CATS DON'T SMILE
By D.B. Olsen

She Fell Among Actors
By James Warren

Two Complete DETECTIVE BOOKS

She Fell Among Actors

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The curtain fell on the last act of the life of Richard Winter, actor extraordinary, when his obese, alcoholic body was found sunk in fourteen inches of soapy bathtub water. But the drama of his death took up from here, for James Warren of Scotland Yard was convinced that this once greatest of all Macbeths had been murdered. To prove his case against those who insisted on viewing the death as accidental, Warren had to tear off the mask and cloak put around Winter the actor to reach the real facts about Winter the man. It was a tough job; Winter had surrounded himself with a diversely prejudiced set of characters. They included a statesman, a thief, a bar-keeper, a widow, a strange young blonde, and a brash journalist. According to their conflicting testimony, Winter was truly a man of many parts. Copyright, 1944, by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc. Regular edition, $2.00.

Cats Don’t Smile

By D. B. Olsen

The letter from Cousin Julia asking spry-and-seventy Miss Rachel Murdock and her sister Jennifer to take over house and paying guests was plain enough, but Miss Rachel, with her nose for crime, sniffed something wrong. To begin with, the guests were an odd pair to find in Julia’s home: a blowzy, blonde nurse, and a short, oleaginous gent with a Cheshire smile. The family in the big house next door was equally inexplicable and became more so when tears and tension turned into murder. In satisfying her avid curiosity, Miss Rachel learned at her own peril why a burned cuff link inspired terror, why music at midnight was carefully calculated, and how the mangled corpse of a cat was a prelude to human death. Copyright, 1945, by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc. Regular edition, $2.00.

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS WILL BE ON SALE AT THE NEWSSTANDS ON JANUARY 1st 1946
SHE FELL AMONG ACTORS

By JAMES WARREN

I SUPPOSE you would say that it all started on the first night of Lewis’ play at the Regent Theatre, an old mausoleum of a place which had been closed since the blitz. The acoustics were not good and the seats were hard. It was draughty. In fact, everything had been done to make the audience as uncomfortable as possible.

Yet on this night it was packed with celebrities who were eyeing each other in that sly way celebrities do, conscious always of the front they have to put up, laughing just a little too loudly, and greeting one another a little too profusely. There were rows of them. Anna and I must have been the only two nonentities in the stalls. But then, of course, we had come to see Lewis’ play and he wasn’t anybody much as yet.

The rest of the audience had obviously turned out to see the great Richard Winter. The veteran star had been off the stage for three years and this evening he was to make a comeback. Everybody was wanting to know whether he still possessed the magic which had caused his name to be already a legend in the theatrical world. Secretly they hoped that Winter would come a purler—at least the actors in the audience did. He was not greatly liked in the profession.

As for Anna and me, we just wanted Lewis to have a big success. He was a very good friend of ours, and since he ate, drank, thought, and dreamt the theatre we felt he certainly deserved a break. This play of his had been sent to all the managers in town and they had all returned it, some with compliments, some not.

But that hadn’t deterred Lewis. He had immense faith in himself, and when he met Janet Winter he discovered someone who had an equal faith. She was only recently out of the academy, a fresh, attractive girl whom you couldn’t pass up in a crowd. The two of them fell in love and she added her weight to the effort of getting Lewis’ play on.

She showed it to her father, Richard Winter, and he was eventually persuaded to back it and take the leading role himself. Janet herself was billed as the ingenue and Lewis produced.

Anna was trying to show me where Noel Coward was sitting when there was a hush in the audience and the manager of the theatre came in front of the curtain. He coughed into his hand, tugged at his shirt cuffs, and then said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to announce that owing to sudden indisposition Mr. Winter will be unable to appear tonight. His part will be taken by Mr. Gerald Carson.”

He fumbled for the join in the curtain and then vanished. There was an excited hum from the stalls. The actors were secretly pleased. A man behind me said: “I knew the old boy would never do it. He must be older than God.”

I turned to Anna.

“That sends Lewis’ play down the drain,” I said sadly.

But Anna didn’t seem to think so. She’d read the script and she knew more about plays than I did.

The curtain went up, and for a time the audience was restless. I feared the worst. The play was a slow drama which got up steam gradually, and it seemed that the customers might not wait for it to reach full pressure. But somehow they did, and by the end of the second act they were openly enthusiastic, and at the final curtain they gave it a big reception.

Anna was jubilant over having been right. On occasions like this it is never wise to remind her of when she has been wrong, so I said I was extremely lucky to have such a clever wife. A bit heavy-handed, I admit, but there was no need
for her to make veiled cracks about sarcasm, which she did all the time we were stumbling our way up the gangway.

I went in search of my hat and coat, and you could tell from the various remarks in the foyer that Lewis was all set for success. We waited to have a word with him, but he was surrounded with people. So we left a message to say we would be at Charlie’s if he had the time for a quick drink.

Charlie’s was a garish bar-cum-restaurant, patronized by many disreputable characters and a small handful of reputable ones. But all the bars in town were crowded these days, and Charlie’s was the one place you could be sure of a seat.

We sat down at a table and Charlie himself brought the drinks. He had one of those ugly faces you don’t quite believe are true when you first see them. He was usually pretty dirty-looking, too, but this evening he was resplendent in a clean white coat and his hair was plastered back tight.

“Evenin’, Mr. Warren. Evenin’, Mrs. Warren. How are you keeping?” I said I was all right, and Anna said she was all right, too.

“And the young fellow. How’s he?”

“About to celebrate his first birthday,” I said.

“Well, well,” said Charlie. “That’s nice. Must be exciting—watching him grow up.”

I sipped my drink. “He won’t grow up silently. That’s his trouble.”

“Keep you awake much?” Charlie gave a sort of grin.

“Too much for a tired policeman.”

Anna said: “Don’t you listen to him. He never gets up anyway.”

“I’m the breadwinner,” I said. “I’m entitled to some privileges.”

Charlie smiled. “Been running many people in?”

“Business is pretty brisk, as a matter of fact. Thinking of opening up a few new jails.”

Charlie saw someone else he knew and with a nod to us he walked off, his flat feet splashing at violent angles across the floor.

“This is lousy gin,” said Anna, making a wry face.

“Serves you right. You ought to know better than to have gin in wartime.”

“But, darling, you so seldom buy me one. I have to seize my opportunities.”

She gave me one of those looks, patted her hair, and went on drinking. “You know,” she said presently, “I think it was strange that Winter didn’t appear in the play.”

“Probably had a cold.”

“But he was the lead. Not many managements would have let the show go on without the lead.”

“Said a lot for Lewis’ play that it was still a success. That understudy wasn’t exactly tremendous.”

“But Winter backed the show. I mean—I don’t understand it at all.”

“Look, dear,” I said. “My guess is that Winter was drunk. He’s been away from the theatre for three years now and I happen to know he spent one of those years in an inebriates’ home in Surrey.”

Anna gazed at her empty glass pointedly. “Perhaps you’re right. . . . But if he was still drinking, why did he attempt to put the show on at all?”

“That’s silly. You might as well ask why he tried to play Hamlet three years back and fell into the orchestra pit in the middle of a soliloquy scene.”

Anna still stared at her glass. “I suppose there’s something in that. It’s an awful pity. That part tonight would have suited him perfectly. . . . Did you say anything about buying me another drink, darling?”

I winced at the direct attack. “I didn’t, Mrs. Warren. But I will. Only one, mind you.”

I called Charlie and he brought a gin. Anna told him it was lousy stuff and asked if he made it out the back somewhere. Charlie looked very shocked.

“I have to buy what I can get, Mrs. Warren. Course I admit it ain’t quite up to standard, but what can I do?”

“It’s a racket,” she said. “You ought to put my husband on to it.”

“If you had the law on them, then there’d be no gin at all,” said Charlie. “And I don’t care for methylated spirits myself.” He laughed at his own joke and asked what show we had seen.

“New play at the Regent,” I said.
LEWIS and Janet looked at each other. Then Lewis said: "Well, he sort of disappeared."
"You mean he didn't turn up?" suggested Anna.
"We haven't seen him for two days," said Janet.
"That's funny," I said. "Where do you think he is?"
They both hesitated. "Shall we tell him?" said Lewis.
Janet nodded.
"Well, it's this way," he said, taking a pull at his cigarette. "Everything went all right until—let me see—it's Monday today—yes, until last Friday. He'd been behaving perfectly. But Friday morning he was late. We waited and presently he arrived at the stage door in a taxi—"
"He was drunk," said Janet. "I haven't seen him like that—not for years. But I expect you know what he was like before he retired?"
"Well," I said, "he was a little fond of the bottle."
"That's putting it very politely." She smiled. "People always do. They seem to imagine I'm sensitive about it. But they're quite wrong. He's my father and he's a great actor, but somehow we've never got on well together. I was very small when he left Mother, and I've never hit it off with Christine."
"You mean the second Mrs. Winter?" She grimaced.
"Yes. She didn't like me, either. So when I left school I went and lived by myself."
"Anyway," continued Lewis, "he was very drunk. We had to cancel the rehearsal that morning and we left him in one of the dressing rooms to sleep it off. In the afternoon he'd disappeared. The next day he didn't show up, and I was worried. You see, he was responsible for the financial side of the production and—well—there were bills and things to be paid. The following day—"
"Sunday?" I prompted.
"That's right. On the Sunday, Janet ran him to earth at the old house in Hampstead."
"He and Christine have moved from there for the last three months," explained Janet. "I told him how worried Lewis was and he said he would see to things
but that he didn’t feel he could play in the show.”

“Why not?” asked Anna.

Charlie arrived with some drinks.

“I don’t know,” said Janet. “On the next morning—this morning, Lewis got a letter to say that everything had been arranged with the bank and that all was well. Neither of us has seen him since.”

“That’s odd,” I said.

“Not really if you knew Father. He was terribly temperamental. I expect some little thing had upset him. The main thing is that it didn’t ruin the show.”

“It certainly didn’t,” I said.

“But he seemed to crack up all of a sudden.” Lewis drank the remains of a whisky. “That was what was so peculiar. I think it was something to do with those two notes.”

“Notes?” I queried.

“On Tuesday and Wednesday Father got a letter,” said Janet. “Lewis feels sure that they made him change his mind. But I don’t think there’s anything in it myself. . . . It’s half-past ten, Lewis. I think we ought to be getting on to David’s party if we’re going.”

“All right,” said Lewis. “Well, thanks a lot, both of you, for coming along and clapping.”

“Drop in and see us one night soon,” said Anna. “And I hope you have some good notices. You deserve them.”

“He will,” said Janet. “I’m sure of it. It’s been so nice meeting you. You’ll excuse us rushing off, won’t you?”

We all shook hands, and then Lewis and Janet left, arm in arm.

We didn’t stay much longer. The place was getting noisy. All the Allied Nations seemed to be sitting round the bar and Charlie was having a hell of a time understanding what they wanted.

When we got outside, it was pitch black. Luckily Anna had remembered her torch, and except for grazing an odd lamppost we got back to Soho Square without incident.

“Won’t it be wonderful,” said Anna, as we climbed the stairs to the flat. “Won’t it be wonderful when there isn’t any black-out.”

I said it would be. “We shall all have to wear dark glasses at night.”

Our arrival into the flat was heralded by loud squawls from the youngest mem-

ber of the family. It was usually difficult for us to have an evening out; but two weeks ago we had discovered an elderly spinster living on the floor below who said she would just love to look after the baby any night we wanted. She was here now, a dour, bespectacled creature with a pinched face.

Anna took off her coat.

“Has he been any trouble, Miss Pain?” Miss Pain beamed through her spectacles.

“He’s been a lamb. Positively a lamb. Not a sound from him until just now. . . . You did tell me his name, but you know I’ve quite forgotten it.”

“John,” said Anna, and then went on to tell Miss Pain how kind it was of her to come in for the evening.

“Oh, I don’t mind at all. You see, I can always read a book, and the little chap’s quite company for me.”

She departed in a flurry, and we were left alone to deal with Master John Warren. He was in one of his petulant moods, when he just wanted to squawk and squawk and squawk. We did everything we knew to get him to calm down, even inducing Buzz, the cat, to peer into the cot and allow his tail to be pulled. All to no purpose.

It was nearly two hours before he finally settled. Our tempers were raw and we were both very tired. We climbed into bed and prayed he would sleep through the night.

We reckoned without the telephone. At four o’clock it rang. That woke John, and as soon as he was properly conscious he realized that he was hungry. He began to tell the world about it.

I padded into the lounge and lifted the receiver.

“Is that Warren?” It was McKay, the chief of the special section of the C.I.D. to which I was attached. “I hev a job for ye,” he said in his pronounced Scots’ burr.

“Can’t it wait till the morning, sir?”

“It’s a job out at Hampstead,” he persisted.

“Aren’t there any police at Hampstead?” I was more than a little annoyed. He had a habit of springing things like this on me.

“Aye, I know how ye feel, but this is
important. It may only be an accident."
"They're all like that," I said. "Why can't people die in their beds in a respectable manner?"

"This one died in his bath," said McKay with a chuckle. "The point is I've had special instructions that it must be handled verra carefully. Wee bit of string pulling behind the scenes, ye understand?"

"So it's one of those?" I said. "All right, sir. I'll get dressed. Where exactly is it?"

He gave me a Hampstead address and then asked how John was.

"He'll get convulsions if he screams much louder," I said.

"Ah, the rascal! I'll be coming round to see him one of these days. . . . Remember me to your wife."

He rang off. I returned to the bedroom and started getting into my clothes. It is not nice getting into any kind of clothes at four in the morning and I was in a mood to bemoan my fate. I began to think how much better it would be to have a job with regular hours. They said that crime didn't pay. It certainly didn't—from the angle of the police.

"Not off again," said Anna as she came into the room. "I wonder you don't take your bed down to the station and done with it."

"I can't help it," I said. "I have to go to Hampstead to see somebody who's dead."

She smiled as I struggled with my tie. "Good-bye," she said. "Shall I see you at breakfast?"

"You may. You may indeed."

I put on a coat and walked to the door. "Hope you enjoy yourself. Drop in again sometime," she said. "It's always nice for the child to meet its father."

I kissed her. "If you don't attend to it quickly it'll burst its lungs," I said.

I managed to find a taxi after a bit of searching. The driver raised a groan about going to Hampstead, but the bribe of a double fare and the sight of my warrant card changed his mind.

In about ten minutes we had stopped outside a large gaunt house. I paid the driver and stumbled up the steps to the front door. I noticed a wide stretch of garden and a high wall separated it from the next house.

There was a constable at the door. I told him who I was and he stepped aside to let me pass.

"Who's dead?" I asked.


I began to remember what Lewis had told me.

I NSIDE I found a uniformed inspector in charge of things. He was very spruce and very military. With him was a special constable with a very Oxford accent.

"Evening, Sergeant," said the inspector. "The doctor's on his way and I took the precaution of sending for the finger-print people."

"Good," I said. "It'll be like a three-ring circus."

He ignored this and said: "Would you want to look at the body first?"

"I'd rather hear how it was found."

The dim hall smelled musty. There were Napoleonic cartoons on the wall and a large grandfather clock which creaked with every swing of its pendulum. The effect was eerie, and I shivered slightly.

"Now, Sanders," said the inspector to the special constable, "tell the sergeant exactly how you found the body."

"Well," said the special constable, looking down his nose at me, "I was on this beat. I come on two evenings a week, you know. I'm part time. I was passing here about three o'clock when I thought I saw someone in the garden."

"Was there someone in the garden?" I asked.

"I don't know." Sanders seemed vaguely offended. "However, I went to look, and naturally I tried the front door. To my surprise it was open, unlocked."

"Was the door actually ajar, or was it latched?"

"Actually ajar."

"All right," I said. "Go on."

"I thought I had better investigate. I went through the house, and when I came to the bathroom I found the light on and a man in the bath. I could tell he was dead. So I immediately phoned the station from here."

"I see," I said. "Thanks very much. Now, Inspector, I'd like to look at the body."
We went up the wide stairs. It was all somber and gloomy—Victorian furnishing with yards of plush and heavy, over-ornate furniture. At the top of the stairs was a signed portrait of Ellen Terry and on the other side a horrible colored picture of Irving.

Sanders pushed open a door along the corridor. The light was on.

I was surprised to see a completely modern bathroom with a sunk bath and a shower. Lying in the bath, quite naked, was Richard Winter.

You couldn't fail to recognize that classic countenance, even though the face was bloated and the head hanging at an unnatural angle.

He was not a pretty sight. Fatter than you would imagine, his arms absurdly thin. The famous Roman nose was mottled with red patches and he was quite bald. Evidently on the stage, apart from wearing corsets, he wore a wig.

I remembered seeing him as Macbeth when I was seventeen—his handsome, warlike appearance, his magnificent command of blank verse. He'd seemed a sort of hero then, at the height of his fame, with autograph hunters haunting the stage door. Women going crazy over him, mobbing his car when he arrived in the evenings. The great Winter! Idol of every stage from Broadway to Moscow.

No, I couldn't believe this was the same man. Not this obese, undeveloped creature. Yet it was, of course. It seemed an ignominious end to such a trail of glory. Macbeth lying dead in fourteen inches of soapy water.

I must have been silent for some time. The inspector coughed and said: "Well?"

"Looks as though he drowned," I said. "Tell me when the doctor arrives."

I glanced around the bathroom. All the usual objects. Nail brushes, tooth paste, a sponge, and an array of little bottles of disinfectant and mouthwash on the glass shelves. The panels over the bath were glass, too—glass cut with a design of waves and fish.

On the wall hung an old dressing gown, a suit—the trousers suspended by braces from the peg—and a batted, wide-brimmed hat.

There was the noise of footsteps on the stairs and the doctor appeared.

He was a nervous, short little man with spectacles and a perpetual cold. This cold had reduced his nose to a ripe strawberry color.

"This is a hell of a time to get anybody out!" he snapped. "You again, Warren. You seem to like early-morning sessions. Why the blazes don't you kill 'em off at a reasonable hour?"

He gave what was meant to be a smile, nodded curtly at the inspector, and set down his bag. Slowly and methodically he examined Richard Winter. We both watched him.

Then I lit a cigarette.

"Have you let anybody else know about this?" I asked the inspector.

"I phoned his brother, Sir Adrian Winter, and his wife, Mrs. Winter."

Sir Adrian was a big, important man. Head of several armament factories. On half-a-dozen production committees. A man very close to the government. I began to understand what McKay meant. Naturally it would have to be handled tactfully. Sir Adrian wouldn't want any scandal. He probably disapproved of his brother Richard heartily. To men of Sir Adrian's caliber, the stage was not quite respectable.

The doctor sighed and straightened up.

"He was drowned. That's my initial diagnosis. Seems to have been drinking heavily. At least, that's what I'd say."

"Any idea how it happened?" I asked.

The doctor took off his spectacles, held them up to the light, and then put them on again.

"Well, he's got a pretty nasty bruise on his head."

"If he'd been drunk and slipped while in the bath, d'you think he could have knocked himself out and drowned that way?"

"It's possible." The doctor had an irritating habit of appearing immensely superior to any suggestions from outside. "But it's not very likely. You look at the bruise."

I saw what he meant. The bruise was high up on the back of the head and the skin was lacerated. Scarcely the sort of mark you made by hitting yourself on the edge of a bath.

"Perhaps he did it before he got into the bath," I said. "What about the gey-
ser? Could there have been any fumes from that?"

The uniformed inspector had just come through the door. "Talking of fumes?" he asked. "I thought of that myself. But there couldn't have been any."

"Why not?"

"The gas was disconnected from this house over two months ago."

"Well, that settles that," I said.

The doctor laughed. "He must have been a tough old boy to take a cold bath at this time of the year."

There was a silence. Then the uniformed inspector said: "I bet a fiver he never did."

I began to think that, too. Winter wasn't the type who would crack the ice in the Serpentine and go for a swim. Besides, why should he suddenly return to this house where he hadn't lived for three months, calmly take off his clothes and have a bath? A cold one, at that. It didn't make sense. True, he was probably drunk. But I didn't feel that all the alcohol in the world could give a satisfactory explanation.

"About what time d'you reckon he died, Doc?"

"Darn it, I can't tell you that until I've done a p.m."

"Roughly," I persisted. "Just an estimate."

"About four days, I should say. And not less than three." He snapped his bag shut and flicked some dust off his coat.

Three days. Yet Janet had said she'd seen her father on Sunday morning, forty-eight hours ago. The doctor might be wrong, but he was a cagey bird. He always knew more than he told you.

I began to get intrigued. It didn't look like an accident any more. It looked. . . . But Janet had said Sunday distinctly. Damn it, I thought, you can't talk to a dead man, or can you?"

II

THE fingerprint boys arrived, dusted everything, took a lot of pictures, and then departed. The ambulance was waiting outside in the street to take Winter to the mortuary. They'd wanted to move the body at once, but I said it was better to leave it until Mrs. Winter arrived.

I went through every room in the house. The furniture in most of them was covered. Only what I took to be Winter's own room showed any signs of recent habitation. There was a suitcase open on the bed and some suits lying beside it, a pile of money on the dressing table, and two half-smoked cigars stubbed out in an ash tray. The bed had not been slept in for some time.

On a chair reclined the wig that Winter wore in life. A symbol of two people: the actor and the man. I knew the actor. I'd seen him play. But the man . . . ? What sort of person was the Richard Winter who had walked out through the stage door every night? I knew that he drank heavily. Why he had done that I didn't know. In fact, I knew nothing. That was the trouble. It was not like dealing with an ordinary man at all.

I wandered down the stairs again and into the drawing room. I pulled the dust covers off the chairs. It was more like a salon than anything else—Louis XIV furniture, elegant, impractical. Furniture made for exaggerated manners, for a race of people apart—men with high heels and women with their hair dressed in absurd, mountainous decoration.

In the corner was a Boulle pedestal clock, delicately ornate. From the ceiling hung a glass chandelier. The chairs were gilt and tapestry.

Was this Richard Winter? Had he sat here, poised on one of these chairs discussing the merits of a new play? Somehow I couldn't imagine it.

By the fireplace was a bookcase containing French classics: beautifully bound editions of Balzac, Molière, Zola, and Anatole France. I pulled out one of the Balzacs, and I was surprised to find that the pages were uncut. Evidently nobody had ever read it. I put the book back and took out another one. It was the same, just as it had come from the publishers.

I was jerked out of my thoughts by the sound of voices in the hall. A detective constable came into the room, his feet making no noise on the thick carpet. McKay had sent him down to give me a hand. He was an amusing, likeable chap called Elliot; fond of women and possessed of a Rabelaisian sense of humor that had set his thick lips in a perpetual grin.
"This is a fine old business," he said. "Mrs. Winter has just arrived. Shall I take her up and show her what remains of her late lamented?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

He fingered his nose.

"He don't look a very pretty sight. Better put a blanket over the bottom half, hadn't I?" He gave me a wink.

"Perhaps you'd better."

"Okay, Sergeant. By the way, have you heard that one about the sultan and his eunuchs?"

"No," I said. "And I don't want to hear it now. You take Mrs. Winter upstairs and then bring her down to me."

"Righto." He went out into the hall.

I heard a woman's voice and then footsteps climbing the stairs. Through the french windows I saw the glimmering headlights of the ambulance. The driver had started up the engine. He revved it up and down because it was cold. The long strip of garden was in the darkness, and you couldn't see the police who were standing there, waiting to take Winter away.

I sat down in one of the chairs and presently Elliot appeared again. His face was still set in a grin. He saw something funny in everything. Even death amused him.

"She's coming down," he said. "Didn't half create when she saw him. Wept all over the place till her face was streaked with eye black. Strange how women never forget to make up. In the raids I pulled some of 'em out of wreckage, and the first thing they did was to reach for their handbags. Even if they hadn't any clothes they'd stop and smear on some lipstick..."

He walked back to the door and escorted Mrs. Winter into the room. She was dressed in a smart black tailor-made costume and a blouse with a white ruffled collar. She had a good figure. Bit on the plump side. Her dark hair hung straight and was cut in a Colbert fringe. She must have been about thirty.

"This is Detective-sergeant Warren," said Elliot. "He's in charge of the inquiry."

"How do you do," she said, holding out a gloved hand. I took it and stared into her eyes. They were red and tear-stained.

"All right, Elliot," I said. "The ambulance men can get busy."

Elliot nodded and left the room.

"You don't mind if I sit down?" she asked, toying with a small handkerchief. "But it's been such a shock. How did it happen?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Winter. That's what I'm here for. To find out. Now, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

She dabbed at her face with the handkerchief.

"All right," she said.

"When did you last see your husband?"

She hesitated. "Well, we live now in a flat in Park Street, you know. It was so difficult to get servants, so we decided to close down this big place until the war's over. You know, of course, that he was to appear in this new play?"

I told her I'd been at the first night.

"I don't suppose it'll be a success without Richard," she said.

I didn't disillusion her.

She continued: "He was such a great actor—such a great actor." She intoned the words like a prayer.

"Quite so," I said. "The last of a famous tradition."

"I can't believe it's true. I can't believe it's really Richard lying up there..."

She broke off into sobs, and I waited for her to compose herself.

Police were carrying a stretcher through the hall and down the steps. "Mind out! What are you trying to do? Squash me against the bleedin' wall!"

I got up and shut the door, and their voices became a distant buzz. The engine of the ambulance was still being revved up and down.

In a moment she looked at me.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What were you asking me?"

"When did you last see your husband?"

"It would be Wednesday. You see, I was going down into the country to visit some friends. I left him at the flat."

"And you didn't see him after that?"

"No."

"Did you know that he wasn't going to act in the play, that he disappeared from the theatre on Friday morning?"

"Yes. Janet rang me up to ask if I knew where he was."

"And did you know."
"I told her she was behaving stupidly. I felt sure he would show up. He never let a play down in his life before."

The body had been placed in the ambulance. There was a grinding of gears as the car drove away from the house.

"Have you been back to the flat since last Wednesday?"

She shook her head. "I've just come up from the country."

"I see. Now, Mrs. Winter, can you explain why your husband should return here and take a bath, a cold bath?"

The question disconcerted her. There was a pause before she answered.

"Sometimes he was not quite himself. He needed looking after like a child. I can't say why he should do that, but he was apt to be eccentric now and then. Why are you asking me all these questions? It was an accident, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "The circumstances are a little strange, Mrs. Winter. And I have to make a satisfactory statement to the coroner."

"I see." She smoothed down her skirt. Her eyes were watching me all the time. "How long had you and Mr. Winter been married, Mrs. Winter?"

"Eight years. It was a romance, you know." She turned her face away toward the french windows. "I had just left the academy and I was mad about the theatre. I wanted so much to be a success. Richard was one of my heroes. He was acting in Shakespeare at the time. I sat in the stalls every night for a week, and at the end of that week I somehow knew I would never climb to his heights. I would only be a mediocre actress. I was desperately disappointed, and I tried hard to persuade myself that I was wrong, but it was useless. I have never been any good at deluding myself, and I realized I would have to face the fact that my ambitions were beyond my reach."

"And then?" I prompted.

"At a party I met Richard. We fell in love, and at the end of a month he asked me to marry him. He did so need someone to look after him. And, well, we had a quiet honeymoon and settled down here. We were very happy. Richard was such an artistic person. He wasn't only interested in the theatre. He liked literature, music, painting. On the stage he went from success to success. He always said he owed everything to me. You see, he was impatient over the small things. He hated talking business and arranging terms. I did all that for him."

I wondered what connection there was between the man she described and the man who had died in the bath upstairs. I could see her as an ardent young student falling for a great actor. I could see him preening himself amid her fulsome flattery. I could imagine, too, the way she had of managing things. Yes, it was all quite clear. Her relations with the actor were obvious. But the man...?"

"Mr. Winter had been married before, hadn't he?" I asked.

"Yes, but his first wife left him. She's in America now. She never really understood him, I'm sure. She was selfish. She didn't make any allowances for his genius. She'd left him several years before I first met him. He never spoke of her. He wanted to wipe the memory from his brain. I think she made him very unhappy."

Suddenly I became conscious of a slight noise outside the french windows. Swiftly I got up and crossed the room. I flung open the windows. There was no one there, but I had a queer feeling that there had been someone there a moment ago.

I stepped into the darkness. For a second I stood there straining my ears for any sound. I thought I heard a swish, as though someone were pushing through the shrubbery on to the grass.

Whoever it was had got away and I knew it would be futile to try to follow. I returned to the room and shut the windows.

Mrs. Winter was leaning forward in her seat, her brows furrowed in a frown. "What was that?" she asked anxiously. "Thought we had a visitor," I said. "A visitor?"

"Someone trying to get in through the french windows."

"Oh, I see. Could it have been one of the policemen?"

"Hardly," I said.

I opened the door into the hall and called for Elliot. He was sitting on an oak settee by the grandfather clock, reading a newspaper.
"Put a couple of men out there in front," I said. "See if you can pick up anyone."
"Why, have you heard something, Sergeant?"
"Yes," I said.
Elliot looked wise.
"Might be the press. They've smelled out Winter's death already. Been a couple of them on the phone."
"You didn't tell them anything?"
"I told them there'd be a handout later from the Press Bureau." His eyes twinkled. "I'll take a couple of the locals, shall I? High-class War Reserves they have here in Hampstead. That fellow who found Winter is a B.B.C. announcer. He's going to give me lessons in voice production."
"Go on," I said. "Get moving."
"Okay, Sarge." He slid off the seat, pocketed his newspaper, and went to the front door.

I went back into the drawing room. Mrs. Winter was standing by the writing desk. I began to feel that her grief had evaporated. Perhaps she had visions of herself in the future as the guardian of the Winter legend, holding anniversary celebrations, writing a biography of the great man, keeping his name alive, and graciously attending first nights.
"Well, I think I've told you everything," she said.
"Not quite, Mrs. Winter. I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you a little longer. Tell me, this new play was to have been your husband's return to the stage after three years, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "Yes. You see, three years ago he had been on a world tour. He had overdone things and he collapsed with a nervous breakdown. I decided that he must have a long rest."

Did she really think I believed that? Did she imagine I knew nothing of the drunken bouts into which Winter had sunk? I couldn't tell from watching her.

I had the feeling that she was posing, reciting a story fit only for a publicity blurb—a story that she would tell again and again to worshippers at the shrine of the great actor. Suddenly I realized that her personality matched the exotic elegance of the room. I was sure she had chosen that furniture because, in her own mind, she regarded it as the right background for a genius.

"For a year he was in a nursing home," she said. "Then he grew stronger, and the doctors said he might come home. So I brought him back here, and for the last two years up to now he had led a very quiet existence... . He was fond of listening to concerts on the radio, and he loved his books. Together we planned his future productions. There was never any question of his not going back to the stage. That was his life, you understand. Occasionally we had a few friends to dinner and discussed old times. Richard was concerned about the world, you know. He felt that it was destroying itself. I remember when the war started he stood by the windows there and said to me: 'Christine, the curtain is going up on chaos. Nothing will ever be the same again."

"It was hard for him, really. He didn't understand the new movements which are sweeping the world. Why should he? He was an artist. He had devoted his life to the theatre and he was sad when he saw it declining like everything else. The raids worried him, too. He had such a sensitive disposition. He would just sit in that chair and go very white and strained-looking. The night there was a bomb over the road he couldn't get any rest at all. Hours after the 'all-clear' had sounded he paced this room. You see, two of his friends had been killed. It was a long time before he really recovered from the shock."

"That must have been bad for him," I said. "Can you explain why he disappeared from the theatre last Friday? I mean, has he ever done anything like that before?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then she said: "No, never. I was very surprised when Janet rang me up. I privately thought that she might have upset him. She had so little reverence where he was concerned. I myself was against his doing the play with Janet in it. They weren't like father and daughter at all. When she lived here she was always rude to him. She never appreciated how kind he was to her."

There were tears again now in her eyes. It was as though she had suddenly remem-
bered she was the sorrowing widow.

"I feel I ought not to have left him," she said sadly. "I shall reproach myself always for that. But he seemed so fit and well and the production was going just as he wanted. I was tired and I needed a change. He suggested my going to the country for a few days, and I didn't think there was any harm in my going. But you could never tell with him. He was so easily thrown off his balance. He had a true artistic temperament." She stopped speaking and dabbed at her eyes. The handkerchief was pitifully inadequate for any genuine grief, but she managed very well with it.

I had a strong impression that she was not sorry he was dead. Her reminiscences came so easily, and there was almost a sense of relief that she was able to use the past tense when referring to him. "I should never have gone," she said. "I blame myself."

"But you mustn't do that, Mrs. Winter. You see, I don't think he died naturally." She swung round quickly, her eyes wide open and her mouth set in a thin line.

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"I don't think it was an accident, Mrs. Winter. We shall know more later, but I am proceeding on the assumption that your husband was deliberately drowned in that bath."

That shook her. For a moment she was so surprised she could say nothing. Her face changed. Ugly marks of anger developed under the make-up.

"No," she said in a whisper. "That's impossible. Deliberately drowned! Why, how ridiculous! Who would want to do such a thing? It's a dreadful suggestion. I can't imagine what put that into your head. I suppose the police always place the worst possible construction on everything. I did think that you would have shown a little more understanding. Richard's brother, Sir Adrian, telephoned me before I came here and assured me that things would be handled tactfully. After all, Richard was no ordinary person. His name is known over the entire world. The least we can do is to see that there are no opportunities for scandal!"

It was going to be difficult. I saw that. But I was determined not to be sidetracked.

"Mrs. Winter," I said, "I don't want to start any scandal. In fact, you may rely on me for the utmost discretion. Nevertheless, I am a policeman. I am here to discover why and how Richard Winter died. Until I get a satisfactory explanation of that I shall have to continue my investigations. I fully understand that tact is necessary, but tact does not mean suppression of evidence. On the present facts no coroner in England would give a verdict of accidental death."

SHE sank into a chair. She seemed stunned by the thought that her husband could have been murdered. At least, she gave the appearance of being stunned. I was rapidly wondering if her valuation of herself as a mediocre actress didn't err more than somewhat on the side of modesty.

"I see," she said. "Of course I understand. Is there anything else you want me to tell you?"

"In Mr. Winter's room there is a suitcase. Evidently he had been packing some clothes. Can you suggest why he should have done that?"

It may have been imagination, but I felt sure I saw fear in her eyes.

"No . . . well, yes, I can. You see, when we moved he didn't take all his clothes with him and he kept saying he would come and fetch the rest by degrees."

"And there is one other question. Mr. Winter left the theatre on Friday afternoon. Do you know where he might have gone between then and the time he died?"

She thought for a moment, her hands still clutching the small handkerchief.

"I suppose he went back to the flat."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Winter," I said. "Has he ever disappeared in this way before?"

"No—never."

"Was there any particular place that he went to, any haunt that he frequented?"

"Not that I know of. I've told you he spent the last three years very quietly. He didn't like crowds. He was happiest when he was here alone. When there were only the two of us in the house. Once or twice we went to first nights, but they only depressed him. He was convinced that the theatre was dying, and the quality of the plays appalled him. And when you feel like that it is better to live more in the
past. He had such a glorious past. He never tired of talking of it.”

She went to the desk, a masterpiece of its kind—delicately poised on eight curved legs, the front rounded and inlaid with a design in metal. She pulled open one of the drawers.

“In here are all his press-cutting books,” she said. “You can look through them if you like. Some of them are in foreign languages, but the translations are alongside. They will tell you more about Richard Winter than I can. . . .” She put her hands in front of her eyes. “He isn’t really dead, you know. He’ll never die. That’s what I’m telling myself. No great artist ever dies.”

She was off again, off on the path that intrigued her most. She had forgotten about Richard Winter really. She was concerned only with his legend. She had frustrated all the attempts I had made to discover anything about the man himself. At every turn she had pushed up the actor and resolutely refused to discuss the human being.

What could I do?

She obviously knew more than she had told me. I even suspected that everything she had said was a carefully fabricated lie. I just didn’t believe in her picture of Winter. She had painted him as a kindly old gentleman amid his books, his pictures, and his radio, with herself worshipping at his feet. She had made no mention of his weakness. From her account he might never have touched a drop of alcohol, never been drunk in his whole life. It was ridiculous. Yet I couldn’t tell her flatly she was lying. That would have made things worse than ever.

Yet she was lying.

With an ordinary person it would have been different. You could break him down, cross-examine him until he told the truth. But McKay had said tact was necessary. That meant there was powerful influence being brought to bear from somewhere, and I suspected it was from Sir Adrian Winter. I would have to watch my step. I would have to be careful every inch of the way, or else I’d find myself facing all sorts of charges.

The more I looked at that room, the more certain I was that Richard Winter had never lived in it. It was a theatrical set piece designed by Christine Winter to frame her conception of the great man.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“I’d like you to wait just a little while longer, if you don’t mind, Mrs. Winter.”

She sat down again, and at the same moment I noticed the French windows quivering slightly. I was quicker this time. I raced across the room and pulled them open. I saw a figure move swiftly away. Without stopping, I gave chase. I could scarcely see anything because I hadn’t a torch with me, but it was getting lighter now, and I could just distinguish the silhouette of the figure in front.

I crashed through the shrubbery and across a flower bed on to the grass. The figure stumbled, and I managed to catch up with it. It was a man. I got hold of his coat and swung him round.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked.

For answer he lunged his fist at me. I side-stepped and got a tighter hold on his coat. As I did so I tripped. I tried hard to regain my balance, but it was no use. I was toppling over and dragging him with me. For what seemed seconds we hung in the air. I expected a hard jolt, but none came. Instead there was a splash, and I felt ice-cold water seeping through my clothes. We had evidently fallen into a pond of some description. It seemed to be fairly deep, too.

The man was trying to get away and I was trying to hang on to him. He began to press me down in the water. Presently it was swirling round my face, stagnant and slimy. I fought back madly, but he had the advantage, and steadily my face sank lower. With a vicious twist he had me still further down. I gulped and took a mouthful of foul water.

The thought flashed across my consciousness that Winter had drowned, too. Was this the way it had happened? His head held under until his lungs were full. I was determined not to go out like that, I spluttered and coughed and struck back at the man.

Once more he exerted all his strength, and I found myself sinking deeper and deeper. This time my head went right under. My right hand, reaching for the bottom of the pond, buried itself in mud and slime. My lungs were bursting when
suddenly he drove his fist into my stomach. I gasped and sank. It was a horrible sensation.

After that I didn’t know any more.

III

I CAME round to find myself lying on the grass and Elliot and two War Reserves bending over me. I was sodden and it was unpleasantly cold. I shivered and stared up at Elliot.

“I thought you’d kicked the bucket, Sarge,” said Elliot. “What the devil happened?”

I was about to tell him what I thought in very lurid language when I was violently sick. To swallow water of any kind is disconcerting, but to swallow water that is stagnant and full of the most unmentionable slime is worse than anything I know.

It was some minutes before I was capable of any coherence. Then I swore at Elliot. “Why the hell did you let the bastard escape?”

“It’s not my fault,” said Elliot. “I can’t be everywhere at once.” He gazed scornfully at the War Reserves. “If you’d given me some policemen it wouldn’t have happened.”

“All right,” I said. “Well, it’s too late now. I suppose he climbed over the wall?”

Elliot nodded. “Eustace here”—jerking his head at one of the War Reserves—“was standing right by the wall. I suppose he was afraid of taking the crease out of his trousers.”

The War Reserve coughed. “I have an infirmity,” he said. “I suffer from night blindness. I’ve told them at the station several times, but they will persist in putting me on night duty.”

“Too bad!” I said, pulling some damp mush out of my hair. “I wonder they don’t send down a couple of specials with cork legs. We’d be complete then.” I grasped the cigarette that Elliot passed to me. “Okay, you get back to your posts, both of you. And don’t let anything slip past you next time.”

“Yes, sir,” they mumbled.

They stumbled off across the grass. Elliot said: “Was that the bloke who done Winter in?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “Nasty similarity about the technique. Did he leave anything behind?”

Elliot nodded. “He left his titfer.” He held up a glistening black bowler hat. “Got a large head, he has. So large he’s cut the leather band out of the inside.”

I sat up and looked at the hat. It didn’t look any different from the millions you see emerging from the Underground any morning. “That’s fine,” I said. “We shall have no difficulty in tracing him at all. Just find a man with a head that takes seven in hats. It’s so beautifully simple!”

“No need to be sarcastic,” said Elliot. “If I hadn’t pulled you out of that pond you might have died. I think it was a very brave thing to do considering I can’t swim.”

I snorted with disgust. “It was two feet deep,” I said. “You certainly deserve a medal.”

He helped me up from the grass and we went back toward the house. I was dripping water like an old piece of seaweed. The uniformed inspector met me at the door and wanted to know what had happened. My patience was exhausted and I said a couple of rude words and continued into the hall and up the stairs.

I took off everything and then grabbed an old dressing gown of Winter’s and swathed it about me. This seemed to delight Elliot, who said it was getting more like Sherlock Holmes every moment. “But you need a bent pipe,” he added.

I let this pass, since the dressing gown was too small for me and it was impossible to be dignified in such a garment. Together we descended the stairs and went into the drawing room.

Mrs. Winters was still there. She got up where he entered.

“What happened?” she asked anxiously.

“I fell into the pond,” I said.

“That is Richard’s dressing gown,” she observed, going white. “He wore that in Chicago ten years ago.”

“I will treat it very reverently,” I said. “It shall be returned to you as soon as I can get back and fetch dry clothes.”

“Was it really someone—outside the French windows?” she asked.

I said it was. “He left his hat behind.” I brandished the bowler. “I suppose you don’t recognize it by any chance?”

“No,” she said. “No, I’m afraid I don’t.”
As she said it I watched her face. She was so astonished by the appearance of the hat that her acting failed for the moment. Her expression gave her away. She obviously knew whose hat it was.

I wondered what it all meant. If only I could drive her into a corner, smash down the phony façade she was putting up! But I knew that that would cost me my job, and I wasn’t sticking my neck out that far.

A
N
HOUR
LATER
Sir
Adrian
Winter
arrived. It was light by then. He came in an enormous black saloon, driven by a chauffeur and with a large priority sticker on the windshield. I thought that if God turned up on the fatal day he would come rather like this.

Sir Adrian got out of the car and walked hurriedly up the path to the house. With him he brought an atmosphere of transcontinental telephones, feverish cables, and all the paraphernalia of big business. Actually all he carried was an umbrella, but you got the feeling that the rest was only just around the corner.

He was a handsome creature, tall and upright; a square-cut face and piercing steel-blue eyes under a mass of greyish hair.

We met in the hall. I apologized for appearing in a dressing gown but explained how I had fallen into the pond. He seemed to think this was funny. He laughed for three seconds, and then his face set again in its hard mould.

“Well, I suppose the whole business is cleared up?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “We haven’t completed our investigations.”

“A simple sort of accident, wasn’t it?”

“That’s what we’re trying to decide. The doctor is making a post-mortem. Certain things suggest that it may not have been an accident at all.”

“Really!” He blew out his cheeks.

“You don’t mean—suicide?”

“Not suicide, Sir Adrian. Possibly murder.”

“BUT that’s ridiculous! Somebody murdered Richard! I don’t believe it. You’re bungling things, young man.”

“Possibly,” I said. “But I can find no satisfactory explanation why Mr. Winter should return here to a house he hadn’t occupied for three months, start packing a suitcase, and then break off in the middle of that and take a cold bath.”

Sir Adrian thought about this. Finally he walked farther along the hall and beckoned me aside.

“Let’s go into the drawing room,” he said.

The place was empty. Mrs. Winter must have gone into some other part of the house.

Sir Adrian sat down by the desk and dropped his umbrella and hat beside him.

“Damn cold in here,” he said, buttoning up his overcoat. “Isn’t there a gas fire or anything?”

I shook my head. “Gas has been disconnected.”

“This room is bad enough when it’s warm. Without any heat it reminds me of a museum. The stuff is worth a fortune, too. Well now, Inspector—”

“Sergeant,” I corrected.

“Sergeant,” he said, “I feel you should know a little more about the family. I think you’d realize then that Richard was crazy. And when people are crazy they do the most alarming things. The point is that I do not want any publicity or scandal to arise from this affair. All my life I’ve been haunted by Richard’s intolerable escapades. He had no moral sense, no sense of decency, nothing. You probably knew him as a great actor. To me he’s been a thorn in the flesh for more years than I care to remember.

“We grew up together, and I don’t think we ever agreed. When our father died the estate was left equally to the two of us. I went into business and gradually I carved out a position for myself. Richard went on the stage. By the time he was thirty he had blown every penny of his share in the estate. He lived wildly. He tied himself to a succession of women. He drank like a fish. I was on tenterhooks, wondering what the devil he would get up to next.

“By thirty-five he was an admitted success on the stage. He married an excellent wife and I thought he would settle down at last. Not a bit of it. He spent money faster than ever, and I was compelled to make him an allowance. He was flagrantly unfaithful to his wife many times but she stuck to him. She went on sticking to
him until the situation was impossible. Then she left him. She is now in America.

“He met the present Mrs. Winter and married her, and I thought for a time that she would manage to look after him. But no. On several occasions he backed the most uncommercial plays and I was forced to cover him and pay up. He never showed any signs of gratitude. In fact, it was exactly the opposite.”

Sir Adrian paused, and a pained expression came into his face.

“Four years ago he dug up an old will of our father’s in which he was entitled to two-thirds of the estate. He employed some shady lawyers in America and started proceedings against me. A year passed and the case was still going on. Then Richard’s drinking bouts grew worse and worse and he was forced to leave the stage. For the last three years he had been subjected to a cure which appeared to be successful. Mrs. Winter spent her life looking after him. I don’t know how she stood it. But I do know that he altered under her treatment. You might almost say he reformed.

“Life has taught me to be a little dubious of people who reform, and when I heard that Richard was returning to the stage I feared the worst. I think you will admit that my fears have been justified. It is obvious from the facts that were presented to me that he was hopelessly drunk and that his condition caused him to do what he did and brought about his death. Unless you have seen him in one of his bouts you can have no conception of the mad things of which he was capable.”

Sir Adrian shrugged his shoulders and sat back.

“I don’t want to influence your decision at all, but I could bring as many witnesses as you think necessary to prove my point.”

He obviously desired to have done with the whole business. Richard Winter was dead, and he wanted to bury him as fast as possible. With the weight of Sir Adrian’s name a coroner’s jury would probably record a verdict of accidental death, and there would be no more said about it.

“T”HAT was the easy way out. But I didn’t like it. I had the feeling that I was being hustled into something, that I was being shown merely one side of the picture. Sir Adrian’s method was subtler than Mrs. Winter’s, but they both possessed the same air of camouflage. What were they hiding?

“Earlier this morning I might have accepted that solution, Sir Adrian,” I said.

“But since I was set on in the garden there, the situation has altered.”

“Just so.” Sir Adrian pursed his lips. He hated meeting opposition. “I should imagine it was probably some tramp.”

“I don’t think that. It was someone who was pretty strong and who was wearing a bowler hat. Not a very full description, but it’s all I have to go on.”

“A bowler hat, eh?”

Was there a slight change in his voice?

“Lots of people wear bowler hats,” said, with a laugh.

“Tell me, Sir Adrian, what happened to the lawsuit?”

He blinked.

“Lawsuit?”

“The one in America.”

“Oh, that. Well, Richard won. I came to an agreement to avoid any further expense. The thing threatened to go on forever. Six months ago I paid Richard fifty thousand pounds.”

So Richard had won. Well, well.

“When did you last see Mr. Winter, Sir Adrian?”

“Must have been last Tuesday. Yes, it was. He came into my office for a moment to ask me about some shares. He seemed perfectly normal then. Matter of fact, I was astonished at his quiet and sober manner.”

“Had he been drunk in the last three years—to your knowledge?”

“No. That was the extraordinary part of it. It really looked like a complete cure. He gave up all his Bohemian ways and settled down peacefully.”

I nodded. “And can you offer any reason why he should have been drunk last Friday when he came to the rehearsal?”

“The theatre, of course. The theatre always affected him that way. It stirred up the worst in him.”

I wasn’t willing to accept the explanation, but neither did I want to argue with Sir Adrian at this stage.

As I said nothing he glanced at his watch.

“Must be going,” he said. “I have an
important conference. If there is anything else—"

"Not at the moment," I replied. "I'll let you know of any developments."

"I think you will find it was just an accident," he said, retrieving his hat and umbrella. He strode out of the room.

From the window I watched his dignified passage down the path to his car, a smooth, calculated exit that would have done justice to a feudal prince.

I had talked now for several hours about Richard Winter and yet every minute I seemed to be travelling further away from him. I saw him only through a fog. If I wanted to play safe I'd fall in with Sir Adrian's suggestion that it was all an accident. There were cases when you did that sort of thing, when you rigged the evidence to fit the verdict. But the personality of the actor intrigued and eluded me. There were a million things I wanted to know.

Perhaps it was worth the risk. After all, Richard had won his lawsuit, hadn't he?

ELLiot and I went through the house from top to bottom. We found very little. Some of the rooms had been closed for a long time and were heavy with dust. Some contained theatrical relics in glass cases; I noticed a script of Kean's and a slipper belonging to the great Bernhardt. You would have thought they were the sort of things Winter would want people to see, things of which he was proud. Yet they were crowded together on the dirty boards of an unfurnished room.

Everywhere we went we discovered that Mrs. Winter had been ahead of us. She was filling suitcases with various ornaments and books. She excused herself by saying that they belonged to her. I was annoyed, but I could do nothing. I had the feeling she was trying to step down the death duties on the house as much as possible. Yet if Winter had fifty thousand pounds, was that necessary?

We came back to Winter's bedroom. All the objects taken from the pockets of the suit which had hung in the bathroom were lying on the bed: various business letters, some loose change, a pencil, a fountain pen. I was going to toss them aside when I noticed two begrimed envelopes addressed to "Richard Winter, Esq., Regent Theatre." I opened them. In each was a sheet torn from a copy of Shakespeare's Macbeth. And on the top of the sheets was the cryptic word: "Remember?"

Elliot scratched his head.

I recalled that Lewis had mentioned Winter receiving two notes during rehearsals of the play. These were obviously the ones.

"Better test them for prints," I said. "Though what anyone would want to send him a couple of pages of Shakespeare for I don't know."

"It's all screwy," said Elliot. "Now, if only we had something really messy. A sex murder, for instance. You know where you are with things like that."

"You have a one-track mind," I said. "People don't spend their entire lives jumping in and out of bed with blondes."

"Be better if they did," he said. "Be more peace in the world."

"You ought to write a book about it," I suggested. "Salvation through Sex."

He grunted and tried to think up something caustic in the way of a reply. At the same moment there was a crash of voices downstairs. Janet Winter had arrived and she and Mrs. Winter must have met in the hall. The sparks were flying in no mean manner.

Mrs. Winter was accusing Janet of being responsible for Winter's death. "You drove him to it," she was shouting. "You and that awful play! He was perfectly all right until you tricked him into this mad scheme. You knew it would upset him, but you didn't care! You thought only of yourself and that young man!"

Janet's feathers were ruffled by this. Her voice was on a higher pitch than normal. She violently refuted Mrs. Winter's accusations. "It was you who got on his nerves," she snapped. "You irritated him more than any one of us. You did all you could to thwart him. You wanted to keep him in a glass case and show him off as though he was a museum and you were the curator."

"I understood his genius!" said Mrs. Winter hysteriaically.

"If he had genius, you certainly didn't understand it. He loathed the way you tried to manage his life!"
“It’s not true!” sobbed Mrs. Winter.
“Is it not true! How dare you say such a thing!”
It was time I intervened. I walked to the stairs.
“Women,” said Elliot, “are the devil. You know, I think the Turks have got something with that harem idea.”
When I reached the hall, Mrs. Winter was wiping tears from her eyes and Janet’s face was very white. Behind them a constable was looking very bored and cynical.
Mrs. Winter pulled herself together when she saw me.
“May I leave now?” she asked. “I would like to get back to my flat.”
“Certainly, Mrs. Winter,” I said. “You will stay in London for the next few days?”
She nodded, and I beckoned to a constable, who helped her out with the suitcases.
Janet slumped down on the settle in the hall. She waited for Mrs. Winter to go, then she turned to me. I was thinking that I would be crazy by now if I lived with that grandfather clock. It had a sardonic tick, a nasty, superior tick that suggested that all humanity was a little feeble.
“How did it happen?” said Janet.
“I can’t begin to believe it yet,” she murmured when I had finished.
I knew that she and her father had lost no love on each other, but somehow I was convinced that she exhibited the first genuine grief I had seen so far.

JANET and I sat in the drawing room. I was beginning to suffer a reaction from my escapade in the pond, so I borrowed Elliot’s coat to keep warm. He took a very poor view of this, but I put him outside to deal with the reporters who were hanging round hoping for a story.
Janet’s sallow face matched the faded elegance of the room. Even her tweed suit didn’t war too heavily with the tapestry and the gild and the metal inlay. She looked very beautiful sitting there under the window—not the beauty of regular features, but a strange fascination produced by the high cheekbones and the widely set eyes. You’d have thought that Winter with his artistic appreciation would have been proud of her. Yet they had never exchanged half-a-dozen words without quarrelling.

“Now, there are one or two things you must tell me,” I said.
She nodded.
“First—do you believe that your father, in a drunken bout, could have met his death by accident?”
“It’s difficult to believe it, and yet—”
“And yet what?”
“It couldn’t have happened any other way, could it?”
“He might have committed suicide,” I said.
“I don’t think so. He was very vain and self-satisfied, you know.”
“Or someone might have killed him.”
She stared at me. Evidently the idea had not occurred to her before. “Do you really think that?”
“Perhaps,” I said. “I’m merely working on every hypothesis. The trouble is that I know so little about him. What kind of man was he?”
“He wasn’t just one man,” she said. “He was a whole crowd of people, all in one. I’ve known him stupidly, quixotically generous, and I’ve known him desparately mean. He had a terrible temper, and in his worst moods he condemned everything. Yet he could, on occasion, be the most tolerant person on earth.”
“Why did you and he never get on?”
“I wouldn’t be the dutiful daughter, fawning reverently on his greatness. I refused to take his advice on the theatre. I knew him too well. Perhaps that was the main point. You see, I knew that Mother had treated him fairly, that the breakup of their marriage was entirely his fault. He liked to pretend to Christine that Mother never understood him, that she was a sort of ogre who had haunted his existence. I knew this wasn’t true, and my presence about the house embarrassed him. He didn’t realize that by marrying Christine he had walked straight into a trap.”
“What sort of trap?” I asked.
“Christine fell in love with Richard Winter, the great actor. She fancied herself as the guardian of genius. She created this awful room and she imagined that Father would hold intellectual parties in it. She wanted him to live in the way she imagined a great actor should live. I honestly believe that she was the cause of his drinking getting beyond bounds. You
She fell among actors

Outside it was a dismal, overcast day. A leaden blanket of cloud hung over the roof tops. The pond in the centre of the lawn was ruffled by the slight breeze, the water reflecting the grey coldness of the sky.

"You finally ran him to earth here on Sunday?" I queried.

"Yes. Sunday."

"What did he say?"

"He was in a temper, said he couldn't get away from people anywhere and what the blazes did I want. I told him we were anxious about the play. He replied that he had changed his mind and wasn't going to act in it. That made me mad, and I told him exactly what I thought. I said that the least he could do was to write to his bank and fix the financial side. He promised to do that, and I left him. He offered no explanation of his behavior at all, and I was far too angry to ask him."

"Was he drunk?"

"No. Yesterday morning—Monday—Lewis got a letter saying that the bank had been instructed to handle everything. That put us in right with the theatre managers. When we showed them the letter we had to pretend that Father was ill, but that we hoped he would be well enough to appear in the evening. Naturally they wanted to postpone the first night, but Lewis wouldn't hear of it."

"About what time did you see your father on Sunday morning?"

"It must have been around ten o'clock."

"What was he doing there?"

"I don't know. I met him in the hall."

"And you can't suggest any reason why he should have suddenly given up the play?"

"No. It's quite a mystery."

I produced the two envelopes which had been found in the pocket of Winter's suit. "You mentioned last night that he received two notes during rehearsals at the theatre. Would these be the ones?" I handed her the envelopes.

She took out the contents. "Two pages of Macbeth!" she said, surprise lighting her face.

"On each of them there's the word 'remember' written. Can you suggest what it means or who might have written it?"

She scrutinized the pages.

"No, I'm afraid not. Of course Macbeth
is a traditionally unlucky play. Some people are terribly superstitious about it. Father’s acted in it only once to my knowledge, and that was many years ago.”

She was beginning to get restive. She glanced at her watch. “I don’t want to seem impatient,” she said, “but I have a matinée today.”

“I won’t keep you more than a couple of minutes,” I told her. “Early this morning we had an intruder who nearly finished me in the pond. A short man who wore a bowler hat. Now that’s a very thin description, but does it ring a bell at all?”

“No. Unless it was my uncle—Sir Adrian,” she said, with her eyes twinkling. I smiled. “It definitely wasn’t Sir Adrian. Well, that’s all, thanks, Miss Winter. If you can think of anything else that’s likely to help I’d be glad if you’d let me know.” I got up and walked to the door with her. “By the way, how were the notices?”

“They were wonderful,” she said. “So it’s a big success, eh?”

Her enthusiasm flared. “It’s almost bound to be—unless—”

“Unless what?”

She sighed. “I was thinking that perhaps Father’s death might affect things.”

“You need have no fear about that. We shall keep very quiet about it.”

We stood by the door. “I suppose you think me callous to worry about a play at a moment like this?”

“No,” I said. “There’s too much time wasted on grief in this world as it is. Good-bye, Miss Winter. When I want you again I’ll let you know.”

Elliot opened the front door for her and his eyes followed the silk-clad legs down the steps.

“That,” he said, “is what I call something. Pity she’s an actress.”

“You don’t like actresses?” I said.

“It’s nothing personal. But when they’re not acting they’re rehearsing, and when they’re not rehearsing they’re learning their parts, and when they’re not doing any of these things they’re going round the agents. What chance has love under conditions like that?”

“They find time for it.”

“Maybe. But I like my passion leisurely.”

He smiled that wicked smile of his. “Which reminds me that I haven’t yet told you the story of the sultan and his eunuchs.”


A NOther half-hour and I decided to go home. I sent Elliot off to check up on the various points we had discovered. Not that they amounted to very much, but we had to start somewhere.

Then I got a cab, and on the way back I tried to think things over. The taxi driver gave a doubtful look at the spectacle of a bedraggled specimen in a dressing gown and overcoat. I passed it off as though it was quite natural, but he kept turning round and looking at me through the connecting glass, evidently expecting me to disappear or change into a pumpkin at any moment.

Richard Winter had died in his bath. According to the doctor’s estimate he had been dead for at least three days. According to Janet he had been alive at ten o’clock on Sunday. You could take your pick.

