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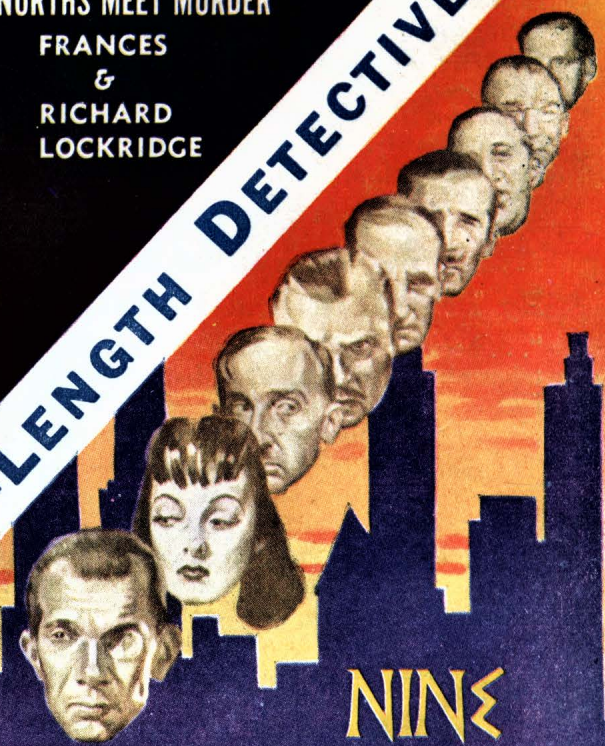

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by ALBERT LEFFINGWELL

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FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

Two Complete
DETECTIVE BOOKS

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager — MALCOLM REISS, Editor

NINE AGAINST NEW YORK

By ALBERT LEFFINGWELL — Page 1

One moment Mike Pope, trouble-hunting American columnist, was drowning his sorrows up and down the peaceful Champs Elysée; the next he was part of the panicked shambles of humanity that choked the Paris-Orléans road. . . . And beside him rode a beautiful, unknown baroness who claimed to be his wife! But he had little time then to worry about that. France was crumbling. The whole world was fleeing toward Lisbon—the last gateway to America, and peace.

But there was no peace for Mike Pope! Back in New York, his strange, new wife disappeared as mysteriously as she had come, and Mike found himself caught up in the greatest espionage game of all time—a pawn of that swastika-shadowed group that called itself The Nine. With mounting horror he saw the grimly familiar pattern grow increasingly frightening. With unbelievable swiftness, climax followed stupendous climax, building inexorably to that vivid night when startled New Yorkers looked up to see the hooked-cross legions of the Fuehrer swarming the midnight skies. . . . Here is a timely, breathlessly-paced novel of things that might have been—or, not too inconceivably, of things that still might be! Regular edition, $2.50.

A PINCH OF POISON

By FRANCES and RICHARD LOCKRIDGE — Page 87

". . . because March 4th is Election Day, of course!" When Mrs. North concluded this triumphant—if somewhat baffling—statement, the telephone rang; and before Mr. North and Lieutenant-Detective Weigand could ever find out what she meant, the Norths were merrily head over heels in a new murder case.

There was no apparent reason why anyone should wish to kill pretty, harmless Lois Winston. But somebody most obviously did—picking the gay Ritz-Plaza roof for his murder scene. It didn't, as Mrs. North pointed out, make sense. It made even less sense when, a few days later, an old woman living alone in a ramshackle mansion on the Hudson, opened her door to a midnight caller and got three bullets through her head. But somehow, Weigand knew, the two murders were connected. And somewhere in the mass of clues, alibis and facts were the links that bound them together. Such tiny, inconceivable links as Mrs. North's red handbag, Volume 11 of the Encyclopedia, and an unimportant old gentleman who got a traffic ticket in Hartford; but they were strong enough to send Mrs. North galloping off to play a lone hand in the dangerous game that had already taken two lives. Regular edition, $2.00.

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS WILL BE ON SALE AT THE NEWSSTANDS ON AUGUST 1, 1942

Nine Against New York

By Albert Leffingwell

The misshapen face drew closer to Pope's own. "You will sleep," he whispered. "And you will tell me what you know about The Nine!"

NINE AGAINST NEW YORK

By

Albert Leffingwell

In name only were they man and wife—bland Mike Pope and the chic baroness from Denver. Back in New York, after eluding the Nazi net, they were not to meet again until that shattering night when the ex-Mrs. Pope met death at the hands of the human machine that waited to crush a million more such lives.

SOMETHING loud and angry hissed in my ear, so I opened one eye. The little silver-rimmed windowpane beside me hissed again as another solid sheet of water crashed against it, driving out of a vast dark blur. What have you done now, dope? I asked myself. Gone to bed in a submarine?

A brain exhausted by tension, fatigue, and alcohol tried obediently to hook up the broken memory-tape but it was no go, so I opened the other eye. A soft bright shimmer straight ahead sharpened suddenly into focus, became the complex crystal-and-amber glintings of a balloon-glass half full of brandy, a balloon-glass which was being twirled slowly by lacquer-tipped pointed fingers on a table-top ten feet away.

The fingers looked vaguely familiar but I couldn't see the face of the girl who owned them; it was obscured by a broad masculine back in annoying lemon-colored tweeds.

All right, I thought, we're not the U.S.S. *Dolphin,* we're a bar. . . .

Yet it is a very curious bar, I thought; it vibrates like a plane. . . .

My God, I thought, as the bright warm gently murmurous little room seemed to stagger in a sudden sidewise lurch, it *is* a plane!

And as I jerked myself upright in my overstuffed chair the girl's face came in view, and memory came back in a kind of blazing flash. . . . And I took no pleasure in the sight of that face, though its tinted ivory contours, its widow's peak of blue-black hair, and especially its wide-spaced melting eyes of a lovely Celtic blue made it a face which any man would want to look at twice. . . . I took no pleasure in it because of what it brought back to me. (Its owner's name was Elona; she was wearing, I noticed, powder-blue French tweeds over a white chiffon blouse, and she was smiling, as her fingers twirled the glass. Not at me—she didn't even see me—but at the occupant of the lemon-colored tweeds.)

Elona: it was no wonder that the shaping of those fingers had seemed somehow known to me. I had held that small pointed hand in mine all through the two endless nights just past . . . two nights streaked with blood and tears and clamorous with flame and terror . . . the two nights and the bright bitter day between—when France fell.

I LOOKED round the little room again, at the chromium-legged tables, the blue-corded upholstery, the white-mustached British Colonel sitting fierce and silent in a corner behind a soda-siphon. Yes, this was a plane, all right; this was the plane of planes, to me at that moment. Elona's big Daimler had snaked us across France, and Spain, and Portugal, and into Lisbon with an hour or so to spare; and it was now (I glanced at my wristwatch) ten o'clock on the third night; and we were three hours out of Cintra Airport on the Dixie Clipper . . . *three hours out —and New York bound.*

I remember that those words formed

themselves into a crude tuneless little song inside my head as I sat back. I remember feeling a vague wordless pleasure with myself for having got us, both of us, safely out of hell. And almost simultaneously, I remember, came a vague wordless yearning to investigate the local plumbing facilities—and I stood up.

My memory of the next few moments is a little blurred with pain, for an invisible dwarf on my shoulder stood up too, and cracked the top of my skull with an iron bar. Or so it seemed. I put out a hand in blind anguish to steady myself, and the Clipper's lounge is very small, and my hand hit a Martini glass which a stately snow-haired dowager at the next table was just lifting to her lips, and would have sloshed its contents into her lap if it hadn't been one of the Dixie's slosh-proof glasses. She gritted something at me and I felt it better to pass on, trailing vague murmurs of regret; Elona's chair loomed up directly in front of me and I rested my hand on its back and bowed courteously.

"I shouldn't drink that brandy if I were you," I said, "because—"

She was evidently as tense as I'd been before I'd fallen asleep. I saw her whole body jump a little as she looked up, startled.

"Because I had some of it and it has damn near wrecked me. I think someone mixed ground-glass with the cyanide—"

For the fraction of an instant, the lovely face looking up at me tautened into lines of cold fury. The blue eyes were chips of blue ice. Actually, as the lips parted, I expected her to hiss at me à la the windowpane. But she didn't even sound angry: it was worse than that. She said, in the tone of weary patience-strained indulgence with which you'd address some pest of an idiot child:

"Ah, Mike, *please* run and play somewhere else"—and she turned her face back to the man with her as though I didn't exist any more.

He said, going on without a pause as though I never *had* existed, "So I told Aubrey we couldn't have *that* sort of thing going on much longer. . . . Will you have some brandy?"

He had one of those gargling Oxford voices, a thin high-bridged Norman nose, and a blond Guard's mustache. Small, pale eyes flanked the nose too closely under sandy thinning hair, and the mouth under the close-cropped mustache was arrogant yet petulant. I had a shadowy recollection of having been introduced to him shortly after we'd come aboard, but I couldn't be sure. The only thing I felt very, very sure of was that it would do me a lot of good to take a poke at him and that if I stood there any longer looking at him, I might weaken; so I made an infinitesimal bow toward Elona's shoulder and I turned away.

I TURNED away and still another table blocked my progress. I stopped, and for no reason at all except that they still didn't focus too well, I rubbed my eyes twice with the back of my left hand.

Then I resumed my interrupted progress forward, toward the nose of the ship. In the next little bay, diagonally ahead and fifteen or twenty feet distant, a man stood up as though my hand's motion had snapped him to his feet with rubber bands. He stood up, looking directly at me and then looking quickly away. I began circling the table in front of me, and he eased himself out from behind *his* table; I paused and fumbled in my pocket for a cigarette, and he stopped and took out a cigarette-case and clicked it open.

He didn't glance at me again, he seemed utterly oblivious of everything in the world except getting a smoke. Yet as I passed him, I had a sudden curious feeling that he was anything but oblivious, that he was aware of me with every nerve and muscle in his body, that he was trying to establish some tenuous synchronization (of thought? of movement?) with me, as though we were two badly rehearsed dancers on an unfamiliar stage. It was a strange feeling: it came in a faint tingling wave and was gone.

I went on past, on up the broad center aisle which traverses the Clipper's thick body at this point, and which crosswise partitions transform into a series of semi-private bays. Each bay leads directly into the next through a narrow doorway cut in the middle of the partition. Since these doorways have no doors, you can see quite a distance ahead of you (and, if you turn, behind you) through the succession of arched openings; I did turn after I'd gone through the next couple of bays, and the

fellow was sauntering casually after me. What the hell? I thought . . .

I reached the small glowing sign I was seeking, and here there was a door and I pushed it open. The man was close behind me now; my fingers held the edge of the door a moment or it would have slammed in his face. He caught it, nodded curtly, and came on in. The little compartment where we stood was like the inside of an ivory egg, drenched and glittering with achingly brilliant light, and as the door clicked shut behind him, my companion got his back against it and scratched a match and for the first time I could get a really good look at him.

HE was a couple of inches taller than my own five-foot-ten, and I judged nearly a decade older than my own thirty-five years. Varnished brogues, a regimental-striped necktie, a heather-colored tweed jacket over Glenurquhart slacks bespoke a certain amount of taste and of leisure, and my eyes traveled on up to the face above them.

It was a fine face and also a tragic face—lines of unutterable strain about the eyes. I knew those lines; they come toward the end-stages of too-long-protracted tension and fatigue. They are quite the opposite of the sagging pouches of dissipation, being the visible scars of flesh spurred too ruthlessly by the on-driving spirit. The wide forehead under thick graying hair was the same dark leather-color as the flat bony cheeks. The jutting down-curved nose over a firm, thin-lipped mouth made the face resemble very interestingly an eagle's face. Or a hawk's. Latent cruelty tempered by—what? Tempered by a very calm, pleasant voice, at least, I thought, as my companion threw the match away and said:

"Little stuffy back there, isn't it?"

"Frightful. I fell asleep. . . ." I started rinsing my hands. My own square heavy face scowled back to me from the brilliant mirror and I thought, Speaking of lines, dope, you've got some little dandies under *your* eyes. A baby could spot *them* for just what they are: too much Paris. Why don't you grow up? . . . Over my shoulder I heard the calm voice say:

"Aren't you Mike Pope?"

"What's left of him. Yes." I reached for a towel. As I swung round, the tall man was grinning at the disgust in my tone. "Speaking of names," I said, "did you happen to notice those people I stopped to speak to just now?"

"You mean the lemon-colored worm with the very lovely girl? My name's McRae, by the way."

"That's it. Who is he, do you know?—the worm, I mean."

"He's a man named Calverton. Hugo Calverton. British novelist, very deep, very dirty. Also very—"

"I *thought* I'd seen that pan of his somewhere. Probably on a book jacket . . . Very noisy, too, hasn't he been lately? Sounding off in the public prints about what the British Empire should—"

"Oh, quite," said McRae in a toneless, hard voice. "Quite."

"How'd you know me?"

"From your picture. The little cut that heads up your column. I'm one of your constant readers—did you know you had one?—but I couldn't place you till just now."

"Ah. Thanks," I said absently, still thinking of Elona.

"Also," McRae said, "we have a mutual friend who speaks very prettily of you at times. . . ."

"Who's that?"

"Hank Weston."

"What?" The towel fell out of my hand. I let it lie. I said: "Listen. You care to kick over a quick one with me? Not in the lounge . . . say in my cubicle. I had quite a shock a few years ago—and another one just a few minutes ago. I can't understand either of them. And if you're a friend of Weston's, you might see if you can throw a little light—because Weston is in back of both of them. Weston is the reason I am now standing where I'm standing, and half ga-ga to boot. . . ."

MY voice may have risen a little; anyway I heard no sound. But McRae moved swiftly aside from the door and turned, and the door was pushed open hard and fast, and Hugo Calverton came in. He walked directly between us without a glance: we might have been a couple of spirit-visitants. McRae said: "Well, let's

have a go at that, then"—and led the way outside and I followed. Two compartments down the aisle McRae stopped.

"There's my hat," he said, pointing toward an aged golf cap slung atop a litter of newspapers on the little table between the berths. "And here's my flask," he said, withdrawing a silver-capped object as big as a bucket from his jacket pocket. "And this," he said, waving the other hand toward the two berths, "is my temporary home. So why don't we sit down here?" I thought it a fine idea, voiced the same, so we did.

Calverton passed us presently, and meantime McRae had poured smoky golden Irish into the silver cap and we had each drained a capful and I felt much better. I craned my neck round the partition and watched Calverton grow smaller down the corridor, and when he'd finally turned off into the lounge again and we were quite alone I said:

"I don't think I'll bore you with my tale after all. There's something else, though, that I wish you'd tell *me*."

"You wouldn't bore me . . . What is it?"

"It's nothing much: just the way you jumped up awhile ago. When I was crossing the lounge after—er—snarling at Calverton, you jumped up from behind your table exactly as though I'd flashed you some sort of signal. Had I? Or was it pure coincidence that you stood up then?"

"Pure coincidence," said McRae quickly, without hesitation, and somehow I knew he was lying. I think he knew that I knew, for he grinned suddenly. "All right, now I'll ask one," he said.

"All right?" I nodded.

"Who's Calverton's girl?"

FOR some reason the question annoyed me. "She isn't Calverton's girl," I snapped. "She's my . . ." I stopped.

"Oh. Sorry." McRae's eyes were glimmering in a dark mask. A mask of bland regret, apology. It was a good act and it amused me greatly, and suddenly I wanted to talk. With reservations . . .

"Oh, she's not *my* girl," I said. "I never saw or heard of her till a few days ago. I know quite a lot about her, though; I know she keeps a giant Nubian slave in a scarlet loincloth; I know she has a secret door in her castle where little gray men slip in and out at midnight—"

"*Please,*" said McRae, looking pained.

"Honest to God . . . a Senegalese is a Nubian, isn't he? . . . Also I know—McRae, what do you do in the world? Army? Engineering? Stockbroking?"

He lied once, my cerebral second self was whispering, *see what he says now.*

"You could call me an agent," McRae said. "A private agent. That's all. *Not* a snooper for the Immigration Authorities, by the way, if that's on your mind. Even if your lovely friend keeps a whole stable of giant Nubians, even if she kills off the little gray men one by one and drops their weighted bodies in the castle moat—I am still not interested. Except, of course, as an admirer of Mike Pope's and a friend of Hank Weston's. . . . Will that do as an answer?"

"Yes," I said, "it'll do. It'll do fine. . . . The thing that bothers me, the reason I'd like to talk with you, is—oh, *Lord,* it's involved! I hardly know. . . ."

"It starts with Hank Weston," said the calm voice.

"Yes. It starts with Hank Weston and me in the Ritz bar in New York a couple of weeks ago. And it ends—well, I have a strong feeling that it hasn't ended yet by any means, that perhaps all I've seen so far is just a kind of hair-raising prologue. Take the matter of the special permit, for instance."

"What special permit?"

"The special *permission* to *partir* which the young woman in question is carrying. The little paper which is the only thing in God's world that got her past two frontiers and aboard this plane. . . ."

"You've seen it?"

"Hell, I got it for her. She is described therein, I may say, as Mrs. Michael Pope. As my wife."

"Really? Congratulations and things."

"Oh, not really, not at all," I said hastily. "A mere device to circumvent trouble. As my wife, of course, she becomes an American citizen. She wasn't one when I met her."

"Why not?"

"Because, though she was born in Denver, about seven years ago, she married Baron Perigord."

"She marr— *Are you sure?*"

The sudden slight stiffening of the long body, the sudden urgency in the low voice, surprised me. "Why—yes," I said. "Reasonably sure. Why? Did you know Perigord?"

The length of the ensuing silence also surprised me, but I didn't break it. I had a pretty good idea of the kind of "agent" McRae was, and his deep-creased forehead under the thick, graying hair showed he was busy. At last he said: "Tell me. Do those pieces of yours in the paper reflect your own views accurately? Your own heartfelt views of life as she's lived in 1940 A.D.?"

"As well as I can make them express the often-inexpressible—yes," I said.

"Then we'd better stop fencing with each other—and you'd better get on with the tale." His clenched left hand on the table-top opened, palm up. A small, oddly shaped bit of bright metal lay in the palm. I bent closer to it and I am sure my heart began to pump faster as I recognized it; then the bony fingers closed again. "I'm still working for her—in a way," McRae said, and there was another silence. He added suddenly: "Perhaps you know, perhaps you don't know: Georges Perigord was one of the worst men in France, one of the most dangerous men in the world . . . Thank God he's dead."

He refilled the silver cap, passed it to me. "Go on with the story," he said, and sat back.

2

SO I did. I told him the story of the two weeks just past. And here it is—just about as McRae heard it that night in early June.

At five o'clock one late May afternoon in New York, I was sitting with Hank Weston in the Men's Bar at the Ritz, and I happened to mention that I was going to take a vacation the next day. Simple, innocent remark? Yes—but here's what happened:

Hank said: "Where you going?"

"Paris."

"Paris? You'll never get there."

"Maybe not. Going to try, anyway."

"Going to beat the Germans to it, hey?"

"They'll never get there," I said. "I just want to see the town in wartime. Maybe I'll do a piece or two about it."

"You've been reading *Life.* . . . Listen," said Hank suddenly and with eagerness, *"if* you get there, you want to do a little job for me?"

"What kind of a little job?" I said suspiciously. Hank is legal sleuth-hound for a big New York indemnity company. As such, he has lost all his finer feelings.

"Why, it's right down your street," he said with enthusiasm. "It's a little blonde job—"

"No," I said firmly.

"—who swiped some pearls and beat it."

"They'll do it every time. Won't they? . . . Whose pearls?"

"Our pearls, in a way," said Hank. "At least, they're insured with us for fifty thousand, which is not hay, so we want them back. And since you are taking your brilliant brain to Paris," he said, patting my knee in shameless flattery, "I believe we'll get them back. Because Paris is where we think we've located Hertha."

"Oh, you have. . . . Why don't you have her pinched, then?"

"Don't want her pinched. Don't want any trouble or any publicity. Just want the pearls."

"Send your local man around to see her, then. What the devil do you want of *me?"*

"Ah," said Hank, gesturing at the waiter for a refill, "I will explain that in two words."

"I can give you," I said hastily, looking at my wristwatch, "just ten minutes."

"Fine. The pearls," said Hank, beginning to talk very fast, "are a necklace. Thirty of them. They were bought from Cartier a month ago by. . . . I'll call him Jake. He is a banker and he is fifty-five years old and *very* rich—"

"I get it," I said, with a knowing lift of the eyebrows.

"Very good. Ha ha," said Hank, laughing courteously. "Exactly. He has been making a big blitz on a nice, hard-working youngster who is a photographers' model and so lovely she'd make you cry. But he has had no luck, so he buys up this sixty or seventy thousand smackers' worth of irritated oysters in a

final frantic effort to induce Jane to Give in a Big Way."

"Why, the heel," I said indignantly. "Curse the rich. Can you or I do that?"

"I'll spare you the details," Hank said. "In two words: Jane is spared the awful indignity of such an offer, because meantime Jake gets very drunk and loses the pearls."

"Good."

"Not for us, it isn't," Hank contradicted hastily. "As soon as our hero feels able to stand the next morning, he whips downtown to see me. He is a frightful stuffed shirt and I have a hell of a time prying any facts out of him, and as a matter of fact he hasn't an awful lot to give because he had evidently been Mickey Finned."

"O-ho."

"He had the pearls in his pocket, you see, and several hours to kill before meeting Jane, and he was so excited he didn't know how he'd struggle through those hours so he began to slide a few quick ones down the hatch and the first thing you know, he was ossified."

"Shocking." I felt very bored.

"The next thing he remembers clearly—the *only* thing he remembers clearly—is a very, very pretty blonde girl sitting beside him, and music playing, and the blonde girl's arm around his shoulder, and a tiny camera flash-bulb exploding and—several minutes later—someone presenting him with the finished prints. He also remembers feeling very pleased with himself at that point, which was a conclusion somewhat premature. "Because," said Hank, "the next thing he knows is, he is standing on his own doorstep arguing with the milkman because he has just felt in his overcoat pocket and the pearls are gone."

"Fascinating," I said. "So naturally you want them back. I think I can just about make my Scarsdale train—"

"Wait, you fool," said Hank, thrusting me rudely back in my chair. "You know what I did?—with only that to go on?"

"I bet it was brilliant, anyway."

"I found the man who took the pictures!"

"That oughtn't to have been hard," I said, rousing myself from apathy. "There can't be too many restaurants in the city where the management obliges with both hostesses and candid-camera snaps. Though I realize you couldn't call in the Law. On account of—"

"On account of Mrs. Jake, Sanctity of the Home, et cetera: right you are."

"Wait. Tell me about the camera man."

"As you just said, it wasn't too hard. It was a nice restaurant—not a clip-joint. Manager was horrified to learn what had happened. Yes, certainly: Jake had blown in full of drinking-likker and lechery. Yes, certainly, one of the hostesses had stopped at his table at his request. Yes, certainly, I could see duplicates of the prints—and yes, certainly, I could get in touch with the hostess . . . she was off duty for the week-end but here was her address."

"I can see it coming," I said.

"Of course. I got the prints all right, but little Hertha had skipped."

"And *still* you can't call in the Law?"

"Jake says no. If necessary, he'll simply stand the loss, make no claim; though it's clear we'd better come through or he's off us for life. That's where we were till yesterday. But we weren't exactly idle meantime—and you'd be surprised how we cover the globe. . . . Anyway a very dazzling blonde with a pearl necklace in her pocket can't go far without leaving *some* traces—not in war days like these. So we've got a couple of false scents and we've run 'em down promptly (Jake's footing all bills and glad to)—and yesterday we hear from our Paris man and we feel pretty sure this time that it's no mistake, it's little Hertha in the flesh."

"I still don't see why you tell *me* all this," I said. "Your Paris man has evidently got eyes. Hasn't he got a tongue? Can't he brace Hertha brutally and—"

"Of course, he can. And he'd get exactly nowhere. Don't you see the position? Jake says no law, so that's out. She can deny everything if she wants to. It all comes down to finesse, my boy."

"You mean you think she'd try bluff."

"If you like, yes. And I think you're a bigger bluffer—I mean, of course, a

better finesser—than our Paris man. So when you said you were going anyway, I thought maybe you'd care to drop round and see if you can soften Hertha up a a bit . . . that's all. Incidentally, could you use ten thousand dollars? It's yours if you manage to turn up with the pearls."

"Somehow I ought to feel insulted at that."

"Do you?"

"Let's see the picture of Hertha."

"Why, you skunk. You're as bad as Jake."

"I'm better than Jake."

"How do you know you're better?"

"I just know. You feel those things."

"Yeah. Here's the picture."

I looked at it and said: "You liar."

"Why?"

"You said she was a little blonde. She's a big blonde."

"Never mind if she is a midget Eskimo, *will* you—"

"Sure. I don't mind. Hertha and I will maybe split the ten thousand fifty-fifty. My sympathies," I said, taking another good look at the photograph, "are entirely with you, Hertha. . . . Well carry on, Weston," I said briskly, slipping the photograph in my pocket, "pull your rambling mind together and give me the details fast. How do I find this Brünnehilde when I get there?"

THE details of my trip to Paris aren't important.

"I'll just say that I located Hertha, and eventually got the pearls. She wore them concealed in a cleverly-fashioned gold bead necklace, the filigreed gold balls concealing the pearls. We were in her room having drinks when I realized what that gold necklace meant. I just reached out and unclasped the thing and dropped it into my pocket.

The details of the fracas that followed can be skipped; I have never cared to remember them. Not that I hurt her—though Lord knows she tried hard enough to hurt me. Her teeth nearly met in my shoulder at one point, and if you don't think that hurts, drop your chin right now and try it on your own. But after all you feel like a fool fighting a woman.

It was all done in silence, of course, for she didn't dare to scream. I hit her as lightly as I dared on the point of the jaw and knocked her cold.

I know I was a fool but I took out my wallet and extracted the money I'd had ready there, in *mille* notes. I tucked them in Hertha's beautiful bosom and went away from there fast before I weakened any more.

3

"WELL, after that," I said to McRae, "what would you have done?"

He grinned cheerfully. "*I* dunno. Turned the pearls over to the local sleuth and got quietly and beautifully drunk, I guess."

"You must be psychic. I did just that. But the funny thing is— *Am* I boring you? Also it's getting pretty late."

"I'm enjoying myself for the first time in weeks," McRae said with obvious sincerity, so I went on.

I went on with the story as well as I could, that is, which was not any too well because so much of what happened afterward remained (and still remains) a blank. One moment I was having a Scotch at the Castiglione Bar before a late dinner, and the next moment it was broad daylight and I was crossing the pavement toward my hotel door, with a fresh-ink-scented morning paper under my arm. I had been proceeding on automatic momentum, as it were, all through the hours between; now suddenly I was sober again, and I stopped out of sheer surprise.

"*That* was a nice constructive bit of work, Pope," I said to myself. "Where the hell have you *been?*" A prim quiet voice beside me said in careful English:

"Are you interested in modern art, sir?"

I turned. There under a spreading lime tree stood a retired clergyman. At least he looked like one. Around sixty; mild, shy; neat gray suit, neat gray pointed beard, neat black hat; black square-toed shoes. His false teeth were a bit too big for him and gave him a faintly shark-like appearance when he opened his mouth but his smile was eminently kind. He said:

"Forgive me if I disturb you. My name is Mull. Alexander Mull."

My eyebrows probably said, So what, Mull?

"I thought perhaps you were a connoisseur like myself." He put his hand in his pocket.

Here come the Feelthy Peectures, I thought: only it isn't possible that this pint-size evangelist should be a—

IT was possible. And they were quite startling. Mr. Mull displayed them with a deft flip of the wrist, riffled through them quickly, and returned them to his pocket with something of a smirk. "I have a little studio near by," he said. "I take these little studies myself. I have three extremely amusing girls. Perhaps you would like to—"

I said hastily. No. Thanks very much but No. Mr. Mull sighed and bowed and I went on into my hotel, which was the Victory, out near the Etoile.

Well. Things got even more complicated from there on, as I told McRae. Time ceased to have any special meaning; voices, music, odors, tactile impressions of one sort and another were all jumbled up together in my mind. I remember sitting in the Bois at one point, eating strawberries and clotted cream; at another point I was back in the Castiglione Bar talking with Chick Perrine . . .

A girl named Henna Wyatt kept coming into my mind at the most inopportune moments, but I waved her sternly away. If she wants to stay in Honolulu, I thought, let her stay in Honolulu. Aloha Oy, I said suddenly to the man who was leading the orchestra at that particular moment: Do you happen to know how to play Aloha Oy, my friend? He said No.

NOW comes the important part. Everything up to now, as I told McRae, was just preliminary skirmishing.

I opened my eyes late one afternoon and I was sitting in an iron chair under high-arching trees toward sunset, and somehow I knew I was in Neuilly, just outside Paris, and that I had an appointment any minute. A very important appointment.

Only I couldn't quite remember where. Or with whom.

Gravel crunched suddenly under rapid feet and the maître d'hôtel came sprinting out of the long low Alpine château of weathered wood calling, "M'sieu' Pope! M'sieu' Pope! On the telephone, if you please."

I stood up mechanically and followed him. We went toward a door whence issued, bravely though a bit thinly, the sound of *Madelon* played by violin and piano. I must have been here before, I thought, he knows my name—

I picked up the handset on the table just inside the door and said, "Hello, Pope speaking." A perfectly enchanting feminine voice said: "Mike. I'll be a little late. Is everything all right?"

"Fine, fine," I said heartily. "Where are you now?" That seemed a safe chance shot.

"At home, of course. . . . Would you rather come here? I'll send the car if you like, darling."

"Splendid, splendid," I said, reminding myself of Frank Morgan. That was a break: she'd send the car. "I'll just wait here then?"

"Right." She sounded relieved. "In ten minutes, darling."

I hung up and went on into the Men's Room.

In certainly not more than six or seven minutes I heard gravel spattering behind me. I turned my head carefully so that it wouldn't fall off and a big dark-green Daimler had crept up the drive. The chauffeur was small, dark, tough-looking, but he gave a pleasant smile and got out and stood at attention by the limousine's back door. I picked up my hat (also new, I noted) and got in.

We drifted through the dying afternoon in silence, under splendid trees as lovely as a chord of music. I didn't know where we were going and I didn't care. The last Scotch had blurred everything quite satisfactorily again

I HAVE often thought, since, that my mood of the moment might have stood as an epitaph of an era—the era which was at that moment dying. An epitaph, so to speak, of Pre-War Man. Democratic Man, old style: heedless, careless, hopeful, thoughtless. And above all, egocentric. That kind of Man will either

have to carve a quite different epitaph for himself from now on—or history will forget he ever lived. The Creator will simply wrinkle a disgusted nose and the suit of armor—as Miss Millay once suggested—will rust in the empty forest. . . .

The car had stopped. We were outside a charming façade of limestone with a steep dark-red Norman roof. Trees all about. The chauffeur held the door open and I climbed out. Directly in front of me a neat graveled path led up to the front door; I thought, Well, ready or not, here I come and I marched up the path and punched a button and the door opened and I must have jumped back a good six inches. Or maybe a foot.

The Senegalese in front of me was at least six foot six, naked except for a scarlet loincloth, and with a scarlet turban tilted over his pointed skull. He said, bowing, in perfect French:

"Enter, sir. Madame Perigord awaits you in the garden."

"Oh, she does, does she?" I said. On account of the start he'd given me, I felt vaguely argumentative.

"Yes, sir."

"How are *you* doing, toots?" I said. "That is the big point at issue, the really big point. Not the wait in the garden but you. Horatius at the bridge, so to speak. You got any bridges around here?"

"I do not comprehend, sir."

"Bridges. You know, des ponts, des travertines, des—" I made motions with my hands. "A travers la Seine."

The black boy's eyes bulged. "La Seine?" he said, anxious to be helpful. "Ah, it is by that way, sir." He pointed over my shoulder.

"Ah, nuts," I said, giving him a smart shove on the chest and pushing past. "Where," I said, whirling suddenly and crouching so as to ward off any cowardly attack from the rear "is this garden of yours?"

"Straight ahead, darling," said the same cool lovely voice I had heard over the telephone. I whirled back. "Why, blow me down," I said, propping myself against a suit of Japanese armor, "you're the girl who—who—"

"Yes."

Blue-black hair swept back in a widow's peak from the exquisite ivory-tinted face; the widely spaced Celtic blue eyes were smiling at me. "Did you have any luck with Mr. Glowa, darling?" said very red lips. The thin black-velvet *robe de style* made her look exactly like an eighteenth-century marquise, a little rakish, a little theatric . . . Things were coming back to me fast.

"Glowa? Never heard of him."

"Don't be absurd, darling. You said he was your best friend in Paris. You said he could get the permit if anyone could. You said you'd call him as soon as Racine got you back to your hotel—"

The Japanese armor clinked at me and its terrifying demon face-mask dug bristles into the back of my neck. I turned and snarled at it. ". . . look in your pocket, darling," the girl was saying.

I put my hand in my pocket and to my surprise it came out holding an envelop that said *U. S. Embassy.* I handed it to the young woman and bowed. She opened it and uttered a cry of joy. "Darling," she said, coming so close to me that I could count her eyelashes and holding up red lips to graze my cheek, "darling, your new wife thinks you're wonderful. *Wonderful!*"

I had an idea that "wonderful" wasn't exactly the word, but I let it pass. I would have let anything pass. I was too thunderstruck to speak.

McRAE was much amused at this point in my narrative, and showed it. "Could you remember your bride's name by then?" he asked. "Or was that still obscure?"

"Funny you should ask that. Because it was just at that moment that I did remember her name: Elona . . . Look, McRae: I'll fill in any gaps in this tale after I get through. Right now I want to give you, as briefly as possible, the sequence of events from that moment—it was last Friday night, by the way—till we got aboard this plane a few hours ago. O.K.?"

He nodded and I went on.

We had a fine dinner, Elona and I, and realization of just what I'd done became a lot clearer and—if possible—even more distressing. The net of it was that Bill Glowa at the Embassy had sliced through coil after coil of red tape, and got me not

only the special permit for my new "wife," but two berths on a special Monday night Clipper from Lisbon. It wasn't at all certain that we could get to Lisbon, but Racine the chauffeur was already out scouting for bootleg petrol, and Elona felt sure the Daimler would make it if anything could. We would start, she said, the next evening.

I didn't argue or debate the point. I seemed to have got myself and her into a fairly complicated mess, and it seemed to my still well-alcoholized brain that it was up to me to see it through. Also she *was* very lovely.

It got to be around midnight and I said I had better catch some sleep. Never mind about Racine, I said: a little walk through the woods would do me good, and I'd pick up a taxi en route back to my hotel.

Elona agreed. We said good night and I blew a kiss back at her and stepped through the long French windows of the parlor out into the starlit night.

The light went out in the room behind me and I took half a dozen steps across the dark grass and stopped suddenly. Footsteps, not loud but distinct, were sounding on the drive. And before I could pick up my own pace again, a figure marched out from under the trees' shadow into the starshine and I was very surprised. Because even in the gloom I could see that it was Mr. Alexander Mull.

I STEPPED behind a lilac bush and waited. It was none of my business: at the moment I was just surprised. Maybe he is Elona's pappy, I thought, or maybe—

Mr. Mull went rapidly past me and walked straight up to what was an apparently blank section of the house wall. There he paused for an instant. I heard a click and saw a long dark oblong of deeper shadow; then the little postern door closed and Mr. Mull was inside. I thought, Well, blow me down: he even has a *key*—

Suddenly I felt very annoyed.

I was not in love with Elona and had no intention of ever so becoming. On the other hand, it seemed to me a crying shame that the new Mrs. Pope should be two-timing me with a little jerk like Mull.

I walked briskly back to the long French window and rapped smartly on the glass.

Nothing happened. I rapped again, tapping an impatient foot like the unexpectedly returning husband in a musical comedy.

The parlor lights went on. Elona opened the window. I said pleasantly: "Sorry to disturb you, chérie, but I think you have a burglar."

One hand went up to her breast in a curiously unreal because utterly conventional gesture of alarm. "B-burglar, Mike?" she said.

"What's Mr. Mull doing here, then?"

"Mr. *Who?*"

"Mr. Alexander Mull. He just let himself into your little side door."

She looked dazed for a moment. Then she said: "Is this fun and games? Or did you really see someone come into the—"

I stepped in through the window. "Let's have a look-round," I said. "Listen: you honestly never heard of a man named Mull? Short, prim, gray beard—"

"Never in my life," said Elona with ringing sincerity. "Did someone really—"

But I was already out in the hall. Directly in front of me was the little postern door, half-ridden behind the Japanese armor. Across the hall from it was another door and I walked purposefully toward that and opened it, intending to go on through. I didn't go through. It was a closet-door. And standing in the corner of the closet was Mr. Mull, exactly as advertised.

I reached in and got a good grip on his coat collar and yanked him out. Elona gave a small stifled shriek.

I let go the coat collar and stood back. I said sternly:

"What's the big idea, Mull?"

He blinked his weak eyes at me uncertainly. The tip of his scraggy beard, an old goat's beard, waggled as he mumbled: "This is very unfortunate . . ."

"I'll say it is. For you."

"*Very* unfortunate. My—my business has not been good lately. Not good at all. People seem to have other things on their minds."

"So what?"

"So . . . I hear that Madame lives here

alone, with—with only the serving-maid in the house at night."

"You heard wrong. She has a large black man; she has a chauffeur; also tonight she has me. Go on."

"So I call here one day; I have a waxed blank; I take the impression of the keyhole in the little door there. I am," he said, drawing himself up to his full height of five foot six, "a burglar."

"You need more practice then. Only I don't think you'll be able to get any for quite a while. Because I am now about to call the Law."

"*No,* Mike." Elona was looking with a mixture of pity and disgust at the wretched figure of Mull. "I won't let you do that," she insisted. "Make him give back the key and let him go."

"I won't."

"We want to get started in a few hours, Mike," she said in my ear. "Don't you realize that if we make a charge, lodge a complaint, we'll never get off? I know French officialdom: we'll be here for days and days if you call in the police now."

I THOUGHT for a moment: she made sense. I said: "All right. Give me that key, Mull."

He handed it to me promptly. His fingers were cold and a little wet, like worms.

"And get out."

He did.

That was that. I said good night to Elona all over again, which was a complicated and delightful process, and along about half-past two in the morning, I reached my hotel. . . .

I knew I wouldn't sleep unless I called Bill Glowa to get some light on certain details which still evaded me. So I called him. His hotel said he was out. So I thrashed around on my bed till dawn and then fell very fast asleep indeed, and when I opened my eyes again it was nearly five of Saturday afternoon.

Between five and six-fifteen, while shaving and bathing and getting my two bags packed and my hotel bill analyzed and paid, I called the Embassy twice and Glowa's hotel three times. No luck. So I called the Embassy back for the third time and asked to speak to Gillingham. He was a pleasant youngster, a friend of Glowa's, whom I'd met first in '37. When I got him, I started to rib him about his absentee colleague but he cut in suddenly. "Sorry, Pope," he said. "Bill's around somewhere—we were all up all night, as you can imagine."

"Why so?" I said, stupidly. "Sudden crisis?"

"Good God," said Gillingham. "Where do you keep yourself?"

"Had a little eye-trouble the last couple of days. Couldn't read newspapers. Only labels. What's new?"

"Glad *some*one's carefree," said the taut voice in a tone of angry scorn. "In two words—and I've got to go, there are three other chaps waiting for this phone—*the Hun is at the gate!*"

"*What!* You don't mean to—"

"I do mean to say. They're charging straight south, straight on Paris . . . 'By, and good luck. Oh: you want Bill to call you if I should see him?"

"No," I said dully. "No, never mind . . . Thanks very much, Gillingham. Good-by."

A TAXI set me down at Elona's door at seven, and meanwhile—from the *chasseur* who got the cab for me, from the hotel desk-clerk (who was pale and sweating slightly), from the cab-driver himself—I had gathered a few details. Enough to confirm Gillingham's warning. And enough to embitter me deeply over Pope's performance of the past few days.

Not, God knew, that *I* could have helped to halt the steel thunderbolt now roaring straight at Paris. But alcoholic oblivion in such an hour seemed as indecent as public drunkenness at your best friend's funeral.

Curious, I thought, going up the graveled path toward the small gray jewel of a house beneath quiet trees, curious that Elona said nothing about this last night—

No, it isn't, dope, I told myself: it's quite natural. *She thought you knew* . . . So why talk about it?

Just as she must think you know some other things, I reminded myself, *that you can't for the life of you remember . . .*

The first part of that Saturday evening was quite conventional. We had dinner

—another fine dinner: there was certainly no shortage in this house, no evidence of rationing or scarcity—and after that Elona played and sang some Schubert *lieder* in a rather small but beautifully trained voice. And after that, we strolled in the little garden under the dark trees and the sky to the northward was dark and quiet, yet it was a very curious quietness and darkness. For it quivered with a thunder which was *almost* audible, it flickered with far lightnings which were *almost* a glow. We came in again, we had another brandy—

And before I could believe it, Racine and the Daimler were at the door.

I wish I could forget—I wish I could hope ever to forget—the journey that followed. It was a nightmare journey—a nightmare from which one could not waken.

We left Paris at one in the morning, with the Daimler whispering through dark streets lit only by ghostly wisps of blue light here and there: streets so deserted, so utterly empty of life that even Elona noticed it. "Why, where is everyone? At this rate we'll make fine time, darling."

"Wait." From the *chasseur*, the hotel-clerk, the taximan, I'd heard only little hints . . . snatches . . . Perhaps they weren't true. . . .

THEY were true, all right. They were much less than the truth. Literally between daybreak and sunset that day, one of those scientifically inexplicable fits of mass-hysteria had spread like a contagion over all Paris. It was not, I think, Fear in the ordinary sense: it was an overwhelming, an irresistible impulse toward *flight* . . . Let wiser men than I explain it if they can.

Racine was heading for the main road south, the Orleans road. We swung round a corner and there was the answer to Elona's question. The road was not only thronged, but it was jammed: jammed four deep. With every type of conveyance you could imagine: elegant limousines like our own, decrepit Peugeots ready to blow up at any moment, heavy trucks, light trucks, horse-drawn drays, bicycles, tricycles—every sort of vehicle that would move.

And not a wheel was moving.

We waited half an hour, an hour. Someone passed the word back that we were being held up so that troops could go through, up ahead. Finally we began to inch along.

We didn't see any troops, we didn't see anything until dawn except smothered gleams of light in the clanking crowded darkness. Just as day was breaking we were held up again, this time for about forty minutes, while our procession made way for a dozen light tanks which came clattering up a crossroad and turned off across the fields to the northwestward and vanished. We struggled jerkily on. . . .

By noon we had gone only sixty miles. Small troop detachments kept straggling along the road: grimy, unshaven, strained faces sweating under the dirt: Colonials and Poles and French all mixed up together. I think everyone who saw them must have known, from the look in their eyes, what no one wanted—even yet—to put into words: that the battle was over, the day was lost. . . .

Racine did a magnificent job at the wheel. Once, in turning back too sharply after passing several slower vehicles, our fender grazed an old farmer's cart. It was barely a touch, but it wrenched off a wheel and the aged wreck collapsed before our eyes. Pitiful bits of salvage from the abandoned homestead—a crate of chickens, bedding, pots and pans, a wretched rusty cookstove—spilled all over the highway. Racine stopped. The old man standing bareheaded and muddy in the ditch took one look at our shining chariot—and spat at us. I didn't much blame him. I helped him pile the debris by the roadside and gave him what was doubtless too much money: it still seemed inadequate as we left him standing there.

We made better time once we got through Tours for the simple reason that people were beginning to run out of gas. Every petrol-pump had long lines waiting, and some pumps were already dry. Racine's illicit operations the day before had been highly successful; we had a dozen tins stored under the seat, so we were all right.

But though the wheeled traffic thinned out, pedestrian traffic seemed as thick as

ever. The sun beginning to sink ahead of us showed each successive hillside of the rolling country black with massed humanity, straining frantically toward the ever-receding horizon. The horizon beyond which there was no war. . . .

WE reached Bordeaux after dark, and the town was a madhouse. Clamorous, hysterical, even the back streets clogged with mobs which seemed ready at any moment to commit some meaningless useless act of absurd violence. Yard by yard the big car nosed its way through, and the cool darkness of the open country beyond was as welcome as a shady pool after days of desert sun. Then at last below us glittered the lights of Biarritz; then Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and the Spanish border just beyond. I'd been a little concerned about that border but I needn't have been: the officials were grave, calm, and courteous; they examined our papers carefully and handed them back and waved us on with scarcely five minutes' delay. As we picked up speed Elona gave a long sigh. "I really believe it now, Mike," she said, and put her head back on the silk pillow against my shoulder and shut her eyes. "We're going home!"

I drove the road across Spain while Racine nodded leadenly beside me. That was a particularly bad stretch because being in Spain reminded me too keenly of my being there before. Of my brief sojourn with the Armies four years before, and of the friends I'd made and how they'd gone from me one by one. It all seemed pretty silly now. Apparently we'd all been just wasting our time.

In midmorning, I remember, a train passed us: I didn't know, but I thought it was probably a Lisbon-bound train. Anyway it was packed to the gunwales with passengers. The railroad and the highroad were running side by side at that point, and as the dining-car slid slowly ahead of us, I could see through one window the enormous fat red black-mustached face of a French Senator who had been world-famous. He was shoveling food into his mouth as though he never expected to meet any again. Leaning across the table toward him was a woman with a face like a depraved angel's: beautiful, insolent, shameless, and cruel. I half-turned my head to point them out to Elona and she was already looking.

"He's heading for South America now, I suppose," I said over my shoulder. "He and his Madame X . . . now that they've sold out France. Or don't you believe those tales about him?"

"I . . . don't know," she said in a voice that seemed to hurt her. "He . . . used to bring her to tea."

I could think of no adequate comment.

Toward midafternoon the Portuguese border appeared: the usual barbed wire and striped barriers across the road. We had a little trouble here but not much: and display of the Clipper tickets clinched matters. On again. . . .

TWO hours later we saw the Tagus gleaming like a great silver snake in the sunlight, and Lisbon was, you might say, just round the corner. We rolled up to the Cintra airport just as the sun was setting, with plenty of time to spare.

The immense gleaming hull of the Clipper, rocking easily on the golden waves of the sunset, somehow made my eyes sting suddenly. For she was all the hope and all the promise of the golden West. Europe, I thought, is done. *Fini.* All but Britain. And would not Britain's real destiny, henceforth, lie Westward, too?

Full of great noble thoughts as I was, the business of paying off Racine, and getting our tickets punched at the Administration Building, bored me terribly. We sat down at the little open-air cafe and I tilted five or six down the hatch in quick succession. At the last one, Elona said—as women will—*"Darling . . . !"* in a sugar-sweet tone.

So I had two more. Or perhaps three. It was very bad brandy. We got up then and we were sauntering along the quai when the incredible thing happened.

I had a hand under Elona's arm, and she was pressing it close against her side. And I was reflecting, in a kind of bitter-sweet sadness, on the transiency of all human love and glory, and wondering whether it would be too much trouble to figure out what time it was at that moment in Honolulu, and what—regardless

of what time it was—Henna Wyatt was doing just then.

The sun was in my eyes so that I couldn't see too clearly, but I could have sworn that for just an instant—just one fleeting moment—the neat gray form of Mr. Alexander Mull was silhouetted in the Administration Building doorway, only it was not a gray form now, it was bathed in lucent gold. A small golden doll with golden beard under the wide-brimmed gold-dusted hat, its worm-like little fingers digging in its vest-pocket as it stood there.

I stopped short. Then I felt Elona's inquiring eyes on me. "What's wrong, darling?" her cool lovely voice said. "You want another brandy?"

I had become very fond of her but I could cheerfully have kicked her for that one. I started to point—and suddenly, as suddenly as it had appeared, the doll was gone. Once, driving back from Cambridge to New York after the Yale game, a small gray mouse appeared sitting on my radiator-cap in a pouring rain. He was there for only a moment and I never mentioned him to anyone because I was never quite sure that he had been there at all.

I felt that way about Mr. Mull at this moment, so I said yes, another brandy would be very nice.

The next thing I remembered was when I opened my eyes—as mentioned at the outset of this chronicle—and rain hissed at me against the Clipper's window. . . .

4

"SO there's the tale," I said to McRae. (The Azores were far behind us now.) "Honestly: what do you make of it? I told you I'd had two shocks. The first one was when I saw Mull in the Administration Building doorway; the second was the way Elona spoke to me a while back."

"I'd like to know," he said, "a little more about you before I comment. Also a little more about her. What she told you, I mean."

"As for me," I said, "the story is simple. Born in Saratoga, where they race horses. In March of 1905. Astrologically, therefore, I am an Aries. Aries, the Ram. Don't speak because I can beat you to it, boy: head battering against a stone wall, and all that. *I* know. . . . 'Energetic, enthusiastic, aggressive, self-willed—and optimistic.' *I* know. Evangeline Adams—or someone—told me that. . . ."

"You've told me all that and more than that, yourself, Mike," said a quiet voice. "Were you Weston's year at Cambridge?"

"No. I was '27. He was '26."

"Ah. Did you see Barry Wood in that Harvard-Army game at West Point? He reminded me of you."

"I was never as good as that," I said hastily. "I got out, and got into newspaper work, thanks to Dick Connell, and old man Hayes—he's Arthur Chesterton's nephew—said would I try a column for the paper, and . . . *you* know . . . here I am."

"Right. What about Elona? What did she tell you?"

"She told me quite a lot—at dinner, and during what I will call the trip down. She was studying voice at the Paris Conservatory in 1933. She met, at a cocktail party at Emmett Holt's, an old lad, a gay old white-haired lad named Perigord. Baron Perigord. He was sixtyish, filthy rich, and very delightful, she said. She married him.

"Her mother came on from Colorado for the wedding, and everything started off just dandy. But the Baron burst a blood-vessel on his honeymoon, and Elona found herself not only a widow but at the same time one of the richest women in France."

"Aha," said McRae.

"Yeah. . . . The Baron had started out, it seemed, in Grasse. Making perfumes. But by the time he burst his sixty-six-year-old capillary, the perfume business had long since ceased to interest him. He was then making steel, steel for the Maginot Line. Through him, Elona had met a number of interesting and amusing inner-circle families; she liked Paris a lot better than she had ever liked Denver, Col.; so after the Baron had been tucked away in the family plot beneath the daisies, Elona sent her weakly protesting mamma back to Denver, and

kept Neuilly house open, and just stayed on.

"She told me she hadn't dreamed she'd stay as long as she did. But, of course, as she said, there are no clocks in Paris." (I'd had a momentary somber reflection as she said this that there should have been a sundial, nevertheless and at least. A big sundial, say somewhere near the Etoile, near the Arc de Triomphe where everyone could see it, with an inscription chiseled on its sides. That rather terrifying old English sundial motto: *It Is Later Than You Think.* . . .) "And suddenly it was the first of June in Nineteen Hundred and Forty, and she'd had a cablegram that her mother was sick unto death in Denver, Colorado, and—she met me."

"Yes," McRae said quietly. "She met you. . . . Go on."

"She met me at the little chateau in the *Bois* where I was sitting on Wednesday afternoon, drunk as two monkeys but not showing it. At least not much. And she'd been bored and frantic—and I'd looked at least mildly interesting . . . and she'd told me her story. And we'd got a little tight together, and I had waved a lordly hand, it appeared, and had mentioned several things. I had mentioned Mr. William Glowa, Lisbon, the Dixie Clipper, the fact that if she married me she would reacquire her lost American citizenship, and the fact that I needed another brandy."

"There's still some whisky, by the way," said McRae promptly.

"No, thanks. . . . Well, of course, everything was up in the air those last days in Paris, and all sorts of rules and regulations went by the board. So I put up a long sob story to Bill Glowa next day about how my 'wife' and I *had* to get back home, and urged him to get busy . . . and here we are."

"I take it she's 'Mrs. Pope' in name only, then." His voice was casual, matter-of-fact.

"Er—oh, heavens, yes," I said hastily, hoping I was right.

"And you didn't discuss Mr. Mull again with her? His name wasn't mentioned on the drive to Lisbon say? And you still haven't mentioned that you think you saw him at the airport?"

"No—to all three questions."

McRae was silent again for what seemed a long time. "What strikes you as strangest about the whole story?" he asked finally.

"That's a big order. Because the whole story is so wacky—"

"I don't think so. Not at all, not up to a point. Not up to when you met Elona."

"Yes, that's right, in a way. The Hertha episode made sense."

"Surely. And you got the pearls. That part's O.K. But the rest of it—"

"Even Mull," I said as my brain suddenly seemed to begin to function again, "even Mull we can put down as a series of coincidences. I must have looked a wild-eyed wreck when he braced me that day about his 'studio'; and his trying to burglarize Elona's house later, out of all the houses in Paris, *could* be just happenstance. And perhaps I didn't really spot him back at the airport after all: perhaps it was just a little man who reminded me of him. I will concede, tentatively, all that—"

"I don't know that *I* will. But go on."

"Well . . . I must say that one thing has struck me as very, very funny indeed. The girl has been living in Paris for years. She's had money, she's had position, she must know any number of important and influential people and know many of them pretty well. Why should she have to fasten on a chance drunken pick-up acquaintance to get her out of France?"

McRAE bent forward and poked me in the ribs with a long bony finger. "Precisely," he said, and the metal-colored eyes looked white-hot. "I hoped that would strike you. Masculine vanity would have kept the question from even occurring to most men. *That* part of the tale is—to me—quite incredible. So—as I sit here, at least—I don't believe it."

"Why, what the devil," I said, sitting up straight suddenly. " You mean you think I'm lying about it?"

"Not for a moment. Not at all. I mean that that part smells. Of a very large and very dead red herring. Or shall we put it that there is a large black colored man in the Neuilly woodpile as well as at the Neuilly door?"

I sat regarding him stupidly. "I don't get you."

"I mean—in words of one syllable—that There Is More in This Than Meets the Eye. That's what I mean."

"Oh . . . Wheels within wheels, and all that? I see."

"Listen," said McRae, hitching his long frame closer toward me across the table-top. "And use your imagination. We are all of us, at this present moment, living through one of the great crises, one of the great turning-points, in world-history. Right?"

I nodded.

"Immense forces, titanic forces, seen and unseen, are being loosed. . . . Even the best of us are maddeningly purblind: like moles in an earthquake. I'm no mystic, I am not interested in the occult overtones of Nazism, in finespun theories of Hitler's daemonic guidance, but I have to admit that the intangible tensions, the waves of fury and of madness which seem to fill the very air we breathe, are real and awful things. They produce such inexplicable results as the mass-hysteria you spoke of—"

I NODDED again, this time absently. For his words had evoked other memories which I could not explain either; and for just a moment, I was not there in the Clipper's little cabin at all. I was back on the Orléans Road again. And all about me the night seemed to quiver with a more than human anguish, as if the old gods, the old legions, were waking—

As if the high air echoed with the far-off half-forgotten horn of Roland, with the thunder of the hosts of Charlemagne . . .

Perhaps, I thought, that had been more than fancy. Perhaps that was what had made those hours so terrible. For the old ghosts had come too late. Those were the hours when France fell. . . .

"—*and* such aberrations as your three-day oblivion, too," McRae was saying. "In the course of which you get married to an utter stranger. Or, let us say, an utter stranger marries you. Now if she were some little tart in a waterfront dive—well, that's deplorable but understandable. But she's one of the wealthiest women in France. Has she ever talked politics with you at all? World-politics?"

"No. Which reminds me: Why was her husband . . . Perigord . . . so dangerous?"

"He was a friend of Thyssen," said McRae, "among other things. It was that steel crowd, you know, which first backed Hitler. Can we skip the details?"

A great light dawned but I kept my mouth shut. McRae went on:

"I could be wrong. I could be dead wrong. But in my opinion, the things that have been happening to you are *not* just coincidence, 'happenstance.' I think this young woman's meeting with you, and her fastening on you, and her making use of you, are all part of a plan. And I think you're right in believing that everything to date is just a prologue—"

"But to what?" I said. "Prologue to *what?*"

"How do *I* know? This planetary storm we're living through, this whirlwind of the mind as well as of the battlefield, has blown some very strange bedfellows together. . . . Or, to change the figure—"

"I'd feel better if you did."

"—it's blown everything off the surface and underground. The whole world is honeycombed with underground operators, underground organizations. You know that: I've read some very eloquent columns of yours on the subject. Calverton at least is open and aboveboard in his pro-Fascist enthusiasms: but that isn't true of most of the actors in this drama. Most of the actors are—masked."

The last words rang in my ears like a bronze bell.

"*You* know," McRae said. "Communists pretending to be Gestapo agents; Fascist entrepreneurs pretending to be Communists and deliberately fomenting trouble among the unions—"

"I know."

"You have to test people out: watch them, prove them. Perhaps someone is testing *you* out at this moment, Pope. Testing your ingenuity, your resourcefulness, your discretion." The steel-gray eyes seemed to be conveying a message over and above what the thin lips said, but the message was obscure. "If you want *my* advice, *play this hand through.* But play it very carefully—with a skeptical and inquiring mind. Believe that anything is possible—and that nothing is proven. Above all, don't flash your own cards too

soon: *let others lead to you.* Do you follow me?"

I felt a little dazed. "I'm stumbling after you, I hope . . . though I can't imagine who'd want to go 'testing' me. Are you by any chance going to be in New York long? How about lunching with me in a day or two?"

The taut cheeks wrinkled in one of his rare smiles. "The wind, you know," he said. "It bloweth where it listeth, and where my superiors list is where I blow. . . . So I never know from one day to the next. But I'd like to, very much, and I'll try. Meantime"—as I stood up—"remember that I could be all wet, all wrong: so don't take my remarks too seriously. Be just as well if we keep out of each other's way tomorrow, though. . . ."

He stood up too, and put out his hand. I felt very proud to shake it. For I knew whom he was working for. He was working for a Queen long dead . . . and for the Empire she symbolized.

The shining bit of metal in his other hand had been the Victoria Cross. . . .

This was toward three in the morning, by my duly re-set watch.

AT three-fifteen, having completed hasty ablutions, I approached the drawn curtain behind which Elona was, presumably, sleeping. The blue nightlight glimmering in the cubicle beyond it showed me the curtain of her berth drawn, too. I got my clothes off as quietly as I could and I was just shrugging into my pajama top when something rustled behind me and a lovely voice said:

"This is a fine way to treat a bride. Who was the man who fascinated you so?"

"And a fine bride you turned out to be, my sweet," I said, turning. "I am still a little sore—"

I stopped. She was sitting up in her berth in a nightgown which might as well have been foam. Have I mentioned that her eyes were blue? The small ivory-tinted face was wickedly demure, and much too brilliant. I said, as severely as possible:

"You should always wash off the mascara before you go to bed. Always. Did anyone ever tell you that you look quite a lot like Hedy Lamarr?"

"Sit down, sycophant," she said, patting the blanket at a point opposite her knees, so I did. "Or de Regnier's *Salomé,*" I said, examining her closely. The slim bare ivory shoulders were beautiful. "Are you part Irish, by the way?"

"Half. My mother was an O'Shea: Dublin. Why?"

"I don't know . . . Skin, eyes, smile: definite Celtic. Well. Nice to be on speaking terms again, anyway. We weren't, a little while ago—"

"Oh, *that.*" She leaned toward me and I turned my eyes hastily toward the window, which was now a dull pearl-gray. However, it was clear I couldn't keep them there forever, so I brought them back. "His name's Calverton. He . . . knows some friends of mine. I had to be nice to him—and you'd been snoring. I was quite annoyed with you. As you say: let's skip it. Tell me about *your* friend."

"Fellow called McRae. Funny: *he* knows friends of *mine.* What a small world, I often say brightly. Also *I* was annoyed with *you.* Notice the past tense."

"I'm glad."

The engines droned sleepily in a silence which wasn't at all sleepy. I felt talkative and mystified. Doubly mystified: McRae's concluding remarks about my being "tested" didn't make much sense to me, and I couldn't analyze my feelings toward Elona. Adrenal disturbances in the dawn, I decided. Nothing more. It would be very pleasant to kiss her, though—and she obviously wanted to be kissed. Or didn't she? "Kiss me, darling," she commanded.

I took my lips and my arms away at last and it was surprisingly hard to do. I sat back. I drew a long breath.

"Elona," I said, "this will not, definitely not, do."

"No?"

"No. You are playing, my dear child, with fire. Pope is not a man to be trifled with. New York is full of blighted lives which prove it. He is tremendous—"

"Ah?"

"—a whirlwind, a tornado—"

"Ah!"

"But he is ruthless. He is also, at the moment," I said in my normal tones, "a little drunk. What do you say we retire respectably? I see dawn through yon windowpane. Shall I tuck you in and put out the light?"

She didn't move or speak, she sat there with her hands folded round her updrawn knees, studying me. The blue eyes were inscrutable, yet I had the feeling that she was pondering, weighing invisible pros and cons in an invisible scale, trying to make up her mind. Then she reached decision, for her face cleared and the scarlet lips opened but the words which came out were not at all what I had expected. She spoke slowly, thoughtfully.

"Mike," she said, "you know you've never told me much about yourself. I know you write for a New York paper and that's really all I know—from your words. But . . ."

The engines' drone was loud in the silence again. "But what?" I said helpfully.

"But your actions—[speaking very fast now]—have told me a great deal. . . . To rally round, as you did, and get me out of that—horror. And *not* to have tried to take advantage, not once to have made yourself obnoxious—"

"Oh, tush."

"All right, two tushes. But I won't forget it. And it makes me sure I can trust you. . . . There's something I want to tell you. Only *you* must never, never tell—"

"Tombstone Pope, they call him."

SHE leaned forward to bring her lips even closer and as she did I saw her give a little start and her eyes flicking over my shoulder widened in the sudden distension of terror. I swiveled to follow her gaze and there was nothing there but the close-drawn curtain, so I glanced back inquiringly at her. She had one finger in warning on her lips and she stabbed with the forefinger of the other hand toward the curtain. I stood up and drew it an inch or so aside and looked out. Hugo Calverton's thin high shoulders were moving fast away down the corridor, draped in a yellow silk gown that fluttered behind him.

I twitched the curtain in place and turned to Elona. "Cousin Hugo," I said. "Going to brush his teeth or whatever. How did you know?"

"The curtain. It bulged suddenly as though someone had lurched against it."

"Maybe he heard us talking and was trying to get an earful."

"M-maybe. He's the snoopy type."

Her face seemed very pale and I noticed that her lips were trembling. I put my large square hand on her small warm pointed one. "Darling," I said, "you're dead. *Nothing's* more important to you right now than sleep. Be a good girl and shut your eyes, will you? We've got the whole day ahead of us—"

Perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference if I hadn't said that. Perhaps her fright at the suddenly bulging curtain would have ended any confidences right then, before they'd even begun. Yet I think there was still a chance—for she was still looking at me, irresolute. Until I said—God forgive me!—"You going to oblige? Or do I have to use force?"

Instantly her face relaxed. She lay back, eying me in delicate mockery. "You could kiss me good night, couldn't you, darling?" she said: burlesque of tenderness which closed the episode. For I did just that; and I drew her curtain again; and I lay down in my own berth and sleep took me in half a minute. And the morning brightened while I slept, and I woke for a brief meal and slept again, and twenty-four hours slipped past as smoothly as our own passage over sunlit seas. And Elona said nothing more about our interrupted conversation. So, naturally, neither did I.

V

AILERONS flickered in Wednesday noon's sunshine and a thin metallic voice said:

"O.K. . . . O.K. . . . Dixie Clipper over Coney Island. Land opposite Runway One. Call over the range station."

I was sitting beside Swede Hanson, who was bringing us in. I'd ridden up with him from Bermuda before. Blue water beneath us turned to the vast green-and-brown checkerboard which was Long Island. In a few minutes Hanson said, answering the voice from the tower at La Guardia Field, "Dixie over the range station."

"O.K., Dixie over the range station. We have an American southbound over Whitestone Bridge. Plan on following him in."

Next instant I saw the American: a

flashing silver streak which was pointing down. I said to Hanson:

"Nice timing, all right."

"We got a good system here."

"I'd better go back and help my—er—my wife."

"Good luck . . . Be with us again soon?"

"The wind," I said. "It bloweth where it listeth . . . *you* know. . . ."

"Yeah." He looked puzzled. "Well . . . good-by."

We went on down, all forty tons of us, and hit the blue waters of the Sound with the usual roar and splash. The blue-upholstered cabin rocked a little, not much, and I looked at Elona and said:

"Well, well. How does it feel?—back in the land of the free, et cetera?"

"It feels wonderful, darling." She spoke with animated enthusiasm. "Eight years—they're like a dream already."

We drifted in slowly to the seaplane ramp. Elona looked dashing in a light gray tweed traveling coat and a hat with a long red feather. She wore a silver-fox scarf big enough for a bathrobe thrown over her shoulder. The exit door opened suddenly to let in a gush of light and air, and the eight passengers filed out.

There had been more, but several had left us at Bermuda. Remained now Elona, and myself, and McRae (I'd hardly had another word with him: he'd spent hours and hours next day reading and annotating papers in a bulging saddle-leather briefcase). Remained also Mr. Hugo Calverton, with whom I was now on speaking terms, at least. Not that that gave me any pleasure. But Elona had introduced us the previous morning and he had looked down his thin nose at me and given me a limp hand to squeeze. I gathered that he had never met Elona before this flight, but it was clear that he was intrigued by the lovely creature who was tied to a hopeless tosspot (me). . . . Remained also two small Jewish gentlemen with delicate fluttering hands and sphinx-like faces above their Savile Row tweeds. . . . In addition, there was the really very charming Englishwoman into whose lap I'd sloshed the Martini: she had cream-white hair and cream-white skin and a black-velvet cape and some assorted gold bangles. Her daughter, she had told Elona, was being married on the West Coast and she wanted to get there in a hurry.

The eighth passenger was a Colonel Sackville, and if you ever read *Punch* or go to the movies you can shut your eyes and see him perfectly: fierce, red-faced, white-mustached, aloof. He was in mufti and drank too much Scotch, and seemed quite typical of his age, race, and class; quite unimportant.

WE filed out, the eight of us, and the flight was over.

Pennants whipped and snapped in the stiffening breeze and the sunlight was blinding. I got a hand under Elona's arm and started to guide her up the ramp. There was quite a crowd gathered to watch the Clipper come in. There always is. I ran a lazy eye over it as we approached, walking slowly up the slanting concrete—and there in front of me was a miracle.

A Grade-A, triple-plated, twenty-one jewel miracle.

Standing on the very edge of the crowd was the neat gray figure of Mr. Alexander Mull.

I wasn't going to be fooled again. I closed my eyes and counted three and looked again.

Mr. Mull was gone.

I said to Elona: "Just a moment," and dived in the general direction of where he'd been standing. But it was too late. He was lost in the shifting crowd. . . .

I came back and took Elona's arm again and I am sure that my face was drawn and I felt her quick curious sidewise glance at it but I said nothing. I looked back but McRae had vanished too. We got through the last barrier and the porter put my two pigskin cases and Elona's four light bags in a Yellow Taxi and we drove off.

Elona settled herself in the seat and said: "For the love of heaven, Mike, what happened?"

"What makes you think anything happened?" My eyes were on the glittering pinnacles of Manhattan and I was thinking—or trying to think—very hard.

"You came back looking as though you'd seen a ghost, and I swear you were grinding your teeth. I could hear them click and splinter."

I pulled myself together. I lit a ciga-

rette. I said: "Why did you lie to me about Mr. Alexander Mull?"

"Mull? Oh, you mean the little burg—I didn't lie, Mike. Don't be tiresome."

"All right, you didn't lie. But I saw him just now, standing on the edge of the crowd as we came up the ramp."

"Really?" She didn't seem much interested.

"Really. But that isn't all. I didn't mention it to you, but—*I saw Mr. Mull in Lisbon, at the airport, right before we took off.*"

"I don't believe it."

"Word of honor. And I wasn't drunk."

"Aha ha ha."

"Well, not *that* drunk."

"All right, he was there. What's so remarkable about his being here?"

"For the love of God, girl," I said, losing patience. "It isn't only remarkable, it's plain impossible. The Clipper's the only way over now, isn't it? He wasn't aboard *us,* was he? Yet here he is when we pull in. Figure it out: *I* can't. It's said to be a pretty tough swim from Cintra to New York."

ELONA turned to me a face completely drained of color. "I'm dumb, darling," she said. "I didn't realize—why, it *is* impossible . . . Are you absolutely sure—certain, certain sure—you saw the little horror both of those times?"

"I rarely strike a woman," I said. "But you are in grave bodily danger when you ask me a thing like that. . . . Maybe Mr. Mull sprouted wings and flew over by himself. Maybe he is a disguised cherub."

"I think you need a drink."

"I know so . . . I tell you: we will go and check you in at the Madison, and I'll push on to the Club and drop my bags and dash off a shower; then I'll come back and give you your first meal in New York. And we can apply our great minds jointly to this Mull-cherub business."

"Maybe he is a yogi," said Elona helpfully. "Can't they levitate themselves or something?"

"They float around at séances. But I never heard of one who could leap the Atlantic. . . . Also, now that you're safe back, we've got to discuss how we're going to get matrimonially unscrambled."

The blue Celtic eyes were brilliant with suppressed laughter. But all she said was:

"How far is the Madison? I'd like to get my mother, long-distance, as soon as possible. Perhaps I can get a west-bound plane later this afternoon."

"It's practically just across the bridge," I said. "You can phone from there more comfortably than in one of these blasted cigar-store booths. . . . O.K.?"

"Yes, of course. You won't be long, will you?"

"Twenty minutes. Half an hour, outside time. I'll give the office a ring, too. Then I'll show you the town."

That was how we planned it. But it didn't work out quite that way. For when I got back from my club to pick Elona up, the desk-clerk at the Madison said that "Mrs. Pope" had gone out. No, she had made no long-distance calls through the hotel switchboard, at any rate: he had been right there and would know. She had come down from her room almost immediately after she'd been shown up to it (I hadn't actually gone into the hotel with her: I'd let the doorman collect her bags, and had waved to her through the taxi-window, and driven on).

Her bags? Presumably they were in the room. . . .

That's funny, I thought. But I waited.

I waited for two solid hours.

Mrs. Pope didn't come back.

She didn't come back at all. She had vanished as completely as Mr. Alexander Mull.

VI

THE next twenty-four months I will never forget, and I imagine few people will while they live. Both hemispheres, of Orient and Occident alike, became so surcharged with war and with fury that our whole planet must have gone sizzling through space like some gigantic bomb. . . .

I will set down now the real story of what happened next, in the early summer of 1942. Unless you are one of a very, very small group, you who read this do not know that story. The fractional part of it which appeared in the newspapers was terrible enough: the reality was suppressed. But I have full permission to tell about it now. The events of yesterday

—the events of this morning's newspaper —make it now definitely advisable that everyone should know the truth about the events in early August, in New York City, in Nineteen Forty-two.

I will tell this story without apologizing for the emphasis on my own small part therein, since that is how it came to me. Also, what I have written already can become fully intelligible only in relation to the struggles and the dumbnesses and—yes, occasionally—the acutenesses of your correspondent, Michael Pope.

And to make even these clear, I shall have to go back a bit. Back to my grandfather.

Through the courtesy of my grandfather, who invented a special kind of cement now used all over the world, I have never had to worry much over the sordid economic details of daily bread-and-butter getting. Perhaps—in fact, unquestionably —I would be a better man today if that weren't so. On the other hand it has left me free to say—and to write—exactly as I pleased, without trying to class-angle my stuff to curry favor with anyone. It has also provided me with more leisure than I'd otherwise have enjoyed, with an extensive wardrobe that I'd be just as well without, with the means to indulge a certain roving fancy (both amorous and geographical), and with an educated and costly taste in drinking-liquors.

It has supplied me, furthermore, with a fine small red-brick house over near Murray Hill, with a small shriveled stoic of a colored houseboy whom I have christened Epictetus Minor, with a Steinway concert grand (which I cannot play) and with a British racing motorcycle (which I rarely ride).

Grandfather's thoughtfulness has done all these things; it couldn't, of course, be helpful about my face because it is, essentially, his face. It is a large dark square face, attached to a large thick square body, and topped by extremely unruly mud-colored hair. Pictures taken of it at the age of three, say, show a certain weird elfin beauty about the entire noggin; but a spill on the Thunderbolt ski trail near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, while I was still in school, pushed its nose nearly flat and carved a deep scar through one eyebrow; a couple of subsequently acquired nicks and knocks here and there have brought it even better into line as a cross between Floyd Gibbons in a rage and Mike McTigue on a bender; and kind friends, looking at it on some mornings of late years, have suggested I take it away and hire out to scare dogs and little children at twilight.

