accept the call, madam?"

Thunderstruck, Leona asked, *"Mr. Henry Stevenson . . . ?"* Almost in tears, she said, "Did you say—Mr.?—From New Haven?"

"Do you wish to accept the call, madam?"

And now the fantastic hope grew that it was all a lie—a terrible dream. Nothing so awful could have been conceived by the man whose life she had shared for so long.

Yet she knew it wasn't a dream. If there was only some other answer to the whole thing—! Well, at least she could ask Henry to call the police. That would bring things out in the open.

"Yes . . . I'll . . . accept it," she said.

She waited tensely, hovering, breathless. She heard the Long Distance Operator's little ring, and then, "Go ahead, New Haven."

11:05

The railroad station in New Haven was a lonely place so late at night. The few people who walked about, or sat idly on benches, were mere specks in its vastness. Footsteps clicked on the stone floors and echoed to the high ceilings. There was an emptiness that could almost be felt, a strange unreality—as though the station, drained of its daytime bustle, slumbered through the night.

Under a huge clock a row of telephone booths extended along the wall, all save one dark and empty. Beside the door of the occupied booth stood a handsome valise—a pigskin affair, with the initials "H. S." neatly stamped in gold near its center lock. In the lighted booth Henry Stevenson waited to talk with his wife.

He was hatless. Under unruly brown hair his face was heavily handsome—an attractive face with wide-set, thickly lashed eyes, straight fleshy nose, powerfully molded mouth and jaw. As he stood there staring at the telephone, his expression was one of grimness and determination. He looked like a young man who knew very well what he was doing, knew that what he was doing must be done.

At last he heard the Long Distance Operator say, "Go ahead, New Haven."

"Hello. That you, darling?" he asked quietly.

"*Henry!* Henry, where *are* you?" He could almost feel her clutching at him over all those miles.

"Why—I'm on my way to Boston, dear. I stopped off in New Haven. Didn't you get my wire?"

"Yes. I—I got it . . . But—but I don't understand—"

"Nothing to understand, dear. I couldn't reach you before. Your line was busy so often. I thought I'd call now and see how you were. I was sorry—about leaving so unexpectedly—but I knew you'd be all right."

"I'm *not* all right—I'm . . ." she began wildly. "There's

someone in this house right now—I'm sure of it."

An ugly, malevolent light gleamed for an instant in his eyes. His nostrils flared, and he drew in his breath sharply.

"Nonsense, dear. How could there be?" he said. "You're not there alone?"

"Of course I am," she replied, whining. "I'm all alone. Who else could be here? You gave Larsen the night off . . ."

"So I did," he admitted gravely.

"And you promised to be home at six sharp."

"Did I?" he asked innocently. "I don't remember."

"You most certainly did," she said. "And I've been alone here for hours. I've been getting all kinds of horrible phone calls that I don't understand . . . and Henry . . . I want you to call the police . . . do you hear me? . . . Tell them to come here at once."

He wondered at the panic in her voice. She was really frightened. Yet—it didn't make sense. What could she know? He could understand it if she were only irritated—Leona had an oversized capacity for irritation. But this kind of fear was another thing. "Now Leona," he said crisply. "No need to be so nervous."

"Nervous!"

"You know you're perfectly safe in that house. Larsen certainly must have locked the doors before she left."

"I know," she said weakly, "But—I heard—someone—someone pick up the phone in the kitchen. I'm sure I did."

"Nonsense," he said. "The house is locked. There's that private patrolman. And the telephone's right by your bed. What's more, you're in the heart of New York City, Leona. Safest place in the world."

"I'd feel better if you'd call the police, Henry. I called them. They wouldn't pay any attention to me." She started to sob in self-pity.

"Look," he said, "I'm in New Haven. If I call from here, the police'll think I'm crazy. Why the police, anyway? Maybe if you call Doctor Alexander? . . ."

String it out, he thought, glancing at his watch. Let her run on—a few more minutes. What could she do then? He was smiling now, a queer half-smile that transformed his brooding face into a mask of glowering evil. Shifting his position in the booth, he glanced casually out of the door for an instant, then turned back toward the phone. He had scarcely noticed the burly, white-haired man with dark

skin and the large liquid eyes lounging a few paces from the booth.

But what was this Leona was saying?

"Henry! What do you know about a man named Evans?"

"Evans?" he asked, taken by surprise.

"Yes," she said. "Waldo Evans."

"Never heard the name in my life, Leona. What makes you ask?"

"He called me up—tonight—I had a long talk with him . . . about *you!*"

11:10

The huge man with the white hair and the dark, permanently sad face had moved just far enough away from the booth to be out of sight of its occupant. Otherwise he might have noticed Henry grow pale as death—the pallor pointing up the defiant set of his jaw. But the man was not interested in Henry's telephone call. He was only interested in Henry. He waited patiently, observing the line of booths, absently fingering the badge in his pocket.