And Winter himself?

He was steadily developing into an enigma. Some people said an actor was every part he played. It seemed to apply to Winter all right. Yet somewhere there must be a key to his character, a clue that, when I found it, would tell me how and why he had died.

I glanced at the books of theatre programs and press notices that I had taken away with me. They told a story of unending triumph, of a trail blazed across the world. Winter, the magnificent. And through those programs you got a picture of him coming down to the footlights every night, maybe a little drunk, but always deafened by the shattering applause. Millions of hands clapping, millions of ordinary men and women whose emotions had been wrung by his enormous power. Could he have been so indifferent?

When I got out of the cab the driver noticed that I was carrying my suit. This was the last straw. He decided then that I was screwy.

As I paid him the fare I said: “I supposed you wonder why I’m doing this?”

“No, mister,” he replied. “No, I don’t wonder at all. Often carry my suits myself. It saves coupons.”

I had no choice but to beat a dignified retreat.
It didn't end there, though. Anna had something to say about it.
"Whatever have you been doing?" she said.
"Fishing for newts," I told her.
She examined the suit. "Why, it's all wet."
"I was nearly drowned in a pond in Hampstead," I said stiffly.
"But, darling, did you have to do it in your good suit?"
"Next time I'll remember to use overalls," I said. "But I might add that I am now wearing a dressing gown belonging to the illustrious Richard Winter. If you look carefully you will find traces of Leichner No. 9 on the collar."
She didn't get it, of course. She stared at me.
"What have you been doing with Richard Winter? I suppose you didn't think to get his autograph?"
"That would have been difficult, considering he is dead."
"Dead!"
"Yes." There was nothing for it but to tell her everything. She listened intently, breaking off every now and then to go and examine something in the oven.
"Do you think it was an accident?" she asked.
I said I was sure it wasn't. "Somebody deliberately bumped him off."
"You could hardly call Winter a bride. Not even when he was wearing his corsets and his wig."
"Darling, I think you're positively callous."
"Where's John?" I said.
"Out with Miss Pain. She had a day off."
"That woman must like children."
"I think she's repressed, poor dear." Anna made a final dash into the kitchen. There was a lot of clutter as she manhandled plates and things. Then she emerged from a cloud of steam and said that lunch was ready.
We sat down at the table, and I stared at an odd-looking concoction in a pie dish.
"What the devil is it?" I asked.
"I don't really know, darling. I got the recipe from one of Lord Woolton's advertisements."

We started eating, and I have never eaten anything before which tasted so much like nothing at all.
"Perhaps I didn't cook it long enough," Anna suggested tentatively.
"It's cooked all right, but what is it?"
"I don't know, darling. I've lost the paper in which it was advertised.
"I think I'll ring up Claridges and get him here to try some," I said.
"Get who?"
"Woolton. He might know what it's meant to be."
"It was something that saved shipping space. I'm sure of that. . . . It's not bad, really." She poised some on her fork.
"You want to put some salt on it."
I tried salt and went on eating. The only result was that I finished up with an alarming thirst. Of course there wasn't any beer, so I had to drink water.
Anna was very crestfallen.
"Darling, I felt sure it would be all right."
I kissed her. "You never want to believe what you read in the papers," I said.
There was a ring on the doorbell.
"That'll be Miss Pain with John," said Anna.
But it wasn't. It was Elliot. He hurried into the room, smiled at Anna, and sat down opposite me.
"Haven't broken in on your lunch, have I, Sarge?"
I glanced at Anna and she glanced at me. We both smiled. She explained to Elliot about the meal, and he shook his head sadly.
"I know how it is," he said. "I had canteen sausages myself. I have a suspicion that the commissioner makes them now. Fills them with old charge sheets."
He shook his head again. "Bad thing. Plays hell with your impulses. I'm only half the man I was."
Anna laughed. Like most women she had a weak spot for Elliot. She made some tea and produced a packet of Cuban cigarettes that had been given her. Elliot was the only man we knew who was tough enough to smoke them. I suspected that one of his ancestors was a bullfighter.
"Listen, Sarge," he said, sipping his tea and blowing out clouds of poisonous smoke. "We have a line at last. I went round to Winter's bank and discovered
that they received no instructions at all about the financial side of that play. I thought this was strange, so I tottered along to the Regent Theatre and got hold of that letter which Winter wrote to Lewis Mason. I took it to the bank manager. Now, this bank manager is a shrewd sort of bird. He had a dekko at the letter. Then he showed it to his head man, and they both agreed that, in their opinion, the letter hadn't been written by Winter at all. This was a gentle way of suggesting that it was a forgery.

"You've got something there," I said. "Did you enquire about a will?"

"Yes. It was lodged at the bank. The manager hummed and hawed a bit before he told me. Strictly off the record he said that the sole legatee is Janet Winter and that the estate runs into several thousands."

This set me thinking. Why had Winter left his money to a daughter he disliked intensely? Why? It didn't add up at all. It did account for Christine's attitude, of course. If she wasn't going to get a penny, it was natural she should fill her suitcases with whatever valuables she could scrape together.

I WAS preparing to go out with Elliot and try to get to the bottom of this letter business when the doorbell rang again.

Anna answered it. She came back presently.

"Somebody called Stuart Jennings. Says he's a journalist."

"Tell him I'm out."

"Too late. He heard your voice."

"Damn!" I said.

Stuart Jennings was one of those very unsuccessful journalists who hang on to the outside of the profession. I knew him moderately well because he had helped me in a club case about six months ago. An odd sort of creature who never settled down anywhere. Seemed to have been everything in his time from a waiter to a film script writer. Whenever he had money he started a weekly paper of some kind and lost it all.

He didn't wait for Anna to go back to the door. He came striding into the lounge, wearing a raffish tweed suit and badly wanting a haircut. He had piercing brown eyes and ink-black hair which flopped over his forehead.

"Hello, Warren," he said. "Just heard that Winter's been done in."

I stared at him.

"Then you've heard more than I have."

"It was obviously murder. A man like Winter wouldn't commit suicide."

"Look," I said. "I can't give you any information. My hands are tied. It's no go, Stuart."

Stuart laughed. "I bet I know who's been tying your hands. The mighty Sir Adrian. God, how Winter hated that man."

"You're wasting your time, Stuart. I can't tell you anything."

"My dear chap, I don't want you to tell me anything. Not yet. It's I who can tell you something."

This set me back at bit. "What can you tell me?"

"Do you know where Winter was last Friday night?"

"No," I said. "I do." Stuart smiled. "I know a lot of other things. I probably know more about Winter than you do."

"Then it's your duty to tell me."

Stuart sat down. "Only on a recipocative basis, my dear chap."

"You must realize I can't make any bargains like that."

"I don't want any bargains. I just want to be the first in at the kill. You see, I'm paid by the line these days. That's what I've come down to."

I thought it over.

"All right," I said. "But you won't get any special privileges. Nothing. You understand?"

"Perfectly." He fumbled in his pocket and produced a half-smoked cigarette. He lit it casually. "On Friday night Winter was in a pub in the East End called The Bells."

"Why was he there?"

"That's something you'll have to find out for yourself," he said, smiling enigmatically. "You're the detective. I don't see why I should do all the work."

Stuart's superior manner annoyed me. He was so damned sure of himself. Still, I couldn't very well turn him down. I needed all the help I could get.

"What was he doing at this pub?"

"Drinking."
"I could guess that. How do you know he was there?"

"Because I was there myself. He was drowned in a bath, wasn’t he?"

I nodded.

"Funny that," went on Stuart. "He was always afraid of water. I travelled to America once on the same boat as he did. It was all they could do to dissuade him from wearing his life belt the whole time. He was a coward where the sea was concerned. I’ve often thought he was scared of life, too."

"You knew him?" I asked.

"Not to speak to. Winter would never speak to a penniless journalist. Let’s say that I observed him. I don’t expect you remember, but just before the war I started a theatrical monthly. Thas brought me into contact with a lot of stage people. There are enough stories about Winter to fill a book. In fact, that’s an idea. I wonder if anybody’s writing his biography?"

I looked at Elliot, who was hiding behind a cloud of Cuban smoke. You couldn’t tell what he thought of the sudden advent of Stuart Jennings. Anna hastily got another cup of tea and gave it to the journalist.

"Thanks awfully, Mrs. Warren. No sugar, thanks. I’ve managed to wean myself off it since the war. Had to retrench all round, in fact. It hasn’t brought me fame and fortune like it has some people."

I felt that it was a sore point with him that many of his friends were now war correspondents in various parts of the world, whereas he had been relegated to that scrap heap of hack journalism from which few return. The truth was—he was unreliable. He could be brilliant, but you couldn’t depend on him. One newspaper had sent him to Sweden just before the war. For a time he had secured front-page despatches. Then, suddenly, he had gone haywire, upset the government, and got himself into trouble. He arrived back in London and drank himself under the table in various Fleet Street pubs.

"If you want a biography of Winter you’ll have to tackle Mrs. Christine Winter," I said.

"Oh, Christine." He laughed. "That was a joke the way she tried to turn the disreputable Richard into a famous figure of society. I happen to know when he was recuperating from his alcoholic collapse she used to give afternoon teas. One day she invited a couple of highbrow novelists. Richard was violently rude and threw a cream bun at each of them. It must have been wonderful. Even the spectacle of him toying with a cup of China tea would have been enough."

"Do you think he was ever in love with her?" I said.

"Not on your life. Richard Winter never loved anybody but himself. I doubt if he ever had a real emotion. But Christine seemed to be able to control him just a little. She pestered him so much that he found it easier sometimes to give in to her."

I SAW that I would have to let Stuart in on the evidence we possessed. Only like that could he be of use to me. It meant breaking regulations, but what would you do?

I recounted what had happened so far. Stuart listened carefully, while Elliot accepted another cigarette from Anna.

"Fancy Christine telling you that nonsense about Winter and air raids," said Stuart when I had finished.

"Why?"

"There’s not a word of truth in it. That’s the odd thing. Winter, who was scared of practically everything else, who would run a mile rather than face a mouse, was literally almost unafraid of bombs. That sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? But there was something in him that exulted in the terrific destruction. Sensitive my foot! That was just part of the tailor-made character she handed out to publicity hunters. Why, on the night that bomb fell opposite his house he was roaring drunk. I know that because a friend of mine was a warden in that area. One of the people killed by the bomb was that famous song-writer fellow—Hansack. My friend found Winter wandering in the road shouting his head off, excited as a child. When he heard that Hansack was dead he said: ‘Thank God for that. He wrote bloody awful music.’"

I laughed.

"Is that true?"

"Honest. Christine may have kidded herself that he didn’t drink during those
two years, but I know different. He just grew more cunning. He drank secretly, and since it took a hell of a lot to make him really tight he got away with the impression that he was completely on the wagon. There was even a story that he bribed the attendants in the infirmaries’ home and that one night they all had a party. When the doctor in charge arrived on the scene, he found all the attendants drunk and Winter strutting up and down in a curtain reciting *Hamlet*.

“Can you throw any light on those two pages of *Macbeth* that were sent to him in envelopes?”

“Not at the moment. But I might think of something.”

There was a pause, and then Anna said:

“It seems a pity he should have to be killed like that. He was such a marvelous actor.”

“He was a ham,” replied Stuart. “Not an actor.”

Anna shook her head. “I won’t give you that, Mr. Jennings. When I saw him as Hamlet he was magnificent.”

“Broad as hell, though; and he took good care that he hadn’t much competition. His companies were made up of very mediocre players.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But I still think he was magnificent. It may just be me. I think modern acting is too restrained in most cases anyway.”

“He certainly had a reputation,” said Stuart. “And that is really all that matters.”

“He set his cup and saucer on the floor. “And he never did anything to deserve it. He was an unpleasant character. Mean, grasping, deceitful, callous, and despicable.” His voice held all the venom of the small man gnawing at the carcass of the great.

“And yet he gave pleasure to millions,” said Anna.

Elliot grunted and broke his long silence. “Most of us are pretty mean anyhow,” he said. “I know I am.”

“That’s the point,” I said. “All those things you called Winter could apply to most major artists. Perhaps the side they show the world is the least important of the lot.”

As I loosed off this trite remark I began to see one step further into the maze that was Richard Winter. Neither his life nor his death could be judged by ordinary standards. Once you accepted that then you were well on the road to discovering the manner of his dying.

I decided that I must go to The Bells at once and Stuart offered to come with me. I told Elliot to see if he could pin down anything about the letter.

“Talk to Janet Winter,” I said. “I think she knows a lot more than she’s admitted.”

Elliot nodded.

“I had an idea about the hat, too, Sarge,” he said. “I noticed that the brim in front is worn and covered with grease. Makes quite a smooth surface. I thought we might have it tested for prints and sent along to Records for a checkup.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s worth trying. Tell Records to speed it up. They usually take a couple of weeks to make up their minds.”

“Righto, Sarge.”

He said good-bye to Anna and departed. “That man positively oozes sex appeal,” she said, when he had gone.

Stuart laughed.

“What is sex appeal, Mrs. Warren?”

“I don’t think anybody knows,” I said.

IV

It took us half an hour in a taxi to reach The Bells. It was situated on the corner of a shabby street facing a big building which Stuart told me was a disused theatre.

“The Palace,” he said, “was once a very famous place. Winter scored his first big success there. But it has gradually gone from bad to worse. They had vaudeville for a time, and I think they even tried to make it into a cinema, but they couldn’t get the L.C.C. to grant a license. Something to do with the fire regulations.”

The sides of the theatre were now the medium for political messages in chalk, interspersed with official bills urging people to save more. Ragged children were playing with a muddy tennis ball in the street. Large-bosomed, blowzy women stood on doorsteps and mangy cats sniffed in the gutters. On the spot where a bomb had demolished three of the grim little houses an emergency water tank had been built. Firemen were busy filling it with a trailer pump.
The Bells had a tiled façade and drab, dirty windows which were plastered with notices extolling the determination of the publican to keep open and be damned to the bombs. There were several entrances, and at one of them a couple of sailors were waiting for opening time, whiling away the minutes by whistling at three girls who were standing at a bus stop.

Further along the street was a pawnbroker's shop bearing a vulgar gilt sign, and next to it a horse butcher's with a small queue of tired women waiting to be served.

We banged on the door of the private bar and presently someone opened it.

"'Nother half-hour yet. Sorry, gents."

A man stood in the doorway, one heavy fist on the door. He was very fat and he had a large sack of flesh under his chin like the wattle of a turkey cock. His eyes were bloodshot, and only a few sparse gray hairs adorned his greasy head. His feet were encased in worn leather slippers, and a thick belt helped to prop up his sagging belly.

He was about to close the door again when he saw Stuart.

"Why, Mr. Jennings! Didn't notice it was you. Anything I can do?"

"This is Detective-sergeant Warren. He wants to ask you a few questions, Ben."

Ben Thomas flicked his bloodshot eyes at me.

"I don't allow no betting and no gamin'," he said belligerently. "I keep a clean house. There ain't nothin' you can have me for."

"I don't want to have you," I said, with a smile.

"Wot's it abaht then?"

"Dickie Winter," said Stuart.

"What's 'appened to him?"

"He's dead," I replied.

"Dead! Not Dickie Winter?" He drew in his breath sharply, making a sound like a soda siphon.

"I'm afraid so," said Stuart.

"Accident, was it?"

"We don't know," I said.

"Caw. When did he die?" He seemed almost incapable of taking in the news.

"If you'll let us come in," I said, "we can talk about it."

He stepped quickly aside and led us to a marbel-topped table that was covered with grime and beer stains. There was sawdust on the floor of the bar into which cigarette butts had been ground. The fly-blown shelves at the back of the counter were flanked with glass that was chipped and blurred. It was a depressing sight.

Ben was genuinely upset when he heard of Winter's fate. His eyes filled with tears and he blew his nose into a capacious handkerchief that hadn't been washed for a long time. "Was it an accident?" he managed to ask eventually.

"It may have been," I said. "We don't know. We're just trying to trace where he'd been since Friday morning. Stuart here tells me that he was in this pub on Friday night."

"Well, since he's passed over I suppose there ain't no 'arm in me admitting that he was. Yer see, he didn't want everybody to know he come here. Had a family and a wife that was hoity-toity."

"Did he come often?"

"Every few weeks in the last year or so. And before that, when he was away on his tours, he'd always send me post cards of the places where he was. And when he come back to England he used to say this was the first stop he made. He was a good sort and no mistake. What an actor, too. Blimey, there ain't nobody to touch him nowadays. These tuppenny ha'penny upstarts don't know what acting is. Why, I seen Dickie Winter when 'e had twenty curtain calls, when they wore their 'ands out clapping for him. Sometimes he'd fool 'em. He wouldn't appear till he'd taken off his make-up. That meant they had to clap solid for over ten minutes. 'Ow many actors could do that now? Not one of 'em!"

"Have you known him long?" I asked.

"Bless me soul, yes. I knew him right from the start. I was stage-door keeper over there at the Palace when he had his first big success. He wasn't half a lad in them days. Always 'avin' a joke, he was. Took nothing seriously. Not even his actin'. But then he didn't 'ave to take that seriously. He couldn't help being good. He was a born actor."

"And you say that during the last two years he has been here every few weeks?"

"That's right."

"Just for an evening at a time?"

Ben laughed. It was a loud laugh, but
somehow there was a nostalgic sadness in it. “No, bless yer, no. When he come he'd stay for two or three days. He’d doss down in one of the rooms upstairs and we’d have a good old blind-up. He weren’t particular, not Dickie Winter. No side with him, nothing. His manner never altered even when he was cock of the walk. We’d yarn about old times. I used to enjoy it. Always have had me heart in the profession—” He broke off and gazed dejectedly round the bar, as though oppressed by the thought that there would be no more blind-ups with Dickie Winter. “And to think he’s gorn. Ah well, we all has to go, I suppose. But they might have spared him a bit longer, so they might.”

I produced a packet of cigarettes and offered them to the other two. As I struck a match my eyes fixed on the squalid setting: the cracked porcelain beer handles, the faded cigarette advertisements, the collecting box on the side of the counter labelled “For Merchant Seamen,” the dart board with its pitted surface, and the small blackboard beside it that was almost white from continual applications of chalk.

Through the top half of the window you could just see the derelict Palace Theatre. I thought of it in the old days, with its lights blazing and its seats full, and of a younger, gayer Richard Winter, debonair and good-looking, who haunted its backstage corridors. A Winter hurrying to success. A man doomed to hit the high spots. And down there in the box behind the time clock, a younger Ben, a man who laughed easily and who was filled with hero worship for the actor.

And now the theatre was empty, the lights had gone out, and the street was a backwater of broken hopes. Under the shadow of it an older Winter had sat and drank and talked with this man who had once guarded the stage door. Was it just as an escape from Christine, from the dreadful personality she sought to thrust on him? Or was it more than that?

“Yerce,” said Ben, puffing at his cigarette. “He’s a good friend gorn and no mistake. Never forgot me, he didn’t. Some of ’em don’t want to know yer when they gets to be stars. ’Course, I ’as a few of ’em in, but not many. Not like the old days.

“Yer see, Dickie Winter helped to set me up in this pub. He knew I wanted it, and he just come along one day and handed me a cheque. I didn’t want to take it, but he says if I don’t have it then it’d go in taxes or on booze. We had a smart turnout and a grand opening. People knew how to drink in them days. The old Palace was doing roaring business, too. This became a rendezvous for professionals. They’d slip in between the acts with their make-up on and they was always up to some game or another.

“Then the straight stuff left and they started to make a music hall of it. Weren’t the same. Nice lot of lads, but not like the legitimate. Got a different sort of crowd, too. Went downhill, if you asks me. Still, that’s how it is with everything. People ain’t got no taste any more. I tell yer, I’d rather see Dickie Winter in Shakespeare than all them music-hall comedians rolled into one. They don’t get the applause he got. And when he was famous there’d be queues ten deep at the stage door. He used to wear his pens out signing autographs.”

“So he did sign autographs?” I asked.

“Only for kids. Funny, he’d do anything for kids. Always giving ’em money or buying sweets and tossing ’em round. Lot of flashy skirts, too, there’d be waiting for him. But he never took no notice of ’em. Just ignore ’em, he would. You had to laugh. Pretty smashin’ bits they were as a rule. But ole Dickie wouldn’t have any truck with ’em. ’I’d rather have a glass of beer and a good cigar,” he’d say with a smile. He was a caution all right.

“He did a lot for me, yer know. When I was took bad with gallstone he paid for me operation. Had a private ward in the hospital and he come an’ see me every day. ’Course, I was really ill. Might have died, but Dickie got a specialist from Harley Street to do the operation. I still got the stones they took out of me even now. Yerce, I owe a lot to Dickie and no mistake. He’s a good friend gorn...”

HERE was another voice telling another story. At last a glimpse of Winter as a human figure. Generous, kind, good-natured. Or was it merely a further manifestation of his absurd vanity?

“Tell me,” I said. “What about his drinking?”
“Well, he drank a lot, o’ course. But then so do most of ’em. That wife of his used to get on his nerves.”

“The second Mrs. Winter?”

“That’s right. Yersee, he used to call her a so-and-so cow. Always the way with actors. Never ought ter get married, yer know. There ain’t nothing lasting about the stage, and marriage, ter my mind, wants a steady sort of handling.”

“How did he get drunk?” I asked. “I mean—people act differently when they’re loaded with alcohol.”

“Funny you should mention that.” Ben rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. Strands of cigarette tobacco clung to his thick purple lips. “He could put away an awful lot without it affecting ‘im. Then suddenly he’d go out like a light. He’d be paralyzed in a second, and he wouldn’t come round for a couple of hours. There was never any in-between with him. Most folk gets so they don’t know what they’re doing. Make fools of themselves, doing daft things because they’re canned. But Dickie acted quite normal until he went out, and then he was just insensible, dead to the world. Like a sack of potatoes. Often I’ve carried him up those stairs.”

“Now,” I said, “what happened on Friday night?”

“Let me see.” Ben rasped his chin. “He come here about seven o’clock, I should say. He seemed in ‘igh spirits and he insisted on buying everyone a drink all round. I asked him what had happened, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“Have you any idea what it was?”

“Naw. All I know is that he was like he used to be twenty years ago. Full of jokes. Didn’t seem to have a care in the world. He went on drinking till about ten.”

“Was he drunk?”

Ben shook his head. “Just normal. At ten he said something about having to go back to his old house.”

“The one at Hampstead?”

“That’s right. Don’t know what it was about. But I didn’t take particular notice. We was pretty full up here. Well, then he left. Doris got ‘im in a cab outside.”

“Doris?” I queried.

“My niece. Sort of orphan. She’s been with me since she was five. She’s twenty-six now. ’Elps me in the bar. She wanted ter go on the stage, but she hasn’t really any talent for it. I’ll go and get her. She’s upstairs. I think it’s about time I opened up, too.” He glanced at a heavy watch which he took from his waistcoat pocket. Then he shambled off through a door at the back.

“Well,” said Stuart, who had been sitting silent all this while. “Do you see any light?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What do you know about this woman Doris?”

Jennings reflected.

“Not a great deal. She’s the dumbest creature I’ve ever met. Bit of a dark horse, though. Most of the actors who have been in and out of here have seduced her at one time or another. She has a weakness for actors.”

“Including Winter?”

“No. She treated him differently. Rather as if he were God. Never called him by his first name—not when I’ve been in here anyhow.”

I heard Ben slipping the bolts on the various entrances, and presently there was a creak from a loose board and a girl appeared in the door at the back.

Stuart’s words had not prepared me properly for this vision. I’d expected just an average sort of girl. Instead, I saw a blonde of quite extraordinary beauty. Her face was perfectly modelled, with exquisite lips and a flawless skin. Her hair hung in a long page-boy bob. She had heavily lashed grey eyes and a tall, well-rounded figure.

It was when she spoke that she let you down with a bang. Her voice was a common whine, and she said words as though she was repeating something she had learnt by heart. She placed an equal stress on every syllable—almost the intonation of a child who is not quite sure what it is saying.

“Hello, Mr. Jennings,” she said. “I’ve just heard about Mr. Winter. Isn’t it terrible? I’m ever so sorry. Was it sudden?”

I could hardly believe it. There was not a vestige of emotion in the voice at all. She might have been talking about the weather, instead of a man’s death.

STUART introduced me. I said I would like to ask her some questions. She came and sat down close to me, exuding cheap perfume. Her red-and-white dress was flashy, but somehow it added to her
beauty. She had long nails from which red polish was peeling.
"I understand Mr. Winter was in here on Friday evening," I said.
She inclined her head. "Yes, he was."
"What time did he leave?"
"Oh, around ten o'clock."
"You got him a taxi?"
"Yes, that's right. I had an awful job. We don't get many in this district."
"Did he say anything to you at all?"
"He said good night."
This was terrible. "I know," I said. "But did he say anything particular? Anything to suggest where he might be going?"
"He did mention that he was going to his house."
"In Hampstead?"
"I think so."
"You just found the cab and he got in and was driven off. Is that right?"
"Yes." Her grey eyes were on me—a steady stare rather like a cat's."
"And he wasn't in here after that?"
"No."
"Tell me, have you known him a long time?"
"Oh yes. Almost as long as I can remember. He and Uncle Ben were great friends. Every now and then they'd have several nights together drinking."
"Did you ever go out with him?"
"Mr. Winter?" She seemed astonished at the suggestion. "Oh no. Occasionally he brought me a present. Before the war it used to be chocolates. Lately he got me some scent."
"Did you like him?"
"He was nice." She smoothed down her dress. "Ever such fun. Used to liven the place up when he came."
"He talked to you a lot?"
"Oh yes. Not about anything in particular, though. Usually he and Uncle Ben would talk about the theatre. Things that had happened at the Palace a long time ago. I wasn't interested in that."
"Don't you care for the theatre then?"
"No. Dull, I call it. Much rather go to the pictures. I mean, you see more for your money. I've only been to a theatre twice and I didn't enjoy it at all. Nothing real about it. You knew they was just acting a part like and that spoilt everything."
I looked at Stuart, who was deep in thought. Then I turned back to Doris. There were more people in the bar now—people with raucous voices who cracked jokes with each other. Very old jokes that must have been repeated hundreds of times before. But they still brought a laugh, and maybe that was all that mattered.
"Surely," I said to Doris, "you've seen Mr. Winter act?"
"No. Uncle Ben often wanted me to go, but I wouldn't. It's just not my cup of tea. Besides, I could see Mr. Winter here. Didn't seem much point in going all the way up West just to see him on a stage."
"But you might have liked the play."
"I doubt it. I think the theatre's soppy myself. Pictures is much better."
I smiled. "Suppose you knew a film star, would you never want to go and see him on the screen?"
"Films is different," she said. "I mean it's not just a stage. It's real life. It happens, doesn't it?"
I wondered what Winter had thought about this. It must have been unique for him to meet someone who had never seen him on a stage and never wanted to. Had he pocketed his hurt vanity in deference to Ben, or had he tried to covert her to the glories of the theatre?
"Tell me, did Mr. Winter ever talk to you about his private affairs?"
"I knew he had a wife he didn't like."
"Did he mention his brother, Sir Adrian?"
Doris hesitated, her hands clasped in her lap.
At that moment Ben, having satisfied the first demands for liquor, returned to the table.
"Did I hear you speak of Sir Adrian Winter?"
"I was asking Doris if Winter ever mentioned him to her," I said.
"Not to Doris he didn't. She's only got two ideas in her silly head—pictures and clothes." He glanced at Doris, and she gave him a sullen look but said nothing.
"But he talked about Sir Adrian to me all right. Proper basket by all accounts. Stuck-up nob. Did ole Dickie out of a lot of money. His own brother, too. I tell yer, some people ain't human. But Dickie wasn't taking that lying down. Not him. I can see his face now when he told me about it. Wasn't he livid! He put the law
on Sir Adrian and that made him sit up. Took a long time, but in the end Sir Adrian had to pay. We had a real good celebration that night. Oysters an' all!

"Would you have said that Winter was the sort of man to commit suicide?"

"'Course not," Ben was contemptuous of the suggestion. "But you said it was an accident."

I nodded. "Just asking a question, that's all."

Ben was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Well, what about a drink? Being a sad occasion like."

He went behind the counter and found a bottle of scotch. He poured out some generous tots. He gave us each a glass except Doris.

"Don’t I have any?" she said.

"Not wasting good scotch on you, my girl," he replied. Then he raised his glass. "To Dickie Winter," he said. "One of the best."

We drank.

All the while I watched Doris. I wanted to know what part she had played in this curious haven of escape which Winter had created. A girl who never went to the theatre, and yet who had fallen many times for the personable wiles of visiting actors. It was ironic.

We had several more drinks, and then Ben had to attend to his customers. As he served a soldier and his girl friend I drew Doris aside.

"I think I'll have a gin," the girl was saying.

"Not on this trip you won't," said the soldier. "It's either beer or nothing."

I took Doris over to a table on the other side. Stuart watched me with a quizzical lift of his eyebrows.

"Now, Doris, I want you to tell me—was Mr. Winter in love with you?"

Her lips twisted up. "'Course not. I don't believe in that nonsense!" she said.

"When he stayed here... Did he ever spend the night with you?"

It was an awkward question and I fully expected her to fly into an indignant rage. She did nothing. Her head moved slowly round until her eyes were on me. Then she said quite casually: "Now and then."

Just like that. No excuses, no preamble. A bald admission. Her face remained im-passive and you couldn’t tell if she was even interested.

Presently she got up.

"I must go and help Uncle," she said.

She sidled off, a living example of that crack about beauty being only skin deep.

Stuart and I didn’t stay much longer. We thanked Ben, and he asked us to come and see him any time. He'd be glad of the company. Then we emerged into the dismal street again.

The horse butcher’s had closed and the queue was gone. But the ragged children were still playing football, even though it was rapidly getting dusk.

Stuart said: "What do you think now?"

"I don’t know," I said.

"I'm so afraid that you'll get on to the wrong track in this business. I mean, the wrong track is so obvious."

"Suppose you tell me which it is."

He laughed. "My dear fellow, I'm not paid your salary. You're supposed to know about these things. In any case, it'll be rather fun watching you go astray."

He said it with an air of omniscience that irritated me.

V

Stuart had a place off Fleet Street in a dingy block of offices which housed some of the lesser agencies and several rather dubious corporations. Strictly speaking, the rooms were meant only to be used as offices, but Stuart was so broke he lived in his. It was sparsely furnished and dreadfully untidy. There was no bath and only a small gas ring for heating kettles.

He insisted on my having a meal with him. We shared a tin of wartime soup, the kind with pieces of garden path to help out the vegetables. Then we consumed some dry bread and some cheese of indeterminate age. Finally, he produced two cups of muddy coffee. The mixture was distinctly disturbing.

He talked ceaselessly—one story after another couched in his glib, amusing manner. The hero was always himself. He had done everything, it seemed. Celebrities had opened their doors to him, actresses had implored him to make love to them, dictators had sought his advice on the governing of their flocks, and revolutions had been started beyond the Andes entirely on
his provocative prose. On the war he was strangely silent, conscious probably that it marked the beginning of his decline and fall.

You could not doubt his brilliance. There were times when his eyes burned with a gemlike flame, when genius seemed to hover over his gesticulating hands. But at the same moment you noticed the lazy curve of his body, the supercilious regard he had for humanity, and the overdeveloped intelligence that was his worst enemy. He was a man divided against himself. Eventually he stopped talking, and I brought things back to Richard Winter.

"What did you mean by saying I might get on the wrong track?" I asked him.

He sank further into a chair that was decorated with several pairs of discarded socks.

"Nothing much."

"You know a lot about Winter," I said.

"You haven't told me all of it."

He smiled sardonically. "I took you down to The Bells. What more do you want?"

"Everything."

"Didn't Ben and Doris provide you with a clue?"

"No." I lit a cigarette and passed him one. "They merely presented me with another facet of Winter's character. There are so many facets I doubt if I'll ever come to the end of them."

"Of course you won't, my dear chap. That's what makes it so fascinating. How many men can one man be?"

"I'm not interested in why he died."

"Ah." His voice was edged with sarcasm. "There speaks the police mind. It will lead you astray if you're not careful."

I said nothing. Suddenly he laughed. "I bet you a fiver you don't solve this case. It's too big for you."

"Think so?"

"Well, I bet I solve it before you do anyway."

"What exactly do you know?"

As I spoke I glanced around the room. Over in the far corner under the window was a desk; on it an old typewriter, heavy with dust, almost buried by a chaotic mount of papers. Then a divan that sagged drunkenly on three legs and some built-in shelves filled with a variety of books. Grimy linoleum covered the floor. It reminded you of the setting of the last act of an arty play where the wayward genius has finally decided to give up the struggle.

"Will you take me on?" he said. "Five pounds."

So he was in earnest. "One on one condition. You tell me what you know."

"Why should I do that? Besides, it would probably mean nothing to you anyway." He paused. "Could you let me have another cigarette?"

I fished out my packet and handed it to him.

"Thanks. You know, I'm very enthusiastic about the biography. It will be the best thing I've ever done."

"Christine may make difficulties," I reminded him.

"I'll deal with her. Winter is a subject that appeals to me immensely. It will be candid and caustic. I shall reveal his character little by little. Like undoing a much-wrapped parcel. I think you ought to take on that bet, you know."

I shook my head. "Not unless you give me all the facts."

"But I've given you most of them. All that remains is the key. With your organization you should be able to find that out for yourself." He blew smoke down in his nose. "I'm frightfully broke," he added. "Could you, by chance, lend me a pound? I'll pay you back when they've squared me for this obituary they're printing tomorrow."

I smiled. On two previous occasions he'd borrowed money but he'd never paid it back. "I'll lend you a pound if . . . ."

"If I tell you the rest of my facts. I might have guessed you'd want to strike a bargain. Still, perhaps I can tell you. I doubt if you'll see the significance in it that I see."

"I'll chance that," I said.

"Well, you've probably heard wild stories about Winter's emotional life. People have suggested he was all kinds of things. Some even hinted that he was peculiar. It's not true. Winter's emotions are the key to his character. If you understand them correctly, it shouldn't take you long to clear up the case. But I don't think you'll understand them with that police mind of yours."

"These rumors about Winter were cir-
culated by malicious women whose advances he disdained—women of high society; much sought-after women. They fell for Winter in heaps. But he avoided them. He refused invitation after invitation. They said he was cold, unemotional, perverted. But that was a lie.

"Famous people have always interested me. I have tried hard to discover what they are really like under that mask they present to the outside world. Winter has never cease to intrigue me. I've heard all these stories, but I wasn't inclined to believe them.

"Well, one night I was in Kilburn in a restaurant there. Who should I see at a near-by table but Winter. With him was a rather overpainted little piece. Winter seemed to be enjoying himself and the girl was giggling continually at the things he was saying. Fortunately he didn't recognize me. In any case he only knew me vaguely by sight.

"I followed them when they left the restaurant. They went to a small block of single-room flats and Winter stayed there for several hours. I made a note of the number of the flat and discovered the girl's name. She worked in a big store in Oxford Street.

"Finally I managed to strike up an acquaintance with her, and I soon discovered that she didn't know who Winter was. She called him Mr. Edwards, and it was evident that she had no suspicion that her lover was the great actor. He had told her that he traveled in millinery, which accounted for the erratic times at which he saw her. He had first met her by following her down to Edgware in the tube.

"You can imagine how surprised I was. I began to devote more attention to Winter. I made a lot of enquiries because I was intensely intrigued. I soon discovered that this was not the only girl Winter had picked up in this way. He was always doing it, and few of the girls knew who he really was. If they did find out, then he left them abruptly and they never saw him again.

"Yes, Richard Winter, who disdained the most beautiful women in London, would go out of his way to pick up a shopgirl. He would behave in a ridiculously childish manner. Like some suburban youth. It was a revelation to me. You see, I know a good many actors, and without exception they all use their reputations and their theatrical fame to make their feminine conquests. Their personalities and their profession are inseparable. Yet, here was Winter pretending to be anything but an actor, inventing fictitious names and false characters. And what for? To seduce some ordinary little girl, some creature whom you would have thought was quite beneath his intelligence."

While he was speaking I thought of that Winter who, according to Ben, had signed endless grubby little autograph books presented by children; who would buy sweets for the urchins who hung around the stage door. A paradox of a man.

"That's all I have to tell you. You now have the key to Richard Winter."

Was it the key? Stuart was sitting there, smiling confidently. And I was in a fog. I had another fact to work on, but I didn't see the significance of it at that moment.

"Do you get it?" he asked.

"Not exactly."

"I knew you wouldn't. It's your police mind. You want clues, strong motives, inflamed passions. They're always your background to murder."

"Suppose you tell me," I said.

"I wouldn't dream of it." His face was flushed with excitement.

His arrogance irritated me. I felt a complete fool. And in worrying over my wounded vanity I completely missed the point of what he had told me.

I ARRIVED at the Regent Theatre in a very bad temper. If I had had the power, I would have put all the people connected with the case into a cell and thrown away the key. A childish mood, no doubt, but even policemen get that way sometimes.

The stage-door keeper said that the curtains wouldn't ring down for ten minutes or so. I went to find Elliot. I discovered him in the greenroom in earnest conversation with a blonde with large saucer eyes and a chromium-plated giggle. He introduced her to me. She was apparently under-studying two of the smaller parts.

She giggled at everything Elliot said. She even giggled when she mentioned how sad it was about Mr. Winter. I couldn't stand it.
I kept trying to catch Elliot’s eye. Eventually I succeeded, and he followed me out of the room.

“So this is how you spend your time,” I said angrily. “I suppose you haven’t spoken to Janet Winter yet?”

“No, Sarge. The curtain had gone up by the time I got here.”

“What about the intervals?”

“Well, I . . .”

“You were too busy talking to that blonde.”

“No, Sarge.”

He gave a superior sort of smile. “I had a word with Gerald Carson.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“The actor who’s temporarily taking Winter’s place. Winter’s understudy.” He paused impressively. “I think when you’ve spoke to him, Sarge, you’ll agree that the case is closed.”

“Closed?” I thought he had gone off his head.

“I know it sounds screwy. But he swears it’s true. You’d better come and talk to him. He gets off the stage before the final curtain. We can catch him now.”

He led me to a corridor to a dressing room on the left. He knocked at the door and walked in. I followed him.

It was a typical dressing room with a bench and mirrors all along one wall, the mirrors lit by naked bulbs. There were a battered screen and an old-fashioned settee and some cane chairs.

Gerald Carson was sitting on one of the cane chairs. He was made up for his heavy character part on the stage. He had seemed a good deal more impressive when I had seen him from the front on the first night.

Elliot introduced me, and we shook hands. His palm was damp with sweat. He resembled a fifth carbon copy of Richard Winter. Continually understudying the actor, he had grown with the passage of the years physically somewhat similar. But there was no personality behind that mask of grease paint. The eyes were dead, the chin was narrow. The fire that made Richard Winter was absent. Gerald Carson was a timid individual, scared to death of himself.

“You can spare us a little time?” I asked.

He nodded. “I have to take the curtain in about ten minutes.” His hand shook as he reached for a cigarette. “You must excuse me. I’ve been jittery all day ever since I heard about poor Winter.”

“You knew him well, of course?”

He rubbed a thin finger down his frayed dressing gown. “As I was telling the other gentleman here, I’ve understudied Winter for the last fifteen years. Got to know him pretty well in that time. He was a great actor, you know. I don’t think people realized quite how great.” He paused. “It was a terrible shock. I’m afraid I’ve given a very bad performance tonight. Still, I’m only playing until the end of the week. Then someone else is taking over.”

“That’s rather bad luck,” I said.

“Oh, I’m not really good enough for such a large part, you know.” He smiled wanly, looking a little absurd with the large false mustache and the heavy lake lining. “It’s only the third time that I’ve ever gone on for Winter in the whole fifteen years. He had an immense constitution although he did his best to destroy it.”

“Just so,” I said. I glanced at Elliot, who was twiddling a match between his fingers. On the wall behind him some previous actor had drawn a rather lewd caricature with a carmine grease paint. Others had contended themselves with writing their names in a penciled circle. “Now, Mr. Carson, we are merely pursuing a routine inquiry. When a man dies as Richard Winter died there has to be an inquest.”

“He was drowned in his bath, wasn’t he?”

“That’s right. But it’s not quite as simple as that. You see, he hadn’t lived in his house in Hampstead for several months. Yet he seems to have gone back there on last Friday night. How long he was alive after that we do no know. But it appears he started to pack some clothes and then drew a bath. As there was no heating, the bath was cold. That part is what puzzles us.”

Carson spread out his hands. “Well, I suppose he was drunk.”

“Yes. But I understand that when he was drunk he was perfectly coherent right up to the time when he suddenly blacked out.”

“That’s true. He gave the appearance of being quite normal. But he never was. And there was no telling when this blackout would come. I remember that he once collapsed crossing the street in Chicago,
They had to bring an ambulance to get him away,” Carson shook his head sadly. “It was such a pity. We tried so hard to keep him off the drink. But when you are dealing with a genius it is very difficult. He had an uncontrollable temper, and if he got the idea that anyone was attempting to influence him he would grow as sullen as a child.”

FIFTEEN YEARS of understudying Richard Winter. Fifteen years as an actor and only three appearances on the stage. Sitting in hundreds of greenrooms the world over, made up ready to act but never acting. It would be heartbreaking to most people, and yet Carson seemed to have slipped into a groove. He gave you the impression that he didn’t want to appear on the stage. He would have been content to understudy Winter for another fifteen years if the actor had lived that long. The truth was he no longer had any ambition.

“You think, then, Mr. Carson, that providing Winter was sufficiently drunk there’s nothing strange about what he did?”

“From my knowledge of him it would seem reasonable.”

“Even the taking of a cold bath?”

“Well, he might have thought it was hot, mightn’t he? I mean, he wouldn’t find out until he got in it.”

“That’s possible. Yet . . .” Somehow I couldn’t swallow that bit about the cold bath. No matter how drunk a man was I couldn’t conceive of his getting into a bath without realizing that the water was icy cold.

“Have you any particular reason for your conviction, Mr. Carson?”

He hesitated before he answered. He looked at Elliot, then patted his false moustache twice to make sure it wasn’t coming away, and said: “I was telling the gentleman here—it happened once before. Almost identical circumstances.” He spoke in a whisper.

“Happened once before?” I didn’t quite get what he meant.

“In New York,” he said. “About six years ago. He was playing Hamlet at the time. Right on top of his form. Then one afternoon he got terribly drunk. He came back to the hotel apartment and would insist on having a bath. I was there at the time because Mrs. Winter had grown very worried. You see, he’d been away since the end of the performance the night before. I begged him to lie down and not to have a bath until later. He wouldn’t listen. He locked himself in the bathroom and I heard him turning on the taps. Fifteen minutes passed and I didn’t hear any noise from the bathroom. I began to get worried. I banged on the door. There was no reply. I banged louder. Still no reply.

“I rushed out and got hold of a lifter and together we broke open the bathroom door. Winter was lying unconscious in the bath. His head had slipped down and was almost under water. We were only just in time. A doctor was called and he said that Winter had probably got into the bath and was standing up when the alcohol caused a black-out. He fell backwards, hitting his head against the back of the bath. The blow knocked him out.”

I began to wonder why no one had told me of this before. Surely Mrs. Winter must have known. Even Janet. Yet it had been left to Carson to stick a large pin in the balloon I’d been blowing up. It knocked me back quite a bit, but it didn’t entirely convince me. I still couldn’t get over the cold bath. All the same, I could see what Elliot meant. If Carson went into the witness box and told that story no coroner’s jury would hesitate to bring in a verdict of accidental death.

“How many people knew of this?” I asked.

“Well, the doctor knew, naturally. I bribed the lifter to say nothing because obviously we didn’t want that kind of story to get about.”

“Yes, yes, but how many of the cast knew?”

His eyebrows rose.

“All of them, I expect. I mean the performance for that night had to be cancelled.”

An idea was forming in my brain. Winter had nearly died. That was the point, and all the people around him knew that. It was a marvelous opportunity for anyone who wanted to do him in. The circumstances merely had to be repeated.

“Tell me,” I said. “Was this a cold bath he took?”

“Er—no.”
"Can you ever remember him taking a cold bath?"

"I can't say I can."

He looked at his watch which lay on the bench. Then he got up. :
"I'm afraid you gentlemen will have to excuse me. The curtain will be down in a couple of minutes now. You can't always rely on the callboy here. You know what it is in wartime."

I got up, too. "There's just one other point, Mr. Carson. I understand that two days last week during rehearsal Winter received a couple of notes. We have found those notes. They merely consisted of a couple of pages torn from a printed copy of Macbeth. Somebody had scribbled the word 'remember' across the top of each. Have you any idea what they might mean?"

Carson was at the door. "I should say it was just a malicious trick. Winter made many enemies in the profession, you know. And one of his peculiarities was a hatred of Macbeth. He loathed the play. Well, I shall be back presently if you care to wait." He nodded to us and stalked out.

"Well?" asked Elliot.

"Damn it!" I exploded. "Winter was murdered. I'd wager everything I had on it."

"Maybe." Elliot continued to twirl the matchstick between his fingers. "But can we prove it?"

"The cold bath," I said. "That's the only loophole. The one mistake the murderer made."

Elliot grew cynical. "I don't think you'd hang anybody on that. Why don't we call it a day and go home?"

"We haven't had the doctor's report yet."

"Doctor's report!" Elliot snorted. "It doesn't mean a damn thing. All right, suppose the doctor swears that, in his opinion, Winter was murdered. Then immediately some specialist is called in and will he agree with the doctor? Not on your life. They'll argue till the cows come home. The jury won't understand any of it."

"But the time of death," I said. "That's important."

"Sarge, you're slipping." He tossed the match away. "Time you've had two or three pathologists snooping around, Winter will have died on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And each of 'em will have yards of Latin to prove it. I think it's hopeless myself."

"You're forgetting Janet Winter," I said. "She has a nice strong motive and she admits she went to the Hampstead house on Friday."

Elliot brushed the ash off his trousers. "Oh, she's up to some jiggery-pokery of her own, no doubt. But can you honestly imagine her popping Winter into a cold bath and drowning him? No, not the type. If she wanted to kill him she'd soak flypapers for months and then gradually poison his porridge. I know her kind."

"Elliot," I said, "you are being a defeatist. I know you are aching to roll that blonde understudy on the nearest divan, but you will have to wait until we have solved the case. Because we are going to solve it. I've bet five pounds on it."

He looked up, astonished. "You've what? You're nuts!"

WHEN we went to Janet Winter's dressing room I was in a very determined frame of mind. I was going to make it tough for her. The fact that she was a friend of mine was going to mean nothing to me. Not a thing. There are times when a harassed detective is willing to build a case against his grandmother rather than have no case at all. And this was one of those times.

We waited for her to get into a dressing gown and then I started on her while she was removing her make-up. A woman is at a disadvantage smearing cold cream over her face, but she managed to look amazingly attractive. My resolve weakened, but I took the plunge.

"Now, Janet," I said, "we've done a lot of combing around and it seems you haven't told us all of the truth."

She set down the towel and twisted in her chair.

But I kept right on and didn't let her get a word in. "Why didn't you tell me that your father nearly died in similar circumstances in Chicago six years ago while he was playing Hamlet?"

"I—well—I'd really forgotten all about it. I do remember now hearing something. But I was at school at the time."

"All right," I said. "We'll leave that. Now, according to what you told me you
went to the Hampstead house last Friday night. You went there because you thought you father might be there."

"Yes."
"What gave you that idea?"
"Well, I'd tried everywhere else." She was a little disconcerted by my attack. But now she picked up her towel and resumed the removal of her make-up.
"And you didn't see him there?"
"I've told you I didn't."
"That's rather strange. You see, on Friday night about ten o'clock he got into a taxi at The Bells, a public house in the East End, and told the driver to take him to the Hampstead house. What time did you go there?"

"Eleven o'clock, I should think."
"Do you still say you didn't meet him?"
"Yes." This question had shaken her quite a bit.

"And on Sunday morning you went to the house again and this time you found him. You spoke to him about the show and he said he would see that a letter was sent to his bank. That letter was never sent. Yet he wrote one which Lewis got on Monday morning at the theatre here."

"That's quite right," she said.
"Now," I said, "were you aware that your father during the last two years was accustomed to go off for days at a time? He went to this public house in the East End."

She thrust the towel aside and put the lid on the tin of cold cream. "I suspected that he disappeared periodically, but I didn't know where he went. Christine was at such pains to cover it up that I never asked."

I turned to Elliot. "Have you got the letter?" I asked.

He nodded, fumbled in his pocket, and handed it to me.

It was the first time I had studied it at all carefully, and before I passed it to Janet I read it again. The address on the top was the Hampstead house. It read:

Dear Mason,

I'm afraid that circumstances quite beyond my control will prevent me from appearing in your play. I'm sorry to give you such short notice. However, later you will understand.

It has suddenly occurred to me that you may have financial difficulties with the bank over the expenses of the show. I said I would back you, and my non-appearance in the show does not alter this promise in any way. I am therefore sending a letter to the bank authorizing them to make the necessary disbursements from my account.

I hope all goes well tomorrow night.

Sincerely,

Richard Winter

I passed it to Janet. "We have reasons for believing that this letter is a forgery," I said.

She gasped. "A forgery! You mean that Father didn't write it?"

"Do you think he did?"

Her face was pale. She toyed with a comb. "Of course. Who else would have written it?"

"Look at it again," I said. "Doesn't it strike you as a rather odd letter? This show was to have been your father's comeback. On Friday he vanished. Evidently he knew then that he would not be appearing in the play. Yet he left it until Sunday before he let anyone know, and that only after you had spoken to him."

"Father was eccentric," she replied. "He never did any of the things ordinary people would do."

"Granted. But, even so, that letter seems all wrong. It just says the necessary things and nothing more. It is a cold factual letter. Besides, if he was going to write to the bank, why didn't he do so at the same time and post the two letters together?"

She bit her lip.

"That's what he said he would do."

I got up and paced the small dressing room. People were hanging along the corridors. Somebody was whistling a ragtime number. In the next room an argument was going on. One actor was accusing another one of cutting his lines. "You left me absolutely high and dry. Unless you give me that cue I can't possibly speak my exit line. I just had to walk off looking a complete fool. There are other people on the stage besides yourself, you know."

I smiled at the fragments of conversation that filtered through the wall. Elliot was sitting there, very bored. His face was quite expressionless.
"Now, Janet," I said, "you still feel that your father wrote this letter?"
"But of course."
"What exactly did he say to you on Sunday morning?"
"I've already told you."
"Did he give any reason for leaving the show?"
"No."
"Did you ask him?"
"Yes, but he wouldn't tell me. He acted rather mysteriously I thought."

I swung round and stood facing her. "I suggest that he never wrote that letter at all. I suggest, too, that you never saw him on Sunday morning. I don't think you went to the Hampstead house on Sunday. I think that you met him when you were there on Friday night."
"No!" It was a startled gasp.
"Because I'm convinced that he was not alive on Sunday morning. He was lying dead in that bath. It would have been a one-sided conversation if you'd spoken to him then... Now, it'll be easier if you tell me the truth."

Her face went several shades paler. She seemed to be fighting a battle with herself. She clenched and unclenched her hands and then stood up and leant with her back against the bench.
"All right," she said slowly. "I did see him on Friday night."
"That's better. Now tell me what happened," I was conscience-struck at the harsh way in which I had attacked her. "Take it quietly. And see if you can remember exactly what he said." I offered her a cigarette.

"Thanks. I'd wanted to keep this a secret, but I suppose that's impossible. I don't know why you're making all these enquiries. You can't possibly believe that Father's death was anything but an accident."

"Unfortunately I do," I said. "Oh!" she murmured. "I've been a perfect fool." She puffed nervously at the cigarette. "You see, when Father disappeared from the theatre on Friday, Lewis and I were very worried. The management here are not very easy to get on with, and it was only Father's influence and the fact that he was appearing in the play that made them agree to let the theatre at all. The money side we typical of Father. He did it all very haphazard. Consequently, we knew that if he didn't appear the management would close down on us. Still, we felt sure he would turn up on Saturday morning. At least Lewis did. But I knew Father. I thought it was quite on the cards he would disappear for a week or more. I determined to run him to earth. I was desperately anxious that Lewis' play should succeed. You see, up till that Friday it had looked as though everything was running smoothly. Father seemed to be absolutely off the drink. But when he suddenly arrived in the morning in that paralytic condition I saw the red light at once. Of course, I didn't discourage Lewis. He's terribly sensitive, and he was worried enough as it was.

"I tried all the places I though Father might be, but I couldn't locate him. Finally, in desperation, I remembered the house at Hampstead. I knew that Christine had found him there once before when he had been away for three days."

I snapped down on her. "Why didn't you tell me that this morning?"

"I didn't think of it. It was all such a shock. Anyway, I went to the house at about eleven o'clock on Friday night. I rang the bell, but I didn't get any answer. I was just going away when I heard a noise upstairs. So I went round the back and got in through one of the windows. Upstairs in a bedroom I found Father. He was sitting on the bed, and around him were piles of clothes."

"The room near the bathroom?" I asked.

"Yes. He was very drunk, and he seemed dreadfully annoyed that I had come there to find him. I asked him why he had walked out on the show. He said he wasn't going to play in it. He was through with it. 'But,' I said, 'what about the money? You're arranged to back it.'"

"'I don't give a damn,' he said. 'It's a lousy play anyway. Now will you get out and leave me in peace?'

"I argued with him, but he just wouldn't talk sense. I told him that he must write a letter to his bank if he was leaving the show. That he couldn't let it down. That seemed to amuse him. 'Can't I let it down! You watch me. You won't get a penny out of me for the bloody thing. I've finished with it, see!"
"I asked him what had happened, but he wouldn't tell me. I explained that if there was anything he didn't like or anything which had upset him we would have it altered. But he was in a strange mood. Apart from the fact he was drunk, he seemed to be in such a violent temper. I said that if he had intended to walk out on the play why had he started it at all? 'Because I had to,' he replied. 'But it's no longer necessary now. I'm through.' Then he laughed and started fumbling with the clothes he was putting into a suitcase. I asked him if he had told Christine. 'That blasted cow,' he said. 'I'm telling her nothing! She can go and take a running jump at herself!"

"I still argued. I tried to appeal to his love for the theatre, but he wouldn't listen. He only raved all the more. He said he was going to cut me out of his will, that he hated the sight of me. I begged him to write a letter to the bank, but he wouldn't. I'd never seen him like that before. His temper grew worse and so, in the end, I decided to leave. I could do nothing."

"What time did you leave?" I asked. She thought a moment.

"Just before midnight, I should say."

"Was he drawing a bath then?"

"No. He said he was going to leave himself in a few minutes. I suggested that we might share a taxi, but he scoffed at the idea. With that I left him."

"It took me some time to find a cab, and when I got back Lewis was waiting for me. He was very anxious and wanted to know if I had found Father. What could I tell him? If I told him the truth, all those horrible things Father had said, it would send him into a flat spin. Besides, somehow I was determined that the play should go on. And the less Lewis knew the better. He gets into despair so quickly."

"I said that I hadn't seen Father, but that he would probably turn up at rehearsals in the morning. Of course, he didn't come. By Saturday evening Lewis said that the show would have to be abandoned. I had been to the management and explained that Father was ill. They had taken it all right, but there was still the money question. I promised Lewis that I would have another shot at finding Father. Actually I knew that if I saw him again he wouldn't alter his opinion."

"I decided on Sunday that there was only one thing to do. To save the show the management must have a letter purporting to come from Father. I know it sounds terribly dishonest, but I had such faith in Lewis' play I didn't think it would matter. I sat down and wrote the letter myself, addressing it to Lewis. I didn't dare send one to the bank, since I felt sure they would see it was a forgery."

"Lewis got the letter on Monday and showed it to me. He was very disappointed, but when the management saw it they were willing for the show to go on. It was such short notice that we had to use Father's understudy. He's not good. Still, fortunately, it hasn't made all the difference."

"I realize now that I was mad to write that letter, but then I didn't know that Father was going to die." She stopped speaking and sat down on the chair again. Her cigarette had gone out and I lit it again for her.

"Have you any idea what was in your father's mind? Why he was packing those clothes? Why he left the show?" I asked.

She shook her head.

I looked at her, and she seemed to be speaking the truth. "Did you know that he had left you all his money in his will?"

She stared at me. "That he had done what!" she exclaimed.

"Left you all his money. He did hint to the bank manager recently that he was going to change the will, but apparently he had not done so at the time of his death."

It was a tremendous shock to her. For a moment she sat very still, then suddenly she burst into tears. They played havoc with the outdoor make-up she was in the process of putting on.

"I didn't know," she said. "It makes me feel such a beast. I never took any trouble to understand him. None of us did."

It was embarrassing for Elliot and myself. You can't very well level a tentative charge of murder against a woman when she's in that state. It wasn't such a hot hypothesis anyway. When you saw her sitting there, her lips quivering and the
tears streaming down her face, you forgot the sophisticated actress. You were conscious only that she was very young and very, very much in love.

So we left her, shutting the door quietly behind us. Out in the corridor Elliot said: “Wasn’t that a trifled heavy-handed, Sarge?”

“I suppose it was,” I said.

We strolled out of the theatre and into the gloomy street. I was beginning to feel intolerably tired. If only I could have got Winter out of my mind I’d have dropped the whole case there and then. But somehow the man haunted me. Until I knew the truth I wouldn’t get any peace. I guess there was a lot of thwarted vanity mixed up in it, too.

“I tell you one thing,” I said to Elliot. “I’m certain that Winter died on Friday night.”

Elliot smiled. “You work too hard. All right, suppose Winter died on Friday night, where does it get us? Nowhere.”

“It’s important that he died on Friday night,” I said.

He yawned. “The most important thing to me just now is to get some sleep. Unless you want me any more I’m getting back to the section house.”

“Okay,” I said. “Don’t be late in the morning.”

He ambled off across Oxford Street, which was practically devoid of traffic except for an occasional taxi or a slow-moving bus. One almost forgot what it had been like in peacetime, when the whole thoroughfare had been crammed tight with vehicles of every description.

Anna was sitting reading when I got in. She put her finger to her lips to tell me that the offspring was asleep. Then when I got close to her she said: “So you’ve showed up at last. How many people have you hanged?”

“Nobody,” I said. “That’s the trouble.”

“You’re just callous. By the way, there’s a letter for you.”

“A bill?”

“No, I don’t think so. Looks something like Uncle Fred’s handwriting.”

But it wasn’t Uncle Fred’s handwriting. I stripped the envelope open and a slim sheet of paper fluttered out. On it was written in block capitals rather crudely formed:

WINTER DIED ON SATURDAY NIGHT

I stared at the paper. Anna picked up her book again. “There’s some cold meat in the kitchen and some pickles. Who’s the letter from?”