Still it is the only face I have. And I hope—and maintain—that it shows at least gleams of intelligence. Though I grant that its owner didn't show much intelligence *in re* the vanished Mr. Mull. Nor *in re* the elusive Mrs. Pope. But in both those instances, I was sore.

I WAS sore about *l'affaire* Mull because of the ribbing I had to take from Hank Weston and others to whom I told the tale. They said I'd been tight for more than a week, which was true. They said it was remarkable that as I came up the seaplane ramp I hadn't seen a squad of flying-squirrels dressed in red panties and carrying crossbows—instead of one small gray Mull. They said—but you get the idea.

By midsummer I couldn't go into the club without some wit starting to hum: "Mull Me, Daddy, Eight to the Bar," and the whole matter became very distasteful to me. Hank Weston, delighted and congratulatory at the return of the pearls, said carelessly that Yes, he knew a chap named McRae, a thoroughly delightful fellow. He had something to do with the B.O.A.—British Overseas Airways—and like all old soldiers, Hank said, he was a most amusing and accomplished liar. Pull anybody's leg, Hank said, as soon as look at it.

I dismissed Mull and McRae from my mind.

I couldn't dismiss Elona from my mind so easily, though I was sore at her too. The Madison informed me that her bags had been sent on to Denver. After the—er—courtesies I'd showed her, it seemed to me she might have scribbled me at least a line. I was quite surprised when, about the end of June, 1940, I got a line. It was written from Denver. It said, folded round a brief clipping announcing her mother's funeral:

DEAR MIKE:

The enclosure will explain my inex-

cusable rudeness. I didn't even have time—after I got my sister via the corner drugstore phone booth—to leave you a note. I rushed back to the Field and they got me a special plane and I am very glad, though Mother was unconscious when I arrived.

I'm leaving for Reno shortly to get us, as you suggested, unscrambled. You don't have to do anything.

My sister and I may be East in the Spring. I'm spending the winter in California. Hope I catch up with you or vice versa one of these days; it was fun knowing you, and a million thanks.

ELONA.

That was all. Very cool, I thought: very cool indeed. But it didn't cool me any: it made me fairly hot under the collar with its cavalier dismissal of me and my services, and I was hot enough anyway.

That summer in New York, you may recall—the summer of 1940—was terrible at best. I spent far too much time on the club roof, sipping long iced drinks which didn't help my temperature or my temper in the least, and wondering whether Henna Wyatt was going to spend the rest of her life in Honolulu. She wouldn't answer letters or even cables.

Not that we'd ever been formally engaged—not that I had the shadow of a claim on her. It was simply that I missed her. Her smile and her voice and the pressures of her slim firm fingers—well, I was always missing these, but even more than these I was missing the lovely ribald glinting mind, the companionship closer and more deeply intimate than one's companionship with one's self which comes to many men never, which comes to no man more than once in one lifetime. . . .

I HAD had that. I had never thought to lose it. At times during the ensuing Fall and Winter, as the weeks of Henna's absence lengthened into months and the possibility that I *had* lost it crystallized slowly into a practical certainty, I came near howling like a lonesome hound.

It is perfectly true that I have a roving eye. Shapes and colorings and scents combined and compressed by the hand of God into any one of a thousand decorative forms and moving warmly, glowingly under silk or furs or lace—they stir me. They stir me strongly. But the emotion is ninety-eight percent aesthetic, as one would respond to the figures on some brilliant and beautiful animated frieze.

I'd thought that Henna understood this. Therefore my first emotion, when she didn't come back, was pure amazement. Just because her favorite uncle had fallen ill in Cleveland . . . just because, while she nursed him back to life through several endless weeks in the Spring of 1940, I'd been polite enough to show her own college room-mate the town . . . just because some of our mutual dear, dear friends had taken it on themselves to misinterpret certain perfectly innocent though I will admit rather flamboyant moments at places like—well, at various prominent places, and to report same in glowing detail to the absentee . . . in a word, just because People Can't Keep Their Big Mouths Shut, Henna had got suddenly sore.

I didn't know it at the time. Not until Uncle Everett was well again. Then, instead of heading East, she went West. Next I heard, she was in Hawaii and having fine time, thank you. This was a postcard. I cabled. Four separate cables on four successive days. Silence. More cables. Then another card. It said seven words:

Skip it, Mike. Have fun. Love. Henna.

That had come about a week before I went on my Paris vacation: it had been one of the reasons I went. Since then, not a line . . .

Now as another spring came on, the spring of 1942, I tried to tell myself that Time was successfully blurring her image in my heart. This helpful fiction contained a grain of truth: I thought of her less because I had less time to think of her: I had become a suddenly and highly controversial figure. I began, in January, a series of columns packed with facts and figures which jarred a good many important people most unpleasantly. The series bore down hard on (a) the bottle-necks in our defense-program, (b) the shockingly outmoded equipment in many branches of national defense, and (c) the consequent terrible vulnerability of America's greatest cities to a sudden and determined invader.

THEY were good columns, if I do say so. But the main thing was that they were timely. *And* sincere. I got more and more wound up myself as I went along; even so, I was surprised at the explosive effect of my material. I hadn't meant to be controversial: I had meant to be truthfully informative. I was promptly called a liar, a traitor, a voice crying in the wilderness, and an ass. I was sniffed at, laughed at, cursed at for indiscretion. I was quoted in the Senate and in Parliament. I got a growing flood of mail: cajoling, obscene, threatening, approving. From a relatively obscure commentator on a metropolitan evening paper, Pope became —to his immense amazement—something of a national figure.

Well. In a sense, of course, he enjoyed it. Tremendously. Stimulation of that sort is like absinthe: insidious but ineluctable. Yet in a deeper sense the experience was anything but enjoyable. Because what mattered, at this point, was neither hand-clapping nor hissing, but the issues themselves. *And the issues were there: the issues remained: the very size and fury of the controversy betrayed the characteristic American tendency to over-optimism, to wishful thinking, to incredulous disregard of too-unwelcome facts. . . .*

That, to any thoughtful mind, was bad enough. But that, by no means, was the worst.

Slowly, myself incredulous, I realized not merely the apathy of great blocks of citizens toward the truths of our national situation—I realized also the strength of the undercurrents which were running in precisely the opposite direction to our national effort. The subtlety, the power, the scope of forces on which you could never precisely put your finger, so cleverly hidden they were behind a mask of Sweet Reasonableness, a mask of True Patriotism, a mask of Honest Pacifism—

That, I reflected, was what McRae had said. . . . The actors, the agents—*were masked.* . . . I said so—and drew volleys of jeers.

It got to be the end of May, it got to be the first of June, it got to be the anniversary of the day I'd met Elona in Paris. Also it got most unseasonably warm.

At 11:30 on the third baking-hot morning I was skimming the first page of the *Times* and I muttered something under my breath and the man at my feet looked up and smiled sympathetically.

The reason he was at my feet was that he was shining my shoes. On the already scorching corner of 32nd Street and Fourth Avenue. He was a very old man and his white hair was drenched with perspiration as he labored; I would not have let him do what he was doing except that I needed a shine and he needed the money. Even so it made me angry.

HE was just flicking the cloth dexterously a last time and I was fumbling in my pocket when something white flicked over my shoulder and fell accurately into the old man's shapeless dirty hat, which sat tilted on its wrinkled crown beside him. I glanced up mechanically and the man who had tossed the weighted paper was already twenty feet down the avenue. Something about his carriage was familiar but I meet a lot of people: he was a tall man, and thin, with fine broad shoulders well-carried. . . . My shoe-shiner had got painfully to his feet and was looking at me out of very sharp blue eyes.

"I think you dropped this, sir," he said in a low voice, and put a crumpled bit of paper in my palm as I held out a quarter in my fingertips.

I stared at the paper while the old man pocketed the quarter and cried, "Now God bless you, sir," in a loud voice, and two swarthy louts who reeked of cheap perfume stepped on more briskly. They had slowed as they came past, or so I thought. Written in a hurried almost illegible scrawl, the paper said, in pencil, *For your Customer.* I turned it over. On the back it said: *Pope follow me.*

I rarely remember being more surprised.

"That'll be the Gunner, sir," the old man said in my ear. "I take it you know him?"

"I— Who— Yes. Yes, I do," I said, as it came to me where I had seen that casual saunter before.

"He'll probably be at the Granada, sir. Four or five blocks down."

I nodded and turned away, my mind

a jumble of confusions; but life was suddenly very interesting. I picked up speed a little and I could see McRae's back quite clearly half a block ahead of me and I thought, "Well, 'follow' doesn't mean side by side," so I slowed down. I let him pace me four blocks and as he crossed 28th Street he picked up speed and by the time I was at 28th, he was crossing 27th. The Granada restaurant in the New York Life Building is at 27th, and I saw the straight sinewy back swerve across the sidewalk and vanish through the revolving doors and I slowed some more. Give him a chance to get settled, I thought.

There were a lot of footsteps behind me but in New York there are always a lot of footsteps. I paid no special attention, which is where I was wrong.

The Granada's revolving doors whirled again as I approached them and a man came out. He wasn't moving fast, just briskly; he was a tall fine-looking man in shark-skin suitings with a pearl in his black knit necktie and an impassively finely cut face under a brown Homburg hat. There was about him an indefinable air of success and Wall Street and insolence, and I tried to place him but I couldn't. He glanced at me as we passed and I again at him; our eyes met and he went on his way.

I pushed hard against the still-moving doors and went in and the low dimly lit room with the familiar bar at the left was full of terror.

THERE weren't more than half a dozen people in it, including the barman and a blonde waitress whom I knew and of whom more later. They were all running toward a table beside a thick pillar near the bar. A man was sprawled across the table with his arms outflung upon it. A thin dark stream was flowing across the white tablecloth.

Though only part of his face was visible, I could recognize the man quite clearly. He looked more sharklike than ever now, because the shock of his jaw hitting the table had partly dislodged his lower plate. The white teeth glittered between his lips, fixed in horrid mimicry of a ghastly smile. The dark, steady stream from the hole in his temple was soaking his gray coat sleeve now—

It was Mr. Alexander Mull, and I was pleased to note that he seemed to be quite dead.

I glanced round and I couldn't see McRae anywhere in the room I knew he'd entered two minutes before. I took one step forward and something hard thrust itself against my kidneys and a voice in my ear said softly:

"Turn around, please. Turn around slowly, and get in the car outside."

It wasn't said threateningly, but in a curious dull inflectionless monotone. I couldn't place the accent: it was certainly not English or American. I said, standing perfectly still, "What the devil is—"

"Slowly, I said. But turn."

I swung round slowly and whoever was behind me moved with me. Not an eye in the room was on us. All were on the dead man. I felt sure he was a dead man because he had that curious deflated look—as though his clothes were suddenly too big for him—which somehow only corpses have.

I couldn't see who was jamming the hard round gunsnout into my back but I could see through the glass doors a big black Cadillac standing at the curb. A faint gray stream of smoke from the exhaust showed that its motor was running. It must have pulled up just as I entered, and the gun-holder must have leaped out, followed me inside. I said:

"All right, let's go. Only keep that thing out of my liver, will you?" and I pushed through the doors into the bright June sunshine and crossed the sidewalk and got into the Cadillac's invitingly open door.

7

YOU don't think at such moments, you just do things. I got in and the door clicked shut and I looked out the window and got my third surprise of the morning.

From without, it had looked like a perfectly ordinary car. But you couldn't see a thing through the windows: not even blurred shadows. Just a faint gray light. The window between me and the driver's compartment was the same type. All, doubtless, bullet-proof, too.

The car curved suddenly right because I slid into the left-hand corner of the seat; at the same time it picked up speed. Let's see I thought: we could be turning into Madison Square. But immediately thereafter I lost track of everything because we began such a complex twisting and turning that it was useless to try to figure. The car was evidently soundproof, too, for New York's familiar traffic roar was blurred to a hushed murmur.

I lit a cigarette and sat back and a voice said suddenly in my ear:

"Mr. McRae."

It was so unexpected, so clear and so close and so vibrantly arresting a voice that I remembered I jumped practically clear of the seat. "Mr. McRae," it said again, coming from a spot six inches in front of my nose where there was nothing but gray whipcord upholstery. So suddenly I got it.

The tiny radio amplifier hidden under the whipcord . . . every up-to-date taxi in town has one, of course. But this must be a two-way radio, for I was evidently expected to answer.

I have never known just why I answered what I did. The obvious reply was, "My name's Pope, you thus-and-such. Let me out of here." Instead I said:

"Mr. McRae speaking, yes; what is it?"

"Thank you," said the voice. "My eyes . . . my eyes are very bad."

"Very sorry to hear it," I said vaguely.

"Yes. It is very hard for me to get about. Even at night, your New York lights—"

"Frightful, indeed," I said. "Frightful glare."

"So, as I wanted very much to speak with you I took the liberty of sending Boris with the car—"

That, I thought, puts the tin hat on it. For gall pure and unadulterated, gall superb and sublime . . . "sending Boris with the car!" "Oh, don't give it a thought," I said heartily. "Always happy to meet new friends. Whom am I addressing, by the way?"

For some reason I felt very happy. That is an understatement: a great wave of elation was curling over and through me. The score was still away over my head, but all the doubts and unresolved suspicions of the past months, all the ribbing I'd had to take from my ribald and skeptical friends because I said I'd seen Mr. Mull in New York, *and all the real vitriol recently splashed my way*—all these were now about to be liquidated. Unless I missed my guess. It was, of course, quite possible that I myself was about to be liquidated, too. But somehow that is an angle which has never much concerned me. When you've got to go, you've got to go; until then, you're safe as churches. The voice said:

"My name is Antrim."

"Ah."

"I do hope that this little trip is not interfering with any appointments? I *was* so anxious to see you."

Was this a not-too-subtle irony? I wondered. Was there a hint, faint but definite, of a mocking feral ferocity behind these dulcet accents? "That depends," I said, "on how long the trip is going to last. I get awfully bored sitting still doing nothing. Also I'm on my last cigarette."

"Only a few minutes, Mr. McRae. I hope it isn't asking too much to suggest that you . . . that you co-operate with me—with us—when the car stops."

"In what way?"

"It isn't necessary to . . . explain now," the voice of Antrim said. "Just . . . be co-operative." The tone was carefully expressionless, almost soothing. That was it, a soothing monotone. I realized suddenly that I was very tired.

THE car was slanting upgrade now, slanting smoothly, swiftly.

I took two drags on my cigarette and it was nearly finished. The car reached the top of the incline and curved sharp right; then, in a moment, left. I took a third drag and ground the cigarette under my heel.

Next moment the car slanted downhill again, and suddenly a thought occurred to me. The smooth upward slant the sharp right curve, the sharp left curve, and then the downgrade once more—

They felt, not to my mind but to my body, like the ramp up Park Avenue to Grand Central, the swing past the Commodore, then the down hill glide to Park

Avenue again. I waited impatiently.

We came to level ground, whispered forward for what might be—I looked at my wristwatch—about a block, stopped. If I were right, this would be 47th and Park.

We waited one minute precisely and I could almost see the lights change. We swung left . . . and left again. Were we going down Madison now? Followed another left swing . . . and then a sharp down-slant . . . and a sudden thunderous vibration brought my heart in my throat with excitement. For I was sure now that I *was* right. And that we were coasting down the underground ramp into Grand Central's echoing concrete caverns. Well, I'd soon know. I sat forward a little on the seat and the car stopped.

The door opened.

I was in two minds whether to emerge with a haughty expression of bored indifference, or to tense my muscles and spring out in a flying leap. I didn't have to decide.

The door opened and a hard square brown face thrust itself into the car and practically into mine. The face had hard black eyes and a thin hard mouth; above it was a policeman's cap and below it was an athletic blue-serge chest with a gold shield. The mouth opened at one corner and a metallic voice said, low and confidentially, "Take it easy . . . it's all right, even if it looks a little funny."

A large brown hand was extended toward me. I disregarded the hand and nodded and pulled myself up and out.

I was standing on the concrete platform of Grand Central where the taxis which turn in at the back of the Biltmore stop. The squarish blue bulk of the gold-shielded police officer was close beside me. Beside him was a tall thin man in dark whipcord: the car's chauffeur, evidently. So far, so good.

But closing in in a discreet semi-circle around the three of us were three other figures, large white-jacketed figures with smart black-vizored caps on their heads, and right behind the Cadillac I could see the long sleek dark body of an ambulance.

The ambulance had gold lettering on its front. The letters spelled BELLEVUE HOSPITAL.

I didn't like the looks of *that* at all. I said to the officer: "What goes on, Captain—"

And suddenly there came to me a vague but horrid notion of what *might* be going on, and I hit the captain as hard as I could with a straight right to his belly, and as he said *Whoof* and his body bent a little, I slammed my left to his chin and vaulted over his collapsing form and dived between two of the white-jacketed boys from Bellevue—

And ran.

THERE was no time to figure direction. I went off the concrete platform in a long flying leap and lit running, on the driveway three feet below. I circled sharp right and tore up the long slanting ramp down which we had just come. I didn't think there'd be any actual shooting behind me and there wasn't. I knew damned well that neither the ambulance nor the Cadillac could follow me because it is a narrow ramp and a steady stream of cars was coming down. But I could hear clearly the sound of flying feet behind me, and I put on a little more steam.

I shot out of the yawning cavern-mouth into 44th Street like a cannon-ball, and cut sharp left and slewed in through the back door of the Biltmore and slowed instantly to a walk and crossed the long stretch of Turkish carpeting in the general direction of the Men's Bar.

Halfway across the carpet I turned my head casually and there was no one behind me but a young woman with a Sealyham on a leash, so I felt I wouldn't be in any Bellevue ambulance for a while, at least. Mine had been the oldest trick in the world, of course, every rabbit, even, knows it: doubling on your own trail. In this case it seemed to have worked: the boys were doubtless charging furiously at this moment up Madison. At least I hoped so.

I wedged myself panting, into one of the phone booths against the left-hand wall, and fished for a nickel . . . Hank Weston's secretary said, Yes, just a moment, and Hank Weston's own voice said, Hi, where you been keeping yourself, boy?

I said: "Hank. Very serious, very

urgent. . . . Where can I find this man McRae?"

"Why, I— Wait a moment." Paper rattled faintly. "Saw him only a couple days ago . . . yes, here it is: Murray Hill 9-7920. Got it?"

"Thanks."

"Anything wrong with you?"

"Not with me," I said. Then the memory of Mr. Mull's displaced false teeth, grinning horridly across the table at the coiling stream of his own blood, was too much: I had an insane impulse to titter. "N-not with *me,*" I said again. "But there's something very wrong with M—M—"

"Drunk again, huh?" He sounded relieved.

"G'by," I said, and hung up, and called Murray Hill 9-7920. A pleasing girlish voice said: "Hotel Biltmore, good morning."

"What?"

"Hotel Biltmore, *good* morning."

I swallowed my surprise (she must have been sitting right over my head) and said, "I want to talk to Mr. McRae, please: it's urgent."

"Who's calling?"

"Is he registered here?" I snapped.

"Just a moment, please."

Some complex clickings were followed by a new voice: male, confident, harsh, a little surly. It said: "Who's speaking?"

"My name's Pope," I said. "Mike Pope. Personal friend of McRae's—in fact I just had a letter from him."

McRae's voice—he must have been listening on another phone—cut in quickly. "Where are you now, Mike?"

"Right downstairs in your hotel. I—"

"Where?"

"Lower corridor, level of the Men's Bar."

"Hold it, will you?" The receiver clicked off. I opened the phone booth door and felt for my cigarettes and found I hadn't any. I was still out of breath and vaguely disgruntled. A tough, bullet-headed, red-cheeked monkey with a pearl-gray fedora on one side of his black hair came down the steps from the upper lobby three at a time. He saw me standing on the carpet alone, stepped toward me. "Mr. Pope?" he asked.

"That's right."

WE fell in step and marched up to the main lobby and into an elevator and were whisked up to the eighteenth floor. The two men who had been lounging on either side of Number 1886 straightened as we appeared, and Bullet-head nodded and tapped and the door opened.

McRae whirled round from where he'd been gazing out the window at the noonday sky. He hadn't aged any in the year since I'd seen his face: indeed the lean brown cheeks were a better color than when I'd seen them last. He was grinning cheerfully, his fingers were sinewy leather in mine—

And then I saw his eyes.

They were startling. They were very startling because all the rest of him was so perfectly under control. But his eyes were the eyes of a warrior of old time, of a man gone berserk with battle-rage: lit from behind, as it were, with a white-hot glow. He said casually:

"Very smart of you to have run me down so fast, Mike. Seems to have been a little trouble. This is Mr. Pope, boys."

Bullet-head and the short fat blond man with a portfolio in his hand (it was he who had opened the door) nodded. McRae said: "There's some rye in the bureau, isn't there? Unless those gorillas outside drank it all."

"I don't—yes, I could do with some, at that," I said. "I have quite a lot to tell you." My eyebrows asked whether it was all right to shoot with the other men in the room, and McRae got it and nodded. "My—er—my two assistants," he said. "Johnny Sword"—indicating Bullet-head—"is the best pistol shot this side of the Mississippi. Red, here, is talented in a different way. He has a card-index mind."

That seemed supremely unimportant to me at the moment. I tried to smile courteously. The rye was forthcoming presently. In toothbrush-tumblers. McRae said, lifting his glass toward mine, "Last time it was Irish—"

"In the cap of your flask . . . toward dawn."

"Bring me up to date. I recognize you. You—"

"Turned in at the Granada, and Mr.

Mull—you remember the little gray man I told you about?—was sitting there dead, and you'd disappeared." I took another sip. "And someone stuck a gun in my back and said, 'Turn round!' and I did. There was a car at the door, a big black Cadillac. I got in. A voice through a two-way radio said: 'Mister McRae—'"

I got a fine effect. McRae jumped clear out of his chair.

"Yes? and you said—"

"I said, 'Speaking: what's on your mind, pal?' Or words to that effect. Was that all right?"

BULLET-HEAD and Blondy were standing close beside me now, with McRae directly in front of me. The room was full of tension. McRae said, "Go on, go on. . . ."

"We slid down the ramp—you know, the underground ramp under the hotel here—to Grand Central, and I got out, and there was a cop there—"

"What about the voice on the radio?" McRae's own voice was vibrating slightly with what must have been intolerable strain.

"Oh, *that*—it was very polite. Said it belonged to a man named Antrim."

Quick blank looks between the other three encouraged me to go on. "Antrim said he wanted to see me . . . you, that is, and would I please be—co-operative was his word, I think, when the car stopped. I asked what he meant and the car did stop and this cop put out a hand and said, Take it easy, and there were three nurses and a Bellevue Ambulance which I did not like the look of at *all*. So I hit the cop in the belly and ran up the ramp and doubled back and called Hank Weston and asked where I could get you. Did I gum anything for you, McRae?"

"Gum anything?" the thin lips repeated. "*Gum* anything. . . . Why, you—you—" His voice failed.

Blondy said suddenly and explosively: "I get it. I get it. Take a look in that glass." He pointed at the long mirror fixed in the door. I looked and it came to me, too, and it was quite startling, though, of course McRae had realized it instantly: I myself was like a mirror of McRae. A somewhat shortened somewhat thickened reflection of his own fine-drawn gaunt length; a somewhat heavier, somewhat darker, considerably blurred reflection of his face, even. We were not wearing the same clothes but we were wearing the same kind of clothes—slacks and odd jackets and buckskin shoes; it was not at all surprising that a man—men—sent out to follow and pick up McRae should have picked me up instead . . . *especially since I was right behind him.* The realization of that made me suddenly a little sore. I said, "Did you know they were after you? Is that why you wrote me that note—when you saw me getting my shoes shined?"

He didn't answer at once, he seemed to be thinking. Then he said:

"Mike, thank God you said exactly what you did. I don't know how to thank you. I'll tell you the whole story—"

"I wish you would. Also I wish *someone* would tell me about Mr. Mull. The miraculous Mull—oh, I haven't told you about that, have I? Remember I said I'd seen him at the airport in Cintra just as we left?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, he worked a miracle. He flew over ahead of the Clipper. *He was at La Guardia Field ahead of us.* I don't believe he can pull another miracle today, though. He looked mighty dead to me."

"I'm damned sure he can't," McRae said, with a certain savage satisfaction. "Because I killed him."

8

I SAID slowly, "That thought occurred to me, of course, but it didn't seem to make sense. Who the devil are you, McRae?"

"I'm an observer," he said quickly. "That's it: just an observer."

"I thought you were an agent."

"Yes."

"But agents of His Majesty's Government don't go around potting little postcard-sellers in restaurants."

"Of course not," said McRae heartily, striking me on the shoulder almost with affection. "Of course not. How right you are, Mike. Note carefully what I just answered you: I am no longer

an agent, I'm merely an observer."

"What do you observe?—and for whom?"

His face sharpened suddenly again as the muscles tautened. "A good deal," he said. "A good deal—lately—that I don't like. Only a little while ago, for example, I observed the man you call Mull, sitting at a table and taking careful aim at me. I had just sat down myself; I was unseen except by Mull; I am a fairly good shot even with that wretched little Austrian air-pistol which I despise; I . . . beat him to it. That's all. And a very good job, if you ask me."

"A swell job, for my money. But still: *why?*"

He hesitated. I said: "Oh, hell. You don't need to be so coy. You are an unofficial and perhaps unaccredited but still pretty damned important observer for the British Army, whose job it is to keep his eyes open and his skin unpunctured—"

"If possible."

"—if possible, and well— Well. In big words, a big-shot in the British Secret Service. In short words, a spy."

He burst out laughing. It had a sincere ring. "No?" I said: "Then maybe you could tell me."

"Hell, I'll do better than tell you. I'll show you." He got up, moved to the door next the bathroom door, and opened it a crack. I heard him say: "Perhaps you'd care to come in, Colonel?"

Through the door, out of some inner sanctum, there stepped into the stiff little gilt-chaired hotel parlor where we'd been talking a tall, slim, white-haired, ramrod-straight man of sixty or so, with a high color, a gentle ascetic's face, and eyes like two cold blue bullets. He was not in uniform, he was wearing plain blue serge with a blue-and-white striped tie, and a Phi Beta Kappa key dangled from the gold chain across his lean middle. Yet "soldier" stuck out all over him, as one says, though another word popped into my mind, too: surgeon. I knew a surgeon once who looked like that at seventy-five. This man I had never seen before. He looked me up—and down; he put out his hand. It was a steel trap of a grip. McRae mentioned his name—

McRAE mentioned his name, but that is one thing I am not going to mention in this chronicle. Even if I did, you probably would't know it, because he had wooed anonymity with the same passion that most men reserve for fame. He is one of the three heads of the United States Intell—no, let's call it just the particular Government information service which every other Government on this planet respects and envies today. Its ramifications are a marvelous thing; its human antennae can pick up a whisper in Tokio, relay it to Saigon, flash it to the Philippines—and decode it in Washington, almost before the echoes of that whisper have died on the Far Eastern air. Since I have to call him something, I will call him Colonel West. He said: "Glad to meet you. Heard the conversation. You going to carry on, Douglas?"

Bullet-head and Blondy had faded gracefully into the bathroom or out the window, I noted. I also noted that they had taken the rye with them. We three sat down. McRae said:

"I'll make this as brief as possible. One, this is all off the record, and you never met the colonel in this room. You never even heard of him."

"Right," I said.

"Two, the reason I laughed just now —and very discourteous of me it was, Mike—was that you were hitting everything on the nose except the core of it. I was born a Canadian, I have been an American citizen for some years now. My interests are purely and solely your interests—and those of every American citizen. We needn't stop to verbalize or debate them now: I take it the three of us in this room can agree that we all agree on *that* score. Right?"

"Right," I said again.

"You're not here," said McRae out of a dead silence, "you're not here in this room by accident."

"No?" I was very, very surprised.

"No. You remember what I said to you in the Clipper? About the possibility that *right then*—you were being watched, 'tested'?"

"I remember," I said, "every word."

"Tell me," said McRae, apparently at a tangent, "how you and your very

fair companion—er—what did happen?"

"Nothing."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean just that. Nothing. Except a note." I explained. A faint line appeared between McRae's eyebrows. "But—you mean you let it go at that? After seeing Mull in New York?"

"Well . . . I couldn't be sure I *had* seen him," I said. "I took a lot of kidding about it, decided I'd been wrong. If Madame Perigord wanted to skip the whole thing, that was her affair. I expected, of course, I'd get a notification that I'd been duly and properly divorced, but I never—"

I STOPPED suddenly. Mountainous wastebaskets full of unopened, unexamined mail slid accusingly behind my eyes. "Was I wrong?" I said. "I'm no Government agent. I'm just a newspaper man."

"Certainly you were wrong," McRae said. "You should have reported the whole thing to the F.B.I. boys at once."

"I'm surprised it didn't reach their big ears," I said, feeling a little nettled at his tone. "I certainly did enough talking about it."

"Listen, Mr. Pope." Colonel West's voice, low, quiet, deep-boring as a drill. "The great danger to this country today—and it *is* in danger—doesn't come from people called Schnickelfritz and Zwiebelklopf, who run around with Swastika armbands and join Bunds and go aggressively Teutonic: no, it comes from quite a different set. Prominent citizens named Jones and Smith and Brown: big people, important people, wealthy people. People who are halfway to Fascism right now—halfway or more—just as the big French industrialists were, just as the Calverton crowd in England were—"

"I know. The old saying, 'There is nothing as timid as a million dollars.' Fear of labor, fear of Communism—"

"Exactly. People who can be reached from overseas, people who can be 'had,' because they're ripe for the plucking. They're not traitors, they're not renegades, remember: they're honest Bourbons. At least some are honest. . . . Well. You'd be surprised how we keep an eye on such people—as well as on others. Your friend Calverton, for example—"

I must have registered my surprise that he knew of my contact with Calverton, for he said quietly:

"McRae told me of that trip with you a year ago. Calverton, of course, is simple: he goes roaring up and down the earth; others aren't so easy. You might be interested to know we have also, recently, been keeping an eye on you."

"What?"

"Yes. Since that special series of columns of yours last winter, Washington has naturally been—er—interested in you. Privately I'll tell you that we were delighted—*delighted*—with the series. It happens to be true. *And* a valuable antidote to a lot of organized counter-effort. We have even gone out of our way, I don't mind saying, to make certain facts available to you—indirectly, of course—"

"I wondered once or twice about that. Of course, I'm grateful—"

"Not at all. We're all in this together, after all. If our outfit had nothing worse than apathy to combat, it would be fine: still, apathy is very, very bad at a time like this: you've helped explode some firecrackers. The other day, McRae suggested we might rope you in to give us another kind of help." He paused, the cold blue eyes fixed on me inquiringly.

"Of course," I said. "Though I don't see—"

"I know you don't. I'll tell you." He stood up suddenly, as swiftly and easily as an athlete half his age. He walked to the window and looked out and down for a moment, turned back to face me.

"What I'm about to say," the quiet drill of his voice went on, "is something that not twenty people in New York know. *On our side,* I mean. I'd give an arm to find out how many on the other side know it. No one must know it from you."

A FLARE of excitement in my head—this was *news* coming!—was a little dampened by the realization that I couldn't use it. But I found myself sitting on the edge of my chair—

"When you've been in this kind of work as long as most of us have, you

get sensitized. Highly sensitized. You have to: because if you don't, you're—ah—out of a job. Permanently. The difference," said the Colonel, "between the quick and the dead, if you follow me."

"Trying to."

"So. In a word: we know—we are *certain*—that the biggest coup of this war so far is being organized right here in this town, right under our noses. Something really tremendous, Pope, and I don't use words lightly. We need—badly—a good man."

I believed him. I said, "Colonel, I'm only afraid I'm not 'a good man.' Not a trained man, I mean—"

"The trouble is," said the Colonel, "that too many of our 'trained' men are now known as just that: known to the other side."

Very simple words. Somehow their tone was hair-raising, and I mean literally. As though he were saying a requiem to too many, far too many, whose number was up. He went on, the acid of self-reproach in his voice: "Also it's urgent—*very*. It's a plan which we think is being timed to explode any moment, literally *any* moment—we can't pin it down. We can't even get a line on it."

"Then how do you know it's there?"

HE thought a moment. "If I gave you concrete instances, you might smile."

"I didn't smile at the Mull phenomena. It was my unbelieving friends who smiled."

"A very good example. The Mull phenomenon, now finished, is precisely the sort of thing I mean. The man's real name was Alexander Papalandos, born in Syria in 1885. He had a long and unenviable record for bribery, double-crossing, and general skullduggery throughout the Near East during World War I. Yet he did get results. He has been a secret agent for as many as four countries at once: poor countries, which could not pay well and could not afford to be too critical. During the Twenties, he was Paris agent for the South American white slave trade: an extremely unpleasant person. *He acted*—this I have on unimpeachable authority—*as pay-off man for the Nazis* in Denmark, in Belgium, and in Holland . . . before they fell. He has been here, I am myself convinced, on the same mission . . . for some months now."

I said. "If you knew that, why not grab him?"

"We haven't known it all that time," Colonel West said honestly. "Lately, since we have known it, we have thought we could learn more by watching him."

"I've been doing some of the watching," McRae cut in. "And he got onto me. Couldn't be helped. This Big Offensive, whatever it is—and very offensive indeed it'll prove, no doubt—is something we've pieced together out of shadows. Shadows and whispers. Mahoney—he's the shoeshine man, and a good man of ours—has heard whispers at night. In flophouses, in the lowest of ginmills."

"Skip it," said the Colonel quickly. "Never mind." He glanced at his gold wristwatch. "Get on with it, Douglas," he said, and sat back.

McRae said, speaking fast: "Mike, will you take a job? You may not live till tonight. I'm still asking you."

BULLET-HEAD stuck his red face through the door. "I checked with Bellevue, sir," he said, addressing McRae. "Doctor Jessop. There was no Bellevue Ambulance at Grand Central today."

The red face withdrew.

"Fake. Thought so." McRae sat thinking, started again to talk. I had an idea that both he and the Colonel knew a good deal more than just shadows and whispers, but I certainly didn't blame them for not confiding further details to me. I sat listening. "My number has been up for some time," McRae said. "I've been shot at twice, missed a truck by a miracle last night. I knew I was being tailed today when I saw you sitting at Mahoney's stand. It's a feeling you get. . . . It's luck and your own guts, Mike, the way you said Yes, it was me speaking; the point is that this Antrim and his Cadillac who scooped you up thinking it was me *are doubtless still thinking it was me.* I refuse absolutely," he said, fixing a baleful glare at Colonel West's Phi Beta Kappa key, "to say 'It was I.' Point of honor. . . . So. You see, Mike?"

"No," I said stupidly in the silence. "I don't see. So what?"

"So you want to go and play being Me

some more? Take my chances for me?"

"How? Why?"

"Oh, for a starter, go over to Grand Central and hang around. Make yourself conspicuous. See if you can't get picked up by the Cadillac again. *You might get a direct line to the Mister Big of this job.*"

"And then?" I tried to keep my voice even, expressionless.

"Then you'll have to play it as it comes," McRae said honestly. "We will *not* trail you. These people are clever as the devil: they'd spot a shadow on your tail. If you *do* get picked up, reveal yourself as Pope if it comes to a showdown; say the whole thing is a mistake; or carry on as McRae if you can avoid the grave. *I* don't know. You're no good to us dead," he said callously, "so you might bear that in mind. Will you go?"

I said: "I don't understand the ambulance business. Why not take me to this Antrim, wherever he is, in the Cadillac?"

"Don't know that either. Maybe they needed the Cadillac for other work."

His tone was hard, somber. Like an iron bar struck with a hammer.

"And if I'm *not* picked up?"

"Then . . . go on down Park to that Granada. Take a table by the far window. There's a waitress there, a blonde girl named Flo Stanton—"

"I know her."

"Oh, you do."

"Known her for three or four months. Often eat a late breakfast there: she was my waitress. Got talking with her . . . amazing girl, as you know. Asked her how on earth, with a background like hers, she came to be waiting on table. She said it was the old story: old Country family first impoverished, then ruined. . . . She thought she'd try America. We've been dancing twice—three times. What's the real story? Is she one of you?"

"She," said McRae, "is one of the Watchers. One of Britain's Watchers. She's to be trusted—implicitly. She'll tell you how to get in touch with me: just as well if you don't phone here again."

I HARDLY heard him. Certain words, certain phrases, have always had overtones of pure magic for me. "The Watchers" evoked for me a vision as haunting, as stirring as the visions engendered when the world was young by other deathless phrases whose full significance only the initiate knew: "The Mothers" . . . "The Path" . . . "The Towers of Jupiter." . . .

"The Watchers" . . . I had never heard of them, but one could guess their purpose, their duties, their sacrifices if need be: an army vast, silent, wakeful, girdling the round earth from sea to sea and from sunrise to sunrise. . . .

". . . just one detail I can give you." Colonel West was saying, and I snapped to cerebral attention again. "It's a number, Pope: the number—or the figure—*Nine.*"

"Nine," I repeated. "Nine what?"

"I don't know. It may be a key-word, or a code-word, or a pass-word; it may also be a red herring. McRae there thinks it's a joke. Tell you more later. Just keep your eyes—and ears—open for any stray Nines."

"Do *you* think it's a joke?" I asked bluntly.

"I'm—reserving judgment."

McRae said quickly: "Mike. Is it a go?"

"Certainly it's a go. I hope I can get something for you: you're paying me a very great honor, and don't think I don't appreciate it."

Which I did. I was also, to tell the truth, somewhat staggered by it.

We shook hands. West clapped me on the shoulder with his left hand as he shook my right, and suddenly I was very happy about everything, and very anxious to be out and about his business.

THE two loungers outside the door were still there. This time, for some reason, they both snapped to rigid attention as I emerged, and I felt even more pleased.

Just to be extra obliging, I made first for the concrete platform I'd leaped from some little time before. The taxi-starter there said he'd just come on duty and I asked whether his predecessor had said anything about any excitement around noontime and the starter said No.

"I heard a fellow who was nuts got away from a Bellevue ambulance."

The starter eyed me with instant suspicion.

Once when I was much, much younger I slapped a bubble dancer at a Village hot-spot on her posterior as she passed me, motivated by sheer jejeune joie-de-vivre. The next thing I knew, a flying wedge of waiters hit me. Anxious to get a bit of my own back, I picked myself up out of the gutter and started back inside and the next think I knew I was in Bellevue. It took me nearly twenty-four hours to get out and meantime I had learned quite a lot from Joe Kiernan who was the charge nurse in the alcoholic ward. I learned, for instance, that in New York, people who make eager inquiries about Bellevue lay themselves wide open to suspicion because the chances are that they belong in Bellevue themselves.

The town is full of nuts. Nuts who pace along Third Avenue muttering to themselves because Ireland never will be free. Nuts who, when they think no one is looking, try to deface or defile the statue of Father Duffy in Times Square. Nuts who follow little girls into moving-picture houses . . . nuts who sidle up and ask you for a quarter to send a wire to President Roosevelt . . . nuts sadistic, nuts paranoiac, nuts exhibitionistic, nuts suicidal—

Also nuts who never, till their dying day, are suspected of being nuts. Maybe they run to fires. Maybe they run a bank. Maybe they are, in this year of our Lord 1942, pacifists. Maybe they believe that Hitler is right. . . .

Anyway, the starter said—looking away with elaborate indifference—he hadn't heard nothing about no ambulance.

To make a long afternoon short: I hung around Grand Central for three solid hours.

I made myself so conspicuous that the cop at the west end of the main concourse began to view me with a sour inquiry whenever I hove in sight again.

I drank quantities of Borden's milk, Coca-Cola, ginger ale and similar distasteful concoctions; I practically rented Vanderbilt Avenue and the sidewalk in front of the Commodore; I filled my pockets with cigarettes I didn't want and bought two dollars' worth of magazines at the more prominent newsstands; in short I did everything I could think of to attract attention except stand naked on top of the Information Booth wrapped in an American flag and blowing a whistle.

And nothing happened. Except that it grew hotter as the afternoon dragged by.

At last, toward sunset, I thought: The hell with it. McRae said hang round, and God knows I've hung. I will now go and look up Miss Stanton.

THE summer dusk filled the long corridor of lower Park to overflowing, like violet wine filling a huge oblong urn. As I crossed 34th Street for the second time that day, I glanced up at the towering Italianate monolith of the 71st Armory, a black finger against the tender sky. And a queer fancy came to me—a fancy that against that sky, blown toward us from far beyond the unseen horizon, drifted a vast sharply angular shadow . . . a shadow which, strangely enough, was colored not gray nor black but bloody red . . . a shadow which, even more strange to say, was not silent but sibilantly audible . . . since all about it hovered a sound which never was on land nor sea.

A sound which was many sounds, interplaited like a rope: the far harsh slamming of a giant's furnace door which is the sound of the bombs when they fall . . . the high shrill whining which is the sound the Stukas make in a power-dive . . . the brassy blare of bugles, insolently proud . . . the roar of tens of thousands of human throats united in one frenzied *"Heil!"* . . . and underneath them all, a low susurrant hum of cogwheels grinding night and day, grinding all initiative, all individuality, all dangerous and divine iconoclasms into dust.

Dust from which, marvelously, sprang living beings. Living, yet hardly human. Submen, if you will—

For the shadow which seemed to me to be drifting ever nearer through the twilight clouds was the shadow of the Swastika. . . .

Something whispered to a stop over my left shoulder and I turned my head. The black Cadillac was there. The door swung open.

I will say for Pope that he didn't hesitate. I got in quickly and the faint spinal tingling of Danger which is like the prickle of alcohol only better was mine

again for the moment. An arm reached back from the right-hand front seat and slammed the door shut, which meant there must be two men up front. I hadn't seen either of them, nor—I cursed silently as I realized it—had I got the car's number. Once again I felt the vast heavy mechanism swing smoothly away and I lit a cigarette from one of my numerous packs of Chesterfields and waited.

"Mr. McRae," the voice said as I threw the match underfoot. "Mr. McRae—"

"Speaking."

"I am very much afraid," the voice said with what sounded like a sigh, "that we are going to have to take steps with you. Yes. Steps. . . ."

There was an almost voluptuous tonation to the word.

"I know that I am damned near out of patience, that's all," I said. "I've been hanging around Grand Central for hours, trying to get in touch with you. Too bad about this noon. I—er—I don't like ambulances, that's all."

There was a slight pause. Then the voice said: "There will be no ambulance this time."

"Fine," I said. "Fine. How soon will we be there?" And as the words left my mouth, my eyes saw the bloodstain. It hadn't been there that morning, I was sure. It was a dim reddish stain all across the seat on which I sat. Evidently the scrubbing (it was still damp to the touch) it had taken had been vigorous but not wholly successful. I could quite believe McRae's suggestion that they'd had other work for the Cadillac. The voice didn't answer my question.

WE twisted and turned as though in an endless gray tunnel of mist: the translucent windows told me nothing. Ten minutes—fifteen—eighteen. . . . The car slowed, made a sudden sharp right-hand turn, and dipped downward so sharply I nearly slid off the seat. The dip was only for a few feet; the car leveled out, stopped. The engine was switched off. The car door flew open, silently.

I looked out. I could see no one. Nothing but a blank concrete wall, three or four feet from my eyes. I thought, Well, you can't die of old age just sitting here, Pope, and hunched my shoulders a trifle and boldly stepped out.

The thin sad-faced chauffeur and a big dough-faced man—also in uniform—were waiting by the right front fender. We were in a kind of oblong cement box just big enough to hold the car. Underground garage, evidently: at the rear, a steel curtain had already dropped into place. At the front, beyond the two men, was an open sliding door which led directly into a brilliantly lit red-painted elevator-cage. Dough-face motioned toward it politely and I walked past him and into the cage and the sliding door shut and the cage rose swiftly upward.

It didn't rise far. At what couldn't have been higher than a third story, the elevator stopped. The door slid back. I stepped out.

I was standing in a little *entresol* about seven feet square. Its walls were distempered a sad lead-color, like a Pompeian tomb. Directly in front of me was another door.

This was obviously metal-sheeted. In the upper center of the metal panel was a small round Judas-window, which was closed; also there was a brass bell-button on the right-hand door-jamb. I waited for a moment and nothing happened, so I pushed the button and the elevator-door behind me slid shut and I heard the *whoooosh* of the cage descending, and the door in front of me swung back.

There was something on my mind which had just slipped off it, so to speak, and I wanted to remember it and I couldn't remember. It wasn't till much later—until almost too late, in fact—that it came back to me: the fact that I had met my second underground ramp of the day.

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THE door swung back and at first the space beyond seemed to be veiled by a velvet curtain. Then I realized it was because the space itself was an ink-black void.

I hesitate to write of what happened now. Not merely because it was horrible but because—even to me at this moment, as I sit writing this record weeks later—it is incredible. Yet it happened. I ask you to believe that it happened.

Something pulled me into that ink-black silent room.

I don't mean that it was any physical compulsion: no noose tightening around my neck, nothing of that sort. It was simply that I had to go.

I took three steps into the blackness and something clicked softly behind me. The blackness became, if possible, even more profound. I knew that the door was shut.

Another click, much fainter, from in front of me coincided with a soft, low, diffused glow which seemed concentrated on the floor at my feet. In the glow I could see my feet, also the outlines of what looked like a low chair. A voice I knew, the voice I had heard in the car, said gently:

"Sit down, Mr. McRae. Again I must apologize for my eyes. They are particularly bad today."

I found myself in the chair. It was a very comfortable chair, with its back tilted at a slight angle.

"There is whisky—and coffee—on the smoking-stand beside you," the voice stated. "Please help yourself." My eyes focusing a little better discerned the shapes of cups, glasses, silverware, and the familiar squat shape of a fifth of Scotch. I thought, No reason why not. They'd never take all this trouble if it were plain and simple poisoning. A clout on the head right now would be simpler. Aloud I said: "Thanks very much. Will you join me?"

"I . . . no," said the voice, quietly. It sounded about ten feet away. "Please help yourself."

I poured myself a sizable slug of Scotch, drank it off. I had had no lunch unless you count half of a sticky chocolate bar. I felt I deserved a drink. It tasted fine.

I leaned back in the chair and the voice said: "You are quite, quite comfortable?"

"Quite." I was. Indeed I felt almost too comfortable. The angle of the chair back made relaxation compulsory.

"I asked you here for a purpose, Mr. McRae," the voice said, and again I was conscious of its curious soothing quality, almost like a lullaby. "I want first to have you make a little experiment with me: a little optical experiment."

"Do carry on," I said involuntarily. I wished I had a cigarette but it was too much trouble to find one and light it.

Without a sound, without a murmur in the smooth almost liquid silence, the light went on.

IT was a shaft of light as powerful and tangible as a glittering spear. It sprang from a point perhaps a dozen feet in front of me and drove upward, slanting away from me, against a curved concave mirror about a foot across. The mirror was at about my eye-level, and tilted slightly toward me, and the angle at which the light struck it turned it into a little blazing silver sun, of a brilliance almost intolerable to the eye.

Yet somehow my eyes could not turn away.

I became aware suddenly that the mirror, the circular sea of light, was moving. Revolving.

Smoothly, slowly, it began to spin. The light-waves lost their aching brilliance, became a softly lucent whirlpool of silver fire.

An absurd remark came into my mind. "Pardon me," I started to say, "is this the Planetarium?" It struck me that it would be a very, very funny thing to say but I found that I could not say it. I could say nothing at all. I sat exactly where I was and the little mirror spun faster and faster and my eyelids began to ache and suddenly the ache went out of them.

The ache went out of them and in its place came a blissful relaxation, a soothing peace as voluptuous as the relaxation of the body in a deep, warm bath. The little mirror spun so fast now that it was a mirror no longer. It was a glittering diamond-drill boring between the tight-sealed invisible jointures of Time and Space. It was a kind of celestial centrifuge, dissolving the three dimensions of our everyday world into—

"Into what?" I remember wondering vaguely, peacefully. The voice spoke.

It came from a point a little to the right of the spinning mirror. It said:

"You feel better now?"

"Much better," I answered, mechanically and without volition.

"You have been very tired."

"I have been very tired."

"But you feel better now. Much bet-

ter. More relaxed, more comfortable. . . ." It was like a caress, that voice.

"More . . . com . . . fort . . . able." It was a great effort to say it, yet it was no effort.

"What is your name?"

"You . . . you know my name."

"I want to hear you say it."

"Michael Pope." What am I saying, I thought, with a last vestige of reason under the triple hypnosis of the amytalized drink, the mirror, the voice. You are saying your own name, reason assured me: no harm in saying your name.

I realized later, of course, that this was not the answer, these were not the syllables, which had been expected to fall from my lips. But all I knew at the time was that the light was changing suddenly. Softening, diffusing. The glittering crystal lance that had splintered against the mirror's shield was now only a calm, soft glow. And in the glow I saw the face.

IT was such a face as I hope never to see again. Yet its outstanding characteristic, at a glance, was . . . kindness.

It appeared gradually as the light softened, at a point below and behind the mirror. Its owner was evidently seated behind the table on which the complex optical apparatus stood. And either that table, or my chair, or both, moved on silent rollers because suddenly I found myself close before the table, elbows propped against it as I leaned forward, and looking long and earnestly into eyes that were looking long and earnestly into mine. Dark, anxious, kindly eyes.

Enormous eyes.

So brilliant, so compelling in the gently strengthening light that the immense bald skull above them was a mere vague blur; vague, too, the other features. Except that somehow the mouth-and-chin section was too close to the upper part of the skull. As though the face had been split in two horizontally, just under the nose, and jammed too hard together in the repair-process. Certain types of war-wounds produced that effect, I knew: where injury to bone tissue necessitated the resection of the whole lower jaw. The net effect was definitely unpleasant and that is a masterpiece of understatement. It was a face which, somehow, despite the impressive eyes, reminded you of a lizard.

I have always disliked being touched or manhandled in any way and that is why I remember feeling a weak astonishment when a hand came out of nowhere and cupped my chin and the dark eyes came a little closer to mine. The mouth opened in a narrow slit like a frog's mouth opening and the soothing voice said:

"That is not your name . . . is it?"

This seemed hard to follow. "Is . . . what?" I said.

"Tell me," said the voice, "tell me your name again. I want to hear you say it—"

"Pope. Michael Pope."

My answer was evidently something of a shock. For just an instant the hand stayed where it was while the dark eyes peered deep into mine. Then—I think quite involuntarily—the hand tilted my chin up slightly, pulled it forward. *"Why did you say it was McRae?"*

It was a gesture involving a muscular contraction of infinitesimal scope. Yet, somehow, at that slight extra pressure, that hint of bodily ownership, that gesture with which one would compel a dog to bend his will to yours—somehow the trance in which I had been bound was broken.

And such a sudden wild rage swept me that I wonder I didn't blow the fuses in every cell of my brain.

MY achievement in staying perfectly motionless, with the dry, cold hand still cupping my chin, was a feat of histrionics of which I shall always be proud. Also, thank God, I succeeded in keeping my voice keyed to the dull monotone it had been keyed in before. "McRae?" I mumbled. "I don't know a McRae. . . ." (What I might *not* have said—if the spell had not been broken!)

"In the car . . . were you in the car this morning?"

"Car . . . yes." (How dumb do I need to act?) ". . . I was in the car this morning."

"You said you were McRae. You said it again this afternoon."

"You said it. So I said O.K., it was he speaking. *I* didn't ask to be picked up. I thought I'd find—"

"Find what?" The two words were like revolver-shots.

"Find why I was picked up," I mumbled through slack lips. (Am I doing all right? I thought. . . .)

The answer seemed all right. The hand was withdrawn, suddenly, and two putty-colored lids closed over the eyes and remained there for a moment. And then—

I wonder still that I did not cry out with horror. Remember that I was, for a number of reasons, in a highly emotional state. The head before me turned slightly while the eyelids opened; turned unconsciously while the brain within was pondering. Distinctly, against the luminous-gleaming background of the darkened room, I saw a thing like a wax hand with four stumpy fingers branching directly out of the back of the skull.

Perhaps that sounds like nothing much. Nothing except an unfortunate anatomical deformity which should have been pitied. To me it was the most horrible thing I had ever seen.

The head turned back. The waxen knobs in the dusky twilight of the room vanished behind the skull again. The voice said, as the eyes returned to mine, "Mr. Pope."

"That's my name." (Try a look of idiot pleasure, dope. . . .)

"You know no one named McRae?"

"Never heard of him."

"Did you ever hear, Mr. Pope, of the Nine?"

"The *what?*" (Did he say *Nine? Did* he? O *Lord,* what a break—)

"The Nine."

"Never heard of them. Heard of the eight-ball. . . ." (Easy, dope, you'll ruin everything.) "I'm just a newspaperman."

"Mr. Pope!"

AN entirely new tone. Brusque, businesslike, formal. My head snapped up. Evidently, so far as my conscious mind went, this was the beginning of the interview. What went before was supposed to be blurred, forgotten. And, except for that faint hand-pressure against my chin, I have no doubt it would have been forgotten—just as Pope would have been damned soon forgotten, after having given the whole show away. . . .

"My name is Antrim."

"How do you do."

He went on apologetically.

"I am afraid, Mr. Pope, that I have greatly inconvenienced you — entirely through a misapprehension. You *are* Mr. Pope, Mr. Michael Pope, the—er—the writer?"

"That is — er — correct." I thought it would be safe to act a bit bewildered, as one who couldn't quite recall what had just happened.

"Would you mind telling me just what occurred this morning? The whole error is most regrettable—"

"Why, it was really nothing," I said. "I turned off Fourth Avenue into a restaurant for a bite of early lunch, and there was some sort of commotion in the restaurant but before I could pick a table or even see what was going on, someone told me, from behind, to turn round and get in your car at the curb. . . . Then you —I suppose it was you—asked if I were McRae and—it is really I who owe you the apology, Mr. Antrim. I should have said at once that my name was Pope. But I felt a bit annoyed at being ordered about so cavalierly—"

"One's overzealous aids. . . ." The putty-colored eyelids closed as if in pain. "Go on, Mr. Pope."

"—so I said, yes, I was McRae. . . . We got to Grand Central and there was an ambulance there, and—to tell you the truth, Mr. Antrim," I said, "I am a confirmed and hopeless dipsomaniac. I have been in far, far too many ambulances to suit me—inveigled there on one pretext or another. I—lost my head. I simply ducked and ran. I thought this was just another scheme on the part of well-meaning friends."

"I quite understand." Did I dream it, or was there relief—deep, sincere relief —in the voice? No, relief was there. So far as I know, I am not a dipsomaniac in any sense—at least not yet. But it really sounded swell.

"SO, then," I said, "I got to thinking. I realized that you might be expecting this Mc—McRae, is it?—on important business, so I came back and hung round Park and the station for a couple of hours, and ultimately your chauffeur picked me up again. . . . It was much too long to explain, then, over your ingenious little radio, so I simply came along. . . .

How *did* you know my name's Pope?"

"You told me—just now. You seemed a trifle dizzy when you came in. I hope you feel better?"

No Park Avenue diagnostician could have bettered the gentle concern in the soothing voice.

"Oh." I gave a stiff artificial titter of relief, and my relief was not artificial either. "Yes, I'm fine now."

"I am very relieved." (We sound like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, I thought.) "I suppose I owe you an explanation of the Maclay business. The name is Maclay, Mr. Pope, not McRae." (Smart of you, I thought.) "Mr. Maclay is an old friend—an old and I am afraid a slightly eccentric friend—of a friend and associate of mine. I am, I may say, a physician. My friend, who is out of town at the moment, wired me yesterday that Mr. Maclay was, in his opinion, in urgent need of medical supervision and, if necessary, of restraint. I have done a good deal of psychiatric work both in England and in Vienna, and I readily consented to bring him here this morning for a consultation, though I have retired from ordinary active practice. Unfortunately, on the way here, Mr. Maclay opened the car door and stepped out. It was then Boris' task to pick him up again. Boris swears he saw him turn in at the restaurant; that he went in after him, saw you, and asked him—asked you, I mean—to step back in the car. That's all. I have not yet met Mr. Maclay, so I cannot speak for myself: but Boris tells me the resemblance is quite startling, I can only ask you to forgive and forget the whole matter."

"Exactly," I said with a magnanimous manly air, "as I trust *you* will forget my own unfortunate predilection which I mentioned to you. . . ."

A wave of the hand assured me it was already forgotten. I stood up. My head ached dully; otherwise I felt all right. "But look here," I said, "my saying I was Mc—Maclay—this noon made Boris lose all track of the real Maclay. I hope you have re-located him?"

"As a matter of fact," the voice of Antrim said sadly, "we haven't. Yet I cannot blame you for that, Mr. Pope. Boris should have been more careful. It is he who will be reproved, believe me."

I STILL didn't know whether I'd be let go as easily as all this courtesy—plus the absurd, yet basically quite possible, tale about the erratic Maclay—implied. Then it came to me that Antrim must be as anxious to get rid of me as I was to be rid of him. And hard on that came another thought: suppose I left now, what had I learned? To help McRae with, I mean? That a man named Antrim, who said he was a doctor, owned a black Cadillac and an electric elevator and a revolving mirror, and had knobs in his head, *and, unless I missed my guess, was part of—one of—the Nine.* So far, wonderful! Only—*where did he live?* McRae—from the blank looks exchanged back in the Biltmore when I'd mentioned his name—had never heard of him. Anyway, "Antrim" was unquestionably a *nom de guerre:* there'd be no "Antrim" in the New York 'phone book, I felt sure. Yet what the devil could I do now? I said, at random:

"Well. It's been pleasant to meet you anyway, and sorry about your ex-patient. *Very* sorry. You been over here long?"

"About three years. I live very quietly. Can I have Boris drive you home?"

"I couldn't think of it. I'd like a little walk, matter of fact. Where are you, Dr. Antrim—Upper East Side?"

The words were simple, obvious, courteous; they were also the wrong words. Terribly, terribly wrong. A silent electric bell buzzed in my brain before the last sentence had left my lips. I could see the great bald dome of a skull move toward me, the immense eyes peering up at me from under the putty-colored lids like a turtle's. Sudden suspicion, too sharp for dissembling, was in the movement, the gaze.

"I am ringing," the voice of Antrim said softly, "for the car."

What could I say? I knew what would happen: the descent in the little steel cage, the climb into the opaque-glassed car, the twisting and turning to confuse any possible tracing of Antrim's whereabouts—and, after my delivery at my own door, a new set of plates for the black Cadillac and, if it seemed worth while, a new coat of paint. Maroon, perhaps. . . .

Start all over again, McRae. Pope, the dope, has nothing to report. Nothing of any consequence. Because, after all, there

are seven million people in New York. You'll never trace this Antrim, never in the world; he's clever, very clever, he'll have covered his tracks perfectly—

I had a split-second in which to make up my mind. I was unarmed, but I was obviously a far stronger man than the misshapen cripple before me. Should I dare everything on physical impact *now?*—to force the whole story from him? Or play safe and let him send me tamely—and blindly—away?

If I had decided the former and thrown myself bodily at him—but you never know. . . .

I didn't decide anything. It was decided for me. The figure behind the table shifted its position slightly and there was movement in the gloom too fast to follow and out of nowhere a great yellow globe seemed to burst asunder right against my eyes and my head seemed to burst with it—

Then nothing.

10

MY eyes opening slowly showed me, through an open window, a set of crystal spangles which were stars above a spatter of larger vaguer lights which were Brooklyn. The dark-gleaming coil of the East River bisected the two, and a long mournful hoot from an unseen tugboat blew into the room, which was mine.

I was lying propped against three pillows in my own bed, fully dressed. The reading light by the bed was on. The mechanical upswing of my left wrist showed the watch-face reading exactly eleven o'clock.

Now what, I thought—and then it came back. It all came back. Up to the yellow globe bursting . . . and that was four, five hours ago and doubtless miles away. . . .

I sat up.

I opened my mouth to bellow for Epictetus when I remembered that Epictetus would be out. I'd given him the week-end off: he'd have left sharp at five that afternoon, Friday afternoon. Besides the house *felt* empty.

I rolled over and reached the 'phone book. I wanted to find the Biltmore number, call McRae. Naturally. At once. The book slid out into my hand and I started to riffle the pages with my eyes half-shut to dull the aching behind them and the pages wouldn't riffle. I was trying to turn the book from the back.

Now, that was a very small thing. But, like most men who live alone, especially lazy men, I am very meticulous about small things. I invariably slid that book into the shelf under the telephone-table a certain way. So that when I pulled it out with my left hand it would fall open under my fingers. *Invariably.* And I had taken the hide — verbally — off my black boy only the day before for having used my bedroom 'phone at all.

The conclusion was inevitable: whoever had brought me home had also been in that room . . . and had, to a certain extent, at least, *searched that room.*

THE thought was so annoying that I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed, feet on floor, the book properly reversed and the Biltmore number found and the receiver already half off its cradle—before the next thought struck me. In view of various things which had been happening, it was a fairly good thought:

If they were interested enough to search the room, they could have been interested enough to tap the wires.

I put the receiver back and looked through the A's.

As I'd expected, no "Antrim."

What'll I do now, I thought?—dash out to the corner pub and 'phone the Biltmore from there? Wait a minute. . . .

I stood up, looked the bedroom over carefully. I couldn't see that a thing had been moved. Excellent replacement-work —*all but that 'phone book.* It is a small house, two floors only: I covered it thoroughly in five minutes. No sign of intrusion: the front door was locked but it is a spring lock: visitors *could* have left easily enough that way. Who would they have been? Why, the sad-faced chauffeur, naturally, and/or Dough-face his colleague . . . after they'd driven me home unconscious. What had hit me? Some trick form of tear-gas capsule—with an anesthetic effect? Probably . . . just Old Doctor Antrim making assurance doubly sure. . . .

Then another thought struck me, and

it was a very bad thought. Antrim was, undoubtedly, a key-man in whatever was afoot. *Would an intelligent and important figure in any such plot have taken a chance on turning me loose*—no matter *how* thoroughly he felt he'd pumped me, no matter *how* gullible I'd seemed—*unless he felt it wasn't, really, a "chance?"* Unless, in other words, the scheme were already so perfectly organized *and so nearly ready to break* that neither I nor any human could be expected *to block it in time?* Those last five words . . . the last two words . . . the last word, "time," . . . assumed suddenly a new and frightful significance and I wrenched the front door open and stepped out.

A taxi had just stopped in front of my home.

I shut my door and the taxi door opened and a slim, white shape detached itself partly from its dark interior and a soft English voice with a lilt to it said:

"I got stood up for dinner. I thought maybe you'd take me to supper?"

"*Very* fine timing, Miss Stanton," I said approvingly, and I crossed the sidewalk and climbed in. A heady gust of *Eve*, which costs thirty dollars an ounce, swirled round me and I sniffed appreciatively. "Where would you like to go, darling?" I said.

"How about the Fifty Club?"

"I'm not dressed."

"Who cares?"

"Not I." I waved at the driver, who had been listening with interest, and slid the partition-window shut and sat back. Flo Stanton threw back her thin, light woolen hood and I saw that she was swathed in a little white wool number which apparently was just wound on, like a sarong. I said, "You look like Ladies' Night in a Turkish bath. Very becoming."

SHE had lovely shoulders and lips to dream about. She was not only a hell of a good-looking girl but an extremely smart one. You don't get a B.A. from Oxford (if you are a woman, anyway) without at least a modicum of brains. I never knew who Flo's father was, though I guessed. I guessed after spotting the little coronet on one of her handkerchiefs. "Who stood you up?" I said, lighting her a cigarette. "Believe it or not, I was just going to telephone you when you drove up."

"I don't believe it. You've been neglecting me."

"You know why."

"That red-haired woman named Henna."

"Isn't red. Chestnut. That's not why, anyway."

"Has she finally given you the gate?"

The wheat-colored hair lay smoothly, demurely, in bands about her head. The dark lashes over widespaced blue-gray eyes were half lowered, but not so low that I couldn't see the eyes' malicious sparkle, I said, "As usual, you have on too much lipstick. . . . You know why I haven't been by. I'm much too fond of you already."

"Just an old schizoid, that's what you are."

"Just an International Menace, that's what *you* are."

"Just an international incident, you mean."

"You're losing your grip. You used to be able to sound hurt a lot more convincingly than that. Matter of fact, I saw you this morning. Gentleman had just been shot dead at your table."

Her lipstick was a scarlet slash against snow-white as the color drained from her face and she shivered faintly, suddenly. She said, lips against my ear, "Mike, I'm nearly crazy. . . . I *had* to see you. Let's not talk here, though."

I patted her knee. It was a very nice knee. "Take it easy, darling," I said. "Skip it till we get a drink. I think *I* am already crazy. Have you seen Douglas today?"

"Doug . . . you know him?"

It was almost a gasp. A gasp of relief. "Sure," I said, "I know him. We're fellow-workers, didn't he ever tell you?"

The blue-gray eyes were wide now, steady on mine. She was not quite so pale. "Prove it," she said in a low voice. "Prove it now."

"I'm telling you. As of this noon. Truly. He gave me a job."

The eyes didn't waver. "Prove it," she said again.

I don't know why I said it, except that it was the first thing that came into my head. I put my lips against the hair

swirling above her ear and said: "The Nine, darling: that's the job. Will that prove it?"

For a moment she might have been a statue. Then the statue sagged against me. Its head fell back, dark lashes grazing my cheek. A street-lamp flashing full on her face as we swung into Fiftieth Street showed me that Miss Stanton had fainted.

I slapped both her cheeks, hard.

Brakes squealed and a dazzle of gold braid on the sidewalk opened the door. Flo Stanton opened her eyes. I said: "Sorry, darling. . . . We're here." She was very good: she blinked twice and glared at me and even managed a smile. "I hope," she said calmly, "that Frederick has a table. . . ."

THE Fifty Club is over between Third and Second: of all places to catch the carriage trade. But it does. It's only a couple of years old. Its chief appeal, outside, of a fine chef and a price-scale that bars all but the idle rich, is a floor show. Not, obviously, the usual floor show: this one presents the last-word, top-flight, globe-famous entertainers in any one of a dozen fields—from magicians to acrobats, from *chanteuses* to talking dogs. It being still only a quarter to midnight, Frederick got us a table.

Flo Stanton put her gold bag and some dark glasses on it and we went back to the bar and I wedged my way through the jam and made a place for her and we had a quick Scotch apiece. A very quick one. I became, internally, a little more frantically acquiver with each passing moment; but it seemed to me vitally important to play this hand right, and if New York was slated to explode in the next five minutes, it was a cinch I was too late anyway. Suddenly over Flo's white shoulder I saw Hank Weston leering at me from a corner settee and I said: "One moment, darling," and stepped over to him. He was sitting alone but places were laid for three. I said:

"Hank, for the love of God talk fast!"

"Always do." He was a little tight, not much.

"How well do you know Douglas McRae? Is he absolutely on the up-and-up?"

He squinted at me from his smooth, heavy face. Then he saw, I suppose, the strain in my own. "Know him very well," he said, quite soberly. "Told you so a year ago. Best fellow ever lived. Great sense of humor. Why?"

I lowered my voice. There was no one near at the moment. "He—er—offered me a job today. With his—er—outfit. You know anything about them?"

Slowly Hank's left eyelid quivered in an impressive wink. Slowly and impressively he nodded his big head, looking hard at me. "Best in the world," he said. "Congratulations."

That was enough for me. If anyone knew the low-down, Hank knew. His big face shimmered suddenly with secret amusement, like water in sunlight. "Here come my guests," he said. "Want to meet them? This is *very* funny. . . ."

I turned. Flo Stanton's beautiful back was toward me as she stood at the little bar. A red-faced fiftyish man with jowls and a pointed gray mustache above a white tie and a too-tight and too-high dress collar was squiring a lady across the floor toward us behind Frederick's supple energetic lead. I'd never seen him in my life. I said: "No, thanks, I—" and the sentence was never finished.

For my eyes flicked up indifferently from a Burgundy-colored gown of chiffon velvet toward the lady's face, and my jaw stayed where it was, which was open.

SHE hadn't changed. Except that she had a new hair-do. And faint violet shadows under her eyes which were new to me. But the widow's peak of blue-black hair was the same, and the proud carriage of the little figure, and the melting Celtic blue of the wide-spaced eyes—

Clear, candid eyes. Oh, my, yes. They looked full into mine and not a muscle of her face changed and her gaze slid away toward Hank inquiringly. "Who is this big bag of rumpled laundry?" it seemed to question, out of a tinted ivory mask of impassivity. Hank was on his feet, hesitant. I said hastily: "Be seeing you, then," and nodded curtly at a point in the air midway between the two new arrivals, who were evidently destined to fill the other two covers on Hank's table, and went away.

For the third time in my life I was very angry with Elona. The first was when

she snubbed me on the Clipper. The second was when she washed out on me. The third was now. Now she had a new angle: she didn't even know me.

But anger was not my dominant emotion at the moment. No: apart from a tearing haste, I felt, chiefly, amazement. For around her neck Elona was wearing a strand of gold-filigree balls.

It might, of course, be pure coincidence. But it looked to me most remarkably like the strand I had unclasped from Hertha's neck in the Hotel Mirage on the left bank of the Seine exactly a year before.

I felt a sudden light-headed conviction that Jowl-face must be Jake.

11

THE little bell rang as the nickel dropped and I spun the dial and a girl said she was the Hotel Biltmore and I asked for Room 1886 and a man said Hello. I said:

"This is Mike Pope. Is McRae there?"

"No."

"Who's this?"

"Sword. Metcha this noon. He's in Washington. All O.K.?"

"I wouldn't say so. *I'm* all right, but—"

"Wanta talk to him?"

"If it's all right to call him down there."

"I just been talkin' to him. He flew down with the Colonel at seven. Here's the number."

He read it to me, I wrote it down. "Anything I can do, lemme know," said Mr. Sword, I thought a trifle wistfully. "I'm just sittin' here. Be here all night."

"Thanks, Sword."

Through the glass door of the booth while I waited, I saw two small red slippers approaching across the rich maroon carpeting. The booth stood in a recess, by itself, flanked by the washroom door and the powder-room door, respectively. Above the slippers was a Burgundy evening gown and above that was Elona's face. It looked, as always, lovely; but anxious. I considered pulling the booth door open and addressing a barbed insult to her as she passed; at the same moment her questing eyes saw me.

She said, "Hello, Mike," with her eyes though her lips didn't move. She glanced quickly behind her and swerved a trifle in her progress to bring her nearer the booth door and I saw she wanted to say something. I opened the door a foot and she stopped and said, not looking toward me now but adjusting a bracelet clasp on her left arm, "Mike: get introduced. And ask me to dance. Will you?—you *m-must!*"

Once before I had seen those scarlet lips trembling as they trembled now. "Of course," I said quickly, and she was already moving on toward the powder-room as the operator said: "Ready with New York now," and McRae's voice in my ear said: "Yes?"

"Mike Pope."

"Well—*that's* a relief. Where are you?" I heard him say, aside to someone, "It's Pope."

"The Fifty Club, New York. With Miss Stanton."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "Nothing happened, then?"

"Too much happened. Can I go right ahead? There's no operator here and no other booth."

"Go ahead. This is the Colonel's office. He's right beside me."

I DREW a long breath and tried to compress my thoughts. I said:

"It's pretty weird-sounding. The car picked me up just below 34th Street late this afternoon. Rode just short of twenty minutes—with a lot of twists and turns. No tunnel noises, no bridge noises: I'm sure it's on Manhattan somewhere. When we stopped we were in a tiny cement garage, steel door at one end, elevator door at the other. I went up, by request, in the elevator. I—met Antrim. He's—well, not quite human. Hypnotist of sorts. Mirrors and things. He tried to hypnotize me. Matter of fact, he damn near *did* hypnotize me: but not quite. Then when he found my real name he seemed a bit taken aback—but, McRae, *he asked me whether I knew about 'the Nine!'*"

There was a silence. Then McRae said sharply: "What did he say? Can you remember, exactly?"

"Just that. Had I ever heard of the Nine?"

"And you said—"

"Said No."

"What d'you mean — 'hypnotize?' Literally?"

"Of course, I mean literally. I—"

"But you're sure you remember he did mention the word Nine?"

I began to get a little hot under the collar. "I've told you so twice," I said.

"Did *he* know you weren't—weren't hypnotized?"

"I'm sure he thought I was. For he went on with a long cock-and-bull tale of mistaken identity and a friend of his who had a wacky friend named Maclay. That was after he thought he'd brought me back to normal again. Wanted me to skip the whole thing. To forget it. Next thing I knew—"

I told him, rapidly, about the yellow globe bursting. And my subsequent awakening. About my displaced 'phone book and my fear of tapped wires. About my starting to plunge out to 'phone him and my bumping into Flo. About what she and I said (I forgot to mention her brief faint). About seeing Hank, and then—seeing Elona. Elona with her filigree-balls and her stony stare and her wattled escort. . . . And finally (I heard McRae draw in a hissing breath of excitement as I came to this) about my curious brief interchange with her just as he'd come on the wire.