"About me!" Henry said as naturally as possible. "What could he have had to say about me?"

"He told me some terrible things. Some of it sounded . . . insane. But there were parts that sounded true . . ."

"A crackpot," Henry said. "You mustn't listen to every crackpot who calls. Now, just try and forget it . . ."

"He told me—you'd been stealing dope from Daddy's company. Is that true?"

Henry snorted. "True? Now see here, Leona, I'm a little hurt that you even bother to tax me with that kind of rot. You must have had a bad dream . . ."

"Dream!" she shrilled. "I haven't been dreamng, Henry. He left some kind of message for you. He said to tell you that the house on Staten Island had been burned down—and that the police knew everything. He said someone named Morano had been arrested . . ."

"What!" Henry snapped. "What was that you said?"

"And—I—I'd never have believed him—except there was that Mrs. Lord—you remember—Sally Hunt—and she told me the same things."

There was a silence for a second, and Leona called,

"Are you still there—Henry?"

He wet his lips. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm here."

"They said you were a criminal," she babbled, "a desperate man . . . And Evans said—you—you—you wanted me—to die!"

"I—" he started to say, but there was no stopping the flood.

"That money—Henry—the hundred thousand dollars. Why didn't you ask me for it? I'd have got it for you—gladly—if I'd only known."

"Forget it," he muttered.

"Is it too late?" she cried. "I'll get it for you now—if it isn't too late."

"It's all right," he said. "Forget it."

Now the tears that had been threatening, streamed down her face. Her voice was hoarse and strangled.

"I didn't mean to be so awful to you, Henry," she said. "I—only did it—because—I loved you. I guess I was afraid you didn't really love me. I was afraid—afraid you'd run away—and leave me all alone . . ."

11:11

Henry remembered now the man he had seen standing near the booth. He looked through the door and, seeing no one, cautiously opened it to get a broader view. The man was there, not far away. He was watching the booths. Henry shut the door. He called into the phone.

"Leona?"

"Yes."

"Leona, there's something you've got to do."

"Will you forgive me—first, Henry?" she sobbed. "Will you?"

"For God's sake," he said brutally, "will you stop that nonsense and listen to me?"

"All—right," she whispered.

"Now do just as I say, will you? I want you to get out of bed . . ."

"I—I can't," she moaned. "I can't."

"You've *got* to," he commanded. "You've got to get out of that bed—and walk out of that room. Go into the front bedroom. Get to the window and scream—scream out into the street."

He waited, tense, fighting the fear within him. He heard her breathing heavily into the phone.

"I can't!" she mumbled piteously. "I can't move, Henry. I'm too frightened. I've tried and tried. But I can't move."

"Keep trying," he urged. "Don't you know I'll burn if you don't . . . I'll . . ."

"Burn!" she shrieked. "What . . .?"

"You've got to move, Leona. Try again. If you don't you've only got three more minutes to live!"

11:12

"What . . .?" There was a terrible gagging in her voice.

"Don't talk any more, Leona." His own voice broke with fear. Sweat poured over his body. He leaned heavily against the wall of the booth, to take the strain away from his shaking knees. "Don't talk. Get out of that bed. You've got to. It's all true, Leona. All of it, you hear me. I'm in pretty deep. I was desperate—I even tried—tonight I arranged—to have you . . ."

"Henry!" A great wail of terror tore from her lips. "Henry! There's someone—coming up the stairs!"

"Get out," he shouted madly. "Get out of that bed. Walk Leona."

"I *can't.*"

"You must! You must!"

"Henry!" she cried again. "Henry! Save me! *Save me!*"

No longer able to control himself—the awful certainty of his fate and hers sapping the last remnant of courage—he shivered all over. "Please, Leona," he cried, "they'll get me—they'll *know*—they'll find out from Morano."

And then, through the telephone, he heard a sound—faintly—a sound that might have been a train grinding across the bridge. And above it Leona's bloodcurdling scream, *"Henry!"*

11:15

For one fleeting moment after her scream she clutched the telephone. Then she threw it back on its hook. Her eyes glazed with unspeakable fright, her heart hammering mercilessly, she heard the onrush of the pounding train. Gasping and gagging she tried to drag herself off the bed.

But she might have been bound with bands of steel. She couldn't move. Louder and louder, rending the black stillness, came the train, until there was nothing in the night but its thundering roar. Nothing could be heard above it. Not even her last, terrible sigh.

The train passed, and in the room there was no sound except a coarse breathing—a stealthy movement away from the bed.

Suddenly the phone began to ring. Rubber shoes shuffled softly across the floor. A hand in a blood-stained glove reached down and lifted the instrument from its base. Henry's voice, trembling with desperate hope, floated up, "Leona! LEONA!"

There was a pause. Then a deep, guttural voice said, "Sorry, wrong number . . ."

11:16

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