The postmark was Hampstead. I passed it over to her. “Your guess is as good as mine,” I said.

VI

It was a peaceful night for the first four hours. But precisely at three o’clock a German plane came over the city and the sirens sounded. This woke Anna, who wanted to dress at once and go to the basement. I said it would be better to wait. The plane seemed to hover about for a time and I hoped that John wouldn’t wake up. He seemed to be lying in the cot fast asleep.

Suddenly all the guns in the world fired at the plane, and it dived with a fearsome whine. Well, naturally, that was the signal for us to get up and transport the infant to the special anti-everything shelter in the basement. Personally, I don’t think it is a very good shelter, but still, most people think they’re safe in it, which is perhaps all that matters.

Miss Pain arrived in curlers and a dressing gown. She started to knit. She said it would probably be a very big raid. I think Hitler must have told her so.

All I heard was the solitary plane that seemed bent on committing suicide. The guns were belching hell at it. John voiced his disapproval of the whole proceedings. He bawled his head off, and Miss Pain said it was a terrible thing for so young a child to be in an air raid. The fact that he had been away in the country for months and that we had had no raid for the last I don’t know how long, did not influence her at all. She said might she try and quiet him down. So Anna passed John to her, and the old spinster paced the floor of the shelter jerking him up and down in her arms. He objected to this treatment and finally I had to take him.

I did everything but stand on my head to amuse him. But he was unimpressed. Suddenly he stopped crying, and I felt that my methods had succeeded. Not a
bit of it. He had caught sight of my cigarette case. This was lying on the bench, and he grabbed hold of it and somehow had it open. The cigarettes fascinated him. He proceeded to pull them out and squeeze them to pieces.

"Hey," I said, "that's all the cigarettes I have until the morning!"

"Oh, let him have them," said Miss Pain. "They make him happy."

"Yes," said Anna. "He's quite content now, see?"

"All right, I'll be a martyr," I replied, and watched the last of the cigarettes arriving, a battered wreck, on the floor.

The German plane disappeared and there was no noise any more. I thought we could get back to bed, but Miss Pain was certain that at least a thousand bombers were heading for London at that very moment. "Besides," she added, "we must wait for the all clear."

And did we wait!

I got cramped sitting there. Even John wore himself out playing with the cigarette case and fell asleep in Anna's arms. An hour of complete silence went by, and then the dismal note of the "All Clear" sounded.

We all got up and climbed the stairs. Miss Pain seemed disappointed about the raid. "Still," she said, "I expect they got it bad somewhere." There was a sort of relish in her voice as she bid us good night and went into her flat.

Of course, after that I couldn't get to sleep. I turned this way and that, but it was useless. I was convinced that if I had had a cigarette it would have been all right. But I had no cigarettes at all. Anna said it was terrible how some people had no control over themselves and why didn't I take up Yogi. She had just read a book on it. What you did was to sit on the bath-room floor and do exercises first thing in the morning.

Well, I was rude about that.

She was rude back and turned over and went to sleep. I began to think about the case. That was no cure for insomnia, either. The more I thought the more mixed up I became. In the end I convinced myself that I had killed Winter by thought transference. I had fallen asleep when I reached that conclusion.

As soon as it grew light I got up. I ached in every bone. Anna was not conscionious and John was miraculously dead to the world. I crept out of the room, dressed in the lounge, shaved, and made some breakfast.

I then went down to the station, found a message there that Sir Adrian Winter wanted to see me, and took a cab to the mortuary.

The old sergeant in charge of the place was very dismal. It appeared that rheumatism was restricting his activity and that he wasn't able to afford to drink scotch any more. These two things loomed as major disasters on his limited horizon. He said that the war was going to last at least fifteen years, maybe twenty, and that suicides were increasing.

"Most of 'em use gas," he said gloomily.

"Now, if it was me, I'd much rather drown."

I said I didn't want to do any of these things. I told him I was too busy to commit suicide.

"You can never tell. A man's all right one day and then—snap! his mind's gone out of gear. He wakes up wanting to kill himself. It's civilization," he said.

"We want to get back to Nature."

I could see this might go on all the morning, so I cut him short and asked if the doctor was there.

"Yes, he's here. Been cutting up that actor bloke. Suicide, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't know," I said.

He led me past the slabs with their gruesome contents. He had a little story to tell about each one and you just couldn't stop him.

Eventually we reached the doctor, who was washing his hands over a sink. The sergeant hung around for a few minutes and then said it was time he took his medicine and shuffled away.

"Well, Doc," I said. "What's the worst?"

He wiped his hands, blew his nose, and peered at me through his spectacles. Then he took his spectacles off and peered at me without them.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want the truth."

He laughed. "Now, don't be silly, Warren. Which way is the evidence going?"

I sighed. "Doc, did Winter die by accident or was he bumped off?"

"Oh, I can't tell you a thing like that.
More than my job is worth. I can give you certain conclusions, but nothing more."

"What's come over you?" I said.
"A little bird whispered that there might be a second opinion called in. So I'm playing safe, understand?"

"But I'm not asking for a statement. Just want something off the record, that's all."

"I see. Well, first I'd say that he died between tea-time on Friday and about ten o'clock on Saturday night."

"And the blow on the back of the head?"

"Might have been foul play. Might not. You see, this chap has an extraordinarily sensitive skin. There are people like that. Bruised easy. Thin, if you understand me. He had loaded up a lot of alcohol before he died. He was a toper. Must have soaked himself in it for years."

It seemed to be all traveling against me.

"Would you say he could have blacked out from the alcohol, fallen, and caused that bruise on the back of his head?"

He nodded judiciously.

"Yes, it's possible."

"Or could someone have faked it?"

"That's possible, too."

I leant with my back to the sink.

"Not very helpful, Doc."

"Look," he said. "I've been in this business for years. There are certain things you can say definitely and certain things you can't. I've seen experts get up in court and talk utter cock and get away with it. For your private ear, I'm inclined to think that this chap was murdered. I'd say that someone dotted him one when he was in his bath. But unless you have concrete evidence to back up that theory I wouldn't dream of standing by it in court."

"So that's the way it is?"

"Yes. Have you got any concrete evidence that points to foul play?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then unless you get any I shall not commit myself. I got caught once before in a case of drowning. I know I was right and the experts were wrong. But the thing you have to learn in this world is that experts are never wrong. I'm sorry I can't be more explicit, but all the data I have are very incomplete. It could honestly be either way."

WE walked through the mortuary together. The doctor took off his white coat and slipped on his tweed jacket. I'd been building a lot on the medical evidence and now there was nothing. Of course, you couldn't blame the doctor. Unless you have seen the way a defending counsel works and the way experts make mincemeat of ordinary general practitioners you can have no conception of the toughness of the courtroom.

"Well, Doc, I'll try and dig up some evidence. You see, I have an absolute conviction he didn't die a natural death."

"All right." He smiled and polished his spectacles. "You get the evidence and I'll stick my neck out. Indeed I will."

In the entrance I found Stuart talking to the sergeant. Stuart was listening to the tale of woe with remarkable patience. When he saw me he smiled.

"How is the detective this morning?"

"No better for seeing you," I said.

"Tell me, what is the verdict of the post-mortem slab?"

"Winter had measles when he was ten," I said.

The doctor was shouting for the sergeant and the sergeant, groaning and complaining, departed. Stuart's eyes twinkled.

"So you're going to hold out on me? Well, I think that's distinctly unfair. After all, I gave you my piece of information. It was worth more than the rest put together. You ought to take me into your confidence. I don't want to lose five pounds, you know." He fumbled in his pocket. "Incidentally, here's that pound you lent me. I managed to get a sub this morning."

I must confess I was surprised to see the pound, but I guessed that Stuart was merely trying to string me along. If he got a scoop on the Winter case it would bring him in quite a lot, despite the fact that the war would crowd it off the front page.

"I'll tell you what the doctor told me," I said. "Apparently, from the medical data it could be either way. Winter could have been the victim of foul play or he could have had an accident. That's all I can get."
"More and more interesting," he said. "Bears out my theory."
"I’m glad to hear that."
"Yes. You know I’m definitely going to beat you to it." He grinned.
I noticed that he hadn’t shaved too well, that his collar was badly frayed. There were circles of dirt under his nails. It was extraordinary how little he cared about his appearance. No wonder Fleet Street had tossed him on to the outer fringe.

"Started the biography?" I asked.
"I’ve planned it out. And I spoke to Christine Winter. She was most gushing. Said I could have all the information I wanted. Wouldn’t wonder if it wasn’t a best seller."
"Good," I said.
"Can I offer you a coffee? There’s a place over the way."
I didn’t get all this courtesy. Stuart obviously wanted to hang on to me for the rest of the day. He had another guess coming.

"No, thanks," I said. "I must be going. Got a lot of calls to make."
"You sound like the village curate."
"Maybe I am. Who knows?" I smiled at him and started off along the road in search of a cab.

I FOUND Elliot in the C.I.D. office cutting out paper women. He exhibited a chain of them as I came in.

"Don’t you think they’ve got a nice waistline, Sarge?" he said.
I exploded. "Haven’t you got anything to occupy your time? I thought you were going down to Records?"

"I had them on the blower. They won’t know a thing about the hat until this afternoon."

"You ought to have gone down there and shaken them up."

"Woudn’t be any use. You know what it’s like, Sarge. If they had a moat and a drawbridge they couldn’t be more exclusive."

"Oh, well." I sat down. "Suppose we’ll have to wait. Any calls?"
Elliot nodded, a smile playing on his thick lips. "Sir Adrian came through twice. He seems suspiciously anxious to see you."

I didn’t want to see Sir Adrian. I knew just what he would suggest. The case must be closed. The funeral must take place. And no more nonsense. And, really, I had no artillery to fire against him.

Suddenly, I remembered the anonymous letter. I showed it to Elliot.

"Came last night," I said. "What do you make of it?"
He turned it over, looking at it. "Woolworth’s paper," he said. "Woolworth’s envelope."

I sighed. "If you think as fast as that you’ll get blood pressure." When he was in one of these moods he was more than exasperating.

"Maybe Sir Adrian wrote it," he said, ignoring my sarcasm. "The spelling’s perfect."

"But why should he want to tell me that Winter died on Saturday night?"
He thought it over.

"Well, you said he died on Friday night, didn’t you?"

"But I didn’t tell Sir Adrian."

"No, that’s right." Elliot rubbed his chin. "It’s an impossible case, Sarge. I think we should make it a nice accidental death and go home."
He set the paper women up so they formed a ballet group across the desk.

I had a fine, biting retort ready when the phone rang. We both looked at it.

"It’ll be Sir Adrian," said Elliot. "What shall I tell him?"

"Oh, tell him I’m coming over to see him now. And you get that letter checked up. See if it gives us anything."

SIR ADRIAN had offices in a large block in Piccadilly. The carpets were thick and there was a knole settee in the waiting room. Everybody in the place seemed to be moving at an enormous speed. Secretaries swept through like galleons in full sail. Typewriters clacked and phones tinkled. It was some time before I could persuade anybody to stop long enough to take my name. Eventually I cornered a bespectacled typist with an icy tilt to her nose. I cut off her retreat and explained who I was.

"Sir Adrian cannot see anybody," she said.
She tried to sweep past me, but I anticipated the move.
"Sir Adrian wants to see me. He's phoned me four times already."
"Well, I don't know. He's got three conferences."

But I kept at her until she got through to Sir Adrian and he said he would see me at once. This annoyed her, and she set her nose at an even steeper angle as she led me into the sacred control room.

It was a large office panelled in oak with an enormous desk, behind which sat Sir Adrian. He was smoking a cigar and dictating to a stenographer out of the corner of his mouth. He waved me to a seat and went on dictating.

I waited while he sealed the fate of a minor official in no uncertain terms. There were so many phones on the desk, you wondered if they all worked. Minions dashed in and out with cablegrams and letters. And the phones set my doubts at rest by ringing two or three at a time. Sir Adrian still smoked his cigar, barked into the phones, barked at his secretary, and doodled on the blotter.

Presently he was through, and the stenographer lifted her skirts and departed. He fumbled with some papers, stubbed out his cigar, lit another one, and then sat back and pierced me with his steel-blue eyes.

"Well, Sergeant, what news have you?" A calm, unhurried voice, almost oily in its solicitation.

"I shall need a little more time yet, Sir Adrian."

His eyebrows rose.

"You've forgotten all that nonsense about murder, I hope?"

"Not entirely."

The eyes continued to pierce me. The smoke wreathed from the cigar in a thick spiral, partially hiding his expressionless face.

"It's a preposterous idea, you know. I fail to see what you gain by clinging to it."

"As a policeman I've always tried to find out the truth, Sir Adrian."

"Have you any facts to support your theory?"

"No concrete ones."

"And the doctor's report?"

"It could be either way. Accident or murder."

A phone rang and he answered it in a monosyllable. He replaced the receiver, flicked some ash off his cigar, and made a note on a pad in front of him.

"I must confess I do not understand your attitude, Sergeant. Surely, the whole case is quite straightforward?"

I accepted the cigarette he offered me.

"Too straightforward, Sir Adrian."

"And what the devil d'you mean by that?"

"I discovered today that Richard Winter nearly died in this same manner about six years ago in Chicago."

Sir Adrian examined the end of the cigar.

"Rather proves my point, doesn't it?"

"Yes and no. There is one difference between the two incidents. In Chicago it was a hot bath into which Richard Winter collapsed. Here it was a cold bath. No one seems to remember him ever having taken a cold bath before, not even when he was very drunk."

"You seem to be building a lot on a very slender point. I understand that the gas had been disconnected. He couldn't have had a hot bath, no matter how much he wanted it. Come now, Sergeant, you must see that."

"I see it all right," I said. "But somehow I don't believe it."

Sir Adrian was getting irritated. He rose from his chair and started to pace the room. He didn't look at me as he spoke.

"As a matter of fact, I'll tell you something. This morning I was very worried about what you had said to me. I rang up a very eminent medical man whose name I will not mention. Suffice it to say that he has often been called in on difficult criminal cases and that his evidence is always treated with great respect in a court of law. I explained to him what had happened. His answer was that unless anything unusual was discovered at the post-mortem it appeared obvious to him that my brother had met an accidental death. And he said this fully knowing my brother and his eccentricities."

It was what I would have expected of Sir Adrian. An efficient man. A man who left nothing to chance.

"It doesn't surprise me," I said. "On the present facts any jury would give a verdict of accidental death."

"Then, my dear young fellow, why will
you persist in this obstinate attitude? It will avail you nothing. And should you attempt to make an issue of it I should be forced to call in this medical man."

I COULD TELL he was restraining his anger. He was not used to being thwarted in his designs. All his life he had probably ridden roughshod over any opposition, and something so unsavoury as the threat of a murder case more than offended his sensitive social conscience.

"I know exactly how you feel, Sir Adrian," I said. "But I must satisfy myself that you are right before I close the case. You see, there are various aspects still unexplained. An unknown man attacked me in the garden of the house, and nobody seems to have any idea who it might be. Again, I was not told all of the truth this morning."

His cold eyes stared at me.

"What might you mean by that?"

"When I spoke to Mrs. Winter she assured me that for the last two years Richard Winter had been completely on the wagon. She told me how he spent his life during that time. She painted for me a picture which I know now was entirely false. Her story made the case appear very strange indeed. I naturally looked for a motive why Richard Winter, who had been cured for two years, should suddenly drink himself paralytic in the middle of the rehearsals for his comeback production."

"My dear chap, you're splitting hairs."

"Not at all, Sir Adrian. Human beings do not act without motive. Often their motive is an impulsive one, but it nevertheless exists."

"If you could unearth Richard's motives you'd be a very clever man." There was an undertone of sarcasm. "He was a thoroughly irresponsible creature. He didn't give a damn for anybody and he caused untold trouble and unhappiness to others. His death, in many ways, is a blessing."

He suddenly burst into a harsh cough which shook him until the veins stood out like cords on his forehead and his face was purple. When the cough subsided he was gasping for breath. He pressed a button on his desk, and when his secretary appeared she got him a drink into which he slipped some kind of medicine. It was several minutes before he was normal again.

"Now," he said when he had recovered. "You were speaking of Richard's drinking."

I nodded. "On making investigations I discovered that he never actually gave up alcohol. Whether he drank when he was with Mrs. Winter I do not know. But I do know that every so often he would break out and disappear for two or three days. Sometimes longer."

"Do you know where he went?"

"A public house called The Bells in the East End."

"You've been there?"

"Yes."

"Then you will have met the sort of people who frequent it. The lowest kind of riffraff. Is it any wonder Mrs. Winter said nothing to you about it? Besides, she suffered enough from Richard when he was alive. He had no conception of what is required from a figure who is perpetually in the public eye. He never even tried to keep up appearances. Any social success he may have had he owes entirely to Mrs. Winter."

I restrained a smile. Richard Winter and social success hardly went together. I began to understand the reason for that Louis XIV furniture and the elegant fairy tale of his intellect and his great interest in the arts. Both Mrs. Winter and Sir Adrian thought Richard should be a social giant. How he must have disappointed them. As time went on I began to entertain a sneaking sympathy for the dead actor.

"Can you imagine," continued Sir Adrian. "Can you imagine the embarrassment of his widow if it was known that he visited a low public house in such a squalid area, getting hopelessly drunk amid the scum of humanity? Surely that is reason enough for her to attempt to cover up that side of his life altogether?"

I agreed that it was. "But not to the police, Sir Adrian. They can be trusted to keep silent. And in the case of a death like this it was vitally necessary to have all the facts."

"Opinions differ on the integrity of the police, my dear Sergeant. However, what do you propose to do now?"

"Continue my investigations."
"Until when?"
"Until I can satisfy myself that I have got at the truth."

Sir Adrian sighed. "I might have expected as much. I suppose it doesn't occur to you that if the inquest and the funeral are unduly delayed malicious people will invent all sorts of rumors. I hold no brief for Richard, but he was a famous man, and famous men are always a target for the envious shafts of the unsuccessful. Apart from the scandal that such rumors would cause, there are Mrs. Winter's feelings to be considered. She is a very brave woman. Unkind things would be said about her. If it was known that the police were suspicious of Richard's death it might even be suggested that she had killed him herself. No, my dear Sergeant, for her sake and for the sake of my own position, I do not intend to allow such a debacle to take place."

I was silent for a moment. I felt a little like Elliot. Why not close up the whole business and go home? It was an attractive idea, and yet somehow the personality of Richard Winter was too powerful to forget. If I gave in now I should always be wondering exactly why he left the theatre when he did and exactly why he died. It was the emotion of wanting to know which decided me far more, I think, than any question of duty.

"I'm afraid," I said, "I cannot give any statement at an inquest until I am sure in my own mind."

"You're being very difficult, Sergeant. I am not quite an unimportant man, you know. If I got in touch with your superiors you might find yourself in an awkward position." He paused, and as I said nothing he continued: "How long do you estimate you will need to clear the matter?"

"I cannot give any definite time," I said. "It depends what I succeed in finding out."

His voice grew cold and unemotional. He slid a pencil through his fingers several times, a gold pencil with a tapered barrel. "So you can't give any definite time! Well, well! Because of a personal desire to make something out of nothing on your part, Mrs. Winter and I are expected to stand by while you jeopardize our positions and tread heavily on her feelings. Before you have finished, the affair will have got wide publicity in the press and will have undone all that Mrs. Winter has tried to do in the last few years. You expect me to stand for that?"

"I shall see there is no publicity," I said. "Very obliging of you, I'm sure. Do you still persist that you can give me no definite time?"

He was angry. He glared at me and then moved back to his desk and picked up a calendar. I knew I was running my head against a wall, but the man's smooth assumption of power irritated me. He was somebody and I was nobody. Therefore, according to the rules of his kind, I was the person to give way. That made me angry, too. I threw caution out of the window. I thought, to hell with it! I'll see him damned first!

He faced me again.

"Well, Sergeant?"

"I'm sorry, Sir Adrian. I will be as quick as I can. That is all I can say."

"You are being very foolish, Sergeant."

"I have already said I am sorry, Sir Adrian."

"All right then. Since you will give me no definite time I will give you one. I shall expect a full inquest not later than three days from now. I shall give your superiors all the facts and make known my wishes. That is allowing you two days to pursue what investigations remain. I think I am being very generous."

He evidently considered the interview was at an end, but I still sat in the chair. Presently he coughed. "I'm afraid I shall have to turn you out, Sergeant. I have some very urgent business to attend to."

"Very well," I said. "But first you would perhaps be kind enough to tell me where you were last Friday night, Sir Adrian?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Because I have a feeling that Richard Winter died on Friday night."

"I was out of town," he said. "At my place in Berkshire. I didn't return until Monday."

"Thank you," I said. "Good morning, Sir Adrian."

I picked up my hat and left, walking
through the expensive waiting room to the lift.

Perhaps Elliot was right. Perhaps Sir Adrian had written the anonymous letter.

WHEN I got back to the office I immediately phoned McKay, who was chief of the section to which I was attached. His voice sounded a little chilly. There was none of the usual Scots warmth about it. Apparently Sir Adrian had already spoken to him.

Very quickly I gave him the facts I possessed so far.

“Ye’ve verra little to go on,” he said. “I think ye’d best close it up.”

“But we can’t be intimidated like this!” I said.

“Aye. Maybe not. All the same, ye havena got a case. I think ye should draw a nice black line under it.” He paused. “Ye see, we canna delay the inquest longer than Friday.”

I protested, but it was no good. The inquest would be on Friday and today was Wednesday. That was the final word. McKay was pleasant about it, but very firm.

“Can I continue investigations?” I asked.

“Weli, ye can find the wee body who tried to drown ye. But beyond that point ye will be acting on your own responsibility. I wouldn’t try stirring anything up. I wouldn’a be able to back ye. Understand?”

“Very good, sir.”

It was depressing, especially when you were convinced you were right. Barely forty-eight hours remained to me, and at the moment I had no further angles to exploit. Oh well, I thought, it will have to be an accidental death.

I spent a gloomy half-hour, trying not to think of Richard Winter, but I couldn’t get the damn man out of my mind. The half of him I had seen made me desperately anxious to see the other half. I cursed volubly and opened the newspaper to see where the war was, but even that failed to shut out the mental apparition of the dead actor.

Just when I thought I would recklessly buy a double scotch, Elliot hurried in. It was unusual for him to hurry and I thought perhaps there might be a fire in the inspector’s room below.

“Hey, Sarge,” he said. “I did what you told me. I went down to Records and blew hell out of them. And sure enough, I got results. They’ve identified prints on the hat. An old lag with a list of convictions. Known affectionately as Ernie—”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, and I forgot all about the double scotch.

VII

RECORDS had sent down a typewritten slip containing Ernie’s particulars. He had had five convictions, all of them for housebreaking, and his last one had been for five years. Altogether, he had spent eleven years of his life in prison, or, if you prefer it, four thousand and fifteen days. It certainly made you think.

His modus operandi was usually to pick a house that was unoccupied. It might be so for only a week end or it might have been vacant for several months. Ernie discovered all these things by posing as an official of the gas company. And when it got too hot he became an official of the electric light company. Assured that the house was empty, he would break in by cutting a pane of glass. In his wake he always left this trade-mark—a circular hole in a window or a door. It was funny really that he never varied his proceedings. But then criminals are superstitious.

The thing that struck Elliot and me was that Ernie had never used violence. If somebody disturbed him, he vanished. That hardly squared with the man who had nearly drowned me in the lily pond. But you never can tell.

Ernie’s age was thirty-seven. His parents were unknown, but he had a wife somewhere in Whitechapel. Children, too. Records said he never went near them and that the wife charred to earn a living.

That didn’t seem to be of much help in tracing him, but Elliot turned over the typewritten slip and showed me that there was an address on the other side. This was the flat of a girl with whom Ernie had “consorted”—which is the police way of saying he had slept with her. Her name was Alice, and her activities bore no relation to the girl who had gone through the looking glass. In fact, she had once been
fined forty shillings for soliciting in Brook Street.

"I know her," said Elliot triumphantly. "I bet you do," I replied.

"Not intimately," he added. "But I pulled her in for that soliciting job. It was when I was in the uniform branch two years ago. I don’t think she was really soliciting, but I was very enthusiastic in those days."

I smiled. "We’d better go and seek her out," I said. "You can do the talking. Since you squeezed her for a couple of quid there must be quite a bond between the two of you."

Elliot didn’t like that at all. He protested that he mixed in only the very best circles, and that his amours were merely the result of his magnetic personality.

"Interesting," I said. "You must show me how you do it some time."

He grinned. "It’s cause and effect," he said.

Well, we walked along to Alice’s flat, which was a stone’s throw from Oxford Street. It was on the top floor up a long flight of stairs that was punctuated by two landings.

We started to climb up, and when we reached the first landing we became aware that there was someone just ahead of us—a shortish man in a black trilby, carrying a brief case. We paused, so that he wouldn’t know we were behind.

He went on right to the top floor and then we heard a bell ringing. This was followed by a door opening and a girl’s voice saying: "Why, Arthur. I didn’t expect you so early!" The man Arthur mumbled something and then the door closed.

Elliot looked at me.

"We’ll have to wait," he said. "Arthur is obviously a customer. Can’t very well burst in in the—er—middle of things, can we?"

Despite my desire to see Arthur in his underclothes I decided Elliot was right. If we wanted Alice to talk it was no use getting entangled in her business. We sat down on the edge of the stairs at the first landing.

Time went by, and Elliot at last told me the story of the sultan and his eunuchs, which I think is very funny. But then you will have heard it already.

It got to half an hour and Elliot sighed. "Long session," he said.

"Perhaps he’s selling her an insurance policy," I suggested.

Elliot shook his head. "He was a customer all right. I could tell by looking at him. I didn’t spend a year on this beat for nothing."

It was an hour before Arthur reappeared. He ambled down the stairs, carrying the same brief case. When he saw us he was a little abashed. But Elliot smiled and said it was a nice day and Arthur agreed. We waited for him to gain the street, then we continued our climb and reached Alice’s door.

We rang the bell, and after a lot of rustling and banging Alice showed herself.

"Good afternoon," said Elliot. "Can we come in?"

She was a nondescript creature, quite attractive in her way, but far too heavily made up. She took one look at Elliot.

"You!" she exclaimed. "What the hell’s the trouble now?"

Elliot smiled. "There is no trouble, Alice. Not as far as you’re concerned, anyway. We’d just like to have a chat. This is Detective-Sergeant Warren."

Alice finished hooking up her dress and then let us in. She led us to a very small sitting room which reeked of cheap scent.

She stared at Elliot. "Trying to pinch me for another forty bob," she snapped.

"Let’s bury the hatchet," said Elliot. "I was only doing my duty."

"Funny sort of duty. Running in a girl for something she hadn’t done!"

"I’ve felt badly about it ever since," replied Elliot. "Still, it’s a long time ago. Have a cigarette."

"Ta."

She took one.

Elliot smiled sweetly at her, and I must confess that she smiled back. It was astonishing. Elliot knew just how to handle her.

"Know anyone called Ernie?" he asked casually.

"Ernie who?"

"Just Ernie."

"I might. What do you want to know for?"

"We’d like to talk to him. Ask him how he’s getting on."

"Come off it!" She grinned at Elliot.
“What’s he done this time? Mind you I haven’t seen him for ages. Not for ages, you understand?”

“Perfectly,” said Elliot. “Well, he happens to have lost his identity card.”

“That’s a good one! I bet he never had one to lose.”

“Oh yes, he’s gone quite respectable. Made a lot of money. Surprised he hasn’t been round to look you up.”

Elliot’s powers of perjury and invention knew no limits. He played on the girl’s greed and her wounded vanity until you would have thought that Ernie had become a millionaire overnight. She admitted that she had once lent Ernie five pounds which he had never repaid. Elliot snatched at this and quickly incorporated it into his argument.

“You mean he’s really made money?” she asked.

Elliot nodded. “Lots of money.”

His voice carried such conviction that she believed him. She burst into an angry tirade against the unfortunate Ernie, calling him all the unprintable words in the typesetter’s cemetery. She raved and ranted, and Elliot gently fed the flames with a soft word here and there.

I took no part in the proceedings at all. I merely sat in a chair and tried to look sympathetic.

In the end she fumbled with her bag and produced a slip of paper on which was written a phone number.

“That’s where he always told me I could get him,” she said. “And when you see him you might remind the little bastard I’m still alive!”

Elliot took the paper and commiserated about the wiles of men. A girl wasn’t safe to trust any one of them. No indeed. I thought he was laying it on a bit hot, but Alice didn’t think so. She heartily agreed with every sentiment that Elliot loosed, the trier the better.

She had quite forgotten that he had dunned her for forty shillings. She knew only that he was kind and understanding and she would do anything to help him. Just anything. I was fearful lest she should drag him into the bedroom there and then to prove it.

But somehow he managed to retreat, and presently we were outside the door with the phone number; while inside the flat Alice was left with the memory of a policeman who had affected her like nothing since the time her first lover had seduced her on Brighton beach and whispered Ella Wheeler Wilcox in her ear.

Elliot winked at me as we descended the stairs.

“Nice work, eh, Sarge?”

“It was murder,” I said. “You’d better keep away from this area for some time to come.”

The phone number took us down the Mile End Road where we stopped at a local police station and spoke to the inspector in charge. He was a jovial, round-faced individual with a tough frame and an enormous capacity for beer. I think he was glad of someone to talk to, because he talked all right. For a solid hour he talked.

Finally he got around to the phone number. He rang up the exchange, muttered a few crude pleasantry to the girl at the other end, and was quickly given the address.

“It is as I thought,” he said, turning to us. “The number is Ma Kelly’s dump. Ma Kelly is my way of being a bloody nuisance in this district.”

“What is it?” I asked. “A pub?”

He nodded gloomily.

“Sort of. It’s really technically speaking a club. All sorts of odd customers get there. We’ve tried to close the place down several times but we can’t get any evidence. If we raid it, nothing happens. Everything is absolutely aboveboard by the time we arrive. I suppose somebody tips her off. You know how it is.”

“Do you call to mind this fellow Ernie at all?” I asked.

“Can’t say I do. But I ain’t got much memory for faces, and I don’t remember names too well. I expect that’s why I’m still sitting in this rat hole. Did I tell you we have rats? Well, we have. Yes, large sods, too. Chew anything to pieces they will.”

I could tell that he was rambling off on one of his circular tours again, so I cut in: “What do you think we ought to do?”

“Now, that’s a problem.”

“Suppose we go there and tackle Ma Kelly?”

“Useless. She sticks to her friends.
Never catch her narking to the police. Tough nut she is, and no mistake."

"Well," I said, "it’s absolutely essential we drag in Ernie and it’s got to be today."

"That’s the trouble," said the inspector. "If he’s at Ma Kelly’s, ten to one he’ll slip through our fingers. Course, we’d get him in the end. But it might be a matter of days."

Then he suddenly stopped talking. He held up a large hand. "Tell you what," he went on. "There is a way, but I don’t know whether you’d like to take it. You see, we can’t get into Ma Kelly’s unless there’s some reason. What’s more, we’d have to advertise our presence for some time beforehand. But if there was a disturbance in the club, something like a fight, for instance, that would do the trick. I could come in with several of the fellows here and we’d surround the place. Do you get me?"

"Yes," I said. "But who starts the fight?"

"You’d have to do that," he pointed out apologetically. "All our people are known. It’s only an idea, mind you. But since you’re in such a hurry ..."

I looked at Elliot. "What do you think?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "We don’t know whether Ernie’s in there or not."

"The only thing to do is go there and find out," said the inspector. "Only you’d have to change your clothes a bit, or they’d be suspicious."

Elliot smiled. "Let’s do that, Sarge."

"Okay," I said. It was not exactly my idea of an evening out, but what would you?

THE INSPECTOR entered into the game and found us various articles of clothing more suitable to the occasion. We dressed up in these, and I must confess we looked more than a little peculiar.

The inspector was enthusiastic. "That’s just right. Just right. I reckon you’ll pass in."

We slouched off down the street, and presently we came to an alley. We dived into this and stopped in front of a side door. A naked flight of worn wooden steps led down into a basement. We hesitated for a moment and then descended. At the bottom we were challenged by a tough-looking customer who adopted a very beligerent tone. However, we had our story pat, thanks to the inspector, and very soon we were passed into a large room that was filled with human beings and smoke.

At the far end was a bar counter. You could just distinguish it through the haze. Behind the bar was a fat woman. I guessed that this was Ma Kelly. She had an enormous bosom that shot out almost at right angles from her thick neck. Her nose was long and fleshy and she had quite half-a-dozen chins. Her ears were held down by a large pair of earrings that swung like pendulums with every movement of her big head. Not exactly everybody’s idea of his favorite grandmother, but she was certainly popular with the crowd in the club.

She gazed at us through the smoke. We ordered some drinks and took them over to a table. A group of people were playing darts and there was a poker game in progress. We sat down and looked cautiously around us. We had a photograph of Ernie, but it was the sort of nondescript police effort that leaves a lot to the imagination.

"Nice joint," said Elliot.

It was so full that it took you time to see your way about. After about ten minutes I thought I caught a glimpse of someone who could be Ernie. I pointed him out to Elliot.

His eyes roved quickly.

"You mean the little guy leaning forward in his seat?"

"That’s right."

Elliot studied the man. "Yes, I reckon that’s him. What do we do now?"

"Follow me," I said. We picked up our drinks and sauntered over to the table where Ernie was sitting. With Ernie was a fat man with loving designs tattooed on his hands. He had scarcely a hair on his head. Ernie was tired and thin. His face sagged downwards in a series of straight lines, as though somebody had tugged at it hard. His eyes were mournful. He would have made a most convincing undertaker.

I beamed at the fat man.

"Why," I said, "if it isn’t Clarence!"

The fat man stared at me through his small eyes. He broke off the conversation he was having with Ernie and his hands moved back across the table.
"What did you say?" he demanded in a thick grating voice.

"You remember me, Clarence," I said.
"Don't you recognize me?"

He took umbrage in no small manner.
"My name is not Clarence," he snapped.
"It never has been. And if it had, then I'd have changed it."

"This is ridiculous," I said. "I'm sure you're Clarence. Have you got a lover's knot tattooed on your chest?"

"No," he roared. "I ain't got nothing tattooed on my chest. Go on, beat it!"

"But, Clarence—" I began. I didn't get any further. The fat man stood up, swore, and took a sock at me. I ducked and lunged out at him, catching him in the soft region of his stomach. The air left his body, like a punctured cycle tire, and he folded up in his seat.

Meantime, Elliot was looking after Ernie.

I DON'T KNOW if you have ever been in one of these affrays, but if you have you will know how quickly a fight spreads. No forest fire ever moved faster. The fat man recovered and socked at me again. Then somebody else socked at me. And a third person hit the fat man. It began to get very complicated, and I kept a weather eye on Elliot, who had laid out Ernie and was being assailed by two other customers who joined in for no reason at all.

Inside five minutes the place was in an uproar. People started throwing bottles, and when the bottles got broken they threw bits of glass. This rapidly produced casualties. Ma Kelly's stentorian voice failed to restore order, so she came out from behind the bar and started belaboring right and left with a chair leg. Her language was very poetic, if you understand that kind of poetry.

The inspector was evidently given the word by his scouts. There was a noise like thunder on the stairs and they poured into the club. They were very large policemen, and in the middle of them was the inspector, grinning beatifically. I think he liked a roughhouse.

Elliot was knocked down and Ernie managed to get away to a door at the back. We chased after him, avoiding two cus-

tomers who swung their fists at us. Ernie got to the door first and smashed it shut, evidently locking it from the other side. There was no doubt that he didn't wish to meet any kind of police. Elliot threw himself against the door and split the panel. He repeated the process and smashed the lock.

We flung the door open and hurried down a passage and up some steps and into the street. We caught a glimpse of Ernie's scurrying figure. We ran like hell after him and saw him disappear into a two-story block about fifty yards ahead. We gained on him and were soon climbing the stairs of the house. People came out of doors and wanted to know what the blazes it was all about. They didn't use that language, of course, but I don't know how to spell what they actually said.

We didn't stop. Up we went, until we got to the roof. Ernie was just trying to clamber up to the next one. He had his feet over the edge and was preparing to jump. But he was nervous, and before he could make up his mind we were on him. Elliot hauled him back from the edge and sat him down.

"Come on, Ernie," I said. "We want to talk to you."

"My name is not Ernie," he replied. "Whatever it is we'd like to talk to you."

"I ain't done nothing!"

We pulled him from the roof and finally he decided to co-operate and walked down the stairs under his own steam. In the street we marched him off to the station. A police van was decanting various specimens from Ma Kelly's and policemen were carting them to the lockups. I doubt if trade had been so brisk in that area for some time.

The inspector said we could use the enquiries room to question Ernie. We pushed him in there and told him to take a seat.

"Always picking on me," he grumbled. "Never give a bloke a chance to go straight."

"Ernie," I said, "you are telling lies. They are things you never ought to tell."

He made a rather belated attempt to pretend that he was an alien of some kind, that his name wasn't Ernie, and that his childhood had been spent in central
Europe. We dealt harshly with this, pointing out that he had no papers and was liable to be shipped to the Isle of Man at once. He regarded our statement rather dubiously and then admitted that he had been born in Brixton and had been no nearer to the continent than the newsreels.

Elliot then asked him if he had lost something, and Ernie enumerated a number of things he had lost in the course of life. These included a couple of girls, a legacy, and the money on a horse that came in at a hundred to one.

“What have you done with that beautiful bowler hat of yours?” asked Elliot.

Ernie paled and his voice was sad.

“I threw it away,” he said. “It was getting shabby. I had an inferiority complex in it.”

Elliot made a clicking noise with his teeth.

“You know that is not true, Ernie. You had that bowler up to a few days ago.”

“That’s when I give it away,” replied Ernie blandly.

“To whom did you give it?”

“That’s my business, ain’t it? No law against giving hats away.” He had recovered some of his confidence. “Very deserving case, the chap I give it to.”

Of course he was lying. His shifty little eyes were swivelling about like an anxious ferret’s. I started to pitch it into him hard. I pointed out that his next conviction would take him to jail for so many years he’d probably die there. Finally I said:

“Why did you try to drown me, Ernie?”

His face was chalk, a dirty, pasty chalk.

“What the ‘ell are you talking about?”

“You were hanging around a house in Hampstead early Tuesday morning. I chased you through the grounds, caught up with you, and then you tried to drown me in the lily pond.”

His jeer was pure bravado.

“Me—drown you! Caw, that’s a laugh! What chance would I have against a strong, healthy chap like you?”

“I overbalanced. It was easy. I know why you did it, too. You were scared of being caught. You didn’t want to get another stretch. I don’t blame you, Ernie. But some people might call it attempted murder.”

This sank and exploded in his brain like a depth charge.

“Murder!” he shouted. “It was just self-defence!”

Elliot smiled sardonically. “So you admit it, eh? You admit you were in the garden there on Tuesday morning? All right, what were you doing?”

“I ain’t admitted nothing.” He tried desperately to keep up his front, but he had given himself away and he knew it. He loosened his tie and pulled at his greasy collar.

“Now, Ernie,” I said, “I want to know what you were doing in that house.”

“You’re making a mistake, mister. Trust a rozzler to fix things. I wasn’t within ten miles of Hampstead on Tuesday morning. Straight I wasn’t!”

He went on for some time in this vein, denying everything and dragging himself deeper into a net of lies. For fifteen minutes he argued. His eyes were bloodshot and the sweat was standing out on his forehead. In the end he realized it was useless. He shrugged his shoulders and his chin sank into his chest.

“All right,” he said. “I was there. But you can’t pin anything on to me.”

“Suppose you tell me about it.”

“Okay. But I ain’t admittin’ nothin’.”

He demanded a glass of water, and the constable who had been waiting, notebook in hand, went off and presently returned with one. He handed it to Ernie, who drank noisily, rubbed his mouth, and then sat back in the chair.

“I knew that house was empty, see. I’d cased it properly and I knew there was nobody living there. I wish I’d never set eyes on the place now. Still, can’t do anything about that. Well, I had things set for Saturday evening. I’d found out exactly what time the copper on the beat went by there and it was dead easy opening the back windows.”

“What time was this?” I asked.

“About ten or a bit before. But I never took nothing, understand. You can’t have me for that. There’s some in it deeper’n me. I ain’t carrying the can back for no one. Get me?”

“There’s still the little matter of the lily pond,” I reminded him, and I could see Elliot grinning from ear to ear.

“That was an accident. Honest it was. Blimey, you don’t really think I’d try to
do in a rozzler, do yer? I’d be bats, wouldn’t I? I was frightened, see. I just acted without thinking. You believe that, don’t yer?”

“We’ll see,” I said. “Go on.”

“Well, I got into the grounds and crept around the back.” His face seemed to grow longer and longer. Vertical furrows cut his cheeks, and there was fear at the back of his eyes. “I was very careful. I knew the window I was after. But when I got there it was locked. I couldn’t understand it. I was sure the place was empty. I was in two minds. One side of me wanted to blow off out of it. The other side said it was a pitty to’ve wasted all that time and then get nothin’ for me trouble.” He paused. “I wish I’d ‘pped it now. Wouldn’t have landed me in this mess. You can only charge me with intent though, can’t you?”

“Never mind about that. Keep going.”

“All right, all right. I was only askin’. You coppers think you own the bleedin’ earth. You do, straight. I think I ought to have a little consideration for telling you this. I don’t have to talk.”

“No,” I said. “You don’t have to. You could face a lot of fancy charges instead.”

“But I didn’t knock off a thing. I was out of pocket—what with bus fares and that!”

I suggested sarcastically that he should put it down as business expenses. “Now, what happened after you discovered the window was locked?”

“I walked around for a bit and then I noticed that a window on the first floor was open. Small window. I guessed it was a lavatory or a bathroom. I’m not one of these acrobatic blokes, but I reckoned I could shin up the drainpipe and reach the window without too much trouble. Well, that’s what I did, and I ripped me trousers doin’ it. Finally I scrambled through the window which was a blasted sight smaller than it appeared. I found meself on a bathroom floor. All tiled and cold it was. Still it seemed that everthing was all right, and I stuck a match to get me bearings. What I saw there give me a proper turn.”

“What was it?” I asked.

He wasn’t very anxious to continue. He had a coughing fit, swallowed some more water, and then rubbed his hand across his knee. “You’ve got to believe what I’m going to tell you, mister. You rozzlers know me well enough by now . . .”

“Come on!” I snapped.

“Well, there was a bloke lying in the bath starin’ at me. I was scared stiff. I’d been copped out and no mistake. I’d felt certain that there was nobody living in the place. My headpiece ticked over fast. I knew I couldn’t get down the drainpipe fast enough to escape. I decided to stay and pitch a yarn. I started talking, tell-ing the bloke I was sorry I had intruded on his bathing but that I was working for the telephone company and there was some trouble with the wires and I was trying to trace it.”

“I bet you didn’t get away with that.”

“The bloke didn’t move,” he went on. “Didn’t bat an eyelid. Just stuck there in the bath.”

“Was his head above the water?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I suppose it must have been. Anyway, I soon realized that he was dead. I’d heard of coves popping off in baths, but I’d never seen one before. I didn’t stay to look long. I can tell you. I wasn’t stickin’ round with no stiffs. I struggled through the window again and shinned down to the garden. Then I beat it, fast as I could go.”

“That’s beautiful,” I said. “And now, why in the hell did you come back to the place on Tuesday morning?”

“I’d left something behind,” he said quickly.

“What?”

“A wallet containing my identity card and all. Must have slipped out of my pocket as I was leaving.”

I stared at him twice. Yes, he really did expect me to believe it. In fact, he was rather proud of his story. Some of the lines in his face had softened.

“How much will I get for intent?” he asked.

“Just a moment.” I stood up and paced the room, while the constable bit his pencil and Elliot twiddled some string round his fingers, making a slipknot. “It won’t work, Ernie. That story’s as phony as blazes. I’ll believe it as far as the time when you found the man in the bath. Suppose you start telling it to me again from there and make it the truth this trip.”

Elliot smiled. Ernie was a mass of
righteous indignation and the constable seemed bored. At the back of the station in the cells one of Ma Kelly’s customers was shouting all the obscene words he could think of and suggesting that the jailer had been born out of wedlock.

"I told you the truth," Ernie said. "Not my fault if you don’t believe it!"

I peered down into his grey face. "We think the man in the bath may have been murdered. He was struck on the head and fell into the water. You say that you found him like that, but that’s only your story. You’ve no proof to back it up. It could be that when you went into the bathroom he saw you, and it could also be that you hit him on the head to keep him quiet!"

"No!" The word was spoken in a throaty whisper. "No! That’s a lie!"

"It stands up better than your version," I said. "In fact, it could be made to stand up pretty well."

He shuddered.

"I ain’t never used violence!"

"You gave a very good imitation of it when you pushed me into the pond," I said.

"I never hit that bloke," he shouted. "I didn’t! Straight I didn’t! I wasn’t near enough to him!"

"They all say that," interposed Elliot.

Ernie passed his hand over his forehead, while Elliot and I contrived to look very grim.

"Just suppose," said Ernie presently. "Just suppose you’re right. Mind, I’m admitting nothing. But suppose you are right and I hadn’t told you all of it. What do I get if I spill the rest?"

"Nothing," I replied. "You might get yourself out of the way of a murder or manslaughter charge. That’s all."

Ernie cogitated. The murder business upset him more than a little. He wanted to get shut of it as quickly as possible and yet something was holding him back. What that was I couldn’t guess.

A FEW MOMENTS later he seemed to come to a conclusion. His eyes remained shifty, but some of the chalk went out of his face.

"You going to tell us?" I asked.

"Ain’t no choice, is there?" He paused.

"Only I would like you to realize that I was forced into this thing. If I’d had my way I’d have scarpered the second I saw the stiff."

"Your second name is Fauntleroy," I said. "Come on, Ernie. I can’t give you much longer."

"All right. Well, it was like I said. I come upon the bloke in the bath, and my first thought was to disappear as fast as I could. I was just making for the window when the bathroom door opened and the light was turned on. An oldish gent with grey hair stood in the doorway. He demanded to know what the hell I was doing there. I said I was trying to revive the bloke in the bath. Well, that shook him all right and he dropped his belligerent tone. After a couple of minutes I told him I was going and he had better call the police."

"Did he say anything about the man in the bath?" I asked.

"Not much. Said there’d been an accident. But he didn’t want to call the police. I could tell that. Eventually I understood why. There were some people downstairs with him and he explained that it was a delicate situation. Didn’t want any scandal like. He’d much prefer it if the body was found when he wasn’t on the premises. And he suggested that I might feel the same way about it."

I smiled. "Every man has his price. What was yours, Ernie?"

"I never said nothing about money."

"I did though."

"Well, there was a little sum suggested, but that was as far as things got."

"I can imagine," I said. "It was a pity the body was discovered before the appointed time. It meant that when you arrived to collect your little sum, as you so nicely put it, the police were in possession. That was why you blundered into the house on Tuesday morning, wasn’t it?"

"I haven’t said so." "Your silence was sufficiently eloquent. Now, who was this man? Did he tell you his name?"

"Not likely."

I nodded. "I should have been surprised if he had. You know, it was exceedingly foolish of you to come to the house when it was already occupied by the police."

"Blimey, you don’t think I’d have come if I’d known you was there, do you? When I heard voices in that room with the french
windows I felt sure it was the gent I'd seen before."

"How much money were you going to get?"

"I'm not answering that."

"Very well. How were you going to pick it up?"

"He said it would be left in the desk in that room."

The more I heard of it the more I admired Sir Adrian, for he it was—quite obviously—who had done the deal with Ernie.

SIR ADRIAN, cool and calm in the face of any emergency. A man who made lightning decisions, who weighed people with ruthless cynicism. A gambler who was not afraid of the stakes. Quite remarkable, in fact.

"Tell me," I continued. "Did you see any of the others who were with this man on Saturday?"

"I did get a dekko. Seemed to be a woman and another bloke."

"Could you describe the woman at all?"

"Well, her hair was done in a fringe and she was wearing a sort of black overcoat. Dark, she was."

Mrs. Christine Winter without a doubt. "And the man?"

"I didn't really see him properly."

At last something was moving. Winter's actions still remained puzzling, but to involve Sir Adrian and Christine in one swoop was not a bad evening's work. I believed most of Ernie's story. He was not clever enough to lie consistently.

What exactly did it mean?

Winter had been dead before midnight on Saturday. That was all you could deduce for certain. But there were many other things that promised to be intriguing. I was going to enjoy talking to Sir Adrian now. I could put on the screws in a way that would salve my wounded vanity.

I turned to Ernie. "There's nothing else you can tell me?"

"No."

I beckoned to the constable. "He can go back to his cell," I said.

Ernie stood in front of me. "You believe what I told you, don't you?"

"Perhaps, Ernie. We'll see. It still might be the way I said at first. You might have hit him over the head to get loose."

Ernie gave a nervous snort. "Blimey, do I look the sort of bloke who would murder somebody?"

"I wouldn't bring that up if I were you," I said. "I got a deep insight into your character when we were in the lily pond."

I sent Elliot off to check up on Sir Adrian's movements as much as possible without arousing the great man's suspicions. Elliot grumbled that we were working night and day on the case and he personally didn't see why we should. Apparently he had a date with the understudy—the girl he'd been talking to in the green-room at the Regent Theatre. And he didn't like work when it got between him and his dates.

We compromised by fixing a definite time for him to come off duty. What he hadn't discovered by then could wait.

"And I hope you realize," I said, "that we may be jeopardizing the whole case for the sake of your boudoir expedition."

He grinned. "You haven't any romance, Sarge, that's your trouble."

I left him and got a cab home.

Winter still eluded me. I wondered whether he would continue to elude me if I solved the case and found out how he had died. At the moment he seemed rather like someone walking through a forest. Occasionally you caught glimpses of him. Then he would disappear behind a solid wall of trees and come into view again at another point. You got no consecutive picture at all.

He had been famous. And the spurs to fame are usually money, power, or vanity. None of them fitted where he was concerned. He was vain, yes. He liked money, too. And he probably got a big kick from his power to sway audiences. But when you admitted those things you were no nearer the truth. None of them could account for the path he had taken. Or was I wrong?

The cab swirled round Soho Square and came to rest, its tires scraping the curb.

The first person I saw when I got into the flat was Stuart. He was making free with my very limited quota of booze and entertaining John by pretending to be a train. Anna appeared to be encouraging him in both activities.

Then I glanced over the other end of the room and saw with a start that Ben
was sitting there, a self-consciously clean Ben in a white collar and a blue suit.

Stuart got up from the floor, drained his glass, and walked toward me.

“You work very late for your small salary,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “Just a tool of the capitalists, that’s me.”

“We’ve got some news for you,” he added.

“Don’t tell me you’ve solved the case.”

He ignored the sarcasm. “Doris has disappeared.”

I looked at Ben. He nodded. “That’s right, mister. Cleared out in the night, I should think. She ain’t never done a thing like that before.”

“Oh, she’ll come back,” I told him.

“Not her. She’s took ‘er clothes and everythin’. Must ‘ave done it secretly. I tell yer, I don’t like the look of it at all.”

“Ben’s afraid something may have happened to her,” said Stuart.

VIII

B en told his story. It was really very simple. He had gone out that afternoon after the pub closed, leaving Doris reading a book. She had said she might look in at the local cinema, but in any case she would be back to open up at the usual time.

“When I returned there was a crowd of customers bangin’ on the doors and shoutin’. Yer see, it was long past opening, and they was more than a bit restive. Well, I let ‘em in, served ‘em, and then went out the back to look for Doris. I reckoned she’d probably stayed later than she intended at the pictures. I waited for an hour and then Mr. Jennings here come in and I told ‘im what had happened. We searched through ‘er room and discovered that she had took all her clothes an’ everything.

“I can tell yer I was never more surprised in me whole life. I made enquiries around, and one of the women across the road had seen Doris come out with suitcases and get into a taxi that was waitin’ for her.”

Anna got up and said it was time John was put to bed, particularly as she intended giving him a bath. Stuart insisted on helping her. He said he was crazy over kids, and he certainly appeared to have won John’s approval. It was a kind of cortege that departed for the bathroom, with John very delighted at all the attention he was attracting and Stuart still pretending to be a railway engine.

We waited until they had gone.

“Nice-lookin’ little chap,” said Ben.

“Fair caution, too, ain’t he?”

“He likes being spoilt,” I said.

The bathroom door slammed and you could hear the noise of taps being turned on. Ben’s face suddenly grew serious again and his thoughts switched back to Doris.

“What do you make of it, mister?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Difficult to say. Has she ever gone away like this before?”

“Never. Not since she come to me first of all. Little nipper of five she was then. Up to all kinds of devilishment. No, she ain’t never left me except to go to her aunt’s in the country about once a year for a holiday. But then I knew all about it, and she usually fixed things days ahead.”

“Had she a boy friend?”

“Not that I know of. Course, she used to ‘ave flutters now and then with some of the actors who come in. Liked actors, she did. But lately she don’t seem to have taken much interest in anything but those magazines she buys and going to the pictures. Lots of young chaps ‘ave tried to get her, naturally. They wouldn’t be human if they hadn’t. But they never got far with ‘er. Bored ‘er they did. Yer see, the way she was brought up in the pub rather spoiled ‘er for ordinary chaps. I mean, in those days we used to ‘ave all the celebrities coming in and out, and Doris was quite a favourite. She’s good-looking now, but you ought to’ve seen her as a kid. She was a picture, and no mistake.”

I could imagine it all right. Doris must have fallen very early in her life, seduced by the soft words of some juvenile lead. And after that there had probably been a succession of men. She was obviously not a passionate creature, despite her provocative appearance, but if the use of sex captivated a fascinating actor for her, then she wouldn’t hesitate to take the plunge.

An actor was always larger than life,
EXAMINED the lock and then forced it with a penknife. Inside I found several playscripts. About half a dozen. Four of them were copies of plays Winter had produced in the past, and the other two had titles I couldn't call to mind. I thought they were perhaps unproduced efforts that had been submitted for his consideration.

Ben was looking over my shoulder. "Wot's the name of the author?" he asked.

I glanced at the scripts. "Thelma Kingston."

Ben exclaimed.

"Oh, I remember them. Caw, lumme, yes. Somebody asked him to read them. An' you ought to've 'eard what he said. I reckon that woman would 'ave died of shock if she knew the language he used to describe 'er plays."

"You don't know her?"

He shook his head.

"Naw."

"Okay, Ben, thanks. And I'll let you know the moment I hear anything of Doris."

He nodded his thanks.

"I 'ope nothin' 'as happened to her. She's a good girl. Useful in the bar, too. Almost look on her as my own daughter, if yer get what I mean."

He shuffled off into the night, heading for Charing Cross Road where he would get a bus to take him home.

I was flipping through the pages of the two scripts when Stuart reappeared. John had duly had his bath and was now being tucked up for the night.

"It would be good to be a child again once in a while," said Stuart, as he sat down. "Lot of the fun goes out of life when you grow up." There was a wistful, nostalgic expression in his cynical face. His eyes were softer than I had ever seen them before.

"You ought to get a job in a day nursery," I said.

His glance fell on the brief case.

"Oh, so you've opened it? Anything much?"

"No. Just a few scripts, that's all." I offered him a cigarette. "Ever heard of anyone called Thelma Kingston?"

His face set hard for a moment, as though the name had rung a bell some-
where. Then he relaxed. "No, never. Thelma Kingston, eh? What is she—a budding playwright?"

"Possibly. There's two scripts of hers here." I watched Stuart carefully, but he betrayed nothing. Yet that first look had told me he knew something. I decided Thelma Kingston should be investigated.

Stuart slowly blew some smoke down his nostrils.

"Well," he said, "how does Doris' disappearance fit into your theories?"

"It doesn't—not at the moment."

He laughed. "I knew you were on the wrong track. Can't you see it's the climax to the whole affair?"

"Suppose you tell me," I said.

He jeered at me.

"Not on your life. Why, I'd be losing five pounds, wouldn't I? Besides, I don't think you'll ever get more than a verdict of accidental death."

"I might if you helped me."

He smiled. "You seem to forget that I'm writing that biography."

"Have you seen Christine?"

He nodded.

"Yes. She was charming. She is giving me every facility."

"Did you tell her it wouldn't be a pleasant book?"

He shot me an odd look.

"What the hell do you mean?"

I went and got a cigarette from the box on the table. "You can't kid me," I said.

"If you write a book on Winter you'll want to destroy the idol, expose the feet of clay. You'll strip him bare with malicious prose."

That amused him. "I certainly shan't do any white-washing, but then I don't think one should in biographies of famous men, do you? I shall endeavour to present a true picture of Richard Winter."

"A true picture," I laughed. "That's something you could never do. You'll present a biased portrait, but that's as far as you'll get."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not going to argue or I'd be here all night. When it's complete you shall have a copy. Incidentally, I intend to devote a couple of chapters to his death. If there wasn't a law of libel I might even hint at the person who killed him."

"Interesting," I said. "Of course, we may have found that out by the time the book is published."

"I doubt it."

His eyes twinkled with mirth. "Matter of fact," he went on, "I know already who killed Winter." He paused. "I knew it yesterday. Well, I must be going, my dear chap. Say good night to your wife for me, will you? And don't drive your brain too hard."

With a wave of his hand he was gone.

Presently Anna arrived. She wanted to know what had happened to Stuart and I told her. Then she explained that she had had a job to get John settled. "He kept on wanting to play with that toy dog Stuart brought him."

I stared at her. "Stuart did what?"

"Brought him a toy dog."

"Remarkable," I said.

"I don't see why."

"You don't know Stuart."

Her forehead wrinkled. "I think he's rather charming. He's got such a nice smile." She patted a cushion and placed it behind her back. "I've rather fallen for him," she added.

"Oh, you have."

"He's so intelligent, too. Did you know that when Noel Coward was poor he shared a room with Stuart?"

I nodded. "I think it must have been a house, because Emlyn Williams, John Gielgud, Robert Donat, and Dodie Smith were there as well."

"Now you're just being horrid." She fumbled for her library book which was in the rack near the wall. "He asked me to go to that new film at the Empire with him."

"How nice," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, I didn't make a date. I said you would probably be taking me yourself, darling."

This was an example of her famous indirect approach. She never believed in a frontal assault; it was always a flank attack. The results were invariably devastating as far as I was concerned.

"I've never mentioned the picture," I said, trying to make some show of resistance.

"No, dear, but, then, you've been very busy, haven't you?"

I thought up all manner of withering retorts, but I never voiced them. I knew
I was beaten. So, having opened my mouth and shut it again, I said that as she wanted to go to the film we would go on Friday after the inquest.

She smiled sweetly. "I'll tell Miss Pain. She can come in and look after John." Then she delved into her book and was silent.