"She has just gone back upstairs," I reported. "Without even a glance this way. Message ends. Now what?"

"I've had all this taken down," I heard McRae say absently. "Let me think a minute. . . . Tell you what you do—and incidentally, Mike, very nice going. . . . Get that dance in, find out what's on her mind, then take Flo and go home."

"Whose home?"

"Yours, of course. Keep Flo with you. . . . I'll 'phone you there at . . . say, 1:15. Your wires may be tapped, at that, so I'll be Mr.—Mr. Burns. Mr. Robert Burns, your Washington cousin. We'll go on from there. Got it?"

"Right. Only I don't feel it was very nice going. I missed the number on the Cadillac—though they'd change that, of course. But I don't see how you're ever going to run this Antrim down—and I'm as sure as that I'm standing here that he's one of the big shots of this gang. Wait a minute: let me describe him: possibly that'll ring a bell with you."

I described him at some length. McRae said:

"Sounds *too* bizarre to me. Sounds like a disguise: don't you think so, Colonel?"

"Possibly," said West's voice. He was evidently listening on a connected 'phone. "You can give us nothing else *nothing*—about the house?"

"No, sir. Because I didn't see it. I only saw the little cement garage, the inside of a little red-painted elevator, the *entresol* with lead-colored walls, and a big, dark room beyond it. That's all. I think the elevator went up at least two floors: possibly three. Not more. So it's a big house—but there must be hundreds and hundreds of such houses on this island—"

"We'll do some checking," McRae said quickly. "We've got our little ways. . . . You did damn well, Mike. What I want to know now is what's on your Elona's mind."

"I'll find out. . . . Oh, one question?"

"Shoot."

"I haven't seen a paper. Anything about Mull?"

"Buy one," said McRae succinctly. "Anything else?"

"No. Except—is it safe to take Flo Stanton back with me? Safe for her, I mean? I haven't a gun on me: suppose there's a reception-committee waiting?"

"There'll be one," said McRae, "and it'll be a good one, believe me. But it won't bother *you*. . . . Good hunting."

"Good-by."

What the devil did he mean by that? I wondered, hanging up. The operator buzzed back angrily for more money. I fed it into the slot, thinking hard.

WHEN I got back upstairs it was a quarter past twelve, and I sat down as unobtrusively as I could beside Miss Stanton, whom I'd left to order by herself and who was just finishing her soup. Under cover of the clash of crockery as plates were changed I said: "Just talked with Douglas. And got further instructions. You're to spend the night with me. How do you like that?"

"I don't know," said my young companion doubtfully. "Will I be safe with you, do you think?"

"Of course not," I said heartily. "So stop worrying about it. Glad you didn't wait your soup for me."

The waiter left us for a moment and I

leaned toward Flo Stanton's fair head and added:

"Very strange thing happened downstairs just now. Tell you about it the first chance I get. McRae was very interested. You saw that man I was talking with—and the man and the girl who came up?"

"Naturally."

The waiter came back. "You must meet her: my wife," I said, and Flo Stanton's eyes flew wide open; then she said: "You're a liar."

Hank Weston's bulky shape looming beside me said, "Mike: I thought of a couple more things I could tell you about our friend," and paused, with an ingratiating leer at Flo Stanton. I stood up, made them known to each other. Hank said, shaking her hand warmly as though he had never felt a hand in his before, "We have to shove along fairly early. Care for a brandy with us now—or are you already started on supper?"

Mindful of the strain in Elona's eyes, I kicked my fair companion under the table and said: "Thanks. A very quick one, between courses. . . ."

TWO minutes later the orchestra began to play *The Blue Danube* on muted strings, and three and one-half minutes later I was holding Elona in my arms. So far as I knew, it was the first time she had ever occupied them thus. She danced very well, which no one ever said about me.

I swung her away from Hank's table and wiped the remains of the sickly sweet introductorial grin off my face and said blandly:

"There is one thing I would like you to tell me quickly, dear one. Are you my wife or are you my ex? You never bothered to let me know."

"Mike," she said, speaking low and fast, "there isn't much time. I'm at the Plaza —I must talk with you. It was very good of you to play up—"

"When you want me to call?"

"Tonight. Or first thing in the morning. Tonight's better: say around two? I'll be home by then. Suite 444—"

"Mrs. Michael Pope? Or Mrs. Jake Noyes?"

"As Miss Elona Paterson of Denver, Col. My maiden self. . . . When we stop, take the key out of my left hand. Hide it."

Jake (I'd been right) whirled past with important puffing sounds. Flo Stanton was looking up at him soulfully. "What do I do with it after that?" I said.

"I'll tell you. . . . Now. Take it." The music stopped, and her left hand descending from my shoulder met mine in the violet-tinted smoke-grayed gloom. Something round and rubbery-feeling was in my palm as her hand fell away. I dropped it in my jacket pocket and people began circling back to their tables.

We were only a few feet from Hank's table, Elona and I, when all the lights went out. All except a couple of baby spots which trained their sharply focused brilliance on a large gold frame at one end of the room. A frame about eight feet high and four feet wide. A black velvet curtain was all that the heavy rococo band seemed to be framing. Then the music began again, this time with the brasses leading: blaring, deafening in a quickstep march. The black curtain flicked away.

For a moment I felt exactly as I had felt when I saw Mr. Mull standing at La Guardia Field as the Clipper fed its passengers up the ramp. For now within the frame you saw a tiny stage. And on the stage, back of a rostrum with a microphone and in front of a large swastika banner, stood the figure of Adolf Hitler, motionless, right arm stiffly outstretched.

I STARED. It was no dummy, it was a living figure; it was also incredible because it was so perfect. Sidelights accentuated every detail with skillful shadows. To imitate mere physical phenomena is relatively simple: here were the lank hair, the ill-made lumpish figure, the Chaplin mustache. But here were also the mystic intensity, the rapt absorption, the dream-haunted burning eyes. . . . The music stopped. There was dead silence in the room.

The figure's arm dropped stiffly to its side. It leaned a little forward, closer to the mike. Breathing, even, seemed to stop in the room. Before our eyes, the figure seemed to swell. . . . *"Morgen,"* it said, *"ist der Tag!"*

Someone struck hands together; the spell was broken; the velvet curtain

flicked back. The music began again, blurring a stupefaction of buzzing whispers, weak handclaps, alcoholic *"boo's!"* This time no brass-throated march, but the nostalgic gaiety of *East Side, West Side.* . . . The curtain flicked away once more: Al Smith, complete with brown derby and cigar, leaned toward us across the rostrum. His face reddened and dripping wet with turgid excitement, he shook a forefinger at the world as he jerked the cigar from his lips with the other hand and bellowed: *"An' here is another one for the record.* . . ."

Suddenly, everyone got it. Everyone, I think, but myself. I am practically a recluse, as you know if you have read this far, and I know very little about the stars of the day, aquatic, dramatic, or cinematic. But this time, as the curtain buried Al in oblivion, the place literally shook with applause. Elona and I were still standing; almost everyone else had sat down, and the floor rocked to stamping feet as though it were a sophomore beer night. I said in her ear:

"What . . .?"

She was striking her small pointed hands together, too. "But, Mike!" she said, delightedly as a small girl at a circus. "It's Darlan!" And before the name was off her lips she hissed out of one scarlet corner of them at me: "Smile, you fool . . .!"

12

THROUGH my own front door I could hear the hall telephone ringing. I whipped out my key and flicked on the hall lights as I got the door open and said to Flo Stanton: "Be at home, angel," and kicked the door shut and got the receiver off its cradle before the bell had finished its next angry buzz.

McRae's voice said:

"This is Mr. Burns, Mr. Robert Burns—"

"I just got in, Uncle Bob," I said, panting a little. "You're early. It's only fourteen and a half after one."

"Let me speak to Johnny."

"Johnny?"

"I'll take it, Mr. Pope," said a harsh voice, and the best pistol-shot east of the Mississippi emerged quietly from shadows beyond the stairway. His pearl-gray fedora still sat rakishly on his bullet head. He took it, all right: that is to say, he took the receiver out of my hand and he said loudly into it: "Hiya, boy? I been waitin'. Like a graveyard, this town is; like a graveyard."

I presumed this was for the benefit of listeners, if any.

McRae did some barking into his end of the wire and John Sword said:

"Naw. Nothin'. Like a damned graveyard."

He had a round bulging stomach, I noticed, and biceps that were also round and bulging: his coat-sleeve might split, like his waistband, at any moment. There was also a bulge under his left arm-pit, which pleased me. Flo Stanton continued her graceful way upstairs, I said: "It's to the left," in a stage whisper, this being the first time she'd ever been inside my home. She kept on. . . . She knew all that I knew now: I had talked fast in the taxi coming down.

John Sword kept saying: "Yeah . . . yeah . . . yeah . . ." and making large violent-looking scrawls with a stub pencil on the back of an old envelope. Suddenly he varied his remarks to: "Yessir. Right here," and jerked the receiver at me. "You," he said. I began to like him. A man of few words, and those to the point. "Boy!" he added under his breath as I took the instrument, "you got a pip *there,* all right." He jerked his head up the stairway.

McRae's voice said:

"Mike. Johnny tells me he's been all over the house. He's had two of the Telephone Company experts check, too. Your wires are *not* tapped . . . not yet, anyway. So shoot."

AGAIN I tried to achieve multum in parvo. "I got the dance; she said she was at the Plaza as Miss Elona Paterson—that's her maiden name—Suite 444; and would I call her, very vital and urgent, at 2. That's in around forty minutes. Or in the morning, she said. We only had a minute before the music stopped. She said: 'Take the key out of my hand when it stops,' and she gave me"—I fished in my jacket pocket and pulled it out—"she gave me no key at all.

She gave me"—I eyed it again, feeling aggrieved—"a cigarette."

"A *what?*"

"A cigarette. A Chesterfield, if that's of any interest to you."

"Maybe," said McRae after a moment, "maybe it's got a long thin key inside it."

"No. It's got practically nothing inside it because it broke in my pocket on the way home and most of the tobacco is gone."

"Hell!" said McRae in a tone of suppressed fury.

"I know. I went back to the gents' before we left the café and looked it all over. There's no message inside, no anything. Maybe there's something in trick ink on the paper, but there's certainly no key."

He didn't seem to hear me. "It's 1:21 now," I heard him say. "Listen: had her party left when you two left?"

"Yes. Just before."

"You said good night—all that—but you didn't let on to anyone else that you'd ever met the lady before?"

"No."

"They say where they were bound—she and . . . er . . . Jake?"

"No. But she must have been going straight home, because they didn't leave till after one, and she said call her at two."

"Mike," said McRae, his voice assuming a new and sharper urgency, "here's what you do: leave Stanton there and tell Johnny to stay close by her. Grab a cab and shoot up to the Plaza as fast as you possibly can. I mean *fast*. Get Donovan, the chief house officer. Tell him I sent you. Tell him to get you into 444 somehow *without* clumping down the corridors so the whole world knows it, and to do it *fast*. Got it? Take a gun with you."

"I've got it," I said. "What do I do with the gun?"

"Don't stand there!" McRae cried across the night. "The girl may have a 'reception-committee' waiting for *her* . . . but it won't be one like yours."

I slammed up the receiver; I barked "Wait a minute" at Sword; I galloped upstairs three steps at a time and saw the edge of Flo Stanton's white dress through my study door. I shot into my bedroom and slid the trick back drawer out of the telephone-stand by my bed and my little .22 was gone. The boys who had brought me home had been fairly thorough, at that, I reflected as I spurned the staircase in a couple of flying leaps, hearing Stanton's faint surprised cry behind me. I said to Sword, who was still standing by the doorway, "You got an extra gun?"

He fished in his hip pocket, extended to me a small flat blue-black automatic which had a lovely vicious look. "Thanks. Stick by Miss Stanton, McRae said. I'll be back—"

I wrenched the door open for the second time that night. "I hope" drifted after me in Sword's bass, faintly ironic . . .

THE big Yellow squealed to a shivering stop and I stuck a bill in the driver's hand and leaped into the 59th Street door of the Plaza. The desk-clerk arched polite eyebrows in welcome and I said: "Where's Donovan?" It was, my wristwatch told me, 1:45—which was quite a feat for the Yellow driver.

"Why . . . *there* he is, Mr. Pope."

The fat gray-haired house officer waddled toward us. I said: "Bill: this is official business . . . Name of Douglas McRae. O.K.?"

He goggled. Then he nodded, primly.

I told him what I wanted. He said doubtfully: "There's a fire-escape past the bathroom if you want to try it—"

At 1:48 I pushed the open bathroom window up another two feet and climbed in.

The door beyond the bathtub was closed, but through it came faint bumping noises. I didn't like the sound of them; I got John Sword's flat gun in my hand and turned the knob with my other hand and found myself standing in a small hallway with light and the bumping noises spilling into it from the left.

Two seconds and about four steps later I stood under the arched entrance to the suite parlor and saw Hugo Calverton's thin Norman nose bent over Elona's purple face while his thin veined hands kept banging her dark head against the yellow silk arm of the sofa where she lay.

"You scut!" he was grunting. "You . . . damned . . . scut!"

For just a moment I waited—

She kicked up a long, beige-stockinged, red-slippered foot in agony at a final thud, and the veined hands tightened around her throat and I didn't wait any more. I stood in the doorway with the flat gun in my hand and triumph—cheap, easy triumph—swelling in my veins. I said: "Hold it, you," and stepped forward. And sidewise, round the door-arch, quickly.

Which was one of the smartest acts of my life. For as Hugo Calverton's head snapped up to glare at me, something like a diving blacksnake swished past my shoulder and missed and the force of the blow carried Dough-face, the sad-faced chauffeur's colleague, clear on into the room.

He must have been lurking at the other end of the hallway just in case . . .

WHAT happened then happened very fast. I can, if pressed sufficiently, act that way. I kicked Dough-face hard at the base of his spine as he stumbled past me, and he sprawled forward in a huddle of whipcord and leather leggings and clutched vainly at a coffee table and fell on his face. The coffee table and its contents made a loud splintering crash. I said again: "Hold it, Calverton," and the tall thin man in the dinner coat disobeyed me because he let go Elona's throat and straightened his long body subserviently and raised his hands, palms toward me, slowly in the air. I had told Bill Donovan, "If you hear a racket in the room, come on in," and at this point a key rattled and Mr. Donovan did come in. I don't think he was pleased with what he saw.

I said: "Bill. This heel on the floor is dangerous. This one in the dinner coat is just a punk. Take 'em both away and get 'em booked with Halloran, will you? —and tell Halloran that our friend"—I winked and he nodded grimly—"says to shift 'em around for a while, so that no lousy bondsman can spring 'em."

"*No,* Mike—"

Elona's voice. Just as I had heard it before. Just as I had heard it in the Neuilly château, when I had told Mr. Alexander Mull that I was about to call the Law. It was thick now, and choking, and she had one hand at her throat as she pulled herself up from the yellow divan and came toward me, but it was the same voice and they were the same words.

Only—a lot of other things were different now. I happened to be one of them.

"Go on, Bill," I said.

He was sixty if he was a day, but he had Dough-face and Hugo Calverton handcuffed together before Elona could open her swollen lips again. "Move, you," he said, and the look which the eminent British novelist gave me was something to remember, but he moved. He moved because he had to: Dough-face was moving.

"Call back here, Bill," I said, and Donovan nodded and a scared-looking bellboy reached in as the trio went out, and closed the door. I leaned back against the wall and looked at Elona. I said:

"How you feeling, darling? Did the slob hurt you? Not that I really give a damn."

"Mike . . ." said her swollen lips. "Mike . . ."

I said brutally: "You sound like a third-rate Western. It can't be *that* bad—"

But my feet were carrying me toward her even as I spoke, and my arm around her shoulders steadied her as she swayed on her feet, and my right hand offered her a solicitous brandy from the decanter in the corner after I had eased her into the yellow sofa-corner again. "Try that, Miss Paterson," I said. "I think I will tilt one straight out of the decanter into our hero here"—and suited action to word. It was very good brandy.

COLOR—healthy color—flowed back into the mottled cheeks as she put her glass down. "Listen," she said, still a little thickly, "do one more thing, will you, Mike? Get a Washington number for me."

"You mean—" I stopped. It was good brandy and it hit me hard but I had that much sense, at least.

The wide-spaced blue eyes were staring at me. "Why was Cousin Hugo choking you?" I said. "Does he often get taken that way?"

The lips moved but no sound came. I looked back at the eyes. The pupils were

pin-points, the iris enormously dilated. And over the whole eyeball was a curious shiny glaze. I cursed myself for a fool because I should have noticed it before, and picked up the telephone where it lay amid the wreckage of the coffee-table and said: "Give me the house physician—and snap it up. This is Suite 444—emergency."

"Thank you, sir: at once." A suave sleepy voice a moment later said it was Doctor Harrison and I said would he hitch on his breeches and get up to 444 in three minutes, a lady had been drugged.

Elona's eyes were closed now. I shook her shoulder. "Listen, darling," I said desperately, "listen to me, will you? Tell me something. Right now. Can you hear me?"

The long dark lashes flickered.

"What Washington number do you want?" I said.

The eyes opened part way. "I gave you . . . the key, Mike," she whispered.

"Nuts," I said loudly. "You gave me no key. You gave me a cigarette. *What key?* And what Washington number? And why was Calverton choking you, darling? Elona: can't you hear me? Can't you hear—"

I stopped. The mention of the word "choking" brought something else to mind. Something else which I should have noticed before.

There was no string of filigree-balls around Elona's neck now.

Only a cluster of ugly purple bruises—

She gave a soft rattling sigh and one leg moved a little on the yellow divan under the Burgundy gown; then she lay very still. Someone tapped twice, gently, at the door. I made it in three jumps and wrenched it open. "I understand—" said a roundfaced, baldheaded little man in a velvet smoking-jacket.

"It's more than I do," I said. "Come in, Doctor." I pointed. "She's just passed out. Can you give her a shot of strychnine? She's *got* to be brought round quickly—"

He moved past me like a cat, soft-footed. Deft fingers fluttered at Elona's wrist, raised an eyelid gently. An ear against her chest was followed by a stethoscope.

I think I knew it even before he straightened up. His eyes behind a gold-bridged pince-nez were dark with sympathy. "You should have called me sooner," he said in a low voice. "The lady is dead."

13

IN fiction, events happen with a beautiful interlocking precision. Real life is messier: confusion is piled on confusion, often, till you fail to see any thread or trace of pattern in what is happening. It was that way with me now. And before my mazed mind could even try to summon the proper emotion, the telephone rang.

I was nearest it. I picked up the handset mechanically and I must have said: "Yes?" because McRae's voice said: "Mike?"

"Yes," I said again.

"News?"

"Sorry . . . She just died."

I heard a quick indrawn breath; then McRae said sharply: "What happened?"

As well as I could, and as briefly as I could, I told him. Out of the tail of my eye I could see Doctor Harrison doing something with a small shining needle as he bent over Elona's body; then he stood back and waited.

". . . was it *your* Washington number she was anxious to get?" I finished. "For the love of God stop holding out on me."

A buhl clock on the mantel struck a single soft note and I glanced at it: quarter past two. McRae said:

"I'm not anxious to, Mike. If she's gone, she's gone, and that's that. Main thing now is to get Calverton and the other one to talk."

"Oh, sure," I said. "That's the main thing now. Well, I told Donovan to call back here after he had 'em parked safely somewhere; what'll *I* do now?" There was perhaps a tinge of bitterness in my tone, for McRae said, a shade more softly, "I know, I know. But you and I haven't got time for sympathy. Mike. She's only one person. There's hell coming for millions if we waste a minute. Listen—and get this fixed in your mind: from all I know, from all I can guess, *invasion is on the way right now.*"

"Here?"

I must have sounded wholly incredulous. He gave a short hard laugh. "I'm crazy, eh? That's what West and I are bucking right now—that attitude. In certain quarters. But get this: *Greenland has been off the air for the last four hours.* The big Julianehaab station. Canadian planes from Iceland are scouting over that way now—but I can only see one answer: an Axis airfleet in Greenland, headed this way. . . . I am told that I could, of course, be wrong." His voice quivered with scorn.

The terrific pressures that were driving him began to communicate themselves to me. "Listen," I said, "listen: there's something I forgot to tell you—"

I STOPPED. Doctor Harrison was still standing there. What did *I* know about his politics? I said: "Er—the doctor is still here. I'd better go into it later. What'll I do? Any hope, Doctor?" I added, so that McRae could hear me.

The little man stepped closer, shook his head. "I gave her an injection directly into the heart," he said. "Too late. I—this should be reported without delay, you know."

I told McRae that. He said:

"That's right . . . What you'd better do, Mike, is—get back home. I want certain things done right away—check on whether Jake came back with the lady, whether Calverton and the other man came in publicly or up the way you did, whether the pearls are still in the suite somewhere, get the suite sealed up, all that. The New York police can handle all that: I'll get Centre Street to shoot up a detail right away. You just tell Doctor Harrison to see that the report goes direct to Captain Davenport at Centre Street—or no: you report it to him yourself, using my name. A very good man. Have him call me when he gets there. What the hell is the matter with that house officer of yours? He ought to have called you back—"

"Maybe he's been trying to get me on this phone."

"He's not a cripple, is he? He could walk back." Overtones of anxiety vibrated in McRae's voice. They were drowned in the thunder of three loud poundings on the outer door. I said: "Hold it just a moment, McRae: maybe this is Donovan," and said: "See who that is, will you, Doctor?" and Doctor Harrison nodded and stepped delicately across the Persian rug and opened the door.

Two big men in dark clothes with identical gray hats pulled over the sides of their heads stood there. Identical truculent attitudes; identical angry eyes. They came into the room in single file, leaving the door open and their hats on. "What goes on here, hey?" said the one who was furthest in. Then he saw Elona's body and his face got even uglier. I said: "Who are you fellows?—and you might take your hats off." In the phone I said: "It isn't Donovan: it's a couple of plain-clothesmen, I think."

"It was Donovan phoned for us," the first one said. "Where is he?"

My jaw fell. "Isn't he downstairs *yet?*"

"Naw."

I said softly into the phone: "McRae: something tells me that those two birds got clean away."

"Calverton? And—"

"Yes. Here: you talk to these dicks, will you?" I handed the receiver to the first one, who took it and barked into it and McRae's answering blast must have been a honey, because it deflated him like a pricked balloon. But he set his big jaw and answered questions. I sat down on the nearest chair and closed my eyes. I don't know when I have felt so exhausted: drained not only of energy but of intelligence, even. . . . The feeling passed, but by the time I opened my eyes I had missed most of the conversation on the phone. . . .

I WILL skip the details of the next forty minutes. They are very distressing anyway. After he'd led me to the fire-escape, Donovan had prudently phoned the nearest precinct house and told them to send over a couple of men just in case . . . The men arrived and after a decent wait grew impatient, which was why they'd come up. . . . *And then—exactly what I'd feared:* four mysterious vanishings into thin air! Donovan, Calverton, Dough-face, and their accompanying bell-boy: they were gone, that's all: gone. All four of them . . . and no grinding of teeth, no purpling of beefy cheeks, no

muttered objurgations too horrid for the public air, could alter the fact that four human beings had disappeared off the face of the earth while two supposedly competent detectives had sat uselessly downstairs with their gray hats pulled over their eyes. . . .

Exactly two hours after Flo Stanton and I had pulled up at my door, another taxi deposited me there again. That is, at three-fourteen.

John Sword must have been watching: he had my front door open as I reached the top doorstep. "Some fun, hey?" was all he said, shaking his bullet-head wisely to show that he was posted on all that had happened. "We been like a graveyard here. Like a graveyard."

"Miss Stanton go to bed? I should have thought to show her the guest-room."

"She's in it. Said for you to wake her as soon as you got in. The boss'll be here pretty quick. He's flyin' up."

"I know. Seems to me I've been on the wire all night. You heard about everything?"

"Yeah. . . . Say, I been figurin'. I bet I know how them rats got away."

"How?"

"They didn't."

"What the devil you mean, they didn't?"

"What I mean, see, they got a third guy waitin' in the corridor; maybe a guy who lives there in the hotel but who's in cahoots with 'em. So he bops Donovan an' the bellhop from behind. Then he an' the Limey an' the chauffeur or whoever he is drags Donovan an' the bellhop into this third guy's room, where they can get to work nice an' slow an' easy on the handcuffs. Though Donovan, the sap, prob'ly carries the key right on him. Tomorrow they'll find Donovan an' the bellhop stuffed under a bed somewhere, and the other three guys will be gone. Skipped down a back elevator or something, maybe right while you an' me is standing here."

"You're pretty smart, Sword. It's something like that, the cops say themselves."

"I get ideas."

"If they haven't skipped now, though, they won't skip: because a cat couldn't get out of the Plaza from now on without the Law knowing it—and come morning, they're going to comb every room in the place."

"I just given you one way it could be," Sword said gloomily. "They's lots of ways."

"Anything else new?"

"Yeah. Dunno whether the boss knows it yet." His sudden elaborate indifference made me realize that what he had to impart now was no mere theorizing by J. Sword, it was genuine front-page news. *"They's someone on the air tonight who hadn't ought to be there."* His eyes popped wide open, glittered at me.

WASN'T there a Fat Boy in Dickens' pages somewhere who used to say ghoulishly: "I wants to make yer flesh creep"—and who then proceeded to do it? Quite unconsciously, I think, John Sword achieved precisely that effect with me. *Someone, something on the air tonight*—what of that dark angular sibilant shadow I had seen in fancy toward twilight, drifting nearer and nearer over the far horizon? I said:

"I'll bite. What is it? How do you know?"

"Remember Red?"

"The short, fat blond fellow who was with you at the Biltmore? The one McRae said had a card-index mind?"

"Yeah. . . . If he could get it off wimmen more it'd be even better. So Red is a radio bug. Short-wave stuff. He knows all the stations, all the wave-lengths, all the licensees— Jeez, I bet you he knows the middle name of every licensed amateur on the Eastern Seaboard. All in his head, see? So he has got his pet set up there at the hotel and when he ain't too busy or even if he is, he winds himself around that set like a—like a—"

"Snake?"

"Mother. Like a nursing mother with her chee-ild. So he calls up here awhile ago—he knows I'm here, of course—and he says, 'This is damn funny, Johnny. They is a new short-wave station which I would say is right here in New York, and she is blasting away on a lot of numbers. She was, anyway.' So I say: 'Prob'ly a new Harlem system, ha ha,' and he says: 'Ha ha, hell, it might be serious.' So I say why doesn't he report it to the Feds

an' he says he has, but the station is now signed off, so they can't cross-check on it. But he says she was blasting away like hell there for a while."

"What time?"

"Around half-past twelve. He calls me around half-past one just to se what's new, and that is when he tells me."

I said: "It's too bad Red didn't hitch up his pants and write the numbers down."

Johnny Sword regarded me with a certain awe, as one would regard such a freak of Nature as a headless calf or an idiot midget. "Of course, he wrote 'em down," he said. "He give 'em to me an' *I* wrote 'em down. You got to co-operate fast in this business. He give 'em to the Feds an' *they* wrote 'em—"

"Let's see them."

ELECTRIC tinglings through every nerve in my body: out of nowhere had come a wild and wonderful idea. That, as I said before, is how the Pope mind seems to work. Twelve-thirty . . . an outlaw short-wave blasting numbers . . . a broken cigarette given me by a small pointed hand that would soon be dust . . . suddenly I saw one way to add them up.

"I dunno why I shouldn't," John Sword's voice was saying, and his hand emerging from his coat pocket extended another dog-eared envelop to me. But the figures on its back were firm and surely traced, in the soft, black pencil-lead I'd seen him use before. I stared at them, I remembered, for a moment: not even seeing them, just trying to slow my breathing and the wild pounding of my heart. We were still standing in the lower hall. I said:

"I used to be a great puzzle-solver." (Which was a lie.) "Mind if I take these upstairs and play with them? Why don't you come, too? Got better chairs up there than here in the hall. . . . Hope you found the rye. It's in the kitchen, behind—"

"I found it. Yeah. I'll stick here, though: I can see who's comin'. Those upstairs rooms of yours are on the back, all but the one *she's* in—"

He jerked his chin toward the stairs. "Well," I said, "suit yourself. I'm a hell of a host tonight. If I get any ideas, I'll try 'em out on you. Was there anything in the paper about Mull tonight? I asked McRae and he told me to buy one. Haven't had time to buy one."

"Little squib, that's all," said Sword indifferently. "Just said unidentified man must of killed himself in this here restaurant, an' body was removed to the morgue. That's all. That's all you'll ever see."

"How'd they explain that he'd killed him*self*—oh, of course, he had a gun, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

I was halfway up the stairs. "Be seeing you," I said, and proceeded into my own bedroom, where the reading-lamp was still burning and the rumpled coverlet and the still-compressed pillows reminded me that I'd left it only four hours before. It had been, all in all, an eventful and fairly fatiguing day; so I threw myself back on the pillows again and moved the reading-lamp closer and got my first look at Mr. Sword's envelope-back.

IT was almost covered with row after row of figures, each with a straight, firm dash between them, and reading along without any break otherwise. And the very first figure of all was a large black 9.

I reached for a pencil and my fingers were trembling.

The first three lines, running—like all the other lines—from edge to edge of the paper—were as follows:

9—24—25—26— 9
24—25—26— 9—24
24—26—27—38— 9

and so on.

Now I know nothing whatever about ciphers and codes which any fairly well-informed citizen doesn't know. But you can't stare at those three lines of figures very long without realizing that they repeat themselves—i.e., that the first four figures are twice repeated:

9— 24—25—26
9— 24—25—26
9— 24—25—26

was probably how the first twelve figures should be set down. Johnny Sword had made no attempt at any such analysis; had simply used a blank piece of paper

on which to record figures as they were read to him. At least I hoped that was the case. Because, if so, 9—24—25—26 might well be the station-identification signal, so to speak—and might be spelling:

N — I — N — E
N — I — N — E
N — I — N — E

My heart began to pound again. If *that* were so, the riddle was as good as solved right then, I thought. Memories of Mr. Poe and *The Gold Bug* flashed through my mind: and flashed out. For I saw at once that it wasn't quite that simple: if the first figure, 9, meant N, then the third figure ought to be 9, too. And it wasn't, it was 25.

Not necessarily, I thought: "9" might still mean "N" because the thrice-given lead-off word might not be NINE. It might be any four-letter word beginning with N: NORA, for example. Or NUMB.

"Or DUMB," I told myself a moment later. For, obviously, if the word wasn't NINE—and it didn't seem to be—then it might be any four-letter word in the English language . . . or the Japanese or German language, for that matter . . . and I was right back where I started from.

WAIT, Pope, I thought. This isn't what you came up here to do. Not exactly. You wanted to add up certain facts.

Fact One: This broadcast had been at twelve-thirty. All right: *I* knew of another "broadcast" at exactly that hour. A "broadcast" by an impersonator named Darlan. Standing as a symbol of Adolf Hitler before a microphone, he had bellowed in brazen assurance that *"Tomorrow is the Day!"* Could that have had some connection with the number-broadcast? *Could Darlan's have been a real microphone?* And if it were a real instrument . . . if that speech, like the number-broadcast, were really some sort of signal . . . if it meant, not just a ham actor's bad taste, but the start of the dirty work itself . . . *then what did "tomorrow"* mean? Today?

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was twenty-five minutes to four on the morning of Saturday, June 14. *Was the attack for today?* Somehow I didn't think so. I didn't think so, because—in line with Teutonic precision, accuracy—it seemed to me that in that case the words would have been different. The "speech" had been made, I was certain, half an hour past midnight—*when it was already Saturday.* If anything were planned for Saturday, I thought, Hitler's effigy would have varied his remarks slightly. He would have said: *"Heute ist der Tag!"—"Today is* The Day!"

Not that your brilliant surmise makes life a hell of a lot sweeter, Pope, I told myself.

Fact Two: This group of numbers was in code. And codes have "keys"—right, Pope? Right. Yes, sir, for once you cannot be successfully controverted. And—

Fact Three: Elona had said to me, "Mike, take the key"—and, later, just before she died, "I gave you . . . the key."

Naturally, I'd thought of a door-key, a metal key at any rate. And been disappointed to find, in the cigarette, nothing of the sort. But—*mightn't the cigarette itself be a "key"*—a key to the broadcast-code?

That was the thought which had hit me so hard downstairs. . . .

I pulled the twisted little scrap of rice-paper out of my pocket with my right hand and my left hand was holding the envelope. The reading-lamp's calm, bluish beam drew a circle of light around them both, a light-circle cut out of the surrounding darkness; and looking down I thought suddenly: There in your two hands, man, you may have the whole story . . . the cipher-message *and* its key. . . . If there's anything inside that skull of yours but mush, Pope, I thought, try and use it now!

14

DAWN and Miss Stanton stole into my room at approximately the same moment, for I raised my head suddenly half an hour later and the sky in the general direction of Montauk Light was paling and a strange figure stood in the doorway. It wore lace panties, a silk bedspread, and a mop of wheat-colored hair. The bedspread was slung round its shoul-

ders like a stole, and it was digging its knuckles into its eyes with its mouth wide open.

"Charming," I said, inspecting it critically yet admiringly from my seat by the window. "Charming. Though the bucolic note is a little forced. . . . You going to come and kiss me good morning, or what?"

"I thought I was going to have to defend my honor," said the figure, yawning again. "Why didn't you wake me? Can I come in?"

"You cannot only come in," I said, getting up, "but you can lie down." I pointed to the crumpled bed.

"I don't feel in the mood now. Sorry."

"I mean lie down and listen. Or sit down. Or fall down. I don't give a damn what you do if you'll only listen. I am," I said, "at my wit's end. McRae will be here any minute and—"

"I'd better get dressed then," said Miss Stanton, not moving from the seat she had just taken on the foot of the bed. "Hadn't I? Is there any coffee?"

"Sword started to make some, five minutes ago. Concentrate now, will you?"

"I will try," said Miss Stanton meekly.

I brought her up to date on the hours just past. It didn't take long. The blue-gray eyes widened a little when I got to the Calverton part, clouded a little when I came to Elona's end, narrowed a little when I spoke of the number-broadcast. No other visible emotion. But when I came to my thought about the key, her eyes began to shine. "Mike," she said, "I think you've got something—"

"*What* have I got, though?" I pointed to the desk where I'd thrown the scratch-pad covered with sheet after sheet of my own scrawled figures: permutations, combinations . . . None of them made sense. "I am surer and surer," I said, "that this wretched scrap of paper"—I held up the matted remains of the cigarette—"*is* the key. My God, it may be—it may be the turning-point in this war . . . and I sit staring at it and I might as well be blind. A woman paid with her life for giving it to me, maybe—and McRae isn't here yet, there's no way to reach him, and every minute counts, and here right under my nose is the answer . . . and I'm blind. You think I ought to call Washington and try to get West?"

"I THINK you ought to keep cool as long as possible. It's going to be a very hot day." Her voice was cooling in itself. "Anyway, this war isn't going to be won because of a bit of paper. Wars aren't won that way, Mr. Pope. You ought to know."

"There was a war lost that way once, though," I said. "On account of a scrap of paper. A scrap of paper that had the name 'Belgium' on it. But that was a long time ago. You were doubtless sporting diapers at the time."

"Let me see it . . . no, both of them." She took the battered cigarette, the dog-eared envelope with John Sword's figures, turned them both over between long slim fingers, delicately. Then she looked up. "What are those?" she said, pointing to the sheets of scratch-paper.

"Why, they're nothing. They're Pope's frantic efforts to be logical. . . . Because look: if this object"—I held up the cigarette again—"*is* a key, it must be a word-key: right? It must contain or designate or in some manner symbolize the word or words which will unravel those numbers." I stabbed a finger at the envelope. Flo Stanton nodded quickly.

"Well, there may be trick writing, secret writing, on this cigarette. If so, we've just got to wait till McRae comes: he can start chemists to work. But apart from that possibility, there's some writing on the paper which *isn't* secret: it's printed in plain English for everyone to see, and in fact the people who printed it hope everyone *will* see it—"

"What *are* you—"

"I'm talking about a twelve-letter word which appears on each and every one of these cigarettes that was ever made—"

Her eyes lighted. "Of course. Of *course*. The word 'Chesterfield.' Mike, you are *very* smart."

"Oh, heavens, yes. Terrific. I *still* can't hook those twelve letters up, by any method I can think of, with any of these numbers."

"Oh, but that's an expert's job. There are dozens of ways—and they've got 'em all classified. That's simple. Just a question of time, of trial and error—*if* you've

got the key. . . . I know a bit, just a bit, about such things because I was engaged once to a lad in one of the London bureaus which—" She stopped.

"Dear child," I said, "you have always been so *very* discreet and guarded with me, but these old eyes are not totally blind. And you yourself admitted Oxford. Carry on."

"There are certain types of ciphers involving a key," she said, sounding severe and didactic though her cheeks were a little pink, "which are among the hardest of all to solve. Because unless you know the key, the pre-determined key, you can spend a lifetime fussing about with them and get nowhere. . . . Of course, it may take a bit of doing even if you *do* know the key. A simple method is where the 'key' is page 291 of Volume Three of the Umpteenth Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica—and where every number, or every word, of the code refers to the position of a word on that particular page. . . . You probably know all this."

"Doesn't sound like a 'simple' method to me—the one you just cited."

"It's simple in one way because to solve it instantly, all you have to do is look up page 291. And count on your fingers . . . But there *are* 'keys' and 'key-words' where things are much more involved: for instance here, if 'Chesterfield' *is* the key-word, there may be some complex re-arrangement of its twelve letters which you'll have to make before you can read the numbers—"

"I know. That's what I've been fooling with. . . ."

I NEVER finished the sentence, for the Pope mind made another of its wild darting swallow-flights. My own package of Chesterfields was lying on the chair-arm three feet away. "Listen," I said, forcing myself to stand where I was and not reach for it, "listen. You and your page 291 have just put this in my head. This particular cipher *couldn't* have Page 291 of Volume Three of the Britannica as its key, but—"

"Why couldn't it?"

"Because, if it's being broadcast on the air, it must be so as to notify quite a large number of people. *Quite* a large number—and you can't imagine any sizable group marching around with Volume Three under each good right arm, can you? Or darting into Public Libraries, either—even supposing that they all stick around where there is a Public Library handy. No: if it's being broadcast, it's for a group; and if it's for a group, the key has to be something simple, compact, always-accessible, something that every member of the group can either memorize or keep always handy."

"I follow. Right so far, I think."

"'Chesterfield'—the word 'Chesterfield'—may be Elona's 'key.' If so, the experts will have to work it out, as you say. That would be a fine key because any dumb-bell can memorize that. But it *wouldn't* be a fine key for the dumb-bells in the group *if* it had an involved method of application, such as you were just talking about."

"Granted."

"However," I said, "right in front of my big nose is a fine, simple, compact, always-accessible modern version of your page 291. It's the word 'Chesterfield' in an enlarged form, you might say. It doesn't have a dozen letters, it has a hell of a lot of letters. I bet it has most of the letters in the alphabet. Which would make it so easy to de-code that even in their cups, even lying blind drunk under the bar where they've been swept with the garbage, our conspirators can't go wrong."

She was standing up, her hand on my arm, and her eyes were a brilliant pure blue with excitement. "Mike—what *is* it?"

I said, pointing, "It's the manufacturer's blurb on the back of that Chesterfield package."

We both dived for it. She was nearest; she won. "Take your pencil," she said. "I'll count. Read the first number."

"Nine."

"Umm. Where'll I start?" She held the package under my nose. The back of the package. The words "Chesterfield Cigarettes" in large type are followed by a small square block of tiny even lettering which says some nice things about what you are smoking. The whole thing is one long sentence, but the first two words, as mentioned, are in much larger type than the rest. I said: "Starting at the beginning, I'd say. Start with 'Chesterfield.'"

"Just for the hell of it, I won't," said Miss Stanton, pacing up and down excitedly in her panties with the bedspread trailing toga-like from a bare shoulder. "I'll start with the small type. It's neater. . . . The first number's nine, you said? . . ."

She ran a pointed pink nail along the cellophane. "N," she said.

WE stopped breathing, both of us, I think, for a moment.

"Twenty-four," I said.

I could see the pink nail skitter to the end of the first line, run along the second—

"I," said Flo Stanton and sat down on the bed as though her knees had failed her.

"Twenty-five."

"N."

"Twenty-six—next letter, of course."

"E."

Elona's face shaped itself for half a heartbeat between me and the window, between me and the tints of dawn. She had given her life, I believed with all my heart, to tell us this. "NINE . . . NINE . . . NINE . . . The next number is Twenty-seven," I said, and under my breath, "Thanks, darling . . ."

"S," said Miss Stanton and I wrote it down. . . .

"Wait till I do a bit of punctuating," I said a minute or two later. "That's all. And that's plenty. We've got—" I took a fresh sheet of paper and Miss Stanton leaned over my shoulder as I printed these characters on the yellow sheet:

NINE NINE NINE!
SUNDA NITE NINE
OCLOC LITES OUT

—which a couple of obvious additions with slashing pencil transformed into:

NINE! NINE! NINE!
SUNDAY NIGHT, NINE O'CLOCK,
LIGHTS OUT!

I looked at my wristwatch. The window was open. A bird twittered in my tiny back garden and an ashcan made musical clinkings somewhere up the street. The scent of Mr. Sword's coffee drifted in from the kitchen just below. "You've got less than forty hours left, New York," I said, and stood up. The Sword voice followed the coffee-trail: "Any time now," it told us hoarsely. Flo Stanton said:

"I don't believe either of you."

14

"DARLING," I said, "sit down. I don't believe it either. But wishful thinking isn't going to affect the issue, is it? *Please* sit down. And cover yourself up. You've lost your bedspread and I'm trying to concentrate—"

"Lecher!" But she sat down. Suddenly I looked at my watch again. "Can you be out of this house in five minutes?" I said. "In three minutes?"

"I . . . in ten seconds, if you—"

"Let's see you do it!" I seized her wrist suddenly, jerked her to her feet. Her lips half opened in incredulous amazement. "I just thought of this," I said—we were halfway to the door—"and it's *vital*, angel"—we were in the hall and I dropped her wrist but I kept on going and plowed on into the guest-room and she came rushing protesting after me—*"you've got to get away.* Now. At once. Start getting dressed and I'll turn my back." And did so, slamming the door.

The high cool room was faintly fragrant with spring and with *Eve* and I heard indignant rustlings as the echoes of the slam died. "Is that your girdle?" I said, leaning my face against the closed door.

Another rustle. "I don't wear a girdle. Get out, will you please, Mike? At once."

"I am not going, I am talking. And please keep on hurrying . . . Do you realize that you and I may be the only two people in this world at this moment—on our side, I mean—who know that key, that message? Don't you see how vital it is for us to separate—and *quickly?* McRae should have been here half an hour—an hour—ago: *we* don't know what's happened, *we* don't know Who or What may not drive up in front of this door this minute—"

Sudden violent rustlings, acquiescent rustlings. "Where should I go?"

"We'll have to think. . . . Can I turn round?"

"Just a— Yes."

I turned. She was shrugging the evening gown down around her hips while she bent to examine herself critically in the mirror. "Aunt Maggie Rolling Home from Another Bender is the way I look," she said. "My God!"

"Florence," I said, "why did you faint in the cab?"

"Hand me that slipper, will you? . . . I'll tell you later. Long story."

"Listen, angel," I said, snapping the clasp on the other slipper for her and standing up. "The world is full of double-crossers today . . . right? I hope you realize what my insistence that you leave me, that you get out *now*, means?"

She stood very straight and her eyes were shining. "Of course I do," she said. "It means that you trust me . . . implicitly."

"That's it."

"Then I hope *you* realize what my obedient departure means. It means—that I have the same sort of trust in you."

HER voice was low, steady. I stooped and kissed her quickly and it was the only time I ever had kissed her and there was no passion in the kiss, only affection and admiration—well, practically none.

Suddenly I knew what she should do. "Have you any money?"

"Fifteen—twenty dollars."

I groped in my pocket.

"That's not enough." I gave her two fifties: she said, staring at them, "So what?"

I told her where to go, and what to do, and she thought it over carefully, running her left hand through the wheat-colored hair like a comb. "A very good idea, Mike," she said. "Count on me."

"I do. God knows I do."

"Good-by, darling."

"Wait. I'll go down first and engage Sword. Give me a couple of minutes. Then slip down and—" She pushed me out the door. . . .

Am I right or am I nuts, I thought, going down the stairs? No: for once, dope, you have been smart. I pushed open the swinging baize door at the end of the hall. "Where the hell you think the boss can be?" said Sword, raising a mouth full of sausages from the porcelain-topped kitchen table. "He said he was comin' straight here."

"How about the coffee?"

He pointed.

"Right there, Jack, right there. I got a coupla more ideas on how them rats got away."

"Save 'em. You think we ought to call up the Colonel?"

"Naw."

Pouring coffee with a clatter and chink of crockery and silverware, hoping the clatter and chink would cover Flo Stanton's exit sounds, if any, I said:

"Why not?" This was a very calm man, despite his high color and his round Celtic face. I added, curious, "Just what is your job, Johnny?"

"Bodyguard." He went on chewing sausages. Epictetus would be furious, I thought. They were his own private sausages.

The front doorbell burred angrily and Sword jumped up. "That's him now, prob'ly," he said. The baize door swung behind him. I sent up a quick prayer to Saint Christopher to speed Flo Stanton on her way, and gulped a last mouthful of coffee, and followed.

McRae was crossing the hall toward me.

"WELL!" we said simultaneously. Then he said quickly: "Flo still here?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "We were getting a little anxious about you. She said awhile ago that perhaps she'd better shove off and do some checking from elsewhere—"

We were in the kitchen then, where it was lighter, and I was startled by his face. Harrowed and furrowed with strain, the eyes bloodshot with fatigue. "Go get her, Johnny, will you?" he said over his shoulder, and sat down. I poured him coffee. He didn't touch it. The baize door was pushed back a moment later and John Sword's voice said: "She's gone, boss . . ." He came on in, looking apprehensively at McRae. McRae didn't look at him, but hard at me. "Did you know that, Mike?" he said, and added: "Johnny—skip over to Lexington and get some morning papers." Sword nodded, vanished.

"Only what I just told you," I said.

"Hell's *fire*," said McRae explosively. "I didn't want—"

"I've got some news for you," I said. "What's yours?"

"Plenty—and all bad. What's yours?"

With Flo out and away, I could speak frankly. "Your man Red," I said, "picked up a trick shortwave message at half an hour after midnight—"

"I heard about that. Bunch of numbers. May mean nothing: some nut. But we've got to make sure. Couple of men over cross-town working on it, though they warned me it might be hopeless. The message is so short, and it's evidently built around a key—"

"I know it is," I said, "and I've got the key."

I couldn't keep the excitement out of my voice. McRae came striding across the kitchen toward me, after a leap to his feet as though his chair had bitten him. His eyes were shining but his voice was very soft. *"You've got the key, Mike?"*

"I'm sure of it."

"What is it? How'd you—?"

"Elona gave it to me," I said. "And was killed for her pains. In my opinion."

"But you said . . . you said she just gave you a cigarette."

"That's right. That's it. That's the 'key'—Chesterfields." The heavy brows met as he tried to follow. *"Give,"* he said. And added quickly: "Does Stanton know?"

Rightly or wrongly, I didn't want to involve her at this point. "I was waiting for you," I said, and pulled my hand out of my pocket with the sheet of scratch-paper in it and held it out to McRae. "There she is," I said. "There's the message. There's the zero hour. . . . What are we going to do about it?"

THE big head bent, still frowning, toward the paper. The deep eyes flicked across the lines. "The Nine . . ." his lips were moving . . . The head snapped up, eyes blazing into mine. "Mike," he said, "you never did a day's work like this in your life . . . I really believe you've got it!"

"What else could it be?"

"Now," he said, as if to himself, *"now* perhaps they'll believe me! . . . I'll take this over myself—how does it work?"

"Just counting." I showed him the package, the lettering.

"Good God!" he said. "Good God! Nine tomorrow night—"

"What you mean, you'll 'take it over' yourself?"

"Over to local headquarters." He spoke abstractedly, eyes still on the paper, the package. Then his head came up again. "Mike," he said, "you're too good a man to lose. But I'm going to ask you to stick your neck out again—away out. . . . Do you mind?"

"Shoot."

"I want you to go and see Charles Martin for me. Right now."

"Charles Martin?" I said in amazement. "You don't mean *the* Charles Martin?"

STILL young, immensely wealthy, and with a taste for both politics and personal publicity, Charles Martin had given up high finance the previous summer to head a new political party. The overwhelming triumph of the President in 1940 had washed the new party up, but it had not washed up Charles Martin. He remained loudly vocal—and wisely quoted—in opposition to each important Administration measure designed to aid Britain. He was neither a pacifist nor a fascist, he announced; he was an American first and last; he stood for the principles of individual initiative on which this country et cetera, et cetera; he quoted George Washington . . . He was one of my pet dislikes, though I had never met him.

"That's it," McRae said. "He's staying with a Doctor Atherton up at Atherton's town house on East 68th Street, and he's making a radio speech at half-past ten this morning and we want to know what he's going to say."

"You mean Hunt Atherton, the flier?"

"That's the boy . . . Old school chum of our Charles."

I nodded.

"I know, I've seen pictures of 'em standing grinning beside Atherton's plane. Why do you want to know what Martin's going—"

"Because," said McRae grimly, "if he's going to sound off the way he's *been* sounding off, I'm not sure he'll be allowed on the air. There's a bit more to it than that, Mike, but we can skip it. You're a

well-known columnist, he'll probably talk with you."

"At five in the morning? I've taken him for a swell ride a couple of times lately, too."

"Oh, he's expecting a call," said McRae with a bite to his voice. "He'll see you, all right . . . will you go?"

"Certainly I'll go . . . What'll I do then? *That* isn't the neck-out errand you had in mind, is it? I wouldn't call Charles Martin dangerous, though I certainly agree he's a nuisance—"

"That," said McRae in a very curious voice, with a curious gleam in his eyes, "is one of the things I want to find out." He told me the street-number. "When you leave," he said, "come straight to the Biltmore, will you? I think West will be there. This thing here"—he waved the number-message—"is going to jar everything loose, I promise you. And, Mike—hurry like hell. Don't stop for *any*thing."

To bother about Charles Martin's radio-mouthings at a time like this seemed a bit silly to me, but so did stopping to argue the point. Five minutes later a taxi was carrying me up Park through the brilliant, cloudless, early day, and it was, I recall, just as we stopped for the lights at 60th that I felt the first sharp birth-pangs . . .

Two blocks later I was delivered of my dazzling, my scintillant, my rash and ill-advised and magnificently audacious Idea.

I SAT motionless for another block, pondering, and suddenly I felt myself gripped anew by the same frenzied urgency which had rushed Flo Stanton out of the house. I rapped hard on the window. "Get over to Madison quick," I told the driver. "I want a telephone." Charles Martin, I thought, you can wait for just a moment—

The phone booth in the little corner restaurant. The dialing Long Distance. The thought, It can't do any *harm* . . . and it *is* better not to call McRae. Even if I could reach him at this moment. He's just one man—one man in an obviously exposed and dangerous position. If I can get West, though, in Washington . . . Oh, *God,* I hope I can get West in Washington. . . .

I got him.

When I came out of the restaurant five minutes later I felt like the lad who finally got his message to Garcia. . . . The taxi was still chugging hopefully at the curb but I shook my head. It was only another block and round the corner—

I was so oblivious of everything but my own thoughts that I went four houses past my number and had to turn and go back. And I was standing on the doorstep and had pressed the bell before I glanced even casually about me. It was a fine big stone house, was Doctor Hunt Atherton's, but that wasn't what made every nerve in my body jump suddenly.

Slanting down from the street to a sliding door under the east end of the house was a short, steep concrete ramp . . . leading, obviously, to an underground garage—

The front door opened. With a little click—like a trap clicking shut.

15

THE man bowing before me might have stepped right out of Wodehouse: sixtyish, with white sideburns and a rosy shiny skull; sleekly plump inside his butler's tailcoat. "Will you step in, sir? The master is expecting you," said a rich, juicy, British voice.

The flat butt of Mr. Sword's gun was a comforting pressure in my hand plunged deep in my jacket pocket. "It's Mr. Charles Martin that I want, not Doctor Atherton," I heard myself saying.

"They are together, sir." He closed the door. I followed silently as he led me to a heavy carved newel-post, started up broad thickly carpeted stairs. It *could* be pure coincidence, I was thinking—that ramp. But if it weren't . . . The butler said: "May I announce your name, sir?" —pausing outside broad double doors.

"Pope."

He threw the doors back. "Mr. Pope," he said, and I passed him and went into the room.

It was a big room, elaborately fitted as a study. The walls above the bookcases were a pleasant sand-color, the ceiling the same. A Chinese horse stood atop one bookcase; a two-foot Buddha in bronze sat opposite him across the room. I noticed suddenly one curious thing about the room: there were no windows. Concealed fixtures along the ceiling molding lit it to

a soft, pleasant glow. There were two men in the room, the one behind the big paper-littered desk being in his shirt-sleeves. I recognized him at once. He was Charles Martin: and seeing him now with his hat off I realized something else. His was the impassive imperious Olympian face I had seen emerge from the Granada a moment after Mr. Mull had been killed. "Why," he said, staring at me as he stood up, "you're the Pope who writes, aren't you?" He had a deep booming voice. "Seen your picture—"

"It is so alleged," I said. "I've seen yours."

He nodded at his colleague.

"This is Doctor Atherton."

The tall man in a white surgeon's overall looked faintly theatric and definitely Mephistophelian, which was the way he evidently wanted to look. He wore a thin black streak of a mustache above a dazzling bright smile. His hair was black, and very glossy. He didn't look like a fashionable medical practitioner as much as he looked like Roscoe Turner: definitely the sportsman type, the kind of sportsman who has the whole world for his playground. "Hello, Mr. Pope," he said easily. "You catch us at a bad time. We've been up all night."

"Sorry and all that," I said. "Matter of fact, so have I."

"I've been trying to help Charles with his speech," said the smiling doctor. "It isn't finished yet, by the way—but I don't wonder you news hawks are so vitally interested. But I understood someone was coming from the Communications Commission—"

"I'm representing them," I said quickly, hoping it was the right thing to say. Nothing seemed to make sense.

"Oh. Sit down, then. Though I don't know just how we can enlighten you with the speech not done."

"I can give him the general drift, Hunt," said Charles Martin impatiently. "Sit down, Pope."

Neither of them had offered to shake hands. Nor had I. I kept my right hand exactly where it was and sat down in an immense soft chair that felt somehow familiar and suddenly I knew why it felt familiar and I knew I was very, very close to Death.

THIS was the chair—and this must be the room—where I had sat when Antrim talked to me.

It added up perfectly. Too perfectly. The slanting ramp to the garage . . . the pitch-black (because windowless!) room . . . Antrim's own mention of his physician-associate . . .

Antrim, Hunt Atherton, Charles Martin—I couldn't believe it yet I *had* to believe it: they must be three of The Nine . . .

And Calverton? And Jake Noyes? Why not?

"This speech," said Charles Martin, and I tried to keep my face a mask and to listen, "this speech is not merely important: it is perhaps historic. Not because *I* am making it"—somehow the very way he said the words revealed an egoism so intense as to be ferocious—"but because America is standing at the cross-roads of its destiny. I propose, I and those who are associated with me, to do what we can to see that this nation takes the right road."

He paused. There was complete silence in the room, and in the silence something deep within me whispered: *Shoot! Shoot now!* What's your gun *for?*

Which was obviously absurd.

"I have been accused," Charles Martin said, "of being a Fascist. I am not. I am not even as much of one as my friend Doctor Atherton, who will argue very eloquently that the masses of mankind—biologically degenerate, spiritually apathetic, physiologically sodden with alcohol and worse—can never successfully control either their own destinies or the destiny of the Nation. I will not go that far. I *do* believe that in times like these one must face the facts. I believe that the only true patriot is the patriot without illusions. The true patriot is neither an 'Isolationist' nor an 'Internationalist' (and how I despise those stupid meaningless labels!): he is first and foremost a realist. Are we being realistic in our present course? I say to you that we are being led by a group of groping dreamers—"

The booming voice vibrated with emotion, stopped short. *Shoot now,* said my own inner voice. *Shoot now: it is bad to wait.*

"We have been accused of being opportunists. Of course we are opportunists. So are all great leaders. So is Hitler.

So is— Do you remember the opening sentences of that early book of Churchill's? 'I have tried to find and to follow the stepping-stones of Fate.' Wonderful! And to find them is not always easy. We are, I admit, those of us who see eye to eye, heartsick and angry at this present moment. We are sick of our Government's criminal folly, sick of double-dealing and delay. We propose to reorganize America in terms which will be intelligible and successful in the world of today."

I stated mildly that it seemed to me America hadn't done too badly to date. Charles Martin brushed aside three hundred years of achievement with a nervous impatient hand-wave. "I am not talking about the past," he said, "I am talking about the present. I am talking—"

Doctor Atherton's long white smock vanished out of the tail of my eye. He had been moving with light cat-like steps about the room, head bent as he listened.

"I am talking," said Charles Martin, leaning across the desk and holding me firmly with his eyes, his pointed finger aimed straight at me, "about Today and Tomorrow—"

(*Shoot! Shoot! Shoot now, now,* NOW—)

The soundless voice suddenly clamorous in my brain stopped as the arm went firmly, silently, around my throat from behind. It tightened, and as my muscles contracted instinctively and I tried to rise, other arms whipping forward over my shoulder pinioned my left hand to the chair-arm and held me motionless. I felt muscular fingers probing my right-hand jacket pocket and a sharp prick near the big vein at the inside of my left elbow.

I fired.

What followed was pure luck, obviously: it is hard to aim accurately through your own pocket, even without a hard hand groping for yours. The gun barked a high angry muffled snarl and Charles Martin's nose disappeared. In its place appeared a round black hole, and even as the gun was twisted from me, a dark-red stream spurted suddenly from the hole, so hard I could hear it spatter like rain on a roof against the papers littering the desk.

I jerked my head violently sidewise and had one glimpse of the displaced panel in the wall behind me, and of the sad-faced chauffeur and of handsome Doctor Atherton. There was an expression of horror on both faces as Charles Martin's body made a thud on the floor—

Suddenly the whole room swirled, vanished . . .

16

SOMETHING soft yet hard was round my ankles and my ankles hurt. My wrists the same. I was lying flat on my back on what felt like a mattress, with arms and legs spread-eagled in the shape of a big X.

I kept my eyes shut and everything came back sharp and clear: the prick of the needle and the spraying crimson stream and the room tilting suddenly out of sight—

My eyelids snapped open and I was very surprised.

I was lying on a mattress, all right: a mattress on a narrow white-iron hospital bed in a tiny cubicle which held another bed. The cubicle had a small-paned window which opened lengthwise down its middle, and through the opening I could see a narrow slit of night sky—

Night? Oh, God, I thought, what time is it? What's happened—

The long, black, naked shape in the other bed, trussed as I was, rolled white eyeballs at me as I moved; it said:

"You get the needle too, boss?"

"What needle?"

"Dey sure use a dull needle here," the Negro said, shaking his head from side to side weakly. "Man, Ah feel her go in mah spine lak a ole dull ice-pick. Dey bore *an'* dey bore an' Ah say, Gaw sake, man, dat *hurt*. He don't care. None de doctahs here care."

"Where's 'here'?"

"Diss here? Diss Belle-*view*," the Negro said gloomily. "Yassuh, diss de only o-riginal Belle-view Hospital, New Yohk City. An' you kin have it, mistuh. Ah don't want no paht of it."

A huge man with arms like hams, bare to the elbow, stood suddenly in the doorway. He had a round red face and a hard eye under a mop of curly black hair. His white uniform was starched to a stiff, gleaming, boardlike finish. He said, ad-

dressing me, "How you feel, soldier?"

"Better. What's the idea of tying me up? And what time is it?" My clothes, I noted, were gone: I was wearing coarse flannel pajamas two sizes too small for me.

"It's Saturday night and the time shouldn't bother you, me boy. You aren't going anywhere."

"What time did I get here? and how? What's your name?" My voice had sounded curiously weak in my own ears; it was stronger now.

"The name is Murphy. Joe Murphy, Night Charge Nurse on the Violent Ward, Psychopathic Division, Bellevue Hospital: what's left of him after his brother-in-law's wedding this afternoon, that is . . . You came in some time this morning, I know, and that's all I know. You haven't got a half-pint concealed about those pajammies, by any chance? . . . I was afraid not."

THE rich brogue floated to me on waves of vinous breath. He seemed a warm-hearted soul. How I happened to be here instead of dead I couldn't even guess, but I wasn't dead: the next thing was to get out. The first step toward getting out was to sell myself to Murphy. Once I showed any sign of undue agitation—I was done. I tried to keep my trembling muscles still. I said:

"How about my getting up? What time did you say it was—no kidding?"

He eyed me carefully. "I guess you can get up," he said. "But no monkey-business—"

"Of course. I'm all right, I must have been taken suddenly drunk is all."

"Better men than *you*"—he snapped the gauze band at my ankles with a hard jerk, moved to my head—"have had *that*" —he snapped my wrist-bands. I sat up and put my feet cautiously on the polished linoleum floor and Murphy kicked a pair of soiled, red-leather, heelless slippers toward me. "You better come and I'll fix you up with a dressing-gown," he said. "The doctor's due through any minute."

I put slow, careful fingers on his big wrist, peered. The watchface said a quarter before eight. "This way," said Murphy and steered me shuffling through the door.

The long, wide, bare hall outside was flanked by heavy oaken doors with small oblong Judas-windows of heavy glass. Some doors were open, some shut. I glanced through a glass in one of the closed ones and a gray-bearded man was standing naked in a corner shaking his clenched fists skyward. "He's waiting for the second coming of Christ," Joe Murphy said, pausing as I paused, "and he gets damned annoyed now and then because Christ is late."

Further on, two big double doors were open and I caught the gleam of chromium and of porcelain and the murmur of running water. There was a whiff of urine and tobacco smoke. "That's the john," Murphy informed me. "Only place you can smoke. Remember that."

"If I had anything to smoke."

"I'll get you a butt. . . . Round the corner here."

WE turned the corner and I could see that at the end of this new angle the hall broadened out into a sort of common-room where there was a lot of noise and motion among pajamaed slippered figures like my own. They were too far away to see clearly and anyway I wasn't interested. I waited while Murphy unlocked a door and revealed a linen-closet. Shall I brace him now, I thought, or wait a bit?

From the common-room came suddenly a long, high, ululating yell. It didn't sound human, it sounded wolf-like, and I jumped. Murphy didn't jump: he kept on poking in a great pile of gowns. "That son," he said cheerfully. "I'll fix his wagon . . ." The yell stopped abruptly, sliced off. "Try this one," said Murphy, handing a gown to me. "We'll have you lookin' like Little Lord Fauntleroy by the time the doctor gets here."

"Thanks, Murphy . . ." We were standing close together half inside the door and I put my hand out impulsively and touched his big bare arm. It was hard as a steel bar. "You look like a very right guy," I said, and meant it. "Is there any way under heaven you could get him here *now?* The doctor?"

The hard, alcohol-reddened face was like a rock. "Any minute, any minute," he said in a faintly disappointed tone, as

though he had been mistaken in his estimate of me. "You just slip that gown on like a good fella— You look pretty healthy to me. What's the tearin' rush about the doctor?"

How explain? Where to start? I stared back at him, silent, though I was bursting. How explain killing a man—or hadn't I killed him? How explain ciphers, keys, death raining from the skies?—without getting, not the doctor, but a shot of paraldehyde and a strait-jacket? Joe Murphy said, looking over my shoulder: "Here he comes now."

I whirled round. Twenty feet behind us light glinted from enormous gold-rimmed spectacles astride a short flat nose in a plump round face; a barrel-body with stumpy, powerful legs was dressed in a white interne's uniform with a stethoscope slung round its neck. He was talking in short barks to a sullen-faced orderly who had evidently been making rounds with him and who was now being dispatched elsewhere. ". . . and snap it up!" I heard the figure say; the orderly nodded again and went back up the hall. I said, "Well, for— Is *that* the doctor?"

"That's him. And be damned careful how you handle him. He's hell on wheels at all times and he seems to be goin' extra good tonight."

I stepped up to the squat, powerful physician and said, planting myself squarely in front of him, "Boy, that chest of yours is certainly slipping. She's slipped clear to here already"—I poked him above his navel, hard—"and you ought to do something about it."

THE heavy frame moved back a pace, involuntarily. Then dazzling big teeth showed practically from ear to ear. "Well, as I live—the Pope in person!"

Our hands met, wrung. He was Stumpy Selzer. We'd played a little football together in our sophomore year at Cambridge. I said: "Stumpy, can I have your private ear for five minutes? This is something serious."

The piercing eyes behind the big glittering lenses moved over me and I was painfully conscious of my sprouting beard, my disheveled hair, my bulging pajamas and my old patched gown. Then Doctor Selzer wheeled without a word. "It looks serious," he said drily, and led the way back up the hall. We angled round the turn and kept on past the room whence I'd emerged with Murphy, and the fat man pointed to a wooden bench against the wall opposite what were evidently the entrance doors to this particular hall. Above these doors, tiny white numbers flashed on, off, on, off, on a square electric call-sign. Stumpy Selzer said, "I can keep an eye out for mine from here. Sit down, Mike. What the devil brings *you* here? Thought you were busy rousing the nation."

I told him. Words spilled from me. He was someone who knew me, someone who—however wild the tale—would trust me, believe me. I didn't have to edit, censor, for him. I began with Hank Weston—at whose name he nodded—and ended with the shot from my pocket and the prick in my arm. I omitted a lot, of course: details, many of them, were unimportant: I also omitted a detail which I hoped was vitally important: my brilliant brain-child born in the taxi and my telephone call to West. . . .

"So that's all," I ended. "So you can see the terrific, the frightful urgency of the position. I'm the only one who knows that Antrim was at Atherton's— Stumpy, you've *got* to get me out of here!"

HE sat looking at me hard, in silence, his thick lips compressed in a thin straight line. Then something awful happened. He put out his hand and patted my knee. Soothingly. And he said, also soothingly, "Mike, I think what you need is some rest."

It was awful because of its implications. One of my oldest, once one of my best, friends. And he didn't believe a word I'd been saying.

I felt as though he'd cracked me on the head with a hammer. I opened my mouth to speak but he went on speaking:

"I don't doubt," he said slowly, "that there's been some trouble—"

(He thinks it was all in your crazy mind, dope, an inner voice told me.)

"—but you *must* be a little twisted, Mike, on a couple of points . . . This Charles Martin business, for instance. You can't have killed him, or you wouldn't be here. You'd be in the prison ward

downstairs. Anyway—*Charles Martin made a radio speech at half-past ten this morning . . . and I listened to him myself.*"

I goggled at him, speechless.

"What's more, I glanced at the new-arrival report before I came on duty. I didn't know *you* were the 'Pope' mentioned there, of course. But I do know that Hunt Atherton brought you in here himself."

Somehow that wasn't so surprising—except for its sublime effrontery. To get me, with what I knew, safely out of the way for the next few hours—without actually killing me: Bellevue was a smart move for them. And if they killed me, they'd have a fairly bulky body to dispose of—on what was going to be a busy day. "What am I booked for, do you know?" I said.

His tone was amused.

"Yes. Alcoholic psychosis, and consequent disorientation. Now listen, Mike. I'll do what I can. I'll phone Weston, I'll even phone Atherton if you say so—"

"Aha, ha, ha. I don't say so. Would you," I said desperately, clutching at straws, "phone Washington?"

"What the devil for?"

"Colonel West's office . . . I've *got* to know or I *will* go nuts— Stumpy, there's one thing I haven't told you."

"Go ahead," he said. It sounded like a sigh.

So I told him what I hadn't intended to tell him, what I had no business to tell him. I told him about my great idea . . .

It was, briefly, this:

We knew, now, the zero hour of a still-tenebrous blitzkrieg slated to burst on New York: nine P.M., Sunday night.

We knew the code and the short-wave frequency which the conspirators used.

Why not issue new orders, ourselves, over the air in that same code?

IT had left me limp for a moment when I'd thought of it, rolling up Park in the taxi that morning. And instantly my mind had seemed to split in two: one part going on to develop the thought while the other part hovered fretfully with objections.

Tell 'em the attack has been set ahead (I had raced on mentally): *tell 'em it's for some time tonight, say: Saturday night, not Sunday. . . .*

What good will that do? asked the Objector—even if they happen to hear your fake message?

Of course they'll hear it: we can blast away on that frequency all day long. We don't have to worry about being detected—

Oh, we don't don't we? said the Objector. Suppose Berlin hears you? Suppose the local gang hears you? The whole thing'll be called off.

Berlin won't hear us. We won't come over that strong. We'll run the local gang down before we start. Even if we don't, our station can hog that wave-length all day. At the very worst, it'll gum the works, won't it? It'll get some of these lads to show their hands? It'll start some sort of a premature attack, won't it? Of course it will—

What good will that do? said the Objector. What about the fleet in Greenland—if there *is* one there?

"That's just the point: it'll be there, not here, when the local boys do their stuff. Wait a minute—wait a minute—this is getting good (I'd thought): *if we cared to, we could send a bunch of bombers up there, up to Greenland: we could catch 'em while they're still grounded, waiting for the hop-off—hell, we could bomb them to bits before they even got in the air—"*

At this point I had cracked my head smartly on the low taxi roof as we bounced over a bump, and the shock must have knocked the cleavage in my mind together again. That had been when I told the driver to get me to a telephone, and fast.

WAITING for my call to West to go through, I had checked my timing. If Julianehaab had gone off the air at say 10 on Friday night, then presumably the Axis fleet had taken over at that time. Eight hours to New York—they'd not be leaving till say Sunday noon. Or thereabouts. All right: turn that around. *Eight hours from* New York: a little over 1600 air-miles. *Our* bombers, cruising at 200, could leave our Eastern fields as late as Saturday noon and get up there easily by 8 or 9 o'clock Saturday night, ready to strike as soon as word came that New York had been attacked—

Then West's voice . . .

"What do you think, Colonel?" I had said when I'd outlined the scheme.

He hadn't hesitated a moment. "I think you've got the idea of a lifetime. We'll do *some*thing with it . . . where are you now?"

"Errand for McRae . . . Has Miss Stanton phoned you yet?"

"Yes. Yes. She's flying down, as you told her to. I think that was a wise precaution, all things considered. Your scheme is over-simplified, Pipe: there are a lot of other angles, a lot of Outs on it that occur to me as I sit here—"

"I know, but—"

"But that doesn't mean it isn't basically an—inspiration."

"Are there any reports from the Canadian scouts from Iceland?"

"Not a word . . . They've simply—vanished. Shot down, perhaps, by the invaders' patrols."

"*We* could take 'em," I had said. "We could take 'em, Colonel."

"Maybe—*if* the local attack really got started here. . . . You haven't talked with McRae about this, then?"

"No," I'd said promptly. "Just thought of it. Only to you."

"Glad of that. This'll have to be a case of take-off with sealed orders, if we decide there's to *be* a take-off. For the North, I mean. One school of thought here wants everything with wings in the East to be hovering over New York: McRae's of that school. I've been suggesting some sort of Northern patrol, myself: so your thought won't come as a complete surprise here. Which is all to the good . . . The loosest screw in your scheme—"

"Yes?"

"Never mind. Just thought of a way to tighten it. *Damnation*—I wish we had more time! Well—carry on. Good-by."

I told Stumpy all this. While nails bit into palms and the palms were wet. "Don't you get it, Stumpy? You've *got* to get me out—or let me telephone, anyway. I've *got* to get in touch—let West know what I know."

"It seems to me, Mike," Selzer said in a soothing tone with his eyes fixed on his large black shoe-caps, "that it's too late to bother about that tonight—"

If I had been a woman I would have wrung my hands. I felt like wringing his neck. "Late? You're damned right it's late," I said, and I know my voice must have risen a little. Perhaps more than a little. "It's after eight o'clock already—our planes may be over Greenland this minute: *I* don't know. But I do know that Hunt Atherton is in on this—I do know that his house is where I met Antrim—I do know that none of West's outfit have the faintest idea how to locate any of this gang. Only me. That's probably where their sending station is, too—and while that station's loose, anything can happen.

"*Will* you let me talk to West?" I said. "Will you? Right now?"

"I tell you," he said slowly. "I'll make a bargain with you. You come and lie down now, and I'll call him myself."

And he looked me full in the eye and I knew that he lied.

It was all over his face.

So I knew what I had to do. I said, standing up slowly, "Well, if you'll do that, Stumpy, *I'll* do . . . *this*—"

And I hit him on the chin so hard it jolted me to my bare toes.

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HE slumped back against the bench and I had his tunic off in three seconds flat: his trousers off and hitched round my own waist in four seconds more. I eyed his shoes, decided no. Take too long. I jabbed my left foot back into the wrinkled slipper which had come off as I hit him, left him there breathing stertorously . . .

The long key-chain on the trousers held half a dozen keys. Next moment I was standing under the flashing electric call-board, trying key after key. And trying to keep my heart down out of my throat.

Selzer's trousers hung in baggy folds about my waist but they were trousers, not pajamas: the slippers weren't so bad—and they were noiseless. The fourth key fitted.

The heavy door slid back; I went through and closed it behind me, and started down the dim, draughty corridor that stretched before me, pungent with

some unfamiliar but definitely antiseptic smell.

I saw no one until I reached the stairs. Up them, with a great rustle of stiff starched skirts, a very young and very pretty girl was coming; she glanced at me and I felt, rather than saw, her eyes flick to my slippers but I saw her face grow doubtful and I put an indifferent possessive hand on Stumpy's stethoscope which was slung round my neck and began to whistle *Danny Boy* and kept marching down the stairs. I could feel the girl turn to look after me; but she was young and inexperienced and hesitant and I kept going and nothing happened to stop me.

Nothing happened at the foot of the stairs, either. A small gray-stone lobby with a barrel-roof; brass wickets in front of three windows, all of the windows being closed, like teller's windows when banking hours are over; a large blue-serged policeman standing at the outer door. I quickened my steps just a little and nodded at him curtly and pushed the door open. He didn't even glance my way. I went down three steps and stood in the little side street and the night air was suddenly cool and sweet about me, and the river a murmurous dark ribbon where long, sad blasts were blowing against a star-spangled sky. And I was —I couldn't believe it—free.

I began to run.

Something jingled in my pocket and I put in a hand and my luck was still in: nearly a dollar in odd coins belonging to Doctor Selzer. I charged round the corner into First Avenue and a long black taxicab cruising slowly by stopped with a jerk at my unflung hand. I climbed in. "Shoot me up to the Biltmore, and fast," I said. The driver said indifferently, "O.K., doc," and we leaped forward. I noticed I had dropped a slipper getting in but it didn't matter. A voice in my ear said loudly: "Eight-thirty o'clock, Eastern Daylight Time," and there was the sound of a triple chime.

I SAT back and we picked up speed. Another voice said: "Ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, we will now —*What?*"

As though someone had seized the speaker suddenly by the arm. There was a moment's mumbling silence. The voice said in accents of excitement:

"Radio listeners, attention. Attention, please. I have just been informed—"

Another pause, broken, like the first, by a low hum as of eager clamorous voices. Then the announcer said:

"Stand by, everyone. The program originally scheduled for this hour has been suspended. I wish to announce to you . . . His Honor the Mayor of the City of New York."

Some quivering overtones in the voice snapped me bolt upright on the seat. The Mayor's harsh familiar tones blared in my car.

"My fellow-citizens," he said, and stopped.

His voice was quivering too. He stopped only a moment to get it under control. "My fellow-citizens," he began again. "I am speaking over a hastily improvised hookup which includes all major broadcasting stations of all major networks. I am going to tell you some terrible news—and I am going to beg for the loyal co-operation of every one of you. The news is this: at 8:45 o'clock—which is exactly twelve minutes from now—a gigantic fleet of Axis warplanes will be hovering directly over New York."

The voice stopped. Dazedly I heard the driver bellowing back at me: "What's that? What did he say? *War*planes?"

"Watch it, for God's sake," I bellowed back. A careening Blue Taxi whose pilot was evidently affected as mine was had just missed taking our right front fender with it. I said: "Pull into the curb till he gets through."

"Citizens!" said the familiar voice again. "You know what has happened in London. I am assured that nothing in this war to date—*nothing*—is comparable to the rain of death from the skies which will shower down on us all in less than a quarter of an hour. Bombs by the ton, by the tens of thousands—gas-bombs filled with a new and terrible gas which is odorless, invisible—and eats its way to the bone in thirty seconds.

"I have been trying frantically to get Washington on the telephone," the voice went on. "All main wires are cut. A well-organized, well-drilled fifth column

is evidently at work. We are isolated, it seems, from the rest of America . . . The most frightful holocaust of which history has record will be under way in the next few minutes . . ."

THE taxi slowed, stopped. I saw that other cars were doing the same, pulling toward the curb. Some light delivery trucks, two youngsters on bicycles, continued on their way.

"And yet," said the voice, "we have one chance. Just one. One chance of escaping this blazing doom. If this city will officially guarantee to offer no resistance . . . if the citizens will, bravely and patriotically, abstain from violence and yield quietly as the invaders take over . . . *we will be spared.*"

"Jeez!" my driver muttered. *"Jeez . . .!"*

"I think most of you know my record. I fought in the last war. I know what war is. I yield to no man as an American patriot. I have also the lives and the well-being of the greatest city in the world under my care. I have made my choice. I ask of each and every one of you that you support me in that choice. At 8:40—that is, in exactly three minutes—the City's new searchlights from the Battery to the Bronx will flash the signal we have been asked to give . . . *the signal which means that we accept the terms.* Again I ask, I implore everyone to be calm. *No resistance*—or millions of us may not live to see tomorrow . . ."

Again the voice paused. It began again in a moment but I was hardly listening. This was worse than the worst of my imaginings—thus to yield supinely, without lifting a finger . . . how did they persuade him to *that?* I wondered, and then, in the same breath, *How did their planes get here?* The figures on John Sword's envelope stood out in my mind as brilliantly as the figures on the Bellevue call-board: after the triple "Nine" signal, they read *27, 38, 9—S, U, N* . . . They spelled Sunday, not—not possibly, Saturday . . . I *couldn't* have been mistaken—

Then *were* there no planes overhead, really? *Had* West and the others touched off a premature attack? Did I dare hope that still?

Yet the Mayor's voice was real . . .

He had stopped talking now and it was curious how quiet it was. For just a moment. Not a horn blew, not a voice . . .

No voice—but there was also no wind; and from far in the silent heavens my straining ears could catch, low and steady as a tom-tom throbbing, a sonorous metallic hum . . .

"Is that them planes?" my driver jerked at me.

"It's not bees," I said. "You can bet on that, boy. Let's get going."

"Mister, I—"

The solid earth, the solid rock beneath us seemed to heave and shudder. It was a convulsion—a series of convulsions—which did not register on my ears, at least, as Sound: perhaps it was too deep, too distant—and too tremendous. As though Manhattan's whole rocky core were quivering—

And then, all up and down the glittering length of the Avenue, the lights went out.

ALWAYS at night in New York, at any hour of the night, you take for granted the myriad yellow squares gleaming brightly in shadowy towers. From where my taxi stood, a dozen such towers spangled the northern sky and rose to westward too. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler and the Chanin, and in between the soft shining which was Radio City: these and others stamped a complex brilliant pattern against the sky.

Now suddenly, as though some giant hand had flicked a vast black curtain down from heaven, the pattern vanished. Now suddenly the sky was full of darkness . . .

A swift silent shadow seemed to rush toward us down the Avenue and the street lamps died . . .

Most of the street traffic was, as I have said, already motionless. The beams of the scattered headlights looked thin and lonely in the engulfing darkness.

"Mister," said my driver again, "I can't—"

I caught my own breath as he stopped short. It was a beautiful sight, really. Beautiful. And terrible. All round the horizon—north, east, south, west—the slim bright lances of the searchlights hurtled glittering toward the stars. A full circle—ringing Manhattan in a curtain of pure white fire. High toward the zenith the lances met, splintered against each other,

swayed slowly back and forth, grew still. Focused all together in one central spot of blinding glory that seemed directly overhead. The whole island roofed and sheltered, as it were, beneath the slanting lines of archangelic swords . . .

I was standing on the sidewalk outside the cab, not realizing that I had moved. And suddenly the sidewalks were full of people.

Where they came from so suddenly I don't know. But every doorway—seen in the thin yellow beams of the scattered headlights—was packed with a jostling crowd; the pavements themselves were so thickly peopled you could hardly move. Spewed up out of cellars and basements—trooping down from the tall old brownstones and the red brick tenements—men, women, children, animals . . . All craning necks skyward, as mine was craned. And all, still, curiously silent. A silence which was already stretched too taut. One degree, one tiny fractional notch, this side of hysteria . . .

Suddenly action—motion—became imperative to me. If I were not to burst, physically, with pressure from within. The taxi was hopelessly hemmed in now anyway, hemmed by those thronging human bodies. I began again to run.

Up First Avenue—running along the gutter beside the curb where motion was still possible, running through the packed, rustling, headlight-stabbed darkness, pushing my way this way, that way, eel-like, picking my openings as a ball-carrying back picks his—

Only this was a different kind of playing-field.

Twenty-eighth Street, 29th, 30th, 32nd—my pace couldn't last. Thirty-third, 34th—and as I dived for the door of a drugstore lit by a chance headlight's beam, a man came stumbling out the door. "The phones are gone too!" he shouted. "I can't telephone . . . My God, I—"

He began to cry. Sobs shook him as he stood in the hard yellowish dazzle of the car's lamps. Someone in the car—a woman—began shrieking at him to get in, get in . . . I'll never make the Biltmore, I thought, not in these clothes. And if I can't telephone—

My own house! Practically just round the corner . . . clothes, at least. And perhaps all the exchanges weren't gone, perhaps—

As I picked up my bare foot to set it forward, the first puff of hot air touched me and—without stopping to think, or reason—I threw myself flat. I was flat on my face on the paving-stones, I remember, when the blast came.

IN Madrid and elsewhere I had heard noises. Explosions. Close at hand, very close. Never, never anything like this. A flash so bright that for an instant it was like noonday, a roar that filled the world and the sky, a blow like a clenched fist against my body—Fist? Like a battering ram that hurled me twenty feet sidewise, skittering over and over in the street in an interlocked tangle of other bodies . . . And a whistle like a fast train as two stone blocks the size of ice-boxes skimmed past my head like pebbles from a sling.

Then as the thunderous boom of the earth itself up-gushing died away came higher, shriller noises: the clatter of debris falling back to earth again, the crackle and crash of collapsing walls, the dry tinkle of glass.

I raised my head. Northward, between me and the river, red flames were leaping skyward. Time bomb?—in the huge Edison plant? The pure circle of the searchlights overhead was motionless, unbroken. I got to my knees, to my feet. There were loud groanings in the darkness at my left. I couldn't wait . . .

Thirty-fifth, 36th—I was almost there. Loping legs that wobbled badly carried me acrosstown westward . . . and with the last remnants of my second wind I staggered under the thin branches of the young elm in front of my own doorway and slipped and caught myself and fumbled for my keys.

An unfamiliar key-chain—but of course. Selzer's keys . . . all I had. I wrenched hard at the door and it opened instantly. The hall was pitch-black—was the house empty?

"McRae!" I called, as loud as my pumping bellows of a chest would let me. "Sword! Who's here?"

A rustle of sound from the head of the stair-case . . . a faint glow of light. "Mike?" said a voice I knew—

The stairs groaned as I pounded up them. *That* was impossible, of course, but—

The door of my room was open, ten feet from the stairs. Henna Wyatt stood in the doorway. There was a lighted candle in her hand, and the yellow light spilled upward across her bosom and across her face and her hair.

It was impossible. Yet there she was—

I had Doctor Selzer's stethoscope still clutched in one hand. I was covered with muck and grime on my tunic where I'd rolled along First Avenue. My breath was coming in great whistling gasps.

Henna—

Out of what sunsets, what Hawaiian dawns, she had come back to me I didn't know. Nor care. The metal tubes clattered on the floor as they left my hand and I took three steps forward and her eyes were enormous in the candle-flame and then both my arms were round her, and her body and her lips pressed close to mine.

16

"DARLING . . ."

"Darling!"

There wasn't time for more, yet I couldn't let her go . . . I *had* to let her go . . . I said, holding her tightly, with my lips against the copper cloud of her hair: "You're all right? How long ago . . .?"

"Half an hour. Or less. I drove here straight from the airport. No one answered the bell so I opened the door—and the lights went out. What is it, Mike? What's happened? What's happened to *you?"*

She could take it. I knew that. I said: "It's invasion . . . at last. Right this minute . . . There isn't time— Come here a minute."

I kept her hand in mine and we crossed the threshold of the little roof-terrace and stood under the white-blazing sky, under the searchlights' fixed, unwavering fingers. Henna gasped. "Look there—and there!" I said, pointing. Red flames were belching all round the horizon like blast-furnaces in a Pittsburgh night. "There go the power-stations," I said bitterly, *"and* the phone-exchanges—"

Far to the southward a tongue of fire leaped a thousand feet skyward—dazzling, incredible — and fresh waves of sound clanged brazenly, filling all the air. "I shouldn't wonder," I said, "if *there* went a bridge. . . ."

Sirens were a thin high screaming far away . . . or were those human voices? Henna's fingers bit suddenly into my arm. "Look, Mike, look!" she breathed, and pointed with the other hand.

I suppose I should have expected it. I hadn't. It came as a complete surprise: the tiny white mushroom far, far above us, billowing downward out of the very center of the searchlights' glare. The night was almost windless: the little mushroom dropped on a long gradual slant to the northward and suddenly I saw that it was not alone. Two—four—eight—why, there were dozens, scores of tiny twirling mushrooms that grew bigger and bigger as they fell—

"Parachute troops!" she whispered.

"Come back—I forgot . . ." I said confusedly and pulled her back inside. But I knew, even before I lifted the receiver, that it would be no good. You know those things sometimes and it is not just a weak defeatism: you *know* them. It was so. I finished my frantic clickings, hung up. It would be pleasant to make myself out bigger than I was at that instant, for I was not very big. I was conscious of just one thing: a rising, fighting rage in my heart. Henna was back. That was the background not only for the moment but for all living: Henna was back. I had done what I could for New York and it hadn't been nearly good enough and that was bad. But this was my girl and she was in danger—

I put the receiver down, said, "No go . . . Darling, I'm going to get you out of this bedlam somehow. And fast. One of those chutists may drop right in the window—"

HER face under its smooth, honey-colored tan was pale but her smile was lovely and her voice was steady. "Vibrant" is a trite word but that is how her face was always, and not her face only but her whole body. The very air around her was electric: her gray-green eyes, the copper glints in her hair, her sudden, wide, breath-taking smile, all pulsed with vitality.

Yet she could be calm; she could be very calm, and she was calm now. "I told you my bags are here, darling," she said. "You want the gun you gave me?"

The word "bags" brought to mind suddenly what I had come there for. I said, "You got some slacks, a sweater? I've got to change to some myself. . . . Can't go riding like this."

"Oh, are we going riding?"

"Not you—" I stopped. I *had* to get her away—yet where, at a time like this, was safety? Perhaps, instead of going alone for help while she waited here, I had better— Perhaps she *would* be safer with me: impossible, really, to tell . . . I said: "All right, we'll try it, anyway." And jumped for my bureau . . .

I am sure it wasn't more than five minutes later that the front door slammed behind us. I was in sweater, slacks, tennis shoes and a two-day beard; Henna in the same without the beard, also with a kerchief over her shining hair. I had her gun in my pocket, and a flashlight; and at least a ray of hope in my heart.

The garage where I kept the Humbolt was just round the corner.

I had bought her in England two years before. Something about the shiny truncated body, the sense of impact and of power which she gave, attracted me, and I bought her and had her shipped home. Which was very foolish. She was built for racing, not for comfort; consequently I took her out very little after the first couple of months. But Jerry O'Shea, at the garage, was mad about her, so I let him fit an extra saddle on her and take his girl out of a Sunday morning. This being Saturday night, I thought she'd probably be in shape to roll—and a motorcycle can get through traffic where even a tank would be stuck.

She was ready.

She stood in the far corner of the dim echoing garage: squat, powerful, a snub-nosed hornet with a wild bull's heart.

"Yain't gonna take her out to*night,* Mr. Pope? With the *lady?"* Shocked surprise. "Din ya know they's an attack or sompin?"

"Is she full up?"

"Yeah. Filled her an hour ago, but—"

I wheeled her round. Henna said, "You get on same like on a horse?" and did, and the Humbolt's sudden eager bellowing shook the rafters . . .

A MOMENT later I saw that she was, indeed, our only chance. Second Avenue was now choked with stalled traffic, with violent clamorous humanity under the searchlights' lucent silver swords. But the Humbolt; siren blaring, wove in and out swiftly. We reached 42nd and I had a sudden, swift impulse to turn left and try to get crosstown to the Biltmore, but one look at the impacted street to the westward proved its impassability. It reminded me of the Orléans Road . . .

I had told Henna, in short jerky sentences as disconnected as the night itself, what the night was bringing. So far as I knew, I mean—which wasn't far. Now as we skidded past 45th Street her voice said over my right shoulder: "All right, where are we heading for now?" and I twisted in to the curb and stopped.

Because I didn't know.

It was that brief memory-flashback to the Orléans Road that did it—that, and her question. And I saw that for a few moments, obsessed by the tumultuous overwhelming desire to have her *safe* . . . out, away, anywhere but here . . . I had been as senseless as those panicked thousands who had gone streaming through the June night in France a year before. *Flight* . . . without question, without reason—

I shifted on the saddle so that I could see her face. The ghostly radiance sifting down from far above gave light enough. "Darling," I said, "forgive me if I'm wrong . . . You mean more than life to me: you know it, don't you? Of course you know it. But there's one place we *ought* to be heading for—and I don't know what we'll find there. Perhaps it's too late to do any good, but we can try . . ."

She bent forward and kissed me. "Hurry up, idiot," she said, "or it *will* be too late."

We shot forward with a roar.

Sixtieth, 63rd, 67th . . . I swung westward, and the traffic was almost nonexistent, and we bounced across Third, Lexington, Park—

Fifty feet beyond Park, looking as un-

real as a dinosaur and completely blocking traffic, sat an Army tank.

My feet touched the ground and the Humbolt quivered restlessly under us as a young First Lieutenant in uniform with an automatic swinging aggressively at his belt stepped up to me and said curtly:

"Who're you two—and what do you want?"

"Why's the tank here?"

"Answer me."

"Sure. Name of Pope. Trying to find a Colonel West—"

He had me by the arm, by both arms. "Man!" he said. "He's just inside the house next door . . ."

"You mean the doctor's house? Doctor Atherton's?"

"That's it. We've got the whole block surrounded—"

"This is Miss Wyatt."

He was delighted to meet Miss Wyatt but he couldn't concentrate on her just then. We passed a cordon of National Guardsmen, and a group of men standing in front of a doorway I knew—a fine iron-grilled doorway in a fine gray-stone house—parted to let us through. We went through fast and I spared only one glance for the underground ramp . . .

THE big lower hall looked like a Meissonier painting of The Night Before the Battle: full of candles, a couple of portable searchlights, uniforms, and cigarette smoke; also a miniature telephone exchange from which cables trailed like snakes. The Lieutenant pushed ahead of us into what was evidently the Doctor's formal parlor. It too was full of men. At its far end a trestle-table had been set up, and on the table three officers were working with slide-rules and big sheets of paper. To one side stood the most curious radio I had ever seen: about three feet square, in a plain oak case stamped U.S.A., it looked as complicated as the Clipper's instrument panel and as sensitive as the Palomar telescope.

Two men were bent before it, busy. One was in uniform. The other was John Sword's friend Red. I touched him on the shoulder as we passed; his fat blond face turned, frowning. "Did you get a message back to 'em?" I said. The frown vanished: he grinned. "I'll say we did. . . . You think that parachuting was all done with mirrors?"

"What about the Axis planes? What about the Mayor's speech?"

He sniffed. "*I* dunno who stooged on that for him . . . But if there's any Axis planes upstairs—except a few that let down some of those trapeze-artists—I'll eat 'em. We got a patrol up and down the Eastern seaboard that a sparrow couldn't get through, what I hear—"

I wished I could sit down. My legs felt weak. "Where else are our boys, Red? Our ships?"

The fat face tightened cautiously. "You better ask the Colonel about *that,*" he said, and turned back to his panel. Someone slipped a hand under my arm. I turned. It was the Colonel—or rather, it was someone who was wearing the Colonel's clothes, and an etched steel mask which was vaguely like the Colonel's face. It was not a face of flesh at all: as hard and as grim as that. A steel mask with twin electric lamps for eyes.

He touched my arm and said, "Like to see you inside a moment, Pope . . . alone."

I glanced at Henna. "I'll park in a corner somewhere: do go on, Mike," she said, and I nodded and followed the tall, slim, white-haired figure with the steel mask toward an inner door. Beyond was a tiny room with a desk, two chairs. Medicine shelves on the walls: the good doctor's home dispensary, evidently. Colonel West waved me inside, came in, and shut the door. He put out a hard hand and shook mine. It was characteristic of him that he wasted no time on preliminaries: even as our hands met he said:

"Things are now very bad."

"Red just told me you got the message through."

"We did. We certainly did. Just as you suggested. Very brief, official-sounding command: it stated that this was 'Final Bulletin, Final Bulletin, Final Bulletin to The Nine'—that 'Lites out' was to 'advance' to 8:45 tonight—Saturday—and that everyone was to spread the word, everyone was to rally round and 'perform as planned' . . . *tonight.* It sounded fine: best German Army style. When I heard it I could hardly believe I'd com-

posed it myself. We kept that going, over and over and over, from noon today till 8:30 tonight. Till 8:33, to be exact —we stopped when that fake 'Mayor' came on the air—"

"Fake?"

"Certainly," snapped the old soldier. "You don't think Fiorello would be as—as supine as that?"

"I thought of that very word—and wondered."

Darlan! Of course: and Darlan had been "Charles Martin" on the radio, too. "The Mayor has disappeared," the metallic voice went on. "Kidnaped, probably, while someone impersonated him—"

"Where'd you send it from, Colonel? And how did you find this house?"

"Sent it right from here," the old man barked. "There's a sending-set upstairs you could talk to China with: probably the very one they've been using. But—*the house was empty when we got here.*"

"When was that? And how'd you find it?" I insisted.

"McRae ran it down from your description: the ramp to the underground garage, the elevator, all the rest of it. We'd have found it sooner or later in any event, because we've been checking every blasted garage-permit on Manhattan Island. But that's quite a job, as you can imagine: actually we got here at half-past eleven this morning . . . Where the devil," he added, "have *you* been? McRae tells me he sent you up here to interview that windbag Martin at five this morning—this very house! Amazing! And not a chirp out of you since."

MY head was buzzing, my ears were ringing, I hardly recognized my own voice as I said:

"Where's McRae now?"

"He was here a minute ago. . . . We've set up a sub-office round the corner: he may have run over there. What happened this morning? Was Martin here? Maybe it's just prejudice on my part: *I* wouldn't be surprised if he were in on this somehow—"

"He was," I heard myself say. "Very much so. Not now. He's dead. I k—"

The medicine shelves tilted suddenly and crazily sidewise and the ringing in my ears became a loud roar. I felt perspiration burst from every pore on my forehead; even my hair felt wet. I was sitting in one of the chairs without meaning to bend my knees. "Bend!" said a voice from a distance. "Bend forward: head between your knees—" Mechanically I obeyed.

An icy deluge splashed over my head, my neck, spattered on the floor. I gasped. My head cleared and I raised it and Colonel West was standing beside me with an empty water-pitcher in his hand. "Passing faintness, that's all," he said brusquely. "Had a hard day?"

"Th-thanks," I managed, still gasping. The dousing had done wonders already: the faintness had gone. Aftermath of the hypodermic which had kept me drugged and sodden all day . . . I said:

"I killed Charles Martin around five this morning—*in this house.* Atherton was here, too—he's in on it. I'll—I'll tell you my story in a minute: give me the rest of yours."

He was staring at me. "Atherton!" he muttered. "I understood he'd been out of town. I—we decided that these rats had been using the place without his knowledge. . . ."

The look in his eyes bothered me: it reminded me of the look in McRae's eyes on the Clipper a year before. When I'd had a feeling that he was trying to convey to me a message over and above what his lips were saying.

". . . Anyway there wasn't a soul here when we arrived," the Colonel went on. "McRae had gone to the broadcasting-studio to interview Martin personally after the broadcast, when you didn't report back, to try to find what had happened to you. He missed Martin by a couple of minutes. That was a little past eleven. We got up here at half-past, as I told you. No Martin, no Atherton, no anyone: whoever had been here had skipped. You see what that means?"

"No."

"It means there's been a leak. A bad leak. From one of us—to them. Someone warned 'em we were coming."

THE little cubicle was still as the grave. His eyes were still on me. "Colonel, I—" was as far a I got before he broke in:

"The point's this, Pope: *so far,* we're all right . . . We've touched off the fuse —thanks to you; we've made 'em show their hand here; we've got the situation here under control. Those parachutists," he added parenthetically, beating me to the question and talking faster than ever, "they don't matter. They came from three lone planes that came over at around 30,000 feet—we let 'em come—and dropped to around 10,000 to let the chutes out. We've got fast cars and spotters assigned to practically all the chutes, so that'll be all right. The point is—*they've got another station.* Another high-power station—*very* high-power. And *they were using it not half an hour ago.* Not the code we know: it's quite different—a lot of unrelated letters, very involved. You see? They know now that something's gone haywire: *my* guess is that they were trying to get Berlin—or Greenland. Or both. . . ."

"'Trying'? Can't we jam them?"

"Can't jam them. All we've got is battery power: all other current's off. Theirs must be battery-operated, too—"

I saw clearly the implications. *"Did* we send planes North?" I said. Obviously, if we had—and if the new station could get a warning to Greenland through —there could be no surprise attack. Or rather—there all too certainly *would* be a surprise attack—*by the forewarned Axis squadrons hurtling against ours. . . .*

The electric-blue eyes boring into mine didn't change expression; the steel mask didn't, apparently, move by as much as a millimeter at any point; yet *something* changed—perhaps a scarcely perceptible nod of the whole head. For somehow my question was answered: I knew that our planes had left. At the same moment West's voice said, almost in a whisper though the door of the tiny room was shut:

"Canada's co-operating, of course. And this morning the two coast guard cutters that we've had cruising in Greenland waters were ordered to proceed to Julianehaab at once. And report back to us. But they aren't there yet—and they don't know about our plans here, anyway. Too risky to go blabbing that out to them over the air. . . . That's why we don't dare talk to our planes, either. Or they to us. Except for one brief signal we've already flashed 'em: the 'Attack' signal, which they've acknowledged. It meant that the 'attack' had already begun here, and that they were free to attack up there. . . . We sent that out right after the lights went out, right after the explosions started. From now on it's up to them—but, by God, it's up to *us* to silence that other station!"

"What time are our ships due? Where are they heading for?" I regretted the questions instantly: the first was none of my business and I already knew the answer to the second. I knew it because only a month before I'd prepared a column on Greenland as a midway base for air invaders—after studying Greenland topography in minute detail. There was only one spot where any sizable air fleet could land safely: the vast sheltered valley close behind Julianehaab itself, the valley with its carefully smoothed ice-surfaced field not five miles from the settlement.

ONLY that one spot—otherwise it would have been utter folly to start our planes North at all. You can't search a whole sub-continent for an invading spearhead. There was no question that that was where our ships were heading: the question was what they would find there. . . .

Apparently the Colonel hadn't even heard me, which was a relief, for he was again figuring.

"We can't jam that station," he was saying, "but by the special grace of God, it's being jammed for us . . . momentarily."

"How—?"

"Weather. We've had reports—the whole North Atlantic area's affected. But that may change any minute, any moment—"

There is no use, my mind said to me quite calmly, in trying to figure the different things that *can* go wrong at *this* point. Only one thing was sure: our best planes, our best pilots, would be smashed to flaming fragments on the Greenland floes if this unknown station got its warning through. Aloud I said (and despite my spell of faintness and the complexity of the situation with which West had been trying to acquaint me, only three or

four minutes had passed since we'd entered the little room):

"Can you get a cross-check—if it starts again?"

"We've got men out, waiting. They'll report by police-radio. But you know how uncertain—except over a period—and it all takes time. And all these rats need is five minutes—five uninterrupted minutes. . . ."

His voice was under control, but I understood now the rigid steel mask. He could only wait—and hope. . . .

And meantime our fleet was humming nearer, nearer its goal—sixteen hundred miles away. Its goal? Its end!—if the warning got through.

I said helplessly: "You've checked places like Noyes' home, of course? And Calverton's place?" He nodded. "Of course," he said. "This afternoon. Every place we could think of. Including Doctor Atherton's Long Island home—we looked there because we naturally thought that if this gang had been using *this* house, they might have forced their way into that one, too."

"Didn't know he had a Long Island home."

"Oh, yes. It's just beyond Hempstead. It would have been an ideal spot for a hangout, too," said Colonel West wistfully. "It's got a private air-field and a hangar—very neatly secluded, too. But there was nothing there. We went all through the house, all over the place. Nothing. Nothing tangible, that is. Except—"

He stopped. Then he went on. Both of us were under such tension that we had to do *some*thing: talking was something, so was listening . . . and thinking. Action, at the moment, was blocked. "I dislike the intrusion of personal opinion," said the old soldier, "in a—er—factual narrative. Therefore I haven't mentioned my opinions: but I will now. I myself have suspected—"

There was a sharp double rap on the door; it was pushed open immediately and McRae came in. I had seen him tired, worn, before: nothing like this. Both eye-sockets were black with fatigue. "You were right," he said heavily, not seeing me at first around the opened door. "It's a German motor— *What!*"

THE last word was jerked from him as he saw me standing there. "My good God!" he said solemnly, recovering himself. "I—gave you up, Mike. I thought you were gone!"

"Not yet. Just got here—"

"They're sure?" said the Colonel sharply.

"Absolutely. So perhaps Atherton *has* been in the thing all along."

"I know damn well he's been in it," I said with some emphasis. "What's this about a German motor?"

"Found it, partly dismantled, in Atherton's hangar this afternoon." The Colonel's voice had acquired a new resonance, vitality. "McRae went down to comb the place, as I told you. With a flying squad of F.B.I. men. Hangar was empty, all but this motor—and no one would have paid any attention to that, except that one of the F.B.I. men is an ex-aviation mechanic. He said he'd swear it was a German motor, and he thought they ought to cart it back with them to town here. So McRae called me and I said Yes, confiscate it by all means. . . . So they did—and we've been having it examined by a couple of our own experts. Where'd you get the report, Douglas?"

"It's been over at the sub-office for two hours," said McRae disgustedly. "Lost in the hustle and bustle—though I don't know what we can do with it now that we know."

I heard his voice saying the words but I heard it only vaguely because my so-called mind was off on another of its darting swallow-flights. Bat-flights might be a better term: sizes of zigzags. Atherton . . . private air-field . . . dismantled German motor in hangar . . . Atherton definitely one of the Nine—

The bat skipped a year and an ocean in its flight and there was Mr. Mull standing in the Cintra airport doorway bathed in lucent gold—

Of course. That was how he'd crossed the Atlantic ahead of us: in a Nazi plane that landed him at Atherton's private field.

Yes? Yes! I felt sure of it. And if that were so—if that were so—

McRae's voice: "What happened to *you,* Mike? Has the Colonel told you how we—"

"Yes," I said. "He's told me. I

haven't told *him* anything yet because I've been listening—and I couldn't throw any new light anyway. But now—McRae, how old is this place of Atherton's? You any idea?"

"New," said McRae promptly. "Less than a couple of years old. I know because I asked. Big and new and very elaborate. He and a friend of his—a young French or German architect—designed the whole thing—house, hangar, grounds—on very modernistic lines. They're still talking about it down in Hempstead because when construction actually started, Atherton had to be away for six or eight weeks and the architect was supervising and very unpopular he made himself locally."

"Why?"

"Oh, he took himself very seriously, that's all. Had armed guards swaggering around the place and warning people off—"

AGAIN my heart was pounding, the blood singing in my ears. I didn't need to hear any more. "Colonel," I said, "I want to see that place myself. Right now. Will you give me an escort—a motorcycle escort? I've got a motorcycle of my own outside."

The old soldier stared at me. "Why—but there's nothing there, Pope. I just told you. Nothing."

I said, the words spilling from me, "Let's not stop to argue. *Will you give me an escort?*" I had my hand on the doorknob. McRae said: "Mike—wait a moment. What is all this?"

"All right," I said desperately, now suddenly conscious of the minutes we'd wasted. "I'll go alone—"

"Pope!" I whirled at the command and faced him. West's eyes blazed into mine so brilliantly I may have blinked. "You'll go with an escort . . . and make it fast!"

His tone, his suddenly human face, told me that he'd grasped what I was thinking; that he thought it worth at least a try. Next instant we were out in the smoke-filled main room and he was barking orders. Two orderlies started out the door on the run, and for an instant West and I were standing close together and alone. *"Underground,* you think?" said his voice in my ear and I nodded. "With the aerial—a fine tall overseas-size aerial—hidden in the hangar wind-sock pole," I said. "Take care of the lady for me, won't you?"

"Gladly. . . . I'll try to get Mitchel Field on the police-radio, too; get a detachment over there—"

"Swell—if you can." I didn't see Henna anywhere in the outer room and in a way I was glad. Every second counted now. "Send the escort after me," I said, and dived on out.

17

I EASED onto the 59th Street bridge at fifty and the river wind tore at my hair and I was glad of the curved celluloid shield clipped to my face. The escort, four strong, was close behind. The lone white stab of blinding white from my headlamp showed bridge traffic herded neatly to one side with an easy lane open on the right; I thought, well, what are we waiting for?—and the forward lunge of the Humbolt threw me back firmly in the slim padded racing-saddle and we soared off the bridge like a bird.

There seemed to be two Popes riding that night. One clung to his metal steel, wind-buffeted and breathless, trying to get the feel, the rhythm, of the ninty-mile-an-hour pace down the Parkway. The other sat quietly in a crystal sphere of tension where the only motion was the quiver of sub-microscopic brain-filaments trying to connect, to hook up: an invisible yet somehow perceptible luminous patterning, like the pattern of a vast electric switchboard or the glitter of sun on water . . . I suppose that what I am trying to say is that my mind seemed to be functioning, trying to function, quite independently of my body's problems. It didn't succeed too well. . . .

From the moment I had seen the horrid smile of Mull's shark-teeth on the Granada's table-top, too many things had happened which didn't make sense, too many questions had shaped themselves to which I had no answer. . . .

Except one quite terrible answer—which I tried to keep sternly out of mind.

The Humbolt hit a slight depression in the roadbed and without warning I felt

us take wing. Literally. We must have flown a good twenty feet through the air with both wheels off the ground before the front wheel touched again, and it was only by the grace of God that I fought out of the developing skid before it got well started, and kept us roaring on. . . .

Taoists in China, I believe, look blank and puzzled when you speak of "good" or "bad" luck. Their point being, how can you know—how can you ever know—whether a given incident makes for good or for ill in that intricate design which is the cosmos? I myself venture to disagree. That little hollow in the Parkway roadbed unquestionably saved my life. And, it being the only life I have, I feel that hitting the little hollow was very fine luck indeed for Pope.

It saved my life because the thudding crash with which we landed loosened a nut on the front mudguard and the mudguard began to shiver and shake. I didn't want to stop unless I had to, and I bent far forward over the handlebars and that is why I am here to write this record down.

THE Parkway was pitch dark except for the white-blazing eye of my headlamp, but I understand it wouldn't have made much difference. I understand that such wires—strung taut across the roadway at just the height of a cyclist's throat—are practically invisible at high speed, even in daylight. . . . Anyhow, as I bent forward, something that felt like a razor blade sliced across my skull from front to back and my head snapped back so hard I could feel my neck-bones crackle and I shut off power with my eyes shut and braked and held on and we skidded to a pounding stop.

I clipped the wire which had so nearly clipped the head from my shoulders and threw a leg across the Humbolt again and we roared on eastward. . . .

Then there were yellow bomb-flares flickering in a row across the road and I slowed. Uniforms resolved themselves into a State Trooper cordon. The two nearest threw up their hands, I stopped.

"License? Papers?"

"I 'm from New York. I want Doctor Atherton's place—just beyond Hempstead."

"Get goin', Doc," said the trooper and another tall youngster in uniform kicked his machine alive and wobbled forward. "We been waiting for you," the first one explained. "Sent out from Mitchel Field to pick you up."

"Oh. Swell. I've got an escort right behind me: show them, too, will you?"

His assent was lost as the third man shot forward and I shot after him but even in that moment I found time for a brief keen flash of pride in my countrymen. I had seen only one small segment of the city, of course; what had happened elsewhere I couldn't tell. But in my circumscribed area I had seen less hysteria, less panic than one sees after any bad car smash: a few isolated outcries only. For the rest, a cool watchful waiting paralleling a persistent incredulity. Not bad, New York, I thought—

Gravel whirled noisily under our wheels and bits of it stung my cheek where the shield had slipped as we angled sharply off the cement five minutes later and coasted up a long curving driveway between high dark elms. Over my left shoulder I could see the faint luminous radiance in the sky which meant that the searchlights still arched above New York—well, I hadn't been much more than a quarter of an hour, incredible as that seemed. My leader slowed and I coasted up beside him. "This is it. What now?" he said calmly.

"There's a hangar back there—right?"

"Yes."

"I think there's a cellar of some sort under it, with a radio . . . people . . . I don't want to waste a second but I don't want to take chances—"

"Here come your boys."

IT was true. They came sweeping en cavalcade up the drive behind us and killed their motors and the seven of us—my escort of four, the two troopers, and I—stood and consulted in whispers. The Colonel had got through to Mitchel Field—they knew that; they didn't know whether the detachment from Mitchel had arrived here at the house yet. I said, "Let's take a look, anyway," and, deploying, we went forward across thick pine needles toward the field and the hangar, past the dark silent house and

toward the black-looming curve of the hangar roof against the sky.

I got the parachutist's Luger out of my pocket and it was loaded and felt better in my hand than the tiny toy Henna had loaned me. Starshine filtering through the elm branches and the pines glinted suddenly on a bayonet thrust almost into my stomach as a curt low voice said, "Halt!"

And then:

"Who goes . . . ?"

"Messenger from Colonel West," I said. "From New York. You from Mitchel?"

A bulky figure joining us resolved itself into that of Major Moffett; he—and his outposts—were from Mitchel, yes. They had only been here three or four minutes. They had been told to await our instructions. I said:

"You've got the place surrounded, though, Major? So that nothing, no one, can get away? We think there's a cellar under that hangar—but first, would you detach a couple of men to tear down that wind-sock pole?" I pointed.

The slim, white spar was dimly visible even from where we stood. The Major nodded. "Possible aerial? Right a—"

Far, far down the field a motor began a resonant bumbling song. "What the hell's that?" the Major snapped. "I gave strict orders—"

Something was moving, moving toward us under the faint starshine. Moving faster and faster—a slim winged shape that hugged the ground like an ice-boat—No! It was barely skimming the ground, it was rising, it was a plane, a long dark low-wing plane, it was in the air, it was laboring to rise—

The motor's familiar surging thunder swelled suddenly—deafening in my ears; the sound seem to engulf us, beat us flat to the earth as the dark dragon-fly raced toward us, lifting, lifting—

The man behind me said gruffly, "Hold still, boss," and I felt a smooth round snout come to rest on my shoulder. . . .

I shut my eyes, for I could guess what was coming. I shut my eyes and all hell broke loose in my face, in my ears, as the automatic rifle went *Sho-sho-sho-sho-sho sho*—

And with its echoes still ringing I heard someone yell, "Watch it!" and I opened my eyes and my heart stopped and I hurled myself sidewise and down. For the shots had gone home: and the black-winged shape faltered—swerved—and came plunging straight for the group of pines. . . .

A rending, splintering crash—branches breaking, wings breaking, bones breaking, backs breaking—

Then, for a moment, silence.

Then groans. . . .

I got to my feet slowly. I said to the man who had sighted and fired, "Some shooting, mister. Never saw the beat of it—"

He was getting to his feet, too. His cap had fallen off. The cap was probably why I hadn't recognized him when he coasted up as one of the cycle escort down the drive. He was alleged to be—and I could now believe it—the best pistol-shot east of the Mississippi: Mr. John Sword.

I STARED at him and he grinned and pointed down the field. Already an army truck mounted with a searchlight had lumbered up, and the whole area was bright as day. Another truck came rumbling toward us, toward the shattered splinters and the groanings among the trees. I thought they would keep: I started pounding across the smooth turf toward the first light. Tearing eagerly at the turf were a dozen soldiers, and even as I came up they had succeeded in prying away enough to show, just below the grass-roots, the outlines of a huge metal hinge joining two smooth steel surfaces which could be nothing in the world but the flaps of the turf-camouflaged underground-hangar doors. . . .

"Gawd!" said one of the soldiers, leaning on his entrenching-tool. "She musta come right up outa there an' the doors slid down shut again! I *knew* that plane wasn't on this field five minutes ago. . . ."

Fifty yards away, on the rim of the field between us and the distant hangar, the tall, white spar with the limp, dark blur at its tip which was the wind sock began to sway, and I became conscious for the first time of the ax-strokes which had been chopping dully across the night. Two more strokes—and the long white pencil-shaped tilted like a breaking mast, fell. A loud splintering noise as the base

ripped through, a thud as the pole hit the ground. "Mr. Pope!" called the Major's voice.

"Sir!" I bellowed back.

"Guess you were right. This thing is wired clear up to the top."

Storm or clear in the North Atlantic now, starshine or hurricane—it doesn't matter, I told myself. Not from this moment—*but had we come in time?*

"How many was in the plane?" asked the soldier, addressing me. "You know, mister?"

"I hope six," I said. "I'm going back and find out."

Perhaps I could find out more than that. Perhaps one of them, before he died, could tell us—

No. He'd lie. All of them would lie. Craven or snarling, whimpering or defiant, they'd lie as the last breath left their bodies. They were that sort. But I felt a sudden deep conviction that that didn't matter, either. The desperate last-minute attempted flight from the rats' nest was in itself admission and confession that the day was lost. . . .

Which meant that we had won.

18

I HAD been wrong about the bodies. The bodies from the shattered plane, I mean. There were only five, not six: and they were being laid out neatly in a row when I got back across the field. That is, they were all neat and quiet but one: one which kept groaning wordlessly and horribly and humping itself like a gigantic worm.

Jake Noyes and Hugo Calverton lay side by side. Calverton's handsome face was smashed and Jake Noyes' thick neck was broken, which I thought very appropriate for both of them. Doctor Hunt Atherton was still breathing, but the thin lips curled back from the white teeth and the lean, dark face under the pilot's leather helmet hardened in a final grin of agony while the Major and I bent over it. A rather short, rather stout figure was stretched next him, and I was startled when I saw that face in the searchlight's hard white glare, for he actually looked, in death, a little like New York's Mayor: *that* role, at least, hadn't cost The Great Darlan much effort or time or make-up. . . .

I passed on to the figure that was still moaning and humping itself on a blanket at the end of the line. I was interested to note that Antrim *in extremis* was quite a small man with narrow shoulders in a suit of stiff black serge which was a little too big for him. It gave him a vaguely professorial air. The skull itself was hidden now by a complicated set of bandages which swathed throat and chin and ran up to form a bulging white turban all about his head. I had a momentary remembrance of what I knew was under the bandages: the horrid cluster of drainage-tubes like a waxen hand, plunged deep in the skull. "What the devil's the matter with *him?*" asked the Major in amazement, pointing at the bandages. "What was he going traveling rigged up like that for?"

"My guess is —paresis," I said. "It's a new German treatment: tubes that soak a form of sulfanilamide directly into the brain. He's—he's not an endearing fellow in any way."

"H'm. And *these,*" said the Major, straightening and surveying the row of prostrate forms, "these are the fellows who were going to take over New York? Ha, ha, ha."

"There were some more," I said. "But they're gone. There still *are* some more," I said, "but—"

Antrim gave a last tremendous hump and stopped grinding his face into the blanket and lay still, as his companions lay. . . .

I had raced back swiftly, then, across the field. What happened then happened very fast—

The tightening of the cordon as the turf was ripped further back. . . .

The quick deft insertion of the dynamite capsules. . . .

The harsh sharp roar as the engineer-sergeant pushed the plunger home. . . .

The pit-mouth yawning before us, enormous and black, beyond the twisted steel which had been the hangar-doors. . . .

Our entrance, behind portable steel shields, down the wide slanting ramp. . . .

My own amazement as we saw the size of the place, the two other planes there, parked twenty feet underground. . . .

The huge built-in radio in the corner, the radio that would chatter in code no more. . . .

THAT had been all. Otherwise the place was empty. I felt a curious vacuum inside me and I knew what it was: the sense of anti-climax that you get when, as Bolitho once said, the Moment, the Big Moment, obstinately refuses to realize itself. "Lafayette, we are here!" —and suddenly, lo! there is nothing for you to do. . . . Nothing to be done but drop your hands and wait. The thought of the five mangled bodies laid out in the dappled starshine was comforting, but it was not enough.

How about those bodies? I thought suddenly. Perhaps, among them, there may be a scrap or two of information, a scrawled memorandum, something, anything of value. Some further clue to just what had happened, to what else might be scheduled to happen—

We looked. Nothing. Nothing but some thousands of dollars in folding money. I left the Army to count it and to search the house again if they cared to, and John Sword and I and the other three New York cyclists bestrode our machines and roared back to town.

Henna's was the first face I saw as I came up the steps of Atherton's town house twenty minutes later. We'd been gone, all told, only about an hour: somehow it seemed a week. "It's a good thing you're back, darling," she informed me. "I was just about to explode. . . . Why didn't you take me with you?"

"Couldn't locate you. Where's the Colonel?"

"He's just inside, sir," offered one of the three young officers who were evidently Henna's permanent bodyguard. At least they showed no signs of leaving her. I pinched her waist and went on in hastily.

The solid ring of listeners about the radio was as motionless as if they'd all been frozen there. "What's up? Where'll I find Colonel West?" I said sharply in the ear of the nearest listener and he glanced round and pointed toward the instrument and I saw the white head in the inmost circle. It was bent over another officer's shoulder and the pencil in this second man's hand was flickering in snake-like hieroglyphics across a writing-pad while the radio made an intermittent thin high squeaking.

"Report coming in now," the man beside me said. "They're decoding as they go along—"

The squeaking stopped. West and the other officer rose to their feet and turned and faced the circle. "Gentlemen," said West in a voice like a silver trumpet, "I have to announce that the invading squadrons have been located—"

He paused as a rustle of sound ran round the circle. It was hushed at once.

"—that they have been surrounded—" said Colonel West and paused again but this time there was no sound.

"—and that, with only minor casualties to our air arm, *they have surrendered!*"

The roar that went up was like the long-drawn crash of breakers on the shore. . . .

19

THEY stood in my front doorway, the three of them, as I swung the door back: Colonel West and John Sword and McRae. I said: "Come in, come in. Been hoping you'd make it sooner," and they did come in. It was half-past eight Sunday evening.

We went into the living-room and Henna Wyatt in copper-colored silk that matched her hair made herself very agreeable while I set out a tray. Epictetus was presumably either drunk or dead in Harlem.

"Thanks," said the Colonel, taking a glass and sitting down next to Henna. "Well, there are quite a few last-minute news flashes, if you'd care to hear them."

"We don't know a thing."

"The most surprising is—we never made any Greenland raid."

"I beg your pardon?"

The blue eyes glinted with amusement: the first I'd ever seen in them. "Officially. No. And it may never come out that we did. Because the Axis has blandly denied that it knows anything about any threat to America, any air fleet in Greenland. Some prank by hot-headed youngsters, dear, dear, the Axis says . . . As a matter of fact, they seem to have been mostly Italian planes in Greenland, at that. Der Führer is a deep one: smart.

Musso has been a flop so far: here's his chance to redeem himself. A few good German planes and pilots as a nucleus: the rest, Italians . . . Hitler is gambling very little in actual *matériel,* you see. Also his precious prestige is safer. Also he is now denying the whole thing!"

"So we may not make the news public, either?"

"Don't know. Not right away, anyhow . . . Another amusing thing. We've scooped up groups quite similar to the Nine in fourteen other cities. There are seven, for example, in Chicago. . . . What isn't so amusing is that the Panama Canal was to be taken care of from a new base in Dakar, Africa—via Recife in Brazil. However, the Canal is sitting up and taking nourishment very nicely, thank you. *That* end of the scheme was called off when the New York business failed—but two of the Chicago group have talked. . . ."

"Bottling the fleet in the Pacific, I suppose, was the angle," I said.

"Yes. . . . Probably we'll never know the full details of the scheme. We'll never know because—though we can twist the truth out of some of the weaker brethren who've been captured—I doubt very much if any of the rank and file ever learned the details themselves. It would have been too dangerous—and it wasn't necessary. Absolute, unflinching, unquestioning obedience: that was the angle. I doubt very much if all of the Nine, even, were trusted with a complete picture of operations planned. Perhaps only two or three of them knew the complete story: Antrim certainly, Atherton possibly—"

That, I thought, *would explain why Elona delivered the "key" to us so late: perhaps she herself didn't know about it before.*

"On the other hand," said the Colonel in a quiet yet somehow ferociously anticipatory tone, "perhaps some are still alive who *can* tell us the whole story . . . At first glance, the idea sounds insane. But remember—as the saying goes, 'They took Denmark by telephone!' I imagine the fourteen key-cities—and there may have been more than fourteen—were to be 'taken' one after another on a very carefully figured and closely interlocked time schedule, following New York's collapse, with wave after wave of supporting planes arriving day by day at Julianehaab, and the general procedure very much the same in all cases. General morale-sapping has been under way for months, remember: apathy, fear psychoses, Fascist philosophy . . . Now—

"Lights out, water-mains and steamlines and phone-wires gone, harbors wrecked, food supplies cut off, the populace in panic, transport stopped (you'd be surprised how much damage a few determined men with hand-grenades have done to the New York subway system!)—then loud-speakers or fake Mayors blaring out their demands for complete non-resistance, surrender, *or else* . . . then some skeletonized parachute-companies launched by the local faithful . . . and always, hovering overhead, the Axis air armada."

"One thing I don't get," I said, "is the amount of dependence placed on these local faithful whom you mention. Why ring them in? Why not just come over and bomb hell out of New York *and then* issue your demands?"

THE Colonel snorted. "Don't you ever read a paper?" he demanded. "Look at London: month after month after month and she still survives, still carries on. . . . No: this was to be a new technique, a quick knockout blow delivered to city after city by paralyzing its nerve-centers. You could never be sure of doing that quickly with bombs from the air. You've got to make *sure* the lights go out, the phones are useless, the keypoints of supply, transport, communication all taken care of. You've *got* to draw on the local faithful for that. Sabotage on a grandiose scale, a scale big enough to induce general paralysis literally overnight: Am I right?" Everyone nodded. *"Then* your brazen threats of death from the air will really get results."

I said curiously, "Colonel, how many people do you suppose were actually involved in this New York business?"

"Not many. You'd be surprised. Point is, it was all *directed,* all organized by the Nine. Nine people. Nine keypoints. Each one heading up a different phase of activity."

"For example?" I said. "Antrim?"

"Antrim?" He spoke as though it were the name of a snake. "We know about him now: Anton Streicher. A very, very curious man. Frightfully injured in a motor-smash when he was eighteen, and with — er — other difficulties which we'll skip for the moment, he was, nevertheless, incredibly brilliant. He had a Ph.D. from Heidelberg, degrees from half a dozen other universities. Physics, optics, astronomy, finally—this is what I believe is called the pay-off!—astrology and hypnotism . . . Personally I believe this whole hare-brained scheme was his idea. He is one—he was one—of those who have been appealing to Adolf's mystic side, ha, ha: I understand that Goering hated him . . . Well: Anton Streicher was Hitler's personal, trusted representative here, to direct the whole thing."

"Mull," I said. "You've told me about Mull. Paymaster and general factotum. Contact man. Second in command?"

"Actually, yes, I should say. Of course Charles Martin thought *he* was Mister Big, thought he would really be made Dictator of this country, with Axis help. By jove, he practically threatened to *make* himself Dictator on the air yesterday—or whoever made the actual speech did. . . . Ever hear of Aaron Burr? Ambitious and frustrated, I think Charles Martin honestly believed he was what America needed—and since America didn't see his point, he was willing to go to any lengths to ram it down America's throat . . . Ironic that of course the Axis would have double-crossed him. Cat's-paw Martin, he was, though he never knew it . . . Well, he'll never know it now," said the Colonel, looking hard at me. "But he made a wonderful front man: to reach and influence Big Business, help move them little by little, even if ever so little, toward the Right . . . toward Fascism. Martin was their prize pig: personally I think his death punctured the whole bubble."

"Wonder what they did with his body?" I said musingly. The Colonel gave me another hard look and I thought perhaps it was a cue to me to do some talking; perhaps his throat was dry. "Calverton, of course," I suggested, "came over to line up whoever he could in the arts. A tough job, because most good artists are liberals. Or not interested in politics anyway. But Calverton was good, too, in his way: he certainly made a lot of noise in the women's Clubs . . .

"Jake Noyes," I added, "really ties in with Martin, doesn't he? The big Bourbon money? I imagine he dug up a hell of a lot of support for the position Martin was assuming. Maybe they promised him he'd be made Secretary of the Treasury under the New Order. He'd be a sucker for that kind of offer. Having made twenty million blossom with only ten to start with, he must have thought he was an unappreciated financial wizard. Also his social position is impeccable, whatever his other habits may have been."

"That's right," said the Colonel, who had become suddenly abstracted. "Go on, Pope."

"Darlan," I said, "is obvious. I understand the man really was a genius: he could take a wad of chewing gum, some black bristles from a whiskbroom, and a couple of cheekpads and give you anyone you wanted to name, from Hitler to—to Heliogabalus. He must have had an interchangeable set of vocal chords, too . . . But as I see it the big point about Darlan was that through him the whole underworld could be contacted — *via* Broadway . . . Through him the gripmen, the actual explosive-toters, could be hired. He isn't French: he was an Italian. Listen, if in Capone's heyday and even later you could hire a murder to be done for a hundred dollars, what sort of service do you think you could buy in these thin times for a thousand? Five thousand? . . . And then to have Darlan fill in for the Mayor (and I still think that was a bloodstain of his in the Cadillac, though he doesn't remember; but he's getting better fast)—is just a natural. And it was not too hard for him to go on the air as Charles Martin, either."

"That leaves three," said McRae as I paused. "How do *you* figure Atherton, Mike?"

"I can't."

"I can," said McRae. "I found what we should have known: he's worked abroad a lot. Berlin hospitals all through the early Thirties. Doubtless a sincere

convert to The Cause. And of course he could do a lot toward—I won't say organizing, but influencing—professional people: he was tops in his field. Also he had another kind of 'field.' That private field was, as you say, a natural . . ."

HE stopped. There was a silence in the room.

"I've told Miss Wyatt all I know about Elona," I said, since this seemed to be the moment to say that. I got up to refill the glasses, and John Sword's eye as I passed it was red and baleful.

"The trouble is," I said, "that I don't know enough. Too much of it is surmise. I wish one of you would help me out. Here's what I feel I *know:* she was a fine girl. She was also one of the Nine: their Beautiful Vampire. A role at which she was very good. They wanted Calverton: she helped to consolidate him. They wanted Jake Noyes. She finally pushed him over the line. He was so mad about her that he even gave her a necklace, the necklace I went to Paris for . . . Did I tell you, Colonel, that it was found in Calverton's pocket as his body lay on the ground outside Atherton's home? . . . She was only converted to The Cause in May. Early May, when she was first approached by some fairly high officials in the then-French Government . . . I say I know these things but I don't even *know* all these: however, I believe they're accurate. I *do* know that she gave us the 'key'; I do know, because there's been an autopsy-report, that there was poison in her stomach when she died; and I believe that it was put there by Mr. Hugo Calverton, who barged in just before I did and forced her or tricked her into swallowing it—and then, out of sheer spite, nearly choked her to death."

"You know more than that," said the Colonel. "Because I told you last night—or was it early this morning?"

"Yes," I said. "I know that Elona was a very patriotic young woman. She happened to love this country. She was also a smart young woman. She was smart enough to realize what a beautiful job of counter-espionage she could do if she pretended to fall for the proposition. Which as I say was to play the conventional lovely siren. That was one thing the group needed—and it had to be someone who was a Siren of Importance: no cheap tart. So she pretended to fall. And she went to the American Embassy and had some long talks . . . We will skip the way the Embassy co-operated in helping to get her back to the States quickly," I said, glancing sidewise at Henna, for when you come right down to it, I had not told her quite *every*thing I knew. Not yet. "But they did—because they were delighted to help. And as soon as she got things straightened out in Denver after her mother's death, she flew straight to Washington—and reported to Colonel West. She has been reporting to him," I said, "ever since."

AGAIN there was a silence in the room. Everyone seemed to be thinking, and they were not the same things . . .

"You'll forgive me for not telling you, Mike?" said McRae suddenly. "It's better if—agents—don't even know each other."

"Here's something I *think,*" I said slowly. "I *think* that Elona finally wangled the 'key' out of Jake Noyes—at the last moment—and passed it on to me. And I *think* that that fact became known . . . and that Calverton went to kill her at once . . . by request."

More silence. John Sword shifted his position a little.

"That makes eight," said Henna Wyatt clearly in the silence. "Who's your ninth?"

"And here, finally," I said, looking at each of my guests in turn, "are some things I *don't* know. I wish you would all listen to them carefully.

"I *don't* know why Mull should try to shoot D. McRae—when Antrim at that very moment had his man Boris out to pick McRae up."

McRae leaned forward interestedly. "I never thought of that, Mike."

"I *don't* know how Boris—who presumably has very sharp eyes, or he wouldn't be driving the Cadillac—could have made such an error as to pick me up anyway, by mistake for McRae. We do look alike: in a vague sort of way, that's true. Enough to be mistaken for

each other on a foggy dark day—or in a dark restaurant by a gunman in a hurry. But Boris had been following McRae, trailing him down the Avenue in bright sunlight—*and Boris went out across the sidewalk in that same sunlight with me.*"

I couldn't prevent a faint emphasis on this because it was a point which had bothered me a lot. Like the preceding point. No one commented.

"I *don't* know," I went on, "how Elona's communication of the 'key' to me could have been discovered so quickly. She spoke of it on the dance-floor to me, in an undertone, with music playing: no human being could have overheard. I am certain that no one saw me take the cigarette: impossible, in the semi-gloom. Yet she is poisoned and choked within the next hour . . ."

The quality of the silence was beginning to bother me now and I went on quickly. "Here is another thing I don't know, and it is a very big thing: *Who told the heels at Hempstead that we were on the way?* Who warned them to stop broadcasting or trying to broadcast at all costs, and warm up the plane and try to get away . . . to Mexico, to Lisbon, to anywhere? *I* don't know—any more than I know that I should go on."

"I think," said Colonel West, sitting like an Egyptian statue, spare and straight and motionless, "that you should go on. By all means."

"All right, sir: I will. Right here and now I'll defy you or anyone to figure an answer to any of these questions that will make sense—*except on one supposition.*"

"What's the supposition, boss?" said Mr. Sword brightly as I paused to light a cigarette.

"The supposition is—that Number Nine is one of *us.*"

NO one spoke. No one moved.

"We know," I said, "that in Elona's case, one of the Nine was reporting to us. Why isn't it possible that the reverse has been true: that one of us has been reporting all our movements to the Nine?"

"Not only possible: quite probable," said the Colonel quickly. "Essence of good strategy for them: to try, no matter what it cost, to win over one of our group to their side."

"But who, in God's name?" said McRae, wrinkling angry brows.

"I have a theory," I said. "Let's call the guilty party X. Let's assume that X learns I have flown back from Paris with Elona. X wonders whether perhaps, just possibly, Elona may have talked to me of her recent 'conversion' to Nazism. X will wait—and watch. X does. A year goes by and Elona has no visible connection with me, and I make no move which indicates I know more than I should . . . Still, I may be a deep one. Suddenly I begin a rather startling and provocative series of columns on the dangers this country is facing—and I keep hammering and developing my thesis and months shoot by and zero hour is near. Better make *sure* of this fellow, make sure that Elona hasn't let anything slip, thinks X. He has noticed I look a good bit like McRae—so he arranges to have me picked up by Boris *in pretended error for McRae.* I am partly hypnotized, and asked what I know about the Nine. But I am not wholly hypnotized, so I say I never heard of them—*and I remember that I was asked the question.* Antrim thereupon dishes out an ingenious but most unconvincing explanation of how the error occurred and sends me home . . . *hoping I'll keep right on thinking I was mistaken for McRae.*"

"But *why?*" said McRae. "If Antrim wonders whether Elona has told you anything, why not just grab you and hypnotize you and find out? Why go to all the trouble of pretending that he is really gunning for McRae?"

"It *was* a lot of trouble, wasn't it?" I said slowly. "And yet it served a very useful purpose. Because, as long as I remained convinced that Antrim *was* gunning for McRae, I couldn't possibly suspect any connivance between Antrim and X, could I? I couldn't dream that Antrim and X were really in cahoots? I'd serve, in my fumbling, wide-eyed, innocent, childlike way, as a perfect cover for X, wouldn't I?"

McRae wrinkled his brows again. "I don't see the connection, Mike."

"I do," I said. "You see, my dear fellow, *I* think that 'X' is—*you.*"

HE stared back at me wordlessly. I said, "You'll forgive me for being blunt, won't you? But that bland tone of yours, that impatient dismissal of other people's efforts, other people's ideas, has irritated me at times a good deal. So I will speak frankly now. Listen:

"Colonel West himself told me he'd had hopes for some time that Mull was weakening—that he could be 'reached' . . . with money. Incurably venal . . . You knew that from West—and promptly reported it to the Nine. You didn't shoot him because he was going to shoot you: that wouldn't make sense, as I've pointed out. You shot him because you'd been told to 'purge' him; you shot him with an air-pistol and you stuck a gun in his fist as you passed his table and you went on out the rear door. Flo Stanton saw —or thought she saw—that hand-motion of yours as you put the gun down by him: she began wondering about you at that point. She didn't know *what* to do—whether to voice her suspicions or not. You don't know it, but when I told her in a cab that I'd been given a job by you, a job involving the Nine, she fainted —in sudden terror that perhaps I was working *for* them. Incidentally, do you remember the three words you snapped at me when I told you I'd solved the cipher and you found she'd disappeared? No? You said: *'Does Stanton know?'* You couldn't have found her anyway—I'd rushed her out of the house because I was fairly sure you were a wrong one by then. But if you could have found her—you'd have tried to put her out of the way just as you instantly tried to put me out of the way by sending me up to Atherton's house, where Atherton and Martin were waiting . . ."

"Mike," said the big man quietly, "Mike: please. Please—"

"Go back a bit," I said. "Antrim, you, the rest, *did* want to know whether Elona had told me of the plot. You threw a bit of paper in Mahoney's hat . . . you had me follow you and had me picked up, and when I escaped you had me go act as live bait again . . . so that you nine could be *sure* I knew nothing. And after that, how very, very useful I could be! To help divert suspicion from you! *And* to check on Elona for you, God forgive me! I told you Elona had said she was giving me a key—I told you what the 'key' was, over the phone. You knew at that instant that Elona couldn't be trusted further, and you had Calverton leave his Gotham apartment and shoot over to the Plaza to shut her mouth for good. *How else could he have known*—how could any human being have known—that Elona had given me a 'key'? . . . When she asked me, just before she died, to get a Washington number for her—of course it was West's number she wanted me to get: to voice her own suspicions of you. But I didn't guess that then. Ostensibly, you were the very one who had ordered me to hurry, hurry, get there quick and *protect* Elona. You hadn't thought I could get there quite so soon . . .

"But when I told you I'd *solved* the 'key' puzzle—then, instantly, I became a menace and I had to be got rid of *at once*. For you didn't want that puzzle solved. What did you do? You asked first, furiously, 'Does Stanton know?' and I implied she didn't. You sent Sword quickly out of the house chasing newspapers, so that no one would hear you ordering me to rush up to see Charles Martin—and I imagine the door hadn't closed behind me before you were on the phone telling Atherton to get me and get me good . . . You also told me not to stop en route, not for anything. Thank Heaven I did—and phoned the Colonel. Thank Heaven I'd already had Flo Stanton phone him, told her to fly to Washington where she'd be relatively safe, told her to confide to the Colonel the secret of the 'key,' told her to be blunt and brutal about her suspicions—and about mine. Thank Heaven, too, that the Greenland trip was kept a secret from you; must have given you quite a shock, didn't it?"

"Colonel," said McRae, and his face was crimson, "I appeal to you. Am I supposed to sit here quietly and take this —this—"

"You even went down to Hempstead in person," I went on, "with the F.B.I. boys —hoping you could keep the search from getting too exhaustive. As you did. But you couldn't discourage that ex-mechanic from bringing back what he recognized as a German motor . . . and you

couldn't quite conceal your anguish when you saw me standing in the Colonel's inner office there—instead of being safe in Bellevue where the harder I fought to get out, the harder they'd hold me.

"You were playing both ends against the middle, McRae, which is what ruined you. It was tough going all the time and sometimes it got just too complex. You couldn't conceal anything that *might* become known to either group of your associates through other channels—if you did, you'd rouse suspicion of your good faith. Terribly, terribly difficult: no wonder you got a little mixed at times. You learned that *all* garage-permits were being checked, so you knew that any moment Atherton's house *might* be identified as the house where I'd met Antrim. So you thought you'd not only play doubly safe (I *might* have hailed someone from the taxi, told them where I was bound) but you'd make a little character for yourself with both sides: first you warned your gang that they'd better skip, a pinch was coming; then you came through to the Colonel with a brilliant 'tracing' of the house *from my description.*

"Oh, McRae!" I said. "'From my description': your idea was good, but you'll go to the chair because of it. And you thought you were playing so safe! Just as you thought you were playing it safe by slipping out after I'd left with my escort, slipping out to warn Hempstead that I was coming, that they'd better warm up the plane and get away quickly. So obvious: any fool could figure the warning *must* have come from you. How'd you do it? Another short-wave sending set parked near by? Not that it matters . . ."

HIS face wasn't crimson now, it was colorless. The putty-tint of Antrim's eyelids. He said between barely opened lips:

"You amuse me, you know. You really amu—"

"Skip the histrionics," I said. "They are terrible anyway . . . I told the Colonel all this in the small hours last night. He agreed it might be as well as give you a little more rope and see what would happen today. But you seem to have cut all your old associates, McRae. You've been playing safe again. We'll learn nothing more from you, so we might as well admit that the ball is over . . . Incidentally, you've been watched every minute of every hour of last night and today: Did you know that?"

He made one last effort, heaving upright in his chair, leaning forward, assuming a pitifully inadequate air of detached interest. "This—er—house-tracing business," he said. "What *are* you getting at? Of course, I traced the house from your description—when you telephoned me in Washington from the Fifty Club."

"I beg your pardon. You told the Colonel—I am quoting him verbatim—that you'd tracked Atherton's house down as the hangout for Antrim's gang *because I'd spoken to you of 'the ramp to the underground garage.'* Right, Colonel?" West nodded. McRae looked acquiescent and dazed; he nodded curtly, too.

"Such a little slip!" I said. "*You* knew that, of course—but *I* never told you that. I never told you that because I forgot it myself till I stood on Atherton's doorstep yesterday morning. What I told you on the phone was that we stopped inside a little cement garage and *went up in an elevator at one end.* Lots of big old houses in that section have elevators up from the garage . . . what used to be the stables. On the ground floor. Very different from 'an underground garage.' I didn't mention any such thing because, as I say, I forgot it. Your saying it proves you knew all about Antrim's headquarters independently of me—right? Just a slip of the tongue—but it'll burn you, McRae."

I am not, I hope, a sadist. But I couldn't forget Elona . . . the purpling bruises at her throat.

The eyes in the corpse-like face were, I thought, blind eyes though they were staring directly at me. The brain behind them had evidently blocked itself, like a rat's in a maze when he finally staggers, unable to decide which way to turn.

Such a little slip—

Yet I knew it *was* a slip. I knew only too well. I couldn't forget, ever, the chill that had struck down my spine as I stood on Doctor Atherton's doorstep at five-ten Saturday morning *and saw the under-*

ground ramp, and realized I had never mentioned it to a soul. . . .

I can't say I saw what happened because it was too quick for eyes like mine to see. But the hand at McRae's side must have made a darting motion toward his pocket for I heard a sharp muffled *crack* as the best pistol-shot east of the Mississippi fired from his hip, and McRae's long body slumped gently backward in its chair. . . .

Somewhere chimes began to sound. "Nine o'clock," I said, because at such moments one has to say something.

"Just as well," said Colonel West, looking at what had been Douglas McRae. "Just as well."

"Sunday night, nine o'clock," said Henna Wyatt softly, looking at me. And at John Sword and at Colonel West. "Wasn't that the zero hour set for the invasion? And thanks to you, it's all over. . . ."

"Well, I dunno. It may be just starting," said Mr. Sword hopefully, heaving from his chair.

"May be," I said. "May be. But it's certainly all over for the Nine. . . ."

A PINCH OF POISON

by

Frances & Richard LOCKRIDGE

A PINCH OF POISON

By

Frances and Richard Lockridge

A pinch of poison in a frosted Ritz-Plaza glass seeded an eerie chain of murders. The links were clear in Weigand's supple hands, and stretched from Park Avenue to a slattern house on the Hudson. But the head of the chain eluded the baffled detective until it whipped back and fastened around his throat.

MAX FINEBERG sat on the running-board and the late July heat sat on his shoulders. The heat, that afternoon, sat on everything; it was a damp and steaming burden on the city of New York. The air was faintly hazy but the sun beat wickedly through it. Hot light glanced from the shiny top of Max Fineberg's taxicab and beat back from the glass of windows across the street.

Mr. Fineberg, his head sagging against the support of his hands, was worried and afraid. He wished he were somewhere else, doing something else. He wished somebody would tell him how he was going to make the next payment on his shiny cab and that he knew how Rose was feeling in the hospital and that his, until recently, instructor in economics at C.C.N.Y. would explain what a cab driver was to do with a dollar fifteen on the clock after ten hours of hacking and with the day almost done.

Hack the rest of the night was, Max supposed, the answer to that last one, and, to begin with, go somewhere else for customers. The present idea wasn't, clearly, working out, although it had seemed a good one two hours ago. He had wondered why none of the other hackers had thought of parking here, at the last stop of a bus line on which buses ran infrequently and where hot men and women might be expected to pay the difference for a quick ride to the nearest subway. He didn't wonder any longer; the answer was "no men and women," or at least none with cab fare. He had better, he decided, get along back to the subway station where there was, at the least, animation. Max stood up and walked, without enthusiasm, around his cab. There was now a pedestrian coming down the sunny sidewalk and Max felt a faint rising of hope. He stood by his cab and tried to make everything look very inviting.

Max tried to look inviting himself by standing a little straighter than he felt like standing and by smiling like a good salesman. He tried to keep the heat and weariness out of his voice as he said, "Cab, lady?" He put his right hand on the door handle and began to open the door in welcome.

The lady didn't seem to see him and Max's hopes descended. But, jeez, he had to get a fare sometime.

"Taxicab, miss?" he insisted. "It's pretty hot for walking, isn't it?"

That sounded like a young man who had been two years at C.C.N.Y. and might have been a professional man if things had worked out that way. At any rate, Max hoped it did. And, sure enough, the lady hesitated and looked at Max. Max smiled again like a good salesman. Under other circumstances, Max realized quickly, it would be easy to smile at her like—well, like Max Fineberg, whoever that was. Like the Max Fineberg who had been going to be— The girl interrupted Max's fleeting introspection by saying yes, she thought so, to the nearest subway station.

IT was better than nothing, Max thought, holding the door open while she got in. He went around to his seat like a salesman giving good service and

started the motor. He flipped the flag down and, looking back at her, asked if she wanted the top down.

"No," she said. "Don't bother. It doesn't make any difference."

She sounded almost the way he felt, Max decided, starting up. Not that she had any reason to—not with those clothes and—and everything. Max knew the way women's clothes ought to look. When he could he loitered his cab in front of the big shops on Fifth Avenue, scanning the sidewalks for fares, and the windows you couldn't miss.

This customer's clothes, now, came out of windows like that. You could tell the difference, particularly when you had been married a couple of years and had had somebody to point the difference out to you. You could tell by the way people stood, too, and by their skins and, particularly with women, by their hair. This customer's hair, now, had been done in a good place and done as often as it needed doing. This customer did not belong among those who get too tired and wonder how they're going to make next payments. This customer belonged among those who had got the breaks. If she wanted to, she could let him take her where she was going, even if it were halfway down Riverside, and never know the difference. She would eat just the same. He pulled up at a red light and thought about Rose in the hospital, and a dollar fifteen—make it a dollar fifty-five, with maybe a ten-cent tip—on the clock.