I relaxed in my chair and tried to blow smoke rings. After ten minutes of failure in this direction I went to the phone and rang up Sir Adrian. A smooth-spoken servant answered. Sir Adrian was out and no one, it seemed, knew where he was. I put down the receiver and dialed Christine's number. I heard it ringing, but there was no reply.

I had been attempting to think up a plan of action that would get the most out of Ernie's confession. It wasn't easy. People like Sir Adrian knew all the answers. You couldn't force them into anything by mere cross-examination. And Ernie's doubtful character was not the best of passports to a jury's confidence.

With the inquest on Friday I had a bare thirty hours in which to produce results. It was a very irritating situation.

Half an hour later Anna looked up from her book.

"Would you be a dear and make some sandwiches and coffee? I'm in the middle of a most exciting chapter."

"I happen to be trying to solve a murder," I replied tartly.

She looked surprised. "You're not still worrying about Richard Winter, darling?"

"I'm afraid I am."

She shook her head. "Oh, but Stuart says it was an accident. He told me all about it and I think he's right."

"So Stuart said it was an accident, did he?"

"Yes." She put her book in her lap. "He explained his theory to me."

"How nice of him!"

She ignored the sarcasm and returned to her book. The situation of the sandwiches and the coffee reached a deadlock and it seemed likely that I would have to give way again. But the ringing of the telephone saved me, like the gong rescuing a punch-drunk heavyweight.

I rushed toward it and lifted the receiver. It was Elliot.

"Is that you, Sarge?"

I said it was. "Did you have a nice time with your blonde?"

He coughed in an embarrassed fashion. "Matter of fact, she must have given me the wrong number of her flat. I walked in on an aged spinster with two cats and an ear trumpet."

"Something must have gone wrong with your system," I said.

"Perhaps," he admitted. "Still, she probably wasn't much good."

"Somebody once said that all women were the same in the dark."

"There's a lot in that," he admitted.

There was a pause. The line was crackling and sputtering. "Well," I said, "you didn't ring me up just to tell me that sad story, or did you?"

"No, Sarge. But you see I didn't have anything to do. So I've been working on the case. I've checked on Sir Adrian's movements. I'm at a restaurant off the Strand at the moment. He's here—in the next alcove."

"He is!" I said excitedly.

"He's got Mrs. Winter with him and he's trying the heavy romantic stuff."

"I can't believe it."

Elliot sounded serious. "But it's true, Sarge. He's holding her hand and talking in whispers to her. And she's growing all coy and fencing him off. It's very educational."

"Well," I said, "that's something I didn't expect."

He went on eagerly. "I haven't been able to get all they're talking about, but I've gathered they intend to go to the Hampstead house very shortly. I thought you'd like to be in on it. . . . Just a minute, Sarge." He went away from the phone and presently returned. "They've just left," he said. "Shall I see you there?"

"Okay," I said. "I'll be along as soon as I can get a cab."

I glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty. A little late for Sir Adrian and Christine to visit the house. More than a little late, in fact.

I put back the receiver and found my hat.

"I won't be able to stay for sandwiches,
darling.” I kissed Anna on the forehead. “So you can have yours when you like.” She gave me a baleful look. “Will you be sleeping here tonight?”

“Possibly,” I said. “But don’t wait up for me.”

I left the room, knowing that for once I scored a point.

I arrived at Hampstead about fifteen minutes later. The gaunt Winter edifice was cloaked in darkness, and it wasn’t until I reached the steps up to the front door that I saw Elliot. He was standing by the french windows that led into the Louis XIV drawing room.

“You’ve been quick,” he said. “Sir Adrian and Mrs. Winter are in there. Seem to be sorting out books, pulling ’em out of the shelves and putting ’em back again.”

By slightly opening the french windows it was possible to hear the conversation inside. Eavesdropping is not the pleasantest of occupations, but in police work there is sometimes no choice.

SIR ADRIAN seemed to be searching for something, flicking through the pages of the books. Christine, looking very smart in a fox fur, was leaning back in one of the chairs watching him.

The night air was causing the curtains to flutter, so I had to close the windows until they were open barely half an inch.

“I don’t understand your attitude.” Sir Adrian was saying. “You told me once that if it wasn’t for Richard you would marry me.”


“You merely loved the thing he stood for.” There was a silence, broken by the noise of book pages being flicked. “Oh, Chris, I’ve waited a long time. Now that Richard’s gone there’s nothing to stop us.”

“People would talk.” Her voice was dry, unemotional.

“Does that matter? Everyone knows the dance he’s led you.”

“It isn’t that, dear. It’s Richard’s reputation. The name he made in the theatre. When I married him I vowed that no matter what he did or what happened I would guard that name.”

“And for that you put up with a drunkard. A man who swore at you. A man who sometimes never shaved or washed for days on end, who was habitually unfaithful to you. He was sarcastic about all your efforts to look after him. He made bawdy jokes about his sex life with you. My dear, you’ve done everything any woman could be expected to do. Now it’s your turn to have some of the pleasures of life. I’m busy now with the war on. But it won’t last forever. When it’s over we can go away.”

There was an urgency in his voice, a warmth of desire that was alien to the mask of the man of affairs that he presented to the world. He was pleading like ten million lovers before him, using the time-worn phrases, the old arguments, infusing them with that optimism which passion evokes. Yet the ghost of Richard Winter was sniping sardonically at his ardour—the ghost that haunted Christine, that probably would always dominate her life.

“I know all that,” she said slowly. “But there was the other side of him. When he was on the stage he was quite different.

“He was a genius then. He had power and kindness, magnificence and grandeur. Do you realize that there are people who will treasure the memory of a performance of his as one of those rare experiences of life?

“For their sake his reputation must not be smirched.

“I hated most of those years I spent with Richard.

“Yet all the unpleasantness, all the humiliation were more than balanced by the excitement of seeing him sway an audience on a first night.

“If only he hadn’t died in such a sordid manner!

“When I saw him lying in the bath it was a terrible shock. I knew that those police would see him like that, would laugh and make vulgar jokes. The newspapers would hear about it, would probe until they got at the truth.

“Then it would reach the ears of the public, who would forget in one moment the inspiration with which Richard had filled them.

“They would take a malicious delight in
dissecting him. That has been the way with all men of genius.

"I knew that I had to protect Richard, not just the man he was, but the brilliant flame that burned on the stage. I was horribly frightened, especially when that dreadful detective started poking his nose into things, making out that it wasn't an accident.

"I suppose there won't be any trouble over that?"

"No," Sir Adrian sounded tired, disheartened. "I got through to the Home Office. The inquest will be held on Friday. And the funeral on Saturday. The detective's only a young, overenthusiastic fellow. I can handle all right."

Elliot stirred beside me. "That's you, Sarge," he whispered.

I nodded. The scene intrigued me so much I wasn't even annoyed at Sir Adrian's unflattering evaluation of me. To him I was merely a very small cog in a very large machine.

Presently Sir Adrian was talking again.

"Chris," he said, "you can't spend the rest of your life guarding his reputation. Why, you'd be like a nun, only much worse. Surely you must see that. He's gone. And you are still alive. He cheated us out of six years. You can't want him to go on cheating us."

"Oh," she said, "it's so difficult. Let's wait a few months, dear. Things will have settled a little then. I shall know my own mind better."

His acceptance was stiff.

"Very well. But you will let me go on seeing you?"

"Of course. Only we must be discreet. Have you found it?" She was evidently referring to whatever Sir Adrian was looking for.

"No. Never mind. Don't worry. I'll see to things tomorrow."

"But it would be awful if it got out!" Her voice was hysterical. "Think of the publicity!"

He reassured her quickly.

"It shan't get out, Chris. I promise you that. Now, you go back to the flat and have some sleep. Heaven knows you need it. You can safely leave the whole business to me."

"Darling," she said, "you're being terribly kind. But, then, you always have been. Still, I wish you didn't resent Richard so. I wish you could see him in a true light."

"Let's not argue about that. Now you go on, dear. You need rest."

"All right." There was a pause during which I imagined they probably kissed. Then: "Good night, darling."

"Good night, Chris. Get some sleep, won't you?"

"I will."

The soft thump of her high heels on the carpet. Then the louder tap on the floor of the hall. She emerged, the light from her torch stabbing the blackout. Carefully she picked her way down the steps and walked along the path to the road. I saw for the first time that a taxi was pulled in to the curb a little farther down. She reached it and in a moment it drove away, the gears grinding with that abdominal anguish that seems to afflict all London cabs.

"You wait here," I said to Elliot. "I'm going to talk to Sir Adrian. Listen to everything that's said, because you may have to swear to some of it."

"Righto, Sarge."

I CROSSED the grass and climbed the steps, letting myself into the house. The atmosphere was dusty and there was no noise save the inexorable ticking of that grandfather clock.

The heavy curtains of the drawing room had been drawn. The Louis XIV furniture did not seem so out of place in the artificial light. It even achieved a certain warmth which was denied it in the harsh flood of day.

Seated at the Boule desk was Sir Adrian. He wore a thick overcoat and he had a scarf twined round his neck. There was a sad expression on his face, an offguard look that would have surprised the many who saw him only in his official capacity.

He gave a slight start as I entered.

"Oh, good evening, Sergeant." His hands strayed nervously along the edges of the book in front of him. It was one of the Balzacs.

"Clearing up?" I sat lightly on the settee.

"Yes." His manner lacked the usual arrogance. "I am so busy nowadays I
have no time in the day to spare at all.”
I waited for ten seconds, wondering what was the best line of approach.
“Will all this be sold up?”
He nodded.
“Possibly.”
“It must be worth a lot of money,” I said.
“Yes. But I’m sure you didn’t come at this hour to discuss the value of furniture, Sergeant.”
That was a jolt. “No,” I said. “I’ve been wanting to see you, Sir Adrian. Some other evidence has cropped up which I would like to talk to you about.”
He gestured impatiently.
“Well?”
“I seem to remember that you told me you hadn’t been in this house for some time.”
“That’s right. The morning Richard was discovered was the first visit for two months.” His voice was hard, the words bitten off, determined.
“Just so,” I said. I inhaled some smoke and then continued. “You’re quite sure of that, sir?”
He gazed at me with a lift of his brows. You could almost hear the danger signal clanging in his brain. “Of course I’m sure.”
“The evidence that has come up suggests that Richard Winter died prior to ten o’clock Saturday night.”
His tone was derisive.
“Really?”
“I think you were in this house at that time, Sir Adrian.”
He flushed.
“Are you accusing me of telling a deliberate lie?”
I nodded. “You probably have a very good reason for it. But at ten o’clock Saturday night you were here. So were Mrs. Winter and Richard Winter’s understudy, Gerald Carson.”
His lips stretched in a taut line. “You seem determined to pursue this wild-goose chase, young man. You can’t still believe that Richard may have been murdered?”
“I am merely trying to expel all reasonable doubts from my mind.”
He spoke restrainedly.
“You would do better to let the matter rest. All the facts fit in with the death having been an accident.”
“Not all of them, Sir Adrian. How-

ever, that is beside the point. Will you tell me exactly what happened here on Saturday night?”
He slammed the desk-top.
“This thing is becoming an insane farce! I won’t be a party to any more examination. You understand?”
I leaned forward. “According to the doctor, Richard Winter’s death could have occurred any time between four o’clock on Friday and about ten o’clock Saturday night. To put it more precisely, it could have taken place while you are alleged to have been in this house, Sir Adrian.”
He stood up. “I demand to know the nature of this evidence.”
“I’ll tell you,” I said. “For some reason which you doubtless well know you and Mrs. Winters and Gerald Carson came to this house on Saturday night. While you were here a man broke in through the bathroom window with intent to steal. He found Richard Winter in the bath—dead. Before he was able to leave I understand that you came into the room and that you bribed him to remain silent about the whole affair—”
“This is preposterous!”
“Let me finish, Sir Adrian. All this is merely allegation. I am not stating it as fact. We have arrested this man and he has confessed to the episode. He also says that he returned here on Tuesday morning to collect a certain sum of money which you had promised him. Whether that is true or not does not affect the issue. What is important is that you and Mrs. Winter and Gerald Carson were here in this house while Richard Winter lay dead in his bath and that you, at least, knew of his presence in the bath.”
“I deny it!” he snapped.
I made ready for trouble.
“That isn’t wise, Sir Adrian. I’m trying hard to handle this case with tact. I may seem heavy-fisted to you, but I’m doing my best. I don’t want to cause more trouble than is necessary. I merely wish to satisfy myself as to the cause of your brother’s death. If you make this difficult for me I shall have no choice but to record these facts at the inquest.”
For a moment I though he intended to go on fighting, but I misjudged him. He was clever enough to know exactly when to change his course. He did so now,
without the slightest embarrassment. “I must confess you have a deal of spirit. I admire spirit.” He smiled ingratiatingly. “All right, I’ll tell you. But it’s strictly off the record. I shall sign no statement.”

“Very well, sir.”

HE STILL FUMBLED with the Balzac novel as though there were some sinister significance attached to it. “I think I told you something of the relationship existing between myself and my brother and you will have seen for yourself a little of the type of man he was. “Irresponsible. Unpredictable.

“He despised me, you know. And I despised him. I have had to work hard for the progress I have made in life, whereas Richard floated along in a carefree, Bohemian fashion. Things just fell into his lap. For as far back as I can remember it has been like that. I had to plod with my studies at school. He could always find someone from whom he could crib. He had no sense of responsibility and was utterly unstable, and yet he was extremely popular. He never failed to get his own way.” He glanced down at the desk. I wonder if he was thinking of Christine when he said that. His voice was bitter.

“Richard,” he went on, “had life handed to him on a platter. And of later years, as I told you, he grew to be a source of great worry to me. One escapee followed another. I had no sooner pulled him out of one than he was in the next. Consequently, I lived in apprehension of what he might do today or tomorrow or the following year.

“I had heard he was going into this play and I was filled with misgivings. I knew what he was like in that theatrical atmosphere. It had the worst possible influence on him. On the Friday I was told that he was too drunk to rehearse and then, later, that he was nowhere to be found. I began to imagine all sorts of terrible things. My political position is not so secure as it might be and I dare not let any scandal affect it in any way.

“Well, at Saturday lunchtime I had a telegram from Richard asking me to meet him at nine o’clock that evening at this house.”

I interrupted him. “Have you still got that telegram, sir?”

He nodded impatiently. “Yes. It is in my office. You may see it if you wish. It just said: ‘Meet me at the house tonight nine-thirty. Urgent.’ I came here very punctually. I remember that the clock in the hall was striking the half hour. I was surprised to find Mrs. Christine Winter also here and Gerald Carson. Apparently they had both received telegrams which were worded identically with mine. We were all perturbed and hazarding guesses as to what it might be about.

“We waited for some twenty minutes and Richard did not appear.”

I stopped him. “Who arrived first?”

He thought a moment. “Er—I think Mrs. Winter was the first to come here. Then Gerald Carson. Then myself.”

“Right,” I said. “Go on, sir.”

His eyebrows drew together in heavy concentration.

“At about ten minutes to ten there was a noise at the top of the stairs and we were surprised to see Richard standing there. He was swaying heavily and his eyes were bleary, his clothes crumpled. ‘I’m glad to see that you’re all here,’ he said, in his sarcastic fashion. ‘Well, you can wait until I’ve had a bath.’ Then he disappeared along the corridor and I heard the bath water running.”

“Just one moment, sir,” I said. “ Didn’t it strike you as strange that he should be having a bath?”

He was taken aback. “Well—no. Not particularly.”

“But the gas had been cut off. The water was ice cold.”

Sir Adrian nodded. “I see. I didn’t know that at the time. And if Mrs. Winter knew she evidently didn’t think of it. She was upset at his condition. She had worked so hard to reform him. She wanted to go up and talk to him, but we persuaded her to stay down here with us. Time went by, and at the end of half an hour I was getting profoundly annoyed. I felt sure Richard was doing it on purpose. I thought I would go up and see if I could reason with him.

“I took Gerald Carson with me and we
went and knocked on the bathroom door. We got no reply. We stood there for a minute.

"Then I heard a faint noise, as though someone was leaning against the bathroom window.

"I rattled the door handle and was surprised to find that the door was unlocked. I went in and switched on the light."

"You mean," I said, "that there was no light on in the bathroom?"

"Yes, it seemed very odd. But then Richard was very, very drunk. I was astonished to see Richard in the bath, his face an ugly color, while crouching on the floor was a person I had never seen before. You will know more about that person than I can tell you. He was very frightened when he saw me because Richard was quite dead and he evidently knew it.

"I realized that if I brought a charge against him, there would be some very nasty publicity. Besides which, I did not want Richard's body to be found while Mrs. Winter was in the house. It would lead to a lot of awkward explanations and I felt she might be spared them.

"So I told this man to get out of the house and not to say a word of what he had seen or I would see that he got sentenced to jail.

"Then we went down and told Christine what had happened.

"I wouldn't let Christine come up to Richard. I said that we must get away from the house as quickly as possible. Then we could arrange for the body to be discovered in less embarrassing circumstances. It was so obviously an accident. Christine told me that the same thing had nearly occurred on an American tour in a hotel bathroom.

"So we left the house and returned to our respective homes. I went part of the way with Mrs. Winter to console her. You see, she was genuinely fond of Richard, despite the hideous way in which he treated her, and his death in such an ignominious manner was a deep shock to her. Well, I think that's all. I make no excuse for failing to tell you this before. My reasons are obvious. But I'm afraid it does little more than make the accident verdict the only possible solution."

I lit another cigarette and thought over the story. It seemed to fit all right. I looked at Sir Adrian.

"It would have been impossible for one of you to have gone up to the bathroom without the other two knowing?" I asked.

He nodded quickly.

"It would indeed. We were all here when Richard appeared at the top of the stairs, prior to going into the bathroom. None of us moved until I decided to go and hurry him up. I took Gerald Carson with me and we left Mrs. Winter down here."

"I see, sir."

The case was wrapped up. It needed only the coroner to put some string on it and it could be docketed away. Still I was not convinced.

"You understand, Sergeant," Sir Adrian was saying, "that this interview does not constitute a statement or an admission of any kind. I can contradict it at the inquest if I so desire."

"Yes. I understand. Tell me, did you ever find out what it was Richard Winter wanted to see you all about? I mean—it was surely something important?"

Sir Adrian shook his head. "I never found out. It may have been just a practical joke. Richard had rather the mentality of the small boy who goes round ringing doorbells. He was cold and precise. You could almost feel the hatred he bore the dead man. It oozed and gushed from every word he spoke.

But why had he not told me this story before? Because of Mrs. Winter and the scandal. That was his explanation. And it would suffice for an English jury for whom scandal was a sacred, abstract something worse than death. But did it really hold water?

"Thank you, Sir Adrian. I won't trouble you any longer."

He smiled pleasantly and I left the house.

I crept round to the french windows and located Elliot, who was cursing volubly about the cold. "It would freeze everything off a brass monkey," he complained.

"Did you hear what Sir Adrian said?"

"Yes. I think we'd better retire at once and take what pension we can get. We'll be the laughing stock of 'C' Division for months to come!"

"Then you're convinced it was an accident?"
Elliot grunted sourly, his brows furrowed over the new disclosure.

"Hell, I don’t know. What matters is that we can’t prove it wasn’t. Come on, Sarge. I’ll freeze to death if I stay here."

We moved on across the grass, Elliot flapping his arms to get warm.

“We’ve stuck our necks out all right,” he said. “You may be McKay’s bright boy, Sarge, but there’s going to be a nice old rumpus over this. You acted in the face of superior authority, and Sir Adrian could get you slammed.”

“I know. I know. But, damn it, I still don’t believe that Richard Winter came back here and took a cold bath at ten o’clock in the evening. I don’t care if he had consumed all the liquor in Scotland.”

“No need to convince me,” said Elliot. “I agree with you. I’m on your side. But it’s a small point to hang a case on when every other blasted thing is against you.”

“Anyway, I’m not giving in yet. I’ve got to locate Doris. She fits into the pattern somewhere.”

“What’s she like?” he asked.

I grinned.

“Blonde and come-hither. Just your type. But she only obliges actors.”

Elliot thought hard.

“Well, as an amateur, I played the lead in the Chinese Bungalow.”

I shook my head.

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t count.”

“Too bad,” he said sadly. “My sex life is getting neglected.”

IX

When I got home I didn’t go to bed. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep, so I made some coffee, sank into an armchair, and proceeded to think about the story Sir Adrian told me. It had seemed that he was speaking the truth, and yet so many things were left unexplained. Why, for instance, had Richard Winter suddenly walked out on the play? If he hadn’t wanted to do it, why had he started it in the first place? The eve of the dress rehearsal was rather late to change his mind. Besides, there was no evidence that he had ever done such a thing before. It was true he had on occasion been so drunk he couldn’t rehearse, but he had never voluntarily turned in a part. Could those pages of Macbeth explain his unprecedented action?

What did they mean?

Again, why had he sent telegrams to his wife, his brother, and his understudy? Just to tell them formally that he wasn’t going to act in the play? But if that were so, why hadn’t he invited his daughter and the producer as well? No, there must have been some other reason, and I had a hunch that Sir Adrian knew what it was.

Finally—and this one stuck in my gullet no matter how it was served up—was it reasonable for Winter to have stepped into an ice-cold bath at ten o’clock in the evening? The excuse was that he had been drunk. Yet he’d managed to talk intelligently to Sir Adrian and the others from the landing. He couldn’t have been absolutely paralytic. And if he had been paralytic, then he couldn’t have got into the bath at all.

It didn’t jibe.

I was annoyed. I knew that McKay would say I had made a fool of myself. It wouldn’t end there, either. Sir Adrian might smile pleasantly, but he was sure to make things awkward for me because I had ridden him so hard. He would set the official wheels moving and I would find myself on an endless belt of a dozen assorted mats during the next fortnight. I would be relegated to routine jobs and that would be that.

It would be wiser to stop now, to turn it in as Elliot had suggested. I could bow low, say I had been mistaken, that I was extremely sorry for the trouble caused. I would fix it so that there would be no hitch at the inquest, then eat humble pie for the next six months and hope for the best.

But the case had got hold of me. If I’d been a medium, Winter’s ghost couldn’t have clung closer. It was as though he possessed me and was sardonically driving me on. I was more certain than ever it was murder. But by whom? And for what motive? No simple investigation had disclosed that. It was different from anything I had ever touched before. Since Monday I had gradually taken a man to pieces, a man with a score of conflicting, contradictory facets. I had stripped him
down, but I hadn't yet found out what made him work.

It had to be there.

Most people have a desire, coherent or incoherent, which is the guiding factor of their existence. They may perhaps not know about it, but it is there just the same. Did the theatre epitomize Winter's desire? Was that the real man, the romantic figure who strode before the footlights for two and a half hours every evening?

Was it conceit?

The majority of actors are vain. Were they not so, they would choose a less hazardous, less heartbreaking occupation when they see that success is eluding them. But, once started, they seldom give it up. They plod on, no matter the hardship. Inside them burns a fire, an urge that is only satisfied when they are playing on the stage. If they cannot do this, they are unhappy.

I wondered if this was the way with Winter. It seemed logical that it should be. And yet... He had walked out on a play—a play that would have assured him a big comeback success.

Why?

It didn't appear to make sense. But then none of it made sense. There were no motives beyond the obvious ones. Janet could have killed him because of the money. Sir Adrian could have killed him because of Christine. Yet, as Elliot wisely pointed out, Janet was not the type to kill in that way, and I privately felt that she wasn't the type to kill for that motive, either.

And Sir Adrian? So smart a bird would have made sure of Christine before taking such a risky gamble. But that he hadn't, was obvious from the conversation I had overheard.

The night wore on. That peculiar stillness that is a feature of London's blackout descended over the city. Only now and then did you hear a cab or the trailing rumble of a freight lorry. I turned out the lights and drew the curtains. A chilly moon was set in the sky and the windows were steamed over. A weird collection of chimneys reached upwards. It is only at night you notice how oddly assembled they are. They sprawl over the roofs like some prolific fungi.

And beneath the myriad smoke-belch-

ing funnels people were living and dying each day. I was concerned merely with the death of one man. My eyes were heavy with cigarette smoke and my head was aching. I began to feel that Winter's passing was of little importance. I was tempted to give up, to have done with a case which was so complex. I might even have persuaded myself that Winter had died accidentally but for one fact which drummed continually through my brain.

*Why had Winter taken a cold bath? Why?*

A RIDICULOUS question, yet I could find only one answer to it. He did not belong to the cleanliness brigade, to the spartan band who greet life with an aggressive vigor. A hot bath would have been different. But I could no more see him settling comfortably into icy water at ten o'clock on a frosty evening in an unheated house than I could imagine the Chancellor of the Exchequer suddenly forgiving everybody their income tax.

True, you could argue that he hadn't known the water was cold, that he had unwittingly stepped into the bath and had been so overcome by the shock he had toppled backwards. Or you could take the more popular view. You could cloak it all with the statement that he had been drunk. When a man is drunk he is incapable; and when he is incapable anything can happen.

But I could believe neither of these solutions.

I was convinced it was murder. But the pointer of my conviction was not strong enough to stand against determined assault. There was little to back it up. Whoever had knocked off Winter had been astonishingly cunning, had displayed a resource that dictated a premeditated killing. It was no spur-of-the-moment affair, but a carefully planned execution.

My thoughts started to wander. I was muzzy. I decided to make some more coffee. Just then there was a slight noise at the door and Anna appeared in dressing gown and slippers. She stood there yawning and looking very beautiful. The sleep was still in her eyes. She flicked on the light before I could stop her.

I hurriedly drew the curtains.

"You'll be getting us fined," I said. I
she is so dumb that she would know about Winter."

It was quite a while before I saw the significance of this startling statement. At that hour I was too tired to figure anything, and Anna was smiling enigmatically and refusing to explain it any further.

So there was no choice but to go to bed.

T he next morning it was raining. It fell in thick shafts, causing the gutters to overflow and the wood-blocked roadway to spurt small fountains as the traffic passed over. Soon the pavements were coated with a thin layer of mud and, as if to add to the misery, a river mist enveloped the city.

The office was depressing.

The heating in the C.I.D. office is never remarkable, but that morning it was turned off altogether because of trouble with one of the intake pipes. I sat and shivered, wondering irritably why Elliot was so late.

The phone rang and Stuart’s voice came through.

“How is the intrepid sleuth this morning?”

“I would be all right if I could get warm.”

There seemed to be a question in his next drawled remark.

“You seem to have raised quite a tumult and a shouting last night. Sir Adrian is breathing gusts of fire. At least, that’s what Christine told me.”

“Really?” I said, trying to conceal annoyance. “You and Christine are getting quite pally.”

He laughed softly.

“But that’s how it should be, old man. The biographer and the widow of the celebrity always get together. This afternoon I am having tea with her and we shall browse through old press notices and Edwardian programmes.”

I laughed.

“In that case you’d better put on a clean shirt.”

He clucked reprovingly.

“Now, now, there’s no need to get personal. Have you discovered who killed Cock Robin yet?”

“You did,” I said.

There was a moment of dead silence before he spoke lightly.

“How intriguing! When, may I ask?”
“Saturday night. At a few minutes after ten.”
“How did I do it?”
“You drowned him.”
He clucked sympathetically.
“Dear me. It’s too bad that I happened to be in the Café Royal with three very respectable characters at that hour, isn’t it?”
“Just as well,” I said. “Or I might build up a case.”
His voice sounded grieved. “I believe you would, too.” He paused and the line crackled. “Actually I rang up to give you some information, but I’m not sure that I shall now.” He paused again. “Still, I’m not one to bear malice. I will tell you, despite the insults. Last night I was drinking beer with some literary lights of the lesser order. I happened to mention the name of Thelma Kingston—”
“Who?”
There was triumph in his chuckle.
“Thelma Kingston. The authoress of those playscripts you found in that brief case of Winter’s.”
“Oh yes,” I said.
“Well, I’ve got her address. Apparently she works as a stenographer in an office off Fleet Street. She’s got a small flat at Lancaster Gate.”
He gave me the address and I took it down.
“Now I think you ought to say thank you,” he added.
I snorted into the phone and he laughed.
“I’ll be coming to collect that five pounds tomorrow.” He laughed some more and then rang off.
When Elliot finally arrived I was prepared to read him a lecture on punctuality and what not, but he just gave one of his ear-to-ear smiles and sat down. “I’ve been working, Sarge,” he said smugly.
“At the blonde?”
He was shocked at this suggestion. He explained carefully that when he said working he meant working. “For the last two hours I have been checking on Sir Adrian.”
I looked at my watch. “He must have been up early.”
Elliot’s usual drawl was absent. He was serious this time.
“He was. That’s the point.”
“Well?”
Now that he was assured of my attention, Elliot relaxed.
“I happened to make friends with the switchboard girl in the block where Sir Adrian has his flat. She is a very intelligent girl, and when Sir Adrian started using the blower so early she gave me a tinkle. I shall have to entertain her for all the trouble she has taken. But then, I can charge it to expenses, can’t I?”
“We’ll see,” I said. “What about Sir Adrian?”
He gestured airily.
“He was phoning up a lot of hotels, at least that’s what the switchboard girl said. She doesn’t know the names of all of them, of course. Eventually he must have got what he wanted because he left the block by the back way. The man we had down there on duty was not expecting this. Besides, you’d told him not in any circumstances to risk Sir Adrian knowing he was being watched. So Sir Adrian almost got away without being seen. Fortunately, I was there by that time and I spotted him. He took a cab and went towards Bloomsbury. I followed, but he must have known what was happening because he managed to get out of the cab without my seeing him. So there I was, chasing a cab with nobody in it.”
“You mean to say you lost him!” I snapped.
“I’m afraid so.” Elliot toyed with a pencil. “Still, we do know that he was heading for Bloomsbury.”
I was surprised and angry.
“We don’t know anything of the kind. If he took the trouble to throw you off the scent, then he could have done a sort of circular tour.”
Elliot shook his head. “The last number he phoned was a Bloomsbury number.”
A Bloomsbury number.
“Maybe that fixes it,” I said slowly. “I wonder what he’s after.”
Suddenly several things clicked into position. In a flash I realized why Sir Adrian was going to Bloomsbury. I guessed at a whole lot more, too, but in this business you have to do one thing at a time.
I turned to Elliot.
“Have we got a picture of Doris?”
He gaped.
“We picked one up last night.”
“Then get it—quickly!”
Elliot moved to the door. "I say, Sarge, you don’t think—"
I speeded him on his way.
"Get that picture!” I barked. "We can do all the thinking afterwards."

WE STARTED on the fringe of Bloomsbury and worked towards the center. Nowadays it is a depressing area, full of faded remnants of departed glory. The blitz has speeded its decline and fall, tearing great gaps in the ranks of blackened houses and ripping chunks of plaster from the sedate porticoes.
An odd neighborhood, that.
It is peopled with a strange variety of types. Students, actors, seedy intellectuals, and an odd collection of societies for the prevention or the encouragement of everything under the sun. Spattered liberally over the whole is a vast number of hotels, lodginghouses, and one-room flats. Some of them conduct a shady business where questions are seldom asked and credit is seldom given. The rooms of these places are barrack-like in their bareness and have witnessed so much hurried passion that they have developed an impersonal cynicism.

Our progress through the area was punctuated with whispered conversations between managers and receptionists in foyers adorned by potted palms. The earth at the base was covered with crushed cigarette stubs.
At each place, the question.
"Have you seen this girl?"
The photograph passed from hand to hand. The manager was a little nervous.
Time, after time, the same discouraging answer.
"No sir. No, we haven’t seen her. Would you like to look at the register?"
"No, thanks."
So it was, time after time, till the answers grew as monotonous as the speaking voice on a tube lift. The potted palms grew fewer and then disappeared altogether. The entrances became smaller, dirtier. Still the same replies. "No sir, would you like to see the register, sir?"
The manner was too obsequious, and handwashing too violent.
My temper wore thin and Elliot was in one of his fractious moods.
"Let’s give up, Sarge, and have a drink."
"We’ve only got about a dozen more places."
He looked grumpily down the street in which we stood.
"If I had my way we’d sing a couple of hymns, bury Winter, and have done with it."
"Come on," I said. "Let’s move to the next one."
This proved to be an ordinary house with the addition of a small glass roof over the entrance bearing the name of the hotel. A taxi was drawn up in front, the driver pacing the pavement and slapping his gloved hands together.
We stalked inside and presented the photograph. I expected the same formula, the same denials, and was surprised when the manager nodded nervously.
"She’s got a room here."
"Is she in?"
His eyes fell.
"Well, I . . . There’s a gentleman with her."
That waked me up.
"Is he tall with grey hair?"
"And wearing a dark brown overcoat?" added Elliot.
Once more the manager nodded. "I think so."
"We’ll wait," I said, "somewhere we shan’t be seen."
The manager understood. His face grew several shades lighter when he realized we intended to be discreet.
"Certainly, certainly. Here, I think?"
"That’s fine," I said. We sat down on a bench in an alcove behind the staircase. Elliot lit a cigarette and let it smoulder from his lips at an acute angle.
"Sir Adrian?" he asked.
"Maybe," I muttered.
I waited anxiously. I was feeling elated. Had I been right? Was this the beginning of the end? Yet there might be some other explanation. Sir Adrian and Doris in a Bloomsbury hotel! Surely that only spelt one thing?
The minutes ticked away. The manager was standing against the side of the entrance. From where we sat he was just a grotesque silhouette.
Still we waited.
Presently the stairs creaked under a heavy footstep. It was Sir Adrian. He looked neither to the right nor to the left.
He scarcely noticed the manager. He kept straight on and walked into the street, going up to the stationary cab. The driver hurried over, Sir Adrian got in, shouted some destination, and the taxi drove off.

I got up at once. The manager hovered near by, wondering what we were going to do next.

"The number of the room?" I asked.

Reluctantly he gave it.

"Ten. On the third floor."

Elliot and I climbed the stairs. They got narrower after each floor. Finally we came to a stop outside a door labelled with a brass "10" which had been screwed in crooked.

I knocked and twisted the handle. The catch scraped and I pushed the door open.

The lost was found.

It was a nondescript room with a bed, an armchair which was pock-marked with cigarette burns, two ordinary chairs, and a washs basin attached to the wall. Against the other wall stood a large, cheaply veneered wardrobe.

On the bed sat Doris. The blonde hair hung in the immaculate page-boy bob about her shoulders. Her figure was cased in a silk wrap through which you could see the color of her skin. Her face jerked up when she noticed us. The lips were set slightly apart and the grey eyes betrayed nothing.

Even seeing her for the second time, I was still astonished at her beauty.

Elliot had a positive leer as he looked at her. I leant against a chair.

"Ben was worried about you, Doris."

"I'm not going back there," she said in her ugly voice. You couldn't tell whether she was scared or indifferent. Around her were spread a number of magazines which dealt largely with fashions in clothes.

"Why have you come here?"

"To fetch you, Doris. You oughtn't to've walked out like that."

She glared defiantly.

"I ain't done a thing. I don't have to tell everybody where I go, do I?"

There was a stillness in the room, as though everything had stayed like that for years.

"Why did you leave, Doris?"

She looked away.

"That's my business."

Quickly I bent over the bed and snatched up a handbag that was lying there. I opened it and saw a large packet of notes, hundred-pound notes. I counted them casually.

"Ten thousand quid, I should say. Quite a lot of money, eh, Doris?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes glared, defiant and sulky.

"Did you get it from Sir Adrian?"

Still no reply.

I DIDN'T KNOW how to tackle her. I had no real intention of going to The Bells, but I wanted to frighten her. The suspicions I possessed were nebulous, and yet I had a feeling they were right.

I tried to bluff.

"You'd better get dressed, Doris."

She shook her head.

"I'm not going."

"Will you tell me where you got that money?"

She shook her head violently.

"Why did you suddenly come here?"

I went on.

She shrugged.

"I was fed up."

"How?"

She suddenly began to talk, angrily, andragedly.

"I was fed up with that bloody bar. Years I've been there. I was tired of getting up at the same time each morning, of working when other people were enjoying themselves. Uncle Ben was all right, but he always treated me as though I was a kid. He didn't realize that I'd grown up."

She hesitated and then continued. "I've been thinking about leaving for a long while. Now I've done it."

There was a slight hysterical note in the childish voice—the nearest approach to an emotion that she had registered so far. It was odd that so much beauty could have been allied to so little brain. She had the stubborn obstinacy of a small girl housed in the body of a woman. It was at once fascinating and alarming.

"You've got to tell me about that money, Doris."

Her harsh voice rose.

"I won't!"

"Then I shall have to arrest you." I couldn't, of course, but bluff is a good weapon.

"No!" It was almost a shout.
"Get dressed," I said. "We'll be waiting outside for you."
She plucked at her robe.
"You can't arrest me! I ain't done nothing!"
"Where did you get that money?"
"I promised not to tell. It was a present, see."
"From Sir Adrian?"
She looked at me sullenly.
"If I tell you, will you leave me alone?"
"I'll see. I was doing my best to look hard and tough. Elliot had his hat on the back of his head and might have stepped straight out of a cops-and-robbers movie. "Now, for the last time, where did you get that money?"
There was a pause. She twisted her hands together, unable to decide.
We waited.
Then she glanced at the magazines on the bed. "He gave it to me," she said.
"Sir Adrian."
"Why?"
She made an odd gesture with her slim white hands.
"It was a present. I told you."
"People like Sir Adrian do not give presents of ten thousand pounds for nothing."
She was silent.
I could picture with what pain Sir Adrian would part with so much money. Only one motive could have forced him into it. I was sure now, surer than I'd been at any moment since the beginning of the case. The pattern was becoming clear and the portrait of the dead actor growing sharper every second.
"You've got to tell the truth, Doris," I said. "It doesn't matter what you've promised."
The sullen expression didn't change.
I went close to her. I spoke very softly.
"What was Richard Winter to you?" I asked.
She seemed scared then. Her hands moved to her face. I thought she was going to cry. Instead, she pushed back her hair and looked straight at me.
"We was going to be married."
Although I had half expected it, the revelation still shook me. When you thought of Winter and the golden path of glory that he trod, and then thought of Doris, you were puzzled as to what there could have been between them.
"When were you going to be married?"
She shrugged.
"As soon as he could get a divorce."
"You loved him?"
She hesitated.
"He was ever so nice. He said he didn't believe in love and all that nonsense. He just wanted me to be myself and him to be himself."
To be himself. And what was that? "When did he ask you to marry him?"
She reflected.
"Well, he'd mentioned it before, but he finally asked me on last Friday evening, just as he was going away in the taxi."
An idea struck me. "And I suppose he was going to make a will in your favor."
Surprised, she looked up.
"Oh, he'd done that already. You see, I couldn't really make up my mind. He wasn't exactly young, and I had to think of myself."
The childish simplicity of it! She cared nothing for the aura of greatness which surrounded Winter. She merely wanted money to buy toys—dresses, furs, visits to the picture palace. It smacked more of the barter of the native than the guile of the gold digger.
"Did Ben know about this?"
She shook her head.
"No. I didn't tell him. He'd have tried to stop me."
"Did you kill Richard Winter?"
"What a wicked thing to say!" She was very shocked. "Why would I do that?"
Why, indeed? If Winter had lived she would have married him and when he finally died she could come into his money. There was little point in killing him. What was more, I was certain that in her strange way she liked the actor. She genuinely found his company "fun."
"And just now you handed the will to Sir Adrian and he gave you ten thousand pounds. Is that right?"
Her answer was a whisper.
"I didn't want to cause no trouble. I rang him up and he asked me to meet him. That's why I come here."
"And you weren't going back to The Bells?"
She tossed her head.
"Not likely. Not ever."
I could imagine her cutting a dash with the ten thousand, living like one of the characters in the cheap fiction she read so avidly.

"Where were you last Saturday night, Doris?"

"In the pub."

"You never went out the whole evening?"

"No. Uncle Ben was there with me." Her hand clutched my arm. "You won't tell him about this, will you?"

"I can't promise."

"I don't want no trouble, see. I told Sir Adrian that I'd never say a word."

It must have been an immense relief to the baronet to find her so amenable. Though ten thousand was a lot of cash, it was cheap for the suppression of such red-hot scandal. The Winter reputations were saved all round, and Christine's legend would remain un tarnished.

"You stay here, you understand? You may not be needed at the inquest tomorrow, but if you attempt to leave I'll come after you."

"I won't leave. Really, I won't."

"Right," I said. "That's all for now then."

We left her sitting there, slightly dazed. I wondered what would have happened if she had married Winter, if he had lived and they had gone off together. She cared nothing for the theatre. How would that have fitted in with Winter's stage activities? His friends would have cold-shouldered her. She had no intelligence. She could not enter into a conversation that lasted longer than five minutes. The actors who had slept with her before had used her merely to gratify a temporary lust. They would never have dreamt of marrying her. Yet Winter had planned to do so. Why?

"What a carcass," observed Elliot. "But fancy hearing that voice first thing in the morning!"

X

AT FIVE-THIRTY Elliot and I arrived at the Regent Theatre. Already the gallery queues were relinquishing their stools and standing on the wet pavement for the final quarter of an hour before they would be admitted. Buskers were struggling to be funny in the rain, but the weather was winning hands down.

We passed through the stage door and sat waiting in Gerald Carson's dressing room.

I gazed around the blank walls and tried to imagine what it had been like to be Richard Winter. But I only succeeded in picturing myself as an actor, which was quite a different thing.

Elliot yawned. "We're on the last lap, Sarge."

"Let's hope to God something breaks before the morning," I said. I didn't want to fail. It would be so ignominious.

Presently the door opened and Gerald Carson walked in. Without make-up he was even more of a pale imitation of Winter. If you looked at him through half-closed eyes you might almost mistake him for the dead actor. He was somewhat embarrassed at finding us there.

"I'm sorry to trouble you again, Mr. Carson, but there are a few questions I'd like to ask you."

"I'll do my best to answer them." He smiled shyly. "You don't mind if I start to make up, do you?"

"Not at all. You go ahead."

He removed his overcoat and changed into the suit which he wore in the part. Then he pulled on an old stained dressing gown and went to work with cold cream and grease paint.

"I understand," I said, "that you received a telegram from Richard Winter on Saturday morning."

He stopped abruptly, the stick of great paint poised between his fingers.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You received a telegram from Richard Winter on Saturday morning asking you to be at the house in Hampstead in the evening."

He was obviously afraid to commit himself. His attitude now was typical of the way he faced life. I felt that he was forever in a perpetual quandary as to which of two paths he would take.

"It's all right," I said. "Sir Adrian has admitted it."

"Oh well, in that case . . . Yes, I did."

"You went there in the evening?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"I was there at approximately twenty-
five minutes past nine.” He was more confident, working some lake into the hollow of his eyes.

“And did you find anyone there?”

“Mrs. Winter was already there. I think she said she had arrived about five minutes earlier.”

“Was there any sign of Richard Winter?”

“No. A few minutes later Sir Adrian arrived. I think it must have been half-past nine.”

“Did you know at all what the meeting was about?”

“Er—no.”

He seemed uncertain over that one, but I didn’t press him.

“Now, perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me what happened after that?”

He was starting to stick on the false moustache with spirit gum.

“Well, we waited for quite a while. Perhaps twenty minutes, perhaps half an hour. But there was no sign of Winter. I thought he was indulging in one of his practical jokes. He was apt to send fake telegrams to people, you know. He had a perverted sense of humor.”

“What sort of telegrams did he send?”

“Various kinds. I know one actor who was with him who trailed all the way to Scotland because Winter had faked a telegram saying that the poor man’s aunt had died.”

“I see. Right. Go on.” I could quite believe that a joke of that cruel kind would appeal to Winter’s sardonic streak.

“Just before ten, or it may have been at ten, I couldn’t quite say which, we were astonished to see Winter standing up on the first landing. He appeared to be very drunk. He was leaning heavily against the banisters.”

“How was he dressed?”

“Er—I really forget.”

“Was he wearing a dressing gown?”

Carson hesitated, his forefinger stained with carmine.

“Yes, that’s right. A dressing gown.”

I remembered distinctly that Sir Adrian had spoken of Richard Winter’s clothes being crumpled. But I said nothing. A mistake like that might be quite innocent. People who are not trained in observation go sadly awry at times.

“Did any one of you speak to him?”

“No, we were so surprised. He smiled at us in an unpleasant manner.”

“Did he speak?”

“Yes. I will try and remember the exact words. I think it was: ‘I’m glad to see you’re all here. Well, you can wait until I’ve had a bath.’ Then he went to the bathroom.”

“Were you aware that the gas was not connected, that the water would be extremely cold?”

“I didn’t realize it at the time. You see, I didn’t know very much about the house. I had been there only as a guest.”

“Go on.”

He hesitated once more, and I could tell he was wondering exactly what Sir Adrian had admitted. “Mrs. Winter was very agitated. She was so very upset that he was drunk. She wanted to go and argue with him, but Sir Adrian persuaded her against it.”

“And you still did not know why he had sent for you?”

“No. We waited for a long time. It might have been three quarters of an hour. Sir Adrian was in a flaring temper. He felt that his brother was purposely dawdling upstairs. I must confess I was a little worried.”

“Did the previous bath episode in America occur to you then?”

“I think it did. I am a little confused about what actually happened. But I was always worried that something terrible would happen to Winter. We had had several narrow shaves in the past with his drinking.”

“I see.”

“Well, Sir Adrian said he was going to hurry him up and I said I would come with him. I could sometimes handle Winter when the others couldn’t. We went upstairs. Sir Adrian knocked on the door. But there was no reply. Presently we opened the door.”

“It was not locked?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Go on.”

“Sir Adrian went in and I heard him gasp with horror. I followed quickly. The light was on and Winter was lying in the bath. His head was under the water and we realized he was dead.” He was shame-faced and nervous. “You must understand that I had no criminal motive in
not telling you this before. It was a conclusion we arrived at together. We didn’t want any scandal attached to the affair. And as it was so obviously an accident...”

“Sir Adrian has explained all that,” I said. “Now, did anything else happen while you were in the bathroom?”

HE WAS uncertain about this. Then he said no. It was amusing the way he had avoided all reference to Ernie whom he must obviously have seen. He didn’t know that Ernie was under lock and key or that Sir Adrian had modified the story. Suddenly it occurred to me that Ernie had never mentioned seeing Carson in the bathroom. He had said that he caught a glimpse of a “woman and another bloke.” Yet, if Sir Adrian’s story was true and Carson’s story was true, Carson must have met Ernie.

There might be something in that, or there might not.

I gazed steadily at Carson. He hadn’t told everything, not by a long way. He was fussing over his make-up like an old woman.

A callboy passed along the corridor shouting the quarter of the hour.

Carson hastened with the finishing touches, dropping the grease paints back into a box.

“Is that all, er—Sergeant?”

“No, Mr. Carson, it isn’t. During my investigations on this case I have been puzzled continually by the behavior of Richard Winter. I know much more than you think I know. For instance, I could tell you a great deal concerning his future plans. All that information I’m treating as confidential. It shall not get into the press unless it is vitally necessary. But there are various doubts which still persist in my mind and I want to clear them up before the inquest tomorrow. I would like you to cast your thoughts back to last Friday. Richard Winter was late for rehearsal. When he finally arrived he was paralytic drunk. He was left in a dressing room to recover. Now, did you see him at all while he was there?”

“No.”

“I want you to think carefully, Mr. Carson. You thought a great deal of Richard Winter, didn’t you?”

“Well...” he began, and then stopped.

“Let’s put it another way. You considered him a great actor and you are desperately fond of the theatre?”

“Yes.”

“Right, now. This is how I see it. Richard Winter had been away from the stage for three years. He was making a comeback. You had been with him for a long time. I suggest you would be anxious when you saw him so very drunk. I suggest you would go into the dressing room where he was and you would argue with him, try and pull him round.”

“I prefer not to answer that question. It can have no possible bearing on his death.” For once there had been no hesitation. The reply had come quickly.

“It has a considerable bearing on his death. Winter’s actions were seemingly inconsistent. I don’t pretend to know very much about the theatre, but I do feel that his exit from this play requires an explanation. He was such a great actor. His heart and soul must have been behind the footlights—”

“Stop!” Carson held up his hand. He was trembling. Under the great paint his features were tense. Was it anger, or was it fear?

“Stop,” he repeated. “I can’t bear to talk of it any more. Would you mind?”

“Time is short,” I said bluntly. “You must tell me whatever you know, Mr. Carson.”

“I’ve told you everything.” He fumbled with his dressing gown and wrenched it off in a clumsy fashion, splitting it under one of the sleeves.

I smiled at him. “There’s no need to get so agitated. Wherever I go people are scared that I will discover something about Richard Winter that they feel I ought never to know. I think they are frightened lest I might destroy the idol. I don’t want to do that, Mr. Carson. I saw him act several times. For me that is enough. He gave one of the most magnificent performances I have ever seen. It was an amazing experience and I am grateful to him. What he may or may not have done in his private life will not affect that memory in any way.”

“I wonder,” said Carson, “if I dare tell you. You see, I have told no one.”

“You must tell me.” I kept my eyes on him. “I promise you the information
shall not be used unless it is absolutely necessary."

He sat down again and patted some more powder into his face. He was sweating. When he spoke there was a bitterness in his voice that had not been there before.

"You said just now that Winter's heart and soul must have been in the theatre."

"Yes."

"They weren't, you know. That is, if he had a heart or a soul. He hated the theatre."

I couldn't quite understand it. "How do you mean?" I asked.

"He hated the theatre! That's plain enough for you, isn't it?"

"But he was such a genius of an actor."

"I know." Carson placed his hands on the bench. "That's what makes it so dreadful. I have been in the theatre since I was fourteen. I have spent my life in it. I have had no other interest. I have tried very hard to be good. I wanted so desperately to be a star. Not for the money. I've never had expensive tastes. But just for the feeling of fulfilment you get from it. I have studied painstakingly. But a long time ago I knew I would never get what I wanted. I would never reach the top.

"Yet Winter had all those things I wanted so desperately and he didn't give a damn for them. He had talent, genius, call it what you will. He couldn't help being brilliant. He was a born actor. And he hated the stage! A thing that would take others hours to work out he did by instinct. In Shakespeare half the time he scarcely knew what his lines meant. But he said them magnificently!"

The bitterness in his voice grew stronger. "I have watched him for years. He used to make fun of me and my love for the theatre. He like to shock me, to show me how he cared for the stage. When audiences clapped him he despised them. 'Damn lot of fools!' he'd say.

"He didn't like theatre people, either. He avoided them as much as he could. And he was scathing about their puny attempts to match his brilliance. You see, they had to work terribly hard to do what he did naturally. He was vain, of course. But his vanity took the form of indifference. He loved to show off to people, to make them see how contemptuous he was of the art which had made him famous."

I was getting near the truth at last. Winter was losing his final wrappings of tinfoil. "But why was he like that?" I asked.

Carson was gazing fixedly at the rough wood of the bench. All the pent-up repressions of his life were sweeping through him. "He was a common man. He liked being common. He made a cult of ignorance and laughed at anything at all intelligent or highbrow. He hardly ever read a book. He loathed mixing with people who discussed art and literature. He was only happy among the lowest grade of humanity. Sometimes when he went off on one of his blinds we would find him in a drinking den talking to just anybody. He was crude in mind and body. I think he felt uncomfortable in the presence of more cultured people. At least, that is the theory I have evolved. It is the only way I can explain his excessive rudeness to the fascinating women who laid their charms at his feet. I think it was the same with both his wives. Perhaps more so with Mrs. Christine. You see, she loves the theatre as I do."

I BEGAN to get a picture of the real Winter. I saw him sneaking off from celebrated gatherings to tell the latest smutty story to an admiring group of laborers. I glimpsed now why he had stuck to Ben all these years. He was at home in The Bells. It was the atmosphere he understood, the atmosphere he liked. No wonder he hated Christine, who tried to glorify the very thing he held in contempt! How he must have loathed that Louis XIV salon and the leather-bound French classics! And his daughter's enthusiasm for the theatre must have destroyed all his parental affection for her. That much was clear.

"But why did he go on? Why didn't he leave the stage?"

"I've thought of that, too. I've often wondered what talent is. They say that genius is an urge that drives a man on. I'm sure that Winter had such an urge inside him. I think it drove him on, despite his emotional reactions, despite his hatred of the theatre. I think it haunted
him. I don't think he could shake it off. He was a man continually in conflict, fighting his own talents."

"Have you any proof of that?"

He nodded. "You were asking about last Friday. Well, when he came in drunk I feared very much for the play. I have a great affection for Janet, and I wanted her young man to have a success. They took him to the dressing room, and after a while I went along to see if I could talk to him. He had come round a bit and he glared at me. 'What does little Gerry want?' he asked. 'You've got to pull yourself together.' I said. 'You must. You owe it to Janet.' He thought that was funny. He laughed so much I thought he was going to be sick. Then he went on: 'To hell with Janet! To hell with the whole damn bunch of 'em! I'm through, Gerry. Through, see!'"

"Well, I was astonished."

"I couldn't understand what he was talking about. Then he produced two envelopes. In each was a page of Macbeth. He showed them to me. 'Some bloody fool is trying to make me nervous,' he roared. You see, he had appeared in Macbeth only once and that was many years ago. One night he went on the stage, and I think he was more drunk than usual. Anyhow, he dried completely. He couldn't remember a line. It was the only moment when his vanity was shaken. We covered it up as best as we could and after ten minutes he was his normal self. He never did Macbeth again."

"He pushed the pages of Macbeth under my nose. 'I'm through, Gerry. Whatever well-wisher sent these damn notes has hit the nail right on the head!' He smiled, and I couldn't understand what he meant."

"Do you recall what happened in Macbeth?" he asked. I said I did. 'Well,' he said, 'it's happened again. This time it's permanent. My memory's gone. I can't remember a line of that damn silly play this morning!'"

"I was shocked. I told him that it would get better if he had a rest. I said I would help him to memorize the lines. I reminded him that Ellen Terry had suffered from the same thing, but that she had overcome the difficulty.

"Then he burst out laughing. 'I don't want to be helped!' he shouted. 'I've waited and waited and waited for the moment when I could leave the bloody theatre for good. At last it has come. Now my conscience is free. If I can't remember lines I can't act! Don't you see, Gerry, I'm through!'"

"I honestly believe that his memory was bad. The urge of his talent was too strong inside him to be appeased by a false excuse. But, faced with this ultimatum, it had to give way to the other half of him. The battle was over.

"So he was through. Through with the theatre."

"I did my best to dissuade him. I flattered him. I told him what a great position he held, how there was no one to take his place. But he wouldn't listen. He had got what he wanted. He was like a man who has been let out of prison after serving a life sentence."

"You can imagine how I felt. All my life I had yearned to be even half as brilliant as he was. I was bitterly angry. I knew that no one would shake him from his decision. He would never appear on a stage again. Richard Winter, one of the greatest actors in the world, was walking out, and it was terrible to see the pleasure it gave him. I couldn't stand it any more. I left the dressing room and went to get a drink to steady myself. When I came back an hour later he had gone."

There it was. The whole of it. Time was needed to adapt oneself to the new vistas it opened up. Carson was glancing at his watch. It was practically time for him to go on.

Down in the auditorium the audience would be sliding into their seats. A glow of light would show at the bottom of the curtains. Presently the canned music would fade out and amid a hush the curtain would swing up. The play would commence and Carson would walk through the part that had been tailored for the great Winter.

Despite all his efforts, despite the loving care he brought to his art, his performance would be no more than mediocre. Had Winter been watching from the wings he would have laughed sardonically. It was the sort of joke that appealed to him.

"Just two more points, Mr. Carson. First, have you any idea why Winter sent for you and Mrs. Winter and Sir Adrian
to be at the house on Saturday evening?"
"None at all."
"Can you tell me where he was between Friday night and Saturday night?"
"I haven't the vaguest notion."
And with that we left.
As we walked out through the stage door I began to understand what Winter had seen in Doris. Her beauty would fulfil all his sensuous requirements, and he would approve her lack of intelligence. She'd go into cheap pubs with him, meet the sort of people that amused him, and never try to make him other than what he was. She'd never reproach him for leaving the stage, nor attempt to create a new background for him as Christine had done. It was a perfect arrangement.

Sir Adrian was still in his oak-panelled office, surrounded by phones and cigar smoke. Most of his staff had left, and only a solitary stenographer lurked in the outer precincts.
He looked tired, and in that light there was a certain resemblance to Richard Winter in his face. It was the first time I had noticed it, and, in any case, it was only a fleeting likeness. Between the two brothers there had been a gulf that no physical similarity could bridge.

He was not surprised to see me. He told me to sit down. Then he reached for a blue document which lay on his desk and passed it to me.

"That is what I bought this afternoon," he said casually.

"I know." It was a will, signed by Richard Winter, leaving everything to Doris.
He sagged a little, knowing that I knew about the will.
"Will you have a drink?"
"No, thanks."
"Cigars?"
"Not now."
"You understand now perhaps my motives for keeping the whole thing quiet."
I met his eyes across the desk. "Suppressing a will is a criminal offence," I said.

He appeared not to hear me. "It was Richard's last act. It expresses his supreme contempt for all of us. Obviously he intended to tell us about it and about his desire to marry that awful girl when he called us to the house on Saturday night. I imagine he would have got a great deal of amusement from our outraged protestations."

He'd have staged it like a scene from a play, leaving the denouement until the end, working on their conventional fears, laughing at them. The marriage would strike at the roots of Sir Adrian's respectability. The will would humiliate Christine beyond endurance. Yes, Richard would have had a hell of a time.

And yet... Somehow there was a doubt in my mind. All his life the actor had been made to do things by the people who surrounded him. He had been forced into deceit and subterfuge to get his own way. The step he was taking was one he had longed to take for years. It was a great temptation to defy them all openly, but was there not, at the same time, an enormous risk that they would retaliate, frustrate his plans, and bring him to heel? To save their faces, they might easily fix it so that he got placed in a mental home. Such things had happened before. Was it logical, therefore, that Winter, for the sake of half an hour's malicious satisfaction, should jeopardize his whole future?

Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't.

Sir Adrian, at any rate, was satisfied.
He went on.

"It is fortunate for us all that he died when he did. I cannot feel any grief, only a deep gratitude that he was not allowed to live to carry out his purpose. I believe that the first test to be applied to anybody is whether he or she happens to be a good human being or not. All other achievements should be secondary to that. Richard may have been a brilliant actor but as a human being he belonged to the dregs."

A smug belief. A fortress wherein the respectable might weave their material pattern. It was natural that it should appeal to Sir Adrian because it presented life as a cut-and-dried affair. But life was antagonistic to rule and precept. It could combine the greatest qualities and the worst in one individual with barbaric zest.

"How did you know about Doris?" I asked.

"She phoned me and I arranged to meet her at that hotel in Bloomsbury. At
the last moment I mislaid the address and had a devil of a job locating the place."