"I think," the lady said, "that I'll change my mind. I think I'll go all the way down, instead." She gave an address, and Max brightened. Make it maybe three dollars on the clock, and a quarter tip.

"Yes indeed, miss," he said. "It's pretty hot for subways." He paused, as if considering. "I tell you, miss," he said, "I could take you down the parkway. Its cooler that way; there's sort of a breeze off the river. Would that be all right, Miss?"

"Any way," the customer said. "It doesn't matter. The parkway will do."

Max felt a lot better. Make it three-fifty on the clock, maybe. And he could roll fast enough to stir up some sort of a breeze, going down the parkway. It hadn't been such a bad stand after all, back there by the bus stop.

IT was the thought of the subway which had made Lois Winston change her mind—the thought of the slow trip downtown, with the car filling until hot humanity swayed in a mass in front of her and alien knees pressed her own; the thought of the suffocating, packed ride on the shuttle at Forty-second and the stampeding rush at Grand Central; the thought of the ride uptown again and the dutiful walk in the heat across town from Lexington. Her rule about such matters was a good little rule in its place, she thought, smiling faintly to herself, but this was not its place. Not after this afternoon.

She glanced at the watch on her wrist and reassured herself that it was now too late to do anything more today. The puzzle she had carried down the hot street and into the cab—the cab, vague interest prompted her to discover from the license card displayed, of Max Fineberg—that puzzle would have to go over until tomorrow. She would put it out of mind, she told herself firmly, and she would think of something else. She would not think about Buddy and his Madge, either, nor about—not, at any rate, for an hour or so about—Dave McIntosh, who looked so little like his name, and yet could at times act so—so McIntoshy. She would, she thought, not think about anything but getting home, and the coolness of a shower and lying for a while with the slatted blinds closed and the air-conditioner conditioning like mad. The trouble with the world today, she thought, is that there isn't enough air in it.

"Perhaps," she said, "you might open the top after all, driver."

"Sure thing, lady," Max said, and pushed a button. The rear half of the roof folded obediently back. Quite a cab, Max thought—if you could pay for it.

"It's quite a day, isn't it, lady?" Max said. "Ninety-six at four o'clock, the radio says. Would you like the radio, on, miss?" Max almost forgot, as they stopped for the parkway and then turned on it, and as the meter clicked com-

fortingly, how much he disliked calling customers "lady" and "miss," and how irritatingly he resented the fact that he always did.

"No," the lady said. "It would probably be baseball."

"That's right, miss," Max said. "Baseball *or* war news. You can't get away from them. If it was good music, now, like you hear at the stadium."

"Yes," the lady said. She said it as if she were forgetting Max. But Max hadn't said anything to anybody for some hours.

"Do you know, miss, you're the first fare I've had since eleven o'clock this morning?" he said. "That's a fact. What do you expect?"

What did they expect? Max wondered. What did they expect a guy to do, with a dollar fifteen on the clock and a wife in the hospital?

"I don't know, Mr. Fineberg," the lady said. I *don't* know, either, Lois Winston thought. What is Mr. Fineberg going to do?

Max was warmed by being called Mr. Fineberg. He was tired of being called "driver." It was seldom, now, that anybody called him Mr. Fineberg.

"It's pretty hard going, miss," Max said, over his shoulder. It was time he told somebody what hard going it was —somebody who didn't know about such things. "I'm a married man, miss, and what do they figure I'm going to do about it?"

LOIS WINSTON looked at the narrow shoulders, slight with youth, and maybe with more than youth. There was a thin neck above the dirty collar of the blue shirt. Max's thin face, as he half turned it, speaking, was thin and clear, with delicate bones leaving shadows on the planes of the cheeks. He was very young, she saw, and very worried.

"I know," she said. She didn't know, perhaps. Things hadn't happened to her. But if you could get to know from what you saw, she could say that she knew. She saw enough of thin, worried young faces, male and female. "Heaven knows I do," she thought, tiredly.

Max paid no attention to what she said. Her words were merely an encouraging murmur.

"In the hospital," he said, "with a baby coming. That's where my wife is, miss." He stopped, and she could see his neck redden slightly. "I'm sorry, miss," Max said. "It's nothing to bother you with." You're a fool, Max told himself. What are you whining to her for? What the hell does she care; what's it to her?

"Oh," she said. "A baby. Another baby!"

"Listen, miss," Max said. "Forget it, see? I'm just a guy who hasn't talked to anybody all day, and I got talking. But it's not *another* baby. It's our first baby." She saw his shoulders stiffen defiantly. "Any reason why we shouldn't have a baby, miss?"

I could think of a thousand, she told herself. If you'd come down to our office some day, Mr. Fineberg, I could show you—

"No, Mr. Fineberg," she said. "There isn't any reason why you shouldn't have a baby. I was thinking of something else."

"Sure, lady," Max said. "You'll have to excuse me, lady, I'm sorry I got started that way."

It was odd, Lois thought, as the pause after that lengthened until it was, to all appearances, permanent, how circumstances kept pushing the puzzle back into her mind. Now it was worrying her again—that odd thing she had discovered this afternoon, an hour or so before she encountered the discursive and self-centered, and oddly touching, Mr. Fineberg. If it meant anything, it meant something extremely unlikely; something darkly peculiar and out of the ordinary run. She was uncertain what to do, or whether to do anything. Already, perhaps, she had done too much; certainly, if there was anything to do she had done too much. There could be no doubt that, when the quite outlandish suspicion had crossed her mind, she had given herself away as completely as she well could. Perhaps that was because she was, for all her experience, an amateur; what they politely called a "volunteer." Professional workers, perhaps, came against queer things so often that they learned to hide any evidence of surprise. Maybe, in

other words, Dave was right, and she should leave the work to those trained for it, and living by it. A professional had, it might be—and as Dave insisted—an attitude which no amateur could ever attain. Perhaps there was something about knowing you could, at any time and without inconvenience, merely walk out which kept you from ever, in the real sense, quite going in.

BUT the fact was, Lois thought as they turned down the ramp at Seventy-ninth Street, worked south and cut east through Seventy-second—the fact was that she was doing good work. Or had been, until today. Now she might be making a mountain of a molehill, or of the shadow of a molehill. The chances were, say, a hundred to one that she was ascribing importance to the patently coincidental.

"After all," she said to herself, "why? It wouldn't make sense. I must be imagining things, and that's all there is to it."

And if she were, she had certainly been silly enough before the interview ended. That sudden change from accustomed friendliness, which reached even to the exchange of inconsequential confidences, to stiff professionalism. That suggestion of further steps to be taken, so flatly in contradiction to everything which had gone before. The implication, so clear in everything she had said in those last five minutes, that something had gone wrong and new problems been raised. And if nothing had, if it turned out to be all fantasy in the mind of a tired young woman on a hot afternoon—

"Well," Lois thought, "I'll take some sort of a prize, certainly. But still, I'll have to tell Mary Crane."

It was consoling to think of telling Mary Crane, who would understand and make so little of it, and who would advise so gently that you would feel, afterward, as if you had thought the whole thing out for yourself. Tomorrow, since it was too late tonight, she would tell Mary Crane. Tomorrow would, in any case, do as well as today.

The cab turned down Park and then east through Sixty-fourth to circle the block and come west again in Sixty-third, while Max looked for numbers. All very swank, Max commented to himself, when he found the number and drew in. The doorman in summer uniform opened the cab door and stood, politely attentive, as Lois Winston paid the bill. She took the change, as Max's expressive face revealed bitterness. But when she dropped it into the coin purse in her bag, her slender fingers brought something out again and the doorman looked surprised.

"Listen miss—" Max started. "I don't know—"

"You can buy something for the baby," Lois told him. "Or for the baby's mother. Goodbye, Mr. Fineberg." She smiled at him. "It was much cooler on the parkway," she said.

MAX sat blinking at her, and then he blinked at the five-dollar bill in his hand. He regarded the doorman darkly, and the doorman regarded him with some suspicion. Then Max shrugged, and put the cab in gear. It was something to happen, all right. But she must be rolling in it, so probably it didn't mean a thing to her. He looked back at the apartment house, and at the back of the withdrawing doorman, solicitously conducting Miss—what was it he called her? Winstead?—through the dangers between curb and foyer. She was all right, but some people had all the luck. You couldn't get past that, Max told himself, as he turned up Park and trundled north again, with quick glances at the possible customers on the sidewalk. Some people had all the luck.

Next morning he remembered having thought that and remembered it with the awe of one who has been brushed, in passing, by the portentous. He remembered it while, sitting by a bed in the ward, he described the ride over and over to Rose, wringing it dry of drama. And Rose, who looked so pale and ill but was, the doctors said, going to be all right, looked up at him from the pillow and looked with admiration, as at one returned from adventure. Looking down at her Max fell silent after a moment, and then he took one of her hands. It was warm and sentient in his. He turned it over and let his thumb move gently along her

wrist. He could feel her pulse there, going steadily. Thump, thump. It made him feel as if he had something very important to say.

"Rose," he said. "I tell you, Rose. It makes you think." He said it with a kind of wonder, as if it were really something very important to say.

II

IT was a surprise to find Buddy at home. It was a surprise to find him even in town. He called from the living-room as she stepped into the foyer of the apartment on the roof.

"Lois?" he called, and when, as she nodded to Mary, who stood smiling attentively at the foot of the stairs to the second floor, she admitted her identity: "Come here a minute, will you, Sis?"

"I'll want Anna in a few minutes, Mary," Lois said. "After I speak to Mr. Ashley. Coming, Buddy."

Buddy could stand up at the entrance of a lady with all the nonchalance of one who was still sitting down. He did so now.

"We thought you might like a drink," he said. "After your services in the cause."

Buddy was, she had to agree as she looked at him, handsome enough, for a man who drank as much as he did at twenty-three. He was wiry and thin, although you would never confuse his sort of thinness with that of, say, her little taxi-driver. He also looked discontented, and his voice was heavily ironic on "services in the cause."

"Hello, Buddy," Lois said. "Madge." She paused, with a tentative smile for the third person in the room, a relaxed and olive-skinned young woman in the very enticingly cut print, who reclined in a deep chair.

"Carol Halliday." Buddy was casual. "This is my sister Lois, Carol. My half-sister, to be exact. Lois Winston."

"Oh, yes," Carol said. Her voice was attractively husky. "How do you do, Miss Winston?"

"You all look very comfortable," Lois said. "And cool."

"Buddy has simply saved our lives, Lois. Literally." That was Madge.

Lois said she was so glad. Buddy said, "What'll it be, Sis?" He said it a little as if he expected a refusal. But she took a cocktail and, still standing near the door, sipped it slowly.

He brought me in to prove he can have Madge here when he likes, Lois thought. And her friends. He is sometimes unbelievably callow, Lois thought.

"What I really want," she said, "is a shower and something dry." She finished the cocktail; put down the glass. He can have a dozen Madges for all me, she thought. My foolish little brother. I'm not responsible for what he does. But she wished she could really convince herself of that. She shook her head in refusal as Buddy raised the shaker again.

"Not now," she said, as she smiled at them again and turned through the door. "Perhaps later." Perhaps, she thought, I really will; the coolness of the apartment, brought by motors which somewhere turned with untiring ease, lessened her weariness. It was good to be cool again, and at home. It was good to have space and quiet and service.

It's fine to have money, all right, she thought, thinking of little Max Fineberg. Money and no real worries—except a little about Buddy. And, of course, she added to herself, a little about Dave. And a little about the afternoon's puzzle.

But after all, she thought, I'm only a volunteer, I can quit any time and just play. And I'm young and people don't mind looking at me and. . . .

And, she thought a few minutes later, as she stood under the shower and looked approvingly down at herself, I'm not going to have a baby. Hurray, hurray! Not like poor little Mrs. Fineberg.

ANNA was quietly efficient when Lois came out of the shower. The spread on the bed was turned back, the shades closed, everything as she had imagined it that long, hot distance ago when she was walking down the street toward Max Fineberg's cab, and trying to convince herself that she should stick to the rules and walk to the subway. There was, she told Anna, nothing more for—she picked up her watch from the bedside table—at least an hour. Anna said, "Yes, miss,"

and started out. Lois made a sudden decision.

"Oh, Anna," she said, "you might bring me a copy of the Encyclopædia. The H's."

"The Encyclopædia, miss?" Anna repeated. "The volume with the H's in it?"

"Yes, Anna, please," Lois said. "There's something I want to look up."

Anna brought the volume and Lois Winston, resting it uncomfortably on her abdomen, read. Then she said, "Um-m-m!" and lay for a while looking at the ceiling. "That's what I thought," she said, after a bit. "I'll have to talk to Mary Crane." Then, quite unexpectedly to herself, she went to sleep.

IT was almost seven when Anna rapped restrainedly on the door. Lois awoke and said, "Come," and tried to remember the wild turmoil of dreams which was slipping away. It was something about— But she could not remember what it was about. Anna said it was almost seven and Lois lay quietly for a moment looking at her. Then Lois was wide awake and off the bed and telling Anna she thought the blue print and then she was looking at herself in the dressing-table mirror. She looked rested, she thought, and a little flushed.

"I hope you had a nice rest, miss," Anna assured her. Anna was calm and unhurried and began to arrange Lois' hair. Lois rubbed cream into her skin and rubbed it out again. She said it was a lovely rest. Somebody knocked at the door.

"Yes?" Lois said.

"I want to talk to you a minute, Sis." That was Buddy, with a demand in his voice.

"I'm dressing," Lois said. "And I've just time before Dave comes for me. You can talk to me tomorrow."

"It won't take me long to say what I want to say," Buddy insisted. "And I want to say it tonight." He spoke as if only what he wanted was important. Lois stirred impatiently under Anna's fingers and made a face at Anna in the mirror. Anna looked dispassionately sympathetic.

"No," Lois said. "Tomorrow will have to do, Buddy. And if it's about—"

"You know what it's about," Buddy broke in. He had half opened the door. "I just want to say—get Anna out of here, will you?"

Lois was on her feet, turning to face him.

"I told you no," she said. "I told you I was dressing. Get out of here, Randall. And stay out until I invite you in." She looked at him and he stared back. "All right," she said. "Get out."

She was stronger; she was always stronger when it was worth the trouble. She was always stronger when she called him Randall instead of "Buddy"; it made him feel, somehow, like a boy who has been reprimanded. It also made him sulky, and there was sullen anger in his gaze now as he stared at her a moment longer. Then he shrugged and closed the door behind him. Lois stood for a moment staring at the door and then she sat down at the mirror again. Anna's proper face showed sympathy and agreement.

"It will be about Madge again, of course," Lois said, only half to Anna. "If he'd only—only let it lie. Anyway until Mother comes back."

"Mrs. Ashley is coming back tomorrow, miss," Anna said. "For the day. For some shopping. She called Mary this afternoon, I think. I supposed Mary had told you."

"Oh," said Lois. "No—I only saw Mary a moment. I suppose she told my brother?"

"I think she told Mr. Ashley, miss." There was no comment in the tone. It hardly skirted a subject which was outside Anna's accepted sphere of comment.

"Yes," Lois said. "Of course. A little higher in front, Anna."

That would account for Buddy's insistence, Lois realized. "He wants to talk to me before I talk to Mother," she thought. "To find out what I'm going to say to Mother." She smiled to herself. "Poor Mother," she thought. "And, after all, what do I care?" But somebody had to be—well, call it judicious. And it couldn't be Mrs. Ashley; it couldn't be Buddy. It had to be Lois and—she smiled to herself again—Madge. Being judicious in opposite directions. Because you couldn't, certainly, deny that

Madge carefully thought things out.

She heard quiet steps in the carpeted hall outside. That would be Mary, coming to report that Mr. David McIntosh was calling. She hoped that this was going to be an evening of the McIntoshy David, or at least the reasonably McIntoshy David. Not the one who sometimes seemed to be pulling and jerking at her; not the one who, once or twice, had grown so hard and bitter in jealousy and made so much of so little. She could do with the nice, comfortable David, or with the gay David, or even, and perhaps just now that would be best, with the reasonably McIntoshy David. But not with the one who glared.

She held up her arms while Anna lowered the blue print to her shoulders. It was a pretty dress, she thought, turning before the long mirror, watching its soft folds swing at her feet.

"And," she thought, smiling at the girl in the mirror, "there's nothing really wrong with the lady. Not with the lady who shows, anyway."

DAVID was reasonably McIntoshy. He was quiet and gentle and said nice things about the way she looked.

"It makes me cooler just to look at you," he said.

"Well," she said, "I don't know whether that is quite the effect—"

He said she didn't need to worry about that. As she knew perfectly well. And that he thought the Ritz-Plaza roof, unless she had some place else in mind? The Crescent Club on the river?

"Oh," she said, "the roof, I think. And no lovely view of Welfare Island. I've had about enough welfare for one day." He started to speak. "All right," she said. "I know how you feel. And you know how I feel. And let's talk about it again—oh, a month from Friday. Shall we?"

A taxicab came politely up to them at the curb. "The Ritz-Plaza," Dave said, and they waited for the lights to cross Park Avenue. The lights changed and they poked west through the still hot street, with the sun slanting in the driver's eyes. But there was a breeze with the top down.

There was a breeze, too, twenty stories above the street, with blinds cutting off the sun and higher buildings casting long shadows across the city. There was a cord stretched warningly between brass uprights at the entrance to the roof and several men and women standing disconsolately on the wrong side of it. But Nicholas smiled at them and beckoned.

"I have your table, Mr. McIntosh," he said. "Near the floor, yes?"

"Not too near," David said.

"But, of course," Nicholas assured him. "Not too near, certainly." He led between tables, walking as if he were threading a needle. He whisked a "Reserved" sign from a table which was, as he promised, near the dance floor but not too near. He beamed approval on the table, and on Mr. McIntosh for receiving and himself for bestowing it. He seated Lois with delicacy; summoned waiters with the assurance of a magician whose effects have never failed.

"This be all right?" David asked, very McIntoshy and down to earth. Lois smiled at him.

"Perfect," she said. She waited until he was seated, too, and smiled at him.

"What if I had said the Crescent Club, though?" she asked. David looked puzzled.

"Why?" he asked. "It wouldn't have mattered."

"Not after you'd reserved a table here?" she asked.

He looked puzzled still for a moment. Then he remembered.

"Oh," he said. "That. That was just Nick's little gag. Good customers and all that. There wasn't any reservation, really."

THE waiters and the bus-boys hovered over them, filling glasses, procuring butter, offering menu cards. Frozen daiquiris came on summons and were cold and sour-sweet in the mouth, and relaxing. But Lois refused the second.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Believe it or not."

There aren't any worries worth worrying about, she thought, as they ate and talked idly; all the little things of the daytime vanished now, as lights went on here and there in buildings, as the city began its nightly transformation. How

terrible blackouts must be, she thought, remembering London three years before and knowing that tonight there was a red glare over it. Both peace, as she had it then, and war seemed so tremendous, so overpoweringly important, that it was inconceivable that one could have time for little worries. They finished eating and sipped long glasses of iced coffee. Then, because it was so much cooler than she had thought, that afternoon, it could ever be again—so much cooler and more peaceful—they danced.

They sat and talked and danced again. Then Dave ordered drinks—brandy and soda for himself and, with a little grimace, a Cuba Libre for her—and they turned them lazily, letting the ice tingle against glass.

"It's lovely here," Lois said. "I don't ever want to go away."

Later, when the orchestra began again, Dave held out a hand to her and they danced again. "Lovely," she said, against his shoulder. "What's the use of anything?"

The floor was comfortably filled, this time, and after they had left the floor, couples brushed past their table as they returned to their own. The people made it seem warmer and the cold drink was refreshing. Lois, who had only sipped before, drank more deeply and then, as they talked, drank again.

"It's getting much warmer, isn't it?" she said, feeling a flush mounting in her cheeks.

David smiled at her.

"Dancing," he said, briefly. Then he looked again. "You do look rather warm," he said. "I hadn't noticed it."

SHE drank again, thirstily, her throat curiously dry. David looked at her and she felt him looking and smiled. Her skin felt hot and she could feel the flush in her face, and she drained her glass. But, although she let the ice caress her lips, they seemed to be growing hotter.

"It's imagination," she told herself. "I'm perfectly all right." She felt David looking at her, curiously. "Aren't I, David?" she said. She hardly realized she had said this aloud. But he was looking at her with concern.

"It's just the heat, of course," she said. "Like this afternoon with little Mr. Finestein and all we have to do is open the back and drive down the parkway. Isn't that right, David? Only not have a baby because maybe we couldn't keep it and then Madge and Buddy would have it. And you know Buddy, don't you, David?"

I can't be saying this, she thought. *I can't be saying any of this! Why does David keep looking at me like that? He looks as if he thought I was drunk. But you can't be drunk on what I've had. Something's happening to me,* she thought. *Something's happening dreadfully to me!*

It was hard to breathe, her lungs seemed to be snatching for breath and, while she strove to quiet it, she felt her breast rising and falling quickly, frantically. And all the time, even after she could no longer make out the words, she could hear herself talking—talking. David was standing across the table, his face anxious, and from a long way she could hear his voice.

"Lois!" he said. "What is it, Lois? Lois!"

She stood up, and now she was gasping for breath and it seemed that her skin was on fire. She could feel her heart pounding now and—

She was standing with a hand out toward David, but as he came around the table to her Lois slipped slowly to the floor and her voice, which had been breaking delirium into words, faltered and died away. Waiters were around David as he picked her up, and the maître d'hôtel, his face very worried, was coming hurriedly between tables. Nicholas' disapproval was evident at a range of twenty feet.

III

NONE of the four in the North's living-room was speaking when the telephone rang. Three of the four were looking at Mrs. North with expressions which bordered on surprise, although there had been nothing essentially astonishing in Mrs. North's last remark. Mrs. North had said, "Because it's election day, of course," and Mr. North had looked at her with suddenly wide eyes and said, in gentle wonder, "My God." William Weigand had looked at both of them with

friendly pleasure and then he had looked at Dorian Hunt and smiled with a kind of contentment. Dorian had blinked a moment and then all three of them had looked at Mrs. North. It was then that the telephone rang.

Since dinner they had been sitting in the dimly lighted living-room. The thick walls of the old house made it a little cooler than it was on the street, and a silently turning fan stirred the air. They all had long drinks and in silence ice tinkled against glass. They were comfortably lethargic, filled with broiled chicken and wild rice and the peace which descends on those who do not, for at least some hours, have to do anything whatever—which descends, particularly, on people who are, momentarily, among those they like to be among and have no incentive to invent speech. Nobody had said anything for several minutes before Mrs. North spoke.

"You know," Mrs. North said, "sometimes I wonder how old I *really* am." She did not say it as might one who expected to start a conversation. Mrs. North merely laid the idea down and rested. Mr. North, who had been about to say something else, caught his own words and replaced them. Then he organized his mind carefully and spoke.

"What?" said Mr. North. Weigand and Dorian left it to him.

"How old I really am," Mrs. North said. "To the year, I mean. I know approximately, of course. But sometimes I get so I'd just like to know. Because of Louise."

"Louise?" Weigand had not meant to enter this. He had planned to leave it to Jerry North; to leave it between the Norths. But the irrelevance overcame him.

"Her younger sister," Mr. North explained. "That's Louise. Only I haven't the faintest idea where she comes in."

"Well," said Mrs. North, "she just started me wondering, that's all. Sometimes it occurs to me that I'm really younger than Louise, because it's only a year or so either way, and then it's very confusing." She looked at the others, and explained. "Because she's my *younger* sister, I mean," she said. "She always has been. Only it's just as likely that she's a good deal older than I am."

"Look," said Mr. North. "Look, Pam. She—" He paused, feeling the subject suddenly elusive in his mind. "I tell you," he said, "why don't you ask your mother? She'd know."

"Would she?" Pam said, as one who really wants to know. "I don't know whether she would, really. Father always used to call *me* Louise, you know."

MR. NORTH made a quick movement, as if he were clutching at something in the air.

"Look," he said. "That hasn't anything to do with it. He was just absent-minded and you know it."

"That absent-minded?" Dorian asked, suddenly. She looked at Pam North with interest. "Really?" Pam nodded, and Jerry, who had known Pam's father, nodded, too.

"When he met her on the street," Mr. North explained. "And after we were married he always called me Henry." He smiled, reminiscently. "Henry and Louise," he repeated. "He was always thinking of something else. But he was always very polite." Mr. North caught himself, quickly. "However," he said, "Louise was always younger than you, Pam—a year and some months younger."

Pam nodded and said that that was what she had always thought.

"But I never really *knew*," she said. "It was always just taken for granted. I knew when my birthday was, of course, but I don't remember that anybody ever told me what year. What year I was born, I mean."

"Well," said Mr. North, "I always thought it was 1907. So next December you'll be—" He calculated rapidly and was about to announce a result when Mrs. North intervened.

"That's just it," she said. "Nineteen hundred and seven was either me or Louise. And the other was 1909. But I can't remember that anybody ever said which." Mrs. North reflected a moment and then said, suddenly: "Teeth!"

Mr. North ran the fingers of one hand through his hair.

"Teeth?" he repeated, a little desperately. Weigand and Dorian looked at him with sympathy.

"Can't you tell by them?" Mrs. North asked. "Like horses?"

"Look!" Mr. North said. "Forget teeth. It's perfectly easy. We can just tie it to something. Say—say the other war. How old were you when it started? That would tell us. If you were—let's see—seven the next winter, then you were born in 1907. Or is that before you remember? Do you remember the start of the other war?"

He looked at her eagerly, hopefully.

"No," Mrs. North said. "But I remember when we went in. Papa told me."

"There!" Mr. North said. "How old were you then?"

"I don't know," Mrs. North said. "Eight or nine, I think. I was in either the second or third grade, but that wouldn't show, because I skipped a grade."

MR. NORTH, his eyes bright with purpose, waved her to silence.

"That's it!" he said. "We can tell by when you were in school, making allowance for the grade you skipped. When did you start in school?"

"When I was five," Mrs. North said. "In kindergarten."

"Now we're getting it," Mr. North said. "If you were five when you started in kindergarten, and then went through seven grades, less the grade you skipped, we can work it out. How old were you when you got out of grade school?"

"Oh," Mrs. North said, "I remember that. I was thirteen." She looked confident a moment, and then her confidence clouded. "Only," she said, "did I really start in kindergarten, or right in the first grade? I don't seem to remember kindergarten, really."

"Try to," Mr. North asked her, eagerly. There was a kind of desperation in his eagerness. "Raffia," he suggested. "Making little rag rugs on a little loom." He cast around anxiously in his mind. "Blocks?" he begged. Mrs. North shook her head.

"Sometimes I think I do," she said. "And then sometimes I think it is just what somebody told me. I don't know really, Jerry." She looked at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "It really doesn't matter, Jerry."

"It's perfectly absurd," Mr. North said. "Of course, we can find out how old you are. Just with a few facts and some logic. We—" He looked at Weigand. "Find out, Bill," he urged. "You're a detective."

Weigand shook his head, and said there were limits. Mrs. North made a face at him.

"Well," Weigand said, "how old were you when you graduated from high school, Pam? That might tell us."

"Seventeen," Pam said.

"And what was your class?" Weigand said. "You know, the dear old class of something or other. What was it?"

Everybody waited, anxiously. Including Pam. Then she shook her head.

"I don't know," she said. "I really don't." She looked at the others a little defensively. "I'm just not any good at dates," she said. "I mean—dates that are now. I was very good in history, though."

She looked at all of them, and said she was sorry.

"It doesn't really matter," she said. "I didn't mean to bring it up and worry everybody. I just wondered and—mentioned it. But there's no use trying to find out, because I'm just no good at dates." She paused and looked at Jerry. "I'll tell you, Jerry," she said. "I don't even remember the date we were married."

Mr. North started to tell her, but she broke through.

"Only the day of the month," she said. "I remember that. It was March 4."

Dorian and Bill Weigand looked at Mr. North, who nodded.

"It was, for a wonder," he said. He looked at his wife curiously.

"How do you come to remember that, Pam?" he asked.

"Because it's election day, of course," Mrs. North said.

THEY were still looking at her, in pleased astonishment, when the telephone rang. Mr. North was the nearer and scooped it up. He greeted it and said "yes" and, after a moment, "yes" again. Then he said, "of course," and handed the telephone to Weigand. Weigand said "right" and listened. Knowing him as the others did, they could see him stiffen as he listened, and Dorian Hunt, whose

gray-green eyes smiled as if by themselves when they looked at Weigand, said, "Oh, dear!" softly. After what seemed a rather long time, Bill Weigand said "right" again and put the telephone back in its cradle.

Weigand sat a moment, looking at the others, and then he smiled. It was rather a detached smile, as if its sponsor was thinking of other things.

"Trouble," he said. "And the police called in. So—I hate to break things up, Pam."

"Murder?" she said.

Weigand looked at her a moment.

"Well," he said, "it might be. That's where I come in, of course. Up on the Ritz-Plaza roof, a young woman." He looked from Pam to Dorian, thinking aloud. "It's an odd thing, apparently," he said. "She seems to have had too much to drink, and passed out. Only when she passed out, she was dead—just like that. Which worried the hotel doctor. And the ambulance surgeon, when he came. And that worried the precinct. Therefore—"

"Oh," Mrs. North said. "A young woman? Dancing?"

"I don't know, Pam," Weigand said. "She could dance there, couldn't she? They didn't say."

"It seems to—" Mrs. North said. She broke off for a moment. "Well," she said, "it won't be anybody we know, anyway. Not this time."

Weigand smiled.

"No," he said, "you and Jerry have had a bit more than your share. This isn't one that will bother you; no detecting for the Norths this time. We'll just find out who killed Miss Winston and let you know."

HE stopped, partly because Mrs. North was staring at him.

"Winston!" she repeated. "Now, listen, Bill—not Lois Winston?"

The other three looked at her, but this time differently.

"Now don't tell me—" Weigand began. Mrs. North held up a hand.

"Was it a Lois Winston?" she demanded. They looked at Bill Weigand, who nodded slowly.

"Right," he said. "Lois Winston. Lives off Park Avenue somewhere. Money. Social Register. That's why the precinct—"

"Then," Mrs. North said, with a kind of detached resignation, "I do know her. Or know of her, anyway. She works for the Foundation."

"Works?" Weigand repeated. "She didn't sound like it. She sounded like money, and all that."

Mrs. North nodded.

"Yes," she said. "That part's all right. But just the same, she worked for the Foundation. A volunteer, I think—anyway, she—"

Weigand broke in.

"I've got to get along," he said. "But perhaps I'd better hear this. Do you want to ride up with me, Pam, and tell me the rest of it as we go?"

"Well—" Pam said, doubtfully—"I—oh, all right, Bill. Only I don't like it. Remember about Jerry's arm. And about my neck." She looked at him, rather darkly. "Remember, Bill?" she said. Bill nodded.

"Bring Jerry to look after you," he said. "Only you're not going to get into this one—nor is Jerry, nor are you, Dorian. It's just a chance to pick up some information without wasting time. Come on."

"All of us?" Dorian asked.

"Why not?" Weigand wanted to know. "I won't make you into a policewoman, Dor. Except maybe by—"

"All right, Bill," Dorian said. "Hold it, Loot."

"And," Mrs. North said, "remember how Dorian got almost—"

"Yes, Pam," Bill said. "I'm not forgetting. We'll be very careful of all of you. Are you coming?"

THEY went, of course. Weigand's Buick, with red lights blinking in front and with the siren speaking low at crossings, went north. Pam sat beside the driver, now very officially Lieutenant William Weigand, acting captain in the Homicide Bureau of the New York Police Department. It was also a somewhat different Mrs. North. Not for the first time, Weigand noted with underlying surprise how quickly cogent she could be when she wished.

She knew little about Lois Winston

at first hand, it developed. She thought she had seen her once in the offices of the Foundation—the Placement Foundation, in West Twenty-ninth Street. "I'm on the committee," she said. "Names. Sometimes benefits. That sort of thing. Jerry sends a check now and then, too." In addition, Pam North was interested in the work itself. "They place children for adoption," she said. "Orphans, foundlings, children whose parents can't care for them and ask help—that sort of thing." As a result of her interest, she had got to know Mary Crane, who was the secretary.

"She's a professional," Pam explained. "Only don't think of social workers in tweed skirts and flat-heeled shoes, looking under the beds for dirt. This place isn't like that. And Mary Crane isn't."

"I know," Weigand said. "I've met them around. Go on."

Pam, she told him, had once thought of doing volunteer work herself, but abandoned the idea because—"Oh," she said, "because of a lot of things. They don't matter." She had asked Mary Crane about it and Miss Crane had been encouraging. They did, she had told Pam, now and then use volunteers; in rare instances, if the volunteers were exceptional and were willing to keep on through a long training period, and sometimes study in addition at the New York School of Social Work, they used volunteers for investigations and in other responsible capacities. Then Miss Crane had cited Lois Winston as an example—a girl who had been with them five years, who worked merely because she wanted to do something which would help people, who took the hours and the tasks of the professional workers but not the salary; who took, also, the routine and the supervision and the exacting personal responsibility which went with the job.

"She thinks—thought—a lot of Lois Winston," Mrs. North said. "You could tell by the way she spoke of her. Although it had raised problems, of course."

"What problems?" Weigand said, letting the siren snarl warning at a car which had injudiciously poked its nose from a side street. The nose withdrew precipitately.

"Well," Pam explained, "to most of the workers it's a job, of course. They are professionals—in that profession, usually, because they want to do something useful, but making their livings by it all the same. And when a volunteer comes in, they are inclined to resent it. Although, Miss Crane says, it merely means one more worker, usually; it doesn't put anybody out of a job."

"Then why—?" Weigand said.

PAM NORTH said she didn't know, in detail. Naturally, Miss Crane had not told her in detail. She had merely let something drop. Pam added that there might, of course, be nothing to it; that, almost surely, there was nothing to it.

"I merely gathered," she said, "that about the time Lois Winston went on the staff—got to be a regular worker, that is—they had had to let a professional worker go. For some other reason. But apparently the girl they fired didn't believe what they said, and thought that Miss Winston had—well, done her out of a job."

"Well—" Weigand said, doubtfully.

"It's possible," Pam pointed out, "that I've—oh, built all this up; made a story out of it—out of something Miss Crane let drop. I do, you know."

She said it without apology, and not defensively. It was merely one of the things Pam North knew about Pam North, and expected others to know. Weigand nodded.

"It would have been five years ago, anyway," he said.

IN the next block, outside the Ritz-Plaza, green and white patrol cars nudged against the curb. He swung the Buick in among them. Weigand got out, and the others, a little doubtfully, got out behind him. Weigand looked as if he didn't know what to do with them.

"Go ahead," Mr. North told him. "Forget us, if Pam's told you what you want to know. We may come up, though, and have a drink and look on. Now that we're here."

"Oh," said Pam. "Yes. On the murder roof."

The Norths looked at Dorian.

"The three of you," Dorian said, a little helplessly. Weigand looked at her,

because it was fun to look at her. Even as she stood, not moving, she had that singular, poised grace which he had first noticed the autumn before when there was murder at Lone Lake and Dorian was in the thick of it, and he had abandoned a firm determination to continue a vacation. Weigand found, against all professional reasoning, that he hoped she would go with the Norths to the roof. He might get to see her again, for one thing. There really is a glint of red in her hair, Weigand decided, realizing that he should be thinking of Lois Winston.

"Oh, all right," he heard Dorian say, and there was a warm center of contentment inside Lieutenant Weigand, somewhere as he crossed the sidewalk to the lobby. It persisted across the lobby and to the express elevator, marked "Roof Only," at the end of a bank of elevaotrs. A uniformed policeman was standing there, as if by accident. He saluted when Weigand came up and pressed a signal button. Weigand disappeared upward as the Norths and Dorian Hunt crossed the lobby. The policeman looked at them doubtfully. But he made no move to stop Mr. North when he, in turn, pressed the signal button. He merely looked at them curiously when the three entered the express elevator and followed Weigand toward what Mrs. North called, and what she said the newspapers would call in the morning, "the murder roof." (The newspapers, as it turned out, were more considerate of the Ritz-Plaza. They merely called it the murder at the Club Plaza, which was obviously more polite.)

IV

BUT when William Weigand reached the restaurant on the roof at a few minutes before ten o'clock that night, there was not yet admittedly a murder. It was a "suspicious death," and so entered on the blotter of the East Fifty-first Street police station and in the records of the Fourth Detective District. There was a girl in a blue flowered evening dress, caught with brilliants on each shoulder, and the girl was dead. The body lay on the bed where Lois Winston had died in the private suite of the roof's manager. The apartment, consisting of living-room and bedroom, opened off a corridor which led to the restaurant itself. When Weigand arrived, two doctors had looked at Lois Winston's body and a third was bending beside it.

There were several people in the living-room of the suite as Weigand passed through it to enter the bedroom. There were detectives from the district, and from the Homicide Bureau—these last waiting for Weigand's arrival—and several people Weigand had never seen before. He nodded to detectives and lifted his eyebrows at Detective-Sergeant Mullins, temporarily in charge of the Bureau detail. Mullins' face, which had been scarred by authority, relaxed. He said, "Hi-ya, Loot?" Lieutenant Weigand nodded and went into the bedroom. Dr. Jerome Francis, assistant medical examiner, stood up.

"Well, Doctor?" Weigand said. The doctor spread his hands.

"Well," he said, "she's dead."

"And?" Weigand said. Dr. Francis shrugged. It could, he said, be several things, some of them quite innocent.

"Right," Weigand said. "But you don't think it is."

"I think," Dr. Francis said, "that she was poisoned. With one of the alkaloids. The hotel doctor—chap named Merton—thinks so, too. And he was here when she died."

Weigand looked down at the body and said she looked peaceful. Francis nodded. She might go that way, with some poisons, he said. According to Dr. Merton she had merely, quite quietly, stopped breathing. She was dead then, and dead on the arrival of the ambulance surgeon a few minutes later. The ambulance surgeon had talked with Merton, agreed with him, and added "suspicious death" to his "dead on arrival." Then the wheels had started.

"Right," Weigand said. "How soon will you know, definitely?"

DR. FRANCIS' shoulders were communicative. But they could hurry it up. If Lieutenant Weigand insisted, they might know something within a couple of hours.

"Depends on what we find when we get in," Dr. Francis reported, matter-of-factly.

"Meanwhile," he said, "and without quoting me, take it as poison. Belladonna, for a guess." Dr. Francis snapped his bag. He asked whether Weigand wanted the body where it was, for any purpose.

"Why?" said Weigand, reasonably. "She wasn't killed here. She just died here. Pictures, of course, but what we want is the p. m. as soon as we can get it."

Dr. Francis nodded. Leaving, he encountered Mullins at the door and said, "Uh!" Mullins, looking very official, said, "Telephone, Lieutenant." Weigand raised his eyebrows and Mullins said, sadly, "Yeh. The Inspector." Weigand picked up an extension telephone by the bed and found Deputy Chief Inspector Artemus O'Malley at the other end of it. Weigand said, "Yes, sir."

"So you finally got there," Inspector O'Malley told him, unpleasantly. Weigand said he had; that he had been having dinner with friends and that the Telegraph Bureau had found him there.

"Well," O'Malley said, "what does it look like? Anything in it?"

Weigand said that it looked like poison. O'Malley made sounds disapproving of poison, which he evidently regarded as unfair to policemen. Weigand spoke soothingly. Weigand admitted that it might be suicide. "Only," he said, "it would be an odd place to pick." Equally it might be murder.

"Well," said O'Malley, relapsing into friendliness, duty between superior and subordinate having been discharged, "get on with it, Lieutenant. We'll go over your report in the morning."

Weigand said, "Yes, sir," without animus. It was natural for inspectors to sleep of nights, while lieutenants, even when acting as captains, toiled. O'Malley vanished from the telephone and Weigand cradled it and stood for a moment looking down at the body. Then he turned to Mullins and said, "Well?"

"Well," Mullins said, "I had the boys get pix. D'you want them to print the joint?"

"Why?" said Weigand. Mullins looked around and said, yeh, that was right. Why?

"Right," Weigand said. "What's the setup?"

Mullins told him. The girl had been having dinner with a guy. One David McIntosh. "We got him here," Mullins said. They had sat at the table after dinner and had a drink or two. Then the girl had begun to act tight. She had stood and talked excitedly a moment, while those at other tables nearby looked at her in surprise, but knowingly. Then she had suddenly collapsed. McIntosh had carried her to the manager's apartment. "It looked like a pass-out," Mullins explained. The idea had been to handle an unfortunate emergency as unobtrusively as possible. But the girl's quietness had frightened them and they had called the hotel doctor.

"Then she just died, I guess," Mullins said. "Everybody was surprised, only the doc had said they'd oughta get a stomach pump."

Weigand nodded and considered.

"Right," he said. "Let's talk to McIntosh. We'll want the stenographer."

"O. K., Loot," Mullins said. He went to the door, nodded to the stenographer and said, "You!" to McIntosh.

McIntosh was a tall, broad, brown young man who looked like several good schools rolled into one. But his face was drained. Weigand was tall enough, but he had to look up at McIntosh. He did look up at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm Lieutenant Weigand, Homicide. Tell me what you know about it."

David McIntosh's voice was heavy and lifeless. His description of Lois's collapse at the table followed that of Mullins, amplifying it with McIntosh's own surprise and consternation, which had given place to anxiety and fear.

"But at first it looked merely as if she had—well, had had too much to drink?" Weigand asked.

McIntosh nodded.

"She seemed excited and incoherent," he said. "Her face looked flushed. But she hadn't had anything to drink—not really."

"What?" Weigand wanted to know. McIntosh told him. A cocktail before dinner. Coffee afterward. Then a Cuba Libre.

"Nothing before you met her, do you think?" Weigand asked. McIntosh was

sure she had not, or not more than one drink at the outside.

"She drank almost nothing," he said. "When she had a drink she usually showed it."

Weigand nodded.

"And you had water with dinner, I suppose?" he said. McIntosh agreed.

"Was it something in what she drank?" he wanted to know. Weigand told him they didn't know. But presumably it was something she had taken by mouth, in liquid or food. And liquid was more likely. It would, obviously, be more difficult to administer poison in solid food, without the opportunity for advance preparation.

"And I gather you ordered at the table?" he said. "You hadn't ordered in advance, before you came, I mean?"

McIntosh said they hadn't. Until they were actually in the taxicab, he said, they had not made up their minds where they would have dinner.

"Could she have been given something, or taken something, before I met her?" McIntosh asked.

"Frankly," Weigand said, "we don't know yet. This has to be merely a preliminary questioning, until we see where we are. Do you know of any reason why she should have taken her own life?"

McIntosh looked surprised.

"No," he said. "That's absurd. She never would have. And even if that isn't true, she would never have come here, with me, and then drunk poison. It's—inconceivable."

WEIGAND agreed it seemed unlikely. He said he gathered that McIntosh had known her a long time, and well.

"Yes," McIntosh said. "Since—oh, for a long time." He paused. "I wanted her to marry me," he said, simply.

"I'm sorry," Weigand said. "I know this is difficult. And she?"

"Sometimes, yes," McIntosh said. "But she was tied up, somehow. Her family—her half-brother, you know—and this job of hers. And some odd notion about being useful. I don't know. But I think she probably would have married me, eventually."

His voice was expressionless, strained. Weigand looked at him a moment. He felt compassion for McIntosh and his voice revealed it.

"All right," he said. "That's all for now. Give one of the detectives outside your address, will you?"

McIntosh nodded. He went out.

"It's tough on him," Mullins said, after McIntosh had closed the door. Weigand said it was. Very.

"Who else have we got out there?" he wanted to know. Mullins told him. The maître d'hôtel. A bloke who said he was Lois Winston's brother. Some dame with the brother. And—oh, yeh. A bus-boy.

"A bus-boy?" Weigand repeated.

Mullins nodded. He looked a little embarrassed and uncertain. He said it was this way. Not more than five minutes had elapsed between the time Lois Winston had collapsed at her table and the time she died in the manager's suite. By the time she died, the hotel physician suspected poison. He had suggested that the table at which she had been eating be left as it was until the police arrived, and Nicholas, the maître d'hôtel, had agreed. He had gone out to see to it and found the table already cleared and reset.

"He said it was just routine," Mullins said. "Seemed to think it was pretty smart of the bus-boy who did it. But I noticed when I got here that there were several tables around there that hadn't been cleared and I just sorta wondered—could the boy be in on something? So I thought—"

"Right," Weigand assured him. "Probably it doesn't mean anything, but we'll have a talk with the boy. He does seem to have been pretty efficient."

Mullins looked relieved. He wanted to know who the Loot wanted. Weigand decided on Nicholas.

NICHOLAS had little to add to the detail of Lois Winston's collapse at the table. He knew Mr. McIntosh well, since he often came there, usually with Miss Winston. And he knew who Mr. McIntosh was, naturally.

"Did you?" said Weigand. "Who is he?"

Nicholas looked surprised and a little shocked.

"Mr. McIntosh is the son of Mr. James McIntosh," he said. "The Mr. James McIntosh."

"Oh," Weigand said. "So." He could see the point of Nicholas' attitude. It was important, and not only in Nicholas' realm, to be the son of the Mr. James McIntosh. Nicholas noted the expression on the lieutenant's face with approval.

"So naturally," Nicholas said, "when we got the reservation tonight we saw that Mr. McIntosh received just the table he asked for, down front, near the floor. Which made it all the more—obvious—when the young lady behaved so strangely. Whereas at their usual table. . . ."

"Oh," Weigand said, "Mr. McIntosh had made a reservation. By telephone?"

Nicholas nodded. Lieutenant Weigand thought it over.

"Was it Mr. McIntosh himself who phoned?" he asked.

Nicholas did not know, but he could try to find out.

"Do that," Weigand instructed. "But what about this bus-boy?"

Nicholas looked perplexed. Then his face cleared. That would be young Frank Kensitt. The boy who cleared the table so quickly? Weigand nodded.

"But that was nothing," Nicholas insisted. "We train the boys to be efficient at the Club Plaza. In the natural course he would have cleared the table at once."

"Even," Weigand said, "when he had no reason to be sure Mr. McIntosh would not return? He didn't know it was anything serious, remember."

Nicholas pointed out that he had seen the young lady carried across the restaurant. He might naturally assume that something not entirely trivial was going on. Weigand nodded slowly. He said that Nicholas had better go back to his post.

"Oh," Weigand said, "some friends of mine are out there, I think. A man and two women, one of them with sort of reddish hair. See that they're well taken care of, will you?"

Nicholas, eagerly, would. Weigand drummed on the desk beside which he was sitting for a moment after Nicholas left. His face was abstracted, and Mullins waited.

"Let's have the brother," Weigand directed. Mullins went to the door and said, "You!" at the brother.

THE brother was a dark, discontented, slight young man who looked more worried than grieved. He was Randall Ashley; Lois Winston was his sister.

"Half-sister, of course," he amplified, sitting nonchalantly where Weigand indicated. "Her father was Clarence Winston, the oil man. Mine was Kenneth Ashley." His tone was faintly supercilious.

"What kind of a man was he?" Weigand asked. Randall Ashley looked faintly surprised.

"What kind of—oh, copper," he said. "Mother married Father about two years after Mr. Winston died."

Then, Weigand discovered, Lois was about three years old. Randall had been born to Mr. and Mrs. Ashley a little over a year later. Lois was twenty-seven—had been twenty-seven. So Randall was twenty-three.

"Although you'd have thought, from the way Sis acted, that I was about thirteen," Ashley put in, rather sulkily. Weigand looked at him without favor.

"You weren't here with your sister, I gather," he said. "I mean, you had your own party."

"I was here with a friend," Ashley said. The word "friend' seemed faintly underlined.

"Were you?" Weigand said. "Who?"

"I don't see—" Ashley began. Weigand didn't either, exactly, but he felt like being stern.

"Who?" he repeated.

Young Ashley looked more sulky than ever. Then he submitted.

"Madge Ormond," he said. "She's a singer."

"Night club?" Weigand hazarded. Ashley frowned.

"Does that make any difference?" he wanted to know.

"No," Weigand said. "As far as I know it makes no difference at all. I just wondered.

"All right," Ashley said. "She is. So what?"

Weigand said he would ask the questions. Where, for example, were Ashley

and Miss Ormand sitting in reference to his sister and Mr. McIntosh?

"Most of the dance floor was between us," Ashley said. He looked a little worried, Weigand thought, and was pleased to think. "Why?" Ashley added. Weigand said it was merely routine.

"Although," he added, "it seems probable that somebody passed your sister's table and put something in her drink."

"Listen!" Ashley said. He stood up. Weigand remained seated and looked at him. "If you're trying to—"

"Oh, go home, Mr. Ashley," Weigand said. "Go home to Mama. Or home to Miss Ormond. We'll find you when we want you."

Ashley hesitated a moment. Then he turned quickly to the door. Weigand nodded after his back and Mullins followed him into the living-room of the suite. Then, after a moment, Mullins came back.

"O.K.," Mullins said. "He's got a tail. Why him?"

"I don't know, Mullins," Weigand said. "I suppose merely because I don't like him."

MULLINS looked at Weigand a moment. Then he grinned.

"O.K., Loot," he said. "O.K."

He thought a moment.

"What are you going to do about those people out there, Loot?" he inquired, waving in the general direction of the restaurant. Weigand regarded him and asked what he would suggest.

"Get their names and addresses?" Mullins suggested, doubtfully.

"Why?" asked Weigand. "They've been coming and going for—[he looked at his watch]—more than an hour since the girl died. If there was a murderer, and he was on the roof, do you suppose he has waited?"

Mullins thought it over, and said he supposed not.

"But maybe somebody saw something?" he suggested.

Weigand said that if anybody had, the police probably would hear from them when the news came out. However—

"You might have some of the boys ask anybody who is still at a table near the McIntosh table," he said. "There's no harm in it, except to the hotel's feelings, and you might turn up something." He paused. "And," he said, "you'll find Mr. and Mrs. North and Miss Hunt out there. You might ask Mrs. North to come in."

Mullins' face brightened.

"Jeez," he said. "Is Pam and Jerry here? And Miss Hunt?" He beamed. "We've had some times," he said, hopefully. Then his face clouded. "Only they was always screwy ones," he remembered. "The cases, I mean."

Weigand agreed that they were.

"And this one," he added, "doesn't seem to be any too clear." He drummed on the table. "You might chase the boys out of the living-room—have them ask some questions of somebody, or go over the tablecloth or something. Is there anybody else left?"

"Only," Mullins said, "this bus-boy guy. Just a kid, he is."

Weigand said Mullins could send the kid in. The kid came in. He had red hair, clashing with the maroon of his uniform, and he looked at Weigand with round eyes.

"Say, mister," he said, "are you a detective?"

Weigand admitted it.

"An officer?" Frank Kensitt insisted. "One of the mucky-mucks?"

"What?" said Weigand. "Oh. Yes, in a way. Why?"

Frank looked around anxiously, with wide blue eyes. The eyes fell on the body, and the boy said, "Jeez." Then, unexpectedly, his eyes filled with tears. After a moment he spoke angrily through the tears.

"Listen, mister," he said, "Miss Winston was a swell lady. Did somebody bump her?"

Weigand nodded.

"Did you know her, Frank?" he asked. Frank nodded. He sure had known her, he said.

"She got me this job," he said. "And got me out of the farm school and everything. She was a swell lady."

WEIGAND probed. Frank was, it developed, a ward of the "office." Weigand puzzled it a moment. "The Placement Foundation?" he suggested. Frank nodded. He was too old for adop-

tion when the "office" took him and, after several other places, he had gone to the farm. And Miss Winston had got him out and got him a job and if any guy thought—

"All right, Kid," Weigand said. He would, he supposed, have to follow this up, or have it followed up. But he had better get it from—who was that, now?—Mary Crane, at the Foundation. "Why did you clear the table so fast, kid?"

Frank looked around the room.

"Is there anybody else here?" he asked, tensely. Weigand shook his head.

"All right," Frank said. "They're in my locker!"

"Who are in your locker?" Weigand inquired.

Frank looked annoyed, and his voice was impatient.

"The dishes," he said. "The things Miss Winston ate and drank out of. What did you think?"

"You mean," Weigand said, "that you cleared the table and put all the dishes in your locker? Why?"

Frank looked contemptuous.

"Fingerprints," he said. "And things like that. I knew it wasn't no pass-out, not no ordinary pass-out. Not with Miss Winston. So I saved the things."

"Well," Weigand said, "I'll be damned." He looked at Frank, who was regarding him intently. "Well, I'll be damned," Weigand said. "You're quite a kid."

"You want 'em, don't you?" Frank's voice was anxious. Weigand nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I'll send a man with you to get them." Suddenly he grinned at the boy. "Only why fingerprints, son?" he said. "Why not some poison left in a glass or on a plate?"

Frank stared harder.

"Jeez," he said. "Sure enough!"

V

THE body of Lois Winston went in a long basket, down a service elevator, to an ambulance marked "Department of Hospitals. Mortuary Division." Nicholas arrived in time to stand aside for it, looking a little ill, as it was carried through the door of the suite. He looked after it and shook his head gravely, paying tribute to death.

"Yes?" Weigand said. He was sitting in a lounge chair in the living-room, and his nervous fingers tapped a cigarette against the side of an ash-tray.

"About Mr. McIntosh's reservation," Nicholas said. "You asked me to check on it."

"Right," Weigand said. "And—?"

"He appears to have telephoned himself," Nicholas said. "At least my assistant who took the reservation says a man called. He specified a table near the floor, although usually he preferred one of the divans against the wall."

"Right," Weigand said. He stared through Nicholas for a moment. "Suppose," he said, "you give me a list of all reservations made for this evening. You can do that?"

There was, Nicholas admitted, a list. But the manager would have to approve. If—

"All I want is the list," Weigand said. His voice sounded tired. "I don't care who has to approve. The manager, Mr. Ritz or the whole waiters' union. Just get me the list."

"Yes, sir," Nicholas said. He moved to the door and opened it. He became, instantly, Nicholas of the Ritz-Plaza.

"But I am very sorry, ladies-sir," he said. "This is a private apartment and I regret—"

"Nonsense," Pam North said, briskly, appearing around Nicholas. "Tell him, Bill!"

Bill told him. Pam came in and Dorian behind her. Mr. North, looking rather worried, followed them.

"Well," Weigand said. "A delegation. Sit, friends. Join me in a cosy little murder."

Pam looked doubtfully at the closed door to the bed-room.

"Is it?" she said, and nodded at the door.

Weigand told her it was.

"They just took it," he said. "It was Lois Winston, of East Sixty-third Street and the Placement Foundation, daughter of the late Clarence Winston, who was an oil man, and the present Mrs. Kenneth Ashley who—" Then he stopped and looked annoyed. He looked around for Mullins and sighed. He emerged from the chair and sought Mullins at the door

and returned with Mullins, who beamed at the Norths and Dorian.

"Hello, Mrs. North," Mullins said, pleased. "And Mr. North. And Miss Hunt! Sorta like old times, ain't it?"

"Hello, Mr. Mullins," Pam said. "It's nice—" She stopped and looked at him more intently. "By the way," she said, "I've been meaning to ask. Have you got a first name? To call you by, I mean?"

MULLINS suddenly looked sheepish and looked hurriedly at Lieutenant Weigand. Weigand nodded, remorselessly.

"Tell her, sergeant," he ordered. Mullins swallowed.

"Aloysius," he said, his voice suddenly booming. "Aloysius Clarence."

He looked at the Norths and Dorian defiantly. Mrs. North looked rather blank.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh—all right, Mullins." She looked at him gently. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Thanks, Mrs. North," Mullins said, warmly. "The times I—"

Weigand broke in, told him to save it.

"Get on the phone," he instructed, "and find out if Kenneth Ashley—the father of the squirt who was just here—is alive. Or what."

"O.K., Loot," Mullins said. He looked around for a telephone book, mutely indicated its absence, and exited.

"Listen," Pam said, "we've got something." She turned to Mr. North. "Where is he?" she demanded. "I thought you were going to bring him."

"Look, Pam," Mr. North said, anxiously, "you're not going to get into this one, are you?" His voice was pleading, but not very hopeful. "He's outside. I left him with a detective. But I don't really think—"

"Who," Weigand wanted to know, "is outside with a detective?" He looked at Pam, and his expression oddly mirrored that of Mr. North. "Please, Pam," he urged. "After all, I'm working here."

Pam looked a little indignant, and then softened. She said all she wanted was a chance. She said it was a waiter who had seen something.

"We got to talking while we waited," Pam said, "and then we sort of talked to our waiter, because maybe he had seen things." She looked at Mr. North, who was shaking his head. "Well," she said, "anyway, I did. And Dorian did, too. And it turned out he had seen something at—at the murder table."

"Listen, Pam," Mr. North said, "have you got to be so tabloid?"

Nobody paid any attention to him. Weigand looked interested and went to the door. He returned with a waiter, who looked worried.

"The lady," the waiter said, doubtfully. "She thought I ought—"

"Right," Weigand said. "You saw something?"

THE waiter, a No. 67 by the disk on his coat, had seen something. Nothing, he supposed, important. But he had been near the table at which McIntosh and Miss Winston were sitting and had been looking around idly, with nobody to serve at the moment and a waiter's glance for the tables. The man and the girl who, somebody said, was dead—well, they had got up to dance. And while they were dancing, a man had come to their table from another table some way off and bent over it.

"I thought he seemed to be sticking something, perhaps a note, under the lady's plate," the waiter explained.

"And would you know the man?" Weigand asked. His tone was quick with interest.

"Yes, sir," the waiter said. "I—but perhaps I should speak to the manager, sir." He looked around the room for advice.

"Just speak to me," Weigand directed. "You knew him, I gather?"

No. 67 looked rather unhappy, and nodded. He was the young man who had been summoned, a little later, to the living-room by a detective. After the girl had collapsed and been carried there. He was a dark, rather good-looking young man, rather slight.

Weigand nodded.

"And that was all you saw?" he asked. No. 67 shook his head. There was, he said, something else.

"After the young lady was—was carried in here," he said, "the young man went

back to the table. He—well, I assumed he picked up the note."

"Why do you assume that?" Weigand asked. No. 67 suddenly looked a little confused.

"I suppose you looked, and there wasn't any note?" Weigand said. The waiter nodded. "Touch anything?" Weigand wanted to know. The waiter shook his head.

"Right," Weigand said. "I'll see that the manager doesn't mind. And thanks."

The waiter went away, still looking worried.

"Is it something?" Mrs. North said eagerly. "Is it a clue, or something?"

Weigand nodded slowly.

"Anyway," he said, "it was Mr. Randall Ashley doing something at his sister's table." He thought it over. "I'm afraid," he said, "that I'm going to have to break in on Mr. Ashley's sleep."

He looked at his watch. It was a little after eleven. There was a knock at the door and a detective handed in a long sheet with names typed on it. Whoever needed to had approved the surrender to the police of a copy of the reservation list of the Club Plaza, on the roof of the Ritz-Plaza Hotel, for the evening of Tuesday, July 28.

Weigand looked at the Norths and Dorian without seeing them. Then he saw Dorian and smiled. It was warming to see a smile answer him.

"Bill," Dorian said, suddenly, "I hope you catch him."

It was surprising from Dorian, who so hated all pursuit, all "hunting," and who had such excellent reason for hating it. Weigand was conscious of delighted astonishment and for a moment was puzzled by it. Then he realized that, for the first time, Dorian had abandoned the separation she had always maintained between Weigand as Weigand, and Weigand as police lieutenant. She had, and quite consciously, come over to his side and he felt very contented about it. He looked at Dorian appreciatively, and it occurred to him that he was beaming at her even before Pam North spoke.

"Lieutenant Weigand," Pam said. "Remember there are Norths present." She paused until he looked at her. "And murderers to catch," she added.

WEIGAND looked back at Dorian and they shared contented laughter with a glance. Then Weigand sighed and returned to duty. He went to the door and called Mullins and Mullins promptly came.

The boys, Mullins reported, were asking questions around, without getting much of anywhere that he could see. Mullins was pessimistic. The dishes from Lois Winston's place had been salvaged from Frank Kensitt's locker. Half an inch of liquid in the bottom of a glass which apparently had contained a Cuba Libre had been bottled and labeled, as had what remained in a water glass. The glass from which, according to McIntosh's account, she had drunk iced coffee apparently had been returned to the kitchen when the drinks were served, as had the plates on the table. The bottles had been dispatched to the city toxicologist at Bellevue for analysis. Weigand nodded, checking off.

"I think we're finished here," he said then. "For now, anyway. We'll leave the boys to go on with their questioning for a while. Tell them to report at the division later. You and I'll be moving, Mullins."

"What," Mrs. North wanted to know, "about us? Do you just throw us back?"

"Well," Mr. North said, "we could always go home and play three-handed bridge."

Mrs. North looked at him coldly and said, "Bridge!"

"Bridge after murder!" she said. "You do think of the dullest things sometimes, Jerry."

She looked hopefully at Weigand, who shook his head.

"No, Pam," he said. "I'm not taking the three of you. Or even one of you. You're big boys and girls; you'll just have to think of something."

"Well," Pam said, "I think we'll go out and have another drink. I want a Cuba—" She broke off. "Or," she said, "perhaps a very weak brandy and soda. Come on."

SHE went and Mr. North went after her. Mullins, after a glance, went after them. Bill Weigand and Dorian stood and looked at each other.

"Hello, Dorian," Bill said, softly. She smiled.

"Hello, Bill," she said.

"She was about my age, Bill, or just a little older," Dorian said. "Wasn't she?"

"Yes," Weigand said. "About that."

"She must have wanted to do so many things," Dorian said slowly. "She must have thought there was time for a lot of things."

Weigand merely nodded. There seemed to be nothing much to say. Lois Winston was probably two or three years older than Dorian, he thought, and he wondered whether, a few hours ago, she had stood and moved as Dorian did.

"Well," Dorian said, "it sounds funny from me, Bill, but—good hunting."

There wasn't anything to say to that, either. It was merely something which stretched back between them to a day when she had had a good deal to say about men who were, professionally, hunters. But there was nothing which needed to be said about it.

"Well," she said, and paused, "I must be in the way." She looked at him. "Take care of yourself," she said, only half lightly.

Then, moving with that singular, balanced grace of hers, she was gone from the room. Police Lieutenant Weigand replaced Bill Weigand. The lieutenant went to the door and said, crisply:

"Mullins!"

Mullins reappeared.

"He's dead," Mullins said. "Airplane crash."

"What?" said Weigand. "Who's dead?"

Mullins looked hurt.

"This guy Ashley," he said. "This guy Ashley's father. The guy you were asking about."

"Oh," said Weigand. "So Kenneth Ashley's dead, is he?" He wondered vaguely why he had wanted to know. Then he roused himself. "Right," he said. "Now we're going places."

Mullins said, "O.K., Loot."

VI

THE Buick stopped outside the apartment house in East Sixty-third Street and a man sauntered over, looking vaguely as if he were going to give advice on parking and offer to wash her off. Weigand nodded to him.

"Upstairs," the man said, jerking his head toward the building. "He came right along, with the dame."

"Right," Weigand said. The detective drifted off, to loiter in low visibility. It was convenient that Randall Ashley had come home and brought the girl—something Ormond, Weigand recalled—with him. Weigand slid from behind the wheel and Mullins joined him on the sidewalk. They went in and up, ignoring an attendant who was disposed to announce them. A slight, blond maid in uniform answered their ring, and Weigand told her they had come to see Mr. Ashley. The girl, he thought, looked pale, and as if she had been crying.

Neither Ashley nor Madge Ormond appeared to have been crying. Both had glasses. They sat together on a sofa in the long living-room and had, Weigand felt, been talking intently when they were interrupted. Ashley twisted to face them, frowned and stood up.

"Well, Lieutenant?" he said, coldly and with a little too much dignity. Weigand nodded to him; to the girl, who was also blond, but neither pale nor weeping. She was the sort of girl for whom almost any man could imagine himself going, Weigand observed with dispassionate interest. She looked back at him, levelly.

"Sit down, Mr. Ashley," Weigand directed, as he and Mullins crossed the room toward them. Mullins looked around the room, taking in the size of the apartment. "Wow!" said Mullins softly. "Quite a joint!"

"I want to know—" Ashley began again.

"Sit down," Weigand instructed.

"Look, detective," the girl said. "You can't bully him."

"Can't I?" said Weigand. "Who told you that, sister? Sure I can bully him."

"Sure," said Mullins, approvingly. "Didn't you know that, sister?"

The girl looked at him.

"Flatfoot," she said, disparagingly. Mullins began to get red. Weigand looked at him and Mullins swallowed and said, "O.K., sister."

"Let's see that note," Weigand said.

Ashley appeared to be very astonished.

"UH-HUH," Weigand said. "The note you left for your sister. And took away again after she collapsed. Let's see it!"

"You don't have to show him anything, Buddy," the girl said. "You don't have to tell him anything."

Ashley turned on her.

"I'll handle it, Madge," he said. He turned to Weigand. "I haven't anything to tell you, Lieutenant," he said. "I don't know in the slightest what note you're talking about."

"Right," Weigand said. "If you want to play it that way. I thought there was a chance the note didn't mean anything, in which case we wouldn't have to take you down town. The way things are, of course—" He left the sentence unfinished, looking down at Ashley. "Don't be a sap, Ashley," he said.

Ashley returned Weigand's gaze for a moment. Then he looked away and hesitated.

"All right," he said. "It wasn't anything. Merely a note to tell her I wanted to talk with her tonight about something important, and to wait up for me if she came in first. When I saw that she was ill, I just picked up the note so that it wouldn't be lying around for anybody else to—" he faltered.

"Let's see it," Weigand said, holding out his hand. There wasn't, Weigand knew, any good reason why Ashley should have kept the note, or why he should hand it over. But it was worth trying. He was gratified to see Ashley's right hand move instinctively toward a pocket. The hand hesitated.

"Right," Weigand said. "Hand it over."

It was a small note, twice folded. It read:

"I've got to see you before you talk to M. So wait up for me and don't think you can get out of it.—Bud."

"You're 'Bud'?" Weigand inquired.

Ashley nodded, sullenly.

"That's what Lois called me," he said. "Lots of people call me that, as a matter of fact."

"And who is 'M'?" Weigand asked.

Ashley started rebellion and abandoned it.

"Mother," he said. "It hasn't anything to do with this."

IT was easy enough, however, to get a story out of him. It was easier after Madge Ormond, hearing him start, looked at him with contempt, but with affection, and said that if he was going to spill everything he knew, she was going home. She looked at Weigand.

"If that's all right with you, Commissioner?" she said, heavily ironic.

Weigand said, without expression, that it was all right with him.

"Call me up, Buddy, after—after you've sung your song," she said. Ashley appeared about to say something, but didn't. He merely nodded. Mullins looked inquiringly at Weigand, who shook his head. The head-shake implied that there was no reason, at the moment, to waste a man on Miss Ormond's footsteps.

Then Buddy sang a song. It was, as Weigand had supposed it would be, a song about money. It was also, as Weigand had likewise expected, rather inadequate, sounding as if several verses had been left out.

Weigand would, Buddy said, have to get the background. "My father's dead," Ashley explained. Weigand nodded. The elder Ashley had died about two years previously, leaving a considerable fortune, the bulk of it to Randall Ashley, but under certain provisions. It was clear that Kenneth Ashley had not thought highly of his son's discretion, particularly in certain matters. The money was to be held in trust until Randall was twenty-five, and paid to him then only in the event he was not married. If he was married, he was to receive only a stipulated income, the principal to be divided among his children, if any, only when the youngest of them had reached the age of twenty-five. It was, Randall said bitterly, a very lousy setup.

"I'd got—well, got mixed up with a girl Dad didn't like," Randall explained. "That was a year or so before he died. So he fixed it so that I'd think twice."

"And," Weigand pointed out, "so that there would be no percentage in it for a gold-digger. In marrying you, I mean."

Randall Ashley nodded.

"Well?" Weigand prompted.

There was, however, a provision which modified this arrangement. Mrs. Ashley, so long as she lived or in

the event of her death, Lois Winston, had power to set the restrictions aside. As things stood, Mrs. Ashley could, if she chose, give approval to any marriage her son might make. In the event she approved and in the event that the marriage did not occur before he was twenty-one, Randall would receive the principal at once.

"Um," Weigand said, thoughtfully. "Yes, I see. So?"

"Well," Randall said simply, "I want to get married."

"Miss Ormond?" Weigand asked. Randall nodded.

"And?" Weigand said, since Ashley seemed to be running down. "Does your mother oppose it?"

That, Randall said, was the point. There was no reason why she should oppose it. But Lois had.

"Why?" Weigand wanted to know.

"I don't know," Randall said. He didn't, Weigand thought, say it as if he really didn't know. Weigand waited.

"Well," Randall said, "you don't know Mother, of course. She will—that is, she always would—listen to anything Lois said. What I said was nothing, what Lois said was gospel." He reported this bitterly. "Mother has been on Long Island most of the summer and doesn't know about Madge. She's coming back tomorrow for a day or so, and I knew that Lois would go to her at once and prejudice her against Madge. So I wanted to see Lois before she talked to Mother. I tried this evening, but she was dressing and wouldn't talk to me. So I wanted to be sure to catch her tonight."

He looked at Weigand, and there seemed to the detective to be a kind of challenge in his look. Weigand decided not to meet it, at the moment.

"Right," Weigand said. "That explains the note, I guess." He smiled at Ashley. "Not so complicated when you explain it," he said. "You shouldn't have made such a fuss about it." He watched Ashley's face, expecting to see relaxation in it. He saw relaxation in it and what might be smug self-congratulation. If Weigand had any reservations about the story—as I have, Weigand thought—young Ashley didn't realize it. Young Ashley felt the story had gone over big. That, Weigand decided, was as it should be. He started to rise, seemed to think better of it.

"By the way," he said, "I wish you'd look over this list of names." He handed Randall the reservation list from the Ritz-Plaza. "See any you know on it?" he inquired. "Besides McIntosh, of course."

IT was a long list and Randall plodded slowly down it. Weigand watched him. He was a good-looking young man, Weigand thought, but he obviously drank too much. There was a kind of querulous expression in the relaxed face. "He looks like a sulky kid," Weigand thought. "And like a selfish one." Weigand hadn't much doubt he was both. Randall finished the list.

"I know one or two," he said. "But there's nobody we knew well—I mean that Lois and I knew well, or Mother. There are a couple of men I've bumped into, and some I've heard about. That's all."

"Which?" Weigand said. Randall pointed, and Weigand checked them off. Several were names known to people who read society pages; one or two appeared now and then in gossip columns. But there were not many checked, and none which seemed to mean anything. Weigand said thanks, and that he guessed that was all, for now.

"I suppose, though," he added, "that I might have a look at your sister's room. Just as a matter of routine."

He got up and Mullins got up. Then, in no hurry, Ashley got up and led the way upstairs. Mullins was impressed by the stairs. "Some joint," he whispered to Weigand. "Duplex and everything. It musta set them back."

Weigand nodded. It certainly must have set somebody back. But he gathered Mrs. Ashley could stand it, married twice to men in commodities. It made him think of something.

"By the way," he said, "did your sister inherit money—from her father, that is? He had money, I suppose."

"Plenty," Randall said. "Yes. Lois got most of it, except for a trust fund for Mother. When Mother dies Lois gets—Lois would have gotten—that too. Why?"

"Well," said Weigand, "we just like to know about such things. Who gets it now?"

"I don't," Randall said, rather hotly. "If that's what you mean."

Weigand said he hadn't meant anything. He just wanted to know.

"Well," Randall said, "*I* don't know. Except that she had made a will. You can find out from that, I suppose."

Weigand said he supposed he probably could.

RANDALL led them down a short corridor on the second floor of the duplex and opened a door. Lois Winston's bedroom was large, with French windows opening on a small terrace. It was done in soft tones of yellow and gray. Weigand noticed with an odd feeling that the bed had been turned back. He noticed a silvered thermos on the table by the bed and crossed to it, lifting the top. It was filled with water. The room, he thought, looked as if it had been lived in happily, and as if it had nothing to tell of unhappiness and death. Then he noticed, on the table beside the thermos, a heavy book—a volume, a glance told him, of the Encyclopædia Britannica. He lifted it idly. It was Volume 11, Gunn to Hydrox. Into the light-hued room it brought an inappropriate suggestion of weighty contemplation.

"I wonder," he said aloud, "what she had been reading in that?"

Nobody answered. Weigand supposed to himself that it had nothing to do with him. But it was an anomaly, and faint curiosity still stirred.

"Did your sister have a personal maid?" he asked Randall Ashley.

"Yes," Randall said. "At least, she and Mother shared Anna. Why?"

"I'd like to see her," Weigand said. Ashley looked about for somebody to send. Neither Weigand nor Mullins moved. Ashley went into the hall and called, "Anna!" Then he came back. Weigand crossed to a desk and opened it, looking at papers in pigeon-holes. A drawer was crowded with papers and photographs. All this would have to be gone through, but not now.