Just then there was a tap on the door and the stenographer put her head inside.
"Will you need me any more, sir?"
"No. That’s all." He handed her some letters. "Post these, will you?"
"Yes sir."

She shut the door and we were alone again.

Sir Adrian lit another cigar. His mood was slightly jovial.
"You are satisfied now? You feel that it cannot have been anything but an accident?"
"I don’t know," I said.
He became persuasive.
"Oh, come, my dear young fellow. Suppose we allow your view. Suppose it was murder. Who could possibly have done it?"
"It might have been a conspiracy. Yourself, Mrs. Winter, and Gerald Carson."
I thought he would be annoyed, but he only laughed.
"Can you imagine Gerald Carson being a party to murder?"
I had to grin.
"Not exactly."
He pressed his advantage.
"What motive would he have?"
"None, of course. Money did not interest him. And his ambition to play Richard’s part was negatived by his knowledge that he would be far from brilliant in it.
"What are you doing about the will?"
I asked.

For the second time he picked it up and passed it to me.
"I am placing it in your custody. Do as you think fit. But, remember, I shall not tolerate any unnecessary airing of our private affairs in a coroner’s court."

It was a clever move. Sir Adrian knew that he could sweep me from my position as a man swats a fly. I dare not present anything but the barest evidence unless I had proof positive that it was murder.

XI

Elliott had gone off to make one or two final checkups, and I walked home in a fretful, nervous mood. Anna and I had a meal, and she tried to interest me in a new dress she was thinking of buying. It wasn’t only the money. It was the coupons, she explained.
"Darling, you’re not listening."
"Sorry, sweet, I was thinking of something else."
Her eyebrows rose.
"Isn’t everything settled yet?"
"No."
"But the inquest is tomorrow."
"That’s right."
"Then . . . ?"
"I’m not satisfied," I said. "Somebody killed Winter. I know it, the way one knows these things. It may be just instinct. It may be illogical, but I’d bet on it with every penny I had."

She glanced across at my plate. "You haven’t eaten any of that apple pie. I made it specially for you."

"I’ll have it tomorrow. I don’t feel like it tonight."

I left the table and sat in an armchair. Anna cleared away the meal, then she came and stood beside me. John was already in bed and we were alone in the lounge.

"Would it help you to tell me about it?" she asked.
"You get on with your book. It’ll be much more satisfying. It’s got a solution, which is more than I have."
She beamed helpfully.
"But I’d like to hear about it. Really."
So I told her of the interviews with Sir Adrian, Carson, and Doris. She sat in the other chair and smoked a cigarette.
"I still think Doris is the center of it all," she said when I had finished.
"I’m not so sure."
She frowned.
"But she gets the ten thousand, doesn’t she? She’s the only one who gains from it."
"That’s true." I began to think about Doris, to work back on the things she had told me. But I didn’t produce any startling inspiration.

There was nothing for it but to approach the problem in a methodical manner. Routine was the thing. We wrote down on a piece of paper everyone connected with the case. Then we went down the list. It was a slow business, and it didn’t get us much further.
Then we outlined Winter’s movements from the morning he had arrived drunk to the time when his body had been discovered in the bath.

I could see his entry into the theater, incapably drunk. The muttered conversations, the whispered gossip among the other members of the cast. Then the cancellation of the rehearsal for that morning. Winter gradually returning to consciousness in the dressing room, and Carson coming in—Carson who had been through all this a thousand times before, who had seen Winter drunk in a myriad dressing rooms, who had stood in the wings for every performance, nervously watching the great man. Carson, who despised Winter the man and defied Winter the actor.

Then had come the outburst.

From that moment it was quite unlike the thousand other occasions. Carson’s face had grown whiter as he heard Winter abusing the theater, slanging the thing he loved.

“My memory’s gone, Gerry. I can’t remember a line of that damn silly play this morning!”

Carson hastened to the rescue. Winter the actor needed help. He would do anything to ensure that the theatre should not lose such a brilliant member. A bad memory was not an insuperable obstacle. There had been others who had suffered in the same way. But they had gone on acting successfully.

“I don’t want to be helped! I’ve waited and waited and waited for the moment when I could leave the bloody theatre for good. At last it has come. Now my conscience is free. If I can’t remember lines, I can’t act! Don’t you see, Gerry, I’m through?”

Carson had recoiled from this sacrilege. He argued with Winter, told him what a great position he held, and how there was no one to take his place. And Winter just laughed. He didn’t care a damn. Rage seethed up inside Carson. He, who would have treasured talent was without it. Yet this man who had talent was casting it aside with no more thought than if he had been throwing away an old overcoat. It was bitterly unfair!

He left Winter, and presently the actor staggered out of the theatre. Where had he gone? To Hampstead? Or to a bar where he was unknown?

We had no evidence on that point. All we knew was that he had arrived at Ben’s pub at seven o’clock. He might have done anything in the interim. Perhaps he had taken out one of those little shopgirls he went to such pains to pick up. That seemed unlikely, for there was Doris. The problem of his sensual desires had been settled.

He had spent an evening in the pub, probably winking continually at Doris, for they held a secret between them.

Suddenly Anna interrupted the train of thought.

“What about Ben? Do you think he knew of the marriage?”

“I doubt it.”

She cocked an eye at me.

“It would give him a good motive for killing Winter.”

Ben kill Winter? Destroy the idol he loved?

“No,” I said. “I don’t think he did it.”

We returned to Winter in the pub. At ten o’clock he had left. Doris went out and found him a taxi. He said he was going to the house in Hampstead.

At eleven o’clock Janet found him in the bedroom, surrounded by piles of clothes. Then had followed the scene between them. He was rude about Lewis’ play. She protested that he couldn’t let them down.

“Can’t I let it down! You watch me. You won’t get a penny out of me for the bloody thing! I’ve finished with it, see!”

Then what? Had she gone, or had she killed him?

I couldn’t see her as a killer.

According to Carson, Sir Adrian, and Christine, Winter was alive on Saturday night. He had spoken to them derisively. He had sent them telegrams in the morning. A dead man couldn’t do that.

But the fact remained that from Friday night until ten o’clock Saturday night no one had seen him.

There was no trace whatsoever of his movements beyond the telegrams.

Then I saw something I had not noticed before.

“Christine was the first to arrive at the house on Saturday night,” I said. “Sup-
pose she arrived and found Winter dead? Then what would Sir Adrian do?"

Anna was excited.

"He would want to cover the woman he loved from any suspicion of murder or from any awkward enquiries. He would evolve a story to prove that Winter was in the house that evening, alive."

"That’s right," I said. "But the advent of Ernie made things difficult. Therefore when I pressed him he had to admit that he found Winter dead in the bath, but covered himself by the implication that Winter must have died while they were all downstairs waiting!"

"But," argued Anna, "what about Carson? Wouldn’t he be too nervous and scared to agree to the false story?"

"No. You forget that in his statement he never mentioned Ernie at all. If he could be persuaded to lie about that, he could be persuaded to lie about Winter’s appearance on the landing."

"Of course," she said. There was a look of triumph in her face. "Darling, we’re getting somewhere."

"I wish I could be sure of that," I grumbled.

If Winter had died on Friday night, then who had sent the telegrams? Suppose one looked at it another way. Were the telegrams and the resulting scene in the house psychologically true? The idea of throwing a bomb at Sir Adrian and Christine might have appealed to Winter, but it involved great risks. Again, why was Carson included in the party? The under-study already knew that Winter was leaving the stage. The proposed marriage would not affect him in any way. The denouement would be a damp squib as far as he was concerned.

The sending of the telegrams looked more and more like the act of someone who was not aware that Carson and Winter had had that scene in the dressing room, an act aimed at confusing the actual time of death and making it appear that Winter had died on Saturday night.

"That would link with the anonymous note you received," said Anna. "The one which said Winter died on Saturday."

"And the pages of Macbeth that were sent to Winter," I added.

She clapped her hands.

"Darling, that must be it!"

"Yes, but how can I prove anything? Sir Adrian, Carson, and Christine will never deviate from their story. They will present a united front, and as long as they do that Winter will have died on Saturday. No amount of arguing will shake their statement."

It was taking shape. The pages of Macbeth, the telegrams, the anonymous letter. And what else?

Janet’s visit to the house on Friday? Or . . . ? Suddenly another idea came to me.

I put it up to Anna.

"After Doris knew that Winter was dead," I said, "she immediately phoned Sir Adrian and asked him to meet her in that hotel. That was the action of an ordinary gold digger, a smart, scheming girl who knew her way around. But Doris isn’t that type."

Anna thought for a minute.

"You’re right there. You mean that someone put Doris up to it, someone suggested she should phone Sir Adrian?"

I applauded her.

"Yes, someone who was eventually going to get the ten thousand by hook or by crook."

The telephone interrupted us and I went to answer it. Elliot was at the other end.

"How are we doing?" he asked.

"Lousy," I said.

He chuckled.

"I’ve been to that Thelma Kingston woman. That’s not her real name. She’s called Master. Quite a personable bit of stuff. She said they were her plays and that she had sent them to Winter some time ago."

"So that’s a dead end."

He caught me up quickly.

"Not exactly. I jollied her along, pretending I was interested in her dramatic efforts. And the funny thing is she didn’t seem to know very well what the plays were about."

"She didn’t!" I exclaimed.

"No. Course, there may be nothing in it."

"There’s a hell of a lot in it," I told him. "Now, I want you to do one other thing."

He groaned.

"At this hour, Sarge?"

"I’ll make it up to you. I want you
to go and see Doris in that Bloomsbury hotel. Treat her carefully. I have a feeling that someone put her up to the idea of phoning Sir Adrian. Some kind friend advised her, if you get what I mean."

"I don't mind seeing Doris," he said. "Not at all I don't. She's definitely something."

"You curb your impulses until you've got that information!"

"Oh, I will," he said with a laugh. "Business before pleasure."

He rang off.

Before I could talk to Anna about Thelma Kingston, there came the dismal wail of the air-raid siren. It was followed by a heavy burst of gunfire and the drone of planes.

She rushed off and bundled John down to the shelter.

"You must come, too," she said.

"Later."

"But think of all the glass here. It's dreadfully dangerous!"

"Don't worry about me."

She hesitated, and then John’s yells sent her hurriedly down the stairs.

The gunfire got worse. I switched off the lights and gazed through the window at the sky. Anti-aircraft shells were bursting like huge red-and-yellow stars everywhere. Searchlights swept upwards. A German raider droned nervously somewhere in the heavens.

I remembered that odd kink of Winter’s. He had not been afraid in those September raids. They had appealed to the elemental side of his nature.

What a character!

Once more the telephone rang. This time I heard Stuart’s voice.

"I’ve had a hell of a job getting through to you. Tell me, do I win the five pounds?"

"I don’t know," I said.

"You haven’t much time left." He laughed. "I could do with the money. I had a summons this morning for my electricity. They’ve cut it off. So I’m laboring by the light of four candles."

"Too bad," I said.

He persisted.

"Do you know who killed Winter?"

"I think so."

There came a low, reflective whistle over the phone.

"Come down and talk to me about it."

"I can’t. I’m waiting for a call from Elliot."

"When will that come through?"

"Within the next hour, I hope."

He gave up.

"Will you come down after the call? You can get a wonderful view of the raid from here!"

"All right," I said.

"And bring the five pounds!"

I rang off irritably. I hated the thought of losing that much money. It had been a rash bet all right.

I returned to my chair and tried to think amid the noise of the barrage. The pages of Macbeth, the telegrams, the anonymous letter, Doris’s phone call to Sir Adrian, and what...?

It was not a large raid, but it threatened to be a long one. Solitary planes roared over every few minutes, and the guns grew ever more furious, filling the air with shrapnel, millions of fragments that fell back to earth, clanging loudly in the roads or on the roof-tops.

I began to wonder whether Elliott was having difficulties. Perhaps Doris was not at the hotel, perhaps he was chasing her half over London?

The hands of the clock slowly moved round. The raid continued.

I paced the room anxiously. In my pocket was the will which Richard Winter had signed and which left all his estate to Doris. What was I going to do with it? Would I have to climb down at the last moment, admit that I was mistaken, and face the consequent storm? Or would I be able to prove myself justified?

The phone rang. I raced to it.

An agitated feminine voice.

"Is that you, Hugh?"

"No," I said angrily, "it is not Hugh."

"Oh, I’m sorry. I must have got the wrong number."

I slammed the receiver down and continued to pace the room.

I went over it all again, trying to picture every stage of it, trying to get inside Winter’s complex mind. My head started to swim. I realized then that I was terribly tired.

Another half-hour passed and I almost fell asleep in the chair. I must have dozed off after that, because the next thing I
knew the phone was ringing madly and I was making no effort to answer it. I shook myself and reached for the receiver.

"I thought you were dead or something," said Elliot. "I’ve been ringing for ten minutes."

"Sorry. I think I dropped off."
He clucked sympathetically.

"Well, you were right about Doris getting advice."

"Who gave it to her?"
He told me, and I knew then that my deductions had been right. The satisfaction that swept through me was like a stimulant. I was suddenly wide awake.

"Does that help?" Elliot was asking.

"It certainly does."
He heaved a sigh.

"Then will you need me any more before tomorrow?"

"I don’t think so."
Satisfaction sounded in his reply.

"Good. Doris says I can stay here as there’s so much shrapnel falling."

"Oh."
He took evident pleasure in my un-concealed surprise.

"Yes. I told her about my playing in an amateur production of the Chinese Bungalow. I think that makes me eligible." He chuckled. "She’s a nice girl when she doesn’t talk."

"Don’t be late in the morning," I said firmly.

His promise was cheery.

"I won’t. It’s an ill raid that blows nobody any good, eh, Sarge? S’long."

The death of nearly a thousand Winters would not have impressed him. If ever a man’s mind ran in a groove, it was his.

I FOUND my tin hat and walked in the direction of Fleet Street. In my pocket was five pounds, but I was hoping that I would not have to lose it.

The shrapnel was still coming down in handfuls, and there was scarcely anyone in the streets. Occasionally you came upon a warden striding self-importantly along or a constable standing in a doorway, but otherwise there was no sign of life.

Fleet Street was a black shroud, illumined every now and then by a sweeping searchlight. The sudden change from the dark to the light and back again was very disconcerting. I found myself stum-
blng over pavements, stepping up to them when they weren’t there and missing them when they were.

And it wasn’t the dark.
My heart was thudding violently, and it wasn’t on account of the air raid. Normally I would have been pretty scared of that, too, but I was filled with a nervous excitement that left no room for anything else. I felt that I knew now who had killed Winter.

I wasn’t sure, of course. There were still large gaps in the evidence. That’s why I hadn’t told anyone, not even Elliot, but had kept it to myself like a small child. I was afraid lest I might be wrong.

It was possible.

I climbed the steps to Stuart’s place and knocked on the door.

"Well, well," he said as he let me in.

"How goes the war?"

"Noisy."
He looked toward the street.

"Are they dropping any incendiaries?"

"Haven’t noticed any."

"Because, technically speaking, I’m supposed to be fire-watching."

He led me inside. His chaotic office-cum-bed-sitting-room was bathed in a ghostly yellow glow from four candles that were stuck in old tobacco tins.

"Rather medieval," he said, with a smile.

"A snooper from the electric corporation crept in while I wasn’t looking. I’d been holding the fort against him for weeks, too." He sat down in a chair and beckoned me to a cane contraption that looked unsafe. I let myself into it gingerly.

"Tell me," he went on, "have you solved the case?"

"I think so."

His eyes were very bright.

"You know who killed Winter?"

I nodded.

"Then I don’t get my five pounds," He pushed the lock of dark hair back from his forehead. "Or perhaps you haven’t enough evidence to sway the inquest? I think the bet was based on that, wasn’t it?"

We were interrupted by a loud voice shouting "Mr. Jennings!"

"Oh, damn!" said Stuart. "That’s my fellow firewatcher. He’ll be wanting me to go and relieve him. Do you mind if we continue our discussion upstairs?"
“Okay,” I said.
He grabbed a gray tin hat and we calmed up two floors of stone steps and reached a ladder that took us on to the roof. A man was waiting there, staring at the sky which was still being split by gunfire.
“I’ll go and get some grub if you don’t mind taking over for a bit,” said the man.
“Not at all,” replied Stuart.
The man disappeared down the ladder and we crossed the roof and found a seat on the buttress of a chimney stack. A mass of dishevelled buildings lay around us. To the right was Fleet Street, to the left Chancery Lane. The periodic flashes silhouetted the big newspaper offices and cast a glistening sheen on the black glass of the Express. It was rather like a giant firework display.
“Now, tell me about the case,” said Stuart.
I shrugged.
“Not much to tell. You know it already.”
“That’s true.” He laughed. “But what I’m really interested in is the five pounds. You’ve no idea how hard up I am.”
“Look. If you cared to co-operate I might find five pounds for you.”
He waved his thanks.
“But you’ll never get a verdict. Sir Adrian’ll look after Christine.”
I must have stared.
“Christine?”
He nodded coolly.
“Yes, she killed Winter. Wasn’t that the solution you reached?”
“No,” I said.
He chuckled.
“I told you you would go astray, didn’t I? Christine killed him to save her face and the legend of Winter the Great. You see, Winter was going off with Doris.”
“I know.”
“Well, then, it’s obvious. But you’ll never bring her into court.” Stuart’s face was a smudge under the tin hat.
“Christine didn’t kill Winter,” I said slowly.
“Then who did?”
I peered at him. “You did, Stuart.”
He scowled in displeasure.
“Oh, now, my dear fellow—”
“You killed Winter. All along you’ve known too much about this case. You’ve had information that could have been got only from the inside. You’ve played a game. The biography, the bet, and your reporting on the death were all part of it.”

He didn’t move, but I felt his eyes on me.
“Interesting. And have you got a case?”
I was getting surer.
“I have. I’ll tell you if you like.”
“Do. I’m partial to fairy stories.” The voice was bitterly sarcastic.
I gave him the whole picture.
“You’ve always been intrigued by Winter. As you admitted to me once, famous people have a fascination for you. Quite by chance you discovered that Winter went to The Bells as a sort of escape from the other world in which he lived. You went there, too. At that time you had an ambition to be a playwright. You’ve had several ambitions at various periods; the motivating force behind them all was your desire for money. You wanted it for the power and position it would give you. You cared nothing for the theatre. You merely wanted to use it as a vehicle for building up Stuart Jennings.”
“This is amusing,” he said. “Is there any more?”
I nodded.
“Plenty. You wrote some plays and one night in The Bells you got into conversation with Winter. You mentioned the plays and he offered to read them. You used a feminine pseudonym—Thelma Kingston. Possibly because you thought it was easier to talk about them if people imagined they were written by someone else.
“It was silly of you to try to provide an alibi for those plays. Elliot saw the woman whose address you gave me. She stuck to the story you had given her, but she didn’t know very much about the plays. If she had known that a murder hung on their identification she mightn’t have been so ready to pretend they were hers.
“There was no need for you to do that. I had forgotten all about Thelma Kingston when you rang up and gave me the address. That act is typical of the things which have put me on your track. At every turn you have overdone it. You couldn’t leave well alone. You were so
conceited that you persisted in being a central figure in the case. If you had retired into the background, not a shred of suspicion could have touched you."

"You're steering very close to libel," he observed.

"There's no one else present," I pointed out. "And what I am telling you I have told no one. Well, your vanity was hurt that Winter did not even mention the plays again. Finally, you asked him about them, and his comments were scathing and bordering on the obscene. You were filled with a deep hatred of him. He had made you feel small. He was somebody and you were nobody. You took a malicious pleasure in discovering all you could about him. Then when he was in The Bells you sat and watched him, soothing your ego with the knowledge that you could expose the idol's feet of clay at any time you chose.

"You took your time.

"You learnt that he was lavishing his attentions on Doris. You learnt, too, that he was planning to leave his wife and go off with her. In a burst of confidence Doris told you one day that Winter had made a will in her favour. From that moment you started scheming. If Winter died, Doris would come into his money, and Doris was a simple, dumb creature. She would be easy to handle.

"And you saw no danger.

"There was nothing to connect you and Doris. You merely knew each other. That was all. You planned that it should stay that way until some time after Winter's death. Then you would descend on her and proceed to get your hooks on the money. You might have to marry her to do this, but that didn't trouble you. You'd have done that, too.

"It was a fantastic idea, but it appealed to you. A murder seemingly without motive. Doris, in a sense, was an accomplice, but she never knew it. There was no arrangement between you. Nothing. Your tracks were perfectly covered."

"At least, so you thought.

"You had heard about Winter's bath episode in America and how he had nearly died. You decided that this was the best way to kill him. You knew, too, that the house at Hampstead was empty. I imagine you planned to inveigle Winter there. It would be easy. He was rehearsing for a new play and you knew where to get hold of him. But your vanity wouldn't allow you to leave it at that. You had to send those two pages of Macbeth to Winter. It amused you, and what had started as a cool, planned murder for money became a game that you enjoyed playing.

"The game centered about the house in Hampstead. And the opening move came sooner than you must have hoped.

"Last Friday you were in The Bells when Winter was there. You overheard him saying he had to go to the house in Hampstead. That relieved you of the necessity of enticing him there. When Winter left, you did not follow immediately. You waited. You were very cautious. Finally, you arrived at the house and got in through a window, closing it after you, thus unconsciously frustrating the plans of a gentleman called Ernie, who was going to use the window to stage a robbery.

"That was a bit of hard luck for you. Of course you were quite unaware that Ernie had had his eye on the house, and you couldn't foresee that he'd pop up there, and later run afoul of the law in my person.

"I expect Janet was still with Winter. You waited until she had gone and then you crept to the bedroom. Winter had passed out into one of his paralytic states. It made things simple. You undressed him, filled the bath with water, and then placed him in it. The impact with the water brought him round and he struggled. You slammed his head against the back of the bath, knocking him unconscious. He subsided and you pushed his head under the water."

STUART interrupted with a hard laugh.

"This is the best piece of fiction I've ever heard. It's rather weak on the factual side, though. You're inferring a great deal. Still, you're not serious, are you?"

"I am very serious."

For a moment he made no answer, and when he did speak, staring over the roofs, his voice was tight.

"Then I suppose I should be annoyed. But, really, it's all so disarming."
“The best is yet to come,” I said. “Having completed your task, you left the house. You were careful not to be seen. You arrived back here perfectly safe. You had finished. There was nothing more for you to do but to sit back and wait.

“Had you done that, we wouldn’t be sitting on this roof tonight and I wouldn’t be telling you this.

“Because Ernie’s story—which we got later—involves you not at all at first. It was only a small part, though a very significant part, of the whole pattern that finally identified you.

“But once more you couldn’t leave well alone. You liked the sense of power the crime gave you. It seemed dull to lie low and wait. You wanted to move the characters around a bit, to make them come and go at your bidding. So you conceived the idea of sending telegrams to Winter’s brother, Sir Adrian, to Christine, and to Gerald Carson. You wanted them to find Winter on Saturday night.

“That little scheme of yours really blew the lid off.

“It worked out better than you imagined. Christine was the first to arrive. She found her husband dead and she was in a dreadful panic. Sir Adrian came to her rescue. He fixed an alibi for her, making out that Winter had been seen alive in the house by all three of them. Each agreed to the false story because each was frightened of being dragged into the tragedy.

“That should have satisfied you. The death of the great actor was explained as a suicide. At least, it had the look of suicide; and Sir Adrian’s influence might have done the rest quite easily.

“Again, it was the cue to stop. But you wouldn’t accept it.

“You were dying to tell somebody how clever you’d been. Of course, you couldn’t do that. So you satisfied your urge by calling on me and by reporting on the death. You enjoyed taking me to The Bells. It was all you could do to stop yourself blurtin out the truth. You took refuge under a cloak of omniscience, purposely trying to mystify me. You longed to talk about Winter, and you gave me the assistance of your extensive knowl-

edge of the man. It didn’t seem to occur to you that that knowledge alone was highly suspicious.

“Nor did you stop there. You made it a point to talk to Anna about the case. You should have known that I’d be interested.

“And then, when you offered her your theory that Winter’s death must have been an accident, you blundered. You should have foreseen what I’d do—suspect that you were trying to sell me the accident theory through her. Not a serious blunder, though. Just an item in a staggering total.

“So you went from bad to worse. Next came the idea of the biography. Harmless in itself, but damning when added to the chain you had started.

“You saw that things were not going quite as you expected. Sir Adrian was acting like a clam. There was a great danger that Doris’ will would be swept aside, and you couldn’t rely on her to force the issue. So you rang her up and suggested that she telephone Sir Adrian. She was vague as usual, and you advised her to meet Sir Adrian at a hotel somewhere and not to let Ben know anything about it. That was foolish of you. It destroyed forever that casual role of on-looker which you had vamped up.

“The other stupid thing you did was sending me that anonymous note saying that Winter died on Saturday. It was pointless, but it fitted in with this terrible urge of not wanting to be left out of anything, of overdoing all your effects. Betting me five pounds on the case was another unnecessary action, but I expect it gave you a great kick.” I stopped speaking and watched him.

“The raid was petering out. The planes were fewer and the gunfire was spaced between longer periods of quiet. It had been a very small affair.

“Is that all?” he asked presently. “It’s not exactly a case, is it?” Calmly he lit a cigarette. “It would never stand up in a court. Just as well for me.”

“It won’t stand up at this minute, but there’s plenty of time.”

He looked up quickly.

“But the inquest is tomorrow morning.”

“I can get an open verdict if I fight for it. I don’t mind being called over the
coals for doing so, either. Then I can make investigations at my leisure. Slowly I can strengthen my case until it's cast iron, until there isn't a loophole left. And you won't be able to do a thing about it. Because there'll be only the two of us who know the truth."

"It all sounds very melodramatic."

"You won't be able to touch me with libel because I shan't divulge any information until everything's complete. It might take a year. It might take two. Always haunting you will be the knowledge that I am gradually catching up. And you won't have the ten thousand to build a legal wall for yourself, because I'll keep an eye on Doris as well. It will be a sort of slow march to the gallows."

That rang a bell. He shivered.

"It's cold," he said, getting up and walking a few paces.

No more words were spoken for several minutes. I sat on the brick buttress. He stood a little distance away.

Presently he turned. "You don't think you can get away with this bluff, do you? You're just mad because you can't get a case and you're trying to frame it on to me."

He was a dim figure in the half-light that was gradually giving place to the dawn.

I didn't answer him.

"I can prove that I didn't kill Winter. I'll show you something that I didn't intend to show anyone. Here a moment."

I walked over to him. He fumbled in his pocket.

Suddenly his hand shot out and caught my arm. Too late I realized his scheme. He meant to push me off the roof. I would plunge to my death in the street below and it would be considered an accident. I could almost visualize the headlines: Fire-watcher Falls From Roof.

I felt myself slipping forward. The guttered edge of the roof came into view, and I was still moving. Frantically I thrust out my arms to save myself. They clawed air for what seemed like five minutes, then they contacted something soft. Stuart's coat. My fingers gripped and I held on tight.

We both toppled. Then his foot be-
came caged in mine and he fell heavily. Catching hold of his coat had stopped me from going right over. I had managed to regain my balance, but he continued to fall.

He slid over the side of the roof and I hung on to his coat. But the material wouldn't take the strain of a dead weight. It ripped across, and the next second I was holding a square of tweed and Stuart was hurtling to the roadway.

Later the doctor told me he must have died instantly.

FOR TWO HOURS before the inquest I was closeted with McKay, my superior officer. I had searched Stuart's room and found sufficient to back up my story. Now that the thing was over I was tired. I wanted to have done with it.

But there were further conferences as to what should be done at the inquest, and in the end Sir Adrian's plea for secrecy won the day. It is not easy to convict a man who's dead anyhow. So a simple statement was made, involving no one very deeply, and a verdict of accidental death was painlessly returned.

In the afternoon they buried Winter. The church was crowded. Everyone seemed to be there, including Ben and Doris. People lined the outside of the church, too. Winter would have disapproved strongly of all that pomp and ceremony.

But Christine was in her glory! For her the game had only just begun. Through the years she would keep the actor's memory alight, preserve the romantic fabrication that she had built round him. She would make Winter's talent a joyful inspiration instead of the millstone it had really been. Thus do legends spring up.

The next day John celebrated his first birthday. Janet and Lewis came. And Elliot brought Doris. She was as vacant as usual, but Janet was quite sweet to her. There was no doubt she had taken a fancy to Elliot. He told me that he was teaching her the deaf-and-dumb alphabet. But in all other departments I gathered she was well above standard. In fact, he told me that. . . . But no. Anna says it's not fit for repetition.
Cats Don't Smile
by D.B. Olsen
THE LETTER from Cousin Julia had arrived in Los Angeles in June. The Misses Murdock read it at breakfast. The letter was short and to the point; Cousin Julia had to make a trip into Canada for business reasons. Part of her home in Sacramento was rented to roomers; she couldn’t simply lock up and leave; and wouldn’t it be a sort of nice change for Miss Jennifer and Miss Rachel to come up and stay for a few weeks? They’d have a chance to see the Capitol. They could study the historical collections. They could read. “We can read at home,” said Miss Jennifer, who was always careful. “I don’t feel like running off up there just to oblige Julia.”

“One never knows,” murmured Miss Rachel. She kept peeping back into the envelope as though to extract something more. “She put it oddly about the roomers, don’t you think?”

“Oddly? How do you mean?”

“She says,” Miss Rachel explained, “that she doesn’t want to leave the roomers alone together. That’s odd, isn’t it?”

“Well,” Miss Jennifer thought things over. “Perhaps it’s a matter of propriety. Perhaps there is a gentleman and a lady roomer. Or very young ladies she wouldn’t care to leave alone.”

“I wonder.” Miss Rachel spread out the page. “Julia’s nervous, or rather she was when she wrote this. She wrote capitol with an a and she’s rubbed out something here. A name. I’ll try to see what it is.”

Miss Jennifer’s eyes grew disapproving. “Really, Rachel, if she didn’t want you to know, I’d think—”

“Mr. Somebody, Mr. Somplessis. Goodness, what a name!” Miss Rachel’s fingers traced across the line. “She’s put his name down just after the place she said she didn’t want her roomers alone together. Then she erased it. Hmmm.”

“No doubt, then, there is a lady also, and you know how Julia is. She even suspected Uncle Merriweather when his housekeeper and he—”

“And she was right,” Miss Rachel cut in. “Uncle Merriweather was a wolf even at sixty. I think, though, that we might oblige Julia just this once. After all, the trip might do us good.”

Miss Jennifer made motions of protest. “Rachel! We’d have to take the cat. And there’d be hours and hours of packing. Please.”

“It’s for Julia,” Miss Rachel said firmly. “She’s our only near relative and we haven’t seen her in ages. Don’t you know your duty, Jennifer?”

But Miss Jennifer noted sourly that Miss Rachel folded Julia’s letter with a look of interest at the place where the incredible Mr. Somebody’s name had been rubbed away.

“Duty!” she sniffed. Miss Rachel smiled.

THE train was hot; the streets were hot; the Capitol buildings when they rode past gave off heat like a white marble oven. But Julia’s garden was cool with a scent of honeysuckle and stock, and the living room of Julia’s house was big and dim and chintzy. Miss Jennifer took off her hat, and Julia’s little colored maid took it away. Miss Jennifer stepped to a chintz-covered chair and sank into it. In the doorway, Miss Rachel was frowning.

“Where is Julia?”

The maid came back. “Miss Julia’s had to go, ma’am. She says for you two ladies to make yourselves right at home. She’ll be back inside three weeks. She said for me to keep you comfortable.” The maid assisted Miss Rachel to take off her jacket and bonnet. “I’ll make you some iced lemonade if you’d care for it, ma’am.”

“I’d like it very much, thank you.” Miss Jennifer was looking at the room.
“This is what comes of owning a gold mine,” she said. “I suppose Uncle Forsyth simply made millions.”

“I doubt it,” Miss Rachel answered, inspecting a bouquet of Talisman roses in a milk-glass vase. “I seem to remember hearing once that he cleared about fifty thousand dollars before they lost the vein. Julia’s been very careful with what her father left her. But remember the roomers. Even Julia wouldn’t bother with them if she had millions.”

Miss Jennifer looked out interestingly into the hall. “I wonder if any of them are at home now?”

When the maid returned with the pitcher of iced drink she answered Miss Jennifer’s question. “No, ma’am, they’re both out. Mrs. Parmenter’s at work. She’s a nurse. I couldn’t say where Mr. Somplessis is.” She set the tray upon a table and poured out two tinkling glassfuls.

“What is Mr. Somplessis like?” Miss Rachel asked quite casually.

She thought that the maid looked at her a trifle strangely.

“You’ll meet him at dinner, ma’am.”

“I see,” said Miss Rachel.

“About your room, ma’am. Miss Julia said that you could have your choice of the two guest rooms that aren’t occupied. You might like to look them over. Then when your luggage comes I can unpack it for you right away.”

Miss Rachel sipped her drink. “I’ll come with you now, Jennifer?”

Miss Jennifer shook her head. “Take the room you like. I’m sure that it will suit me too.” She held out her glass for more lemonade.

Miss Rachel and the little maid went up into a large and shadowy second-floor hall. Six doors faced her; two of them were open. Miss Rachel realized at one and the same time how large Julia’s house really was and that the hall carpet was a trifle shabby. Inside one room whose door was open stood a four-poster bed with spread and valance of starched eyelet embroidery. “This is what Miss Julia calls the colonial room,” the maid said. “Would it appeal to you?”

Miss Rachel took in the little chairs of maple, scatter rugs in pale peach, a miniature desk where writing letters would be a joy. She ventured in. Then she saw that the eyelet embroidery, though immaculate, was mended. Another laundering and Julia would be out money for a new coverlet.

“It is lovely,” said Miss Rachel. “May I see the other room too?”

The other opened door showed furniture blocky and low, a counterpane splashed with poinsettias, and white washable window draperies of thick seersucker.

“This is the Spanish room,” the maid said. “Miss Julia bought this furniture out of one of the original houses here in Sacramento. It’s old as all get out.”

“And Julia’s got her money’s worth,” Miss Rachel said to herself. She sat down in a rawhide-covered rocker. “I like this very much,” she said aloud to the maid.

“Will it be all right if I put both your things in here?” the maid asked. “You see, Miss Julia’s hoping to rent one of the rooms.”

“Of course,” said Miss Rachel.

“Then I’ll show you the bath.”

Miss Rachel followed, and a door at the end of the hall opened upon a narrow space all darkness.

“This is a sort of funny arrangement,” the maid said. “Miss Julia says it wasn’t meant to have a bath up here. I guess the first folks here bathed in their rooms, perhaps. Maybe the rest of it was outdoors in the back.” She giggled, an easy, cheerful sound, and plunged through the dark space of about a dozen feet and threw open a door. Light streamed through, and Miss Rachel saw the bathroom beyond, and here a square place in which shelves were built for linens, and at the left a narrow stairway going up.

“What’s this?” she asked.

The maid, adjusting towels on a rack above the tub, looked over her shoulder. “That’s another room, ma’am, all alone on the top.”

Miss Rachel studied the little stairs. “Rented?”

“No, ma’am. It’s furnished after a fashion, but Miss Julia didn’t think it would pay.”

“You’re very neat, then, to keep these stairs so well dusted.”

The maid frowned a little, making a chocolate line in the smooth brown forehead. “I guess it don’t get so dusty up here, ma’am.”
Miss Rachel put a surreptitious finger into the corner of a shelf and brought it out fuzzy and gray. "I suppose not," she said. "Do you think Julia would mind if I saw the upstairs room?"

"Oh no, ma'am. You're to feel right at home and do as you please. Here, maybe there's a light on those stairs."

There was a socket—Miss Rachel had seen this—and it was without a globe. She and the maid felt their way up the staircase by holding the narrow rail. There was a tiny landing halfway, then a turn. They came up into shuttered sunlight and stuffy, closed-in warmth.

"Whew!" said the little maid, making for a window. "Airless. You can't breathe." She flipped up the blind and worked at the sash.

Miss Rachel studied the furnishings. There were a mahogany bed, a bare mattress, a dressing table painted white, two chairs that must have once belonged to a breakfast set. The windows were without curtains, and there was dust everywhere except upon the seat of one of the chairs. Miss Rachel stepped idly to the dressing table and drew open the drawers.

In one of the top drawers were five cigarette butts. They had been crushed out against the wood, and there were burned smudges on the white enamel.

In a bottom drawer were a postcard and a cuff link. The cuff link was heavy and old-fashioned, a knot formed in gold and set with a little stone, all of it black as though it had lain in a fire. The postcard showed lacy towers against the sky and the lettered words: Bombay: the Governor's Palace. While the maid threw open a window and stuck her head through for fresh air, Miss Rachel turned the card quickly to look at its other side.

Mrs. Nettie Parmenter, 156 Senate St., Sacramento, California.

The message was brief. I made it. Bob.

The maid had turned and was looking at her. "Shall we go down, ma'am?"

Miss Rachel dropped the postcard back into the drawer and put on a look of dreamy foolishness. "I love a high room where at night one can see the stars. What a view there must be!" She stepped to the window the maid had opened. Across the fragrant tangle of Cousin Julia's garden, past a grape arbor and a giant fig and a low stone fence covered with roses, was another yard and another house. The yard was smooth lawn bordered with petunias. The other house was brick, with a great flagstone terrace set with garden furniture. On the window ledge Miss Rachel's fingers found something smooth and cool.

She looked down. A mirror of the sort furnished with women's purses lay tuckered away where the blind had covered it.

"Would Julia mind, do you think, my taking this room?"

"This room, ma'am?" The maid looked about in dismay. "With all this old furniture that don't even match? Miss Julia calls this the rag-bag room. Would you care for it, really?"

"I think so," Miss Rachel decided, keeping the pose of being suddenly in love with it all.

"And your sister?" the maid wondered.

"Perhaps not," Miss Rachel said. "Perhaps she'd like the Spanish room. But I'll be up here. You can tell the expressmen to send up my suitcases. And the cat."

"Cat?"

"She's always wild when she's first let out after a journey, and I'd like her to get used to this room as soon as possible."

"Oh, I see."

Miss Rachel, by leaning a little from the gable, could see the windows of another room just below. "Whose room is down there?"

The maid took a moment to consider.

"That would be Mr. Somplessis' room, I think."

Miss Rachel touched the little mirror; it answered with a wink of light.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she said to herself.

II

But if the gabled room reminded Miss Rachel of something out of Alice in Wonderland, Mr. Somplessis proved to be distinctly Arabian Nights.

He appeared at dinner, just as Miss Rachel and Miss Jennifer were sampling an excellent soup. Miss Rachel was thinking that the colored cook knew a trick or two with a clam and an onion when she looked up to see a slim little man bowing himself in through the door. He stopped when he saw her eyes on him. He had
very white teeth in a dark face, and when he had finished smiling the smile died away slowly, as though he had forgotten it was there.

Cousin Julia’s dining room was big, full of mahogany and crystal. The conventionality of the room made Mr. Somplessis look as if he’d just been flown into it by a genie. Miss Jennifer choked.

“I’m very sorry to have surprised you ladies,” Mr. Somplessis said to Miss Jennifer’s sputterings. “Your cousin told me you were to arrive. I hope she explained my presence, also.”

“You are Mr. Somplessis?” Miss Rachel asked politely.

“Yes, madame.”

“I’m Miss Rachel Murdock and this is my sister, Miss Jennifer.”

“Fragrant names,” Mr. Somplessis said with a new bow. “So much that is old-fashioned is so beautiful.”

Miss Jennifer began to be interested, since she had long opposed Miss Rachel’s giddiness in wanting to be modern. “Won’t you join us? The soup is very good.”

Mr. Somplessis slid gently into a chair and unfolded his napkin. “Thank you. Yes, the food is always of a good quality.” He had a precise way of speaking, the ghost of a foreign accent. His dark skin had a grayish cast and his black eyes were liquid. The double-breasted tweed suit did not make him look like a businessman, but he made the tweed suit look like a disguise.

It was very easy not to like Mr. Somplessis at first sight.

“Our cousin left rather hurriedly,” Miss Rachel said after a while of eating.

“You didn’t see her?” Mr. Somplessis inquired.

“No. She must have taken a train this morning before our arrival.”

Mr. Somplessis raised a dark eyebrow at her. “It was my impression that your cousin was gone yesterday.” He turned to the little maid bringing in the fish.

“Was it not so, Chloe?”

Chloe didn’t answer his look. She placed Miss Jennifer’s plate carefully and refilled Miss Jennifer’s water glass. “You mean was Miss Julia gone before ladies came? Yes sir, she was.”

“I meant,” he said a trifle impatiently, “that Miss Julia took the train yesterday. Did she not?”

A trace of wariness seemed to have come over Chloe. “Miss Julia had a hurry-up call from Canada, sir. Business, I expect. She told me she was very anxious to get going.”

“Yesterday?”

Chloe shot a glance at Miss Rachel as though she would rather have answered this question elsewhere. “Yes sir. Yesterday.”

Mr. Somplessis went back to his food with an air of having proved something. Miss Jennifer began to talk about the beauties of Miss Julia’s garden. A plate came to rest in front of Miss Rachel, and she saw that the slim brown hand holding it was shaking.

Miss Rachel rose. “My tablets. How stupid. I left them in the kitchen.”

Miss Jennifer’s eyes grew wide. “Your tab—”

“If I don’t take them with meals, I suffer so,” Miss Rachel told Mr. Somplessis. She followed Chloe, who carried dishes.

In the pantry, where neither the cook nor Mr. Somplessis could hear, she said, “Now we’ll have it, Chloe. When did Julia leave this house?”

“Early this morning,” Chloe whispered over her shoulder.

“Why did she want Mr. Somplessis to think she’d gone last night?”

“She said she couldn’t stand another meal with that man. She meant dinner last night and breakfast today, I guess, ma’am.”

“You saw her get on the train?”

“Oh yes, ma’am.”

“Why does she dislike him, Chloe?”

“I expect only Miss Julia could tell you that.”

“You don’t sleep here?”

“Me and cook sleeps at home. Cook’s my aunt Mary, ma’am.”

“Mrs. Parmenter doesn’t eat here, does she?”

“Mrs. Parmenter always eats wherever she’s nursing. Most of the time that’s over at Hurgraves’. The big house with the terrace you might have noticed out of top-floor window.”

Miss Rachel remembered the velvet lawn with its border of petunias, the garden furniture set out upon flagstones. “Yes, I remember the house.”

“Old Mr. Hurgraves has heart trouble. When he’s bad, Mrs. Parmenter goes there
because she likes the family. The rest of the time she fills in with other cases."

"I see."

"Not meaning to gossip, ma'am, but I thought once in a while Miss Julia got sort of worried about Mrs. Parmenter being here, too."

"Hmmm."

"Not that I'd mention anything Miss Julia didn't want to tell me."

"You're a very tactful girl."

"Then about two weeks ago Miss Julia spoke of you, ma'am. I gathered she thought you might be of some help to her." Chloë's eyes apologized for their doubtful scrutiny of Miss Rachel's little figure. "She didn't say in what way. She just seemed awfully relieved to know that you were coming."

"Hmm, she would," Miss Rachel said. She remembered a time when Julia at seven had gotten a grasshopper tangled in her hair. Rachel, just ten, had had to pick it out. "You won't talk about this to anyone, will you?"

"Oh no, ma'am. I'm too smart for that."

"Good girl, then. Miss Rachel went back into the dining room, met Jennifer's stare with a nod and Mr. Somplessis' liquid searching with a smile. "I couldn't find the tablets. I must have left them upstairs."

Mr. Somplessis broke his bread with a dark and narrow hand. "Taking medicine with meals is disagreeable, is it not? A meal should be a bouquet of food and drink. Putting in pills is like adding a weed to a cluster of jasmine."

"Or a skunk cabbage with roses," said Miss Jennifer.

Mr. Somplessis showed a moment of shock, not knowing how poetry had escaped Miss Jennifer these seventy-one years. "But perhaps it is not stomach distress but nervousness which upsets you," he said when he had recovered a little. "So often nervousness counterfeits other troubles."

"I am never nervous," said Miss Rachel. She watched, and it came: the smile that showed Mr. Somplessis' big white teeth and then remained forgotten, dying.

"If Rachel were subject to nervousness," Miss Jennifer put in, "she'd have been dead of it long ago."

"So?" said Mr. Somplessis.

"She's dabbled in some murder cases at home, much to my displeasure." Miss Jennifer's plain face grew bleak. "Horrible affairs. They didn't appear to disturb her."

"Jennifer exaggerates," said Miss Rachel, watching the real amusement come into Mr. Somplessis' eyes and agile brows—everywhere but at his lips. "I was worried somewhat. It didn't affect my appetite."

Mr. Somplessis started to reply, but there was a step in the hall. A buxom lady with bleached hair came into the doorway; she was wearing a blue cape over a nurse's dress and a white cap above a great many yellow curls.

"Good evening," she said.

For an instant there was a glint of some expression in the black eyes that Mr. Somplessis turned toward the door. Miss Rachel was to think about that glint later, to try to pin it down to humor or hatred.

JUST now she was busy taking in the looks of the lady in the cape. Mr. Somplessis glided to his feet and bowed.

"May I introduce Mrs. Parmenter? Mrs. Parmenter, these ladies are our hostesses in Miss Julia's absence." He waited while Mrs. Parmenter came a step or so forward. "Miss Rachel and Miss Jennifer Murdock."

"So glad to meet you," Mrs. Parmenter said. She put out a plump hand indecisively, let it hang while Jennifer dropped a fork to reach for it, then suddenly took it back. "Miss Julia said you were coming. Did you have a nice trip?"

"Rather warm," said Miss Rachel.

Mrs. Parmenter put her head on one side and looked at them reflectively. "Would you feel like going to a party?"

Miss Rachel must have betrayed her surprise at the unexpected question. Miss Jennifer, having just retrieved the fork, dropped it again.

Mr. Somplessis said smoothly: "Does the invitation include me?"

"Well . . . If you'd care to come, I'm sure Mr. Hurgraves would like it." She turned again to Miss Rachel, "I have a dear old gentleman I'm nursing. A heart case. He's having a birthday today, and the children have forgotten, and I thought if I could find someone his own age to bring over for an hour or so . . . The idea struck me this afternoon." She had an ag-
gravating way of not finishing a great many sentences. "Then when I saw you ladies I just said, I'll jump right in and ask them. So I did."

Mr. Somplessis murmured: "I haven't anything else to do."

But Miss Jennifer, having found the fork, this time under the table, put it firmly aside for Chloe and fixed Mrs. Parmenter with a displeased look. "We've come a long way, Mrs. Parmenter, on a hot and stuffy train chock-full of soldiers on leave who sang. I held a woman's baby while the woman stood in the aisle, and when we ate it was out of a box with some dried sandwiches and a—"

Miss Rachel cut in: "What my sister means, Mrs. Parmenter, is that though we're tired we'll come spend an hour with your Mr. Hurgraves."

Miss Jennifer turned a look at her that made even Miss Rachel quail. "If you wish to go, Rachel, go. Don't expect me to go with you." "Oh, I'm sorry." Mrs. Parmenter tried to placate Miss Jennifer with a smile. "Really, I didn't mean to impose upon you ladies. I just thought... well..."

"When do you expect us? Mr. Somplessis and me," Miss Rachel said.

"I'll go up and dress," Mrs. Parmenter answered, with a sidelong glance at Miss Jennifer's frown, "and be down in about a half hour. It's sweet of you, really. You can't know what a bit of company can mean to someone like Mr. Hurgraves."

"We won't be apt to excite him?"

"Oh no."

"Very well. I'll be ready in a half hour."

"So sweet," Mrs. Parmenter murmured. She didn't murmur it toward Mr. Somplessis. There was even a thought in Miss Rachel's mind that Mr. Somplessis hadn't originally been included in the invitation at all.

The meal ended with a pineapple ice and salted nuts. When Miss Rachel excused herself to go upstairs, Miss Jennifer indignantly followed. In the upstairs hall she caught Miss Rachel's taffeta sleeve.

"Rachel, what on earth are you about?"

Miss Rachel looked at her sister. There was nothing Dresden-frail or fanciful about Jennifer. She was a plain, sensible, right-

eous little old lady. Almost—this was horrible disloyalty, but it was the truth—almost the battle-ax type. Miss Rachel considered briefly telling Jennifer about the various oddments she had found in the upstairs room and then dismissed the idea. Miss Jennifer would never understand that a mirror tucked out of sight beside a window must mean signaling.

"I'm bored," Miss Rachel said flatly.

For an instant Miss Jennifer stared, voiceless. Then: After those soldiers and that woman's baby? After that horrible little old man who kept winking at us?"

"He had a tic," Miss Rachel said. "Anyway, the Hurgraves' house looks lovely from upstairs, and I want to see the inside of it."

"And why, Rachel, are you upstairs?"

"Air," said Miss Rachel promptly.

Miss Jennifer shook her head from side to side, slowly. "You're up to something, Rachel. I know all the signs. Secretiveness, lies, evasions. What on earth has set you going, here in Julia's house?"

"Julia," said Miss Rachel. "Julia sent us a letter she knew would get me up here."

Miss Jennifer cast a look about as though wanting to get her hands on Julia at the moment.

"Then she got cold feet, as usual, and left without telling me what she should. I think I'm beginning to get hold of it, though."

Miss Jennifer drew herself up tall—tall, at least, for Miss Jennifer. "I do now and absolutely forbid you, Rachel—"

"Again?" murmured Miss Rachel. "—to create and trump up any mysteries, intrigues, or horrors. I forbid it. I won't endure it."

"I have never trumped up anything," Miss Rachel defended. "I have smelled out some horrors that were already well hatched. I have sicked the police on a few criminals. They were all criminals before I arrived on the scene, or at least potential criminals. You act as though I'd coached them."

There was the click of a latch in the little silence that followed Miss Rachel's words. There was a step, too, and then Mrs. Parmenter came out of the passageway that led to the bathroom.

She smiled at Miss Rachel and Miss
Jennifer. She was still wearing her uniform, even to the cape. "I'll be powdering my nose. I won't be long now." She went past with an arch, self-conscious step and opened the door opposite Miss Jennifer's.

Miss Jennifer seemed to take in all over again the bleach, the coquettishness, the ornate curls. "That woman," she said. This was as far as Miss Jennifer ever got, since her vocabulary was limited by a Victorian upbringing and she had not Miss Rachel's ear for naughty inventions.

"Yes," murmured Miss Rachel. "I know what you mean. Uncle Mortimer's housekeeper had that same playful expression. Makes me eager to see Mr. Hurgraves."

"He's probably an old fool."

"I shouldn't wonder. He has children, according to Mrs. Parmenter. Perhaps some of them will be around."

Miss Jennifer made her mouth prim. "If you persist in going, understand I don't approve of it."

"I understand," Miss Rachel said meekly. To Miss Jennifer's obvious disgust she went up promptly to get ready. It was not until she was in the gabled room, in the instant before she touched the light switch, that she suspected Mrs. Parmenter had not been in the bathroom at all. She had been here. She had thrown up the blind at the window which Miss Rachel had lowered carefully before going out to dinner.

Across the dark space of the two big gardens shone the lights of the Hurgraves' home. A glow splashed out to half illumine the terrace, and there was the vague pattern of the flagstone and the dark shape of the garden furniture.

A figure extracted itself from a canopied lounge and scuttled off obliquely against the light.

Then Miss Rachel's fingers found the switch and involuntarily pressed it. The room, Julia's rag-bag room, sprang to brightness. The terrace with its scuttling figure—if there were a figure—was outside with the night.

III

THE front door opened upon a circular hall carpeted in deep blue. A stairway whose railing made a spidery pattern of griffons filled its other half. Miss Rachel knew little of ironwork, but she suspected the railing might have been imported before the war from some of the famous works at Nuremberg. Two glass-enclosed cases held displays of leatherwork and brasses. There was a single picture on the pale green wall, an original Goya or something so like it as to fool anyone but an expert. The carpet was a deep sponge underfoot, and the air of the hall was warm with a faint perfume.

Money, Miss Rachel thought; how plainly it all said money.

The circular hall had the rich restraint of a bank, the pride of possession of a museum.

At Miss Rachel's shoulder, Mr. Somplessis drew in his breath with a slight hiss. Mrs. Parmenter, rushing ahead as though the hall were old and familiar territory, smiled back to say: "We'll go right up. Mr. Hurgraves will be expecting me. You two will be the surprise!"

There had been no sign of a servant. Mrs. Parmenter, using her own key, had come in with the accustomed sureness of an old employee. Now, at the top of the plush stairs, she pointed ahead to a closed door. She had changed form her nurse's uniform to a gray silk dinner dress and gold shoes, and the arm she pointed with wore a gold chain with a heart-shaped lock.

"In there, I'll peek in first." She tiptoed to the door. She looked very arch and a little silly. She rapped twice and whistled a scrap of waltz music.

"Monkey business," said Mr. Somplessis unexpectedly in Miss Rachel's ear.

Mrs. Parmenter opened the door and caroled through it: "Happy Birthday to Charlie! Happy Birthday to you!"

A little man hunched in a wheel chair, so white of skin and hair that he looked lifeless, grinned out at them. "Company?" he chirped. "You're a sweetheart, Nettie."

"Am I?" She sidled through and motioned for Miss Rachel and Mr. Somplessis to follow.

The first thing Miss Rachel noticed was that Mr. Hurgraves' room didn't match the hall. Here was Cousin Julia's rag-bag room expanded in size and then jammed full of unwanted stuff. Here were two dressers that matched neither each other nor the bed; here were so many old arm-
chairs they seemed to be sitting in each other’s laps; here was a surf of little tables so thick that walking between them was like wriggling through a maze.

Mr. Somplessis drew another hissing breath and whispered, “So.”

Miss Rachel saw that the patient eyes of the little old man in the wheel chair had followed her scrutiny of his room. There was no lack of courtesy or of warmth in his voice, though, when he asked her to sit down. Miss Rachel suddenly felt sorry for Mr. Hurgraves. He was so obviously sick and so obviously except for Mrs. Parmenter, in utter neglect. Miss Rachel sat down; she wished she hadn’t stared so at the ugly dressers and the shabby chairs.

“I’ve asked the maid to bring us a little wine and some cookies,” Mr. Hurgraves said. “I’m sure the cook made some of her cinnamon cakes today. I smelled them.”

Mrs. Parmenter hovered over him like a hen. “You can’t have wine, darling.”

He touched her hand shyly. “But you and our guests can. Shall we play a bit of bridge?”

They played bridge, at which Mrs. Parmenter proved stupid and Mr. Somplessis nerveless and expert. Some color came into Mr. Hurgraves’ white face. The maid brought a decanter, glasses, a plate of cakes. The wine was the cheapest of claret, and the cookies were baker’s vanilla wafers and not very fresh. More color came into Mr. Hurgraves’ skin when he tasted the claret and the cakes, an angry shame into his eyes.

“I’m so glad they aren’t cinnamon after all,” Miss Rachel said. “I shouldn’t have been able to eat them. Cinnamon disagrees with me so.”

Little old Mr. Hurgraves looked at her gratefully. But Mr. Somplessis murmured: “And your tablets, madame. You forgot them again, didn’t you?”

Miss Rachel could not be sure that his liquid black eyes were laughing. Later, after an hour and a half that seemed to have done wonders for Mr. Hurgraves, while Mrs. Parmenter led them by the terrace and the garden pathway back to Julia’s, Miss Rachel remembered that unpleasant remark—unpleasant and yet without any expression whatever—and she wondered for the first time just what purpose Mr. Somplessis had in wanting to meet old Mr. Hurgraves.

MR. SOMPLESSIS was not the sort of person to entertain idle curiosity. He had the streamlined purpose of a cobra, the directness of a stiletto. There had been something about old Mr. Hurgraves, or about the house itself, which had taken him into it.

Mrs. Parmenter was prattling in the fragrant dark of the garden. Her words floated back, and gradually Miss Rachel gathered that she was talking about the other Hurgraves.

“... Donald and Kay. Kay’s the most beautiful thing. There are people whose hair is the color of platinum, really, though I didn’t used to believe it. Kay makes you remember those fairly ladies we read about as children.”

“La Bella Dame Sans Mercy,” whispered Mr. Somplessis in a tone Miss Rachel almost didn’t hear.

The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy... Miss Rachel’s thoughts translated Keats’s title and then went back to lisening to Mrs. Parmenter.

“Then there’s Ivy. A dear, plain girl. And Bob. Bob’s a cousin or something; his last name is Grennel.”

“Bob?” said Miss Rachel, her thoughts flying back to a postcard and the delicate traceries of the Governor’s Palace in Bombay.

“Bob’s a sailor. He’s gone all the way around the world on a tanker since the war, right through swarms of submarines—”

“And he’s home now?”

“He’ll be here from Philadelphia in a day or two.”

“And those are all of the Hurgraves?”

“Well.” Mrs. Parmenter ducked into the arbor, and the gray silk glimmered faintly in the dark. “There’s Rheba. It’s hard to know Rheba. She’s older than the other children. A stepdaughter. Mr. Hurgraves married her mother some years ago. The home and furnishings were Mrs. Hurgraves’. Perhaps you noticed—Well, I won’t mention that.”

The image of the entry hall, the lacy banister, the Goya, the antique leathers, and the brasses rose in Miss Rachel’s mind.
“Mr. Hurgraves’ furniture was his own?”

There was a trace of hesitation on Mrs. Parmenter’s part. Then, since they were almost at Julia’s back door, she said quickly: “Since Mrs. Hurgraves died, there’s been some friction. On account of Mr. Hurgraves’ illness, his wife had taken control of some business interests before her death, and I’ve heard talk she left some things to Rheba the others think should have been theirs. Of course this is family gossip.” She stopped and turned on Julia’s back steps and looked across the gardens to the brick bulk of the Hurgraves’ house, the terrace with its slanted light. For the first time Miss Rachel saw a touch of worry, even a trace of fear, in Mrs. Parmenter’s smooth face. “Rheba’s caused so much trouble. I don’t like her. There, I’ve said it. Even if someone heard me . . .” She dropped her tone and went in.

Mr. Somplessis came silently out of the dark. “I am afraid Mrs. Parmenter shows poor taste. Were I her patient, I should not wish to have my family talked about so freely.”

Miss Rachel didn’t answer; she let him go past her and shut the screen. From the dark below the steps came a soft meow, and Samantha showed green eyes in the kitchen light.

“You’ve been out long enough,” Miss Rachel said. She put down a hand, which Samantha disdained. “Come, kitty, bad kitty. Come.”

Samantha looked back into the darkness—Miss Rachel was unaccountably reminded of Mrs. Parmenter at Mr. Hurgraves’ door—and gave forth a throaty sound of invitation. To Miss Rachel’s amusement a cat as gray as Mrs. Parmenter’s dinner dress slid up to stop at Samantha’s side. He was huge, battered, obviously male.