"We'll take this along," he told Ashley. Randall Ashley nodded, indifferently. There was a knock at the half-open door and Weigand, turning, said "Yes?" to Anna. Anna was a tall, spare woman of forty, her face gray and drawn. But her voice was unshaking and quiet.

"Yes, sir?" She said it to Randall Ashley, but Weigand answered.

"I'm a police lieutenant, Anna," he said. "I want to ask you a question or two."

"Yes, sir." Anna's voice was still quiet.

"I want to know what Miss Winston did this afternoon and evening," he explained. "When she came home, what she did, anything you remember she said."

ANNA told him. Miss Lois had come home a little before six, spoken to Mr. Randall and his friends in the living-room and gone to her own room, after telling Mary that she wanted Anna. Then she had bathed and rested for perhaps an hour and then Anna had helped her dress to go out with Mr. McIntosh, who came for her about half-past seven. She remembered nothing of importance.

"I wanted to talk to her, Anna, don't you remember?" Randall said. "And she was dressing or something?"

Yes, Anna remembered that. It was not, she indicated, of importance. And nothing else? She could think of nothing else. The last she had seen of Miss Lois was when the girl left the room to join Mr. McIntosh.

"I stayed and—turned down her bed," Anna said. Her voice hesitated for a moment as she spoke, but regained its soft steadiness.

"You were very fond of Miss Winston, weren't you, Anna?" Weigand said.

"Yes, sir," Anna said. She did not amplify, or need to.

"By the way," Weigand said, "this copy of the Encyclopædia. It wasn't usually kept here, I suppose? Did she read it today, do you know?"

Anna remembered and seemed surprised.

"Why, yes," she said. "She had me get it for her a few minutes after she came in. I had forgotten."

"Did she read it, do you know?"

Anna thought she must have. It was lying on the bed, open and face down, when she straightened up after Miss Winston had left. Anna had picked it up and closed it, and put it on the table. Weigand said, "Um-m-m."

"You didn't," he asked, "happen to

notice what page it was opened to? Or what subject?"

Anna shook her head.

"It was open about the middle," she said. "I didn't notice exactly."

"No," Weigand said. "There was no reason why you should. Probably it doesn't matter."

He turned to Ashley.

"We'll be going, now," he said. "I'll send a man in for the papers in your sister's desk—he'll be right in. And I'll want to see your mother when she gets in tomorrow. You've got in touch with her, I suppose?"

ASHLEY had. He had persuaded her not to come in tonight, but to wait until morning. Weigand nodded, and led the way out of the bedroom. Downstairs, the maid who had admitted them waited in the foyer to show them out.

"A drink or something?" Ashley said. Mullins looked hopeful, but Weigand shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said.

Ashley turned into the living-room and the maid opened the door. But then she stepped through after them and closed it behind her, so that the latch just failed to catch. Weigand looked down at her. She was a slight, pretty thing, now pale and agitated.

"Yes?" he said.

She spoke rapidly, excitedly.

"I've got to tell you," she said. "You ought to know. They're married. I heard them tonight when they thought I wasn't around and they're married. He said, 'Now that we're married'."

"Who is this?" Weigand said. "Mr. Ashley?"

"Him," she said. "Buddy. And that singer girl. They're married, only nobody is supposed to know."

She spoke breathlessly.

"I tell you they're married!" she said. "And all the time he was—"

She broke off and looked up at Weigand. She was obviously about to cry.

"All right," he said. "I'm glad you told me. But I wouldn't worry about it—" He paused. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Mary," the girl said. "Mary Holden. But it doesn't matter."

Then, while he still looked at her curiously, she was through the door and had closed it behind her.

"Well," Mullins said, "what d'y know?"

"That Randall and his girl friend have hurried things a bit," Weigand told him. "And that Randall stands to lose a lot of money if it comes out. And that there is a chance his sister knew about it. What do you know, Mullins?"

"That this girl Mary is crazy about our Buddy," Mullins told him. "Is, or was. Right?"

"Right," Weigand said.

IT necessitated a change of plan, Weigand decided, riding down in the elevator. He had planned to send the detective who had been trailing Randall Ashley to get the papers in Lois' desk, and take them to Headquarters. But now he wasn't sure; he thought it might be worth while keeping an eye on Ashley. He looked speculatively at Mullins, and nodded to himself. Mullins caught the nod and interpreted it.

"Listen, Loot—" Mullins began. Weigand stopped him.

"You'd better go back and get those papers, Mullins," Weigand said. "Take them to Headquarters and sit on them. We'll keep Conroy on Buddy."

The elevator stopped at the ground floor. Weigand got out. Mullins looked resigned and stayed in, reascending. Outside, Weigand spoke a word to the loitering detective. Then Weigand, after a glance at his watch, found a telephone. He called Bellevue Hospital, asked for the Pathology Building and got it. He asked for Dr. Jerome Francis and, after a pause, got him.

"Well," said Weigand, "how're you coming?"

"Listen," Dr. Francis said. His voice sounded tired. "Did you ever do an autopsy?"

Weigand asked him what he thought.

"Well," Dr. Francis said, "did anybody ever tell you it takes time? Or that analysis takes time? Call me tomorrow afternoon. Or Thursday morning. Maybe I'll have something."

"No," said Weigand, "I can't wait that long. What have you got now?"

"She's dead," Dr. Francis said, with

heavy sarcasm. "I cut her up and she was dead. Thirty minutes for the autopsy, which is damned fast going, if you want to know." He paused. "Except for the head, of course," he added, honestly.

"What killed her?" Weigand asked.

"I'm telling you I don't know yet." Dr. Francis' voice tried patience. "She didn't die naturally, so far as I can tell. The organs are perfectly normal. Her pupils were dilated. So I think she got a parasympathetic poison—probably belladonna or atropine. But that's what I told you before."

"I want to know definitely what killed her," Weigand said. "Isn't there any way you can tell? How long will a chemical analysis take?"

"About two days," Francis told him.

"Any other way of telling?" Weigand wanted to know. Dr. Francis hesitated.

"Well," he said, "I can run a biological test. It won't be decisive, but it will tell something. And I guess we can spare a guinea-pig. Call me in the morning."

"No," Weigand said. "I'll come down and see you. And the guinea-pig. And you can tell me what it means." He hung up. Francis would be there; grumbling but there. Weigand got the Buick and rolled downtown toward Bellevue. He was thinking. He tried to tell himself he was thinking about the case, and tried really to think about the case. But Dorian kept coming in.

AT Bellevue he walked through the morgue, nodding to an attendant and not looking at the cupboards of the dead. In one of them, he supposed, was what remained of Lois Winston, who only a few hours ago must have been thinking of what she would do tomorrow. Francis was in the autopsy room. He was smoking a cigarette, gloomily. He wondered, audibly, if Weigand didn't know that even doctors sleep.

"So do detectives, when the chance arises," Weigand told him. "How's the test coming?"

"I was waiting for you," Francis told him. "Come along."

He led Weigand to the animal room but he ignored guinea-pigs, clustered softly in a cage. He went on, opened another cage and said, "Come on, kitty. Nice kitty." The nice kitty, a formidable gray bruiser with one devastated ear, hissed at him. Francis looked into the cage, doubtfully, and closed it.

"I think I'll get some gloves," he said. He got some gloves. "Andy doesn't like experiments," the doctor explained, opening the cage again. Andy emerged, well gripped and snarling.

"I thought you said a guinea-pig," Weigand said. "You can't fool me, Doc. That's a cat." Weigand looked at Andy, who sneered. "Quite a cat," Weigand said. "Do we have to kill a cat?"

"Who said anything about killing it?" Francis wanted to know. "And as for the guinea-pig—that was metaphor. Andy, here, is a metaphorical guinea-pig." He looked at Weigand, who regarded him questioningly. Francis seemed somewhat flustered. "Oh," he said, "all right, I did think of using a guinea-pig. They're always handy. But I checked up, and guinea-pigs won't do."

"Why?" Weigand wanted to know. "I thought guinea-pigs always did." Francis shook his head.

"Not for atropine," he explained. "Ginea-pigs eat it—thrive on it. In the wild state, anyway; we don't feed them atropine here. But they normally eat plants which have a large atropine content and don't turn a hair. They tolerate the poison so well, as a matter of fact, that it would take about as much atropine to kill a guinea-pig as it would to kill a man. And, of course, there's another difficulty."

"Is there?" Weigand's voice was mild.

Dr. Francis nodded.

"Human blood serum is almost as deadly to a guinea-pig as atropine is," he said. "If we injected enough blood to carry a normally lethal dose of atropine into the pig, the pig would die of the blood first. The atropine wouldn't make any difference. So I decided not to use a pig."

"I think you were very wise," Weigand assured the doctor, who looked at him suspiciously and then grinned.

"O.K.," he said. "O.K., I just looked it up. I don't carry everything in my head. Do you?"

"No," Weigand said. "How about the cat?"

FRANCIS had been holding Andy, who was still annoyed, pressed against the top of a laboratory table. He looked down at Andy, who looked up at him, balefully, the black pupils of his eyes large and indignant in the normally lighted room. Francis, keeping both hands on the cat, nodded toward the cat's eyes.

"See the pupils," he directed. "It seems light enough in here to us, but the cat's eyes know better. Out in the sun, the pupils would be slits. Now—here, hold him a minute."

Weigand held Andy down on the table and scratched behind a pointed ear. Andy seemed a little placated. Francis wheeled a hooded lamp over and turned it on. Powerful white light beat down on Andy and Wiegand's hands.

"Look at his eyes," Francis directed. Weigand looked. The pupils had narrowed to shut out the light.

"Now," Francis said, producing what appeared to be a medicine dropper, "I've got blood serum here, taken from Lois Winston's heart during the autopsy. I'll —hold that cat!"

Andy, taking advantage of Weigand's preoccupation, lurched under the detective's hands. Weigand's fingers closed, just in time, on departing hindquarters. Andy was rearranged.

"Hold his head up a little," Francis directed. Weigand got a finger under the cat's chin and lifted.

"Now," Francis said. "I'll put one drop of the serum in his right eye. Watch."

Francis, while Andy glared darkly at him, held the dropper over the cat's face. A drop came out. It hit the cat's nose, thanks to Andy's quick movement. Francis steadied the cat's head and dropped again. The second drop went into the right eye. Andy jumped convulsively under Weigand's hands, which this time were ready. Andy yowled.

"Watch the eye," Francis directed. Weigand watched. For a moment nothing happened. Then the pupil began to widen. The pupil of the left eye remained contracted against the light. Francis switched it off.

"No reason to blind the beast," he said. "You saw how they were. Now look at the right one."

The pupil of the right eye, now, was almost fully dilated. Even with the flood light off, the pupil of the left eye had dilated only a little. Andy looked oddly lopsided.

"O.K.," Francis said. "There's your test." He lifted Andy and put him back in his case. "All right, boy," he told the cat. "It'll wear off after awhile." He turned to Weigand.

"There you are," he said. "It was atropine, all right. There was enough atropine in the blood to dilate a cat's eyes —and enough to kill a girl. Probably administered in the form of atropine sulphate. Which dissolves in almost anything."

Weigand nodded.

"Good enough," he said. "Tell me about atropine sulphate."

DR. FRANCIS told him. Atropine sulphate was a drug used in medicine—in ophthalmology, for example; internally to check secretions; sometimes, in cases of surgical shock, to stimulate respiration and circulation. It acted by stimulating the higher nerve centers, while at the same time paralyzing the peripheral endings of the nerves of the autonomic system.

"Well, well," Weigand said. "Think of that. What does it look like?"

"It's a powder," Dr. Francis told him. "A white powder. No odor. No strong taste. At least, that's what they say. I never tasted it myself. The dose is very small, normally from one-two-hundredth to one-one-hundredth of a grain. A grain ought to kill a couple of people."

"How quickly?" Weigand wanted to know. Francis lifted his shoulders. It depended on the dose. Since it wasn't a custom to give lethal doses of atropine sulphate to humans, the data was incomplete. But from a few minutes to a couple of hours, depending on the size of dose, and other conditions.

"I'd say your subject got quite a dose," he added. "Probably about a grain."

It wasn't satisfactory, Weigand decided. Lois might have got the poison before she left home; she might have got it at the restaurant table shortly before she

collapsed. But that wasn't, obviously, Dr. Francis' fault.

"How would you get it?" he asked. "I mean, just walk into a drugstore and say, 'I'd like some atropine sulphate, please. About enough to kill a guy!'"

"Well," Francis said, "*I'd* requisition it. But—no I don't suppose you could get it at a retail store." He thought it over a moment.

"I'll tell you," he said. "You could go to a drug supply house and say you were a manufacturer and wanted some atropine sulphate. If you looked all right, or went to the trouble of having letterheads printed or something, they'd sell it to you. There's no law against it."

"What would I be manufacturing?" Weigand wanted to know.

"What?" said Francis. "Oh—eyewash, of course. It's used, in minute quantities, in several commercial eyewashes. Makes the eye bright and glowing. See advertisements."

"Really?" said Weigand.

"Sure," said Francis. "Doesn't do any great harm, probably. Or much good, of course."

Weigand thought it over.

"How much is a grain?" he asked. "I mean, as to bulk. A tablespoonful?"

Francis looked at him in surprise.

"The things you people don't know!" he said, sadly. "You could pick it up on the tip-end of an after-dinner coffee spoon. You could hold it between your thumb and forefinger."

"So," said Weigand gently, "the medical profession naturally refers to it as a 'massive' dose. Very illuminating, Doctor."

BUT the doctor, he decided as he left the Pathology Building, had been illuminating enough. He thought it wearily and looked at his watch. It was after one o'clock. He thought of things he might do tonight and thought he might do them, also, in the morning. He telephoned Headquarters and conferred with Mullins. The detectives who had questioned customers at the roof had made reports but Mullins thought there was little in them. Mullins was sitting on the papers. The laboratory had not reported on the contents of the glasses taken by young Kensitt from Lois' table.

"Well," Weigand said, "call it a night. But get in early."

He turned from the telephone and drove across and uptown to his apartment in the West Fifties. The telephone was ringing. Weigand scooped it up and said, "Yes? Weigand speaking."

"Pam North speaking," she told him. "I couldn't sleep and neither could Jerry. What? No, of course, I won't."

"Wait a minute, Pam," Weigand said. "What won't you?"

"Jerry says to tell you the only reason he can't sleep is that I keep talking," Pam said. "Only I won't, of course."

"No, Pam," Weigand said, "I wouldn't. What is it, Pam?"

"Well," said Pam, "have you found out who?"

"No, Pam."

"Or how?"

"Well," Weigand said, "as to that, yes. Somebody gave her something called atropine sulphate. A para-sympathetic drug."

"Oh, yes," Pam said. "Paralyzes the nerve endings of the sympathetic system. How awful!"

Weigand restrained his gasp.

"How—" he began, and thought better of it. "Somebody gave it to her in a drink," he said. "It would only take about a grain, the M.E. says."

"Well," Pam said, "how would they carry it around in a restaurant?"

He had her there, Bill Weigand decided. He said he was afraid she didn't realize how small in bulk a grain of atropine sulphate would be. One could carry it, he told her, between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh," said Mrs. North. "I see. You mean a pinch."

"What?" Weigand said. He was too tired to keep up, he decided.

"A pinch," Mrs. North told him. "Like a pinch of salt. Only in this case, a pinch of poison."

VII

ROUTINE awaited Lieutenant Weigand Wednesday morning at Headquarters. Mullins also awaited, reading the morning newspapers. He held one up and shook it as Weigand entered.

"The Herald-Trib got your name wrong

again, Loot," Mullins told him. "I before E."

"Well," said Weigand, who was grumpy and whose mouth tasted of coffee and last night's cigarettes. "Well, think of that." He spoke without pleasure. Mullins looked at him, and decided the point had better be waived.

"It's a very popular crime, Loot," he said. "Very popular. Except the war sorta gets in the way, of course."

"All right," Weigand said. He looked at his desk, which held papers in neat piles. "All right, sergeant. What's here?"

There was, Mullins told him, a lotta junk. There were reports from the detectives who had asked questions of late diners at the Ritz-Plaza roof after the murder. "Nothing in 'em," Mullins reported. There was the stenographer's transcript of the questions asked by Weigand himself. There was a copy of the formal, interim report, made by the offices of the Medical Examiner. Weigand knew more than it contained.

"And then there's the Inspector," Mullins added, glumly. Weigand nodded. There was always the Inspector. He looked at his watch and decided the Inspector could wait, for a few minutes. He read the transcript of the questions he had asked McIntosh, Buddy Ashley, Nicholas and the rest. He read fast, knowing his way, but exactly looking for things missed.

At one point he said, "Huh!" and made a note. Mullins, watching, made sounds of inquiry.

"Something we missed?" Mullins wanted to know.

"No," Weigand said. "I got it at the time. I was just checking to see whether I was right. As I was, Sergeant Mullins."

Weigand's voice was, Mullins decided, thawing.

"Yeh?" Mullins said.

"The reservation," Weigand told him. "At the roof. McIntosh says he didn't have one—at least, that seems clear from what he said. He didn't know where he was taking the girl until they got in the cab. But the head-waiter says there was a reservation for McIntosh and the list shows it was made at"—he consulted the list—"six-fifteen that evening."

"Screwy," Mullins said. He thought. "Say," he said, "this guy McIntosh ain't telling all he knows." He paused and looked at Weigand hopefully. "Maybe we ought to bring him in, Loot?" he said. "You know. Just ask him some questions, sort of?"

WEIGAND shook his head, and said they didn't know enough. It was, Weigand pointed out, merely something to keep in mind. There might be a perfectly harmless explanation. Mullins looked doubtful.

"Like what?" he said.

Weigand shook his head.

"You think of it, Mullins," he said. He went on through the transcript. It ran about as he remembered it. It was all clear enough, as far as it went—clear, at any rate, as to what people said had happened. But neither the people nor what they meant was entirely clear. Lois Winston was not entirely clear herself.

Weigand said "Um-m-m," thoughtfully, and the telephone rang on his desk. He said, "Yes?" and then quickly, "Right, Inspector." Mullins drew his face down dolefully and Weigand looked at him darkly. Then Weigand replaced the telephone smiled.

"We've got to have them," he said. "It's regulation. Now—"

Mullins was to get things rolling. He was to hurry the office of the City Toxicologist, in so far as was politic, for a final report on the poison which had killed the girl. The police laboratories, less diplomatically, were to be hurried in their reports on the contents of the identified flasks which contained the dregs of Lois Winston's glasses at the roof. And, because there was not really much doubt as to the poison, Mullins was to get men working on that. Briefly, Weigand told Mullins of the assistant medical examiner's guess about atropine sulphate, and his speculation as to how it might have been obtained.

"So," Weigand said, "we'll have to cover all the wholesale drug houses. It may be a job. What we want is a list of atropine sulphate purchases in the past few days. Where a purchase was made by a man they didn't know, we want all the details we can get."

"O.K., Loot," Mullins said.

"And," said Weigand, "we want it this afternoon. So get them started."

"Listen, Loot," Mullins started, but stopped when the lieutenant looked at him. "O.K." Mullins repeated with emphasis. "You want me to go along? Personally?"

"Why not?" Weigand said. "Only check in, in case I want you."

Mullins went. Weigand summoned Detective Stein, who was a bright young man and came in looking it.

"I want you to get hold of the Encyclopædia Britannica," Weigand told him. Detective Stein gulped, but kept on looking bright. "Not all of it," Weigand reassured him, seeing the gulp. "Volume Gunn to Hydrox."

"Yes sir," Detective Stein said, and waited.

"Start about a third through and make a list of general subjects," Weigand instructed. "I don't want names, or descriptions of cities or historical data. I want something that a young woman of twenty-seven or thereabouts, with plenty of money and O.K. socially but working as a volunteer for a social work agency, would be reading a few hours before she got poisoned."

Weigand looked at Stein, who looked rather baffled. Weigand smiled.

"I don't know what I want," he admitted. "I don't even know if it bears on what we're after—the guy who killed the Winston girl. But maybe it does. Work from about a third the way through the volume to about two-thirds of the way through."

"Yes, sir," Stein said. "She was reading it, you say?" Weigand nodded. "And left it face down somewhere opened about the middle?"

"Right," Weigand said. "So see what you can get me, Sherlock." But this tone was amiable and, Detective Stein decided, approving. Detective Stein, looking brighter than ever went out after Gunn to Hydrox.

WEIGAND looked after him, reached for the telephone and let his hand drop, and went in to see Deputy Chief Inspector Artemus O'Malley. O'Malley looked as if he had had a long, comfortable sleep. He was all brisk alertness, and ready to hear all about everything. Weigand told him what he knew. O'Malley nodded.

"The brother," he said, all having been made plain. "He figured the girl was going to tell their mother about the marriage. So he would have lost the money. He was there; he went to the table; he tells a thin story about a note, producing a note he probably wrote while he was waiting for you to come around. What do you want?"

"Well," Weigand said mildly, "a little evidence wouldn't hurt. Like an identification of little brother buying poison."

O'Malley was impatient.

"Sure," he said, "we'll get that. We'll bring the kid in and ask him some questions and maybe he'll spill it. Then he'll tell us where he got the poison and we'll have the guy who sold it to him come around and identify." O'Malley looked at Weigand, who seemed doubtful. O'Malley glared at Weigand, and said that Weigand looked to him like turning out to be one of the bright boys.

"Making things complicated," he said. "Not seeing the noses on their faces."

Weigand was mollifying. Probably the Inspector was right. Nevertheless—

"I want to dig around a bit yet," he said. "I think there are some angles. Like McIntosh and the reservation he didn't make, for example. Buddy will keep; we're camping on him."

IT took some time, but the Inspector mollified. He didn't, he admitted, want Weigand to work them into a jam. "This kid's got money, I suppose?" he said. "I mean his mama's got enough so they know people with money?" Weigand assured him that the kid knew such people. "Yeh," O'Malley said. "And they'd squawk." So, O'Malley admitted, they'd better sew it up first. As a matter of form.

"Only," he warned, "don't go losing sight of the kid. He's the guy we want, all right. We've just got to pin it on him."

Weigand agreed, watched for a pause, and said he had to see some people. O'Malley let him go. O'Malley called in the Headquarters men from the newspapers, told them that he, directing the case, had identified the poison as atropine sulphate and that he most confidently

expected to make an arrest very soon.

"Within twenty-four hours," the man from the Sun helped him.

"Twelve," said O'Malley, firmly. "An arrest is imminent."

Weigand, thankful to get on with it, picked up the telephone when he was back in his own office. He got David McIntosh on the wire and told McIntosh what he though McIntosh ought to know. Then he took up the reservation.

"No," David McIntosh said, decidedly. "I didn't make a reservation at the roof."

Weigand told him that, all the same, Nicholas had his name on the reservation list. McIntosh said he didn't know about that. Then he hesitated a moment.

"Come to think of it," he said, "there was something about a reservation. Oh, yes—when Lois and I got there, Nicholas said he had 'my table' and afterward Lois said I must have made a reservation. I told her that was merely Nicholas' way of getting good customers in ahead of outsiders who'd been waiting. But if there really was a reservation—well, I don't know."

"Don't you?" Weigand said. "All right, Mr. McIntosh."

IT wasn't so all right, however, he thought as he hung up. There was something fishy about it. He drummed on the desk, filed the fishiness for reference, and picked up the telephone again. He called Mrs. Gerald North, and got Mr. Gerald North.

Mr. North said, "Hello, Bill."

"I wanted to get Pam," Weigand explained. "She knows the head woman—Miss Crane, isn't it?—at this place where the Winston girl worked. I thought she might call Miss Crane up and pass along the word I was coming around—sort of soften the old dame up. What do you think?"

"Pam," Mr. North said, "is out somewhere. I'm very much afraid she is out detecting, Bill. But if she comes in, I'll tell her."

"Right," Weigand said.

"Only she isn't an old dame," Mr. North said. "Or not very."

"Listen, Gerald," Weigand said. "You're getting to talk like Pam."

"My God," said Mr. North, prayerfully. "Thanks for telling me, Bill. Why?"

"Who isn't an old dame?" Weigand asked.

"Oh," Mr. North said. "You had me worried. That was perfectly clear—Mary Crane isn't an old dame. Very pleasant, really. And in her middle forties, I should think. How're you coming?"

Weigand was, he told Mr. North, still going, in several directions.

"How about coming around for dinner tonight?" Mr. North suggested. "Maybe we could get Dorian in. Pam will want to hear everything."

Weigand said it sounded swell. And that he'd try. He cradled the telephone, left word that he would be at the Placement Foundation for an hour or so, and left Headquarters. The relative coolness of the morning was gone, he discovered. His car, which had been parked in the sun, was like an oven as he settled behind the wheel. He opened everything and rolled. The breeze was pleasant and he decided on more of it. He touched the siren and rolled faster. On occasion, he thought, it was comfortable to be a cop.

MRS NORTH seemed surprised and a little chagrined to see Weigand and said, "Oh!" Then she nodded.

"Of course, you would," she said. "Only I got here first. She doesn't."

"What?" said Weigand. "Please, Pam."

"Know why anybody would kill Lois Winston," Mrs. North said. "Obviously. Isn't that why you're here?"

Weigand looked across the desk at the woman who lived at it and discovered that she was smiling, amusedly. His own eyebrows went up like the shrug of shoulders. Mary Crane, assuming this was Mary Crane, as the lettering on the door promised, apparently was well acquainted with Pamela North.

"This is Miss Crane, Bill," Mrs. North said. "But I've already asked her, of course."

Lieutenant Weigand said, "How do you do, Miss Crane." And Miss Crane said, "Hello, Lieutenant. Mrs. North's been speaking of you."

Weigand saw why Mr. North had taken exception to the "old dame." Miss Crane was not, certainly, young. But she had no particular age. She was brown and

built solidly and her brown eyes looked as if she had seen a great deal and was still interested in seeing more. She wore a black silk suit that carried its own crispness and a soft, white blouse. She would not, Weigand guessed, be wearing flat-heeled shoes or a shapeless felt hat. He thought of cartoons of social workers and looked again.

"No," Miss Crane said. "You needn't be alarmed, Lieutenant. And sit down. Although there isn't much I can tell you, I'm afraid." Weigand sat and looked around the casual, rather dimly lighted office.

"Tell him about the Pickett," Pam North advised. She was looking unusually perky, Weigand thought, with a hat which wore a tiny red feather. The color of the feather identified as Mrs. North's the red straw bag lying on Mary Crane's desk.

"If he likes," Miss Crane agreed. "But it is obviously absurd. The Pickett, as Mrs. North says, is Ellen Pickett, a worker we had until about a year ago—Miss Winston took over some of her work."

"Oh, yes," Weigand said. "The one who thought Miss Winston had taken her job. I doubt whether—"

"No," said Miss Crane, decidedly. "Miss Pickett was very upset and just before she left she made a very difficult scene. She felt that Lois was an amateur who didn't need a job and who was taking hers. But it was just—well, difficult disposition on Miss Pickett's part. It was the disposition, really, which made us decide to let her go, rather than anything Miss Winston did."

"Although," Weigand pointed out, "there was some truth in what she said. Miss Winston was an amateur, and didn't need the job and there are, I suppose, only a certain number of jobs?"

IT didn't, Miss Crane told him, work out that way. There were, to be sure, only a certain number of paid jobs. "But there is all the work in the world," she said, and sighed faintly. "We could use twice as many workers as we have; when we find qualified volunteers it is—what shall I say?—so much velvet.

"Of which," she added after a moment, "there isn't too much here."

"And Miss Winston was qualified, I gather?" Weigand asked.

Miss Crane was succinct. "Very," she said. She had gone to the school of social work and had spent three years at the Foundation in a, more or less, probationary capacity. Then, because and only because, she was a useful worker they would have been glad to employ, she joined the regular staff of investigators. She took assignments like the rest, worked more or less the same hours—"with, naturally, some latitude," Miss Crane added—and was in every sense a staff employee, except that she was unpaid. Her status was unusual but by no means unique, Miss Crane explained. Most large, well-run agencies had one or two such volunteers on their staffs.

Weigand nodded and decided to clean up as he went along. Had Miss Pickett got another job, he wondered.

She had, Miss Crane told him. In Detroit in an agency— She paused, and sought words. "Which has somewhat different standards from ours," she said.

"The movie one," Mrs. North explained. "The one you're always reading about. *They don't keep any records!*"

Mrs. North spoke as if this were a rather dreadful thing, which came, Weigand thought, oddly from Mrs. North. He thought of investigating, out of sheer personal curiosity, and pushed the thought away. He wondered whether Miss Crane could tell him how Miss Winston had spent the previous day; her last day.

"As far as her work here went, I mean," he explained.

Miss Crane nodded. She already had got out the assignment record, she said. Miss Winston had been on an investigation during the afternoon, talking with prospective foster parents. Earlier she had been making a routine checkup at the Municipal Building.

"Yes?" Weigand said. "How was that?"

IT was, it seemed, simple enough. One of the Foundation's older wards—a girl of seventeen, who had not been adopted and was being partly supported by the agency—had made up her mind to

get married to a young boy of about her own age.

"We hoped she hadn't," Miss Crane said. "There were several reasons, none of which matter. We tried to reason her out of it."

They were not sure they had been successful and had suspected that the girl had got married anyway, falsifying her age. Miss Winston, with her own appointment several hours off, had volunteered to check at the Municipal Building on marriage licenses issued during the past week or two. That was what she had done Tuesday morning. Weigand, listening, said "Hm-m-m" with interest and the women looked at him.

"That hooks up with something," Mrs. North challenged. "When you sound that way, it always hooks up with something. Doesn't it?"

Weigand admitted that it might, but volunteered nothing. Mrs. North commanded with her eyes and he shook his head. "Later, maybe," he told her. He turned back to Mary Crane.

"In the afternoon," she said, "Lois seems to have gone to see some prospective foster parents—a Mr. and Mrs. Graham who live"—she consulted a card—"up in the Riverdale section of the Bronx."

"Where," Mrs. North wanted to know, "is that?"

It was, Weigand told her, the section the Henry Hudson Parkway ran through after it crossed the Harlem River. She looked puzzled.

"Ben Riley's," he explained.

She brightened, and then clouded suddenly.

"Isn't that still Manhattan?" she said. "I always thought so."

Weigand told her it was the Bronx, all right. But not the Bronx one usually thought of. He broke off suddenly, thinking.

"This investigation," he said. "This may sound foolish to you but—could there be anything dangerous in it? I mean, could she—or any worker—find out something that she shouldn't and—well, antagonize people?" He saw that Miss Crane was smiling, and smiled back, rather apologetically. "I suppose," he said, "I'm thinking of our kind of investigations—police investigations."

MISS CRANE said he probably was. Investigations of possible foster homes would not, she said, be at all likely to lead the investigators into dangerous situations.

"It is a little difficult to explain to a layman," she said. "Particularly against all the background of misinformation which has been built up in the layman. Our 'investigations' don't include any prying. They are conversations, chiefly — the worker talks to the prospective foster parents and tries to get to know them; she looks over their house and gets an idea about their financial standing. She asks them questions which, when they first apply for children, they are told will have to be asked. She sees neighbors and friends and relatives whose names the foster parents supply for that purpose. You can see there are a good many things we have to know, before we trust a child with strangers."

Weigand nodded.

"It is all done for the child, essentially," she told him. "But in some measure for the foster parents, too. The more we know about them, the better chance we have of—well, fitting them with a child. If the foster parents have been through college, for example, they will be happiest with a child who may, some day, go through college, and they would be disappointed with a child whose mind wasn't fitted for formal education. And we try to fit races and temperaments and—well, you can see it is something of a job."

"And Miss Winston was a good worker?" Weigand said.

"Very," Miss Crane told him. "She—well, it has been a very great shock to all of us, Lieutenant."

Weigand nodded. Pam North broke in.

"Are the Grahams the people who are going to get Michael?" she said. Miss Crane nodded.

"Michael?" Weigand echoed.

"The little boy we are thinking of placing with Mr. and Mrs. Graham," Miss Crane told him. "A child of about three. The placement seems to be very suitable, although Miss Winston's death will delay matters. She was handling it, and much of the investigation may have to be done over. I won't know until I have read her recent reports."

"Oh," said Weigand. He thought it over. Michael, he decided, didn't come in. He might see the Grahams, because it some times helped to find out what a person who had been murdered was doing and saying in the hours before death. It would be, just possibly, worth a trip to Riverdale. Meanwhile— He stood up and started to thank Miss Crane. He was glad, at any rate, to know that Lois Winston had had an opportunity to go over the marriage license lists at the Municipal Building. It would be interesting to find out whether, in searching them, she had run across a name more familiar to her than that of the wayward ward of the Placement Foundation.

"Listen," Mrs. North said, firmly. "I think you ought to hear about Michael. It's a very strange story and—well, you never know."

Weigand started to shake his head, and again met command in Pam North's eyes. She was, for some reason, rather eager about this, he decided. He looked at his watch. Another half-hour wouldn't make much difference, one way or the other.

"What," he said, "about Michael?"

MRS. NORTH looked at Mary Crane and nodded. Miss Crane seemed puzzled. She said she couldn't see what bearing it could possibly have. She looked at Lieutenant Weigand and smiled questioningly and he nodded, just perceptibly.

"If it doesn't take too long," he said. "We want to keep Mrs. North happy."

It wouldn't, Miss Crane agreed, take long. It was, like all the Foundation's case histories, confidential. "Mrs. North is on the committee, of course," Miss Crane explained. She looked a little bewildered about that, Weigand noticed. He merely nodded, barricading a sympathetic grin. The nod accepted the forthcoming information as confidential.

Michael, Miss Crane explained, was a little boy of three with a rather unusual history. He had come to the organization some six weeks earlier, being brought under care by a man who said he was the child's father. Miss Crane herself had eventually interviewed the man—an odd, unshaven man who looked ill and, eventually, said he was ill. He wore dark glasses, she said, and even so sat with his back to the window because the light hurt his eyes. He wanted to surrender Michael, his son, for adoption. He had not brought the boy.

"He said he was Richard Osborne," Miss Crane said. Osborne said he had been a draftsman, but recently had been too ill to work. He had been taking care of Michael by himself since his wife had left him, when they were living in San Francisco. He had come to New York on an offer of a job and had got it, but held it only a few months. That had been during the winter before. While he still had the job, he had begun to feel weak and ill and had looked around for someone with whom he could board the child. Through a man who worked with him he had heard of a woman—a Mrs. Halstead—who sometimes boarded children. She—Miss Crane stopped. She had been summarizing from a sheaf of papers on her desk, now and then checking her memory against something written there. Now she looked up.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I remember, now. I should have started back a bit. Mrs. Halstead lives up in Riverdale too, you see. But it isn't merely coincidence."

"Well," Weigand said, "let's finish with the boy."

THE boy's father, Miss Crane continued, had gone to see Mrs. Halstead, decided she would be suitable, and arranged to board the child there. He had done so until recently, paying seven dollars each week. For the past several weeks, however, he had been unable to pay.

That was because he had, recently, grown so ill that he could not continue to work. He had gone to a doctor and, on the doctor's advice, to the Veterans Bureau. A complete physical examination had followed.

"I'm a very sick man, Miss," he had told Miss Crane. From his description, he was indeed a very sick man. He had contracted tuberculosis and, in addition, had a serious heart condition. Those things were, he said grimly, in addition to an eye ailment he had had, off and on, for years. The upshot was that he had been accepted for care at a Veterans Hospital. Because of his lungs, they were sending

him to Arizona. But they were not hopeful.

"I am going to die very soon," he said. He said it matter-of-factly, Miss Crane remembered. Before he died, he wanted to make provision for Michael. He could no longer pay board to Mrs. Halstead, but he believed she would keep the child in any case. She had, he said, grown attached to Michael. But she was an old woman and, he had recently decided, a difficult one. "Cantankerous," he said. "I've heard—"

He had, he explained, heard indirectly that Mrs. Halstead was severe with Michael and irritable. He was sure that this was only on the surface; that at bottom the woman was deeply attached to the little boy. But she was too old to take permanent charge of him as Osborne suspected she now wanted to do. What he hoped was that the Foundation could take the boy under care and arrange, eventually, for his adoption by a couple nearer the right age.

"I don't want him brought up by an old woman," Richard Osborne had insisted. "And I can't care for him. I'm not going to live long enough."

He had, he said, somebody in mind. When he had heard that Mrs. Halstead was irritable with the child, he had gone to a park in which he knew Michael and the boarding mother went for walks. He had watched, and seen Mrs. Halstead pull at the child's arm, and snap at him irritably. And he had seen Michael run to another, much younger woman, who called him by name. Michael had run to this woman and it had seemed to the man, watching, that there was a flow of affection between them which was what he wanted for his son.

IT was that woman, or someone like her, he wanted for his child, he explained. Possibly that very woman, who had somehow got to know Michael in the park, and perhaps to care for him. He didn't know, of course, whether she would want to adopt the boy—so far as he knew she might have children of her own. But seeing her with his boy had made him realize more acutely than ever what the child should have. And it was that he wanted the Foundation to find for Michael. He wanted, he said, to surrender the child to the agency and have him cared for.

"I told him we could not accept a child without seeing him," Miss Crane explained. "We have to know whether children are suitable for adoption; sometimes, for various reasons, it is hopeless to try to find permanent, private homes for them. We told him that we would see the child and investigate conditions and let him know."

But he had insisted that that would not do. He was leaving for the hospital, he said, the next day; his transportation had already been arranged. He wanted things settled for the child before he went; doggedly, he kept insisting that he would die soon and that delay was impossible.

"It seemed to me a special case," Miss Crane said. "Finally I agreed on a compromise. Since he insisted, he could sign a release at once and authorize Mrs. Halstead to turn the child over to us. We would not be bound by it unless we found the child suitable for placement. If we did not, we would communicate with him and, if he could do nothing—I meant, really, if he was dead—we would have to turn the case over to the Department of Welfare. Finally he agreed to that and we let him sign the surrender, making us the guardians of the child."

IT was interesting, Weigand found. It had nothing to do with him, but it was interesting—interesting and worrying to think of this gaunt, dying man sitting in that room, trying to provide in some way for a little boy.

"Now," Miss Crane went on, "we go back—and this is coincidence. Checking up, we found that that was not the first time we had heard of little Michael Osborne."

A couple of weeks before Osborne came with his story about the child, Miss Crane said, a woman in her early thirties had come to the agency and had asked to see Miss Crane. She had come about a little boy she had met with an old woman—a strange old woman, she said—in a park in Riverdale. She had met the two often and, because he was a charming little boy and she was childless, she had talked to him and petted him. "I've always wanted children," she said to Mary Crane, simply.

She had discovered, through talking to the woman, that the child was not related to the elderly woman; that she had been caring for him on a boarding basis, but had grown very fond of him and was beginning to think she might adopt him. It made the younger woman suddenly think that perhaps she might have the little boy for her own.

"The woman is too old to take care of him," the visitor had told Miss Crane. "She is cross with him—rough. I don't think he ought to be living there, in that dark old house."

The woman, who said she was Mrs. Graham, had gone home with the old woman and the little boy, once, and seen the house. "All run down," she said. "A strange, dark barn which must have been there on the hill for ages. Awful for a little boy."

Mrs. Graham wanted the agency to do something to investigate and to take the child from the old woman and the strange, dark house. And then, if they thought it advisable, let her have the child. But that last was only if they thought best; in any case, the child must be got out of that house.

MISS Crane had told her, gently, that there was nothing they could do, directly. They might—or she might—take the matter up with the authorities, although it was not likely that the authorities would intervene. The Placement Foundation was a private charity and, although it worked closely with the Department of Public Welfare, had no official standing. So it could do nothing. Mrs. Graham had showed disappointment but had seemed to understand and had said she would think it over. Perhaps, if it finally seemed to her best, she might go to the authorities herself. Then, as she was going, she had stopped, suddenly, and asked whether the Foundation could get her a child.

"We told her, of course, that we were always glad to get applications from possible foster parents," Miss Crane said. "I had Miss Winston come in and she talked it over with Mrs. Graham and eventually took her application. It was on file when Michael's father came to us and wanted to surrender the child. Then—"

Miss Crane stopped suddenly, and looked at Mrs. North in a suddenly surprised way.

"You know, Mrs. North," she said, "perhaps you were right, all along. Perhaps there *is* a connection."

Miss Winston, Miss Crane said, had gone to see the child at Mrs. Halstead's and found conditions much as the child's father and Mrs. Graham had described them. The child's situation was not good, the environment, including Mrs. Halstead herself as part of it, definitely unsuitable. She had also reported that Michael was a nice, alert little boy, almost certainly suitable for adoption. As a result, the Foundation had decided to take the child from Mrs. Halstead's, acting on the strength of the father's surrender and his note to Mrs. Halstead. Miss Winston had gone alone first to get the child, and had run into a tirade of abuse from Mrs. Halstead, who refused to give him up. There had been nothing to do, then, but to bring the police in and in the end the child had to be removed almost forcibly.

"Mrs. Halstead was a strange old woman, apparently," Miss Crane said. "She was almost frantic. She railed at Miss Winston and threatened her and only calmed down when the police officer proposed to take her into magistrate's court with a view to having her committed to Bellevue for observation."

Weigand said, "Hm-m-m" and then:

"What kind of threats, do you know?"

It might, Miss Crane said, be on Miss Winston's report. She turned back through the sheaf of papers, found a place and read:

"June 3. Agent went to Mrs. Halstead's to remove Michael, accompanied by a patrolman, since Mrs. Halstead had been abusive on a previous visit. She was again abusive, threatening agent violently and screaming, 'You're going to pay for this!' and other abuse. The child was removed and taken to boarding home in Queens."

Weigand said "Hm-m-m" again.

"Right," he said. "And the child is still in Queens?"

"Yes," Miss Crane said.

"No," Mrs. North said, at about the same time. She shook her head at Miss Crane and added: "He's right here. Seeing the doctor or something. I saw him when I came in. Wait."

NOBODY tried to stop her, which was as well. She went out and down a corridor, leaving Weigand and Miss Crane to look at each other, slightly baffled. Mrs. North returned with a small, blond boy who was riding in her arms and trying to catch a watch, shaped like a little silver ball, which dangled from her neck. He grabbed it and examined it carefully. He turned it over and beamed at it and made appreciative sounds. At the back, a rounded crystal left the busy works entirely visible.

"Wheels!" said Michael Osborne, quite clearly and in evident ecstasy. He pulled at the watch as Mrs. North put him down.

"No, Michael," she said. "Break. You mustn't break my watch." She cast an eye around. "Here," she said, dangling the red purse. "Pretty."

Michael looked and was not interested.

"He doesn't seem to like purses," Mrs. North said. She looked at the purse. "Of course," she said, "he's perfectly right, really. There's nothing in it."

Michael was diverted, with some effort, by the offer of Weigand's sturdier wristwatch. He shook it briskly, said, "Ticks" with enjoyment, and then suddenly put it down on the floor.

"Go, now," Michael said, and walked firmly to the door. There was no diverting him this time. Convoyed by Mrs. North, Michael went.

Weigand and Miss Crane smiled after him. He was, they agreed, an amiable child. One could see why he had instantly attracted Mrs. Graham and why she had wanted to get so much small sunniness out of a dark house. Weigand was rising again as Mrs. North returned. Then he remembered something and took from his pocket the reservation list Nicholas had given him. Would Miss Crane, he asked, run down it and see whether she recognized any names as connected with Miss Winston? She looked doubtful.

"There's always a chance," he said.

Miss Crane looked down the list, shaking her head. She was almost at the bottom before she stopped and reread a name. Then she held it up so that Weigand could see and pointed. Weigand read.

"Well," he said. "Now that *is* interesting."

"What?" said Mrs. North.

Weigand showed her the name well down on the list.

"Barton Halstead," she read.

She looked at Weigand, without surprise.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. North, gently, "this will teach you to pay some attention to what I tell you."

VIII

BEFORE he left Mary Crane's quiet office at the Foundation, Weigand sought a more precise description of Michael's father—always assuming, he thought, that the man who had introduced himself as Richard Osborne *was* the father of Michael. He did this on the theory of cleaning up, so far as possible, as he went along. He still could not believe, in spite of Mrs. North, that Michael would prove to have much to do with his problem. And even if Michael did, Weigand realized after Miss Crane had done her descriptive best, Michael's father was apt to remain nebulous.

When Osborne had complained of his eyes, Miss Crane said, she had had her secretary switch off the overhead lights, so that only a desk light and shadowy illumination from a window which opened on a court had remained. As a result, it had never been particularly clear what Osborne looked like. He was youngish, she thought, but his hair was beginning to show gray. His face was thin and shadowed; he hadn't shaved for a day or so, apparently. The dark glasses effectually hid his eyes, and with them those telltale lines which gather around eyes, telling of age and health and, often, of disposition. He was shabbily dressed, but it was hard to put a finger on the shabbiness—a blue suit, rather worn; run-down brown shoes; a tie which had been knotted too often. Miss Crane reviewed her description privately and said she was sorry.

"He looked ill and he looked thin," she said. "He might have been almost any age from the middle twenties to the middle thirties. I'm sorry; there was nothing about him that stood out, except that he was obviously ill. You could tell that from the way he moved."

"Or, of course," Weigand pointed out, "that he wanted you to think so. An un-

certainty of movement could be assumed. Even a day's growth of beard makes any thin man look unhealthy."

"Yes," Miss Crane said. She was vexed with herself. "I should have observed more closely, but of course I expected further information. We are waiting for a report on him from the Veterans Hospital."

She had no reason, Weigand told her, to think it was particularly important. Probably, as a matter of fact, it would turn out not to be particularly important.

Pam North walked to the elevator with him and rode down. She said why didn't he come to dinner, and that they would have Dorian if they could.

"And Mullins," she said. "I miss Mullins."

Weigand said it would have to be left open, and that he would bring Mullins if possible.

"Don't forget Michael," Mrs. North said, and waved eagerly at a taxicab.

"What?" said Weigand.

"Important," Mrs. North told him, leaning from the window of the cab as it started up. "I think it's Michael—"

Mrs. North and the taxicab went around a truck and vanished. Weigand found a telephone and got Headquarters. Things were going along. Mullins was assisting, personally, in the search for a man who had bought atropine sulphate. A report on the contents of the glasses from which Lois Winston had drunk at the Ritz-Plaza roof had come in. One of the glasses had contained water. The contents of the other was more complicated. Headquarters read over the report to Weigand. It was detailed and confusing.

"Did they say what that meant?" he inquired.

They had. It meant rum, Coca-Cola and a little lime juice—in other words a Cuba Libre.

"No atropine?" Weigand insisted.

"It don't say so," Headquarters told him. Weigand said, "Damn!" Then he dictated a wire to be dispatched to a Veterans Hospital in Arizona, inquiring about one Richard Osborne. He left word that if Mullins came in, he was to be held. He hung up and stared at the telephone. Then he dialed another number and got David McIntosh. There was, he told McIntosh, one question. Was he certain that Lois had had only one Cuba Libre?

"Yes," McIntosh said. Then he paused. "Come to think of it," he said, "I'm not absolutely sure. What happened has put it out of my head. She may have had two—I'm not certain."

WEIGAND thanked him without enthusiasm and hung up. So young Frank Kensitt's carefully gathered evidence was worth precisely nothing. The drink left on the table was innocent, but there might have been an earlier one which was guilty—guilty, and removed when the second was served, and long since vanished. And now there was no evidence to show whether the poison had been administered at the roof or elsewhere. "Screwy," Weigand told himself, in the absence of Mullins. He looked up another number and dialed again, getting a voice at the Ashley apartment. Then he got Anna. He wanted Anna to remember something.

"After Miss Lois came home yesterday afternoon, did she drink anything?" he wanted to know. There was silence while Anna thought. Then there was guesswork. Miss Lois might have had a drink with Mr. Randall and his friends when she first came in. Afterward, in her room, she might have drunk water from the thermos on the table by her bed. Anna wouldn't know.

"The thermos was full when I was there," Weigand told her.

That, Anna told him, was natural. When Miss Lois had gone out, Anna had straightened up in the room. She had turned back the bed. She had also emptied and refilled the thermos. Was it full when she emptied it? She hadn't noticed. She was sorry.

"There was no reason why you should," Weigand said. "Although I'm sorry too. Has Mrs. Ashley returned?"

Mrs. Ashley had. She was in her room, lying down. She had been almost hysterical earlier and a physician had been called to care for her. He had, Anna supposed, given her a sedative.

"If she's well enough, I'd like to talk to her later today," Weigand said. "Will you tell her, please?"

Anna would tell her. Weigand hung

up again, feeling that he was hurrying on a treadmill. He telephoned Headquarters again and directed that a man be sent to check on recently issued marriage licenses and told what was to be looked for. He found that Mullins had returned and got him on the phone. Mullins said that things were moving and that here was a funny thing, Loot. It seemed, he said, like David McIntosh had been making reservations all over town.

"What?" asked Weigand.

The manager of the Crescent Club, on the East River, had telephoned in to volunteer information, after he had read of the case in the newspapers. David McIntosh had telephoned to the reservation office there a little after six the previous evening and engaged a table, stipulating that it be near the dance floor. He had never claimed the table.

"Screwy, ain't it?" Mullins said. Weigand said it was.

"Mr. McIntosh seems to have been a little confused," Weigand said. He considered. "Or," he said, "somebody has been making reservations for Mr. McIntosh; somebody who wanted the girl and him to sit near the dance floor."

"That don't make sense," Mullins told him, firmly. Weigand said it might.

"If a table is near the dance floor," Weigand explained, "a lot of people pass it, going from their tables to dance and coming back. Doesn't that mean anything, sergeant?"

Mullins digested it and said, "Say!

"For dropping things in drinks," he said, "it would be about perfect, Loot."

"Right," said Weigand. "Stay there and handle anything that comes in," he instructed. "I'll keep calling. I'll probably be in during the afternoon. You're invited to the Norths' for dinner, by the way."

"O.K., Loot," Mullins said. "That'll be swell."

"If," Weigand told him, "you get to go. The chances are you'll be working, sergeant."

He hung up while Mullins was getting a protest phrased and left the telephone. He retrieved his car and worked west, suffering traffic lights patiently. He drove under the express highway for some blocks and then climbed a ramp to it. He rolled north along the highway, then along the Henry Hudson Parkway, and might have been anybody driving out of town. But in the Riverdale section he turned off, looped and crossed the Parkway on an overhead. He worked through quiet streets beyond the row of new apartment buildings fronting the Parkway, dipped over the hill and went downgrade toward the river. The old houses there were older; it was a backwater in New York.

MRS. EVA HALSTEAD'S house was, Weigand decided, probably the oldest of them all. It was a big, square house of damp-looking brick, set far back in a garden of weeds. An uneven brick path ran to a porch which was massive but tottering. Boards bent under Weigand's feet as he crossed to the door. He pressed on a bell and nothing happened. He knocked and then knocked more loudly. A dog barked shrilly somewhere inside and Weigand waited. The heavy door opened a crack and a smell of dust and cabbage emerged. A voice, harsh and forbidding, followed.

"Well, young man?" the voice said. "I don't want anything."

"Mrs. Halstead?" Weigand said. "I'm not selling anything."

"Then go away," the voice told him, and the door's crack narrowed. For the first time in years, Weigand put a foot in a door. His voice became authoritative.

"This is the police, Mrs. Halstead," he said. "Police Lieutenant Weigand. I want to talk to you about Miss Lois Winston."

"Killed," Mrs. Halstead said. "And none too good for her. Stealing children." But the pressure against Weigand's toe relaxed. The door opened reluctantly and revealed Mrs. Halstead. It also revealed a rather dirty and very fat white dog and a thin, very clean gray cat. The cat emerged and rubbed against Weigand's legs.

"Come here, Toby," Mrs. Halstead said, sternly in a harsh, cracking voice. The cat turned and went in, leaving Weigand impressed. He thought of the Norths' cat, Pete, and his inscrutable ignoring of all commands, and was more than ever impressed. He looked at Mrs. Halstead.

She was in all respects formidable. She

was heavy and tall and an old, wrinkled face met the world implacably. Her lips were a slit above a jutting chin, and a heavy nose hooked over them. She was dressed stiffly in black silk and a boned net collar guarded a wrinkled throat. Weigand tried to remember when last he had seen a boned net collar and Mrs. Halstead frowned.

"Well, young man?" she said. "Are you through staring at an old woman?"

"I have been instructed to talk to you," Weigand said, evenly and inaccurately. "I think we might both be more comfortable inside."

MRS. HALSTEAD withdrew stingily and permitted entrance. The hallway, which split the house down the center, was musty and damp, and the odor of cabbage was stronger. When Mrs. Halstead looked firmly at Weigand and he still did not go away, she led him to a door on the right and entered, leaving him to follow. Overpowering heat met him at the threshold. The room, with shades drawn over closed windows, was stifling. Mrs. Halstead sat in a dirty morris-chair and faced Weigand.

"She ought to have been killed," Mrs. Halstead said. "I ought to have done it myself."

"Did you?" Weigand asked. It seemed possible that if she had she would say so, and stare him down.

"No," she said. "You're a fool, young man." She seemed, however, slightly more tolerant.

The cat crossed the room and jumped on her lap. She let it stay. A heavy, veined hand stroked its back.

"But you were at the Ritz-Plaza roof," Weigand asserted. "With your son."

"My son was killed twenty years ago," she said. "In the war; the other war. Barton Halstead is my nephew."

"But you were at the roof with Barton Halstead," Weigand insisted.

"Certainly," she said. "Since he was kind enough to ask me." There was hard emphasis on the word "kind." "Barton occasionally remembers a duty to poor relations," she said. She studied Weigand's face and something like a smile broke against her chin and lapped its way to her lips. "Because I knew he'd hate it," she said. "He thought I wouldn't go. So I went. It was very trying for Barton."

She seemed to relish Barton's discomfiture, in retrospect. The smile ebbed.

"Very well," Weigand said. "You threatened Lois Winston, Mrs. Halstead. You were present on the roof when she was killed."

"She was poisoned," Mrs. Halstead said. "I suppose somebody put something in her glass?"

"You guess well, Mrs. Halstead," Weigand said, without expression.

"Don't be silly, young man," Mrs. Halstead said. "Can you see me sneaking over to a table, without anybody noticing?"

WEIGAND looked at her. He had to admit he couldn't. He kept the admission to himself, however. There might have been some other way.

"I swore at her when she stole Michael," Mrs. Halstead said. "Michael was all I had and I was good to him. There was no foolishness, but I was good to him. She and those damned social pryers stole him." She glared at Weigand. "And the police," she added, with rancor.

"I have nothing to do with that, Mrs. Halstead," Weigand said. "I don't want to argue about it. You did threaten Miss Winston. She is dead. You were around when she was killed.

"And," he added, "Michael wasn't yours. He had a father."

Mrs. Halstead sat up in the old morris-chair and stared at Weigand.

"So you know about that, do you, young man?" she said. "What do you know about that?"

Merely, Weigand told her, that Michael's father had asked that the child be removed from her care, since he could no longer pay board, and that the father was ill and in a hospital in the West.

"You know that, do you?" she said. There was a kind of cackle in her voice, and an odd emphasis on "know."

"That's the record," Weigand said. "What do you know about it?" He felt that he was being led down a side-path, but curiosity pulled him along.

"What should *I* know about it, young man?" Mrs. Halstead said. "A man brought the boy here and arranged for me to board him. I did. The man sent a

money order each Saturday and I got it on Monday. I spent the money on the boy."

"Precisely," Weigand said. "Then he stopped sending the money and sent somebody to get the boy. You wouldn't give the boy up and the police were called. You threatened Miss Winston."

"She stole him," Mrs. Halstead said. "He wasn't hers. He was mine, more than anybody's."

"More than his father's?" Weigand said. Mrs. Halstead stared at him.

"Who was his father, young man?" she demanded, her voice harsh. "Do you know that?"

"No," Weigand said. "I only know what a man said. What difference does it make?"

MRS. HALSTEAD stood up. The chair creaked as she left it and the floor as she joined it. The cat skidded to the floor.

"You'd better find out, young man," she said. "Before you start accusing old women. I'm an old woman, Lieutenant. Nobody helps *me.*"

The last was cryptic. Mrs. Halstead was cryptic. The heat made Weigand faintly dizzy. He stood up, too.

"If you know anything, Mrs. Halstead, I would advise you to tell me what it is," he said. "Did you kill the girl?"

She seemed to think it a reasonable reiteration.

"No," she said. She said it almost pleasantly.

"Do you think you know who did?" Weigand asked.

"I could," she said. "And I couldn't."

There was an odd expression in her eyes, Weigand decided. She was an odd old woman, living in an odd old house. There was no telling what she meant.

She was vague about the time she had spent at the roof. She gave Barton Halstead's home and business addresses with evident pleasure, clearly hoping he would be annoyed. Barton Halstead's business affiliation gave Weigand occasion for thought. He was with the Larmey-Fencott Drug Corporation. Mrs. Halstead watched his face.

"They probably have plenty of poisons," she assured him. "Only I'm afraid Barton never met Miss Winston." She seemed unhappy about this. "But of course he could have got some poison and given it to me," she said. Her ancient eyes gleamed. "He'd love to give me poison," she said, and laughed. Her laugh was an oddly shocking titter. Weigand felt, and suppressed, sympathy with her nephew Barton Halstead. He told Mrs. Halstead that he would see her again.

"When you know something," she said. "Do. Although probably I won't let you in. Now go away so I can eat my dinner."

Weigand thought of what was apparently a boiled dinner, at midday in the musty heat of the old house, and went gladly. He went across the creaking porch and down the worn brick path and knew, as surely as if he had seen her, that Mrs. Halstead was staring after him from behind the shade of one of the windows. He stopped at the nearest telephone and directed that a man be put on Mrs. Halstead. She would know it, of course. Any watch kept near enough to the old house to be of use would be plainly evident to the watched. He hoped it would give her something to think about.

HE sat at the wheel of his car, turned into a patch of shade, and drummed against the horn rim with his fingers. Where, he wondered, am I?

Reasonably, he told himself, I am midway of a chase for wild geese. Inspector O'Malley probably was right; the case was fundamentally simple. It was Randall Ashley killing for money—a motive hallowed in fiction and, equally, in fact. For Ashley one had motive, opportunity and, if it were as easy to procure atropine sulphate as Dr. Francis said, means. He seemed merely a spoiled, sulky young man, but spoiled and sulky young men were not badly adapted for murder. They lacked consideration, for one thing, and a murderer must be ruthless of others for his own ends. Expecting things to come easily, they might well turn nasty when things didn't. Almost certainly, their man was young Ashley.

And so he, a police lieutenant who ought, from experience, to know that in police matters the most obvious is the most likely, was in a far corner of the Bronx pursuing the ghosts of notions—

talking to strange, but probably harmless, old women in smelly old houses, wondering about the paternity of little boys. It was Mrs. North who had started him on this, Weigand realized; Mrs. North with her insistence that little Michael fitted in somewhere. And Mrs. North was nobody's guide in matters of detection. Or, on second thought, wasn't she? The trouble was, you couldn't tell.

"So, as long as I'm up here—" Weigand said to himself, but half aloud. He started the motor, swung the car and sought another address. The Graham house was large, too, when he found it. But it sat on a clipped lawn, with trees shading it, and Venetian blinds guarded open windows from the sun. The bell rang at the Grahams' and a small dark maid answered it, and would see whether Mrs. Graham was in to Lieutenant Weigand.

Mrs. Graham was a small woman with fluffy, blond hair and intense blue eyes. There was a kind of hurried eagerness in her movements as she crossed the cool living-room to Weigand and said, "Oh, Lieutenant . . . about Miss Winston?"

Weigand was, he said, sorry to bother her. It was a matter of routine.

"In these cases," he said, "we try to discover all we can about the victims' actions immediately preceding the crime. I understand Miss Winston visited you yesterday afternoon?" Mrs. Graham nodded, grave now.

It was, Weigand told her, hard to say what he wanted. Probably there was nothing, but he would like to hear anything she could tell him—anything about how Miss Winston seemed, what she said—anything at all that she, Mrs. Graham, thought pertinent in the light of what had happened. Mrs. Graham nodded and then, after a moment, shook her head.

"She was very normal," she said. "Just as I'd seen her several times before. She was cheerful and, after we had talked a little about Michael, we had iced tea and —just talked. My father joined us for a few minutes and we—oh, merely talked about New York and how hot it could get. My father lives in Hartford, you see, and just happened to be here. It was all—inconsequential."

"You had got to know Miss Winston rather well, I take it," Weigand said. Mrs. Graham said, "Yes," warmly.

"She had come to see me several times because of our application for a child from the Foundation," she said. "She came first after we applied and then to tell us about Michael and then once or twice later—to ask about references and things like that. They like to find out all they can about families, you know. To protect the children."

"So you had grown quite friendly," Weigand said. "Got to like each other?"

"I had got to like her very much," Mrs. Graham said. "I don't know how she felt—but yesterday she stayed longer than she needed to, just to talk, so I suppose—I was terribly shocked last night when I heard about it."

"Oh," Weigand said. "You heard last night? How was that?"

IT was, Mrs. Graham said, simple. Her husband had read about it in the papers and when he came home told her, because he had recognized the name of the girl killed as that of the agent who was seeing them about Michael.

"We were both terribly worried," she said. "And sorry, too, of course. But worried about Michael—about getting him. Do you suppose that Miss Winston's death will, somehow, hold things up?" She looked at Weigand, her blue eyes darkly intense. "We both so want Michael," she said. "And already we've waited a long time."

About that, Weigand said, he had no idea. Speaking as an outsider he didn't see why the death of the agent handling a placement should more than temporarily delay the placement. He advised her to call Miss Crane and find out.

"Oh, I will," Mrs. Graham said. "That's what John said. John is my husband."

Weigand nodded.

"By the way," he said, "about what time was it that he told you of the murder? It must have been rather late, I suppose; there couldn't have been anything about it in the earliest editions of the tabloids." He tried to remember. The standard-size papers came out about 11:30; they might have had something, probably did. He waited for an answer.

There was a moment of hesitation.

"Oh," she said, "John was very late last night—something at the office. It was almost one when he got in. Then we sat up talking until after two. About Miss Winston and Michael."

That fitted, Weigand decided. Assuming John Graham had been something of an owl on Tuesday night, or devoted to his work.

"By the way," he said. "We have to clutter the record with all sorts of facts, most of them of no importance. What is Mr. Graham's business connection?"

Mrs. Graham looked surprised. Weigand couldn't blame her.

"Why," she said, "he's office manager for a perfumery manufacturer. Henri et Paulette. It's an American firm, really, but the name—well, it just seemed to sound better, I guess."

Weigand made a note of it without any great conviction that it was a note he would ever have cause to refer to.

"Going back to yesterday afternoon," he said. "I would appreciate it if you would make a special effort to remember Miss Winston—how she behaved and what she said. I mean, the smallest thing might have importance. Something she said—about people she was going to meet, or things she was going to do—the little things that people let drop—something like that might help us."

HE waited. Mrs. Graham was dutiful in her concentration. After a few moments she shook her head.

"I can't think of anything at all," she said. "We talked about Michael, as I told you. We talked about the heat. She said she would be glad when evening came and it got cooler, and something about going to a restaurant where it would be cool. She said something—oh yes, she said, 'It will be nice not to be a working girl for a while.' I'd heard that she had a lot of money, really, and didn't need to work, and just did it for the children. And so once or twice we'd laughed about her being a 'working girl.'"

Weigand said he saw.

"I suppose," he said, "she didn't mention where she was going. I mean any specific place?"

There was, he thought, a momentary hesitation, as if Mrs. Graham were thinking before she answered. Then she said, "No." He waited an instant longer.

"No," Mrs. Graham said, "I'm quite sure she didn't. She just said some place where it would be cool. That might be any place, of course, with everything air-conditioned."

Weigand agreed. He was a little puzzled, momentarily, and for the first time wondered fleetingly whether Mrs. Graham had told all she knew. But there seemed to be no reason why she should boggle at telling him if Lois Winston had mentioned the Ritz-Plaza roof. He let the incident click into a suitably inconspicuous place in his memory and started to speak again. But there was a slight sound at the door and a man stepped in from the hall and stopped, smiling in the deprecatory way of one who interrupts.

HE was a spare, tall man with a thin, pleasant face and he was, Weigand guessed, in his late fifties although he carried years well. Old for Mr. Graham, Weigand thought, and then Mrs. Graham looked up.

"Oh, hello, Dad," she said. "How's Father Graham? Lieutenant, this is my father, George Benoit. Dad, this is Lieutenant Weigand from Police Headquarters. He has been asking about Miss Winston—you remember I told you?"

"Yes," George Benoit said to her. His voice, like his face, was pleasant. "How do you do, Lieutenant? Your father-in-law is very wide awake today Margie. He wants to know what the policeman wants."

"What?" said Mrs. Graham. Her voice was surprised. "Now, how on earth did he know there was a—a policeman here?"

"I don't know," her father told her. "He was sitting by the window and looking out and he said, all at once, 'Margaret is seeing a policeman. I want to know why.' So I came to find out."

"How on earth?" Margaret Graham inquired, looking at Weigand helplessly. He smiled.

"There's a police shield on the car," he explained. "I suppose your father-in-law saw it, and saw me come in."

"Well," Benoit said, "he wants to see

you, Lieutenant. He said 'Send that policeman up here.' "

"Oh dear!" Margaret Graham said. "Now what?"

She looked at her father ruefully, and he smiled.

"You know Cyrus, Margaret," he said. "If policemen are in his house he wants to see them. He's not going to let anything go on he's not in on. He wouldn't be Cyrus Graham if he did."

Margaret Graham sighed and looked inquiringly at the lieutenant.

"Would you?" she asked. "He'll wear us out afterward if you don't. You see he is—well, he has a strong will, and it has got all the stronger since he's been so sick."

Weigand looked at his watch. It was after one and he had had no lunch. Also he had things to do and people to see, among whom he saw little reason to include Cyrus Graham. But Cyrus, whatever else he might be, and however apparently far from any conceivable line of investigation, was clearly an observant gentleman.

"Well—" Weigand said, slowly standing.

"It needn't take but a few minutes," Mrs. Graham assured him. "And it would be very kind of you. He hates to be out of things so, and it is very bad for him to be excited. And he is always excited when he doesn't get his own way."

"I gather," Weigand said, "that your father-in-law can't get around?"

LEADING him toward the door, Mrs. Graham nodded. She stopped for a moment in the hall and amplified. Cyrus Graham, John Graham's father, had been ill for several years—so ill that he could not leave his wheel-chair and was not permitted the slightest exertion. "It's his heart, chiefly," she said. "He may collapse at any moment. And several years ago he had a stroke—everybody thought he was going to die then. But he just didn't, somehow—the doctor said it was almost a miracle. It's almost four years, now, and he doesn't get any better or any worse."

"He seems active enough mentally, anyway," Weigand said. She agreed to that.

"He always was," she said. "And his mind hasn't changed—or not much. He's crotchety and a little querulous, as it's perfectly natural he should be, and he was always—well, he always wanted his own way. But he sees things."

She led him up wide stairs to the second floor and along a long corridor. She knocked on a door near the end and a nurse opened it and smiled without giving anything away. Margaret said, "Good-afternoon, Miss Nelson. May we see your patient?"

Miss Nelson opened the door for them, still smiling from a distance. An old, thin voice said, "Come in! Come in!" Cyrus Graham was sitting in a wheel-chair by a window which opened on the street. He was emaciated so, that it seemed that the light from the window might shine through him. There was a little fringe of white hair around his head and the skin on top of his head was almost bluish white. He had long fingers on the hand he raised shakingly and he pointed one of them at Weigand.

"You're a policeman, sir!" he said. "Don't tell me you aren't!"

"I wasn't going to, Mr. Graham," Weigand said. He spoke gently. "I am Lieutenant Weigand, of the Homicide Bureau. I just stopped to ask your daughter-in-law a few questions. It is nothing."

"Nothing?" said the old man. "Of course it's nothing! About that Winston girl, eh?"

"Yes," Weigand said.

"Margaret didn't do it!" the old man said, and then he laughed, a little, creaking laugh. Weigand smiled in response and said he hadn't thought so. It was merely, he explained, that Mrs. Graham was one of the last to see Miss Winston before her death, and that as a matter of routine—

"Routine!" the old man said. Everything he said seemed propelled from his lips by a tiny inward explosion. "Don't talk to me about routine! You sound like that damned nurse!"

"Well," said Weigand, rather lamely, "that was all it was. Just checking up."

"She was a nice little thing," Cyrus Graham said, irrelevantly. "She was up here once. Told me about things. They think I don't know about things, you know."

"I imagine," Weigand said, still gently, "that you find out."

The old man laughed his creaking little laugh.

"YOU'RE damn right, son!" he said. "You're damn right! They thought I didn't know about the kid."

He turned from Weigand to Mrs. Graham, who had dropped into a chair. He looked at her wickedly.

"Thought I didn't know," he said. "But I did!"

"Did you, Father?" she said. She seemeed placid. Or, Weigand felt rather than saw, almost placid. There was an undercurrent of something. "What did you know? We didn't try to keep anything from you."

"No good if you had," the old man told her. "No damn good if you had. I find out."

"Of course you do, Father Graham," she said. "You mustn't get excited."

"Who's excited?" the old man demanded. He seemed to have forgotten Weigand, who wanted to get away.

"All right, Father Graham," Margaret Graham said. "Nobody's excited. But there aren't any secrets about Michael. You know that."

The old man stared at her and then nodded his head.

"No secrets," he said. "That's right. No secrets. They want to adopt this boy." The last was to Weigand again.

"Yes," Weigand said, "I know."

"Can't have any children, you see," Cyrus Graham explained. "Silly business."

This was puzzling. Weigand showed it to the shrewd old eyes apparently.

"Adopting," Graham explained. "Anybody's brat. But it's all right with me. As long as they don't try to keep it from me."

"Of course," Weigand said. "Lots of people adopt children, you know."

"Silly business, just the same," the old man said. "Damn silly business. Women!"

"Women want them," Weigand translated, more or less for his own benefit. "It seems to be very natural."

Old Graham nodded his head.

"Ought to have their own, though!" he said.

"Really, Father," Mrs. Graham said, "that's an odd way for you to talk."

Graham looked at her, and his manner softened.

"Don't cry about it, Margaret," he said. The tone was kinder than the words. "Not your fault. Except marrying a Graham. Somebody should have told you."

"There wasn't anything to tell," she said. "It just isn't true. Everybody's told you that. The doctor told you that."

"People are fools," old Graham said. "Look at my father. Look at his father. Don't tell me it isn't so."

Mrs. Graham looked at Weigand appealingly.

"I'M sorry," she said. "I didn't know he would get off on this."

"Well—" Weigand began. But the old man broke in.

"May as well know," he said. "No secret about it." He pointed a long finger at Weigand. "Crazy," he said. "That's what it is. Crazy." He waggled the finger. "Not me," he said. "It skipped me. But all the rest of them. My father. His father. So I decided to stop it. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know," Weigand said. "I don't entirely understand you, Mr. Graham."

"Fool!" Graham said. "Perfectly simple. Insanity in the family. In all the Grahams. Except me, of course. Even John's a little off."

He looked at Margaret Graham as he said this.

"Father!" she said. The tone was shocked, protesting.

"Not bad, yet," the old man said. "Nobody sees it except me. You wait!"

Weigand wished he were out of this. But, nevertheless, it was interesting.

"Told them they couldn't have children," Graham said, this time to Weigand. "Not and get my money. My son's smart, whatever I say. Knows money is better than kids. Humors me."

He laughed again, wheezingly.

"Not going to pass it on," he said. "Or I don't pass the money on. Got him, eh?"

"Yes," Weigand said. "Only it isn't generally believed that insanity can be inherited, you know."

"Fools," Graham said, positively.

"Think I don't know about that? And whose money is it?"

"Yours, I assume, Mr. Graham," Weigand said. "Will you feel the same about an adopted son?"

"Of course not!" the old man said. "Why should I? No taint. They can adopt a dozen! A hundred! Nothing to me, as long as they're not under foot."

"Well," Weigand said. This time he really moved to go. Mrs. Graham stood up. Old Graham looked at them.

"Hope you catch him," Graham said. "She was a nice girl, for nowadays. Catch him and hang him."

"Right," Weigand said. "We'll try, anyway. Good-bye, Mr. Graham."

The old man wasn't looking at them any more. He was staring out at the street. He seemed to have forgotten them. Neither spoke until they were outside again. Then Mrs. Graham said she was sorry.

"I didn't know he would be like this," she said. "He is unpredictable."

Weigand looked at her, feeling sympathy.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It must be difficult for you. That is true, I gather—what he said about children?"

"Oh yes," she said. Her voice sounded tired, and without spirit. "That's true enough. If we have children we don't get his money. And John feels we need it. That's why we are adopting Michael. And none of it is true, of course. His father wasn't insane, nor his grandfather. Just as he is—explosive and odd, but quite sane. We found out. Even if insanity is hereditary, there isn't any to be inherited. But what can we do?"