“Not tonight,” Miss Rachel said firmly, and caught Samantha before she could get away. A light came on somewhere above, made a square patch of brightness against the tangle of the arbor. Miss Rachel studied the slant of the beam, then stepped off the porch to have a look. Then light shone in her room at the top of the house.

Miss Rachel scurried through the house with the frightened cat. She passed Mr. Somplessis at the door of the living room, preparing to light a cigar. In the second-floor hall was Jennifer.

“Someone’s up there!” Miss Rachel flung at her, then ran into the closet space and up the narrow stairs.

Mrs. Parmenter was standing in the middle of the room.

She was looking at the bed, made up with Julia’s prized patchwork quilts and a russet spread, turned down by Chloe before she had gone. Miss Rachel’s toilet articles on the dressing table, a suitcase as yet unpacked on the chair, a spray of honeysuckle in a glass seemed also interesting. She looked at Miss Rachel, when she came up, with a touch of panic.

“I didn’t dream . . . Did Chloe put you up here?”

“I love a high room so,” Miss Rachel managed, much out of breath.

“Oh.” Mrs. Parmenter looked about helplessly, and Miss Rachel waited. Finally she stammered: “I thought I heard a noise up here. That’s why I happened to come up.”

“Mice, no doubt,” suggested Miss Rachel.

“Ah . . . I suppose it must have been.” She looked at Samantha, struggling to get out of Miss Rachel’s grip. “Of course your cat will take care of them.”

Miss Rachel let Samantha drop. “Before I shall ever hear them.”

Mrs. Parmenter colored ever so little. “I’ve been in the habit of coming up here once in a while on warm nights. One gets the breeze from the river, and there’s the view.”

“I thought of the view,” said Miss Rachel. “Well, I . . .” She passed Miss Rachel, turned at the head of the narrow stairs. “I won’t keep you up any longer. We had a nice evening, didn’t we?”

“I thought Mr. Hurgraves a very nice gentleman.”

“He’s so sweet.” Mrs. Parmenter inspected her golden bracelet with its heart-shaped lock. “He’d do anything for me. If you just knew . . . But I won’t keep you.” The golden slippers tapped down into silence. Miss Rachel hung over the banister until she was sure that Mrs. Parmenter was gone.

There was a disadvantage to the room. It had no door.
Though the turn in the stairway insured privacy from people going to and from the bathroom below, there was no way that Miss Rachel could close her room and be sure that it would stay closed. She would, she decided, have to depend on Samantha for warning if there were intruders.

She went to bed presently and tried to force herself to sleep by remaining utterly still. She kept on being still even when Mrs. Parmenter returned shoeless, a gray ghost with a heavy breath, to rummage briefly in the drawers of the dressing table. Mrs. Parmenter’s lilac sachet stained the night; Samantha woke and watched her, and Miss Rachel felt the irritated movements of her pet.

At last Mrs. Parmenter stole away, having been a good deal more quiet than the mice she thought had brought her up before.

Miss Rachel gave her ten minutes, then got up and put on the light. The bottom drawer of the dressing table no longer contained the postcard from Bombay or the burned cuff link. The cigarette butts had been removed previously by Chloe.

Nor was the little mirror anywhere on the ledge of the window.

Miss Rachel made mental notes: Mrs. Parmenter had used the room for spying upon or signaling to the Hurgraves’ house; perhaps both. She had a postcard sent from Bombay by a cousin of the Hurgraves’ who had made a trip around the world in a tanker; she had a burned cuff link that might mean anything.

Or all of it might mean that she and Mr. Hurgraves carried on their mild flirtation by signaling during Mrs. Parmenter’s off hours.

Miss Rachel went back to bed. She was conscious of nothing more terrifying than a small irritation at Julia for running away ahead of time, a mild pity for the transparenties of Mrs. Parmenter, an unreasonable dislike for Mr. Somplessis because he was sly. No terror, no choke of fear.

She went to sleep at last. Sometime during the night she stirred awake to hear incredible music. It seemed just outside, a waveling and plaintive melody, graceful and yet grieving. A minuet, Miss Rachel thought, coming more awake. A minuet played on—of all instruments—a mouth harp.

And Mr. Somplessis was doing it out of his window, or it couldn’t possibly seem so close.

Miss Rachel, very sleepy, reached for her slipper and tapped smartly with its heel upon the floor. The minuet broke off into startled silence. She had a fuzzy thought of Mr. Somplessis looking at his ceiling, black eyes shining in the dark, his mouth still open where his harmonica had been.

Miss Rachel looked at the old-fashioned lapel watch under her pillow. It was midnight.

She gave Mr. Somplessis a final admonishing rap and went back to sleep. In the morning she could scarcely believe the thing had happened. Mr. Somplessis, at breakfast in a figured silk dressing gown as oriental as a fez, was matter-of-fact and even a trifle dour.

“I heard your music,” Miss Rachel said to him in the middle of the grapefruit. “I wish you’d play sometime when we’re not trying to sleep. It sounded lovely.”

Mr. Somplessis seemed to brace himself; he avoided Miss Jennifer’s stare at what Miss Rachel had said of him. “Sometimes at night I find it difficult to sleep. I play a bit for relaxation. Since no one else has had a room on my particular corner, I haven’t disturbed anyone. After this I’ll be more careful.”

Miss Jennifer returned: “You wouldn’t bother her if she weren’t up there like an owl.”

“Eagle,” suggested Miss Rachel.

“Someday I’m going to supply Rachel with the most ghastly crime. I’ll have clues and blood and . . . and things . . .”

The line of thought must have seemed erratic to Mr. Somplessis, but he regarded Miss Jennifer with grave interest.

“Then, after Rachel’s worn herself out over these repulsive items, I’ll reveal the joke. There won’t be any crime, any body, any murderer. And I hope the silliness of its cures Rachel of meddling for all time.”

She seemed to have given Mr. Somplessis something to think about. He sat utterly still and looked into his grapefruit.

“Do you know,” he said at last, “you have an amazing idea there.”

Miss Rachel thought: I don’t like the way he said that.

Miss Jennifer, warming up, went on to details. “I’ll have bloodstained footprints
and a knife—it’ll be bloody, too—and a woman’s coat all full of gashes. I know the sort of thing Rachel goes for.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Somplessis absently.

Chloe came in with an omelet, but Mr. Somplessis waved his plate away. “I have a great many things to do today. I’d better get at them. Excuse me, please.” He put down his napkin and bowed himself out of the room.

Miss Jennifer was a triffe crestfallen at the sudden departure of her audience. She kept glancing at Rachel as if to see what effect her threats might have had. The omelet, the biscuits with apple butter and honey, gradually distracted her.

Miss Rachel dawdled over her food, her mind on other matters. She hoped that Mr. Somplessis’ affairs took him out of the house. She was planning to thoroughly ransack both his and Mrs. Parmenter’s rooms.

IV

For, after all, Cousin Julia had been nervous about something. Perhaps nothing more dangerous than a coquettish Mrs. Parmenter signaling a lonely Mr. Hurgraves. Or Mr. Somplessis’ unfortunate habit of playing a mouth harp at midnight.

But it would not hurt in the least to have a peep at the belongings of these people and make sure—for Julia’s sake, of course—that there was nothing underhanded going on. Mrs. Parmenter was gone even now for the day. Mr. Somplessis might soon depart. Miss Rachel would have to keep an eye out for Chloe and make sure that Miss Jennifer was settled down to knit. What Jennifer could say about such escapades was monumental.

Even as Miss Rachel took a last thoughtful bite of biscuit, Mr. Somplessis came hurrying down the hall. He nodded politely at them through the dining-room door. He was wearing his double-breasted suit and carried a brief case.

Miss Rachel watched the brief case with regret and then grew hopeful as he paused suddenly, set it down against the door some five feet from where Miss Rachel sat, and rushed off back upstairs.

To Jennifer’s expressed horror, Miss Rachel scurried over to the brief case and picked it up. There was not time to risk unlocking the catch or undoing the buckled straps. Miss Rachel shook it hard and listened. There was nothing, no whisper of paper, no weight, no slightest stir of contents.

Mr. Somplessis rushed down a moment later, patting a fresh handkerchief in his breast pocket. He picked up the brief case with another nod for Miss Jennifer, who was pink, and Miss Rachel, who was demure.

Miss Jennifer, stiff with indignation, put out a hand. “Mr. Somplessis . . .” she said.

He paused again, courteously but impatiently, and Miss Rachel began to look somehow like a little girl who is going to be spanked.

“Your left shoe is coming untied,” said Miss Jennifer in a tone like a pricked balloon. Mr. Somplessis thanked her and meticulously retied his shoe. Then he said good-by and the front door closed after him.

“Would you really, Jennifer?” said Miss Rachel.

“No.” Miss Jennifer pushed away from the table miserably. “But you deserve it. You’re getting worse. You snoop when there’s no excuse for snooping.”

“There was an excuse,” said Miss Rachel. “I wondered what he might be taking away with him.” She rose also and went out with Jennifer into the hall. “It was very decent of him not to be taking anything.”

“I don’t see how that can be any concern of yours.”

Miss Rachel sighed. There would be a tedious hour now while Jennifer puttered about, getting ready to knit. To pass some of the time, Miss Rachel took the cat out into the garden. The gray tom jumped off an arbor seat and stood with his back arched, still half asleep.

There was a step on the path that led over to the stone fence and the Hurgraves’ home. A young woman with hair the color of walnut wood came through the curtain of vines. She had a snub nose and a wide, uncurving mouth and freckles. She was dressed in gray slacks and a green sweater. The clothes were not new; the slacks had a tuck at the waist, as though they had
belonged to some bigger person. She was about twenty. She was so plain that you thought the word plain the instant you looked at her face and before you looked at her hands. Her hands were lovely, brown and slim and alive.

"Oh," she said, seeing Miss Rachel.

"Hello," said Miss Rachel.

"I'm Ivy Hurgraves," the girl said awkwardly. "I came after Rheba's cat." She reached for the gray tom, and he leaned toward her, purring.

"I think he came visiting my cat, and he may not stay home very well while she's here," Miss Rachel said.

"Oh." She stood there in the sun, looking at the gray cat as though he presented a problem. "Rheba won't like his running away. She's very particular that he stay home."

"Cats," observed Miss Rachel, "are inclined to be cats."

The girl smiled a little and the brown eyes softened. "I don't believe I'll even mention seeing him here. Would that be so bad a lie?"

"It wouldn't be a lie at all," said Miss Rachel, glad that Jennifer wasn't here to confuse the issue. "You'll save her being cross. Rheba, I mean."

The girl lifted the gray cat and left him on the arbor seat. "Go back to sleep, Silver." She glanced shyly at Miss Rachel.

"Are you Miss Julia's cousin?"

"I'm Rachel Murdock."

"Miss Julia spoke to me about your coming."

Miss Rachel tried to think of something further to say; there was an awkward moment, and to break it she burst out with: "I suppose it was your father Mrs. Parmenter took us to visit last night?"

The girl's face grew rigid under Miss Rachel's glance. "Mrs. Parmenter? Do you mean ... into the house? Into Father's room?"

"We played bridge," Miss Rachel said, lame in the face of the girl's fright. "It was his birthday. At least Mrs. Parmenter said it was."

"Yes, it was Father's birthday." She took a moment and achieved calmness again. "Rheba doesn't know," she said as if to herself. "She doesn't know, and so there hasn't been a fuss."

"You mean that Rheba wouldn't have liked us being in your home?"

"In her home," the girl said.

"Rheba is your sister?"

"She is my stepsister." A touch of weariness tightened the line of the generous mouth. "She isn't always very easy to live with."

"I understand," Miss Rachel said.

"Did you ever live with a stepsister who owns the bed you sleep in, the clothes you wear, the food you eat, the very toothbrush and soap you keep yourself clean with?"

Miss Rachel shook her head. She was a little abashed by the sudden vehemence in Ivy's voice, the light cold as steel in her eyes.

"Then you don't understand," said the girl. She turned quickly and ran through the vines and into the green twilight of the spreading fig. She ran as though getting away from the passionate regret in what she had just said.

Miss Rachel recalled Mrs. Parmenter's words, rattled off in the dark here under the arbor. "Then there's Ivy. A dear, plain girl."

SHE left the cats looking interestedly at each other from opposite ends of a bench and went in to find Jennifer. Miss Jennifer was in the living room. She had glanced over the war news and was settling herself to knit. Chloe and the cook could be heard laughing in the kitchen. Miss Rachel slid upstairs and in through Mr. Somplessis' door all in one flow of movement, like a diver going into a pool.

Mr. Somplessis' room had been begun as heavily Victorian, which was all right except that Mr. Somplessis had added a few things of his own. These included a three-foot statue of Buddha in eggshell crackleware, a train of ivory elephants, an incense burner as big as a washbasin (there was incense in it, burning with an odor of sandalwood), and some wall hangings full of dancing girls in gauze. The effect was much like that of Mr. Somplessis in a double-breasted suit. If Julia knew what he had done to her Victorian room there was little wonder she refused to eat with him. Here was a bazaar on Downing Street, a minaret sprung up in Berkeley Square.
It was funny and strange and a little unpleasant.

Miss Rachel studied the room briefly and then went to work. In the course of the next fifteen minutes she discovered some remarkable things about Mr. Somplessis.

He had an immense store of Egyptian cigarettes in a box under his bed. He slept in his underwear or in nothing at all. He used a skin lotion and a hair oil with a heavy, cloying perfume. He owned four dressing gowns, all silk and all oriental-looking, and a complete polo outfit. He liked preserved ginger, caffeine tablets, and books on the inheritance laws of California.

Miss Rachel took the books—there were three of them—to the window from the floor of the closet where she had found them. They had been well read, and some passages were marked, passages relating to the inheritance of properties from a deceased husband or wife where there was no will and where there were other claimants.

Miss Rachel put the books away after a cursory study, but she went on thinking about them. She also took a long look out of Mr. Somplessis’ windows, which framed, each at a slightly different angle, the terrace and the rear windows of the Hurgraves’ house.

The mouth organ was on Mr. Somplessis’ dresser, and next to it was a pair of field glasses.

“I am beginning to think,” Miss Rachel told the gauzy ladies on the wall, “that Mr. Somplessis is up to something.”

There was this peculiarity also about him: he had no friends who wrote him letters and he had no personal papers of any sort stored away. There was no object in the room which bore the name Somplessis. Two of his handkerchiefs were initialed: R. H.

Miss Rachel made sure that all of Mr. Somplessis’ belongings were as she had found them and slipped out warily to Mrs. Parmenter’s door. Here was Chloe, running a dust mop over the shining floor, her back to Miss Rachel, humming a minor tune to herself.

Mrs. Parmenter’s room, like Mr. Somplessis’, had started as strictly Victorian; and, like Mr. Somplessis, she had done something about it. She had added two kewpie lamps with pink shades, a pink rayon spread, some satin souvenir pillows painted lavishly with beach scenes and poppies, a tinted photograph of herself in a beaded frame, and a stuffed toy dog with one eye closed in a sly wink.

If Mr. Somplessis had conjured a minaret in Berkeley Square, Mrs. Parmenter had brought Coney Island to the vicarage.

Miss Rachel coughed discreetly.

Chloe turned and smiled her easy, friendly smile. “Can I do something for you, ma’am?”

As an excuse for looking in, Miss Rachel said: “I was wondering if you’d seen my cat.”

“I believe cook coaxed her in to eat. Liver. Is that all right?”

“It’s her favorite food. I’m sure she’ll be very grateful.”

Chloe bent to run the mop expertly under the bed. She brought out a trace of lint; she looked in disapproval at the counterpane, which was awry. “I wish Mrs. Parmenter would let me shake out her bed and make it up good for her. Look at the wrinkles, show through clear at the top. Wouldn’t be lint falling after I got through.”

“It could stand straightening,” Miss Rachel agreed, eying the bed.

“She’s very particular about that bed,” Chloe said. “She wants it her way and no other.”

Miss Rachel passed a noncommittal remark and went discreetly away. A half hour later, Chloe having gone below to dust the living room, Miss Rachel flew back to explore. Under Mrs. Parmenter’s untidy pillow her fingers found cold steel. She drew out the little gun. It was like a toy inside her palm, and a quick look into the chamber showed it to be unloaded.

For the first time the feeling came over Miss Rachel that Mrs. Parmenter was not only silly, she was on the verge of idiocy. She had a gun with which she obviously hoped to protect herself. The gun was not loaded; it was, therefore, a bluff. The thing Miss Rachel had learned most thoroughly during a considerable number of skirmishes with crime was not to bluff a bullet. She sighed; she put the little gun back and patted the pillow down over it.

Looking for other signs of fear on Mrs. Parmenter’s part, she found the bar-and-socket lock at the top of the door. She
climbed a chair to examine the lock more closely. It was quite new, and the scars made by Mrs. Parmenter's unskilful handling of a screwdriver were raw in the wood.

Miss Rachel put the chair away and sat on the bed to think.

Mrs. Parmenter expected something or someone to try to get in at her. Miss Rachel, casting about for suspects, tried to recall every detail of the woman's attitude toward Mr. Somplessis. She had not been enthusiastic about his going over to Hurgraves', and yet at the end of the evening she had thanked him sincerely for having made a fourth in old Mr. Hurgraves' beloved game of bridge. She had been uniformly coy with Mr. Hurgraves.

It wouldn't be either of them, Miss Rachel thought, or there would have been traces of strain in her manner. Somebody else, then? Someone in the disconcerted household beyond the flagstone terrace? Miss Rachel ticked them off in her mind from her memory of Mrs. Parmenter's prattlings. Donald and Kay: they were married. Kay, the Hurgraves' daughter-in-law, was exquisitely beautiful. A bit spoiled, Mrs. Parmenter's tone had hinted. Ivy, whom Miss Rachel had met that morning in the arbor. Would it be plain, freckled, thwarted little Ivy?

No, not Ivy.

There was, if she remembered correctly, someone named Bob who was due home on a trip around the world on a tanker. And then there was Rheba, the stepdaughter who owned the house.

It was Rheba whom Mrs. Parmenter didn't like.

Miss Rachel went thoughtfully across the room to rummage among Mrs. Parmenter's dresser drawers. She found a great deal of talcum and cologne, two jars of anti-wrinkle cream, many discarded lipsticks, and a box of curlers which showed much evidence of wear. In a mass of pink silk lingerie Miss Rachel found the postcard from Bombay and the burned cuff link. They were tied up together inside a brassiere.

Miss Rachel studied the postcard again, but it gave nothing more; the boy named Bob had mailed it in Bombay. The message, I made it, referred no doubt to the ship's having escaped the submarine menace. And yet... one might think Bombay had been Bob's destination.

She put the card back, rearranged Mrs. Parmenter's things into their accustomed confusion. Miss Jennifer's voice was in the hall, calling her. Miss Rachel waited until Jennifer went to explore the gabled room and then slipped out.

She found that the house looked different. There was a sense of danger in it. Closed doors and shadowy corners held unpleasant possibilities, and even Chloe's easy laughter sounded a little false.

"I'm imagining things," Miss Rachel told herself.

Late in the afternoon, after a good deal of thought that got nowhere, she told Miss Jennifer about Mrs. Parmenter's gun and the new lock on Mrs. Parmenter's door. With reactions from Jennifer as recorded elsewhere.

Mr. Somplessis did not appear at dinner. Sometime after eight Mrs. Parmenter fled through the hall, and from the glimpse Miss Rachel got of her from the living room, she thought the woman had been crying. Her bedroom door slammed with a noise that re-echoed to the front of the house. Then there was silence.

Since their conversation that afternoon, during which Jennifer had tried to remind her of their father's sensible teachings, Jennifer had been a trifle cross and inclined to sulk. The story of the little man who had got up in church to tell the congregation of Mr. Murdock's business ethics was not one of Miss Jennifer's favorites. After being forced to listen to it, she usually punished Rachel with silence.

At nine Miss Jennifer went up to bed without saying good night. Miss Rachel, after waiting for some sign of life from Mrs. Parmenter and the belated homecoming of Mr. Somplessis, gave up and followed. In the gabled room she stood in the dark and looked down at the garden; there were fragrance and a warm wind and a lonely cricket, but no sound of prowling.

"Julia and Mrs. Parmenter are two of a kind. They're frightening themselves over nothing at all," Miss Rachel decided. She undressed in the dark and slipped into bed, and the cat jumped up beside her.

After a long while of uneasy slumber, of
dreams, of stirrings and complainings from Samantha, Miss Rachel awoke. The room had the chill odor of just before dawn and something more; something quite ugly and unpleasant, a strong, sickening smell that brought her out of bed with a jump.

She put a bare foot to the floor and then drew it back quickly. Something cold and sticky and congealing remained on her sole. Then, since she must, she padded through it to the light switch.

Before her was the explanation of the smell, the horrid stickiness on her foot, and Samantha’s restlessness. Poured out in puddles and rivers, angling away in the seams of the flooring, was such a gout of blood as Miss Rachel had not dreamed could be.

V

HER first thought was of Jennifer. “She’s done it,” Miss Rachel told the cat, “and it isn’t good. It’s clumsy and there’s too much. Much too much.”

She cleansed her feet with a towel, put on a robe, and ran downstairs to rap at Miss Jennifer’s door. Miss Jennifer, in curl papers and a voluminous flannel nightgown, yawned at her through a crack of light.

“Goodness, Rachel, whatever gets into you? It’s the middle of the night.”

“You forgot the body,” Miss Rachel said cleverly. “And footprints. Remember?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about and I’m sleepy,” said Miss Jennifer.

Miss Rachel giggled. “There’s blood a foot deep in my bedroom. Don’t say you didn’t put it there.”

Miss Jennifer’s eyes at the crack seemed suddenly more awake. “I do not,” she said distinctly, “go about ruining other people’s floors with messes such as you describe. Anyway, you dreamed it. Go back to bed.”

“I didn’t dream it. Come and look.”

Miss Jennifer very reluctantly went to look. A moment of seeing Miss Rachel’s floor from the top of the stairs sent her back down again shrieking. Stupidly, Miss Rachel stood in her room and listened to Jennifer in the hall below; she was flapping about erratically, pounding on doors and screaming warnings through them to Mrs. Parmenter and Mr. Soplessis.

There was interruption; the opening of a door and the stoppage of Jennifer’s breathless screams. Then, a moment or so later, the dark face of Mr. Soplessis looked at Miss Rachel from the stairway.

“I do not understand,” he said. “Your sister said there had been a crime committed here.”

Miss Rachel indicated the great stain on her floor. “Obviously,” she pointed out, “no one lost that much blood and then casually walked away. It’s a hoax. I thought at first it was Jennifer’s.”

There was a brief flicker of his eyelids; his smile widened and hung there forgotten. “You refer to her threats at breakfast? Yes, this would fit their pattern, wouldn’t it?”

“You were there,” Miss Rachel said pointedly.

He bowed. “Perhaps we should investigate further, however, before we dismiss it as a joke.”

They went down, and for the next half hour a thorough search went on. It was Miss Rachel who found the cut screen in Julia’s service porch and the outlandish bloody footprint in the hall. The footprint frightened her so at first that she almost screamed the way Jennifer had. There was a blob of red in the rough shape of a sole and six—she counted them tremblingly—six toes. At that moment she quit wanting to scream and felt like having hysteries. Laughing hysteries. The thing was so obviously trite, so obviously and poorly put on.

She went back to the upper hall, where Jennifer and Mr. Soplessis stood whispering.

“I see,” said Miss Rachel, “that you are comparing notes as to the success of your little plot. Well, it has succeeded. I’m thoroughly mystified. Now shouldn’t we get busy with some mops and clean up Julia’s floor?”

There was something wrong, something strange, in the way they turned to her. Miss Jennifer was white and her eyes had grown very big. Mr. Soplessis’ eyelids opened and shut with a nervous twitch.

In the silence and brightness of the upper hall, Miss Rachel felt a trace of goose flesh creep out along her arms.

“It’s Mrs. Parmenter,” Miss Jennifer whispered. “She won’t open her door.”
"How do you know she's in there?" Miss Rachel wondered.

"Well... shouldn't she be?"

Miss Rachel went to Mrs. Parmenter's door and tried it. The latch at the center of the door gave and moved slightly inward; the bolt she knew to be at the top held firm.

Miss Rachel rapped, put her ear to the panel, and listened. A little of the dark and of Mrs. Parmenter's stillness seemed to seep through the wood at her. "It's Miss Rachel," she said loudly. "Please let us in, Mrs. Parmenter."

There was such utter and deadly silence on the other side of the door that an echo of Jennifer's alarm sprang up in her. She rapped again; listened again. From the way Mr. Somplessis looked at her when she turned round, she judged she had grown as white as Jennifer.

She tried to stay calm. "I think we'd better open it, one way or another. Do you think you could smash it in?"

Mr. Somplessis shrugged his narrow shoulders. "With an ax? There is one, I think, in the toolbox in the arbor. But who would be responsible to Miss Julia for the damage?"

"I will," said Miss Rachel. "Hurry."

When Mr. Somplessis came back with the ax, Miss Rachel directed him where to strike the door. "Something's holding it at the top," she explained.

The first blow cracked the wood; the second split the upper panel, and the broken door swung in the open upon darkness. Miss Rachel reached quickly for the switch. There was a moment of dread, of fluttering hope, before the yellow light flooded the room.

Miss Jennifer said shakily, "Why, there is she!"

"Go back!" said Miss Rachel.

Mr. Somplessis stared at the figure on the bed. Burrowed into the folds of the rayon satin spread was the figure of Mrs. Parmenter. She was wearing a pink nightgown and her hair was rolled on aluminum curlers.

"Her face," muttered Mr. Somplessis incredulously.

Miss Jennifer screamed.

Mrs. Parmenter's face was quite hideous, almost unrecognizable. "She's been strangled," said Miss Rachel. She rushed to the still figure and touched its flesh. "She's been dead awhile. There isn't any hope."

"Come out, Rachel!" shrieked Miss Jennifer.

"Go and call the police," Miss Rachel answered. She saw how Mrs. Parmenter's struggles had disarranged the bed. Not so much as might be expected from a woman as large as she, however, fighting for life. She ran a quick hand under Mrs. Parmenter's pillow, found the cold touch of the little gun. This was what Mrs. Parmenter should have reached for in the first moment of danger. Miss Rachel looked slowly about the room. One of the kewpie lamps was missing. Miss Rachel walked to the dresser and picked up its mate. The base was heavy, of solid plaster, and the kewpie's head made an excellent handle if one should wish to use the lamp as a weapon.

"There's one missing," she said.

Mr. Somplessis coughed discreetly at the back of his hand. "Shouldn't we leave things as they are! The police expect it, do they not?"

"Rachel," moaned Miss Jennifer from the hall, "don't touch it!"

"Go and do as I told you," said Miss Rachel crossly. She resented the scrutiny of Mr. Somplessis' liquid eyes. She wanted to find the missing kewpie lamp and prove to herself whether it might not have been used to render Mrs. Parmenter almost helpless before the strangling took place.

She knelt to peep under the bed, and Mr. Somplessis knelt down beside her.

"You are familiar with death, yes?" he asked curiously.

"I discovered a long time ago that the best thing to do about a murdered person is to try to find out who killed him. Or her," Miss Rachel said with some acidity, "It's so much more informative than fainting."

He studied her. "You are a most resourceful lady."

"Thank you." Under the bed having proved empty, Miss Rachel rose. Mr. Somplessis stood also; he motioned toward the dead figure of Mrs. Parmenter.

"Where is the thing which strangled her?"

"It's still in her flesh," Miss Rachel said, not without a shiver. "Quite deep, I
imagine. Wire, or something as strong and as narrow."

A shade of respect crept into Mr. Somplessis' attitude. "What connection is there, then, between Mrs. Parmenter's death and the blood you found in your room?"

Miss Rachel stared at him until the color came up darkly into his sallow face. "Can't you explain that?"

"I don't know what you mean," he evaded. He turned and walked to Mrs. Parmenter's windows and jerked at the blinds. Mrs. Parmenter must have believed thoroughly in fresh air; every pane was up and the fragrance of the garden stole into the garish room.

Miss Rachel kept a close eye on Mr. Somplessis' hands. "Are any of the screens unlatched?"

"One of them," he said expressionlessly.

Miss Rachel went to look; she pushed open the screen, whose hook seemed lost, and gazed down into Julia's garden. "We'd better leave the garden for the police," she said. "They'll want to hunt for footprints and things." She drew her head in to surprise a fearsome look in the eyes of the dark little man.

"Indeed," he stammered. "I suppose we'd better leave the rest of it for them."

It was odd that he should suddenly, after calmness over Mrs. Parmenter, begin to stagger and shake.

"I believe Julia keeps a decanter of brandy in her sideboard," Miss Rachel told him. "We might have just a bit to bolster us."

Miss Jennifer staggered away from the telephone in the hall as they came down; she followed into the dining room, but when Rachel poured out brandy she protested. "Meddling with a murdered woman, and to top it off, you start drinking!"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Miss Rachel. "I'm not depraved; I'm feeling chilly. The house is cold."

"And there's Mrs. Parmenter," muttered Mr. Somplessis, throwing the shot of brandy down his throat.

"Well . . . " said Miss Jennifer tremblingly.

Miss Rachel poured her a drink. "I knew you wanted it all along."

Miss Jennifer began sputtering words, but Miss Rachel didn't wait to hear. She finished her own drink and then scurried into the back hall where she had found the bloody footprint. The light was on and there it was—six toes and all. With a sniff for its improbability, Miss Rachel went on through the kitchen to the service porch.

A SCREEN over the laundry tub was cut and folded back neatly to show a triangle of outer darkness. Miss Rachel bent closer. There was no bending of the cut edge where an intruder would have crawled in over it, no snag of lint from clothing, no displacement of the faint layer of dust on the ledge above the tub.

"If he came in here, he floated through naked," Miss Rachel said to herself impatiently. She was looking through the screen at the tangle that showed beyond, a rumple of stock and heliotrope, vaguely pastel in the light that seeped through the screens of the porch. And a pair of shoes.

Incredibly, in the flowering dimness of Julia's garden, there was a pair of men's shoes. Sturdy and darkly oiled and thick-soled. A workingman's shoe. Miss Rachel ducked a trifle and saw a pair of denim-covered legs. "Who's out there?" she called.

The legs moved a little, uncertainly, with a hint of wanting to bolt off into the dark. Then a young voice answered her: "It's me. I'm Bob Grennel. I was—I thought you might be Mrs. Parmenter."

A whole series of little items about Bob Grennel ran through Miss Rachel's head in that instant—items a bit gruesomely in the voice of Mrs. Parmenter herself, items such as Bob Grennel being a cousin of the Hurgraves, gone on a trip around the world in a freighter, sending a postcard from Bombay.

Bombay. There was that snatch of thought again. I made it, he had written. Just three words, as though arrival in Bombay were of the utmost importance. Not: I made it from Philadelphia, with submarines left safely behind and home ahead.

"I got in rather late tonight, been away a while, and I thought if I could I'd wake Nettie up and talk to her." He advanced a little, so that Miss Rachel saw a brown sweater, a thick young pair of arms. "But
I heard some sort of funny noises a while ago."

*Jennifer's screams...*

"I wondered," he finished huskily, "if anything was wrong."

He sounded very sincere and very puzzled. "Just how long," Miss Rachel asked, "have you been standing out there?"

"Oh." The brown sweater shrugged. "Five or ten minutes."

How to tell him he'd arrived just too late to talk to Nettie Parmenter, that Nettie was recently and thoroughly and very horribly dead?

"I scarcely know how to begin," said Miss Rachel; at that moment, from somewhere off toward the center of the town, a police siren raised its baying tone and began to beat toward them. "Mrs. Parmenter has met with a—with an accident."

He seemed to jump at her from the bed of stock, and his face showed at the narrow opening in the screen: a young, tanned, very masculine face, topped with a dirty cap in which shone his seaman's button. "Nettie's hurt? Is that what the yelling was about?"

Miss Rachel studied the real alarm in his eyes. "Mrs. Parmenter is most seriously hurt."

He ran to the screen door and tried to get in. When Miss Rachel obliged by opening the latch, he bounded through. He was bigger than he had seemed in the garden; there was a sort of roughhewn look about him, and he smelled of strong soap and tobacco.

"Where is she?" he cried.

"In her room," stuttered Miss Rachel, "but you mustn't go up there. She's—"

The words were wasted. He was gone. He knew his way easily through Julia's house, Miss Rachel saw as she ran after him. He took the stairs to the second floor three at a time; he jerked at Mrs. Parmenter's broken door. There was a strangled and incredulous cry and afterward silence. Miss Rachel peeped in. Bob Grennel was standing by the bed where Mrs. Parmenter's body lay; he had his hands over his eyes and he was weeping hoarsely.

Miss Rachel thought to herself how easy and violent are the emotions of the young. He was not more than twenty-two; Mrs. Parmenter must have been almost twenty years his senior, and no matter how good a friend she had been, it was odd that he should be so shattered, so instantly in grief.

Miss Rachel stole in softly and took his arm. "Don't look at her any more. Come downstairs and I'll get you a drink of brandy."

His words came, rough, inexpressible, desolate. "Who did this to her?"

"We don't know," Miss Rachel said, trying to draw him away. "The police are coming. They'll find who did it."

He flung her hand away with sudden impatience. "I have a right here. Leave me be."

"I know," Miss Rachel said. "She mentioned you as a friend."

"A friend?" He gouged at his eyes cruelly with his knuckles to stare at her. There was such a fury of grief in him that he shook with it as if he were cold. "Of course. She didn't wear her heart on her sleeve."

Miss Rachel, not understanding, shook her head.

And then Bob Grennel said the most incredible thing of all. "We hadn't told anyone about our getting married. We were keeping it a secret. See?"

**VI**

**MISS RACHEL** looked involuntarily at the woman on the bed. Even in death—the sort of death Mrs. Parmenter had met—the lines and the faint saggings of forty remained in her face.

"You were married?" Miss Rachel said stupidly.

"No." He gouged his eyes again, choking on his impatience with her lack of understanding. "We were engaged; we would have been married this trip home for me."

Still she tried to orient herself to this new situation; remembering the coyness and the warmth between Mrs. Parmenter and old Mr. Hurgraves only aggravated her confusion. "Had you heard from her during your trip?"

"She wrote in care of the steamship company. I had a letter in almost every port." He fell suddenly to his knees beside the dead woman in a move that was theatrical, a little overdone. "I swear, Nettie," he said, "that whoever did this
will pay for it. I swear that now." He took a closed hand in his and opened it and pressed its palm. "You would have been my wife. To me, you were all I lived for." He leaned, shaking, against the gaudy coverlet.

Miss Rachel stood there, feeling awkward; she tried to think of something comforting to say because the boy's grief seemed so deep, his desolate love so genuine. The memory of Mrs. Parmenter's flirtatious dimples across the bridge table made her shudder. How do you tell someone you're sorry he's lost the woman who was making a fool of him?

The boy sprang up before she could say anything. "Who was with her tonight?"

"We don't know."

Savagely: "What was the screaming about?"

"That was my sister. We'd just found Mrs. Parmenter, as you see her here."

The siren turned into the street below and died before Julia's house. Miss Jennifer, in a scrabbling rush that sounded like a whole basketful of mice, got through the lower hall to the front door.

Bob Grennel had taken on a sudden look of strain. "Maybe I shouldn't be here. Maybe I shouldn't have come in as I did."

"Since you are here, I believe you'd better tell your story to the police. They'd question you eventually, anyway."

"You mean—suspect me?" The square face had turned hard. "Are they crazy?"

"Just careful and thorough. They'll want to know every detail about Mrs. Parmenter, and you can help them."

Steps—a whole procession of steps—came up to Mrs. Parmenter's door and a big stony-eyed man in a black overcoat looked in. "I'm Captain Fuller, Homicide," he said. He walked to the bed and studied the dead woman and rubbed the right side of his face with the knuckle of a thumb. "Here she is, boys. Come on in."

Three men came into the room. One carried a camera and a case of equipment; the second held a satchel that Miss Rachel suspected would contain fingerprint materials; the third had the shrewd look of a ferret, and he began at once to study the locks and the window catches. A little man in a gray fedora peered in through the door. The stony-eyed man looked round at him. "Give us a little while, Doc. I want some good pictures on this." He turned to Miss Rachel. "Are you the lady of this house?"

The old-fashioned phrase contrasted oddly with his brusqueness and the grim expression on his face. "No," said Miss Rachel. "She's away. She's Miss Julia Murdock, my cousin, and she's in Canada."

He stared at her as though trying to convince himself that Miss Rachel was lying. "You found the body?"

"In the presence of my sister and of the other tenant, Mr. Somplessis."

"He's the dark fellow downstairs?"

"Yes."

He jerked a thumb toward Bob Grennel. "Who're you?"

Bob Grennel looked at the woman on the bed. "Robert Grennel. I am—was her fiancé." He called it fee-ants and the word sounded young and a little foolish. "We were going to be married."

"Yeah? You live here, too?"

"I live with my relatives, the Hurgraves family, across the block back of here."

"What are you doing here now?"

"I just got in from a long trip. I'm a merchant sailor. I wanted to see Nettie so much I was going to try to wake her up."

The stony-eyed man flicked a look at his watch. "At four-thirty in the morning?"

Sudden misery welled into Bob Grennel's face. "We were crazy about each other. What in hell difference did it make what time it was?"

"O.K. We'll talk about it later. Go on downstairs, will you?" He seemed a little embarrassed by Grennel's show of emotion, but his glance at Miss Rachel was speculative, cautious. "By the way, don't give that reporter down there any more than the dead woman's name and business. He sneaked up on us this trip."

They went down. In Julia's living room, on a rose-colored divan, Mr. Somplessis was humped and looking somewhat ill. He wore one of his oriental robes and a pair of red Morocco splippers.
Miss Rachel carefully avoided trying to see his pajamas, in case there weren’t any. Miss Jennifer, ramrod-straight in a chintz chair, was finishing a speech to a bored young man who lounged just inside the door.

“Sorry, lady, if you think I’m such a ghoul,” the young man replied as Miss Rachel and Bob Grennel came in. “I just follow the Homicide Squad because it’s a living. I’m really not the kind of creep you think I am.”

“Anyone who meddles with murder, when they don’t have to is a—a creep,” declared Miss Jennifer, stumbling over the unfamiliar use of the word. “A creepy creep. You’re as bad as Rachel.”

Miss Rachel saw that she and Grennel had come in upon an argument, and she was sorry. She would have liked a quiet time to question him.

“Rachel?” The reporter cocked a brow at Miss Jennifer. “Who’s she?”

“My sister there,” snapped Miss Jennifer. “If she hadn’t dragged me up here from a perfectly good home in Los Angeles, none of this would have happened. At least it wouldn’t have happened to me. Rachel’s like that. She’s—almost pathological.” Hereafter, to Miss Rachel’s embarrassment, followed the summary of some of her more lurid exploits.

To her further embarrassment, the reporter seemed to be writing it all down.

“Little old lady crime-bound,” he said wryly. The gleam in his eyes promised mischief. He shook a finger at Miss Rachel, nodded to Miss Jennifer, and went out.

“I got rid of him,” said Miss Jennifer in triumph.

“By giving him a ridiculous story,” Miss Rachel answered, really cross. “Don’t you know, goose, that it’s all going in the paper?”

Miss Jennifer’s mouth flew open and her eyes blinked in an expression of anguish of surprise. She kept very still for a long while after that.

Mr. Somplessis had been staring meanwhile at Bob Grennel, and the look of being extremely ill was shading off into curiosity. Finally he said to Miss Rachel: “This is someone the police found prowling, perhaps?”

“He says his name is Bob Grennel and that he was Mrs. Parmenter’s friend,” said Miss Rachel.

A flicker of brief but complete understanding showed in Mr. Somplessis’ liquid eyes before he concealed it. “So? You have made a journey, Mr. Grennel?”

“Around the world,” said Bob Grennel indifferently; he seemed to have his senses tuned for any sound from upstairs; he had given Mr. Somplessis scant attention.

“You found the journey . . . interesting?”

Bob Grennel shrugged.

“And Mrs. Parmenter welcomed you?”

“How could she,” Grennel said impatiently, “when she was dead?”

A sharpening came into Mr. Somplessis’ tone. “You did not see her alive? Is this your story?”

Bob’s head flung round in a touch of anger. “It’s my story. What of it?” He seemed slowly to take in Mr. Complessis’ appearance: the dull, dark skin, the liquid and brilliant eyes, the black hair like a cap. “Say, what are you? A Hindu?”

The stare and the words were bald, deliberately rude. Mr. Somplessis shot Grennel a momentary look of venom. But he said smoothly: “I am of Armenian descent, Mr. Grennel.”

“You’re damned dark,” said Grennel flatly.

“Through no fault of mine but of nature’s,” said Mr. Somplessis, implying that Grennel was a boor for bringing up the subject.

“Let’s don’t start arguing with each other,” Miss Rachel put in. “We’ve much too much to talk about. Jennifer, you were almost directly across from Mrs. Parmenter’s room. Didn’t you hear anything?”

“If I had heard Mrs. Parmenter being murdered,” Miss Jennifer said shakily but with emphasis, “I’d have started screaming. Right out of my window. For the police.”

“Hmmm. Yes, I believe you would,” said Miss Rachel. “And you, Mr. Somplessis?”

“I should have done what I could to repel the intruder.”

“Had you ever heard Mrs. Parmenter express fear of anyone?”

He spread his dark hand suddenly on the brocade of his robe and spent a mo-
ment studying the outline of his fingers.
"No. She had an intense dislike of Mrs.
Hurgraves, of course."

Miss Rachel was momentarily puzzled.
Then she remembered the Hurgraves’
daughter-in-law. "Kay?"

"No. Rheba."

"But Rheba is Mr. Hurgraves’ step-
daughter."

He shook his head without looking up.
"There is more. Rheba, the stepdaughter,
was married to a cousin of Mr. Hurgraves’,
someone he had raised with his own chil-
dren and who had been like a son to him.
This man isn’t— His whereabouts are
in question, I believe."

Bob Grennel seemed to have come out
of his truculence into a mood of taut at-
tention. "What do you know about my
family?"

"Very little," Mr. Somplessis moved
one shoulder in a shrug. "I had heard
Mrs. Parmenter make some reference to
the mystery about Teddy Hurgraves. Very
casually, I assure you."

"Rheba’s husband being gone has noth-
ing to do with Nettie." Bob Grennel sat
on the edge of his chair and looked at them
one by one. "Nothing whatever. Do you
understand?"

Mr. Somplessis agreed oilily. "We un-
derstand. I mentioned it in passing."

"O.K., said Bob Grennel, relaxing.

An amused, secretive look fluttered over
Mr. Somplessis.

THERE were hard steps in the hall,
and Captain Fuller came to stand just
inside the door. He had a sheet of note
paper in one hand, and there was a kind
of smirk—a happy smirk—on his mouth.
Miss Rachel saw that he was a man who
hid his happy moments in being sour.
Perhaps, she thought, because he thought
happiness was a bit undignified.

He said loudly, "Who is Rheba Hur-
graves?"

Bob Grennel jerked where he sat as
though something had stung him. He
plunged his hands into the pockets of the
brown sweater before answering. "She’s
a relative of mine. She’s my uncle’s step-
daughter, if that’s relationship."

"What connection did she have with the
dead woman?"

"Well ... Employer, I guess you’d

call it. She hired Nettie off and on to
look after my uncle."

Fuller’s stony eyes slid toward the rear
of the house. "Are they all over there
now?"

"All?" said Grennel.
"Your family," said Fuller.
"Sure."

Joyfully—it tried to be sourly—the cap-
tain turned to the stairs. "Jackson. Get
across the alley and bring those people
over here. Yes, in their night clothes, if
that’s what they’re wearing." Jackson
came running down, and Fuller muttered
some instructions. To Jackson’s hurrying
back, he concluded: "I want them over
here before they get together on a yarn.
Hurry at it."

Jackson pounded out at the back.

Bob Grennel sprang up. "Here, you
can’t do that. They’re asleep."

"I hope," said Fuller, coming into the
room. He still held the sheet of note pa-
per; if he saw Miss Rachel craning her
neck to see what was written on it, he
gave no sign. He walked about inspecting
the furnishings like a man passing time
at an auction. After a while he said to
the three of them generally: "This Mrs.
Parmenter was a nurse, I gather. Had
she ever done anything else?"

"She used to be on the stage," Bob
Grennel said. There was some touch of
pride, of footlight fever, in his tone. "Years
ago, of course."

"Any good at it?" asked Fuller.
"I don’t know. I think she did all
right, though."

"And her husband? Where is he?"

"He died a long time ago."

Fuller stood staring at Grennel now,
taking in his youth and the work-worn
clothes and the signs of crying in his face.
"How old are you?" Fuller asked sud-
ddenly.

Grennel stared back defiantly. "I’m old
even to know what I’m doing." His
readiness to flare up betrayed that he had
been goaded on this point; by the other
Hurgraves, perhaps. "I’m over twenty-
one. I can vote. I can earn my own way."

"I said, ‘How old are you?’" Fuller
shot out. "You’ll just make it tough by
getting smart, kid."

"I’m twenty-three," Grennel admitted.
Fuller suddenly thrust the note paper
into his coat pocket. "How long had you known this woman?"

Bob Grennel seemed to take time to think. "About two years, I guess. Maybe a little longer."

"When did you and she get engaged?"

"Just before I left on my trip. Five months ago. I'd asked her before, but she never gave in until she knew I was leaving. Then she admitted that she I-loved me, too, and she let me give her a ring."

"She isn't wearing it now," Fuller said bluntly.

Anger shone in Grennel's eyes. "I know. It wasn't everyone she wanted to know. If Rheba had found out, she would have used it as an excuse to fire her."

"Why?" said Fuller.

"Rheba and Nettie never got along very well. If nurses had been easier to find, I guess Nettie wouldn't have had the job at all. Rheba was always accusing Nettie of things like—like flirting and carrying on with a man."

Fuller made a sucking noise with his tongue and his teeth.

"Who did know of your engagement?"

"Well... Ivy did. I knew I could trust her."

Ivy's plain, unhappy face returned to Miss Rachel's memory. The girl had shared Bob Grennel's secret, had known of his love affair with the older woman. Had some of her half-wistful rebellion been because of it?

Captain Fuller abruptly dropped the line he had taken with Bob Grennel. He turned to Miss Rachel. "Did you see Mrs. Parminter during the evening?" He waited for Miss Rachel's nod. "Was there anything unusual about the way she acted?"

"She seemed upset. She came in after eight—somewhat later than usual, I think. She didn't speak, though she must have seen us sitting in the living room. She seemed to have been crying. She ran upstairs and shut her door, and that was the last we saw of her."

"And you?" said Fuller to Miss Jennifer.

"The same," managed Miss Jennifer, shuddering.

Fuller's eyes had stopped at Mr. Somplessis. "Do you agree with these ladies?"

Mr. Somplessis made a pleat in the brocade across his knee. He didn't look at Fuller. "I was not at home until quite late. I did not witness the scene Miss Rachel describes."

"Where were you?" boomed Fuller, warming up.

"He was in the arbor," Miss Jennifer put in promptly. "I looked out when I opened my windows, after I'd put out my light and was going to bed. And there he was. In the garden. Smoking one of those funny-smelling cigarettes."

Mr. Somplessis' pores seemed visibly to open to let out perspiration. His hand found a kerchief in his pocket. He touched his upper lip and his temples. He was trembling.

"Well?" said Fuller, growing impatient.

"Ah... Yes, I was in the arbor. The night was delightful, and I had not the mood to sleep."

"You were there, then, when Mrs. Parminter came through on her way home?"

"No. I was not there then."

"Wait." Captain Fuller laboriously extracted a small notebook and a disgracefully chewed pencil from an inner pocket. "Better begin to get things straight around here," he muttered.

Mr. Somplessis quivered, shut his eyes, coughed hackily.

"Name, please, and business. And how long you knew the murdered woman," said Fuller.

"My name," Mr. Somplessis stammered, "is a mistake. Yes. First I want to explain that on my arrival here the lady who owns this house, a Miss Julia Murdock, in questioning me—"

His words were gradually overlaid by the sound of running and of excited mumblings in the hall. Fuller turned his head toward the door. A man—the ferret-eyed man who had examined the locks upstairs—ran in. He cried: "Hey, Captain, look at this. Look at this damned goofy thing I stumbled over out there in the dark."

He knelt quickly and put down upon the floor the rather large and loose newspaper-wrapped package he was holding. He pushed the papers aside. The living-room lights shone on a mass of fur clotted and stained red with blood, on green eyes glassy in death, on a cut throat from which the blood poured.

It was the gray tom. Rheba Hurgraves' cat.
A n expression of bafflement and rage squirmed over Captain Fuller’s face. He raised himself from inspecting the dead cat and looked harshly from one to another of the people watching. “Well? What’s this all about?”

“Take it away!” shrieked Miss Jennifer, overcome.

“Poor old tom,” said Miss Rachel in sorrow.

Mr. Somplessis had recovered some of his poise with the distraction of Fuller’s attention elsewhere. He inspected the nails on one dark hand. “Is it dead?”

“Dead?” roared Fuller. “It’s decapitated!”

“Oh,” said Mr. Somplessis.

Captain Fuller pointed an angry finger at the dead tom. “What damned connection has this thing with the woman upstairs?”

“I don’t know,” Miss Rachel said, “but I believe I can show you for what purpose the poor animal was killed.”

Fuller turned the finger on Miss Rachel. “Then do it.”

She took him upstairs, past the room where through an open door, photographer’s bulbs were flashing over Mrs. Parmenter, on up into the gabled room with its horrid splashes of blood. Her own cat mewed at them from the bed and eyed Fuller with suspicion.

Fuller bent down and put a finger into the mess, inspected what clung to his finger tip, then wiped his hand on his kerchief. “Blood, all right. You think it’s the cat’s?”

“I suspected a hoax when I awoke and found it here,” she said.

Fuller cast a profane eye about him. “For the love of Pete, why?”

“Why did I suspect a hoax?”

“No,” he exploded. “Why the mess, why the crazy shenanigans in the first place?”

“Well . . . teasing, I suppose.” She looked at Fuller’s purpling face and decided not to go into the subject in any detail. It was better that he should think them all slightly mad than be warned at the outset that he had an amateur crimister on his hands. “A prank,” she finished. “A sort of joke.”

Captain Fuller looked long at her; he must have seen a tiny, demure old lady with a face like a pixie’s, immaculate in a white chenille robe. He glanced at the floor again. Then he said a few things under his breath, Aloud, and finally: “Now just what connection has this with that woman who’s—”

“I don’t know,” Miss Rachel said again. “At first I thought there must be no connection, that this was just a joke played on me and that the murder had nothing to do with it. Now I’m not sure. The cat whose blood was drained to be poured out up here belonged to Rheba Hurgraves.”

Captain Fuller snatched the paper out of his pocket and reread it. Miss Rachel’s eyes never skipped through anything so quickly. There were four lines of furious-looking script:

Rheba Hurgraves:
I hereby and from this present date resign from your employment. I wish I’d done it long ago. Now that I know just what you are capable of, my only regret is that I

Captain Fuller folded it and thrust it back into his pocket. He began a hurried search of the room. When he tried to pick up the mattress to look under it, Samantha scratched him.

He stood and sucked his scratched hand, and suddenly a new thought seemed to hit him. “Those people. The Hurgraves. Why aren’t they here?” He seemed to listen. “I used to know old man Hurgraves. I wonder if he’ll remember.”

“Surely they won’t bring him,” Miss Rachel said. “He’s an invalid.”

But Fuller had run down into the anteroom where the shelves were and on into the hall. Miss Rachel followed, bringing the cat with her. She was able, from the stairs, to watch Fuller’s entry into the living room and the impact of his presence on the group of unfamiliar people gathered in the center of the floor.

Ivy was one whom Miss Rachel knew at once. She was wearing the sweater and slacks, though with an air of having thrown them on while half asleep. There was a plaid jacket across her shoulders. Her hair was tousled. The freckles stood out in her pale skin.
Next her was a young man, taller and thinner than Bob Grennel, in contrast with him, too, in that his face had a look of sensitive reserve, of moody softness. He looked a lot like Ivy, who must be his sister, and he had hands like hers; long and sure and alive. He had an arm around the girl who must be Kay, his wife.

Kay. Yes, there was no mistaking her, because she deserved all the superlatives Mrs. Parmenter had used about her beauty. Her hair was truly platinum, pale lovely stuff that fell curling below her shoulders. She wore a white satin robe with the faintest overtones of pink. She had fine dark brows—dyed, Miss Rachel surmised—and a mouth with a sulky and petulant look that made her seem very young.

Miss Rachel noticed that old Mr. Hurgraves was not in the room.

Facing Fuller as he came in, and for some moments obscured from Miss Rachel by his bulk, was a tall woman in blue.

She was completely and meticulously dressed. She had straight black hair drawn into a dark snood, a face of almost Slavic cast, high-boned and broad, a set of her head that expressed energy and anger.

"... an outrage," she was saying hotly to Fuller. "Routing us out like this in the middle of the night. What are we supposed to know about Mrs. Parmenter?"

The back of Fuller’s head had a tilt of satisfaction, and Miss Rachel suspected that he liked his witnesses angry. "I’ll tell you the first thing you ought to know." He paused to fish out the notebook and the rag of pencil. "She’s dead."

The black-haired woman had her hands in the pockets of her gray coat; Miss Rachel saw how they balled suddenly at what Fuller had said. She looked at Fuller scornfully. "You’re crazy. She can’t be."

"Take her up, boys," Fuller said to his men. "Have her identify the body."

She seemed to step back a little. "Wait. I have a right to know what this is all about. I won’t submit to your strong-arm methods. You’ve got to explain things first."

"Upstairs," Fuller said without modifying his tone. "I want to know if the woman up there is the same you employed as a nurse. It’s important." He poked the pencil in her direction. "First I want your name, just to keep things straight."

She had a strong mouth, a jawline in no sense beautiful but striking. She licked her lips. There was, to Miss Rachel’s notion, something quite down-to-earth, quite primitive about this woman. If she had kept Hurgraves property that had belonged to her stepbrother and stepsister and to old Mr. Hurgraves, it was because she liked money and took it when she saw the chance. "I’m Rheba Hurgraves," she said.

"Mrs.?" said Fuller, scribbling.

"Mrs."

Fuller cast a look about. "Your husband here?"

"My husband is away. I don’t know where. I can’t give you any address."

A stir, a ripple of interest or of protest or of some other emotion too vague to be defined, seemed to flow through the group at her back. Even Bob Grennel sat straighter and grew more attentive.

Rheba seemed suddenly galvanized into a desire to get the sight of Mrs. Parmenter over with. "May I go up, since I must?"

Fuller seemed aggravatingly slow in his writing. "No address. When and where did you see him last?"

"Are we inquiring into the death of this woman or into the disappearance of my husband?" She waited; Fuller made no answer. "Have I asked for an inquiry about my husband?" she snapped.

"No." Fullered squinted at her. "We heard about it, though."

Shock like the slap of a quick hand came into her face. "You did?"

"Go on up," said Fuller, as if he hadn’t heard.

She hesitated a second. "Thank you," she murmured. She passed Miss Rachel at the foot of the stairs, a detective following. She smelled faintly of some flower scent. She walked like a queen being careful of a muddy path.

Miss Rachel remembered Mrs. Parmenter and her ways, and she knew suddenly why the women had disliked each other so. Mrs. Parmenter, coy and fluttery and vain, would have been harsh contrast to the streamlined composure of Rheba Hurgraves. Not only that: Mrs. Parmenter’s looks had had the tawdry over-
there was that terrible fight she had with Rheba.

Donald said quickly, "Perhaps we shouldn’t bring that up until Rheba’s here to tell her side of it."

"Rheba’s always telling her side of things," Kay said. "I heard it all, and I can tell both sides."

Miss Rachel asked quietly, "Did the quarrel occur this evening, just before Mrs. Parmenter left your house?"

Kay turned blue childlike eyes on her. "Yes. Just before Nettie went home. They were loud about it; you could hear them all over the house."

"I didn’t hear them," said Donald Hurgraves.

"Well, they were fighting over a box."

Miss Rachel stared. "A box?"

"The Bombay box," said Kay without emphasis. "That carved teakwood thing in Rheba’s room."

A harsh look crept into Donald’s face. "If Nettie went into Rheba’s room even for a match, God help her."

Fuller seemed to be paying no attention; his pencil remained on the pages of his notebook. Perhaps only Miss Rachel saw that he had stopped writing and was merely wriggling the pencil about in circles.

"Rheba said that Nettie was trying to steal the box," Kay went on. "You remember when Rheba got it, don’t you?"

"On her honeymoon," said Donald. "She brought it back from her honeymoon."

He seemed strained.

Bob Grennel was staring at his cousin. "What was Nettie supposed to want with the thing?"

Kay shrugged, taking a packet of cigarettes from her robe pocket and lighting one slowly. "Didn’t hear. Just that yelling about Nettie being a thief."

There was a sound on the stairs. Rheba Hurgraves came down slowly. She stopped in the hall to pull the gray coat together as though she were cold; she looked at Fuller, who met her eyes. "Now," she said, "I hope you’re happy."

"Do you identify the body upstairs?" Fuller said officiously, "as that of Mrs. Nettie Parmenter, late of your employ?"

She kept on looking at him levelly. "I do."

Fuller jabbed his pencil into his mouth.
as though it were a cigar. "Your relations as employer and employee were friendly?"

"No."

"Not friendly." He chewed the pencil a little. "Why?"

"I didn't like Mrs. Parmenter and she didn't like me."

"Hmm. Any specific arguments?"

"No. It was just—" She stopped; took one step so that she could see round Fuller and see Kay. Kay promptly turned her back. "I see. Kay told you. Well, yes, we did have quite a row this eve—yesterday evening. I caught Nettie trying to smuggle something out of my room, something she's had her eye on for a long time. A box. A carved box I'm very fond of."

"What's in it?" demanded Fuller.

Her glance fled from his and she said quickly, "Nothing."

Fuller spit out a bit of the pencil and wriggled the remainder to the other side of his mouth. "If I should send a man over to your place now for the box, would it be 'empty'?"

She waited for a moment, perfectly quiet inside the tailored coat, her eyes on some point just in front of Fuller's shoes. Then: "No. It wouldn't be empty. It has some odds and ends in it. Keepsakes. Things my—my husband left when he disappeared."

"And it was because of this box, containing articles which had belonged to your missing husband, that Mrs. Parmenter was—" He checked himself under her blazing glance. "Uh—that you had the fight."

"Argument," she corrected. "Words, not blows."

He chewed the pencil and walked about a little. "Now that leads to a sort of hunch on my part. The hunch that Mrs. Parmenter was interested in finding out something about this missing man."

"It's a damned lie!" Bob Grennel had shouted the words, had leaped out of the chair in saying them.

Fuller let the pencil sag; caught it in his hands as it dropped. "Hey! Why so hot over it, all of a sudden?"

Grennel flung out: "You make Nettie sound like a damned snoop!"

"She was, and a liar to boot," said Rheba Hurgraves.

Grennel walked to her and lifted his hand suddenly. The sound of the slap he gave her was loud in the room; so shocking loud Miss Rachel expected a cry afterward as a matter of course. But Rheba Hurgraves took the blow without flinching; she took one hand from her pocket and, as neatly as a professional, hit Bob Grennel in the eye with her closed fist.

It was Grennel who ground out wordless rage. Then Fuller crashed through between them. "Break it up. None of that. No fights. We've got work to do."

"It's your work," said Rheba silkily.

Fuller measured her is if in admiration, and he smirked. "Now, Mrs. Hurgraves. The box. Jackson will go along with you."

Bob Grennel turned suddenly and caught Ivy's hand in his. "I'm getting out of here," he flung at Fuller. "If you want me, I'll be home." He pulled Ivy's arm through his and locked fingers with her.

Miss Rachel wondered if anyone else in the room saw what she saw in Ivy's face in that moment—the hidden and frantic hope, the blind, possessive, starved desire.

VIII

B Y N I N E O'CLOCK that morning the police had gone, the body of Mrs. Parmenter had been taken to the morgue, Mr. Sompless had slipped upstairs with a word about shaving—it must be soothing, Miss Rachel thought, to stand in front of a mirror and coat your face with a warm lather—and Chloe was serving breakfast in the dining room.

Chloe had not a shadow of her former friendly warmth. She kept whispering to herself a dark prognosis of danger. She let the coffee grow cool; she burned the toast; she brought a jar of honey instead of the strawberry jam Miss Jennifer had asked for.

Miss Jennifer was too sleepy and too frightened to care. She stared into the honey as though she saw a great many things reflected in it—Mrs. Parmenter, perhaps.

Miss Rachel, freshly turned out in sprigged dimity, began a second helping of shirted eggs. "I've found out two things this morning," she told Miss Jennifer.
Miss Jennifer moaned softly.

"One—there was a ladder, the ladder used to prune Julia's trees, put against the wall. That's how the murderer got into Mrs. Parmenter's room. The police have been taking plaster imprints from the flower bed. They've taken the ladder away, no doubt for microscopic examination."

Miss Jennifer had closed her eyes as though the sight of Rachel were too much for her.

"The second is that Mrs. Parmenter was stunned before being killed by a blow with one of her kewpie lamps. I saw Captain Fuller slipping out with one of them this morning. The base was broken, I wonder where he found it?"

Miss Jennifer plunged a ladle into the honey. "If you don't mind—spare me the details, Rachel."

"Details get one places," Miss Rachel pointed out.

"I'm not going anywhere," snapped Jennifer. Then: "Yes, I am. I'm going out of this house for the day. I'm going to visit the collection of censers and candelabra in the Franciscan Museum. After that I'm going to sit in a park. Any nice park."

"No doubt you will enjoy yourself," said Miss Rachel, "but speaking of things with smoke coming out of them—"

"Censers."

"—why didn't you tell me Mr. Somplessis was in the arbor last night?"

It took a moment for Miss Jennifer to digest the relationship of a censer to Mr. Somplessis. "You made me quite cross with that story about Father in the church," she said finally. "I—I almost did come down and tell you that I'd seen him out there in the dark. He looked errie. There was something by his feet—a bag or something."

"Did it wiggle?" asked Miss Rachel.

Miss Jennifer studied this through. "I see. You think he caught the cat and kept it tied up in something and was waiting for you to go to sleep so he could—"

"Well," said Miss Rachel, "it's a possibility."

"There is a sort of cruel look to him. I suppose he'd be capable of doing such a thing. How could we know?"

"I'll think of a way," said Miss Rachel, brightening. "Several clues have made me suspicious of him. His nervousness about the police searching the garden—he knew they'd find the cat. His lack of shock when it was brought in dead. I wonder..." She paused, and there was the sound of Chloe's nervous rattling of dishes in the pantry.

"What?" said Miss Jennifer worriedly. "I wonder why he did it, if he did. So pointless. So cruel."

"Perhaps," said Miss Jennifer hoarsely, "he'd just killed Mrs. Parmenter and he was blood mad. Like Dracula."

Miss Rachel dropped a fork to stare. "Really, Jennifer, how do you come to know anything about Dracula?"

"Not from the movies," snapped Jennifer. "I read the book."

Miss Jennifer had never approved Rachel's avidity for horror films. "Oh," said Miss Rachel. "Anyway, it won't stack. He wouldn't have set out in the arbor with a cat in a bag, planning a ghastly joke on me, if he had Mrs. Parmenter's murder coming up."

"How do you know?" insisted Miss Jennifer.

"He'd be a very queer murderer to do that."

"All murderers are queer."

"Most of them are sensible people after their fashion, and their actions, viewed from the point of their own necessities, are quite reasonable."

"Fiddlesticks," Miss Jennifer rose from her chair.

"I'm afraid," Miss Rachel said, staring into the plate of shirred eggs, "I'm afraid there are going to be more."

"More... deaths?"

MISS RACHEL frowned. "You see, there was something going on when we came. Julia saw something that frightened her and, like the coward she is, she got us up here and then ran away. Mrs. Parmenter, Bob Grennel, all of the Hurgraves seemed to have been involved in some sort of plot we can only guess at. What Mr. Somplessis' place is in the mystery, I don't know. He's a little too keen about the details of the Hurgraves' affairs to be in this for nothing."

Miss Jennifer glanced into the hall. "Shh. He might be coming."
Miss Rachel lowered her tone to a whisper. "Take that business about the teakwood box, for instance. There was an implication that Mrs. Parmenter had been trying to get it for a long time. Fuller sent his man Jackson over with Rheba Hurgraves to get it this morning. Jackson came back without it, and I heard Fuller using violent language in an undertone. I gathered the Bombay box was missing. The..." Her voice died and her eyes grew quite enormous.

Miss Jennifer stood stock-still, waiting.

"Don't you remember?" cried Miss Rachel, rising. "How stupid I've been! Kay Hurgraves called it the Bombay box, and Donald said later that Rheba had brought it back from her honeymoon."

"Bombay. In India. Why?"

"That means they must have gone around the world!"

"Of course it does."

"And Bob Grennel went out on a freight as a seaman, endured the grinding work and the risk of submarines and wreck and drowning, to get there. To reach the city where Rheba and her husband had been and where they had bought a box."

"How do you know?"

"He wrote that postcard to Mrs. Parmenter. Oh, I forgot. You didn't see it. Well, she had put it in my gabled room for safekeeping, I presume. Later she took it away and hid it among her things."

"You prowled!" accused Jennifer.

Miss Rachel looked at her in impatience. "I investigated."

"Rachel, there are things no gentlewoman—the kind of gentlewoman Father wanted you to be—"

"I've had more fun since I got here," said Miss Rachel, to Jennifer's confusion. "I'm going to run up now and see if the police found that postcard."

"Rachel, you can't go into that room! Captain Fuller expressly forbade us to!"

"He is inclined to be childish, isn't he?" She ran out into the hall and came to so sudden a stop that she almost fell over herself. Mr. Somplessis was coming down the stairs. He carried his lean brief case; he bowed to her.

"You're going out?" stammered Miss Rachel.

"One must work," she said with reserve. She took a quick step, looked at him in a blaze of inspiration. "Mr. Somplessis—were you ever in Bombay?"

He paused on the lowest stair, set down the brief case, and began to pull on a pair of gloves. His eyes, watching the workings of his fingers, were cool and unfathomable. "Why do you ask this, Miss Murdock?"

"I—I don't know."

"Perhaps because of the rudeness of Mr. Grennel?"

"Yes, perhaps. I'd forgotten that, though." A sudden and disconnected idea flitted through her mind. Mr. Somplessis hadn't known Grennel. That meant that he must have moved into Julia's house since Grennel had been away, five months ago.

"Often I am taken for someone of an Eastern race," said Mr. Somplessis, "and yet my mother was a highborn French lady and my father an Armenian, a Christian, of purest blood." His smile, the odd smile without friendliness or humor, came into his face to hang there forgotten. "I have never been in Bombay nor even so far as the borders of India. Does that answer your question?"

His overpoliteness, his attention to detail, were irritating. "Yes, thank you. I won't keep you any longer."

She waited until the front door closed behind him; then she hurried up into the second floor. A note hung by a tack to Mrs. Parmenter's broken door.

Keep Out
By Order of Police Dept.
J. Fuller

"J," murmured Miss Rachel, slipping through. "John, perhaps. Or Joseph. I wonder if anyone calls him Joe?" She ran to the window and raised a blind. The bed, stripped now to the mattress, gave the room a for-rent look. There was an odor of stale cigarette smoke, of men who had worked quickly in a closed space. The absence of Mrs. Parmenter's photograph was noticeable. Taken for police files, no doubt.

Miss Rachel plunged into the search. Evidently the lingerie had not been sifted thoroughly, for the burned cuff link and
the postcard from Bob Grennel were among the garments, still tied loosely in the brassiere. Miss Rachel removed them. The card had been rolled into a cylinder and the cuff link put inside.

She looked at the two objects in her palm. *These have to be clues,* she thought. *Else Nettie Parmenter wouldn’t have been so secretive about them.*

**WITHOUT** any twinge of conscience—or, rather, none that she could not ignore—she put the postcard and the cuff link into the pocket of the sprigged dimitry.

She went on up into the gabled room, which smelled wetly of strong soap and of Chloe’s scrubbing. From her purse she extracted a little notebook, somewhat larger and more neat than Captain Fuller’s. Inside were odds and ends of scribblings: shopping reminders, recipes, names of new books (mostly mysteries), and financial jottings. She found a clean section near the back and wrote at the top of the page: *Nettie Parmenter.*

After some mental sifting of wheat from chaff, she added: *Aged about forty. Widow. A nurse for some years. Engaged to Bob Grennell (Aged 23). Appeared to have a flirtation going with old Mr. Hurgraves.*

She sat for a long time in the quiet of the gabled room, thinking about the last point. Had Nettie Parmenter really been flirting, really meaning to involve old Mr. Hurgraves in a romantic tangle? Or had it been the manner of a thoughtless and silly woman who ogled men without even thinking about it?

Well, Miss Rachel told herself, I’ve got to make the decision. I’ll call it flirting. It looked that way to me.

She continued writing:

*Nettie Parmenter had been trying to get hold of Rheba’s Bombay box.*

*She had been doing some sort of signaling from this upper room.*

*She must have had great interest in the fact that Bob Grennel had reached Bombay.*

*She clung to a job with the Hurgraves in spite of Rheba’s open dislike and the opportunities for a nurse—any nurse—elsewhere.*

*Rheba Hurgraves has a husband mysteriously missing.*

*Ivy Hurgraves is almost certainly in love with Bob Grennel.*

When she had finished she sat for a long time looking at the page, trying to fit the facts into a pattern, to interpret them so that they cohered to some straight line of objective action on Mrs. Parmenter’s part.

Simple nosiness could not account for Mrs. Parmenter’s fervent interest in the affairs of the Hurgraves, including the mystery about Rheba’s husband. Miss Rachel felt that she was staring into the works of a watch whose mainspring was missing. Here were wheels and tickings, but the thing that made them go was not in sight. Even Nettie Parmenter’s possibly romantic attachment for Bob Grennel or for Mr. Hurgraves—whichever was genuine—could not explain her desire to pry into Rheba’s secrets.

I wish there were a way, Miss Rachel thought, that I might get into the Hurgraves’ house. An excuse. She looked about hopefully. The bulge in the sprigged dimitry drew her eye. She pulled out the postcard.

The postcard might do it. She could say she’d found it, give Bob Grennel a chance to claim it. This would mean giving up the clue, possibly incurring the wrath of Fuller if he came to know. She scanned both sides of the card; there seemed nothing on it not easily remembered nor completely understood. She scribbled down date and message in her book. Then she put on a little lavender wool jacket and a tiny white hat and went down into the rear hall that led to the garden.

Chloe, having scrubbed the gabled room, was busy with the footprint in the hall.

She raised up as Miss Rachel went past. “If I knew how to reach Miss Julia, I’d write her a letter. I’d tell her I was quitting. I don’t crave to stay with such goings on.” She regarded the misshapen footprint darkly.

“Try to look at it as an adventure,” advised Miss Rachel.

“I like my adventures wholesome,” said Chloe, shaking her head.

“Hunting down a murderer can be a very fascinating business.”

Chloe shifted the hand mop. “Not when
you’re too busy to cast an eye over your shoulder, it isn’t.”

“I see what you mean,” Miss Rachel agreed. “If I were you I’d take things easy and keep an eye out for trouble. By the way, I wonder if you might not have some information that would be helpful.”

“Me?” said Chloe. “I don’t know a thing.”

“About the Bombay box?”

She shook her head.

“Never heard of it.”

“Nor about Rheba Hurgraves’ husband?”

“He’s gone. He disappeared over in Europe someplace. That was just before war broke out. He got in trouble with the Germans.”

Miss Rachel felt her ears fairly grow peaks. “When did you hear this?”

“That’s the story Rheba Hurgraves told when she came back from her honeymoon, ma’am.”

Miss Rachel stood frozen in surprise. “Honeymoon?” she croaked. At least it sounded like a croak to her amazed ears.

“Mr. Teddy Hurgraves—Oh, Miss Rachel, he was the nicest man! Always friendly and kind and good-natured. He never came home from that honeymoon with Miss Rheba. She lost him over there. She said he had a camera and was taking pictures and the Germans snatched him away for being a spy.”

“Wasn’t anything done by his family?”

“They had fits,” Chloe said. “You’d have to know Mr. Teddy to realize how people would feel about anything happening to him. When nothing came of all they could do, old Mr. Hurgraves almost died.”

“What a queer story it all makes,” Miss Rachel said lamely.

“Miss Rheba’s a queer woman,” said Chloe.

“Had she known Teddy Hurgraves before her mother married Mr. Hurgraves?”

“I don’t think she did. You see, Mr. Teddy was away a lot. He was older than his cousins, Mr. Hurgraves’ children, though I guess he felt like a brother, he loved them so. Mr. Hurgraves married Rheba’s mother about 1933. The depression was getting pretty bad. Mr. Hurgraves had a nervous breakdown over business troubles, and his wife sort of stepped in and took over. She was like Miss Rheba, very firm and strong. She died in—let’s see—1938. I heard a lot afterward about her leaving Miss Rheba some things for her own that should have belonged to the Hurgraves’ children.”

“And when did Rheba marry this Hurgraves cousin—Mr. Teddy?”

Chloe thought a moment.

“The year the war came—1939. It was queer they went off on that long trip with Mr. Teddy ailing. He had heart trouble, too. Like old Mr. Hurgraves. You could almost say it runs in the family.”

Miss Rachel stood a long time, thoughtfully, while Chloe finished scrubbing the stain from the floor.

“Who made this awful thing?” Chloe asked, getting up. “It wasn’t no real foot, ma’am. I could see that.”

“I don’t know who made it,” Miss Rachel said absenty.

“The murderer?” Chloe wondered, shuddering.

“I rather think not.”

Chloe scurried off into the kitchen. “Going to get me a rabbit’s foot,” she said as the door closed after her.

Miss Rachel pushed open the rear screen and went down the steps into the garden. Here the noon sun so bright it stung the eyes, a warm smell of curled petals and spaded earth, a hum of insects like a small song far away. Miss Rachel passed through the arbor to the gate set into the stone fence. She looked across at velvet lawns and the great flagstone terrace of the Hurgraves’ house. Blinds were drawn in the windows of the upper floor. There was, somehow, a look of angry reserve about the place—or perhaps this was merely imagining.

The grass was springy underfoot, the terrace cool with shade. Miss Rachel went cautiously to a frech window and peeped in through it. Here was a room with the dimensions of a concert hall and the furnishings of a palace. She found herself eyeing a grand piano in blond wood, long shelves of books, a fieldstone fireplace set cornerwise, sofa and chairs in pearl-gray velvet, ash-green carpeting like a sea. All of it dim, curtained in gray velvet to keep out the light.

She thought for a long moment that the room was empty. Then she saw a figure in the dark niche of a door. She knew it
once the straightness, the black hair in its strict line, the shoulders held in an attitude of impatience and disdain.

Rheba Hurgraves was looking at her with a gaze as cold as a cat's.

**IX**

**MISS JENNIFER,** who is considered in some quarters to be the more sensible of the Murdock sisters, is inclined on occasions to pass remarks on the subject of monumental lies. Some members of the Parchly Heights Methodist Ladies' Aid have thought she looks rather searchingly at Rachel. But Rachel remains demure.

Rheba Hurgraves hurried to the French door. To Miss Rachel's surprise, she pulled it inward, and the draft rippled the hem of the sprigged dimity through the opening. "I'm amazed they found anyone so quickly," said Rheba. "They didn't promise. They said they hadn't a soul left on their list."

Since the door was so obviously opened for her, Miss Rachel stepped in. The vast room was cool; there was an echo in the air of the soft odors of stock and carnation in the garden. Miss Rachel looked at Rheba and nodded her head agreeably.

Now that she was fully in view, Rheba Hurgraves studied her with a look of impatience. "You don't look strong enough for heavy work like nursing," she said. "Ah, Miss—"

"Murd—" said Miss Rachel, turning the rest into a cough.

"Miss Murd," said Rheba. "But since my stepfather is fairly active and Kay and I can help, I'm sure you will do. The thing Mr. Hurgraves requires is companionship." She searched Miss Rachel's tiny figure, the dimity, the lavender wool, the little hat of starched piqué. "He is inclined to melancholy, and we try to keep someone with him who is cheerful. Are you cheerful?"

Miss Rachel beamed with a look of unutterable joy.

"Did you bring a uniform?"

"Miss Rachel shook her head regretfully. "I see. You weren't sure you'd like us." Rheba laughed with a note of pleading. Miss Rachel looked coyly at her toe. She doesn't like having to keep the old man company, Miss Rachel thought. Because she cheated him at her mother's death, perhaps?" "Hmmm," said Miss Rachel, wondering.

Rheba rushed on as if thereby to avoid refusal. "Will you stay now? If you will, I'll see that one of the men—Donald or Bob—takes you for your things after dinner."

Miss Rachel glanced about in a manner of indecision.

"Perhaps," said Rheba, "you'd like to meet your patient."

Miss Rachel made a show of being more undecided than ever, as though the prospect of rushing into work was distasteful. Rheba half turned. "Our former nurses haven't slept in, but if you should need a room I can give you one."

This favor obviously hadn't been offered Mrs. Parmenter. Miss Rachel permitted herself to brighten considerably.

"I'll show it to you," said Rheba, making for the door.

They went into a rear hall where a middle-aged maid was polishing the floor with a dust mop. She nodded to Rheba but she did not smile.

"Corners, Bess," said Rheba, going past. "You skipped them the last two times. I won't allow it again."

She's very brave in the face of the labor shortage, Miss Rachel thought, following up the stairs. At the top she looked back. Bess was leaning on the mop, making an unladylike gesture toward Rheba's back. When she saw Miss Rheba watching, she winked.

They came into the upper hall at the end opposite to that which Miss Rachel had entered on her previous visit. Rheba led to the way to the right. The passage turned, narrowed, showed two doors. Rheba threw open the nearest. Here was a neat, small room with a white bed, a plain dresser, a wardrobe for clothing.

"This has been the cook's," said Rheba, "but I can move her in with Bess."

As though the cook has no preference in the matter, Miss Rachel thought. She inspected the room peckishly. "It's been a considerable while since I did nursing," she said. She examined a mended spot in the curtain.

"I can offer excellent wages," said Rheba winningly.
"Your last nurse," said Miss Rachel delicately. "What reason had she for leaving?"

This was gall to Rheba, who so obviously wanted to be the grand lady handling out a job to a grateful applicant. The high-boned face turned ash color, and anger glittered in her eyes. Then came control and no doubt the memory of war plants grinding day and night, wheedling away the help that suddenly didn't have to be subservient any more. She said in a voice like candy: "She had an unavoidable engagement elsewhere."

SHE'S putting it mildly, thought Miss Rachel. How does she mean to prevent me learning the truth? Or does she mean to break things gently? "Well—" said Miss Rachel aloud.

"Then it's settled?" said Rheba with an air of having taken a high hurdle gracefully.

Miss Rachel was busily trying to imagine why Rheba hadn't yet recognized her. Was it because her anger and her attention, at that early hour this morning, had been directed so exclusively toward Fuller? Or because a woman like Rheba would feel that a little old lady in white chenille was just so much wallpaper? Or had wanting a nurse so badly made her blind to the obvious?

Miss Rachel said briskly at last: "Who is to be my patient?"

"My stepfather." Rheba grew very bright. "He's not confined to bed. He is subject to heart attacks if he doesn't take care of himself, and he gets lonely. Would you like to meet him now?"

They went toward the front of the house, meeting no one. Rheba rapped at Mr. Hurgraves' door, and his voice came.

"Who's there?"

"Rheba. I've a surprise for you."

The voice was apathetic.

"Come in."

He was in the wheel chair by a window. The sunlight brought out the patina of age in his skin, made silver of his hair. He took off his spectacles slowly, closed a book in his lap, looked soberly at Miss Rachel.

He's going to give me away, she thought with a quiver of danger.

"How do you do?" he said gravely.

"This is Miss Murd. She is taking Mrs. Parmenter's place."

He turned abruptly so that his face was toward the window. The sun shone on a twitching place in his neck, made the old skin seem worn to transparency. "I see."

"You mustn't grieve," said Rheba, as though she found the words hard to say. His hands crept off the arms of the wheel chair and into the sleeves of his robe; her tone must have chilled him. "I won't."

"You'll try to be happy? Be interested in something new?"

"Yes."

"Would you like me to pick up some new puzzles downtown?"

"If you will."

"I'll leave you, then, to get acquainted with Miss Murd." She went out quickly.

The old man turned from the window to look accusingly at Miss Rachel. "Nettie brought you to see me as a friend. How does it happen you pass yourself off now as a nurse?"

Miss Rachel sat down upon one of the numerous chairs, a high-backed rocker with a varnished seat. At one knee, so close that it crowded her, was a little table covered with cheap knickknacks. By the chair arm was a combination magazine stand and book rack, loaded with odds and ends of worn stuff. Miss Rachel said gently: "Rheba made a mistake. She thinks, for some reason, that I came in answer to a call she made to an employment agency. She rushed me up here before I could explain."

His eyes settled on the little hat of starched piqué. In spite of the look of grief in his face, a touch of ironic humor crept in.

"I see. And to get out of staying with me, she grabbed the first visitor and pressed her into service."

Miss Rachel nodded. "I see you noticed my hat. No doubt she took it for a nurse's cap. Some of them are fairly odd. The Johns-Hopkins cap always amazes me."

His face twitched; the look of humor was gone. "Frankly, I hadn't wanted another nurse. I know they're difficult to find; they're needed desperately in the hospitals, and I'm not really sick. I get lonely sometimes. I could endure that."

"I thought," Miss Rachel said slowly, as though putting a brand-new idea into
words, "that if you needed someone for company and for running errands I might help you for perhaps a few days. Just to tide over, so to speak. Of course I'm not a nurse."

"Rheba wouldn't know the difference." He sat as if studying her offer. "This is very kind of you."

"No, it isn't," Miss Rachel said. "It's just that I'm a very curious person and like sticking my nose into other people's affairs."

He drew away quickly.

"You see," she went on, "I'm convinced that the reason for Mrs. Parmenter's murder is here, in this house."

"Here?" He looked at her stonily.

"That's impossible."

"Aren't you interested in bringing her murderer to justice?"

She felt how hackneyed and melodramatic the phrase was; she wondered that he showed so much interest. The white brows drew together. He clenched one hand and struck the arm of the wheelchair softly. "With all my heart and soul," he said, being quite as hackneyed as she had. "I'd see him in hell if I could."

"I'm trying to get to the bottom of an affair about a Bombay box."

Her abrupt switch into the role of detective seemed to puzzle him a little.

"Rheba's box? I don't understand why you should mention it."

Miss Rachel thought swiftly. Since Mrs. Parmenter seemed to have kept her interest in the box from him, perhaps she had better continue the deception. "Rheba mentioned that it had been stolen during the night," she compromised. This took care of Rheba's suspicions of Mrs. Parmenter and Fuller's rage over the loss of the box, all in one lump.

"Stolen?" He moved his hands nervously. "By whom?"

"She didn't know."

He sat quiet for so long, his eyes on the window ledge with its strip of sun, that Miss Rachel grew restless. He seemed to be in some far place of remembered miseries, of haunting pain and regret. When he spoke finally, his tone was harsh.

"Rheba kept Teddy's things in there—heir pearl studs he'd inherited from his grandfather, his watch, the high school ring I got him when he graduated—"

"Cuff links?" Miss Rachel wondered absenty.

"He would have been wearing them."

He looked at her suddenly. "Why did you ask that?"

"It just popped out."

HIS EYES grew introspective, went back to that other place where loss was new and unendurable and Teddy Hurgraves' disappearance a fresh agony to be lived through all over again. "You would have had to have known my nephew to understand how we felt over his loss," he said, and the remark, so like Chloe's, struck an echo in Miss Rachel's mind. "He was a prince of a man. Wherever he went there was a kind of gladness went with him. It's hard to put into words. Wait. I have a picture of him here."

He turned the wheel chair toward a glass-enclosed case against the wall. From between the body of a violin without strings and an iron paperweight in the shape of a dog's head, he took an album. The leaves were unbound, awkward to hold together, shuffling apart as he took them out.

Miss Rachel found herself looking at the picture of a man about forty, a slim man in whose face was an echo of the sensitiveness of Donald's, not moody here but smiling. It was a sensitiveness of strength, of kindness, and of deep understanding. He held a puppy in his arms, the sunlight was on his dark hair, and behind was the terrace of the house, the garden furniture in redwood and awning.

"He was my wife's brother's son," said old Mr. Hurgraves. "I adopted him and gave him my name. I loved him like my own."

"How odd," said Miss Rachel, "that he should have fallen in love with someone like Rheba." She caught herself, grew scarlet lest she had given offense.

The old man put his head back and shut his eyes. "Don't ever think that Teddy might have loved her. He pitied her as he pitied all unhappy things."

"But they were married," Miss Rachel stammered.

"We knew why he had married her, afterward."

Miss Rachel searched the weary and withdrawn face. "Why?"
“It’s such a long story,” said old Mr. Hurgraves huskily. “You would have to know about Teddy growing up, and about his being an orphan, and his loneliness before we took him. His everlasting gratitude afterward. His loyalty. The kind of loyalty that is difficult to understand because it is so selfless. And you’d have to know how sick he was that last year and how sure he was that he would die.”

The room seemed to have grown very still. It seemed to have grown full, too, of the memory of Teddy Hurgraves, of a slender man who was ill and whose kindness had no faltered in the face of that illness.

“He was so basically honest he didn’t attempt to fool Rheba. She’d been crazy about him for a long time. He proposed to her very simply, very directly. I was there and I heard. He said, ‘Rheba, I should like to marry you. I am ill and you may not have me very long, but I shall try hard to make you happy while I live.’” The worn face twitched with some sardonic touch of humor. “She stumbled over herself saying ‘Yes!’ Then he went on: ‘There are certain legalities which we shall discuss in private.’”

Miss Rachel had a dizzying sense of looking into a large and complicated puzzle the main part of which—right in the middle was missing. ‘Legalities?’

He nodded.

“My properties. The ones my wife took over and left at her death to Rheba.” He drew a long, sighing breath. “He made Rheba sign them over to him. He couldn’t sell them; he had no control over them. But they were his to will away at his death, and he willed them to me.”

Now she saw suddenly, what all of it was about. She knew why Mrs. Parminter had flirted—tentatively, leaving a loophole—with old Mr. Hurgraves, who might or might not be on the verge of getting his wealth back. She knew why Mrs. Parminter had pried into Rheba’s things. She even knew why Bob Grennel had retraced, so far as he could, that honeymoon trail around the world.

She didn’t know, though, why so much of the mystery seemed to center in Bombay.

She didn’t know why Mr. Sómplessis played minuets at midnight.

MISS RACHEL removed the lavender jacket but retained the little hat. When Mr. Hurgraves wasn’t looking she studied it in one of his mirrors. It was most definitely like one of the odder sorts of nurse’s caps.

Mr. Hurgraves, having taken the album, sat looking through it dreamily. Miss Rachel found a schedule pinned to the wall beside the door. The typewritten sheet, prepared by Mr. Hurgraves’ doctor, specified milk, crackers, and a rich broth at noon. By now the hands of her little watch stood at twelve-fifteen. She went down to find the kitchen.

Rheba Hurgraves met her at the bottom of the stairs. Bess was there also, mopping rebelliously at a corner; Miss Rachel sensed mutiny in the air. She saw that Rheba was angry. Rheba put a hand on the banister—a broad, agile hand with flat nails—and composed her mouth for speech. In that instant Miss Rachel knew.

Rheba had remembered!

“Your name is Murdock, isn’t it?” She didn’t wait for Miss Rachel’s stuttering reply. “You’re Miss Julia’s cousin from Los Angeles, aren’t you?”

Miss Rachel can be quite winning and a little stupid at the same time; she has found it a combination that people peculiarly trust. “I’m so sorry you mistook me for the nurse. I should have corrected you at once—but, you see, I’d really come over to offer to help. Julia and you must be such old friends”—Rheba’s eyes flickered at this—and I felt that the least I could do would be to offer in her place. So I just went along upstairs to see if there was anything helpful I might do.”

The anger had gone out of Rheba very quickly. Miss Rachel could fairly feel the racing thought, the knowledge that had come over Rheba that here was a way around the nurse shortage, and free. Her smile was a trifle glassy but her eyes were glad. “You’re very kind.” It was a purr. “I did rush you upstairs in a hurry, didn’t I?”

“Quite all right,” murmured Miss Rachel.

“And since you offer in Julia’s behalf, I’ll let you help. Nothing heavy. But Mr. Hurgraves will be a problem without
someone to keep him amused. Mrs. Parmenter's death was a dreadful shock to him. The police weren't very gentle about telling him."

"Crude," said Miss Rachel. "By the way, I came down for his milk and broth."

"I'd forgotten." Rheba's face went blank. "Of course. He should have had his lunch."

She led the way into the kitchen, a shining big room of glass and tile and white enamel, where a plump woman in a blue uniform was shredding a cabbage. "Lina, this is Miss Murdock. Miss Julia's cousin. She has offered to keep Mr. Hurgraves company for a few days, and she'll bring his meals as Mrs. Parmenter did."

The plump woman nodded.

"His tray's ready. It's over there under the tea towel. The broth got cool again. I haven't time to keep heating it up."

Pure rage looked for a moment out of Rheba's eyes; not, Miss Rachel sensed, because Mr. Hurgraves must have a cool broth, but because the cook dared speak her mind.

"I don't mind heating it. Show me where the pans are kept."

Rheba went out suddenly with a look of choking over a great many words. Miss Rachel put the soup into a pan.

"I hate her guts," the cook said conversationally. "I'm going to quit next week and go to work riveting. Doubleday Aircraft."

Miss Rachel nodded approvingly. "I think that's a good idea."

The cook stared.

"I'll bet you'll be good at it," Miss Rachel went on, taking up the broth. "My housekeeper in Los Angeles went into welding. She's working in a shipyard. I think that's much more important than fussing over me."

"Say!" The cook smiled, studying Miss Rachel's pixie face. "You've got a lot of spunk."

"My mother's people were actors," said Miss Rachel, as if that explained everything. She went out with the tray.

She found Mr. Hurgraves still sitting quietly with the album on his lap. He inspected the tray gratefully. "Thank you. I was getting a bit hungry."

"While you're eating," she told him, "I'm going to run home. I'll be back within a half hour. Will you be all right till then?"

"You shouldn't bother with me," he protested.

"Nonsense." She saw that he had his napkin, that the tray was secure on the little table beside his knee. Out in the hall alone, she hugged herself. Then she went down cautiously to the front of the house, into the big circular entry with its lacy ironwork, its Goya, its air of fervid and impeccable wealth.

The collection of brassware shone softly in its case. She stopped before it, then crossed the display of leather.

Here were examples of antique Moorish saddlery, books bound in the time of Queen Elizabeth, dagger sheaths embossed with silver from the days of Cortez, some examples of leather coins. It was the collection of someone who pleased his fancy without adhering to a period or a type of design. It was haphazard, but it represented money. Much money. It had somehow, too, the touch of a woman's taste. Rheba's mother's, perhaps.

Miss Rachel slid over to the nearest door and pushed it inward with a finger tip. She found herself looking into a room fitted out with the severity of an office: carpeted darkly, holding only a desk and a walnut filing cabinet and a few books in a case. Rheba's sanctum, Miss Rachel thought. Rheba's stage when she felt like playing the businesswoman.

There didn't seem to be many places one could hide a teakwood box, but Miss Rachel went in to make sure.

She removed the books and ran through the contents of the desk drawers. She tried to investigate the filing cabinet, but it was locked. Miss Rachel gave it a mental promise to return.

Another door led into the great central room whose windows led out upon the terrace. Miss Rachel felt that here, with the maids busy on housework, was too great a chance to take in prying. The big room would have to wait, along with Rheba's filing cabinet.

A third door showed her a small reception room. For duller visitors, she thought. It was formal, impressive, without warmth. She prowled over and behind such spindling furnishings as there
were. She found a wad of gum under the arm of a little rosewood chair, put there by some lout without any sense of decency. But no teakwood box.

The fourth door, under and somewhat behind the staircase, showed a narrow space with one window, some battered overstuffed furniture, an old desk beside the windows, and Donald Hurgraves. He had a typewriter in front of him, he was smoking a pipe, and he was looking at her snappishly.

"Yes?" He swung in his rickety chair.

"What do you want?"

"I—I heard the typewriter, and I wondered—"

He corrected the clumsy lie. "That's very odd. I haven't typed anything as yet."

She stood there in guilt, feeling like a small child caught stealing or something equally immoral. The kind of face he had—subtle, responsive, imaginative—could be more disapproving than Rheba's impassive one.

He knocked the pipe out abruptly into a try. "I do happen to know who you are. Besides being Miss Julia's cousin." His hands riffled the edges of a newspaper on a chair. "Have you seen this?"

She came into the room. She saw that his desk had business memoranda piled on one side and sensed that he was some undermanager of Rheba's. The other half was loaded with manuscript in all stages of correction. He was half his own man, at least, and trying to write. Miss Rachel picked up the newspaper. She slowly grew quite scarlet.

The reporter had done well with Jennifer's remarks; he had made them into a story for the front page. There was a vivid description of Miss Rachel—a little old gentlewoman with the manner of a wizard and the instincts of a bloodhound—and there was much romancing about her previous adventures.

Lavender and corpses . . .

Have you a sleuthing grandmother in your home?

Miss Rachel Murdock views each new body with a cool eye . . .

She wanted suddenly to run home to Jennifer and take up knitting.

He must have read her mood. "Here, now. Don't you dare be embarrassed."

"Why not?" she managed.

"Because you've been enjoying yourself in a sensible manner. You've had some games of wits with clever minds, and there must have been enough danger in it to make it spicy."

She stared at him. "Oh."

"I'll bet you've had more fun than the ordinary sort of little old lady who sits in church playing the organ or dozing by a fire with a cat."

She smiled a little. "But I have a cat."

"I'll bet it never gets a chance to doze."

She sought for words. "Your sense of humor is a bit—it isn't—"

"You mean it's rough and ready? On the macabre side?" He put on suddenly the look of a young and handsome demon. "Only in this room. Only here where Rheba leaves me alone." He leaned toward her as if to tell a secret. "She thinks I do nothing here but work for her."

"And you're really writing, too?"

"Mostly," he corrected. "I'm doing a book. Fiction, but it will be full of political angles. Rotten ones."

"Oh."

"Disappointed?"

"Oh no. Your book should be quite interesting."

"But you don't like them to be about politics? Or reform?"

"I like very much," Miss Rachel said discreetly, "to read a good mystery now and then."

"Yes." The look of being a demon shaded off into sullenness. "Most people do, don't they?"

"Had you ever thought of doing a mystery? Just for fun?"

"No." He studied the window, which had a thread of cobweb across it. "That is, not until Nettie Parmenter was killed. Since then I've been racking my brains trying to think who did it, wondering if I might find a plot in the thing."

She edged closer, hopefully. "Any ideas?"

"Ye-es." He took up the pipe again and began rather nervously to refill it with tobacco. "Nettie was afraid of something or of somebody. She gave me the feeling, now that I've thought back over the past few weeks, of being on guard. Of looking over her shoulder on stairs, of avoiding dark places." He drew flame into the pipe bowl from a match. "At night she
seemed especially wary. The dark . . .”
He stared at the match. “Yes. That’s it.
The dark.”

Miss Rachel waited.

HE BLEW OUT the match. “Once or
twice I heard her leave the terrace
and start running. Running through our
yard and Miss Julia’s. I thought at the
time she was simply in a hell of a hurry
to get home. Now I believe it was fear.”

Miss Rachel’s mind re-created the scene:
the figure in a dark blue cape racing over
the clipped lawns in the starlight. The
creak of Julia’s little gate. The flash in
and out of the arbor.

Mr. Somplessis had waited last night in
the arbor.

“She expected trouble. That much was
obvious. I wonder she didn’t take better
precautions.”

Miss Rachel looked obliquely at him.
“Better ones?”

“Than running.”

“Oh,” said Miss Rachel. She had re-
membered briefly the unloaded gun, the
lock on the door that hadn’t kept a mur-
derer from coming in at the window.

“But then,” he continued, “Nettie al-
ways gave the impression of being a little
off the beam. She half did so many things.
She halfway made love to my Dad. She
half promised to marry Bob, the young
idiot. She half did and half didn’t take
the part of the rest of us against Rheba.
I gradually got the impression she was
trying to use all of us to her own pur-
pose—whatever that was.”

Miss Rachel pondered.

“It might have had something to do
with your cousin’s disappearance, mightn’t
it?”

“With Teddy? Oh, I see. You re-
membered that point about the Bombay box.”
He smoked moodily, looking into the type-
writer. “I can’t see any connection. I
mean I can’t see what interest she’d have
in that horrible affair about Teddy.”

“Was she employed here when it hap-
pened?”

“In 1939? Lord, no.”

“What do you think about your cousin’s
appearance?”

“I think Teddy died on that trip,” he
said at once. “We’ve all come to that con-
clusion . . . all except Dad, who won’t
give up hoping. The yarn she invented
about the Germans was preposterous.”

“The tour management . . . wouldn’t
they have known if something like that
had happened?”

He shook his head slowly. “Apparently
not. War had been declared. There was
a mad rush for steamer reservations. The
plans of the tour went to pieces. Then in
several places—India, for example—Rheba
and Teddy had changed plans and switched
reservations at the last moment. I’m sure
that she lied about the details of a lot of
it—dates, names of steamers. She spent
several months in New York before ever
coming home to tell us. The war closed
everything down like a black curtain cut-
ting off the past.”

“Her passport?”

“She said she’d lost it.”

“There must be records somewhere.”

“No doubt. In some port along their
line of travel. Checking up, trying to lo-
cate steamers they used, is impossible now.
Italy, where she recently and suddenly
claimed that they spent a month, is a
shambles. The Riviera is a powder keg,
and no one is interested in a lone Amer-
ican who might or might not have gotten
that far on his honeymoon.”

“England?”

“Teddy didn’t get to England. That
much of her story is true.”

“Didn’t the American Embassy in Ber-
lin have a record of her investigations on
her husband’s behalf?”

“No. Obviously there weren’t any.”

“What does she say?”

“She says the Embassy people put Ted-
ny’s disappearance down to a domestic
quarrel and dismissed her.”

Miss Rachel was making a mental dia-
gram of the tour. “They sailed from San
Francisco?”

“That’s right. We had letters from him
from Hawaii and Singapore and Bombay.
Bombay was the last.”

“Perhaps,” she offered tentatively,
“your cousin Bob did some checking up
while he was away?”

“Bob? No. His route wasn’t the same.
Anyway, what could he do now? The thing
we’re all inclined to forget is that more
than four years are gone.”

She sat quietly, looking at him. Bob
Grennel had had some aim in view in get-
ting to Bombay, some hope of checking up on Rheba's story. Mrs. Parmenter had shared that aim or interest with him. But why?

There must be a link somewhere, she thought. A link that will prove that Nettie Parmenter was meddling with Rheba's affairs with a purpose and that that purpose was the cause of her being killed. She had been working on the disappearance of Teddy Hurgraves with a vengeance; she'd tried to steal the Bombay box; she's sent Bob Grennel to... A link.

A burnt link...

Her hand crept into the pocket of the sprigged dimity and the hard little cylinder of the rolled card made a thimble shape around her finger. Inside rattled the link, softly, the cuff link scarred with fire.

For a moment Miss Rachel was on the verge of bringing it out, of showing it to Donald Hurgraves.

Something about him, some stillness, some watchfulness, repelled her.

She grew a little chilled, and there was a nervous prickling in the hairline on her neck.

Donald Hurgraves smiled a rather crooked smile. "You were going to say—"

"Nothing." She rose from the chair.

"I must be running along."

"Come in again." He made it sound like a dare.

**XI**

FEELING a trifle disturbed, Miss Rachel went back to Julia's house for a very late lunch. Miss Jennifer dropped her knitting and leaped out of a chair at the sight of her.

"Where on earth—" she shrieked.

Miss Rachel put a finger to her lips. "You're being quite loud, Jennifer. Remember what Father always said about the quietness of ladies?"

"Father had no idea of the sort of things you'd be up to, or he'd have taught me to scream at you," cried Jennifer. "Now tell me at once where you've been."

"I've been over nursing old Mr. Hurgraves."

"Nuro—" Miss Jennifer stood utterly still, and there was somehow about her the look of a miniature witch just fallen off her broom. "No," she said weakly.

"Yes," said Miss Rachel, picking up the knitting for her.

Miss Jennifer swallowed. "How?"

"Just poking around. Rheba practically dragged me in and put me to work."

Miss Jennifer felt behind her for the chair and sat down in it suddenly. "I suppose you know that one of those people is most likely a murderer."

"Hmmm. Yes—provided, of course, that Mr. Somplessis isn't."

"Why on earth do you want to mix with such people?"

"I'm nosy," Miss Rachel admitted. "Besides, they're hiding something over there. At least, one of them is."

Miss Jennifer thought this over. "That box of Rheba's?"

"I'm literally dying to see inside it."

"You may literally die getting to," snapped Miss Jennifer.

Seeing that the conversation was apt to deteriorate into a moral victory on Jennifer's part, Miss Rachel went off to get a sandwich and a glass of milk in the kitchen.

Chloe was there alone.

"My aunt wouldn't stay, ma'am. I'm going to try to manage somehow. Would you mind an awful light supper tonight? I'll try to get the hang of it by tomorrow."

Miss Rachel, making a sandwich from the plentiful resources of the refrigerator, nodded over her shoulder. "Let me fix a salad. We can have toasted buns with cheese and a canned soup."

"Would you eat a store cake, ma'am?"

"Certainly. And ice cream—store ice cream."

"Will that be enough, do you think?"

"More than enough. Chloe, I want to ask you something."

Chloe looked at her apprehensively.

"About that murder, Miss Rachel?"

"Not exactly. About Mrs. Parmenter. Think back. How long has she lived here at Julia's?"

Chloe took time to count. "More than a year by a month or so."

"Had she worked for the Hurgraves before she moved here?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure she had."

"Was she ever in any difficulties?"

Chloe's blankness answered in the negative. "Any—well, trouble, unpleasantness?"
Miss Rachel’s random fishing drew a sudden flash of interest. “Only that angry man about the loan.”

Miss Rachel, staring, almost dropped the sandwich. “Go on.”

Only of course Mrs. Parmenter wasn’t a bit afraid of him, ma’am,” Chloe assured her. “She told him to take his carcass out of here, he’d get his money without being ugly over it.”

Miss Rachel had listened earnestly. “How long ago was this?”

There was more counting of slim brown fingers. “Right recent, ma’am. Two or three weeks.”

“Was it a private loan?”

“No-o. I think somehow it was a loan company. He kept threatening her with a whole corporation of lawyers.”

“Do you know how much she’d borrowed?”

“Close to a thousand dollars he mentioned, ma’am.”

“Did he say when she had borrowed it?”

“Well... let’s see.” Chloe, taking up a teapot to rinse it, looked absently at the running faucet. “He said something like, ‘Five months is a long time for this size loan. We want an adjustment.’ I’m sure that was it. Five months.”

Miss Rachel straightened a piece of lettuce slowly. “I see.”

“Wouldn’t it seem they’d been pretty good not to come after her before that?”

“She must have been making some sort of payment, enough to keep them from making a fuss. Then she stopped. I wonder why?”

“She said something mighty sharp about paying them back all in a lump.”

“That’s very interesting.”

“I wondered why she borrowed it in the first place, ma’am. She worked steady at good pay. Course, with the fondness she had for clothes and make-up stuff, I guess she spent most of it. Why’d she happen, though, to need a thousand dollars all at once like that?”

“Five months ago,” Miss Rachel murmured, nibbling the sandwich. “About the time Bob Grennel was leaving.”

“I never saw any signs of her spending a sized chunk like that. You think she might have sent it away?”

“It’s an idea.”

Chloe dried the teapot and set it on a shelf.” Another thing, before I forget, ma’am. This Captain Fuller was here while you were out. He asked me where you were and I said the post office. Of course, I didn’t really know where you were, but the police are very queer about people wandering off, so I just made up something quick.”

“You’re a girl after my own heart,” said Miss Rachel. “If he asks another time, it can be the library.”

Chloe giggled.

MISS RACHEL, having finished the sandwich, went upstairs, through the storage space that led to the bath, and on into the gabled room. Here she made some hurried summarizing in her notebook. She wrote down as much as she thought pertinent of her interviews with Mr. Hurgraves, Rheba, and Donald. She saw the picture that was beginning to emerge: a family whose interest and obsession was money, whose pride was show, whose particular jealousy was that one of them had been more shrewdly grasping than the rest.

She sensed the pressure that such an attitude would have on a sensitive nature like that of the missing Teddy Hurgraves. When everything else had failed, he had offered himself to Rheba. A distasteful bargain for a man like that, she thought. Of course, Teddy had thought that he was going to die.

The family had been quite agonized about his disappearance. Miss Rachel was beginning to wonder if the fact that Teddy’s death meant the return of Mr. Hurgraves’ properties wasn’t the principal factor in the search for him.

The frantic doings of Mrs. Parmenter, however, seemed to have no motive but the problematical one of her eventually marrying Mr. Hurgraves.

But was it so simple?

This had seemed logical when Miss Rachel had first heard the queer story of Teddy’s will. But she saw, on reconsidering, that too much of it depended on the whim of an old man who might easily find out how affairs stood between Mrs. Parmenter and Grennel, and who might wish to leave his properties to his children anyway.

There was, of course, the possibility that
Mrs. Parmenter had had a scheme of black-mail in mind.

If Bob Grennel had been bringing proof of Teddy's theft. . . . If Rheba had been informed of the price of silence. . . . If the price had been too high. . . .

For a moment she felt quite excited, and then she saw that there were many discrepancies in this theory. Killing Mrs. Parmenter wouldn't silence Bob Grennel. And if Bob had discovered the truth in his travels and was bringing proof of it, how had Mrs. Parmenter known? No letters or telegrams had come for her during the two days before her death. The one thing that seemed to confirm, though very slightly, the idea that Bob was bringing important news of some sort was his eagerness to reach Mrs. Parmenter in the middle of the night. And even that might have been what he had said it was—love.

If I could peep into Rheba's things, she thought, and if she were stupid enough to keep any message she'd had from Nettie Parmenter. . . .

After a good many nibblings of her pencil—it was beginning to resemble the ragged one of Captain Fuller—she decided to let the problem wait and to get back to the Hurgraves' house and into some line of action.

She crossed the terrace and slipped in through a french window. The big room was quiet, orderly, full of fresh garden flowers. On her way she paused by the grand piano and lifted the lid, an inspection meant to be a glance and which turned into a stare. In the shadowy compartment the row of strings shone with a silver gleam. All except one, a cut or broken one of which only the stub remained.

Miss Rachel touched the curled scrap of wire and felt its prickling across her finger tip. She remembered suddenly and a little sickly the way Mrs. Parmenter had looked in death. But surely if piano wire had been buried in the flesh of Mrs. Parmenter's neck, Fuller must have been here before this.

Or had he?

She put the lid down very quickly and looked about. The room had its air of stillness yet, a coiled and ferocious stillness, she thought. The odor of the flowers seemed to have grown oppressive, funereal.

There was no rustle from the garden, no sound from out of doors to disturb the utter quiet.

And in that quiet she heard suddenly and distinctly the sound of breathing.

She felt a trifle dizzy. She clenched her small hands so that nails bit into the palms. You've always had just the sort of incredible imagination Jennifer said you had, she thought fiercely. Now you've made up something that . . . breathes.

The thin, disembodied struggling sound went on.

Miss Rachel shook with a nervous chill. She forced herself for sanity's sake to lift the piano lid again, to reinspect the cut string. She drew a finger across the neighboring strings, and there arose a muted half octave of humming.

So there was nothing wrong with her ears.

When the sound of the humming died away she held her own breath and listened. For a moment there was just the emptiness of the room, a vacuum of soundlessness so deep that she felt her ears ache with it, and she was reassured.

Then it came again, a sighing and struggling breath.

There arose in her an echo of the old and unreasoning nightmares of childhood, the fear of horned horrors lying in dark places, of faceless terrors ready to reach a groping hand, of being too frozen with fright to run.

She put out a foot uncertainly and found that her muscles still obeyed her. Stumbling, she made the door to the rear hall and got through it before the . . . it . . . could take another breath. She shut the door and leaned against it, trembling.

A little of the flower odor seemed to sift through the panel. To get away from this she went upstairs. She patted herself to neatness before rapping on Mr. Hurgraves' door. When there was no answer, she turned the knob and peeped in.

Mr. Hurgraves was gone.

TEETERING on the threshold, looking in at Mr. Hurgraves' empty chair and the tray with its dishes stacked and the napkin folded beside them, she felt as though eyes as well as ears were playing tricks on her. She hadn't known that Mr. Hurgraves was able to get about . . .
and still, Rheba had mentioned something of the sort. She went in and closed the door, searching her mind for Rheba’s words.

*My stepfather... he's not confined to bed.*

That wasn't the same as saying he could go about as he pleased.

She opened the bath and the closet doors diffidently, coughing a little before peeping in.

In the closet hung two rather shabby suits and an extra bathrobe and a single pair of shoes. Miss Rachel inspected the shoes with care, just on the chance they might be covered with garden soil from under Mrs. Parminter’s window. She then ran through the contents of the suits.

She was still shaking from her fright in the big room, so that she almost missed the thing that was tucked into Mr. Hurgraves’ watch pocket: a hard, irregular little object which winked yellowly when she brought it out into the light. A key. A most intricate little key made of brass with a curious round bit, a twisted shank, a grip etched and enameled in a design resembling a tulip.

An odd key.

Miss Rachel put it on her palm. It was not so long as the width of her hand. The design on the grip was worked with a microscopic fineness, the lines of enameled spider-thin.

She was bent over it, filled with pleasure, when she heard a step behind her in the room. She popped the key into her dimity pocket—so quickly that, remembering later, she wondered if she hadn’t planned to do so all along. She turned from the closet opening to find Ivy Hurgraves looking at her.

Ivy was wearing a pair of riding breeches and a yellow blouse. The riding breeches would have fit Rheba; Ivy had pinned them to the waistband of the yellow blouse with a safety pin. She had been digging somewhere out of doors, Miss Rachel thought; there was dust in her hair, in her lashes, and she was wiping soil from her hands upon the riding breeches.

“Good lord,” she said, “but you gave me a fright! I didn’t expect anyone in here. Wait a minute.” She stared hard.

“You’re Miss Julia’s cousin.”

“That’s right.”

“Then you’re the neighbor Rheba said had offered to help.”

Miss Rachel nodded. “I’ve been home for a minute or so. I came back and found your father gone. I’d left him here with his lunch.”

“He’s down on the terrace.”

“That’s odd,” said Miss Rachel thoughtfully. “I came by that way a moment ago and I didn’t see him.”

“He’s just settling himself,” Ivy said. “He must have been going down one stairs while you were coming up another.” She reached for the tray with her curiously graceful, curiously adroit hands. “I’ll take this to the kitchen. He wants his medicine on the terrace. That pink stuff by the bed.”

“I’ll take it to him.” Miss Rachel picked up the pink bottle quickly. She had acquired a brand-new and perfectly reasonable explanation of the breathing, the sound that had frightened her so in the living room.

She went down quickly. Mr. Hurgraves was visible through a French window, stretched out upon a canopied lounge, his legs wrapped in a blanket in the sun, his head and shoulders in shadow. There were, as always, the odors of carnation and stock like a cool echo of the garden, the silence a little deathlike, the room in shadow from the heavy draperies. Miss Rachel slipped forward to a spot just beside the piano. There she waited.

Of course, she thought, I won’t hear it now. That sound of breathing was made by Mr. Hurgraves, hiding for some reason until I went away. Waiting in a closet... or somewhere.

A second ticked away. Then two. The doors, in their niches of shadow, seemed like the diminishing reflections in a series of mirrors. Miss Rachel even had a confused idea that she didn’t know by which door she had entered.

There won’t be any breathing now.

*There it was.*


Miss Rachel made a rush for the French window and the warmth of out of doors. Mr. Hurgraves looked up in surprise at her sudden arrival. The sunlight made him seem almost transparent. Miss Rachel
remembered a spider she had found once, hung in an old web, utterly colorless from being dead so long. She thrust the bottle at him, held herself rigid lest she tremble.

He took the bottle with an air of being puzzled by it. "I'll need a spoon." He looked up apologetically. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

Miss Rachel clung to the edge of the canopy over the lounge chair. She felt like saying a good many foolish things.

She thought of saying: "Do you know a string's gone out of your piano? And that if you stand by it you can hear some disembodied things trying to breathe?"

She almost saw Mr. Hurgraves' answering amazement.

"And do you," she wanted to blurt out, "believe in ghosts?"

XII

MISS RACHEL, curled inside a blanket, lay on her bed and listened to the tick of her little watch under her ear. The windows in the gables let in a gray ghost of light, the reflection from the business district gradually going dark some blocks away. She could see the shadowy rail at the foot of her bed, the faint shine of the mirror, the well of the stairway like a frame put on darkness.

She could hear Samantha, who stood on the edge of the blanket and complained. Samantha was a creature of habit, used to being settled before midnight. She didn't like Miss Rachel with all of her clothes on, tense and fidgety, pretending to be asleep.

Miss Rachel reached for her watch. The luminous dial showed the time as eleven forty.

She explored again the pocket of the sprigged dimity, which sagged. There was now, beside the postcard and cuff link she had found in Mrs. Parmenter's things, the tulip key of Mr. Hurgraves', a pencil flashlight, and a tool contrived out of an ice pick of Julia's, a tool which Miss Rachel was sure ought to open the French windows on the terrace and might even prove effective with Rheba's filing cabinet.

She had gone to work on the ice pick after that evening's interview with Captain Fuller.

Fuller had come in at dinner with a telegram in his hand. The telegram was from Lieutenant Mayhew of the Los Angeles detective division. Its message read: I see by the papers that Miss Rachel Murdock is with you. God help you, man.

Miss Rachel had seen no reason for Lieutenant Mayhew to go sticking his nose in, and Fuller's remarks on the subject of spying spinster's had been apt to the point of infuriation.

So she had taken the ice pick up to her room and worked on it madly with a hammer and file.

And now she was ready... all except that scared spot at the nape of her neck that grew cold and prickly when she thought of the big room in the Hurgraves' house. As for being caught in this business—there was no story she could imagine which would pass things off, and so she hadn't bothered to make one up.

A river steamer blew a watery note into the night a long way off, and the crickets in Julia's garden stopped singing to listen. There was the whispered passing of a little breeze. Miss Rachel threw aside the blanket, sat up, and made a quick grab for the cat.

Samantha leaped off the bed before Miss Rachel reached her and ran soft-footed for the stairs. She disappeared into that well of blackness.

"You aren't going!" Miss Rachel said in an angry whisper. "Come back!"

There was a green glow in the dark, as though Samantha had winked at her.

Miss Rachel put on her lavender jacket, laid out upon a chair. "Be a good kitty," she coaxed. "Come, kitty, nice kitty!"

If cats could grin, Samantha was probably grinning.

She went down to the second floor softly. The hall here was not entirely dark, since Miss Jennifer had insisted that some light be left on in the lowest floor, and there was a reflected glow from the living room. Samantha, an ink spot in the gloom, lengthened herself and slid away willfully from Miss Rachel's fingers. She stopped to sniff at Mr. Somplessis' door.

"If you so much as purr and wake that man," Miss Rachel threatened, "I'll spank you hard. If you dare—"

As though in answer to Samantha's show of interest, a plaintive and eerie
melody crept from Mr. Sompless’ room. A minuet as old-fashioned as a lace fan and as terrifying as a shriek.

*I’m not even upstairs to rap at him!* Miss Rachel thought.

She fled away from Mr. Sompless’ door and his music, down through the kitchen and service porch to the door that led out into the garden. Here on the service porch the music was unexpectedly loud. She guessed that Mr. Sompless must sit by his window to play and that he might see her if she went through the garden.

She went to the front of Julia’s house and slid out through the main entry. The cat came after, nimble as a shadow and as impossible to catch. Miss Rachel, on the sidewalk, felt exposed to the stare of the neighbors—though they were all apparently asleep—and she halfway expected a policeman to pop out of the hedge at her. There was, after all, no telling the full possibilities of Captain Fuller.

She walked around the end of the block, keeping within the shadow of trees and hedges as much as possible, and came up to the imposing brick mass of the Hurgraves’ house, a dark bulk under the stars. Getting to the terrace meant a bold dash across the lawn. Running with her skirts lifted, she came unexpectedly upon a depression in the grass out of which rose a pale column. She stumbled headlong, saw the liquid glitter of water, and saved herself from complete immersion by clinging to the column, which turned out to be a marble lady not wearing anything but a pitcher.

She giggled because she couldn’t help it; partly from nervous tension and partly because she had a sudden vision of Jennifer if Jennifer could see her clinging to the graceful nakedness of the marble lady. She climbed out. Her hems were dragged now, though she wrung them tightly over the edge of the pond. The wet cloth clung to her ankles and there was a wet-moss smell to her shoes. Samantha came and inspected her from a distance with displeasure.