Weigand didn't know. He admitted he didn't know.

DOWNSTAIRS, George Benoit was standing by a window, looking out at the hot street. The elder members of the family seemed to like looking out of windows. Benoit turned as his daughter and Weigand entered and smiled at Margaret Graham's helpless, half-amused shrug.

"Difficult, I see," Benoit said. "Poor old Cyrus." He seemed gently amused. "And now, my dear, I'm off," he said. "Since I can't see Craven until tomorrow, I may as well see Smith today." It sounded a little like a riddle to Weigand, but evidently not to Mrs. Graham. She said, "But it's so hot, Father. And that long ride in the subway. If you insist on not driving."

He would, Benoit told her, rather ride the subway than try to park on Forty-second Street.

"Wouldn't you, Lieutenant?" he said to Weigand, smiling. He was a pleasant man, Weigand decided. Then he remembered that Benoit had met Lois Winston the day before.

"I'm going downtown from here," he said. "I can give you a lift if you like."

It was very good of him, Benoit said. He'd appreciate it. He repeated his appreciation when he sat beside Weigand in the Buick. Weigand U-turned and headed toward the Parkway.

"Good of you," Benoit said. "Beats the subway. But I don't know anything, if you had that in mind."

He smiled at Weigand, wisely. Weigand smiled back.

"Right," Weigand said. "Always a cop. But it's nothing, really. I wondered what you thought of the girl—the girl who was killed—when you met her yesterday. I suspect you think about people."

"I liked her," Benoit said. "I was sorry to hear of what happened. And it disturbed my daughter, of course—she thinks it will complicate matters about the boy. I don't suppose it will?"

Weigand said he shouldn't think so.

"You didn't notice anything odd about her?" he pressed. "She didn't seem under a strain? Anything like that?"

Benoit shrugged.

"I didn't notice anything," he said. "But I'd never seen her before. I don't know how she was usually, of course My daughter would be a better person to ask."

Naturally, Weigand agreed. He had asked. Mrs. Graham had noticed nothing.

"Nor did I," Benoit repeated. "I wasn't paying much attention, actually. I was—well, not in a settled frame of mind particularly. I was thinking of my own affairs and of a cop in Danbury. Or should I say policeman?"

It didn't matter, Weigand told him. "Cop" was all right.

"Traffic, I suppose?" he said, not caring.

THEY were talking idly, wheeling toward the Parkway. Traffic, of course, Benoit told him. And a sweltering three-hour delay, where it would do the most harm, while he paid a five-dollar fine to a judge.

"I was driving down from Hartford," he said. "I live there, you know. Going to Washington to see a man. And so I get held up in Danbury until it's too late to make it. I decided to stop in New York overnight and go on to Washington by train this evening. I was feeling annoyed about the whole business when I saw Miss Winston, so I didn't notice much about her."

Weigand agreed it was annoying. Although, he added, anything which would keep a man out of Washington in weather like this wasn't an unmixed evil. Benoit smiled.

"It's hot enough here," he said. "It's hot in Hartford."

A fascinating discussion. Weigand told himself, broodingly. And probably as valuable for his purpose as any other he had had that day. He had, he suspected, merely given himself a few irrelevances to thing about; merely cluttered his mind. "The trouble with me as a cop," he told himself, "is that I get interested in people. People who are none of my business." He sighed, and drew up behind another car which had stopped for a red light. O'Malley was, after all, a better cop. He stuck to the main issue—he stuck to Randall Ashley which, nine chances in ten, was the place to stick.

"Light's changed," Benoit said, half to himself.

Weigand pulled the gear lever toward him into low and let his foot relax on the clutch. Then he pushed it down again and waited while the car ahead jumped the light.

"I've got to be legal," he told Benoit. "At least, when there's no hurry. Our friend in front doesn't have to be, he figures. So he goes while it is still red both ways, which would make the traffic detail a little annoyed if they saw it."

"Oh," Benoit said. "I didn't notice. We have a somewhat different system in Hartford."

WHAT he would do after he dropped Benoit and checked at Headquarters, Weigand decided, was to get back on the Randall Ashley angle. It might, he decided, be worth while to talk to Ashley's girl friend—Miss Madge Ormond, who sang in night clubs. It would be interesting to see what she did when he called her Mrs. Ashley. He turned onto the Parkway and picked up speed. It was only fifteen minutes later that he wheeled off at Forty-fourth and delivered Benoit to city traffic.

"This will be fine," Benoit said. "No use dragging you across town. I'll get a taxicab."

He was, Weigand explained, going across town, patient of the lights. He dropped Benoit and found a telephone.

Mullins had reports of three unknowns who had purchased atropine sulphate during the past week, all to make eyewash. The eyewash business must be good, Mullins thought.

"It's all a lotta eyewash, Loot," he said, cheerfully.

It was hot in the booth.

"Is it?" Weigand said. "Did you plan to mean something, sergeant?"

His voice was not encouraging. Mullins remained tolerant.

"O.K., Loot," he said. "We got a wire from the Veterans Hospital in Arizona. They never heard of any Richard Osborne. Have we gotta be surprised?"

"No," Weigand said. "We don't have to be surprised. What else?"

Detective Stein had turned in a funny-looking list of words which he said the lieutenant wanted. Something about an encyclopedia?

"Right," Weigand said. "Hold it. I'll be down."

MULLINS had had a check made on Madge Ormond, who was, unless somebody had slipped up, safely at home in her apartment in the Forties. She was in the money, it seemed like. In the field of night club singing, she rated.

"Zori's," Mullins said. "Only it's closed, now, for redecoration. And she's been in a coupla shows."

"Right," Weigand said. "And?"

A man was on his way to keep an eye on Mrs. Halstead. Randall Ashley had

not left the apartment; a middle-aged woman, identified as Mrs. Ashley, had gone in. So had a man with a black bag. (The lounging detective apparently had made friends with an elevator operator, Weigand decided.) David McIntosh had gone to his office about ten, gone out to lunch about one. He was still out to lunch, and Detective Hildebrande was practically sitting in his lap. Young Frank Kensitt was, as he had indicated, a ward of the Foundation. Lois Winston had taken special trouble with him, and got him his job at the Ritz-Plaza. He was now doing a little floor scrubbing at the Ritz-Plaza.

Weigand ticked off detail.

"Right," he said. "There's no use your taking root there. Get onto the Ashley lawyer, or whoever knows. Find out the precise conditions of the will."

"What will?" said Mullins.

It was, Weigand decided, a sound question.

"Both wills, come to think of it," he said. "The will under which young Ashley gets his money, if he does. Lois Winston's will. Any other wills you run across."

Mullins said that would be O.K. And then what?

"Come in," Weigand said. "We'll see what you've got. Then, if you've been a good boy, I may take you to the Norths'."

Mullins was cheerful.

"O.K., Loot," he said. "I'll dig around."

WEIGAND went to lunch. It was, he realized after he had thought of it, high time. He absorbed a Tom Collins which was only fair and some cold salmon which tasted of nothing. He returned to the car, circled the block and pulled up in front of an elderly building which had a window card saying "Vacancy." Inside the vestibule he pushed a bell marked Ormond and the door clicked. On the third floor a colored maid said that Miss Ormond was dressing

"She isn't seeing nobody," the maid said.

"She wasn't seeing nobody," Weigand corrected. "Now she *is* seeing somebody."

He showed his badge and the maid's eyes enlarged.

"Yessir," she said. "I'll tell her."

She went, leaving the door open. Weigand followed her in.

It was a surprisingly pleasant living-room, he decided, with light walls and unobtrusively modern furniture. The maid went through a door at the side and after a little while Madge Ormond came out the same door. She was wearing a pale yellow negligée and was stimulating to look at. Her eyes were wary and her voice had no particular intonation. It was low and husky and she laid it out flat on the air.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" she said.

She had decided, Weigand observed, not to be the tough little girl that she had been at their first meeting. Her new manner seemed to fit better.

"How long have you and Randall Ashley been married?" Weigand said.

SHE looked at him without answering for a moment and, still looking, sat down. Weigand sat down opposite her. The negligée opened as she crossed her knees and Weigand observed that she had very nice legs.

" 'Bout six weeks," she said. She didn't ask how he knew. She closed the small rift in the negligée, without making a point of it.

"You know," he said, "it means that Ashley doesn't get his money. Only the interest."

"Yes, Lieutenant," she said. "We both knew that."

"And so tried to keep it secret," Weigand said.

She wasn't rising.

"Naturally," she said. "Not being fools. Wouldn't you, if it came to that?"

"No," Weigand said. "I don't think so."

She looked at him and smiled.

"But you are so upright, Lieutenant," she said. "And I'm just a night club singer. That's why the lady is a tramp."

"Are you?" Weigand said. "I wouldn't know."

"And," she said, "you wouldn't believe me if I said I wasn't. If I said I didn't give a damn about the money."

"I don't know," Weigand said. "I might, Miss Ormond. About being a tramp, that is. Everybody gives a damn about money." He looked at her, and

this time her eyes did not reject his look so blankly. "Suppose I say I wouldn't pick you for a tramp. Suppose you pretend I'm not trying to put anything over. Just to see how it works out."

She studied him, this time. Then she nodded slowly

"You don't seem so tough," she admitted. "Maybe you really want to know things. I don't think I'm a tramp. Randall's money is swell—any money is swell. We'd like to have the money, all right. *We'd* like to have it. Not *I'd* like to have it." She looked at him hard, leaning forward a little and searching his face. "Is that too deep for you, Lieutenant?" she said.

Weigand was patient.

"I can touch bottom," he said. "I just want to know, Miss Ormond. You can see why—you're not missing things. What Randall might do if you were just digging some gold is one thing. What he might do if you and he were really together is another. You'll have to take my word for it that I just want to know."

He paused.

"Or," he said, "you don't have to take my word. Play it as you want to. I'll get along somehow."

"All right," Madge Ormond said. "I'll take a chance. I love the kid. So what does that make me?"

HE looked at her thoughtfully. Sophistication can be very defensive when it is challenged.

"It makes it different," Weigand said. He studied her face and then saw that her eyes were wet. Her smile was neat and exact and her face was smooth and lovely, but her eyes were wet. "Your mascara will run," he warned her.

"Not it," she said. "Guaranteed." She said it as lightly as she could, but it wasn't very lightly. Slowly she began to nod her head and her lips trembled. "All right," she said. "I'm not so tough. I love the kid. He loves me. He wouldn't do anything to hurt us." She said it challengingly. "He's different underneath," she said. "He's not the way he acted at all."

"Isn't he?" Weigand said. He said it gently. He didn't, he found, think Madge Ormond had gone into her act.

"We both started out being tough," she said. "I'll give you that. He was money in the bank to me and I was—well, I'll give you one guess—to him. And then—then it got different. Not all at once, or anything. Just after a while it was different. And then we decided to get married. But we still didn't see any reason why he shouldn't have his money; we wouldn't be cheating anybody else. So we kept it secret."

"Where did you get married?" he asked.

"Right here," she said. "Only—well, Madge Ormond is just the name I use. I'm—" she hesitated. "Oh, the hell with it," she said. "My name is Stella Ormk."

"What?" said Weigand.

She laughed, a little hysterically.

"Ormk," she said. "Believe it or not, Ormk."

"I've got to believe it," Weigand said, awed. "It would have to be true."

He thought a moment.

"It was only six weeks ago?" he said. "That might be important. Remember, I can look it up."

"Yes," she said, "six weeks." She didn't ask why it might be important.

"And," he said, "how long before that had you been—going together?"

"About two years."

"Not"—he figured quickly—"nearer four years?"

"Two years," she said. "Why?"

He shook his head at her. A theory was growing in his head as he shook it.

"Before that," he said, "did he see a lot of some girl—some girl his father found out about? Some girl, maybe, who really was a tramp?"

"I don't know," she said. "I suppose so. We didn't talk about it."

"Do you know," Weigand said, bluntly, "whether he and this other girl ever had a child?"

She stared at him, her eyes widening.

"I DON'T get it," she said. "He was just a kid—what do you mean?"

He wasn't, Weigand reminded her, so much of a kid as all that. Four years ago he was nineteen. Plenty old enough to get into trouble.

"Suppose that had happened," Weigand said. "And it came out. He wouldn't get his money, would he?"

It was a stab in the dark, and he couldn't tell what it hit. She stared at him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. There was no animus he could detect. "It was just if he married, I think."

Weigand puzzled over it. He didn't know, either. But it was worth trying.

"Suppose," he said, "that there is something in the will which provides that Randall doesn't get his money if he is married before he is twenty-five *or* if he is seriously involved with a woman before he is twenty-five. And suppose somebody—his sister, maybe—stumbled by accident onto the fact that he had had a son when he was a kid of nineteen." He watched her face. If she and Randall were really close, and there was anything in his theory, she might know—she might know a lot. He waited.

"It wasn't that way," she said. Her eyes were very wide in a pale face. "You can't do that to Buddy!"

"I'm not trying to do anything to Buddy," he told her. "I'm trying to find out what you know. Maybe it wasn't in the will. But maybe Lois did find out about the child and was going to use what she had found out to influence her mother, so that she wouldn't agree to Buddy's marriage with you—and wouldn't be reasonable if she found out that you were already married. How does that theory sound?"

"I tell you it wasn't that way," she said. "I don't know where you get all this stuff about a child. Buddy didn't do anything to his sister—he couldn't." There was terrible anxiety in her face. "You believed me a while ago," she said. "You've got to believe me now—he couldn't! We didn't want to hurt anybody; we wouldn't ever have hurt anybody. We just wanted to be together, and we didn't see why he couldn't have his money. And so he wanted to talk to Lois."

She spoke eagerly, with a kind of desperate intensity. She believes that, Weigand told himself. I'm almost sure she believes it.

"That's why he went to her table," the girl went on. There was no effort, now, to maintain a pose. She seemed younger and, Weigand thought, very frightened.

"He just went over to leave a note," she went on. "About talking to her later—he was going to tell her everything about us. The way it really was. He said he could make her understand—he said she just didn't understand how it was, because she kept remembering how he had been when he was younger, but that he could make her see. 'She's all right, really, Sis is,' he said to me. 'She'll be for us when she gets the picture.'"

HER eyes were anxious as they sought his.

"Everything was going to be all right," she said. "We both believed it was—we were sure. Don't you see we wouldn't have gained if anything happened to Lois—that we just wanted to explain things to her, so she would tell her mother how Buddy and I really felt. Don't you see that?"

"I don't know," Weigand said. "I think you believe it, Miss Ormond. I wondered about that, but now I think you believe it. But I don't know, really."

Her arm went out along the arm of the chair, and her head dropped on it. It was a defeated, touching movement.

"I'm sorry," Weigand said. "But you'll see how it is yourself when you think it over. You're just going on what your husband told you. I can't promise anything."

The blond head turned wearily on the arm.

"Leave me alone," she said. "Can't you leave me alone?"

Weigand turned away. Then he stopped.

"I'm not trying to get anything on anybody, Miss Ormond," he said. "Nothing that isn't already there. If Buddy's in the clear I can't possibly hurt him. You know that."

"All right," she said, her voice muffled and dull. "I have to believe you. But I'm afraid. I'm so afraid!"

There wasn't anything to say. Weigand turned and walked toward the door. Behind him he heard Madge Ormond sobbing. It's a hell of a rocket, Weigand told himself, gloomily. He was tired of seeing people. He would go down to Headquarters and look at some papers. Papers didn't stir you up. It was easy to be a cop when you could do it comfortably on paper.

X

HE was rather relieved than otherwise when, getting a physician on the telephone at the Ashley apartment, he was informed flatly that Mrs. Ashley was still in no condition to be interviewed. He drove downtown through the heat. It would storm later, he thought. Looking down a side street as he drove south he could see heavy storm-heads banking up in the west. At Headquarters there was word to see Inspector O'Malley. O'Malley wanted action, he said.

"Where's this Ashley guy?" he wanted to know. Weigand told him. The Ashley guy had gone out early in the afternoon to see an undertaker. Now he was back at the apartment again, presumably holding his mother's hand. David McIntosh had gone back to the offices from which he administered his affairs—the McIntosh estate. Then he had gone to the Harvard Club. Not being a Harvard man, the detective associated with David McIntosh had loitered in Forty-fourth street.

"Ashley," O'Malley said, positively. "Ashley's the guy. What are we waiting for?"

They were waiting for evidence, Weigand told him, with all proper politeness. Meanwhile—

"Meanwhile," O'Malley said, "you waste time talking to a lot of people who don't figure." He banged his desk. "If I wasn't nailed down here I'd do it myself," he said. "You young guys—"

Weigand waited until Inspector O'Malley blew over. He was not particularly alarmed by the chance that O'Malley might leave his desk. O'Malley liked a place to put his feet.

O'Malley blew over. Weigand went back to his desk and found reports awaiting him. Two of the three men who had recently purchased atropine sulphate to use in making eyewash were, it developed, busily making eyewash. The third had not been located. At the address he gave, nobody had ever heard of him. Weigand brooded over this.

"There's our guy, Loot," Mullins said. "All we have to do is round him up."

"Is it?" Weigand said. "That's nice, Mullins. What does he look like?"

"Well," Mullins said, "we had a little trouble there. He's a short, fat guy about five feet, ten inches and weighing around a hundred and sixty pounds, and he's either got black hair or he's bald. A couple or three guys saw him, which makes it tough."

"Well," Weigand said, "let me know when you round him up, won't you, Mullins?"

"Listen, Loot," Mullins said, aggrieved. Weigand smiled at him.

"Right," Weigand said. "No doubt he is our man. It will be a help to have these couple or three guys look him over—when we catch him. The D. A.'ll like that. But I think we're going to catch him from the other end."

MULLINS pondered it and said, "Yeah.

"It's screwy again, ain't it, Loot?" he said. "You think it was this guy, Ashley?"

Weigand shrugged.

"Well," Mullins said, reasonably, "who else we got? This guy McIntosh?"

"Why not?" said Weigand. "On the other hand, why? He wanted to marry the girl, and the only quarrel he seems to have had was because she wouldn't marry him fast enough and wanted to keep on working. So he kills her? Why?"

Mullins said he wouldn't know. Still, this McIntosh guy was there.

Precisely, Weigand agreed. And if he had any reason, he was a good bet. There was already, something screwy about the reservation angle. Mullins nodded, approvingly. He thought the Loot had something there, all right. On the other hand, there was Mrs. Halstead to be considered. She, alone among the people they had run into, admitted animus toward Lois Winston. And she was at the roof.

"Yeh?" Mullins said. "How come?"

Weigand told him. Mullins brightened. Then his face fell.

"She don't sound like the kind of dame who would be dancing much, Loot," he said. "So why pass the table?"

"Right," Weigand said. "Things seem to cancel out."

"How about Mrs. Graham?" Mullins said. "Does she fit in anywhere?"

Weigand shook his head. There was nothing to indicate it. She denied, by

implication, having been at the roof; she professed to have liked Miss Winston, and the smooth progress of the placement proceedings supported her contention, so far as it applied. If she had any special interest, it was to keep Miss Winston alive until the placement was completed. Mullins nodded. The same, Weigand said, seemed to apply to Mrs. Graham's husband, except that they didn't know where he was that night.

"He was out," Weigand said. "A business conference—maybe."

Weigand sighed. Graham would have to be interviewed. He looked at Mullins speculatively, and an expression of cheer crossed his face.

"Listen, Loot," Mullins said, quickly.

"Yes," Weigand said. "That's what we'll do. You pop along and see what Mr. John Graham was doing last night. We might want to know some time."

"Listen, Loot," Mullins said. "He ain't even in it. And it's hot as—"

Gravely, as a lecturer on police practice, Weigand told Mullins about routine and thoroughness. One should, he pointed out, leave no stone unturned, and no grass growing under foot. One should take the stitch in time that saved nine and watch the pennies so that the pounds would take care of themselves. One should—

"O. K., Loot," Mullins said. "I'll go see Graham. You got me, Loot."

IT was, Weigand thought after Mullins had gone, probably foolish to waste Mullins' time. But it might be useful to have everybody placed, even those on the outskirts. He got an assistant of the city toxicologist and listened. Knowing what to look for and being prodded, they had hurried. It was now official that Lois Winston had died of a heavy dose of atropine sulphate. Things were thus kept in order as they went along, Weigand told himself. He picked up two typewritten sheets, dictated by Detective Stein, who had found an encyclopedia.

"Subjoined," wrote Detective Stein, "is a partial list of subject headings from Volume 11 of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Pages 199 to 810. This is approximately the center one-half of the volume."

Detective Stein was thorough, Weigand decided. And he liked nice words. "Subjoined," Weigand read over, pleased. He went on with the list.

It began with "Hawkweed" which was a "troublesome weed" native to the British Isles and North America. It included Haworth, which was in Yorkshire and "hawser" which was a thick rope. Hawthorne, Nathaniel, was fully dealt with. Weigand read on:

Hay. (Grass dried in the sun. Two and one-half pages.)

Haydn, Franz Joseph.

Hay Fever.

Head-dress.

Health.

Heat. (Thirty-one pages.)

Hebrew. (Nineteen pages.)

Heir.

(Weigand paused at this one and made a note. It might be worth while, eventually, to discover what the Encyclopaedia had to say about heirs.)

Heligoland Bight. (Two pages.)

Helium. (Colorless and odorless gas for ballons. Two pages.)

Henry—

(The Henrys ran on indefinitely, by number.)

Hepatoscopy. (Method of divining the future.)

(Weigand appreciated Detective Stein's explantory notes. Otherwise, he feared, curiosity would have driven him to looking up "hepatoscopy.")

Hepplewhite.

Heraldry.

Heredity. (Resemblance between an organism and its ancestors.)

Herring.

Hibernation. (The more or less comatose condition in which certain animals pass the winter in cold latitudes.)

Hieroglyphs.

Hindenburg.

Hindustani.

Histology. (Science of study of the tissues.)

Hittites.

Hockey.

Holland.

Hollywood.

Homicide. (The "general and neutral term for the killing of one human being by another.")

"Well," said Weigand. "Why neutral?"

There was nobody in the office to answer him and he read on.

Hormones. (Discussion of adrenalin under this heading.)

Houses.

Underneath, apparently after he had read over the transcription, Detective Stein had written in long-hand:

"These looked most promising. Might be something in hormones, do you think?"

WEIGAND read the list over, slowly. Here and there he crossed out. If Lois Winston had been reading about Hittites or Hollywood the previous afternoon it was hard to see that it meant anything. Perhaps she had merely read herself to sleep in the encyclopaedia; Weigand knew a man, he reminded himself, who read the encyclopaedia whenever opportunity offered, purely as a relaxation. It was difficult to think of any circumstances under which Holland or hockey or Hindenburg might apply. He crossed them off, shortening the list. Hay and Haydn went. Finally he ended and looked at the words remaining:

"Health — heat — heir — helium — hepatoscopy — heredity — hibernation — hieroglyphs — histology — homicide — hormones."

He looked it over again and scratched off "hibernation." Then he wondered where he was, and couldn't decide. Chasing wild geese again, probably. He sighed. The chances were, he thought, wiping his forehead, that Miss Winston had merely been reading up on heat. That would have been appropriate, if tautological. He stuck Stein's report in his pocket and looked at his watch. It was, he was surprised to note, after five. The Norths had said "any time" and he could hope they meant it. About now, he decided, Mr. North would be crushing ice for cocktails, using that short wooden mallet at which they had all looked, once, with so much widening surprise. The thought of cocktails was pleasant. And perhaps Dorian would be early. Then he had another thought, and called Dorian's apartment.

It was fine to hear her voice; to hear, or imagine, a new note in it when she heard his. She was, she said, going to the Norths'—just dressing. And it would be nice if Bill would drive by for her—very nice. Cradling the telephone, Weigand felt much better. What he needed was a drink and some conversation, and then he could come back with his mind rested and put two and two together. A picture of Dorian rose unexpectedly in his mind and he smiled at it. Well, he thought call it "a drink and some conversation," anyway.

He left word that Mullins, when he returned, was to come on to the Norths'. He went out into Center Street. The clouds were halfway up the sky now; it was strange, and somehow forbidding, that the storm was taking so long to gather. There was an odd, disturbing light on the streets and buildings as he drove uptown for Dorian Hunt.

XI

THE storm broke while they were finishing dinner at the Norths', and it was a great relief to everyone. The strange, coppery light had held for almost an hour and then it had grown dark, an hour and more before it was time to grow dark. For a long while then, they could hear thunder rumbling off across the Hudson and Mr. North, staring out of the window, had seemed nervous and irritable.

"For God's sake, get on with it," he instructed nature. But it was still a quarter of an hour before nature obliged. Then nature got on with it in a rather surprising fashion, hurling noise at the city, rolling thunder along the streets, splitting the false darkness with lightning. Then a wind raced through the apartment and rain rattled angrily against quickly closed windows.

"Well," Mrs. North told her husband, "you asked for it."

It was intermittently too noisy, then, for conversation. They were sitting around the room with coffee cups balanced before it was worth the trouble to talk of more than subjects which came conveniently in snatches. And then none of them said anything for a time, but presently they were all looking at Weigand expectantly. He, in turn, looked back at them, one by one.

"Does it ever occur to any of you good

people that I am a public servant, sworn to secrecy?" he inquired.

Pam laughed openly at him, and the others smiled.

"That's a good one, Loot," Mullins said. "That's sure a good one."

Weigand looked at him darkly and then he shrugged.

"You can't keep us out of them, Bill," Mrs. North told him. "You ought to know that by this time. And we're all very confidential."

"And," said Weigand, "very confident. Too confident by half. But what do you want to know?"

"Why," Mrs. North said, "who did it, of course."

Weigand shook his head. So, he said, did he.

"It's in all the papers," Mrs. North pointed out. "About David McIntosh and the girl's brother and his girl and everything. Even about Michael and the Foundation. Everything. So there's no harm in telling us the rest."

"And," she added, "it will be clearer to you after you talk. It always is."

There was, Weigand admitted, that. He looked at Mullins speculatively.

"This isn't happening, Mullins," he said. "Not officially. Right?"

Mullins merely looked hurt.

"Right," Weigand said. "And, by the way, what about John Graham, for a starter?"

"O. K.," Mullins said. "I talked to him. Up where he works."

HE was, Mullins said, office manager for some place where they made perfume. He got out a notebook. "Henry et Paulette," he said.

Mrs. North looked puzzled. Then her face cleared.

"Oh," she said. "I see. It sounded —like a cannibal, somehow."

Mullins was puzzled and waited, but she did not clarify.

"Well," he said, "he's got a pretty good job there, apparently. Sort of in charge of things." He had a private office and a secretary and Mullins had just caught him before he went home.

"He was worried," Mullins said. "Seems like there's a nurse out there and she had called up and said the missus wasn't feeling good—she'd been hysterical or something. So he was about to close up and go home."

"Hysterical? Weigand said. "She seemed all right—" He let the words trail off. "That's interesting," he continued, after a pause. "All right, Mullins. How about last night?"

"Well, Loot," Mullins said. "This is a good one. He was at the Ritz-Plaza roof. With the girl in his office—the secretary. What do you think of that?"

A large silence developed. The Norths and Dorian looked at Mullins; then they looked at Weigand and waited.

"I think," Weigand said, at length, "that it was a good idea to send you up there, Sergeant. And then?"

John Graham had, Mullins indicated, been frank about it. He was at the roof for dinner, with his secretary. They had been working late and both had to eat. He had planned at first to go to a restaurant nearby; had, in fact, sent Miss Hand, who was the secretary, along to the restaurant to wait. He had had to make a detour on the way, conferring with the advertising manager. "And," Mullins commented, "he probably thought there was no use in people seeing him and the girl going out together."

Graham had joined Miss Hand at the restaurant in, as it turned out, about half an hour. The conference had taken longer than he had expected. And he was tired and hot and discovered that the air conditioning in the restaurant they had picked had broken down—or, at any rate, wasn't cooling the restaurant.

"'And so,'" Mullins read from his notes. "'I thought it would be good for both Miss Hand and myself to go to some really decent place, considering the weather and the work we had to do later and everything. So I suggested the roof.'

"That," Mullins said, "is what he says. Do we have to believe him, Loot? Or was he just showing the girl friend a good time?"

Weigand said he wouldn't know. What did the girl say?

"Just what he says," Mullins admitted. "So what?"

"Right," Weigand said. "Did you check it?"

Mullins had partly checked it, at any

rate. Graham had conferred with the advertising manager. Miss Hand had gone first to a restaurant nearby, on her own story. There hadn't been time to verify at the restaurant. There had been time, however, to telephone and ask about the cooling system.

"It didn't break down," Mullins said. "On the other hand, the man said, when I sorta got tough, that maybe it hadn't been working as well as usual."

WEIGAND drummed with his fingers on the coffee table. It would all, he decided, be worth looking into. With an inquiring glance, which brought a nod from Mr. North, Weigand picked up the telephone. He got Detective Stein and sent him forth to look into things. He replaced the telephone and sat for a moment looking at it. He started as if to pick it up again and then apparently thought better of it.

"Well," he said, "that's the newest bit. Now—"

Rapidly, he sketched the case as it stood, amplifying little but suppressing nothing which seemed of importance. He told of Mrs. Halstead and her hints of knowledge not divulged; of Mrs. Graham and her odd father-in-law, of Madge Ormond—but not of the baptismal name which "Madge Ormond" overlay. He showed them the list he had made from Detective Stein's longer list from the encyclopedia, and of the apparent disappearance of Michael's father.

"That wasn't much of a surprise," he added. "I never fell particularly for the mysterious man. It looked like a dodge to get rid of the child, all along. Although I don't know what Miss Crane could have done, even if she had suspected."

Dorian read over the list and passed it to Mr. North, who looked at it and gave it to Pam. Mrs. North made sounds of discovery.

"Heir!" she said, triumphantly. "That's what she was looking up—heirs. Or—what's hepatoscopy?"

Weigand told her. She shook her head.

"Heirs almost certainly," she said. "Or—or heat, of course. Because she wanted to know why it was so."

"Was so?" Mr. North echoed.

"Hot, of course," Mrs. North told him. "Only in that case it doesn't fit in, does it? It must have been heirs, only that doesn't fit in with my theory. And I'm pretty sure about my theory."

EVERYBODY looked at her in surprise, and she nodded firmly.

"I'm pretty sure," she said. "Ever since I knew it started with Michael."

"Which," Weigand told her, "you, of course, only think you know."

She shook her head. She was, she said, sure as anything that it was Michael.

"And," she said, "he was kidnaped, of course."

"What?" said Mr. North, anxiously. Weigand said, "What?" at almost the same time, and with almost the same tone. Mrs. North looked at them triumphantly.

"Of course," she said. "Don't tell me you missed that. By Mrs. Halstead, or by somebody Mrs. Halstead was—well, was in with. And the man who brought Michael to the agency was a Federal agent."

"A what?" Mr. North said. "A Federal agent? Listen, Pam, I don't think—"

Mrs. North waved a stop signal at him.

"He had *re*-kidnaped him," Mrs. North said. "But he didn't want to do it officially because they were still looking for the rest of the gang. So he pretended *not* to be a Federal agent and brought him to the Foundation. And—" She stopped suddenly, her eyes rounding. "Listen," she said, "I'll bet I know something else. *It's David McIntosh's son!*"

They all looked at her.

"My God, Pam!" Jerry North said, in slow awe. "How did you ever—I mean, how did you?"

"Well, Mrs. North said, "it's all clear—except maybe about McIntosh. I'm not awfully sure about that."

"No," Weigand said. "No, Pam, I can see you mightn't be." He ran a hand through his hair, thinking how often he had seen Jerry North make the same gesture. "Why kidnaping, Pam?"

It stood to reason, Mrs. North said. Here was a little boy and a woman who sounded just like a kidnaper." She paused.

"Kidnapess?" she said, doubtfully.

Her husband and Weigand and Dorian Hunt shook their heads slowly, unanimously.

"And, of course, Lois Winston found out," Mrs. North said. "Something happened when she was out there—maybe she really went to see Mrs. Halstead yesterday, as well as Mrs. Graham—that made her realize it was a kidnaping. And she gave herself away, somehow. So they followed her to the roof and killed her.

There was a pause.

"WELL," Mr. North said, "what do you think of that, Bill?"

"Oddly enough," Bill Weigand began and got a calculatedly hurt look from Mrs. North. "Oddly enough, we don't know it isn't so. Mrs. Halstead's place wouldn't make a bad hangout; we don't always hear at once about kidnapings—often not until the parents have tried to get the child back on their own. Wipe out the McIntosh angle—you just put that in to make it harder, Pam—and the Federal agent, and it's a theory."

Pam looked pleased.

"I can't say I believe it for a minute," Weigand added. "But it's a theory. Very pretty theory. And it washes out a lot of bothersome things, like Buddy Ashley."

"Well," Mr. North said, "that's the trouble, isn't it? Because, of course, it *is* Buddy Ashley. I hate to agree with O'Malley, but you can't get away from it. The rest is all—well, just put in to make it harder. Not put in *by* anybody, you understand—the rest is just irrelevant material which always crops up in murder investigations, when you cut across people's lives. You've said as much yourself, Bill."

Weigand nodded.

"So," Mr. North said, "wipe out Michael, and with him Mrs. Halstead and the Grahams. Just don't make it harder. Here's Buddy Ashley, who's afraid his sister is going to give things away to his mother; give away the marriage, which she found out about at the Municipal Building yesterday morning. If that happens, and if the sister makes a damaging story out of it—and he thinks she will—he doesn't get his money. Maybe he needs money. So he bumps her off. Either he puts poison in her glass at the roof, or he fills her thermos bottle at the apartment with it, figuring she'll drink it sooner or later. And one time or another she does drink it. And there's the setup."

IT was a long speech for Mr. North. He drank the last of his coffee thirstily. Then he looked at Weigand with expectant confidence. Weigand nodded.

"That's always been the safest guess," he agreed. "I never denied it. But other things have kept coming up. And there are a couple of points in favor of Ashley. One of them, I'll have to admit, is Madge. I think she's on the level. There's a chance that Ashley feels about her as she seems to feel about him. In that case, if she isn't a digger, it's hard to see why he'd murder his half-sister for the money. Remember, he gets the income from it in any case; it is merely a question of the principal."

"Is he hard up?" Mr. North asked.

Weigand nodded. Investigation indicated that young Ashley was hard up.

"As people get hard up in his league," he added. "He owes a lot, some of it to guys I wouldn't want to owe. But he's still eating, obviously. And nobody's pressing him too hard, that we've discovered.

Mr. North said, "Um-m-m."

"You know what it's like?" Mrs. North said. The others paid attention.

"It's like coming in the middle of a picture," she said. "I mean a moving one. There are a lot of people doing things and you don't know why, or who you're in favor of and who against. And so you have to just work things out."

"Just to work things out," Mr. North said. "I know what you mean. I hate to come in in the middle—never makes sense."

Mrs. North shook her head.

"I think I prefer it," she said. "It makes things seem so interesting—so much more interesting than things really *are* in movies. You can just sit there and imagine, and think maybe it is going to be different. Even when it isn't, in the end, you've had the fun of thinking."

"Well," Weigand said, "all right, Pam. You think it was kidnaping; Jerry thinks it was Ashley. You think, also, that it was David McIntosh's son, and a Federal agent and like coming in in the middle of a movie. Right. What do you think, Dorian?"

"I'm afraid of what I think," she said. Her voice was low. "You see, I'm afraid it was the Grahams. I'm afraid Lois Winston was looking up heredity."

"Yes?" said Weigand.

"Suppose," Dorian said, "that the old man—old Cyrus Graham—really is insane, and that his insanity is really inheritable. Suppose Miss Winston found it out and was going to report it. They wouldn't place a child in a home where there was insanity, would they?"

The question was to Pam.

"No," Pam said. "Obviously they wouldn't, I should think."

"But," Dorian said, "suppose they're desperate to have the child—suppose Mrs. Graham is desperate and her husband is devoted to her and, in addition, not quite sane. Perhaps they think that if they kill Miss Winston the truth won't come out. Maybe they figure they can fool the next worker and get the child. So Mrs. Graham gives her something to drink with atropine in it at the house that afternoon, and it doesn't work until much later. Is that possible?"

"It might be," Weigand admitted. "The time the poison needs to take effect doesn't seem completely clear. A few minutes, or a few hours—depending on the dose, and the patient's susceptibility, which may vary. I suppose it isn't impossible."

He spoke doubtfully.

"I can't quite see it," he said. "The motive seems, even supposing that Graham is insane, altogether to weak. It would require that they were both insane, anyway—because on your theory, Mrs. Graham is in on it, even to the extent of being the actual killer. I'll admit they might both be a little off, but it seems like a lot of coincidence. Only—"

"Yes?" Dorian said.

"It would be simpler if we supposed that Graham administered the poison at the roof," he said. "He could have—anybody could have. Suppose that Mrs. Graham is entirely innocent. There's still a catch. So far as we know to the contrary, Graham merely went to the roof by accident. Suppose he did, and got an insane notion to kill Lois Winston so the insanity wouldn't come out. Does he just happen, accidentally, to be carrying poison around?"

NOBODY said anything for a moment, and then Mrs. North sopke.

"There's another flaw in it," she said. "Apparently there's no secret about Cyrus Graham's *thinking* there is insanity in the family. He apparently tells anybody he sees, just as he told you, Bill. So where's the big secret they are murdering to keep?"

"I suppose that Cyrus really is insane," Dorian reminded her. "And that it is *really* hereditary insanity. Mrs. Graham pretends it isn't, but possibly Lois found out?"

"How?" said Mr. North. "I should think it would take a long period of observation, even for a qualified psychiatrist, to determine that. And, anyway, I don't think that insanity *can* be inherited."

"That," Weigand said, "would be worth knowing. I'll—"

But Mrs. North got up.

"What's good for the goose is good for the gander," she said. "No, that's wrong—sauce. Anyway, we've got an encyclopedia, too." She vanished, thumped from the hall, said, "Damn," and returned with a heavy book.

"Volume 12," she said. "'Hydroz to Jerem.' What's 'Jerem'?"

Nobody knew.

"Well—" Mrs. North said, and turned up a light. "Let's see—insanity. Instinct in man, insects, insectivora—here it is—insanity."

"Why," inquired Mr. North, "do you suppose she always backs into books? She backs into newspapers the same way."

NOBODY answered, except Mrs. North, who made a shushing sound.

"Insanity," Mrs. North said. "U-m-m. Here we are. 'Predisposing cause. (1) Heredity. It has to be admitted that few scientific data are before us to establish on any firm basis our knowledge of the inheritance of mental instability.' They don't seem very sure of themselves, for an encyclopedia, do they? And so on and so on and so on. 'It seems that the absence of an hereditary taint makes the occurrence of insanity much less probable than the presence of it makes the occurrence probable.' What does that mean?"

"Read it again," Mr. North suggested. She read it again.

"I seem to get it," Mr. North said. "It seems to mean that if you haven't insanity in the family you stand a pretty good chance of not going nuts. Whereas if you have insanity in the family, you still stand a pretty good chance of not going nuts. You're a lot surer of staying sane if you have no family background of insanity than you are of going insane if you have."

"That sounds almost as bad;" Mrs. North told him. "But I get it, I guess. Now—'in all studies there is lacking some method of determining what are the fundamental units that can be transmitted by heredity. It is probable that these will be found to be not actual diseases, or even definite predispositions to such, but factors that can develop into either insanity or other conditions (character anomalies, criminality, genius, etc.) according to the interaction of environmental influences.'"

"My God," said Mr. North. "Authors! We've got a man who writes like that."

"Then," Weigand told him, "if you publish people like that you ought to be an authority on them. What does he mean?"

"I think he means that a certain potential instability may be inherited, but not insanity itself," Mr. North said. "He's very cagey."

"Yes," Weigand said. "That's what I gathered. He apparently doesn't think that there is much likelihood of direct inheritance of insanity. Very interesting. And where were we?"

"I should think that Lois would have had to be a lot surer than that before she said anything," Mrs. North said, practically. "Much surer than she could have been, if the authorities are so—upset about it. And anyway, from all I've heard, Mrs. Graham is a nice woman and terribly fond of children, so it's clear she didn't. Don't you think so yourself, Dor?"

"I'd rather," Dorian admitted. "I don't like my theory, really. But, of course, some very objectionable people are fond of children, Pam—some of them are even fond of dogs. Only I'll admit the motive seems pretty obscure, in this instance."

Weigand agreed.

"So?" he said.

"I gotta theory, Loot," Mullins said, unexpectedly. "It was this guy McIntosh. Who had a better chance? Who lied about making reservations? Who didn't do anything about it until it was too late?"

Mullins' voice sounded pleased.

"Why?" Weigand asked him.

"Well," Mullins said, "I'll have to admit that ain't so good. But maybe he *did* kill her because she was standing him up—wouldn't marry him and just kept kidding him along. It wouldn't be the first time that happened, Loot."

"No," Weigand said. "That's quite true," he told the others. "There have been plenty of cases—rejected love, even in modern times. But usually the murderers weren't exactly McIntosh's type. They were usually little, injured men, so weak and insecure that they had to prove themselves in blood. Sometimes they go to their girls' homes and kill themselves on the doorstep, for revenge. But none of that sounds like McIntosh."

"Well," said Mullins, stubbornly, "you don't know, Loot. Maybe he's that kind of a guy, underneath. He's a rich guy, remember, and never had any knocks. Maybe the first one was too much for him."

Weigand nodded. He couldn't, he agreed, prove it wasn't so.

"At the moment," he said, "I frankly can't prove anything. And yet—"

Mrs. North took him up.

"You think it's all in?" she said. "That you, and now we, have had a chance to see everything there is to see and that—well, that we've been blind?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Weigand said. "I have a vague sort of hunch that it's all spread out and—what did you say, Pam?"

"What?" said Pam. "Why, just what you just said. That we have had a chance to see everything and—"

"Oh, I remember," Weigand said, "'and that we've been blind.'"

He sat for a long minute and looked at her. Then he smiled slowly and looked from her to Dorian and then to Jerry North, still smiling faintly.

"No," he said, "I think you may be wrong, Pam. I think perhaps I see a light."

Pam sounded excited.

"Do you, Bill?" she said. "What does it show?"

Weigand smiled at her still, although the smile was fading. It had quite faded when he spoke.

"Oh?" he said. "The light? Why, it shows danger. Pam. It—"

The shrilling of the telephone bell tore his words.

XII

IT was strange to discover that, even on such an errand as this, discomforts still mattered. It was a wry and irrelevant fact, and obscurely unsettling. There should be a great and terrific dignity on such an errand, the murderer thought. Now you set yourself off, darkly, from other men and women; now you carried death in your hand. In the hand, gripped hard, was death, and in the mind was death and it was strange that when death moved with you all little things did not draw away, abashed by the dark, fearful majesty of the moment. "I am going out to kill," the murderer thought. And still there was discomfort, belittling the moment.

The murderer dragged feet through wet, tall grass in the darkness, finding a way with feet and with the hand which did not carry death. Wet bushes slapped and distracted with their small, impotent annoyance. Water sloshed through shoes and garments clung, cold and impeding, around legs. The world dragged at the murderer, as if to hold death back. But death could not be held back; once you have killed you must, if it is needed, kill again. And now it was needed. The murderer's mind fixed on the need and clung there.

Long ago, the murderer thought, I did all this before—long ago, when I was twelve or so, all this happened over. That night it rained and I was lost and after a while it was like this. Then the world was too big and all the walls fell back and there was nothing I could reach. And everything was unreal then, and I stood off and saw myself and I could not get back into myself for a long time, until somebody brought a light. It is that way now, the murderer thought, and for a moment the murderer stood still, in tall, wet grass. The murderer saw this other person standing there, clutching death. That is myself, the murderer thought.

It was only for a moment and then the murderer went on. It had been dark for a long time, but that was the false darkness of the storm. The clouds were rolling off now and there were wet stars left behind, but now it was really dark, with the darkness of night.

"I can't see my hand before my face," the murderer thought and held up the hand which clutched death. The murderer giggled softly because the thought was so irrelevant and inadequate and stale against the moment. "I can't see my hand before my face," the murderer thought. "My hand before my face. My hand before my face." The words became a rhythm and in the rhythm the murderer could forget the other little, futile things. The surface of the murderer's mind played with the words, over and over, and was occupied. The murderer forced through a low, uncared-for hedge and stopped. "My hand before my face, my hand before my face," the murderer's mind said over and over.

There was a light in the house. It was a pale, yellow light and the murderer watched it for a moment, not moving. The light was blotted out a moment and then reappeared, as if someone had moved between the window and a lamp. In the darkness the murderer moved forward slowly, carefully. The weedy grass was not so tall, here, but still the murderer's feet sank into it, sank to soft, yielding ground.

"Footprints!" the murderer thought, and stopped. "I'm leaving footprints," the murderer thought. Then, with a puzzled sigh, the murderer remembered that that thought had come before and been allowed for. The fear which had surged up for a moment, as if something vital had been forgotten until it was too late, ebbed away. "My hand before my face," the murderer thought. "My hand before my face."

THE door of the house ought to be a little to the right of the window. They would be watching the house. For minutes the murderer had stood at the end of the street, in the darkness, and waited

until there was dark movement near the house, just perceptible against the fading light in the sky to the west. That would be the watcher, the murderer had decided, and had moved backward cautiously in the shadow and gone down another street and then, very slowly and with a kind of desperate care, through a weed-grown lot. If they are smart, the murderer thought, they'll find out the way I came through the weeds. The murderer giggled, thinking how little good it would do them if they did.

It was, the murderer thought, moving with slow care toward the house, easier the other way. The white powder had looked so innocent in the little twist of paper; there was no terror in letting it slip from the paper into the glass. It was not like murder, the murderer thought—the mind would not accept a few grains of white powder in a glass as murder. You felt no particular responsibility for what happened; it was as if the white powder, in some fashion of its own, became the murderer. Between what you did, untwisting paper and letting powder spill, and the death which came afterward there was no connection that the emotions could compass. You knew you had killed, but you did not feel like a murderer. When you murdered you saw the other person's face near your own, and saw terror in it and then—you killed. You reached out a hand and there was death in it, and you killed.

It is real this way, the murderer thought, and there was a kind of savage eagerness in the thought. The other one who died had been an obstacle; you pressed a button and, at a great distance, the obstacle disappeared. But this one was an enemy and you would meet your enemy and see fear in the enemy's face and then your one hand would act. The murderer looked at the weapon. A knife would have been better; there was a kind of dreadful intimacy about killing with a knife. But it was too late to think of that, now.

That was past. There remained only what he had to do now.

Here was the door and the murderer raised a hand. It had come, now; now there was no waiting for it any longer. The murderer knocked.

A DOG began barking shrilly inside. The murderer waited and the dog's bark died away.

"No!" the murderer thought. "She's got to be there!" The murderer knocked again.

There were slow, heavy steps moving toward the door. Then they stopped and the woman inside spoke.

"Who is it?" she said. "Go around to the front."

"No," the murderer said. "You know who it is. I've got to talk to you."

"Oh," the woman said. "So it's you. I wondered if you wouldn't come sneaking around. Wait a minute. You can talk to me, all right."

The murderer heard the metallic clatter, subdued and small, as the chain was lifted inside. Now, the murderer thought. Now it has come. The door opened a little way and the woman stood in it.

"Well," she said, "so it's you, all right, is it? I thought—"

There was no use letting her go on. It was now—now! The gun spoke three times.

It was not as the murderer had thought it would be. There had been no time for terror in the other face; it had merely been the old woman's face, with a kind of satisfaction in it, and then, in the instant before she fell, there had been nothing in the face at all—not even surprise. And then the woman was no longer standing at the door.

The murderer ran, now. Now the darkness was a friend, was safety. The wet grass and the wet bushes closed behind the murderer, like a concealing curtain; the murderer could feel the world thickening behind to protect. There was a kind of exultation in the murderer's mind. "I'm safe," the murderer thought. "Now I'm safe!"

XIII

WHEN the telephone bell shrilled Weigand was nearest, and he scooped it up even as Mr. North nodded at him.

"Yes," Weigand said. There was a pause. "Yes? Right, Sullivan." There was another pause. Weigand's voice when he spoke again was not raised, but there was a new timbre in it. "Who got her?"

He listened again. "No," he said. "I suppose you couldn't. Are you sure she's dead? Where are you?" Pause. "Well, get on to the precinct. Tell them to get some men around the block—around several blocks, if they've got enough. How long has it been?" He listened. "It won't do any good, probably," he said. "Tell the precinct it's our case and get them on it. Get the district squad on it. I'll be along. What?— Right!"

He was standing as he dropped the telephone back on its cradle.

"Mrs. Halstead has been shot," he said. "She's dead." He looked at the others; at Mullins, who was on his feet, too. "God knows I don't get it," Weigand said. "Unless—" He stared unseeingly at Mr. North for a moment. He pulled himself out of it. "All right, Mullins," he said. His voice was crisp and full of purpose. "We're going along."

'Do you suppose it's the same one?" Mr. North said. His voice sounded alarmed. Weigand looked at him and saw him.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "It looks like it, doesn't it?" He was reaching for the door when he spoke again. "I guess we'll have to wash out your kidnaping theory, Pam," he said. He was through the door and halfway down the stairs. Mullins, however, stopped a minute with his hand on the knob.

"Goodnight," Mullins said. "I'm—" He clutched for the correct words. "I'm sorry we have to bust off like this, Mrs. North. We had a swell time." Mullins took one last look at a tantalus which contained rye. "As far as it went," Mullins said, a little wistfully. Then he called, "O.K., Loot," in answer to a muffled sound from below, and went heavily, but rapidly, down the stairs.

"Well," Mrs. North said, looking after him. "That was sudden, wasn't it?"

"Very," Mr. North agreed. "There's nothing like a murder to break up a party."

Mrs. North said she was thinking that.

"You know," she said, "do you suppose it could be something we do—something wrong, I mean?—*All* our dinners seem to end like this nowadays. With murders." Mrs. North looked perplexed. "Do you suppose," she said, "it could be something about us?"

THE side street in Riverdale, so deserted an hour earlier—so distant, in its eddy, from the city of New York—was busy enough now. Weigand wheeled the Buick diagonally to the curb, so that its headlights joined others in sweeping the rough, weed-grown yard; in glaring harshly on the old brick of the house itself. Green-and-white radio cars stood by the curb. Behind the house, visible and audible as Weigand stepped from the car, men moved with lights. Somebody said. "Here. Look at this!" and lights converged in a knot.

A light swung into Weigand's face as he walked up the path with the car lights behind him. "All right, buddy," a heavily official voice started.

"Right," Weigand said. "Weigand. Homicide."

"Yes, sir," the voice said, still official, but less heavy. "They're waiting for you inside, Lieutenant."

He didn't need to be told that Mullins, moving in on the lieutenant's heels, was another cop. Even if Mullins had been alone, not sponsored by the Lieutenant, no other cop would ever have called him "buddy," in the tone reserved for interfering laymen. Mullins was policeman to his shoe-leather, and looked it every inch. "Hiya," he said to the uniformed man who had checked them. "Hiya," the patrolman responded, giving the password.

They were already rigging floodlights in the old house, augmenting the smaller glow from forty-watt bulbs in bargain basement lamps. The cold, inquiring glare of the floods was merciless to the old house—to old rugs on the uneven floors, to faded paper curling away from the walls of the hall, to the holes in the covers of heavy, ancient chairs.

"Right," Weigand said to a detective who told him "right out there, Lieutenant." "Right," he said again, when another detective straightened up as he entered and said, "Weigand? Kenman. Bronx Homicide.

"Here she is," Lieutenant Kenman said, needlessly. "Three of them. Right through her."

WEIGAND knelt where Kenman had been kneeling. She had been a big, heavy woman, had Mrs. Halstead; a wo-

man with an unrelenting face. The face had relented, now, but even in death it was formidable. She lay huddled, as if she had been half supported by something when she was shot, and had crumpled to the floor. Weigand swung a torch around, examining the old boards of the kitchen floor. Blood was dull on the boards. The beam of the torch swept under an old icebox, from which brown paint was flaking, and picked up two small, answering beams.

"What the hell?" said Weigand. He moved the light a little and, behind the tiny lights was a cowering cat. "Poor little devil," Weigand thought. "There ought to be a dog. Anybody seen it?"

"We've got it in another room," Kenman said. "It was a nuisance out there. It—it had been around after she was shot. Blood all over it."

"Right," Weigand said. "The M.E. been along?"

He hadn't, Kenman said. He had a ways to come. There wasn't, anyway, much they needed the M.E. to tell them.

"Somebody stood outside," Kenman said. 'There are some marks out there—thin, dried mud. She opened the door. Somebody plugged her three times with a .38."

"So," Weigand said. "You got a bullet?"

They had found a bullet only partly embedded in the wall behind Mrs. Halstead. It had gone through her, missing bone. It came from a .38 and was in good enough shape for comparative analysis when they had a gun to check. Weigand nodded.

"That'll help, when we get the gun," he said. "Make your D.A. happy. Although I don't suppose he'll ever come in on it—New York county's got first crack, I should think. Right?"

It was, Kenman said, no skin off him. The district attorneys could fight it out.

"So you figure," he said, "that this hooks up with the Winston kill?"

"Well," Weigand said, "it wouldn't just happen that way, would it? I mean, it doesn't figure to. The people were looked up, certainly. So one murderer probably does for both."

Kenman nodded. He'd figured it that way, of course.

"Right," Weigand said. "And where do we stand now? What's the precinct doing?"

The precinct had all the men it could spare on the job; so did the detective division which included the precinct. "They're cleaning up out back as well as they can in the dark," Kenman said. "They've found where the killer went through, going away. He wasn't waiting for anything. They've found where he stood on the porch—apparently he persuaded the old girl to open the door for him. Then he plugged her, and got going. He must have gone fast, or your man would have picked him up."

"Right," Weigand said. "Where is Sullivan?"

"Helping around somewhere," Kenman said. "You want him?"

WEIGAND did. Sullivan was yelled for by a man whose voice barked in the night. Sullivan appeared, not looking very happy.

"It's a hell of a note, Lieutenant," he said. "But what could I do? There's no cover out front; unless I was going to go in and sit with the old dame, I had to hang out across the street. And how was I to cover the back door?"

"All right, Sullivan," Weigand said. "Nobody's blaming you. What happened?"

Sullivan had been, he said, standing across the street, where the shadow was deepest. He was standing so that he could look along the side of the house, and command a section of the back yard. There was only one light in the house—a dim one from one of the side windows, near the rear. He was keeping an eye on it, and whatever else was going, when he heard the dog bark. He wondered about that and started across the street and stopped. The dog's barking was something to wonder about, but nothing to act on. It was about a minute—perhaps two minutes—later that he heard the sound of three shots, close together. Then he moved.

He ran along the side of the house, but couldn't run full out because of the roughness of the ground and an undergrowth of weeds and bushes. By the time he got around to the back door, he heard somebody running a good way off. But he looked for Mrs. Halstead, first, when he

saw that the back door was partly open. He found her when he tried to open the door a little more; she was lying against it. He went around to the side and in through a window so as not to disturb the body.

"And I didn't know she was dead," he said. "I didn't want to push her around if she wasn't. It makes a difference, lots of times."

"Right," Weigand said. "I don't know what more you could have done. But by the time you found out about her, the murderer had got away. You didn't hear any more running?"

"That's it," Sullivan said. "But there's only one of me, Lieutenant."

Weigand nodded, abstractedly.

"What else do we know?" he asked Kenman. Kenman knelt again by the body. "Feel this," he said. "It isn't blood."

He directed Weigand's hand to the hem of the long, black skirt. It was wet. Moving his hand, Weigand found it was wet all along.

"Just water," Kenman said. "The shoes are wet, too. She'd been out somewhere just before—during the rain or just after it."

"Right," Weigand said. "How about a coat—a raincoat? Or an umbrella?"

THE boys had been looking, Kenman said. He called to one of them.

"That's right," the detective said. "We just found it, hanging up in the bathroom. An umbrella, that is. No coat."

"Wet?" Weigand asked.

"Yeh," the detective said. "Pretty well soaked."

"Right," Weigand said. To Kenman he said. "Maybe it'll help, eventually. Anything else?"

"Well," Kenman said, "she'd eaten dinner before she went out. Stacked the dishes but not washed them. Had beans, apparently."

"Right," Weigand said. "We'll tell the M.E. Give him something to look for. And—"

There wasn't, Kenman said, much else yet. It was an old house; about half of it apparently wasn't in use, and hadn't been for years. Mrs. Halstead seemed to have lived in a couple of rooms downstairs and the kitchen. There was another room upstairs which looked more habitable than the others, and more recently used. Nothing was very clean, including the clothes of Mrs. Halstead which filled a closet opening off the central hall. That was about all—

"Here's something, Lieutenant," a new voice said. A small, thickset detective appeared with it.

"You Lieutenant Weigand?" he said, addressing the Homicide Bureau man. Weigand nodded. "Then the old dame was writing you a letter," the thickset detective said. "Stuffed down in that old chair of hers. We just dug it out."

He handed Weigand a sheet of paper. It was crumpled, and Weigand straightened it out. Kenman put the beam of his flashlight on it and Weigand read:

"Lieutenant Weigand: I have been thinking things over since your intrusion today and have also made a discovery about Michael's father which I think will in—"

The letter broke off.

"So then," Weigand said, "the murderer knocked at the door."

Kenman looked at him.

"Yeh," he said. "You make it sound like a book title, but that's probably the way it was."

"'In—'" Weigand quoted. "'Interest you,' probably." He stared at the letter. "Damn!" he said. "Just when she was going to spill it. This guy annoys me, Kenman."

"He is sort of annoying," Kenman admitted. "What's the routine?"

"Oh," Weigand said, "turn the boys loose, of course. I don't suppose the fingerprint boys will get much. Oh, by the way, they'll probably get mine—I was here today. Have them check at Headquarters before they start baying, will you?" He looked around the room. "The pictures will be pretty, won't they?" he said. "They ought to get the cat there, crouching by the body. The papers would love 'em."

"Sure," said Kenman. "They'd be pretty."

"We'll have to try to find out where she'd been," Weigand said. "It may not mean a thing—probably she was just out

after a quarter-pound of tea, or something. And it may mean the hell of a lot."

"Yes," Kenman said. "I'll get the boys on it. Anything else special, since it's your case?"

WEIGAND thought and shook his head.

"Just the ordinary," he said. "We'll find out everything we can, and save the bullets and take the prints. I'd like reports downtown, of course. And if the boys in the back yard run across a murderer in the bushes they might bring him along."

"Yeh," Kenman said. "I'll remind them. You know who did it?"

Weigand looked at him.

"I wouldn't say know who, by a long shot," he said. "I've got a hunch, but I can't break it. I can guess why."

"She knew something," Kenman said. It was more statement than interrogation. Weigand nodded.

"Right," he said. "I'd say she knew something. And that she was going to spill it. And now where do you suppose Mullins is?"

They sought Mullins and found him in the back yard, looking gloomily at some footprints etched smudgily on a small expanse of weedless earth.

"Tennis shoes," Mullins said darkly, when they found him. "Old tennis shoes. No nice identifying marks or anything." He looked at the lieutenant, a little resentfully. "You and I sure get the screwy ones, Loot," he said. "And no breaks."

They left Kenman to carry on with the routine. There wasn't, Weigand told Mullins, anything more for them at the house, for the moment anyway. They swung away from the curb and headed toward the Parkway. They were about to enter it when Weigand stopped, sat for a moment with his hands resting idly on the wheel, and then backed the Buick away from the Parkway and swung it to face north again.

"While we're up here," he said, "we may as well look in on the Grahams. Find out how the lady is. That would be polite, wouldn't it, Mullins?"

"Listen, Loot—" Mullins said.

"She was all right this afternoon," Weigand told him. "A little nervous and strained, maybe, but all right. You know, Mullins, she didn't look to me like a woman who was getting ready to collapse. She didn't look that way at all."

THE Graham house blazed with light; even the porch was flooded.

"Looks like a party," Mullins said as they drew up. "I thought she was sick."

So, Weigand said, had he. They parked and Weigand led the way to the door. He had barely touched the bell when the door swung open. The man who faced him was about medium height and thin, but it was, Weigand guessed, the thinness of the wiry. The man's light hair, graying at the temples, was disordered as if excited hands had been running through it. In the instant before he spoke, Weigand felt that eagerness drained out of the man.

"Oh," he said flatly. "Who are you?"

Weigand identified himself.

"I came to ask about Mrs. Graham," he said. "I was up here, anyway. I was talking to her this afternoon and—"

"Were you?" the man said, bitterly. "So you were talking to her this afternoon, Lieutenant? And what did you say to her, I'd like to know?"

Weigand shook his head.

"I don't get it," he said. "I just asked her some routine questions. Why?"

"Because," the man said angrily, "she's gone! You scared her somehow and she's run away, or—or something's happened to her. Did you scare her about the boy?"

"No," said Weigand. "I didn't scare her about anything, Mr. Graham."

The man stared at him and appeared to accept the statement.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm—well, it's got me. She was all right this morning. This afternoon the nurse who takes care of my father called and said that Mrs. Graham was hysterical. I came home at once and she'd gone—just like that—gone. The nurse said she had seemed quieter after a few minutes and had been willing to lie down. The nurse had to go back to Father then, and didn't know anything more. But apparently Margaret just got up and—and went away. When I came home she wasn't here."

"Perhaps," Weigand suggested, "she's just gone to see a friend or—"

"And stayed away more than four hours?" Graham said. "When she knew the nurse had telephoned me and that I was coming home? You'll have to do better than that, Lieutenant." He stared at Weigand and Mullins. "Oh, come on in," he said. "I was going to call somebody anyway—get the police on it."

Weigand and Mullins went in.

"I thought maybe she'd gone to see somebody," Graham said. "I thought maybe she was nervous and upset about something and couldn't stand to stay here alone. And when she didn't come back I telephoned a lot of people. And then—well, it was crazy, but I'm pretty near crazy about it anyway—I went out and looked for her. I thought—God knows what I thought. That she had been going some place and that something had—happened to her. It's lonely up here. I—I looked in all the loneliest places."

HE pressed his temples with the palms of his hands. *"Where is she?"* he demanded. *"What's happened to her?"* He seemed himself to be on the verge of hysterics.

"Take it easy," Weigand told him. "Probably—probably it's nothing. The chances are she's all right and—"

"Why are they?" Graham broke in. His tone seemed desperate. *"You* don't know what's happened to her, do you?"

"Why, no," Weigand said. "How should I know? But most people who disappear turn up all right, eventually. The chances are they will." He looked at Graham. "I can't promise anything, of course. But we have ways of finding people. Do you want to make a report about her?"

"I don't care what I do," Graham said. "I've got to find her."

"Right," Weigand said. "Just take it as easy as you can. I'll get on to the Missing Persons Bureau and start things moving. Now she was—let's see—about how old?"

Dully, Graham described his wife. She was thirty-two, he said, and weighed about a hundred and twenty pounds; she was blond and had blue eyes and probably was wearing a pale blue silk dress and a white linen hat. He, helped by the nurse, had looked through his wife's clothes, and those things seemed to be missing. Weigand, at the telephone, turned the particulars over to the Missing Persons Bureau.

"There may be a hookup of some sort with the Winston case," he told the lieutenant at the Bureau. "Give it what you've got, Paul."

"They'll do all they can," Weigand told Graham, turning back. "As fast as they can. There's nothing for you to do but sit tight and stay by the telephone. The chances are she'll call up. There's no sense in your wading around in vacant lots."

"I know," Graham said. He seemed calmer now. "There never was. But I had to do something."

Weigand said he could understand that. But now there would be good men working on it and—

"I'll tell you," he said. "Maybe we can do something else. Not that I think anything will come of it, but it will relieve your mind. I'll get the precinct to send a couple of men to look around the neighborhood just on the chance—well, that she might have fainted, or something. Right?"

Graham nodded.

"It might help," he said. "I wish you would."

WEIGAND called the precinct and listened to the desk sergeant. He agreed that it was too bad; that already the precinct was using a lot of men to look for things he wanted found; that the precinct wasn't made of men. He said it was tough, but there it was. It needed to be done. The sergeant lapsed into mere grumpiness; finally he agreed that it would have to be done. Weigand hung up and turned to Graham.

"They'll put a couple of men on it," he said. "It's their busy night." He looked at Graham thoughtfully. "Mrs. Halstead was killed tonight," he said. "You know who she is, don't you?"

"Halstead?" Graham repeated. "It seems to me—" He looked up suddenly, his interest appearing to quicken. "Wasn't she the woman who had Michael?" he asked.

Weigand nodded.

"Killed?" Graham said. "You mean, in an accident?"

"No," said Weigand, "she was murdered."

Graham loked at him, and his expresion of worry and alarm deepened.

"What's happening, Lieutenant?" he said. "First Miss Winston and then Mrs. Halstead and—*Lieutenant, what about Margaret?*"

"Take it easy," Weigand said. "There's nothing to show any connection. I don't think anybody is after your wife, Mr. Graham. Unless—"

"Unless what?" Graham said. Weigand paused.

"Well," he said, at length, "I'm assuming that Mrs. Halstead was killed because she had some information which was dangerous to the person who killed Lois Winston. I don't know that's true, but I think it is. If Mrs. Graham had similar information she might be in similar danger. But apparently she hasn't."

He waited for Graham to say something. Graham merely looked at him.

"That's right, isn't it?" Weigand said. "She didn't know anything?"

"No," Graham said. "She didn't know anything. What could she know?"

Weigand shrugged.

"If I knew that—" he said, and let the sentence trail. "I suppose you don't know anything yourself, Mr. Graham, which might be—dangerous? To yourself or to your wife?"

Graham looked surprised.

"I?" he said. "What would I know?"

Again Weigand shrugged.

"NOTHING, I suppose," he said. "Unless you saw something at the roof last night—something, perhaps, which didn't mean anything to you at the time, or even something you've forgotten. Something that might be dangerous to the murderer?"

Graham shook his head.

"No," he said. "I wasn't there long, as I told—as I told this man." He looked at Mullins.

"Mullins, Mr. Graham," Weigand said. "Sergeant Mullins."

"As I told Sergeant Mullins," Graham said.

"By the way," Weigand said, "when were you there?"

Graham thought it over.

"From about seven-thirty," he said. "At a guess. Until—oh, perhaps a quarter of nine. Then Miss Hand and I went back to the office and worked for about two hours, or perhaps longer. I didn't see Miss Winston."

He paused.

"Or," he said, "I didn't recognize her if I did. I'd only met her once, and not for very long and I don't remember people very well. And when they're all dressed up, in their war paint—well, I can recognize the paint more easily than the women."

Weigand thought a moment.

"Oh, yes," he said. "That's your business, isn't it? Something and Paulette, isn't it?"

"Henri et Paulette," Graham said. Mullins looked startled at the pronunciation. "Cosmetics and perfumes and the like. Why?"

"No reason," Weigand told him. "It just happened to come up."

Weigand spoke easily, offhandedly.

"It seems to be a good business," he said. "It keeps you working nights, apparently."

"Not often," Graham said. "But recently we've had quite a rush. That's one reason I took Miss Hand to the roof—thought she rated some sort of reward for the time she's been putting in."

He seemed, Weigand thought, rather unduly explanatory, as if having taken his secretary to the Ritz-Plaza were a little heavy on his conscience.

"I suppose," Weigand said, suddenly, "that Mrs. Graham understood—didn't get any false impressions, I mean. Because if she did it might explain—" He broke off, as if embarrassed. Graham looked puzzled for a moment, and then rather indignant.

"Oh," he said, "I see what you mean. I suppose I can't blame you for the notion. But there's nothing in it. I telephoned Margaret and told her why I couldn't get home last night, of course, and that I was taking Miss Hand to dinner."

"Oh," Weigand said. "I didn't really think—"

"If you want to know what Margaret said, I'll tell you," Graham said. "She said, 'Mind you take that poor girl to a nice place for dinner, making her work on a night like this.'"

"And," said Weigand, "you did. It's all very reasonable." He stood up.

"Try not to worry about your wife, Mr. Graham," Weigand said. "I think we'll find her, safe and sound." He looked at Graham, demanding his attention. "I really think we will, Mr. Graham," he said.

Graham stared at him apparently attempting to find ressurance; apparently not finding it.

"It's easy to say that" he said. "It's damned easy to say that. But things don't seem very safe around here, do they?"

XIV

BACK at Headquarters, Weigand stared at reports on his desk and spoke harshly of detectives. The reports had come by telephone from Hanlon and Smith and Healey, who had been set to dog the footsteps of, respectively, Randall Ashley, Madge Ormond and David McIntosh. All three detectives were very sorry and, Weigand suspected grimly, apprehensive. Halon and Smith, working, together had somehow managed to lose Ashley and the girl; Healey was beginning to have dark suspicions that he had lost McIntosh. All had good explanations and would, Weigand knew, have even better ones when they came on the carpet.

Healey's was the best; looking at it, Weigand was puzzled to think what he would have done in Healey's place, with McIntosh taking cover in the Harvard Club. Healey, a high school man himself, had waited outside in Forty-fourth Street. He had waited from the middle of the afternoon, when McIntosh left his office and went directly to the club, until almost ten o'clock, getting more nervous and perplexed by the moment. Inside the Harvard Club, protected from high school students and other tribesmen without the law, McIntosh had grimly stayed. Or at least, Healey hoped he had stayed. There seemed to be very little Healey could do about proving it.

Finally he had asked the doorman whether Mr. McIntosh was in the club. The doorman had looked at him doubtfully and asked, in less direct words, what it was to him. He might, the doorman admitted have Mr. McIntosh paged if—Mr. Healey—insisted. The doorman seemed to doubt whether either Mr. McIntosh, the club or Harvard University, which, the doorman's manner implied, had final jurisdiction would approve. Still—Healey decided against having McIntosh paged. It would, eventually, have made an issue where there was no issue to stand on. He didn't want McIntosh for anything; he merely wanted to know where McIntosh was. It would be difficult to explain this to McIntosh, son of the James McIntosh and much more influential than any first-class detective, if McIntosh did appear.

So Healey had backed out and telephoned for instructions. Before he backed he had managed to find out that there was a service exit by which members could leave if they chose.

So, Weigand realized, they had no real way of knowing where McIntosh was during the period of Mrs. Halstead's murder; no way at all. He might in the end emerge harmlessly from the club, and again into Healey's ken, and still they wouldn't know. If they had occasion to ask him he might say that he had been there all the time, and they would be unable to prove anything either way. So—

HANLON and Smith had less excuse, although even in their cases there was palliation. A little before six o'clock, Ashley had left his apartment and Hanlon had duly picked him up. Ashley had gone by cab to Madge Ormond's apartment, or at least to the house in which her apartment was. Hanlon had joined the watchful Smith on the sidewalk and compared notes. Both "subjects" seemed safely cooped. Smith had suggested that Hanlon hold on while he, Smith, went around the corner to grab a sandwich and Hanlon had agreed, stipulating that when Smith came back he, Hanlon, would be wanting a sandwich, too. The sandwiches had occupied the better part of an hour, and it was not until then that it occured to Hanlon that most houses have front and rear doors.

Hanlon had gone to the rear and verified his suspicion that this house conformed to the general rule, and the two had watched both doors industriously un-

til almost nine. Then Hanlon, whose alertness, if not sensational, seemed more acute than that of Smith had begun to wonder. Eventually, the two detectives had gone to Madge Ormond's apartment and, when there was no answer to knocks, had let themselves in, illegally but understandably. Neither Ashley nor Miss Ormond had waited.

Here was at any rate, obvious intention to throw off surveillance, Weigand thought. McIntosh might have eluded Healey quite unconsciously—might not, in fact, have eluded him at all. But if Madge Ormond and Randall Ashley had got away, as they had, they could only have done it by plan. It was hardly likely that they made a habit of leaving the building by the back door, going through another door in a board fence, and emerging through the basement kitchen of a restaurant on the next street. Now, clearly they would have to be picked up. He directed that they be picked up, as soon as they reappeared, and brought in.

XV

"RIGHT," Weigand said, "that's the way I thought it worked." He put the telephone receiver back on the hook in the booth. He looked rather pleased with himself, Mullins thought. Mullins was pleased too, although he didn't know precisely why. The Loot was working things out, Mullins guessed.

At Bellevue, Dr. Jerome Francis put his own receiver back. He looked puzzled. He shook his head, admitting he didn't see what Weigand was getting at.

"However," Dr. Francis said, dismissing it. He could read about it in the papers. Meanwhile he had some interesting brain sections to do. Dr. Francis drew on rubber gloves and prepared to do them.

"What've you got, Loot?" Mullins asked, curiously, as they got in the car. Weigand seemed in good humor.

"A hunch," Weigand told him, uninformatively. "Nothing you couldn't have on what we've got, Mullins, if you'd use your head." Weigand looked at Mullins' head. "I guess," Weigand said, with some doubt.

"Listen, Loot," Mullins said. Weigand grinned at him. They went across town to the Placement Foundation. They rode up to Miss Crane's office. Miss Crane was cheerful and a little hurried. "The committee's meeting," she told Weigand.

He wouldn't, Weigand said, keep her. He merely wanted to look over whatever data they might have on Michael.

"The placement record," Miss Crane told him. "It's supposed to be confidential, you know." She smiled. "But I've already told you most of it," she said. "So you may as well see it all." She turned to her secretary.

"Have them send in Michael's record," she said. "Michael Osborne. The lieutenant can read it here, if he likes, while I see the committee."

That would do admirably, Weigand told her. The record arrived—it consisted of loose sheets, bound in cardboard folders. Weigand skimmed it, reading the condensed record of Michael's first appearance; a summary of the conversaton with "Richard Osborne" who now more than ever, Weigand decided, had life only in someone's imagination; records of the child's physical examination, which showed him a small boy evidently pleasing to doctors; a summary of his psychological test, with the psychologist's findings. Michael was doing well mentally, too. He had passed all the tests at the three-year level, most of those at the four and one or two at the five. He was superior; estimated I.Q. 120 plus.

He ought to get along all right when things settle down, Weigand thought. He turned back to the psysical record and reread it. Very husky for three, apparently, and with no defects—or, perhaps, one. "Protanopia," the record noted, and passed on.

"So," Weigand said, half aloud. "I was pretty sure it would be."

HE leaned back in his chair. It was a funny case, he thought; in some respects strangely intricate. He remembered the little things which had put him on the trail—always assuming he was on the trail—and smiled. They were such absurd little things. The engrossment of a child; the impatience of a man. And a hunch or two.

"But I'm still a long way from proving anything," Weigand told himself.

In the outer office, Mullins was striking

up an acquaintance with Miss Crane's secretary, who was looking at him, Weigand feared, with rather amused eyes. Weigand collected Mullins and went on. He stopped in the Forties and pushed a bell marked "Ormond." The door clicked and Weigand went up. Madge Ormond looked around the edge of a door and said, "Oh, hello, Lieutenant. Please come in."

"I want to talk to you," Weigand said. "Not here, however, I want to talk to you and your husband at the same time. Would you rather have us bring him here, or will you come along to his mother's apartment with me?"

"Oh—about last night?" Madge seemed a little amused. Weigand showed no amusement.

"About last night," he agreed. "And other things. Will you come along?"

"Of course," Madge said. "Everything's all right, now."

"Is it?" Weigand said. "I hope you're right, Miss Ormond. If we wait out here while you dress, will you stay away from the back door—and the fire-escape?"

"Of course," Madge said. "I won't be a minute."

She wasn't, to Weigand's surprise, much more than ten minutes. She came out in a blue dress which looked crisp and cool, and with a small blue hat pitching on the waves of her blond hair. "Real blond," Weigand thought, looking at her eyes. "Well, well."

She was willing to talk as Mullins drove them to the Ashley apartment, but Weigand was not. He would, he told her, rather go over it once, with Ashley present. Mullins parked the car, with a strong look at the doorman, in the reserved space before the apartment house in East Sixty-third. The two detectives and Madge Ormond rode up together.

RANDALL ASHLEY, his hands extended, started toward Madge when she preceded the two men through the living-room door. Then he saw Weigand and Mullins and stopped and said flatly, "Oh."

"Go ahead," Weigand said. "Kiss your wife, Mr. Ashley."

Ashley flushed darkly. Weigand watched as Madge's hand went out to his arm, pressing gently in caution. Ashley hesitated, then made an effort, and smiled.

"All right, Lieutenant," he said. "I'll hand it to you. Madge said you knew. How did you find out?"

That, Weigand told him, didn't matter. He wasn't, right now, interested in marriage, anyway. His voice was not friendly.

"Suppose," Weigand said, "you tell me about last night. And if you were planning to say it was all an accident, skip it."

Madge and Randall looked at each other. They smiled at each other and Madge nodded.

"He's got us," she said. "He always seems to get us." Ashley shrugged.

"All right, Lieutenant," he said. "We were pretty sure you were having us watched—at least I was sure you were having me watched. And Madge and I just wanted to get off by ourselves. That isn't strange, is it?"

"Isn't it?" said Weigand. "I wouldn't know."

Ashley flushed again, and again Madge's touch silenced him.

"Let me tell him," she said. "After all, he has to find things out." She turned to the lieutenant. "Only this time there isn't anything to find out," she said. "Not really. It's just as Buddy says—we wanted to be alone. We wanted to talk about some things without the chance that somebody—well, that anybody might be listening in. Is that unreasonable?"

"I still don't know," Weigand said. "What things?"

"What the hell business—" Ashley said, and again Madge stopped him. It was interesting, Weigand thought, to see how the sulky boy drained out of Ashley at her touch, leaving a much simpler, rather more attractive man.

"I'll tell him," Madge said. "It wasn't anything. I suggested we get away and talk things over. I wanted to persuade him to quit trying to make a secret of our marriage. I wanted him to go to his mother and tell her about it, and accept any decision she makes. I tried to persuade him that—that getting the money in a lump isn't really important."

SHE stopped and looked at Weigand. Weigand met her eyes.

"I thought," he said quietly, "that he was already convinced on that point—that

it didn't matter whether he got the money all at once, or merely the income. I thought that, Mrs. Ashley, because that's what you told me."

She flushed, this time.

"It was really true," she said. "It was true when I told you that. It isn't *really* important to him, any more than it is to me—not important enough to *do* anything about—anything—"

"Like murder," Weigand finished for her. "I hope you're right, Mrs. Ashley." There was no particular expression in his voice.

"I *am* right," she said. She spoke eagerly, searching Weigand's face. "You see what I mean. Of course, he'd *rather* have the money all at once, but it isn't anything—anything *vital*. Not to either of us. And now he agrees that we should tell his mother, and not try to influence her, don't you, Buddy?"

Buddy hesitated a moment.

"Yes," he said, finally. "I suppose so. I still think the old man pulled a dirty trick on me. But I agree with Madge that it isn't very important."

"Right," Weigand said. "I'm glad you've got together." It sounded rather cryptic, which was all right with Weigand. "Now," he said, "where did you go?"

"Out to Ben Riley's," Madge said. "The Arrowhead Inn, you know."

SHE said it calmly. Weigand stared at her, examining her face. He turned to Ashley. He couldn't see anything in Ashley's face either.

"Out in Riverdale," he said. "Yes, I know Riley's. And that doesn't mean anything to either of you?"

They both looked at him. They seemed surprised.

"Mean anything?" Madge repeated. "Ben Riley's?"

"Or Riverdale," Weigand said.

Ashley said, "Oh! That's where Lois had been Tuesday afternoon," he said to Madge. "Don't you remember? Out seeing some people in Riverdale about a child?" He turned to Weigand. "Is that what you mean, Lieutenant? I can't see that it would mean anything."

"No?" said Weigand. "Does Mrs. Halstead mean anything?"

"Halstead?" Madge repeated. Her face was, so far as Weigand could determine, completely blank. So was Ashley's. He waited for more than a minute, and then spoke.

"Assuming you don't know," he said, "although it was in the newspapers—Mrs. Eva Halstead was killed last night. She was the woman who had, up to a few weeks ago, been taking care of Michael. Michael is the boy about whom your sister was seeing those people in Riverdale, Ashley. And Mrs. Halstead lived in Riverdale—lived about half a mile, or so, from Ben Riley's Arrowhead Inn. I'm trying to make it all very clear for you—for both of you."

They stared at him.

"But I don't see—" Madge began. Ashley cut in.

"There's no way you can mix us up in it, Lieutenant," he said. His voice was hot and hurried. "I'll grant you you might make out some sort of a motive—a damned bad motive—for my—doing something—to Lois. But this Mrs. Halstead! We never even heard of her!"

"No?" said Weigand. "I hope you didn't. I'd hate to find you lying to me, Ashley."

Ashley stared at him, then made a gesture of resignation. His voice was quieter when he answered.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said, "I can't make you believe us, if you've decided not to. If you think you can prove anything, go ahead and try it."

WEIGAND nodded. If Ashley wanted to take that attitude, he said, it would be perfectly understandable—also perfectly all right with him. But if Ashley thought there was no way of tying Mrs. Halstead into it—

"Well," Weigand said, "suppose I outline a case. You don't have to say anything, unless you want to. Suppose I say that you got very much entangled with the young woman who—preceded Miss Ormond. The one your father knew about when he made his will. Suppose that was around four years ago and that the entanglement had a result—Michael."

"No," Ashley said. He spoke without heat. "You're barking up a wrong tree, Lieutenant."

Weigand nodded.

"All right," he said. "We're just sup-

posing. Suppose the girl died, or disappeared, and left you with the baby. Suppose you found various people to take care of him, ending up with Mrs. Halstead. Then suppose Miss Ormond came along, and you decided to get rid of an entanglement and, posing as Richard Osborne—he was about your height and weight, and dark glasses and a growth of beard would be all the disguise you'd need—you unloaded him on the Placement Foundation. What do you think of that theory, Ashley?"

"I think it's lousy," Ashley said. He still spoke without heat. "So what do you do now."

Now, Weigand told them, he saw Ashley's mother, if she was able to see him. They'd let the rest slide, for the time being.

"Do you want to find out whether she can see me?" Weigand said to Ashley. Ashley hesitated. "Yes, Buddy," Madge said. "Do what he says." Ashley went out, slowly. He seemed to hate to leave Madge with the detectives.

"*Do* you believe it, Lieutenant?" Madge said quickly, when Buddy had left. "All those things you said—about Buddy and about me? Do you really believe them?"

He looked at her. He spoke mildly.

"I only said they could be true, Mrs. Ashley," he told her. "And I want you to answer one more question. Was there anything the matter with your father's eyes?"

Madge stared at him, out of very large blue eyes of her own.

"My father's eyes?" she repeated. "What on earth, Lieutenant?"

"Was there anything wrong with your father's eyes?" Weigand repeated. "Surely that's simple enough. Never mind why."

"I don't know quite what you mean," she said. "He wore glasses. He was nearsighted, I think. I used to try to look through his glasses when I was a little girl, and everything blurred. But I don't think there was anything else." She smiled. "I just thought all grown-up people wore glasses," she said. "I didn't think about what it meant."

"Right," Weigand said. "I just wanted to know."

She seemed about to say something more, but Ashley came back into the room. He nodded to Weigand.

"All right," he said. "You can see her for a few minutes. Are you going to—?"

"Tell her?" Weigand asked. He shook his head. "Not right now, anyway," he said. "If you've been telling me the truth, you're going to tell her yourself. And if you're telling the truth, I don't want to mess things up for you."

HE motioned to Mullins to remain in the foyer, and climbed the stairs behind Ashley. The senior Mrs. Ashley was lying on a chaise-longue, and she had been crying. She looked younger, in some ways, than the sixty-odd she presumably was—one would have guessed her age at sixty-odd, with the mental reservation that she did not look it. She had a light voice which would, Weigand suspected, twitter over conversations when she was herself. Now it was thin and drained.

She said, "How do you do, Lieutenant?" and Weigand said he was sorry to intrude. He waited until Ashley had gone out, and said he was very sorry about what had happened. Mrs. Ashley's pale blue eyes filled and she nodded. She wiped her eyes with a tiny, lacy handkerchief.

"It is dreadful," she said. "Dreadful. I can't understand why anyone should want to hurt Lois—she was always so—gentle and sweet to everybody."

Weigand waited.

"You don't suspect my silly boy, do you, Lieutenant?" she said. "That would be too absurd. Or his wife, that he thinks I don't know about?"

Weigand was startled, and showed it.

"Oh," she said, "you didn't know I knew? But I did, so you see if you thought that might be a motive for Randall, you were wrong. I've known it for weeks. A friend of mine found out, and told me."

She is shrewder than she looks, Weigand thought.

"Did your son and Miss Ormond know you knew?" he asked casually. "And do you approve?"

"No," she said. "I've been waiting for them to tell me. And yes, Lieutenant, I approve—at any rate, I don't disapprove. I would have preferred—but that doesn't matter. I think Miss Ormond is charming and that she is really in love with my son. I also think she is good for him, don't you?"

She is *much* shrewder than I thought, Weigand decided, looking at her. Her eyes challenged him.

"I think she quite possibly is good for him, Mrs. Ashley," he said. "But to go back—you don't really think that your knowledge completely eliminates the motive, do you?"

"But of course it does," she said. "The only reason he could have had for doing anything to Lois was because he was afraid that she was going to tell me about the marriage. Or about something else. But if I already knew—oh!"

PRECISELY, Weigand told her. It might be something of which she knew nothing. And it might still be the marriage.

"They didn't know you knew," he said. "They thought you didn't. And your son, if he acted, would have to act on the basis of his own belief, even if it was inaccurate. Of course you see that, Mrs. Ashley."

She nodded.

"I see what you mean," she admitted. "But you know it is perfectly absurd, Lieutenant. In your heart."

This seemed to be the day, Weigand thought, for women to explain to him what he really thought about things. He shook his head.

"I'm a policeman, Mrs. Ashley," he pointed out. "Policemen can't think with their hearts."

She looked at him closely.

"All right, Lieutenant, have it your own way," she said. She dismissed it, apparently. "What did you want to ask me?" she said.

"Whether there was anything wrong with your first husband's eyes, Mrs. Ashley?" he said.

She looked perplexed, as Madge Ormond had. Then she shook her head.

"No, Lieutenant," she said. "He had quite remarkable eyes. To the day of his death. Why?"

Weigand said it didn't matter. He thanked her and found his way out of the bedroom; then, collecting Mullins, out of the house. There was a new detective, looking almost too alert, on guard in the street. Weigand nodded to him and let Mullins drive the Buick. Weigand sat without saying anything after he had given instructions. The Loot, Mullins could see with the corner of an eye, was thinking. It was a spectacle cheering, as well as rather strange, to Mullins. The Loot was a funny sort of a guy. He could just sit still and think. Mullins ran through a red light, touching the siren gently. Weigand said nothing. The Loot could sure think deep, Mullins told himself.

THE interview with David McIntosh took only a few minutes. McIntosh received them in a very inner office, and was as bland as the expansive top of his irreproachable—and arrestingly unoccupied—desk. He raised no objection to telling where he had been the evening before. He had been at the Harvard Club for cocktails, dinner and finally for bridge. He did not ask why Weigand wanted to know.

"I gather you've heard of Mrs. Halstead's death," Weigand said. McIntosh remained bland.

"Certainly," he said. "I read it in the papers. I haven't the faintest idea why it arouses interest in my movements, but I'm perfectly willing to cooperate."

Weigand said it was good of him.

"By the way," he said, "you didn't make a reservation at the Ritz-Plaza. You're still sure of that?"

McIntosh looked annoyed.

"How many times—" he began. Weigand gestured.

"Right," he said. "You didn't make a reservation at the Ritz-Plaza. How about the Crescent Club?"

He watched McIntosh's face narrowly. He could see only surprise and bewilderment in it.

"The Crescent Club?" McIntosh repeated. "What the hell? I didn't even go to the Crescent Club. Why would I make a reservation there?"

"I don't know," Weigand said. "But you *had* a reservation there." He shook his head at the incredulity in McIntosh's eyes. "Oh, yes," Weigand said. "You had a very nice reservation there, the manager says. A table right near the dance floor. There's no doubt about that. But I suppose you say you didn't make it?"

"I don't get this," McIntosh said, slowly. "I don't get it. There's something—I don't get it. I didn't make any reservation anywhere. We didn't know where we were going." He stared at Weigand inquiringly,

seeking explanation. Weigand's face offered none.

"Right," Weigand said. "That's all, I guess."

He was rising when Mullins, who had been sitting in a corner, suddenly spoke.

"Was there anything the matter with your father's eyes, Mr. McIntosh?" he said. McIntosh looked at Mullins, whom he had apparently forgotten, with evident surprise. Weigand looked with equal surprise, and then closed his lips on a grin.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I was forgetting—thanks, sergeant. Was there anything the matter with your father's eyes, Mr. McIntosh?"

"What the hell?" said McIntosh, wonderingly. He looked at Weigand, who apparently meant it.

"Why, yes," McIntosh said. "He had double cataract toward the end. Though what that has to do—"

Blandly, Weigand told him that it was of no consequence. "Just routine," he said, which left McIntosh looking more blank than ever. He was still looking blank when Weigand and Mullins were ushered out. In the building corridor, Mullins was evidently pleased.

"You pretty near forgot that one, Loot," he said. "Good thing I remembered." He paused, evidently in thought. "Listen, Loot," he said, "what do we want to know for?"

Weigand smiled at him.

"Routine, Sergeant," he said. "Just routine."

XVI

MR. NORTH looked at his watch and announced to Mrs. North that he was overdue.

"At the office," he said. "Where I should have been half an hour ago." He looked at her seriously; standing he took her chin in his hand, and shook her head gently.

"And you, kid, stay at home," he said. "Or go to the movies or—or anything. But leave the murder alone." He made her look at him. "I mean it," he said. "No more murders for the Norths. We get bunged up—you got bunged up and then I got bunged up. Next time—well—leave it to Bill, Pam. I mean it. I still think of you lying on the floor upstairs and—"

Pam wiggled a bit until her chin was loosed and then she kissed him.

"All right, Jerry," she promised. "I'll just look on. Spectators sports, sort of. All right?"

"All right," Jerry said. "See that you do." Jerry, after sticking his head out a window to see what the weather was like, and discovering that the storm hadn't done much for the temperature, went along to his office. Pam had another cup of coffee and read about the war. But she still was annoyed with herself, she discovered.

"Bill knows something," she said to nobody in particular, although Martha, cleaning up, said, politely, "Ma'am?" Mrs. North shook her head, abstractedly. "It hinges on Michael," she told herself. "There's something about him that I've missed." Then she thought it would be perfectly all right with Jerry if she just went up to the Foundation and read Michael's record. She hesitated a moment, and then told herself that that wasn't really getting into it. Not really. It was interesting to have it settled, and she put on her hat with the red feather and tucked her red purse under her arm.

THERE wasn't any trouble about seeing the record. Miss Crane, who might have hesitated, was away somewhere, and Mrs. North pointed out, hardly firmly at all, that she was on the committee. She read the record carefully, with special attention to Richard Osborne's description and to his account of Michael's short, unsettled past. She shook her head, and read on. She found out, as Weigand had, that Michael was a smart little boy— "which I knew from the first!" she told herself—and was about to look up "protanopia" when it happened. Miss Crane's secretary got the message and said in shocked tones, "No!"

Then she was talking very rapidly on the telephone, and asking hurried questions. There was such a stir in the air that Mrs. North stopped reading. Something exciting had happened.

The secretary cradled the telephone and immediately picked it up again.

"Get Miss Crane," she said, evidently talking to the operator. "Well, find her —it's vital. One of our children has been kidnaped."

"Michael!" Mrs. North said. She said it on a rising note of excitement. "Not Michael?"

The secretary nodded, holding a hand over the transmitter.

"This morning," she said. "Sometime in the last two hours. He was out playing and now—now he's nowhere!"

"Oh!" said Mrs. North. "Oh, no! Not Michael!"

She stood up and her red purse slipped from her hand and fell, spilling compact and lipstick and spraying oddments. Mrs. North stood for a moment with wide, frightened eyes.

"But he's just a little boy!" she said. "Nobody could!"

Possibly if Miss Crane had been there —if Pam could have had the feeling that something was being done, then, quickly —Pam might have remembered that she was to keep outside of things. She always insisted, afterward, to Jerry that it was because nobody seemed on hand to do anything that she had forgotten her promise. Jerry pointed out that the police could be notified at once; that, as a matter of fact, the police had been notified at once. But Mrs. North insisted that it wasn't, at that moment, enough to think of the police.

"I just thought of a little boy," she said. "And dreadful things happening, and the way he played with my watch. You'd have done the same thing, Jerry!"

"No," Jerry said. "Not I, Pam. But you—yes, that's different."

THE police heard the news a few minutes after it came to Pam, but it was more than an hour before Weigand heard of it. For once he was out of reach, turning over odds and ends at the New York offices of Henri et Paulette. So, without his knowledge, the Missing Persons Bureau widened its net; the police at a Queens precinct went into action and O'Malley, fuming in his office, was snappish even with reporters and demanded that heaven and earth be moved to discover Lieutenant Weigand. Weigand, with Mullins beside him, turned over odds and ends patiently.

He talked, first, to Miss Hand—Miss Geraldine Hand, the secretary of John Graham. She had been at the roof, he told her, and they wanted to know everything that anyone at the roof that night could remember. Had she seen Lois Winston?

"Yes," Miss Hand said. "Although I didn't know who she was at the time. But I recognized the man she was with—Mr. McIntosh—from seeing his picture in the papers and then I looked at her just—well, just to see what kind of girl a man with all that money went around with. And then next day, when I read the papers, I realized who she was."

Weigand nodded.

"By the way," he said, "do you know Mrs. Graham? She's missing, you know."

He studied her. Her face assumed an expression of concern.

"Yes," she said. "Isn't it—dreadful? She always seemed such a—well, calm and even-tempered woman. Although, of course, I only met her a few times—she dropped in here now and then. Not often."

"It's very upsetting for Mr. Graham, certainly," Weigand said. "I suppose you didn't—but I can't ask you to betray any confidences." He paused, and she looked at once interested and appropriately noncommittal. "I suppose," he said, "that Mr. and Mrs. Graham got along all right? You know what I mean?"

Miss Hand's expression registered the question as indiscreet.

"Really, Lieutenant," she said, "if there were anything you wouldn't expect me—but, fortunately, there wasn't. So far as I know, at any rate. He never—well, said anything, or expressed anything, which would make me think different."

"Right," Weigand said. "I suppose he called her up when he was going to be late getting home—that sort of thing. He was considerate, I mean. When he was going to be delayed—as the other night—he would telephone and all that?"

Miss Hand nodded, and said, "Of course."

"As it happened," she said, "Mrs. Graham telephoned him Tuesday, and he

told her then. But he was just going to call her—he'd told me to remind him."

"Right," Weigand said. His tone expressed conventional approval of marital consideration. Miss Hand, he could see, was thinking him rather stodgy—the substantial, middle-class policeman.

"By the way," he said. "Just what is Mr. Graham's position here. Office manager—something like that?"

Miss Hand nodded.

"And other things," she said. "He runs this end; our factory's in Long Island City, you know. He has something to say about everything except the actual manufacturing — sales, purchases, new lines—almost everything. Of course, the main office is at the factory, really, but a great deal clears through us."

"Quite an important position," Weigand said. His voice betrayed admiration of Mr. Graham's importance and, he trusted, a proper note of envy. "He must make a—well, a pretty good thing out of it."

Not, Miss Hand assured him, loyally, as much as he deserved to make.

"He has a great deal of ability," she said. "I sometimes feel that they don't appreciate him properly at the factory. He ought, really, to be a member of the firm, instead of just a salaried executive. But I suppose that needs capital, doesn't it?"

Weigand, with the air of a man out of his depth in commercial matters, but trying not to show it, agreed that it probably did. He thanked Miss Hand and collected Mullins. Outside, Mullins looked at him darkly.

"That was an act, Loot," he said. "Just an act."

"Was it, Mullins?" Weigand said. "Think of that!"

HE shepherded Mullins to the Buick and drove downtown. He arrived between harried appearances of messengers in search of him, and had time for a telephone call before the storm broke. He made the telephone call to Danbury, and asked them to trace records. It was, he said, a routine item for the files—an item concerning a George Benoit, who had got a ticket there sometime Tuesday. The Danbury police checked while he held the line. The Danbury police reported.

"Yes," Weigand said. ". . . Yes . . . About what time?" . . . How long did you hold him? . . . Um-m-m. . . . Did he have any explanation? . . . He did, eh? . . . What? . . . Yeh, that was a hot one, wasn't it? . . . And was he?" There was a longer pause. "Sure enough!" Weigand said. . . . "Yes . . . Yes, it must make it difficult. . . . Well, thanks, sergeant. Do as much for you some time."

He hung up and sat staring at Mullins.

"Well," he said, "that's that. The little pinch of corroboration, sergeant, that savors the best of hunches."

"What?" Mullins said. "I don't get it."

"Don't you, Mullins?" Weigand said, gently. "You should, you know. It's all been spread out for you. What you didn't see, I've told you."

Mullins stared at him.

WEIGAND left like a man going somewhere, but he sat at his own desk and drummed his fingers on it. He telephoned Missing Persons and got Paul Durkin. He asked crisp questions.

"I think we've got a line," Durkin told him. "We rounded up a taxi-driver who picked Mrs. Graham up near her home last night—a guy named Fineberg—Max Fineberg. Funny thing, he drove Lois Winston downtown from there Tuesday afternoon. What do you think of that?"

"Well," Weigand said, "it's a fine time for him to be remembering it." He thought. "Although," he added, "I can't see it makes much difference. Where did he take Mrs. Graham?"

"To a hotel," Durkin said. "Or, anyway, to a hotel door—the Carney. It's a little place, very respectable, in the Murray Hill district. Naturally, she's not there now."

"Naturally," Weigand said. "That would be too easy. Did she ever go there? Or did she just wait until Max drove off and walk away?"

"I wouldn't know," Durkin said. "No Mrs. Graham registered there. A Mrs. Gebhart did, about the right time. The clerk's pretty old, and pretty short-sighted, but his description sounds as if Mrs. Gebhart and Mrs. Graham might be the same person. But he can't identify a picture—

just shrugs and says, 'Maybe, maybe not.' You know the kind."

"Yes," Weigand said. "And what about Mrs. Gebhart?"

"Checked out," Durkin told him. "Took a cab this morning; the boy who brought her bags down also had a gander at Mrs. Graham's picture and says it looks like Mrs. Gebhart. He's not very sure, either; says he didn't look closely, and why should he? He put her in a cab. It's too bad he didn't pick one of the regulars that work the hotel, but he didn't. There are only a couple and both were gone. So he flagged a cruiser. A Paramount. We're chceking, but it will take a while."

IT might, Weigand realized, take hours, and with no vast certainty. If things didn't go as he anticipated, he might see Staten Island yet. Cab-drivers were supposed to make records of all their trips, showing where passengers were picked up and where set down. Usually the big company drivers did. Sometimes they didn't. It would take a while to look over the sheets; it would be several hours, at best, before all the sheets were available.

"How about the kid?" Weigand asked Durkin. Durkin said they had just started on that and that it was as much a precinct and reserve job as theirs. Some details had come along. Michael had been playing on the front stoop of the boarding home, which was a detached house with a neat little yard. Another boy who was under Mrs. Konover's care had gone to school; Mrs. Konover was busy with her housework. And Michael had merely vanished. The neighborhood was being searched and the precinct men, aided by a Missing Persons Bureau detail, were questioning people who might have seen something. So far—

"Wait a minute," Durkin said. "Let's see that, Mike." There was a pause. "Well," Durkin said, "here's something. There are a couple of women around inquiring, too. Or were during the morning. One of our men came on the track of them when he was asking some questions in the neighborhood. Any idea who they'd be?"

"No," Weigand said. "It's funny. What kind of women?"

"We don't get *anything* but lousy descriptions," Durkin complained. "Young women, apparently. They were around a while and then went off in a taxicab. Mean anything, do you think?"

"I hope not," Weigand said. "I suppose it's on the radio? Well, then, maybe a couple of helpful women who heard it on the radio and just wanted to poke around." He laughed, shortly. "Mrs. Konover better watch out," he said, "they'll be taking her yard along as a souvenir if she isn't careful."

"Yeah," Durkin said. "Ain't people wonderful?"

Weigand, disconnecting, drummed on his desk. He remembered something.

"You were going to find out about a couple of wills, Mullins," he said. "What did you find out?"

Mullins looked startled for a moment. Then remembered and hauled out a notebook.

"Ole man Ashley's," he said. "The money is left pretty much as Buddy says; all tied up. He gets the whole business when he's twenty-five if he isn't married. There's nothing about being mixed up with a woman any other way, like you thought maybe. Mama Ashley can say a marriage is O.K. if she wants to, and then sonny boy gets the jack. Like sonny boy said. O.K.?"

"Right," Weigand said. "How about the girl?"

LOIS WINSTON, it developed, had left a considerable legacy to the Foundation. There were minor legacies to friends; a substantial one to the maid, Anna. The residue went to the college Lois had attended, with the stipulation that it be used for special research in the field of sociology.

"No motive there," Mullins said. "Unless maybe—say, Loot, how about Miss Crane? At the Foundation. Suppose she figures she can get her hands on the money that goes to the agency—"

He stopped, because Weigand was staring at him.

"Listen, Mullins," Weigand pleaded. "Don't think, huh? The Foundation, like all such agencies, is supervised by the state, and all their funds are audited regularly. I can't see Miss Crane killing anybody; she couldn't get the money if she did. Nobody at the Foundation could. And, if you

were thinking of that, I don't think the president of the college killed Miss Winston, either." He looked at Mullins. "I don't like to discourage you, sergeant," he said. "How about Anna?"

Mullins shook his head.

"Huh-uh," he said. "She ain't the type." He looked at Weigand severely. "You got to know types, Loot," he instructed.

Weigand nodded, as admiringly as he could. He said he thought Mullins had something there. Then the telephone rang. It was Durkin again, and he was crisp.

"Got the kid, Weigand," he said. "For once a hotel dick kept his eyes open. A dick at the Fairmount, up on Forty-eighth. Just called in to say that the boy—he's pretty sure it's the right boy by the description—was brought in there two-three hours ago by a woman. Registered as Mrs. Anderson, the woman did. Got Room 1209. Hasn't gone out since she came in. I'm sending—"

"Don't," Weigand said. "Don't send anybody. Put men on the doors; better have a couple on the twelfth floor, too. I want to pick the kid up myself." He broke off, thought. "No question about who found him, Paul," he added. "The break goes to the M.P.B., naturally. But I think it hooks in on the Winston killing, and I want to check it myself. Right?"

"Sure," Paul said. "I'll get the men out."

"Right," Weigand said. "I think you've broken it, Paul. Nice going. Be seeing you."

Mullins stood up, too. He responded to the change in Weigand's mood. They were going places, now. That was what Mullins liked; going places. His look at Weigand was hopeful, inquiring.

"Right, Mullins," Weigand said. "This is it, or close to it. Come on."

XVII

THE Hotel Fairmount towered without character over Forty-eighth Street; it was massive and nondescript—masonry with interstices into which beds and the occupants of beds could be fitted. The doorman's uniform was arresting; the doorman inside it pale and inconsequential. A few people sat in a grillroom which had windows on the street and pudgy waiters in noticeable uniforms looked out vacantly. Mullins pointed out that they hadn't had any lunch, and his step hesitated when, through the windows, he saw bottles on the bar. "Later," Weigand told him, curtly.

In the lobby the few people visible were without savor. Weigand's eyes flickered over the room. There were several men, waiting for nothing, who looked, if anything, more nondescript than the rest. There was one who didn't; who looked what he was. Bad work, that, Weigand thought. Cops who looked like cops had their jobs, but unsuspected observation was not among them. Precinct man, Weigand decided. One of the unnoticeable men turned from the cigar counter, vaguely, and brushed close to Weigand.

"Still there," he said, without moving his lips. Weigand nodded. With Mullins beside him—and heads came up as Mullins passed, and one casual gentleman went, with studied indifference, toward the door—Weigand went to the elevators. The eyes of the black-haired young man at the controls of the waiting car slipped over Weigand without interest but widened when Mullins followed. His eyes slid up and down Mullins.

"Twelve," Weigand told him. The young man looked at Weigand, leaving the car door open. Weigand looked back, without truculence. "Now," he said, almost gently. But there was no gentleness in the tone. "Get going."

The operator reached for the door. He kept his eyes on Weigand as he slammed it; groped for the control and moved it without shiftng his gaze.

"You better look where you're going, son," Mullins told him. "You wouldn't want to run into nothing, would you?" Mullins turned to Weigand and beamed, falsely. "Sonny don't want to run nto nothing," he told Weigand. Weigand smiled, fleetingly. This wasn't, he thought, the place he had expected to find Michael. But for anybody who wanted to keep under cover it wasn't a bad place. Only, if his theory was right—

He broke off as the car stopped.

"Twelve," the black-haired youth said. He said it indifferently. Mullins, follow-

ing Weigand out, patted the boy's shoulder.

"Nice going, sonny," he said. "Didn't run into a thing."

THE operator glared at Mullins and met a pleased smile. The door, clanging shut, nipped at Mullins' ankles.

"Temper," Mullins said, and sighed. A short, fat man with a red face who had apparently been waiting for an elevator looked at Mullins. Weigand's eyes flickered over the short, fat man.

"Homicide," Weigand said. "Lieutenant Weigand. You're the house man?"

"Yeah," the house man said, heavily. "I called Missing Persons. The kid's in twelve-nine. What is it? A snatch?"

"It could be," Weigand told him. "Which way's twelve-nine?"

The short man waved a short arm.

"Couple your guys around here, somewhere," he said. "You gonna do any shooting?"

"Why?" said Weigand. "Who'd we want to shoot?" He looked at the fat man. "Go look in some keyholes, brother," he advised. "Keep it clean."

"Listen—" the fat man started.

"Right," Weigand said. "You gave us a buzz. We've got it in the books. A nice gold star for Mr. Zepkin, house detective. The Police Department appreciates it. But we'll take it from here."

"Sure," Mr. Zepkin said. "Sure you will, Lieutenant. We don't want anything funny going on at the Fairmount."

"Sure you don't," Weigand said, cordially. "Not at a high-class house like the Fairmount." He paused a moment. "We'll be seeing you, I wouldn't wonder," he said. He started down the hall toward twelve-nine; stopped.

"Let's borrow your key," he said to Zepkin. "I'd just as soon not knock. I'll leave it at the desk."

Zepkin handed over his pass-key. He looked knowingly at Weigand, who returned the look blankly. Mr. Zepkin pressed the signal button on the elevator grill.

"It's a suite," he said. "Two rooms. Twelve-nine and twelve-ten."

"Right," Weigand said. They moved along the hall. At the end of the hall there was a window and a man was looking idly out it. He turned when he heard the steps of Weigand and Mullins. Weigand nodded to him.

"Keep an eye on twelve-ten," Weigand directed. "We wouldn't want anybody leaking out." He saw the man's hand move instinctively, toward a holster. Weigand smiled. "You won't need it," he said. "Not if I'm right."

Quietly, Weigand slipped the pass-key into the keyhole of Room 1209. He waited for movement inside and heard none. He turned the key and pushed the door open. A small, pleased voice said, "Man!" Weigand stepped through the door. He looked at the woman and the little boy sitting by the window, the child in the woman's lap.

"Well," Weigand said, "I *will* be damned!"

"OH, I don't know, Bill," Pam North said, over Michael Osborne's blond curls. "Not if you learn to knock at doors and say your prayers every night. How are you, Bill?"

"Well," said Mullins, looking over Weigand's shoulder. "What d'yuh know?"

"I thought," Pam said, "that you two would never get here. We—I, that is—I've been here hours. It doesn't seem to me that the police are very efficient."

Weigand looked at her darkly.

"So you were the women," he said. "Out in Queens, prowling around, asking questions, getting in policemen's way."

"Women?" Mrs. North repeated, wonderingly. "How could I be 'women,' Bill? Even if I was out in Queens, asking the other little boy—Andy—where Michael was. When he came home from school for lunch, because it's only around the block. I'm still not plural, Bill."

"Sometimes," Weigand said, "I wonder."

Then he turned, because he heard a door open. Dorian Hunt stood in the doorway.

"All right, Pam," Dorian said. "She won't go. She says she's going to stay where Michael is." Dorian looked at Weigand. "And anyway," she said, "there's probably a man outside the other door. You wouldn't slip up on that, would you, Bill?" Her voice was faintly scornful. Weigand wished it weren't, but his own tone was equable.

"No, Dor," he said. "I wouldn't slip up on a little thing like that. Tell Mrs. Graham to come out and—" He broke off. "No," he said, "wait a minute. Let's get this straight. You and Pam were the women over in Queens. Whose idea was that?'

"That was my idea," Pam said. "I didn't know, then. I thought—that is, I was afraid—something would happen to Michael. And I wanted to help. I thought Dor would want to help, too, so I called her. And she did." She paused. Her voice was serious, now. "I was terribly frightened, Bill. About Michael—after all those awful things."

SHE looked at Michael, who was studying the dangling watch around her neck. Michael was having a really good look at the watch, now. He thought that if you picked at the back it might come open, so that you could feel the wheels. Pam, looking at him, thought he might be right.

"Look, Mike," she said. "How about the purse?" She reached the purse from the floor near her and dangled it before Michael. He looked at it frowned slightly and returned to the watch. Pam shook her head.

"A phobia," she said, "that's what it is. A phobia against purses. He's going to be a socialist."

"Listen, Pam," Weigand said, "you thought Michael was in danger. So you got Dorian and went out to find him. You started in Queens. Then what?"

"Then," Pam said, "we found that Andy—he's the other little boy Mrs. Konover boards—had just come home from school. So we asked him where Michael was. You see, the detectives had asked Mrs. Konover everything they could think of, and gone away, and none of them thought of Andy. And Andy, just as he was going to school, had seen Michael go away in a taxicab with a 'pretty lady.' The taxicab came up where Michael was playing and the lady got out and called to him, and Michael ran to her and they both got in and the taxicab went away. And so we asked Andy if he heard the lady say anything and he did."

"What?" Weigand said.

"He said the lady was sort of crying and laughing and saying, 'Oh, baby! Oh, baby!' over and over. Andy said it was a lot of slush. And then, just as Andy came up to see what it was all about, the lady said something to the man who was driving the cab and they went off. Andy yelled after them, because he wanted to go for a ride, too, but they didn't stop. So we asked what the lady said to the man who was driving the cab. Andy said she said 'Fairmount' and something about a street, so we looked it up and came here. And here they were."

"Well," Weigand said, "that was simple."

"But I knew," Pam went on, "that you and Mullins would find the place, eventually, and I thought—well, I didn't want Mrs. Graham to get into trouble. So Dorian and I tried to persuade her to go home and promised to take care of Michael, but she wouldn't. Dorian was in the other room trying to persuade her, because we thought that if she was away from Michael it might be easier. But it wasn't."

Weigand looked at Dorian and then at Pam, and smiled.

"No," he said. "It wouldn't be. What did Mrs. Graham say—besides saying she wouldn't go?"

Pam started to speak, but Dorian stopped her.

"Bill," she said, "have you got anything against her? Against Mrs. Graham? Is she—the one you're hunting?"

THE voice was very quiet. It seemed to come from a good way off. Weigand looked at her.

"What did she say, Dorian?" he said. "What do you think from what she said?"

Dorian looked at him for almost a minute before she answered. When she spoke her voice was tired, uncertain.

"She can't be, Bill," she said. "She simply can't—wait until you talk to her. She's—she's almost hysterical. She thinks you're going to take the little boy away from her. She—oh, talk to her, Bill. Before you do anything!" There was emotion in Dorian's voice. "You can't do anything to her, Bill—you can't! She's so—so unhappy it breaks your heart!"

"I'm sorry, Dor," Bill said. "I'm sorry,

God knows. But I didn't start it, Dor. You've got to remember that."

Dorian's answer was a helpless spreading of the hands. Then, quickly, she turned.

"Mrs. Graham!" she called.

There was a pause and Mrs. Graham came to the door. Her face was pale and she had been crying; even now her lips were working and her eyes were dark and —yes, Weigand thought, frightened.

"Come in, Mrs. Graham," he said. He spoke gently. But she was not looking at him. She was staring, with a kind of frightened eagerness, at little Michael. The child looked up and stretched out his arms to her.

"Margie," he said. "Pick me up, Margie!"

Mrs. Graham was across the room, kneeling, with her arms around the child.

"You can't take him!" she said. "You can't!" Her voice was anguished. Her body half cut off the child from Lieutenant Weigand. "He's mine!" she said. "He's my boy—you can't take him away from me. It's been so long—so long!"

Her blond head went down against the little boy, while her arms held him. Michael's face puckered.

"Margie," he said. "Don't twy, Margie."

Dorian's gaze was on Weigand. He felt its demand before, slowly, he turned from Mrs. Graham and the little boy. He met the challenge in Dorian's eyes and his shoulders slowly lifted.

"Yes," he said. "Yes—but what can I do, Dor?" He paused. "How much have you guessed, Dor?" he said, more quietly.

Her eyes looked puzzled, for a second.

"Guessed?" she repeated. She seemed to think a moment. "That her heart's breaking for the little boy," she said. "That she's —hysterical with fear that he'll be taken away from her; that all this has spoiled everything, so that she can't have him. What is there to guess?"

WEIGAND nodded slowly, without answering. He motioned to Pam to give the child to Mrs. Graham and, when she had—when Michael sat on Margaret Graham's lap, with his arms around her, and when her arms had fastened around him as if they would never let go—Weigand drew Pam toward him with a motion of his head.

"And you, Pam?" he said. "How much have you guessed? What Dorian has—or, something else?"

Pam was very quiet, now, as she looked into Weigand's eyes—very quiet and thoughtful.

"I don't know, Bill," she said. "She— she didn't say anything more. Just about wanting the boy and being afraid he would be taken from her. But—"

"What did you guess, Pam?" Weigand insisted.

She shook her head.

"I don't know, Bill," she repeated. "It's all confused—but—" She paused again. "It hooks up somehow, doesn't it, Bill? So that you can't be sure about her—about her and Michael?"

Weigand nodded, slowly.

"I'm afraid it does, Pam—Dor," he said. "I'm afraid—" He broke off, hesitated a moment, and then crossed to Mrs. Graham. His touch on her shoulder roused her; her arms closed more desperately around the child.

"You hurt me, Margie," Michael said. He wriggled a little. "You hold me too hard, Margie," he explained.

"I'm going to have to take you home, Mrs. Graham," Weigand said, gently. She shook her head.

"Yes," Weigand said. "You'll have to come home, now." He hesitated. "We'll all go with you," he said. "It's almost over, Mrs. Graham."

She did not seem to understand what he said, or only a little of it.

"Michael?" she said. "Michael goes too?"

"Yes," Weigand said. "Michael goes too. For now, anyway." He looked down at her, trying to command her attention. "There are things to be worked out, Mrs. Graham," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

Her eyes grew very wide. She was trembling.

"Michael?" she said, desperately.

"I don't know," Weigand said. "I can't tell you about that, Mrs. Graham. That's —that's outside anything I can control, Mrs. Graham."

HE looked at her steadily, his eyes grave. He waited.

"All right," she said. "I'll go home.

But I won't let Michael go! I'll never let Michael go!"

Weigand did not answer, directly. He motioned to Mrs. North, who took the little boy again and dangled the fascinating watch for him. Mrs. Graham stood up.

"I'll get my things," she said, dully. "I'll go with you."

Weigand nodded.

"There's one thing before we go, Mrs. Graham," he said. "One question. Is there something the matter with your father's eyes?"

Mrs. Graham stared at him, her own eyes opening.

"Oh!" she said. "How—how did you guess?"

He looked at her.

"Try not to be afraid, Mrs. Graham," he said. "And how did I guess? Oh, a light of course. It just had to be put together." He waited for her to say something, but her eyes were devouring Michael. "Was that the way Miss Winston found out, Mrs. Graham?" he said. His voice was still gentle, but the texture had somehow changed. She did not answer, but he thought she heard.

As he turned, as Mrs. Graham went to the other room for her things, he found Pam's eyes upon him. There was a question in them and, as he watched her, Pam's eyes went, involuntarily it seemed, to little Michael and to the purse on the floor and then back to Weigand. Pam's eyes widened and after a second she said, "Oh!" There was fear in the syllable.

XVIII

AFTER the others were in the car, Weigand left them for a minute and found a telephone booth. Headquarters told him that all was under control; that the man he wanted was where he wanted him. Then, with Mullins at the wheel, they drove through Forty-eighth, swung back west and rolled uptown. Although Mullins was at the wheel, their movement was considered. Lights were observed; speed was no more excessive than convention allowed and motorcycle policemen tolerated. It was close to three-thirty when they swung to the curb in front of the Graham house in Riverdale.

Mrs. Graham, sitting by a window in the rear with Michael on her lap, had not moved or spoken. Her arms were around Michael; she stared out unseeingly over his tousled blond head. Pam North, between Margaret Graham and Dorian, had stared at the back of Mullins' neck and thought, not about the back of Mullins' neck. Dorian's eyes, fixed on nothing outside the window, saw, or seemed to see, no more than Mrs. Graham's. After the car stopped there was a little pause, and then Mrs. Graham stirred.

"Home," she said. She said it dully, with a kind of dull bitterness. Pam reached across her to open the door.

"No," Weigand said. "I want you three to wait here with Mullins for a few minutes. He'll tell you when to come in." Pam started to speak. "No," Weigand said, "I've got something to do, first."

A maid opened the door of the Graham house. Her eyes passed incuriously over the car.

"Mr. Graham," Weigand said. "Lieutenant Weigand, tell him. I have some news about Mrs. Graham."

Graham came to the living-room door as Weigand spoke.

"News?" he said. He spoke hurriedly, eagerly. "Is she all right?"

Weigand told him she was all right. He said it flatly, without expression and, watching Weigand's face, an odd expression came into Graham's.

"She's all right," Weigand repeated. "You'll be seeing her—soon. She's on her way here. But while we wait I've a few questions to ask."

"Questions?" Graham repeated. "What questions? Has something new happened?"

"No," Weigand said. "Nothing new. I just—well, say I want to check a few things. There seems to be a few descrepancies I'd like you to clear up. For example—I understood you to say that you telephoned your wife Tuesday afternoon?"

Graham seemed to be puzzled.

"Oh," he said, "that! What about that? Yes, I telephoned her."

WEIGAND'S voice was mild. He said it was no doubt some mistake.

"However," he said, "Miss Hand says that Mrs. Graham telephoned you. She

says that you had planned to telephone Mrs. Graham, but that she telephoned you first. Which is right?"

"Oh," Graham said. He seemed to be thinking. "I guess she is, as a matter of fact," he said. "Does it make any difference? I can't see—"

"Well," Weigand said, "it might, you know. Say your wife had something to tell you—then it might be interesting to know that she had called first. Did she have anything important to tell you, particularly?"

"No," Graham said. "I don't recall that she had. I had said that I might be tied up that evening and she was going out and thought she might be away when I called and so she called me to make sure. Something like that." He looked bewildered. "I still don't see what difference it makes," he said. He looked hard at Weigand. "You're sure Margaret's all right?" he said.

Weigand nodded.

"She's quite all right," he said. "Now, to get back. Did she tell you anything about Miss Winston's visit when she telephoned? I'd like you to remember—did she, say, mention that Miss Winston had been here, or anything, like that?"

"Well," Graham said, after a pause, "I think she did, just that Miss Winston had been here."

"She didn't," Weigand said, "say anything about Miss Winston's having met your father-in-law, Mr. Graham?"

Graham showed reflection.

"Come to think of it, she may have," he admitted. "She told me her father had dropped in, anyway—had some sort of trouble in Danbury when he was driving to Washington, and was delayed so that he decided to stop here. I may have gathered that he and Miss Winston met." His apparent puzzlement waxed to astonishment. "Don't tell me you think Benoit is mixed up in this," he said. The thought seemed to amuse him. "That's pretty absurd, Lieutenant," he said, with laughter in his voice.

"Is it?" Weigand said. His voice was unruffled, mild. "We have to check everything, you know, Mr. Graham. So I gather your wife did call you, instead of the other way around; that she told of Miss Winston's having been at the house, and of a meeting between Miss Winston and Benoit. Right?"

"Yes," Graham said. "This gets me, Lieutenant."

"Does it?" Weigand inquired, only interest in his voice. "I'm sorry, Mr. Graham. Now—did she say anything more about Miss Winston? Did she, for example, say where Miss Winston was going that evening?"

"What on earth," Graham wanted to know, "would I care where Miss Winston was going to dinner?"

"Right," Weigand said. "Why should you? Was anything said about it?"

"No," Graham said. "Of course, not." He spoke emphatically, staring at Weigand.

"Right," Weigand said. "Now—did you tell Mrs. Graham where you were taking Miss Hand to dinner? No—wait a minute. You explained about that, didn't you? It was a last-minute decision—you'd planned to go somewhere else, but the other place was too hot or something. Wasn't that it?"

"Yes," Graham said. "That was it."

"Right," Weigand said. "We have to keep things straight, you know. Now—I gathered from Miss Hand that your position is a fairly important one at your office, Mr. Graham—that you're more than an office manager; that you're something of a sales manager, in addition, and that you occasionally act as a purchasing agent, too. Is that right?"

"Yes," Graham said. "Approximately."

"Yes," Weigand said. "You've made quite an impression on your secretary, Mr. Graham. Did you know that? She thinks the work you do is out of proportion to your position—and to your salary. She thinks you ought to be a member of the firm."

"Does she?" Graham did not seem much interested. "I'm doing all right."

"Of course," Weigand said. "But you would buy into the firm if—if you had the capital, wouldn't you, Mr. Graham? It would make quite a difference in your income, I suppose? And you wouldn't mind that, of course."

"Who would?" Graham said. "Listen, Weigand—I don't see—"

"Right," Weigand said. "You don't have to answer these questions, of course.

But we like to get a clear picture. Now—I talked to your father and Mrs. Graham yesterday, and I gathered there is a rather queer situation about his money—something about your not having children, because of his belief that there is insanity in the family? I'd like your version of that, Mr. Graham."

"There's no version," Mr. Graham said. His voice was worn, irascible. "It's rot. He feels that way, but it doesn't mean a damn thing."

"Still," Weigand argued, "he could make it stick, couldn't he? If you did have a child, I mean? He could fix it so you didn't get any money, couldn't he?"

"The courts would have something to say about that," Graham said.

"Would they?" Weigand asked. "Even if your father *isn't* insane, Mr. Graham? And from what I saw of him, he isn't—not in any way that would invalidate a will. The courts are inclined to follow a testator's expressed wishes pretty closely, Mr. Graham—if he isn't insane, and the conditions aren't peculiar in any legal way. You know that, don't you?"

The last question came while Weigand was standing. As he spoke he moved toward the window and stood by it for a moment. Then he turned back to Graham.

"Your wife will be along any minute, now, Mr. Graham," he said. "Is there anything you want to tell me before she comes?"

"What the hell?" Graham said. His voice was hoarse, grating. "What would I have to—"

Weigand broke it. His voice now was level, and rather hard.

"Well," he said, "suppose you tell me this, Mr. Graham. What does your firm, Henri et Paulette, manufacture? Face creams? Scent? Face powder? Lipsticks? Things like that?"

"Yes," Graham said. "Things like that."

"And," Weigand said, *"eye-lotion*—something for women to put in their eyes before parties to make them bright and beautiful. How about eye-lotion, Mr. Graham?"

GRAHAM stared at the Lieutenant, and his own eyes were bright and hard. Weigand waited a moment, but Graham merely stared.

"An eye-lotion, Mr. Graham?" Weigand repeated. "An eye-lotion—with atropine sulphate in it?"

He waited for Graham's gaze to falter. It seemed about to; then Graham was looking beyond Weigand to the door, where Mrs. Graham stood, holding Michael to her and with Pam North and Dorian behind her.

"Margaret!" Graham said. There was excited relief in his voice, and he started to cross toward her. "Margaret! You're all right?"

Margaret Graham did not move. She stood with the child, looking at her husband. When she spoke her voice held nothing.

"Yes, John," she said, "I'm all right."

Her tone seemed to stop John Graham. Then he turned, sharply, toward Weigand.

"What have you done to her, Weigand?" he demanded. His voice had a snarl in it. "What have you made her—"

Weigand shook his head, slowly.

"Why don't you say hello to your son, Graham?" he said. "Why aren't you glad to see Michael?"

The words had a harmless sound as Weigand spoke them. But they brought a strange change to John Graham's face; it grew hard and bitter, and a kind of blankness of fear spread over it. Graham stood motionless for an instant; then, with convulsive speed, he moved. Even as Weigand's hand reached toward his police automatic, it was too late. Graham was across the floor. His charging shoulder sent Mrs. Graham staggering to the side, clutching the child. His hand wrenched at Pam's arm, sending her against a chair. He had Dorian, who had stood behind Pam, in his arms for a moment; then, as she struggled, he was behind her, his left forearm against her throat, forcing her head up and back. And his right hand held a gun long enough for them to see it. Then the gun was pressing hard against Dorian's side.

GRAHAM'S voice was high, cracking, as he spoke. Across the few feet he seemed to be screaming at them.

"Don't any of you move!" he screamed. "She'll get it, if you do. Don't try to stop me!" His voice rose high, and broke. *"Any of you!"* he cried. *"Don't move!"*

He was backing into the hall, pulling Dorian in front of him. Weigand saw her eyes widening in a white face.

"Drop it!" Weigand said. "Drop the gun, Graham. You can't make it."

But Weigand's hand had dropped from the butt of his own gun. Fear was singing in Weigand's mind. *"He's crazy,"* Weigand thought. *"In a moment he'll break—and kill!"*

Graham was moving away from them still, into the hall. His eyes were bright, hysterical.

"You won't burn—" he was screaming. Then the scream went out in a choking sound, and there was a soft, muffled sound. Weigand was moving as Graham's right hand wavered, and the pistol began to spill from it. He was in time to catch Dorian as, released, she staggered away from Graham. Weigand seized her by the shoulders; he was shaking her and talking and he seemed to be very angry.

"You!" he said. "You—why can't you stay out of things?—Why do you have—" Then, suddenly, he stopped speaking, because she was looking at him and smiling faintly. He said nothing for a moment, and then drew her to him. She followed his eyes down to Graham, crumpled on the floor. Mullins was kneeling behind him, and fitting a blackjack into his hip pocket. Dorian's fingers closed on Bill Weigand's wrist.

"Is—is he dead?" she asked. The words came gaspingly.

Mullins stood up slowly. He was smiling, but the smile faded slowly. An expression of mild affront replaced it.

"Dead?" Mullins repeated, incredulously. "Dead, Miss Hunt?" He looked at her darkly. "Do you think I'm an amachoor, lady?" he inquired, with dignity. "Do you think I don't know how hard to hit a guy?" Mullins was a craftsman, insulted in his craft. It was clear that, for Mullins, the savor had departed, leaving ashes in the mouth. *"Dead!"* he repeated, dully. "Huh!"

But Graham was already stirring. Within five minutes, during which Pam sat with Margaret Graham and Michael at the end of the living-room, John Graham was conscious again; ready to be told that he was under arrest for the murders of Lois Winston and of Eva Halstead. He did not look at anybody when Weigand told him, but stared at the floor, dully. When Mullins clicked handcuffs about his wrists, he transferred his stare to them.

When Weigand told Graham, Margaret Graham's head dropped to her arms on a table beside the chair. Even when little Michael tugged at her arms and tried to see her face, she did not seem to know it.

XIX

MR. and Mrs. North were on hands and knees on the living-room carpet when Martha let in Dorian Hunt. Dorian looked at them with only moderate surprise, but she said, "What on earth?"

"Pete," Mrs. North told her. "Pete's back."

She and Mr. North regarded Pete. Pete, a black and white cat lying comfortably stretched out between them, regarded Pam distantly over his left shoulder.

"I tell you," Mrs. North said, "he does look shorter. Whatever you say, he's not as long as he used to be."

"I know he isn't," Mr. North said, argumentatively. "I never said he *was* as long as he used to be. I merely said that, for all practical purposes, he *looks* as long. Hello, Dor. Do you notice any difference?"

Dorian got down on her knees to look at Pete. Pete shifted his gaze to Dorian, putting his head flat down on the carpet and looking at her upside-down.

"You have to get to one side of him to see properly," Mrs. North said. "Perspective."

Dorian moved to one side of Pete. She looked at him carefully.

"I can't see any difference," she said. "He looks about the same to me." She looked up at Mrs. North. "Is he supposed to have shrunk?" she said.

"Oh," said Mrs. North. "Didn't we tell you? I suppose with the murder and everything. He lost some tail."

"With the murder?" Dorian said, lost. "I don't see how."

"Not *because* of the murder," Mrs. North said. "Because of the murder we didn't tell you. He lost his tail in the door up at camp. He was sitting in it."

"In the doorway," Mr. North explained. "The wind blew it." He regarded this statement darkly for a mo-

ment. "Blew the doors, I mean," he said. "French doors, you remember. It blew them together. And Pete's tail was in between."

"Oh," said Dorian. "How dreadful, Pete."

DORIAN was still sympathizing with Pete when the doorbell rang and Martha crossed to click the downstairs door open. A moment later, Bill Weigand stood in the door of the living-room. His face was tired, but there was no strain in it. He answered the inquiries in the three faces.

"Yes," he said. "All over, including the shouting. Graham's spilled the whole business. A bullet fired from his gun matches one of the bullets that killed Mrs. Halstead. We've found the boy he sent out late Tuesday to get a package from a wholesale drug company—a package of atropine sulphate, to be sent along to the factory. The boy didn't know what it was; he just had a note. And the drug concern didn't report it when our men inquired, of course. It was a perfectly legitimate transaction. He's admitted making reservations for McIntosh at both the roof and the Crescent Club and—"

"Look," Mr. North said, "you're starting in the middle. The middle for me, anyway. Don't I count? All I know is that John Graham killed Lois Winston and this Mrs. Halstead, and that Michael is really his own son. And his wife's?"

Weigand nodded.

"And his wife's," he said. "Born in legal wedlock, all on the up and up. That was the trouble, really."

"Listen, Bill," Mr. North said. He sounded a little exasperated. "Suppose you tell us about it. First, how did you find out?"

"Well," Weigand said, "to be honest I never did find out all of it—until Graham started talking, of course. I guessed part of it—the main part. As soon as I knew that Michael was really the Grahams' son I had it, of course. Just as Lois Winston had it, when she made the same guess for the same reason. The details filled in afterward."

"All right," Mr. North said. "If you will begin in the middle. How did you know Michael was the Grahams' son?"

"Protanopia," Weigand said. Mrs. North nodded, contentedly. He smiled at her. "Got that, didn't you, Pam?" he said. "I thought you would."

"Michael is color blind," Mrs. North explained. "Red blind."

Weigand nodded. "Red blind" hardly said it, he told her, but it was close enough.

"And so," he added, "is Mrs. Graham's father, Benoit. I was tipped off to that when I was driving with him and he said the lights had changed, so we could go ahead. Actually, the lights we could see hadn't changed. The cross traffic lights had turned red, too, and the driver ahead jumped the gun, as most drivers will when the police aren't around. And, you see, color-blind drivers, when they're stopped by red lights—which don't show red to them—go by what other drivers do.

"That gave me a start on it. The rest, about Benoit, was confirmation—nice to have in court, but telling me nothing I hadn't guessed. Benoit was given a ticket in Danbury for passing a red light. You see, there weren't any other cars around to tip him off. They held him—they're strict there, just now—and when he claimed to be color blind they gave him a test. He was."

Mr. North looked puzzled.

"I DON'T see—" he began. Weigand's nod stopped him.

"I got the fact that Michael is color blind, too, from the record," Weigand said. "But again I only got something I expected. The hint had come earlier, when Michael wouldn't pay any attention to Pam's purse. Generally children go first for anything red; it used to be argued that red was the favorite color of all children. They think now, incidentally, that it is merely brightest to most children. But Michael wouldn't touch the purse. To him, probably, it was just sort of gray and uninteresting. He fastened on the watch, which was bright and fascinating."

Mr. North started to speak, but Weigand held up a hand.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'm coming to it. Color blindness of this type is transmitted in a sex-linked inheritance pattern. That's what Lois was looking up in the encyclopedia, incidentally. Under 'Heredity,' of course. It's all there. It is trans-

mitted like hæmophilia. Women don't show it. Mrs. Graham isn't color blind. But her father is, and some—not all—of her sons would be. Michael happens to be. I remembered something about that, and looked up the rest. I was following, incidentally, precisely the path Lois followed—to her death. Because she, already knowing that Michael was color blind, met George Benoit Tuesday afternoon. She wasn't supposed to; never would have, probably, if some traffic officer in Danbury hadn't stopped Benoit. It was chance—just one of those things."

"How did she find out?" Mr. North asked. Weigand shrugged.

"Graham wasn't there," he said. "We haven't questioned Mrs. Graham much, as yet. But it isn't hard to guess—Benoit told her. His mind was full of being held up in Danbury, because it was important to his plans, and he talked about it. He explained his color blindness, possibly. It was nothing to conceal, as far as he was concerned. And it is possible that, until Miss Winston showed what she knew—she may have said something about its being an odd coincidence, before she realized herself what it might mean—the Grahams didn't realize how this inherited vision defect was giving away their plot."

"Oh," said Dorian. Her voice was shocked. "She was in it, too? Mrs. Graham, I mean?"

Weigand nodded slowly.

"IN part of it, anyway," he said. He paused, thoughtfully. "I don't think she was in the murder, Dor," he said, gently. "Graham insists she wasn't, and I'm inclined to believe him. Technically, of course, she was an accessory after the fact. She knew—she guessed, even if he didn't blurt it out—what had happened." He looked at Dorian thoughtfully. "This isn't official," he said. "This is just among friends. I doubt if she will ever be tried for anything. With the motive she has—a natural longing to have her own child—it isn't the same as the motive her husband had—we'd probably never get a conviction. Even if we wanted to."

"Please," Mr. North said. "Please—*begin at the beginning!*"

"Right," Weigand said. "I know it sounds complicated. It isn't, really. It begins, of course, with old Cyrus Graham, and his belief that there is transmissible insanity in the Graham family. Whether there is or not—and after the way Graham acted this afternoon I'm not so sure there isn't—he made it clear that if the Grahams had a child, they didn't get his money. He has a lot of money; his son wanted it a lot, partly because he saw a chance to get ahead in Henri et Paulette if he had some capital. But—Mrs. Graham wanted a child a lot. She had that—oh, that basic craving for a child that some women have. Then, about four years ago, old Cyrus had a stroke and the doctors said he was going to die within a matter of weeks. And so—" He paused.

Pam nodded.

"Yes," she said. "I see. She decided not to wait any longer; to take a chance."

"Right," Weigand told her. "And by the time they knew that Cyrus might live for months, it was too late. Too late, anyhow, for anything Mrs. Graham would consent to. So there they were—the baby coming, old Cyrus—"

"Not going," Mrs. North said. "But the money going."

"Yes," Weigand said. "That was the way of it. So Graham made his plan, and his wife, because she was willing to do anything to keep the baby, and because she wanted to do what Graham wanted—and because there wasn't, she felt, anything really wrong in it—agreed. The plan was simple, at first. They would merely conceal the baby's birth—she went 'on a trip' when the time came—and arranged for boarding care until the old man died. But, again, the old man didn't die. It turned out to be not only months, but years—and all the time Margaret Graham was kept away from her baby around whom her whole life centered. After a while, she got desperate. She told Graham he had to fix things some way, she didn't care how, so she could have her son. But if he didn't fix them, she was going to have Michael anyway, whatever happened to the money. So he had to fix it."

MR. NORTH, motioning to Weigand to go ahead, spooned cracked ice from a thermos pail into a shaker, added gin and dry vermouth, and mixed. He poured martinis into glasses and twisted

lemon peel over them. Weigand let the cool cocktail trickle slowly down his dry throat.

Faced with his wife's ultimatum, Weigand told them, Graham had decided on a plan. They would adopt their own son—adopt him legally and by a method which would give the curious, alert old man in the wheel-chair upstairs no faintest ground for suspicion. They would adopt the boy, not privately but from an agency publicly engaged in placing children. They would make it appear that only chance brought them Michael, instead of some other child. Then Cyrus could not possibly suspect the truth.

To accomplish this, Graham had first taken Michael from the boarding home he had been in—out of town, it was, for greater safety—and found some place for the child nearby. He had inquired around, carefully, and hit on Mrs. Halstead. Then he had posed as Richard Osborne, wearing dark glasses, letting his beard grow for a day or so, and pretending physical weakness, and arranged for Michael to be boarded with the old woman. They had waited for a time, then, to give Mrs. Graham a chance to meet Michael "accidentally" in the park. When that had been done, Mrs. Graham went to the Foundation and told about the little boy with the old woman, exaggerating conditions somewhat but not excessively. She arranged it so that, if the little boy did come under the Foundation's care, they would inevitably think of her as a suitable foster parent. She put in an application for a child—ostensibly for any suitable child. But, naturally, she would not have accepted any child but Michael.

"A little later," Weigand continued, holding out his glass for more. Graham got himself up again as Richard Osborne and visited the Foundation, telling his cock-and-bull story and arranging for the child to be taken under care. He knew enough—he'd gone to the trouble to find out enough—about the practices of such agencies to feel sure that, when a worker saw the conditions of Mrs. Halstead's, the Foundation would think it best for the child to act on his authorization and remove it."

"Don't," Mrs. North said, "call Michael 'it.'"

"What?" said Weigand. "Oh, all right. Where was I?"

They told him.

"Well," he said, "it all went according to plan, at first. The agency investigated and was about ready to place Michael, when Miss Winston's suspicions were aroused. And that meant, Graham instantly saw when his wife called up that afternoon and told him she was afraid Miss Winston suspected, that an investigation would be started. Now—any investigation would be almost sure to reveal the plan.

THE rest, he said, was obvious. When his wife telephoned Tuesday afternoon and told him what had happened, Graham made light of it—insisted that all he would need to do would be to talk Miss Winston out of it. He said, however, that he had better see her that evening, if he could. Fortunately for his plan, Miss Winston had spent some time merely chatting with Mrs. Graham and had given her a sketchy outline of her evening's plans—"

"As anyone might," Mrs. North said. "Talking about the heat, and how to get away from it, and about going to roof gardens."

"Right," Weigand said. "Miss Winston had actually mentioned the Ritz-Plaza roof and the Crescent Club to Mrs. Graham as likely places where she and McIntosh would go for the evening. Graham found this out from his wife. Then he telephoned to both places and reserved tables in McIntosh's name near the dance floors. He couldn't, you see, merely take a chance that Lois and McIntosh would happen to sit where he could pass their table without arousing suspicion; that was something he had to make sure of. He suspected, rightly as it turned out, that McIntosh wouldn't question a reservation—would just accept it as in the natural order of things.

"When he had made the reservations, Graham took enough of the atropine sulphate and twisted it in a cigarette paper and put it in his cigarette case. Then he told Miss Hand to go to the other restaurant, and promised to pick her up there after his conference."

Mr. North looked puzzled.

"Why bring Miss Hand into it at all?"

Mrs. North looked at him sadly and shook her head.

"So he would have a dance partner, of course," she said. "So that—"

"Right," Weigand cut in. "And he had to park her some place while he found out whether Lois and McIntosh were going to the roof or over to the club on the East Side. So he went around to the apartment house where Lois lived and waited until the girl and McIntosh came out. He saw them get a cab and go straight across Park Avenue. Then he knew that, if they were following out their original plans—and he had to take a chance that they were—they were going to the roof. If they had been going to the Crescent Club, they would have turned north in Park Avenue and then turned back toward the East River. So, hoping he was right, he picked up Miss Hand, made his excuse about the cooling system in the other restaurant, and took her along to the roof. It must have been a relief to him to see McIntosh and the girl there, and at a table convenient for his purposes.

"The rest was fairly simple, as long as he kept his nerve and his wits. He did. He danced with Miss Hand—probably several times, until there was a time when McIntosh and Lois were on the floor, too. Then he maneuvered so that, as the music stopped, he and Miss Hand would be near the McIntosh table. Miss Hand went ahead, of course—he could, if he needed to, direct her so that she would pass the right table. He came along behind, took out a cigarette—and the paper of poison—and flipped the powder into Lois's drink. In the general movement and confusion—the music had ended, remember, and dancers were going back to their tables all over the room—there wasn't any real danger that he would be noticed. He wasn't noticed. Miss Hand, for example, was never even aware that he had stopped or hesitated.

"Graham and his secretary stayed at their table a little while and then went back to the office and did their work. He couldn't have been much interested in it—he'd already done his real work for the evening. He found out that he'd done it successfully when the early editions of the morning papers came out. He must have figured he was pretty safe when Buddy Ashley and Miss Ormond turned up as red herrings."

Mrs. North cocked her head speculatively.

"You know," she confessed, "I think I rather like Madge Ormond. At first I thought she was the obvious type, out for what she could get, but she really loves young Ashley."

Weigand nodded. "She'll be good for him, too. He's a spoiled brat, God knows, but with her around, I think he'll improve."

Mrs. North agreed sagely. "But do you think Mrs. Ashley will stand for the match? Not that she could actually prevent it, but she could see to it that the boy doesn't get another cent."

"I think from what little she told me, that she's more or less in favor of the idea," Weigand said. "She's nobody's fool, for all her vague ways, and she knows little Ashley from the inside out. No, I don't think there'll be any trouble in that romance. It's one of the few good things about this case."

WEIGAND stopped and finished off his cocktail. He appeared to have finished.

"And Mrs. Halstead?" Dorian prompted.

"Just stumbled into it," Weigand said. "She saw Graham on the street and recognized him—maybe from the way he walked—as 'Osborne.' Tuesday evening, after I had seen her, she went around to the Graham house and accused him of being Osborne. He denied it, of course, but could see that she didn't believe him. Maybe she threatened to tell us. So he killed her. Actually seeing her die hit him hard, apparently—I think that murder, rather than Lois,' haunted him, and finally made him break after we had him."

"And Mrs. Graham—she knew all the time?" Pam was curious.

"Oh yes," Weigand said. "She knew. That's why she tried to kidnap Michael, finally. Miss Winston had let drop where the child was, I suppose. He was all that Mrs. Graham cared about by that time—she was distracted, and had only the one burning idea—*get Michael.* So she got him."

"And now?" Dorian said. Her voice

was anxious. "Does she get him? To keep?"

Weigand shook his head, slowly.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "But, for what it's worth, I should think so. You see, he's her own child. She won't have to prove that; we'll prove it for her, when Graham goes to trial. And unless somebody presses the issue, and the court decides she isn't a fit parent—well, I should think the child would stay with her. Wouldn't you, Pam?"

Pam nodded.

"I don't see how it could be any other way," she said. "It's—it's something nice that has come out of it, anyway."

Nobody said anything. Martha finished setting the table. Mr. North stared at her, abstractedly. He was obviously thinking it over. Then he looked puzzled.

"Listen," he said, "wasn't there a suspicious man who *had* bought atropine sulphate that day? What about him?"

Weigand shook his head.

"There," he said, "you've got me. We haven't found him; we don't figure to. For all I know, he may be another murderer, laying in his stock of poison. For all I know, he may be dropping it in a glass somewhere at this very—"

The telephone shrilled across his words. Everybody jumped and Mrs. North said anxiously, "Oh dear!" Mr. North picked the telephone up, after a second of looking at it with deep suspicion.

"Yes?" he said. "What? Who?" There was a little pause. "No," Mr. North said. He listened a moment longer, said, "No" again and put the telephone back in its cradle.

"What was it?" Mrs. North inquired. There was excitement in her voice. Mr. North looked at her and smiled gently.

"A wrong number, Pam," he said. "Just a wrong number. Not another murder."

Pam said, "Oh," and sighed. It could be taken for a sigh of relief, of course. Mr. North decided he would take it for a sigh of relief. If it were anything else, there was nothing he could do about it. Pam would merely have to learn that she couldn't have a murder every night, with dinner. Not even if she did know a detective and—Mr. North looked across the room at Dorian and Bill—a lady who was, apparently, going to be a detective's wife.

The Two Big $2.00 Mystery Detective Books in this issue

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and

A PINCH OF POISON

By FRANCES and RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

". . . because March 4th is Election Day, of course!" When Mrs. North concluded this triumphant—if somewhat baffling—statement, the telephone rang; and before Mr. North and Lieutenant-Detective Weigand could ever find out what she meant, the Norths were merrily head over heels in a new murder case.

There was no apparent reason why anyone should wish to kill pretty, harmless Lois Winston. But somebody most obviously did—picking the gay Ritz-Plaza roof for his murder scene. It didn't, as Mrs. North pointed out, make sense. It made even less sense when, a few days later, an old woman living alone in a ramshackle mansion on the Hudson, opened her door to a midnight caller and got three bullets through her head. But somehow, Weigand knew, the two murders were connected. And somewhere in the mass of clues, alibis and facts were the links that bound them together. Such tiny, inconceivable links as Mrs. North's red handbag, Volume 11 of the Encyclopedia Britannica, and an unimportant old gentleman who got a traffic ticket in Hartford; but they were strong enough to send Mrs. North galloping off to play a lone hand in the dangerous game that had already taken two lives.

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