Miss Rachel scurried for the side of the house and followed it to the terrace. She found the double latch of a pair of French windows and went swiftly to work. The tool proved less versatile, the lock more stubborn than she had thought. Samantha sharpened her claws on a canvas chair and yawned. There was the sense of time passing, of the stars growing a bit colder.

*I’ve got to hurry,* she thought.

The lock gave a little and then snapped back into place. Miss Rachel said a word which Miss Jennifer would not even have known. But eventually the latch yielded and the door swung forward, opening on utter dark and breathless quiet and the closed-in smell of flowers.

At her heels the cat made a little sound like a question mark translated to a growl.

Miss Rachel went in.

**THE LOWEST DRAWER** of Rheba’s filing cabinet was the only one to yield, and there was no Bombay box inside. There was a dusty folder containing a sheaf of bills: lumber bills, cement-contracting bills, even a copy of an old hotel bill. This latter Miss Rachel was about to put back into the drawer when the heading, in the round spot of her little flash, fairly jumped at her.

*Hotel Naishapur, Bombay.*

Below, in the space for items to be paid for, were written the words: *To remind you, madame. C. Hagar, Mgr.*

That was all.

It was a discreet hint, a gentle mentioning to nudge madame’s memory. There was no clue on it to account for a lost husband.

But it had been written in Bombay.

Miss Rachel folded it tightly and put it in with Mr. Hurgraves’ tulip key and the other things she carried. She was, she felt, getting together a sizable museum. Then she shut the drawer and worked with the tool until the latch had caught again. She went back out into the circular hall.

She felt now a sense of disappointment, of letdown. The adventure had not lived up to its promise of danger, of escape. Standing in the dark, with the air of the house gradually growing cool with the advance of the night, she wondered if she might as well not risk a trip upstairs. There was so obviously no one stirring, no one in the least wise to the fact that the house had been broken into.

There was a fraction of a second after
that thought had crossed her mind, a piece of a moment, before amazement froze her.

She saw then that there was a motionless something on the stairs. Up against the circular wall, behind the scratchy blackness that was the ironwork grill, was a shadow of lighter color. There was to it, because of the intense dark, only a hint of human form, of head and shoulders and the wideness of the trunk. But Miss Rachel fled. She ran to the niche under the stairs where the door of Donald’s sanctum stood; she flattened herself against the dark wall and waited.

For what seemed forever there was no sound at all.

Then there was a slow, unmistakable step on a stair above Miss Rachel’s head, and a further sound as of a long gown dragging.

Someone spoke sharply into the silence.

“Rheba!”

Miss Rachel thought incredulously: Why, it’s Mr. Hurgraves! There was no weakness and no faltering in his voice.

“Rheba! Where are you going?”

The sound of the gown’s rustle paused, and Rheba said, “I’m going out to do something about that music.”

“You’re a fool,” said Mr. Hurgraves.

Rheba laughed. There wasn’t any fun about that laugh. It was the abrupt break in an iron composure, a little too loud and with a touch of hysteria in it.

“It only annoys you because you’re keyed up,” said Mr. Hurgraves. “Going out into the dark would be very unwise and might even be dangerous.”

“I’ve figured that out, too,” said Rheba.

“We can’t just go to pieces in the face of things like this,” said Mr. Hurgraves. “The weakness of one of us is the weakness of all. The newspapers will have a holiday if you do something silly.”

Miss Rachel tried to analyze this even as she took it in. Was Mr. Hurgraves thinking about the reputation of his family . . . or of something else?

Rheba said shakily: “I’m so daft I even see things in the dark. I thought I saw something down below as I stood here on the stairs.”

“What did you think you saw?” said Mr. Hurgraves carefully.

“I thought— Of course, it couldn’t be anyone.”

“Nevertheless, we’d better see about things.”

Mr. Hurgraves’ lighter, almost pattering steps came down past where the rustle of the gown had stopped. Miss Rachel, holding her breath, turned the knob of Donald’s sanctum door and slid through. There was a discreet snap of a light switch. She could see Mr. Hurgraves by the front entry staring about. He was wearing a black robe and leather house shoes. Rheba came into sight as Miss Rachel watched. She wore a taffeta negligee of yellow, and there was a red-and-yellow snood over the black loop of her hair. She looked barbaric and splendid and a little wild.

“It wasn’t anything,” she insisted. “The music kept me awake. I—I felt I had to do something.”

Mr. Hurgraves made no comment. He went to the door of Rheba’s office and threw it open and pushed the light switch inside.

Miss Rachel slid away from the door and crept behind Donald’s desk and crouched there. She almost choked as Samantha, two green eyes and a black-feather shadow, came around the other end of the desk and stood looking at her.

“Go away!” she whispered; and then: “No, don’t you dare!”

Samantha sat down. Mr. Hurgraves threw open the door of Donald’s office and light fanned out across the floor toward the desk. Through the kneehole aperture Miss Rachel saw the lower edge of Mr. Hurgraves’ robe, his thin ankles, his rather large leather house slippers.

“I’m going back upstairs,” Rheba said from the hall.

Mr. Hurgraves didn’t move. “Just touch the light switch when you go past, will you?”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“In a moment.”

The light went out, and Mr. Hurgraves’ legs and the open door and the surrounding disorder of Donald’s office blanked into darkness.

Miss Rachel put out a hand to touch the wood of the desk. She leaned into the kneehole space, listening. She thought that she could hear the stiff rustle of the yellow taffeta on the stairs, and then a
nearer step—Mr. Hurgraves’—walking off quietly after Rheba.

SHE crawled through the kneehole space and raised herself soundlessly. Trying to find the door with her eyes was like trying to see a penny in a bucket of ink. She started from the desk, and then some sense of warning made her pause.

Quietly, just inside the door, she heard the fall of Mr. Hurgraves’ shoe.

“Who is in here?” he asked very softly.

“Speak up, please.”

Miss Rachel stood without moving, without breath that she was conscious of, waiting for his touch to find her in the dark. She wondered how Mr. Hurgraves had guessed someone was here and how she might smooth things over when she was caught.

“You needn’t be afraid of me,” Mr. Hurgraves said hesitantly.

Miss Rachel thought: One never knows, does one?

He coughed gently. “There is someone here, isn’t there?”

Miss Rachel crawled back behind the desk in a wriggling posture which Miss Jennifer would have wept about. Samantha, too curious, got in the way and had her tail knelt upon. She spat and jumped; a sound of falling paper filled the dark.

Mr. Hurgraves snapped on the lights. In the shadow cast by the desk Miss Rachel crouched and wondered if her skirt showed beyond the edge of the column of drawers. Mr. Hurgraves drew in his breath harshly, let it out in an explosive chuckle.

“A cat! I’ve been talking to a cat! Here, puss, where did you come from?”

He reached for the wary black figure, and Samantha darted out between his ankles into the hall.

“I’ll be damned,” said Mr. Hurgraves, sounding a little tired. He went out quickly and shut the door after him. There was a scurrying noise overhead from the direction of the stairs. Miss Rachel shut her eyes to try to think.

If he were chasing the cat upstairs, there should be time enough for her to reach the terrace. She would have to leave Samantha, but the cat had proved in the past to be well able to look after herself, even in unfriendly hands. Miss Rachel crawled from behind the desk, opened the door, and put a listening ear to the crack. There was no sound of life out there in the dark, but from somewhere above Samantha was giving her lost-and-angry cry.

Miss Rachel skirted the circular wall and found the door to the big room. Here was the familiar smell of flowers, a sense of luxury and quiet that pervaded even the darkness. Miss Rachel crossed the corner of the room, touched the edge of the piano, started past, and then stopped.

The piano was open. She reached in, and the strings answered her touch with the faintest of music.

She swallowed the choking lump that had come from nowhere into her throat and stood utterly quiet to listen.

There was no interval of waiting and no sense of distance between. So quickly and so close that it seemed just beside her ear came the breathing, the hoarse breath like a sigh.

XIII

MISS RACHEL found herself out of doors, battering at the lock of Julia’s little gate. The pale mass of the stone wall stood waist-high, and beyond it was the whispering tangle of Julia’s garden—and safety.

She stopped battering to rub her temples and to wonder just how she had come to be where she was. There was a confused memory of flying out the French door like a bat and of crouching among some shrubbery with her handkerchief stuffed into her mouth and her eyes shut, then of getting lost on the expanse of the Hurgraves’ lawns and of finding again the naked lady with the pitcher.

And now Julia’s gate.

Nothing had pursued her, and now she was calming a little.

Whatever the breathing thing is, she told herself firmly, it’s not Mrs. Parmenter!

Well, said some other part of her mind reasonably, what is it, then?

She shook a little with the memory of that moment by the piano and looked back at the house. There were no lights visible on the lower floor, but in two upper rooms—Rheba’s and Mr. Hurgraves’, she thought—was a discreet glow. The garden furniture on the terrace made a series of
black, half-defined shapes, and the row of French windows beyond seemed to shine now and then with a faint, ironic glitter.

She pushed up the latch of Julia's gate with a feeling of having escaped something quite horrible and deadly.

The path, sifted with leaf mold, was silent underfoot, so that Miss Rachel came to Julia's arbor without making any sound.

The people in the arbor weren't making any sound either, so that she all but stumbled upon them. The only warning she had—almost disastrously too late—was the incense-like odor of Mr. Somplessis' cigarette smoke curling out between the thick vine, as lazy on the night air as a camel chewing its cud, as spine-stiffening as the touch of a knife between the shoulder blades.

Miss Rachel stopped and waited, and at last Mr. Somplessis spoke.

"All of this that you say is quite interesting. Even fantastic. But it is also common knowledge in this city."

"Don't pretend," said Ivy Hurgraves' intense voice, "that you picked up what you know on street corners."

"Oh, no." There was a pause, then a long sigh as though he had blown out a fresh cloud of smoke. "I didn't say that."

"You came here all prepared to play some game with Rheba," Ivy accused. "You're in with her. You know something about Teddy, and she's paying you to keep your mouth shut."

"My dear," said Mr. Somplessis, "you misjudge me harshly."

Ivy's tone was bitter.

"I wish that you had to live under Rheba's thumb, grudged your clothes and your food and even the privilege of looking in at her damned collections."

"I do not underestimate Mrs. Hurgraves' personality."

Ivy Hurgraves seemed to wait for words into which to put her burning resentment. At last: "If we could ever break Rheba down and make her admit that Teddy died on that trip—"

"Wait a minute," Mr. Somplessis put in abruptly. "Is it true, then that Mr. Hurgraves, her husband, went away on such a journey and left it to her honesty that his death should be reported if it occurred?"

"There was to be some sort of sign if he felt done for," she said impatiently. "It never came."

"A sign? What sort of sign?"

"I don't know. Some personal belonging—small enough to mail, Donald thinks. We don't know what it was."

"Who knew, then?"

"My father."

Silence came back into the arbor, and Miss Rachel shivered under the touch of the river breeze.

"What I really came to ask you," Ivy flung out, "was why you play that horrid little tune in the middle of the night."

He laughed, a short mirthless sound, and Miss Rachel could imagine his smile hanging on forgotten while he continued smoking. "I will first ask you a question. What effect does my playing seem to have on your stepsister?"

"I knew it." There was the sound of Ivy's jumping up. "I knew you were in with her. The tune is a signal. It's part of your plot."

"How does she behave?" insisted Mr. Somplessis.

"She leaves her room," snapped Ivy. "But you'd know that!"

"And she goes . . . where?"

"To you!"

"Not at all," said Mr. Somplessis with great calm. "She does not come to me, and I should like very much to know why."

"I don't believe you!"

"Your privilege, Miss Hurgraves."

"I'm not—I don't really care what you and Rheba are up to, anyway. I have other things to think of, other people who might be hurt by whatever cheap plot you and Rheba are hatching."

"Other people," Mr. Somplessis repeated speculatively. "Yes. Young Mr. Grennel."

"My father!" Ivy cried in a tone that blushed.

"Why not admit that you are in love with Mr. Grennel? It's so much simpler than trying to hide what everyone knows."

"I'm not!" Ivy stammered, but it was weak.

"Of course you are, and knowing the stupidity of the police, you fear that they might think you killed Mrs. Parmeater because she had appropriated your lover."

There was a moment of silence, of speechless fury; then the sound of a slap.
MR. SOMPRESSIS said a little breathlessly: "You have made an enemy."

“I don’t care!"
He spoke slowly.
"I do not forget an insult, nor a kindness. This is the way of my people, and I follow it." He had the reserve of a duelist, the implacable power of a snake. "I am here tonight because of a kindness. I go far, you see, to repay. I shall repay you for that slap."

"Do any sneaking oriental thing you like!" The words came out in a rush, but her tone had a note of terror in it.

He might have bowed to her in the dark confines of the arbor. "As you say."

There were stumbling, hurrying steps. Miss Rachel scrambled into the shelter of an oleander tree, and Ivy ran past, rattling the vine and raising a trace of dust from the path to tickle Miss Rachel’s nose.

The silence came back and the breeze seemed very chill. Miss Rachel rubbed her wet ankles wearily and worried about her cat and prayed for Mr. Somplessis to go away inside. He must be settling back to smoke. The teasing smell came back upon the air, and there was once in a while the barest trace of a sigh.

Miss Rachel inched out from under the oleander tree with the idea of perhaps skirting the arbor and getting to the front of Julia’s house. She was trying to remember the exact relationship of the oleander to the giant fig and another path beyond a row of hollyhocks, when Mr. Somplessis spoke again.

"Aren’t you coming through, Miss Murdock?"

She popped a hand over her mouth and tried to creep back under the oleander.

"There is no one here but me," he said quietly, "and I shan’t hurt you."

He’s guessing, she thought. She kept still, breathless.

"I think you have been over at the Hurgraves’ house looking around. I might ask if you saw Mrs. Hurgraves—Rheba Hurgraves—showing any interest in my music."

Curiosity being Miss Rachel’s besetting sin, she took a step forward so as to hear better.

"You heard my conversation just now with Ivy Hurgraves. I see no reason for being secretive. Won’t you answer my question?"

She advanced into the darker, slightly warmer, and much more odorous confines of the arbor. "How did you know I was there?"

"I expected you, eventually. The newspaper accounts of your other adventures were very vivid. With your technique, you may even have been inside the house. Is it still as rich and as lonely as it was over there?"

"I felt that way about it, too," she admitted. "Luxury piled on luxury—except, of course, in Mr. Hurgraves’ room."

"Yes. We come to that," he said oddly. "He has so many utterly useless things," Miss Rachel told him, and stopped. Some half thought, some ghost of a startling idea, had crossed her mind and she was trying to pin it down. Mr. Hurgraves... and his belongings, the collection of a lifetime... his treasures...

Mr. Somplessis broke the spell. "Please—did you see his stepdaughter?"

To tell a little might mean the return of a lot. "Yes, I saw Rheba. She had heard your music and she was coming over to do something about it when Mr. Hurgraves stopped her." This wasn’t, she reminded herself firmly, the same as admitting she had broken into the Hurgraves house.

"I wonder why?" Mr. Somplessis said. "He doesn’t want a scene the newspapers can get their teeth into." She felt for the bench in the darkness and sat down upon it. "Just what are you trying to do with your minuet?"

"I might express it as a war of nerves."

"Between you and Rheba? But why?"

Then she remembered blackmail, as she had in Mrs. Parmenter’s case, and said: "Oh, perhaps I understand anyway."

"You do not understand at all," Mr. Somplessis corrected, "if you think that I am after some of Mrs. Hurgraves’ money."

"No?"

"No," said Mr. Somplessis.

Miss Rachel tried desperately to think of something besides Rheba’s money which he might want. He went on smoking. Out of the dark, with an angry pounce, came Samantha. She sat on Miss Rachel’s lap and said things in cat language.
"Your cat?" inquired Mr. Somplessis. Miss Rachel said that it was.

"The one thing I am sorry for is the mess I made of the affair with that other animal."

Miss Rachel trembled. She had a sudden and insane idea that she was dreaming.

"You see, Mrs. Hurgraves' cat was to have been a part of my—my war of nerves. I meant him to die quickly and painlessly and to be used in a way which would frighten her very much. And instead he got away."

THE NIGHTMARE MESS on her floor returned to Miss Rachel's memory. She tried to see Mr. Somplessis in the gloom, but there was nothing more substantial there save a voice and some smoke.

"I had cut the poor beast's throat in such a way that he should have died at once. He surprised me. He lived. He clawed me very badly. In an effort to tie him I managed to fasten the cloth sack around his neck. He ran with it up into your room and there tore it off and . . . expired."

Jennifer's story about seeing Mr. Somplessis in the arbor with a white bundle at his feet . . . I see," gasped Miss Rachel.

"I managed to get him away without waking you. I had no way to clean your floor without embarrassment. So I carried through an idea which occurred to me because of our conversation the previous evening—your sister's threat to make a gruesome joke—and I tried to put in the trappings of a prank. A bloody footprint with six toes. A hole in the screen that wouldn't admit a child. I'm very sorry. I paid Chloe for her extra work, and I'll reimburse Miss Julia for the screen."

"But that poor cat!" Miss Rachel cried, getting back her wind.

"I know."

"How could you?"

"My time is growing very short," he said. "I was quite set on finding some means of thoroughly frightening Mrs. Hurgraves."

She waited, not knowing what to think of him now.

"You no doubt wonder what my motive is in all this that I have done," he offered. "Very much," she said.

"I was once in a very bad plight. I won't burden you with details but will say simply that I was accused of robbery in a hotel where I was a clerk."

"Where?"

He paused, then said: "Not yet. In this hotel was a guest, a man who did for me what no other human being had done before. He looked beyond my face, which I know is evil, and studied the man inside who is—let us say, a little better than the face."

Miss Rachel, remembering her snap judgment and instant dislike for Mr. Somplessis, felt confused.

Mr. Somplessis went on in a cool voice.

"This man was very ill, so ill that he had not long to live, and so his efforts in my behalf were all the more unusual. He hired a detective who uncovered the real criminal, a porter. Were it not for that, I should be in prison this day."

There swam up into Miss Rachel's memory the picture of Teddy Hurgraves on the terrace, a puppy in his arms, the sunlight strong on a sensitive face full of kindness and of an insight into life. "I know who that man was," Miss Rachel said suddenly.

"Let us not speak his name, since we understand each other," said Mr. Somplessis.

"And because of what he did . . ."

"I was a long time saving the money to come after her," said Mr. Somplessis bitterly.

Miss Rachel jumped to her feet. "But if you have proof, why go about things so deviously? Why not just walk in and—"

He said sharply: "I gave you credit for more acuteness than that."

She sat down again slowly. "You haven't any proof."

"None at all."

Miss Rachel thought her way through to a startling conclusion, "You must have been there at the time of his disappearance, though, to know as much as you do. What was done by the police in—whatever city this was?"

"They made a thorough search. They found nothing. Mrs. Hurgraves hushed the matter up as a private disagreement between her and her husband. He was
ill, according to her story, and trying to worry her with a cruel trick. For a long time I thought this might be true and I watched the piers at steamer time, remembering how much he had wanted to go home. Then I came gradually to realize that she had some motive in concealing what had happened to him. I saved my money. I came here.”

“The guests, the employees at the hotel . . .?”

“I am convinced that they knew nothing except for the manager, my cousin—Him I suspect of helping Mrs. Hurgraves and of being well rewarded.”

“His name?”

“Cassim Hagar.”

Miss Rachel’s fingers flew to the sagging pocket of her dimity, to the folded notice on hotel stationery. It was a crisp, unyellowed sheet. Rheba was still paying for Cousin Cassim’s services.

“I should explain now also that my name is not Somplessis,” he went on. “When I came to ask about renting a room in your cousin’s house, she demanded my name and in what place I had lived previously. I began rather awkwardly to tell her about my former landlady, a difficult woman, whose house, of course, was not so near the Hurgraves and not so suited to my purpose. I said, ‘Some places . . .’ I think I meant to say that some places are not to be endured; she took it for my name. Because of my accent she called it Somplessis. This matter has been awkward because of the police. My name is Hagar, like my cousin’s. Raoul Hagar.”

That explained the initials on Mr. Somplessis’ handkerchiefs, of course, but Miss Rachel felt as though an oversize mental meal had been stuffed into her mind and that it was proving difficult to digest. If all that Mr. Somplessis—Hagar—had said was true, he was quite a different character than what she had thought him.

Or had Mr. Somplessis a gift of lying as uncanny as his smile?

XIV

HE SPOKE gently. “You have found my story interesting, and now you are trying to figure out whether it is fact or fantasy.”

She blurted: “You could be here in the interests of your cousin. As a—a collector.”

“I could,” he admitted.

“Anyone who would kill a cat in such a way—?”

“In my country,” he interrupted, “we have a long history of sacrificial death. That’s what the cat was meant to be—a sacrifice to the shortness of time and to my determination that the truth should be gotten out of Mrs. Hurgraves.”

“You failed,” she reminded bitterly.

“I have begun to fail,” he said with a curious passion. “This man who helped me has lain for a long while in an alien grave, and it is time to do something quite drastic.” There was a rustle as though he searched his pocket for something, then a breath drawn in, then the graceful melody of the minuet.

Miss Rachel cried: “That particular tune—”

“In time I shall explain how I happened on it.” He went back to playing the soft minor thing that filled the night with its melancholy. Then, breaking off: “If anything should happen to me you must expect a message. In—hmmm—let us say the most obvious place possible.”

She paid little attention to this last, though she was to recall it later. She cried anxiously: “Why not go to the police?”

“To Captain Fuller?” He laughed.

She sank back, disappointed. She heard the scrape of Mr. Somplessis’ shoe and sensed that he had risen.

“It is time, I think, that I should interview Mrs. Hurgraves.”

Miss Rachel could make out the even shadow of his slim shape. “Be careful.”

“I shall be the very soul of caution,” he told her.

He put away the mouth harp and took out another cigarette and lit it. The air that had begun to smell again of the garden reverted to incense. Miss Rachel wished that she could see his face. She thought he might be smiling; not at her. At the pathway that led to the woman he was determined to see.

THE SUN was a yellow eye winking through under the blind, and the warm breeze was full of Julia’s tangle of stock
and heliotrope. There was also a disapproving voice: Miss Jennifer's. She stood in the stair opening and shook her head.

"Don't pretend innocence, Rachel. You've been prowling. Your dimity's ruined and your jacket has dust over it. Even the cat's too utterly worn out to wake up."

Miss Rachel pushed herself up to yawn. "What time is it?"

"Almost eleven."

"Has Fuller been here?"

"And gone. He must have been out somewhere, too. He practically snored at me across the breakfast table. I'd offered him some coffee."

"Anything new on Mrs. Parmenter?"

"I didn't ask."

"Is Chloe still with us?" Miss Rachel wondered.

"She's coming up with something for you to eat. Not that you deserve it."

There was a delicate rattle of china, and Chloe came up bearing a tray with coffee, buttered muffins, and an omelet sprinkled was parsley—a touch Miss Rachel had suggested at dinner.

"Morning, ma'am." She was getting back a little of her smile.

"Good morning, Chloe."

Chloe put the tray on the bedside stand and went to draw up the blinds. A bird in Julia's fig tree chattered a scolding.

"You'd better run down again in case someone comes," Miss Jennifer suggested. Chloe went away. "Now. Where were you, Rachel?"

Some perversity and naughty desire to shock Miss Jennifer made her say: "I broke into the Hurgraves' house and did some eavesdropping."

Jennifer didn't quite believe this, though she responded with a pleasant show of revulsion. "That wouldn't account for the condition of your clothing."

"First I fell into their fishpond and then I crawled under an oleander to avoid meeting Ivy Hurgraves."

Miss Jennifer set her plain mouth in an expression of scorn. "No one could have made me believe, during the days of our youth, that you would turn out the way you have."

"Mmmm. My one regret," said Miss Rachel through a bite of omelet, "is that I found my talent so late in life."

"It is not a talent. It is an insanity."

"We shall simply have to disagree on that point, then. By the way, have you run into Mr. Somplessis this morning?"

"I have not."

"Any of the Hurgraves?"

"Donald's wife, the lovely girl with the platinum hair. She came over to see if you were still in a mood to help with the old gentleman."

Miss Rachel choked on her coffee. "Stupid! How could I have forgotten?"

She scrambled out of bed and began to disrobe. A look of outraged tears came over Miss Jennifer.

Half in and half out of a petticoat, Miss Rachel paused to stare. Then she went over softly to put her cheek against Jennifer's. "I was always the giddy one, wasn't I? Remember the time I coaxed you to put a cricket in old Mr. Bell's top hat?"

Miss Jennifer's tears turned into a look of trying not to smile.

"And when he put his hat on at the door he told Father he believed his scalp must be starting to liven up again?"

"Bald as an onion," choked Jennifer. "Oh, Rachel, how could we?"

"It wasn't hurting anyone," said Miss Rachel. "Old Mr. Bell had a few moments of hope, and the cricket got away."

But Miss Jennifer suddenly took Miss Rachel's hand off her own. "No, Rachel. Don't try to make me see the funny side of things. You're involved in a foolish and dangerous business, running around at night with a crew of murderers, burglarizing homes, breaking the law. That's the sort of thing best left for the police."

"Fuller would be insulted," Miss Rachel giggled, "to hear you describe his job like that."

But Miss Jennifer stalked downstairs, shaking her head.

Miss Rachel spent a few seconds wondering whether the excitement was worth Jennifer's disapproval and then decided that it was. She straightened the room, put away a few articles, and then dressed. She put on a fresh gown of lawn with a small pattern of violets, took the white piqué bonnet from its box, called the cat, and picked up the tray.
In the kitchen were Chloe and Jennifer, struggling with menus. Miss Rachel put down the tray and looked for the cat's breakfast in the refrigerator.

"Will you be away for lunch?" Chloe asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"I'll remember about Captain Fuller."

"Thank you, Chloe."

She left the cat inspecting a bit of liver and went quickly and alone through the garden to the back gate.

Across the expanse of lawn, Donald's wife stood talking to Bob Grennel.

HE LOOKED thinner and more adult in street clothes, and the air of dejection and grief was almost gone, as though he might be getting over the first shock of Nettie Parmenter's death. He held a gray felt hat, turning it restlessly in his fingers. When he looked at Kay he narrowed his eyes against the silver glitter of her hair.

Kay's attitude was one of solicitude, of trying to help in the lightening of his mood. She put a hand on his arm. Then they saw Miss Rachel simultaneously. They turned with almost an air of mutual defense.

Kay was wearing a blue pinafore, blue anklets, and white canvas wedgies. She had put a couple of morning-glories behind her ears, and they were beginning to wilt. "Hello," she said as Miss Rachel approached. "We're so glad you could come."

"Sure decent of you," murmured Grennel. He avoided Miss Rachel's eye with a trace of embarrassment.

"And Rheba wants you," Kay added. "Right away."

There was an air of proprietorship and of employment about this last that Miss Rachel didn't like.

"I say, Miss Murdock," Grennel burst out, "you don't have to do this unless you want to. It's a damned nuisance—Rheba's imposing on you."

Kay teased him. "Travel's made you thoughtful, Bob. But we do need Miss Murdock, and she's a dear to help."

Still he didn't quite look at Miss Rachel; he stumbled on in what he was trying to say. "The—the police are nosing around. This isn't the pleasantest place in the world."

Miss Rachel wondered if he had meant a warning.

"Nonsense," said Kay, and laughed.

On a sudden impulse, Miss Rachel asked him: "I was thinking about Mrs. Parmenter's funeral. Are you attending to it?"

Kay stood as frozen, as inarticulate, as though Miss Rachel had just said something indecent. Grennel plucked at his hat.

Miss Rachel went on. "Since Mrs. Parmenter was your fiancéé, I thought you'd be the one in charge."

He muttered: "I'm going down this morning." He didn't look at Kay, saying it.

Kay plucked one of the morning-glories from her hair and looked at it vindictively. "These things go limp so quickly, don't they?"

"Try a thistle," said Miss Rachel sweetly, going in.

She couldn't quite analyze what had caused her to feel that sudden anger against Kay Hurgraves. Was it the sight of the impatient hand crushing the morning-glory? Was it the fringe of lash like a little girl's, the childish eyes studying the flower that was no longer flattering, the mind that discarded the thought of death in the face of its own petulance?

She went through the living room with a long look for the piano. It stood shadowy and shining, an arrangement of honey-suckle and pansies in a silver dish on its lid. Miss Rachel tapped at the door of Rheba's office. Rheba's voice said, "Come in."

She was at the desk. She wore a gray linen suit with epaulets of dark blue braid. Her black hair was looped into a blue snood that was somehow as businesslike as a typewriter. She nodded to Miss Rachel. "Thanks for coming again. There's something I want to ask you before you go upstairs. It's about the lock on the French window."

Miss Rachel restrained her hand, which, nervous with guilt, wanted to stray in the direction of her pocket. There was nothing in the pocket of her lawn dress save Mr. Hurgraves' odd little key and the burned link. The other articles, including the tool which she had wielded on Rheba's window, were tied in a handkerchief and tacked to the back of the dressing table in
the upper room at Julia’s. “What is it?” she asked politely.

“We think the house was entered last night. There are certain marks, scratches. . . .” She picked up a sheaf of papers from the desk and shook them together. “I was wondering just what time you left last evening and whether you noticed if the doors to the terrace were locked.”

“I don’t remember precisely.”

“But you went out that way?”

Miss Rachel decided to improve her memory. “Yes. Now that you mention it. . . .” She concentrated by trying to see what Rheba’s papers were about. “Not locked. I’m sure of it.”

“Thank you.” Rheba turned toward the filing cabinet with the sheaf of papers. She swung forward from her swivel chair and put a hand on the bottom drawer. Then she stayed that way, as fixed as stone.

A chilly contraction began to crawl from Miss Rachel’s shoulders up into her scalp. Rheba’s astonishment, her frozen outrage, were so well done that they were perfect. She made a portrait of a well-bred businesswoman discovering the ravishment of her private affairs. She was also so genuinely angry that the cords stood out in her throat and the hand holding the papers was as rigid as a metal claw.

SHE TURNED slowly, and her eyes came up to settle on Miss Rachel’s face. The chilly contraction raced over Miss Rachel from head to foot, and she felt stifled, smothering.

“Is something wrong?” she managed. Rheba spoke coldly.

“Very wrong. “I’m afraid we’re being taken advantage of.”

“I don’t understand.”

She did, though. Rheba suspected her. If I fail this test, she thought, I’m a dead duck.

“I find that my filing cabinet has been tampered with in an effort to break into it as the house was broken into.” Rheba folded her hands on the desk, and her eyes on Miss Rachel were shrewd and searching. “Not expertly. Like the French window—clumsily. With some homemade tool, I suspect, and by someone with just strength enough to wreak damage without getting anywhere.”
spots in his white cheeks, and his eye on
Miss Rachel was anxious.
"I'm so glad you came," he said. He
put down the battered magazine he had
been reading. "I must ask you some-
ting. I hope that you won't be angry.
It's about a key."
Miss Rachel felt an unwilling blush
creep into her face.
He put out a hand that trembled. "If
you have my little key, won't you give it
to me? You see, it's the key to Rhea's
Bombay box."

XV

"If you haven't the key, please don't
take offense at my asking for it."
He made an apologetic gesture. "If you
do have it . . . I beg you to give it back
to me."

There was something compelling and
pitiful about the way he looked at her.
Miss Rachel put her hand into her pocket.
Then she stopped.
He saw her motion, saw the hesitation
that followed. "You might say that since
the key isn't mine I have no business in
keeping it."
"Oh no," Miss Rachel stammered.
"It is actually Rhea's key," he insisted
wearily. "I took it without her knowl-
dge or permission. I—stole it from her."
Miss Rachel's fingers brought out the
key and the cuff link intertangled. They
rolled together on her palm.
"I haven't any real feeling of guilt," Mr.
Hurgraves went on rather automatically.
"If I can find the Bombay box and see just
what is and what isn't in it—"
He had begun to tremble, suddenly and
visibly. An ashy color spread into his
face. He put a thin hand up to touch his
throat, where the old flesh showed bare and
wrinkled above the collar of his pajamas.
Miss Rachel went close quickly. "What
is it? An attack?"
"No." It was more a sigh than a word.
"Nothing."
She put her hand down upon the coun-
terne, and his eyes followed it glassily.
"Shall I call someone? The doctor, per-
haps?"
"No. Wait."
He breathed with a harsh, stoppered dif-
ficulty. A trace of sweat sprang out be-
tween his eyebrows and across his upper
lip.
"Do you need some sort of medicine?"
Miss Rachel asked, searching the room
with a glance for the pink bottle.
"What is it," he ratted, "that you have
there?"
Miss Rachel opened her palm. "Your
key. I—I took it from the pocket of your
suit in the closet. I had an idea, too, about
opening the Bombay box if I could find it."
He shook his head frantically. "Not the
key. I see that. The other."
She picked up the cuff link scarred with
fire, the heavy knot of gold swinging by
its chain, a smaller knot at the other end.
"This?"
"Where did you get it?"
Miss Rachel, standing so close, felt the
communication of the emotion that pos-
sessed him. It was terror. She sensed
its cold, slow infection like the advance of
a shivering tide. And unaccountably, too,
for there was nothing so frightening about
the link.
"I found it," she said, watching him.
He shut his eyes suddenly. He seemed
to shrink into the pillow.
"Is it yours?" she wondered.
He remained very shrunken and very
still. "No," he said at last. "It isn't
mine."
She tried to keep her head clear, to
study his reactions coolly, but the conta-
gion of his fright was almost overpow-
ering. She had an insane urge to drop the
cuff link, to fling it away. There was
something quite dreadful about the thing,
or Mr. Hurgraves wouldn't be acting the
way he was. "Have you seen it before?"
she asked. She thrust it at him.
He opened his eyes and recoiled.
"Whose is it?" she insisted.
"Please." He urged his thin body crab-
wise toward the other side of the bed.
"I—I don't seem to be feeling so well
after all. Perhaps the medicine would
help. Do you mind?"
There wasn't anything to do but to hunt
for the pink bottle. Miss Rachel poked
about the room with the feeling that he
had his eyes on her and that he was lying
there stiff with fear, trying to think of
other excuses to keep her away. She had
put the link and the key back into her
pocket, and he had seemed relieved.
“I believe,” he said hoarsely, “that the maid may have taken the medicine away with my breakfast tray. You might ask in the kitchen.”

“I’ll be right back,” Miss Rachel promised.

She flew down to the big room of chrome and tilework where the cook was scrubbing the refrigerator.

“We’d know better than to keep his medicine down here,” the cook said indignantly. “He’s spoofing you.”

Miss Rachel peeped hastily into a cupboard so that it wouldn’t quite be lying to tell Mr. Hurgraves she had made a search. “What are you doing about your war job?” she asked the cook.

“Examination Monday,” said the cook, rattling the ice trays.

“Fine,” said Miss Rachel, flying out. She ran back upstairs and looked pantingly in to find Mr. Hurgraves’ bed empty.

THERE WERE signs of the scrambling haste of his departure: bedding dragged awry, a few whatnots fallen here and there, the closet open and the hanger which had contained his robe still swinging a little. Miss Rachel wasted no time; she went quickly down the hall to the iron railing that overlooked the circular entry.

No sign of Mr. Hurgraves here, just Ivy standing in the middle of the floor, her feet wide on the blue carpet, disreputable in slacks and an old sweater, thumbing her nose toward Rhea’s office door.

But he had come this way, obviously, or Miss Rachel would have seen him on the other stairs. She started down softly, and Ivy heard. She flung round, and for a moment her face was angry.

Then: “Hello. I thought for a minute you were somebody else.”

Miss Rachel continued to the bottom of the stairs. “Who?”

“Kay. Her hair’s as white as yours. I’d just come in from the sun, and for a moment all I saw was your hair up there like a light.”

Miss Rachel thought this over and decided that it was a compliment. “Thank you.”

Ivy laughed. “You’re welcome. By the way, how’s your Mr. What’s-His-Name this morning? The little man with the ghastly smile?”

“Mr. Somplessis? I haven’t seen him.”

“I had a row with him last night. What on earth is he up to with that music? Charming a cobra?”

Remembering the fixity and flatness of Rhea’s eyes, Miss Rachel nodded. “He might.”

“Where is he from?”

“I haven’t the least idea, but I think he looks oriental. Don’t you?”

“A Hindu,” said Ivy thoughtfully. “Definitely one of those untouchables from India.”

“I believe the term untouchable refers to a caste,” corrected Miss Rachel. “Anyway, he’s very light for one of them.”

“He’s probably a mixture,” said Ivy impatiently. “Who cares? If I see him prowling around again I’m going to call the police.”

“You did see him prowling?” said Miss Rachel.

Ivy nodded eagerly.

“He was on our terrace early this morning, before dawn. I thought he started to sit down on the lounge chair that Father uses so much, and then he suddenly straightened and went away.”

“To Julia’s?”

“No. Toward the front of the house and the street. I imagine that he caught sight of me. I had my window open. I was leaning through it to watch him.”

“You mean that he went completely away?”

Ivy nodded. She thrust her hands into the pockets of the slacks, and under the press of her knuckles the wool showed frayed and snagged. “Another minute and I’d have been at the telephone. I guess he read my mind.” She grinned a little spitefully.

“You saw him go as far as the street?”

“No.” The grin went away. “What do you mean? Do you think he might have gotten in at the front?”

“Hardly,” Miss Rachel pointed out, “since the door there was no doubt locked.”

She saw that she had planted some doubt in Ivy’s mind. The girl stood moving one toe restlessly, watching the pattern its moving made on the dark rug.

Miss Rachel took this moment to ask: “Has your father gone by this way?”

Ivy nodded toward Rhea’s office. “In there. You can hear them if you listen.”
There had been from somewhere, Miss Rachel realized, an increasing mutter, an angry and monotone quarreling.

“They do that ever so often,” Ivy said. “I wonder what the devil they’re arguing about?”

She looked at Miss Rachel, the plain face full of mischief, and Miss Rachel saw what she had in mind. “Shall we?” Miss Rachel asked. They went together and put ears against the upper panel of Rheba’s door.

The subdued but inimical murmuring went on with only a word recognizable here and there.

“We might have known,” Ivy whispered. “That damned woman has too much control even to scrap like a human being.”

Miss Rachel knelt and tried to see through the keyhole, but there was a key in its other side.

Ivy suddenly put her lips close to the frame and screamed, “Fire!”

Miss Rachel almost fell over in her haste to get away. Ivy began to pound with closed fists. “Fire! Fire, you fool!”

There was a sound of running steps, the scratch of the key being turned, and Rheba flung open the door. “What on earth are you screaming about? What’s wrong?”

Her furious eyes searched out Miss Rachel’s almost-vanished figure under the staircase. “You. What are you doing here?”

“Fire,” said Ivy flatly, grinning into Rheba’s face.

“Where?” cried Rheba.

“You’ll find out someday,” said Ivy, walking away.

Rheba took on a suddenly deflated air. She stared after Ivy as though the girl’s unending hatred and resentment were beginning to grow wearying. Then she turned to Miss Rachel. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. If you’re wondering about Mr. Hurgraves, he’s in here.”

From where she now stood Miss Rachel could see him. He was crouched in one of Rheba’s businesslike chairs with an air of being very cold and very forlorn.

“He isn’t feeling well and should be back in bed,” said Rheba. “Will you help me get him upstairs?”

Together they assisted Mr. Hurgraves back into his room. He did not seem so weak as unwilling. At the door of his room he seemed to brighten with a look Miss Rachel could not fathom.

Rheba, guiding Mr. Hurgraves to his bed, examined the frowsy room with distaste. But she said a peculiar thing. “Now lie down. Nothing is changed. Nothing will be.”

He turned from her. His eyes settled on a small table against the wall, an arched-legged table on which rested a sea-shell paperweight, at ratan tray full of odd pebbles and stones, and a photograph of a woman in a moss-colored leather frame. Miss Rachel surmised all at once that this was the first Mrs. Hurgraves, the mother of Donald and Ivy.

For a half moment she felt as she had felt in the Arbor with Mr. Somplessis; there were the nebulous beginnings of an idea she had had about Mr. Hurgraves and his collected possessions. A teasing fragment of thought. She tried to search it out.

Rheba interrupted briskly. “Will you stay and see that he gets a little sleep?”

“I’ll be glad to.”

Mr. Hurgraves sank into his pillow and shut his eyes. Rheba closed the door softly. Miss Rachel felt oddly alone and alien in the cluttered room. She went to a window and looked out, seeing a corner of the garden, the expanse of turf, planted beds of blossom.

Kay Hurgraves, in the blue pinafore, was throwing some crumbs to a couple of blackbirds who walked about boldly, their bodies black and shining on the green lawn.

Mr. Hurgraves spoke tiredly from the bed. “There isn’t any need for you to stay if you’d rather be home, Miss Murdock.”

“No, you don’t,” she thought. Not just when I’m getting somewhere. Aloud: “I’m sure Rheba wants someone to be with you.”

He sighed. “Then sit down and be comfortable.”

She sat dawn in a big chair by the window and found it unexpectedly soft and relaxing. “What a good chair this is!” she said.

He beamed.

“Very good. Good material, good workmanship. They don’t make them like that any more.”

“Have you had it, then, a long while?”

He nodded with his eyes shut. “A long, long while. For almost thirty years.”
She pounced on an idea. "Did your wife choose it?"
"We chose it," he corrected. "Before the children were born."
"Do you mind," Miss Rachel asked hesitantly, "talking a little about the first Mrs. Hurgraves?"
He was silent so long that she thought she might have offended him or that he hadn't heard. Then he said in a very low tone: "She was so beautiful and so kind that being near her was like inhaling a fragrance."

Miss Rachel looked at the picture by the bed, thinking how the face of the woman in it had the same sort of quality Teddy Hurgraves' had had: a merciful insight and understanding and love.
"Teddy was her nephew!" Miss Rachel said.
"I think I told you he was her brother's son. You see the resemblance?"
"It's quite striking."
"They were alike in their gift of making people happy," he went on. He suddenly looked frustrated and bitter. "I shouldn't have tried marriage again. How silly to think you can re-create that kind of life!" There was a stifled cough that covered a sob.

"Don't distress yourself," Miss Rachel cautioned.
"Then this—this Mrs. Parmenter. She was kind, you know. No understanding, no real help. But a sort of surface agreement that was comforting."

Remembering Mrs. Parmenter's arch efforts as a companion, Miss Rachel nodded. "I know what you mean."
"I wouldn't have dreamed of marrying her, of course."
Miss Rachel all but jumped out of the chair. "Did she know that?"
"I'm sure that she did."
Miss Rachel rubbed a temple with one hand. Lost: one perfectly good motive for Mrs. Parmenter to have been dabbling in the disappearance of Teddy Hurgraves. There wouldn't have been a marriage to look forward to if Mr. Hurgraves' money were suddenly returned. There was just . . . blackmail.

Feverishly, Miss Rachel's mind began fitting it all together. Mrs. Parmenter had borrowed a sum of money from a loan company. She had given the money to Grennel to finance his searchings on the trip he was about to make. Bob Grennel, under the spell of an infatuation for Mrs. Parmenter, took the money and went off and found something. Bringing it back, he had in some mysterious way been able to let Mrs. Parmenter know of his success. Mrs. Parmenter had gone to Rheba and demanded an advance in cash—enough to satisfy the loan people—a beginning.

Only, what could Grennel have found, and why wasn't he doing something about it now?

Was he too frightened over Mrs. Parmenter's murder?
She moved restlessly, and the chair screeched.

Mr. Hurgraves sat bolt upright in bed. The screech came again, though Miss Rachel had been sitting still. The sound wasn't in the chair, she realized. It came from out of doors, out past the window where the sun lay golden on the Hurgraves' lawn. Out where Kay had been ostentatiously feeding a couple of blackbirds.

Miss Rachel scrambled up out of the chair and flattened herself against the pane. There was the sound of Mr. Hurgraves getting out of bed, stumbling into furniture, his voice croaking an inquiry.

Below, in a tangle of delphinium and stock, stood Kay. She had her hands clenched madly over the bosom of the pinafore and she was arched backward as though something at her feet were ready to attack. Her face was twisted with terror and she went on screaming again and again.

Above her in the air the two blackbirds twisted. Their cries, and the alarm in them, were an echo of her own.

XVI

By the time Miss Rachel had half fallen down the back stairs and raced through the kitchen to the side yard, Captain Fuller was already beside Kay Hurgraves. Kay was still screaming, and Fuller was shaking her as though he wanted to break her in two.

"Cut it out!" Fuller shouted. "Damn it."
He flung around and saw Miss Rachel, and a glint came into his eye. He thrust the writhing girl at her. "Here. Take it away till it shuts up."
Then he bent to stare at something among the flowers.

The cook had ambled out after Miss Rachel. She stood peering and afraid, her hands wrapped in her apron. Kay Hurgraves clawed at Miss Rachel’s impatient bosom and said strangled things about a body. Miss Rachel got rid of her by giving her to the cook.

Fuller’s neck swelled in anger when she peeped past it to see what it was Kay had found. “Get out of here!” he growled.

Miss Rachel couldn’t have moved if he had breathed fire at her.

Mr. Somplessis was lying face down in a welter of blossoms. There was very little disturbance of the flower bed. He looked as though he had knelt, enigmatic and patient as always, and then slipped forward upon his face. Something about the broken and unnatural way he lay spoke plainly of death.

Miss Rachel found it hard to breathe. She remembered all that Mr. Somplessis had told her, with the conviction that it had been the truth. Tears came to sting her eyes. She tried not to think of Teddy Hurgraves and his kindness, and what Mr. Somplessis had tried to do in return.

Captain Fuller put a hand down and pulled the collar of Mr. Somplessis’ coat away from the back of his neck. Knotted deep into the flesh was a common black shoestring. It had been levered to the limit of tightness with a little stick.

Fuller stood up impatiently and scratched his head and pushed his hat around over it. “He didn’t just sit here and let somebody do this,” he decided, and knelt again to run searching fingers up into Mr. Somplessis’ black hair. “A knockout, like the Parmenter woman.” He grunted angrily and bent close to examine Mr. Somplessis’ discolored features. “Go call my office, will you? I guess you know the ropes well enough to tell them what’s needed.”

It was flattery, after a fashion; meant also to get rid of her. She hurried away. The terrace, bright with sun, the sudden darkness of the living room, swam with her tears.

She recalled a telephone in Rheba’s office, an extension in Donald’s. She rapped at Donald’s door under the stairs.

Donald Hurgraves was propped in his chair with his feet on the desk and his eyes shut. He seemed to be asleep. When Miss Rachel peered in at him he yawned and came awake slowly.

“May I use the telephone?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, drawing his long legs off the desk, pushing the telephone toward her. “Come and get it. Hey, what’s this? Tears?”

She nodded without explaining. She asked the operator for the number of police headquarters, since no book seemed available, and while she waited for an answer Donald’s hand came up to grip her arm.

“Somebody’s dead.” He was wide awake now, startled, apprehensive. “Who is it? It isn’t . . . Kay?”

“Not Kay, not anyone here. Mr. Somplessis.”

“Miss Julia’s India man?”

Miss Rachel capped the receiver with a hand. “Why do you say that?”

“Wasn’t he?” Donald’s eyes were puzzled, searching. There seemed no guilt in them.

“I suppose so,” she answered. She finished the call Fuller had requested; she turned to find Donald putting a chair out for her.

“Sit down. You look a bit shaky. Fuller won’t let you meddle with his corpse, anyway, now that he’s got there first. I don’t blame him. You look like the kind of little old lady who goes around collecting money for animal welfare. You don’t belong with crime.”

She studied the sensitive face, the moody eyes trying to be friendly. “I gave up being a conventional person a long time ago. Things have been so much more exciting since I did.”

“I know. But somebody ought to warn you. The game you’re playing isn’t tiddlywinks. By the way, how was this fellow killed?”

“The way Mrs. Parmenter was. A blow to knock him unconscious, then . . . strangling.”

Her voice had broken. She winked back tears again.

“Not always exciting, is it?” He tapped the typewriter keys with absent-minded gravity. “Poor devil. What was he doing in the flower bed?”

“Ivy said she saw him on the terrace in the night.”

“She did?” He was obviously startled.
"Hanging around was he? I don’t like that." He frowned at the desk top.

"Perhaps he expected to meet someone," she suggested.

He gave her a quick look she couldn’t read. "How had he acted over the Parmenter murder?"

"Excited. About as upset as we all were."

Donald sat without speaking for some minutes. Then he said: "Getting back to something I brought up before ... I’m afraid you might get hurt."

"Meddling?"

He nodded gravely. "Meddling."

She shook her head. "Even if I should — there’s too much to do, to discover, to quit now."

His mouth grew firm. "That’s Fuller’s job."

"He isn’t nosy enough."

Donald laughed without humor. "You don’t know the guy."

"I mean" — she smoothed the lawn skirt with its scattering of violets, touched the pocket and felt the clink of metal from inside— "I mean that the police are never quite nosy enough about trifles, inconsequential things. They go in for obvious clues like fingerprints and bullets and plaster casts, and they usually get along quite well. But some cases — this one, for instance — need, I feel, the study of stray and seemingly unrelated things like Mr. Songlessi’s music and a postcard and — some sense of recklessness added the last word — and a link."

IT REGISTERED with Donald as startlingly as though she had stood up suddenly and kicked him. A kind of drawn look came under his eyes, and he turned so suddenly the chair almost went from under him. "A what?"

"A link."

"What kind of link?" He almost shouted it.

"A cuff link."

He seemed to advance toward her out of the chair, his hands gripping the desk, his feet quite silent. "What are you talking about?"

Her hand dived into the pocket and came out with the cuff link in its palm. Donald drew in his breath so sharply that it made a whistling sound between his teeth. "Where did you get that?"

"I found it in Mrs. Parmenter’s room after she was dead." This was half its history, anyway."

He stared at the ash-encrusted loop at gold for a long minute. He seemed to be drinking something in, some knowledge, some realization that shook him. He turned suddenly toward the window so that Miss Rachel could not see his face. She thought that he struggled with some almost uncontrollable emotion. Terror, like Mr. Hurgraves? Miss Rachel decided not.

Donald put his head down on his clenched hand. "Do you mind getting out?" he said in a stifled manner.

She rose hesitantly. Then she touched his shoulder with her fingers. He was shuddering, racked with some agony he was trying to keep down.

"Won’t you tell me what it means?" she asked.

For some minutes he was still — stone-still. Then he got out: "It means Teddy is dead, there isn’t any doubt."

Miss Rachel stood thinking, putting a few pieces of the puzzle together in her mind. "This was the sign, wasn’t it? This was what Teddy was to send to your father when he knew the end was near?"

"That’s right. I happened to overhear. Listen, I’m going to make a damned fool of myself in a minute. Clear out, will you?"

Miss Rachel slipped out into the circular hall. Rhea’s door was closed. Miss Rachel wondered if anyone had told her as yet of the crime committed in her flower bed. A whisper like the sound of the wind seemed to run around the walls. The circular hall was like a well, full of watery echoes of nothing at all. It was a moment before Miss Rachel knew that the whispering was real. Furiously real. It came off the stairs above her head.

The ghost of Ivy’s voice, full of rage. "No, I won’t listen to you. Not again. Not after the business with Kay on the terrace."

"I was talking to her." This was a man — Bob Grennel. The voice was young, full-bodied, a little guttural as a whisper. "I was just talking to her, not a damned thing else."

"I’m not blind." She put passion into it.
"No. You’re crazy."
"When I think how I swallowed all that about old Nettie Parmenter! Nettie, powdered like a freak. Why didn’t you tell her you liked blue pinafores and morning-glories?"
"Shut up, damn it."
"She could have had her face lifted."
"I’m going to slap yours."
"You thought you’d covered up so cleverly, you’d protected that rotten little—"
There were choked, furious sobs, the scuffling of shoes.
"Donald’s going to know." She sounded as though she spoke from behind his cupped hand.
"I’ll beat your brains in if you mess Donald up."
He must have lifted her suddenly and carried her bodily away. The whispering, the struggling on the stairs ended, and there was a kind of stillness you listen through, feeling your ears grow a little.
Miss Rachel crept out into the open, looked up through the lacy ironwork. The stairs were empty.
She went up cautiously. Ivy was at the other end of the hall, alone, rubbing her wrist, her face wet with tears. When she saw Miss Rachel she turned her back, opened a door, and went through.
Mr. Hurgraves stuck his head out of his room a moment later. "What is it the police have down there? I can’t quite make out what that man Fuller is doing."
Miss Rachel told him as gently and as calmly as she could. She urged him back to bed, to resume the rest that Rheba had ordered. He seemed lethargic with shock. When his breathing had become regular, his face on the pillow relaxed and expressionless, Miss Rachel came back into the hall.
She tried to think about what Ivy had said to Bob Grennel on the stairs in an orderly manner, but ideas jumped in ahead of each other, and she found herself in possession of a full-blown, if slightly lopsided, theory. Bob Grennel had pretended to be smitten with Mrs. Parmenter so that he could get out of her what she knew about the disappearance of Teddy Hurgraves, and so that she would finance him on his trip of investigation. Purpose, as hers had been, the blackmailing of Rheba. He had come back earlier than he had told the police, killed Nettie to get rid of her, and was now waiting for the right moment to go on with the rest of his plan.
Mr. Somplessis would have to fit in somewhere.
Except that he didn’t.
The one person who would have any reason for killing poor Mr. Somplessis was Rheba Hurgraves herself.

WHEN MISS RACHEL went out upon the terrace she saw Fuller at once. He was planted in the flower bed like a bull defending a favorite pasture. He waved her away and glared.
Miss Rachel went meekly back inside.
Out of sight of Fuller, however, she picked up a sudden briskness. In the kitchen was the cook.
"I took Mrs. Hurgraves upstairs," said the cook. "She quit screaming and tried to be sick. You want to look after her?"
"I believe," said Miss Rachel, "that she can look after herself."
"That one can," said the cook, and winked.
"I want to ask if you’ve even seen this before," said Miss Rachel, holding forth the link.
The cook took it between thumb and forefinger and studied the design and the scarring with fire. "Someone has tried to burn this," she said thoughtfully. "Now, I wonder."
Miss Rachel gave her time to think it through.
"Mrs. Parmenter used to get my goat, poking forever into the incinerator trash, making a mess of the half-burned stuff. Not lately. Not just before she died."
Miss Rachel drew a deep breath. "How long ago?"
"Six months. Less, perhaps. Yes, I’d say up until about three months ago. Then she stopped all at once."
"This was among her things when she died."
The cook thought for a while longer. "I can say that I ever saw what she found. I just guessed at the time she’d lost interest or gotten what she was after." The cook looked at her shrewdly. "Doing a little on your own, is that it?"
Miss Rachel winked outrageously. "Don’t tell Captain Fuller."
The cook chortled. "Him? Look, I can tell you it wasn't nothing on paper Nettie Parmenter was after. She'd wait till I'd burned that. Then she'd slip out to where the boxed ashes were. She'd come in with hands like a nigger's. Thought I didn't see."

Such curiosity shone in the cook's face that Miss Rachel took pity on her. "I don't see any harm in telling you what it's all about. This cuff link was to be a sign from Teddy Hurgraves if he felt was about to die."

"On that honeymoon? I catch on."

"It should have come to Mr. Hurgraves, of course, so he'd know what to do."

"I heard about that will Mr. Teddy made. Wasn't that a whacky business? Why didn't he just make her fork over and be done with it?"

"Rheba looks like a hard woman to push. I gathered, too, she had hopes that her husband would live after all, and she'd go right on controlling Mr. Hurgraves' properties. The will made Teddy Hurgraves happy and she humored him. I can imagine how she reacted when he died, after all."

"A tiger, she is." The cook stuck out her tongue. "Me, I'm getting out."

She handed Miss Rachel the burned link and went back to scrubbing some radishes and carrots.

Miss Rachel turned toward the hall door. Against the shadows on its other side stood Bob Grennel. There was a fresh scratch on his cheek where Ivy must have gotten in a little nail work. His square face was angry and unhappy.

"I wanted you to know I arranged about Mrs. Parmenter's funeral," he said.

"It's to be Monday. The police are ... doing something about her now."

He had seen the glint of gold on Miss Rachel's palm. His whole body stiffened visibly.

"Thank you for telling me," said Miss Rachel coolly. She put the cuff link back into her pocket.

He didn't go away. He went on staring at her. Miss Rachel had the feeling that Bob Grennel was seeing her for the first time.

Was he seeing her as a troublesome nuisance to be gotten out of the way?
the thought of heaping trouble on anyone. She fluttered with tag ends of packing, broke a bottle of scent, and couldn’t find a glove.

Miss Rachel made her come downstairs and they brewed the tea. When it was finished Miss Rachel walked through Julia’s garden to the Hurgraves’, meeting Chloe, from whom all smiles were gone. She found Fuller holding court in the little reception room. He was seated in the rosewood chair, writing at a desk with spidery underpinnings, his big hand, clutching his pencil, as suitable against the fine wood as a row pork chop on satin. Kay Hurgraves was standing with an air of being ready to leave. She looked at Miss Rachel like a child just thoroughly scolded.

“I want to talk to Ivy Hurgraves again,” Fuller muttered. Then he caught sight of Miss Rachel. “Hello, Mrs. Hurgraves, go upstairs without discussing this thing with anyone, will you?”

“Now I’m not allowed to talk. He thinks I murdered that queer dark man,” she flung at Miss Rachel.

“I’m trying to keep my mind as free of prejudice as possible,” he said with broad emphasis. “I want each story separately, not colored by what other people think they saw and heard. That’s all.”

She marched out, smoothing the skirt of the pinafore.

Miss Rachel came close to the little desk. Fuller looked at her in the way a cotton farmer looks at a boll weevil.

“You think I’m quite a nuisance,” she offered pleasantly.

He smiled rather grimly. “From what I hear from Lieutenant Mayhew, you’ve been in other people’s hair.”

“More telegrams?”

He fished a yellow sheet out of a pocket and gave it to her.

Captain Fuller,
Homicide Division,
Sacramento Police Force,
Sacramento, Calif.

Don’t yield to that impulse. She’s probably right anyway. I know what you’re going through. Mayhew.

Miss Rachel tapped an angry foot. She almost didn’t tell Fuller about her last conversation with Mr. Somplessis. Then he broke into her mood with sudden laughter. “The guy’s kidding. I’ve got an idea he likes you.”

She remembered all at once the forbearance of Lieutenant Mayhew in situations that must have tried his patience. She recalled the kindness of Mrs. Mayhew; people as young and as lovely as Sara didn’t often spend much time entertaining two elderly spinsters. She relented; she told Captain Fuller of the conversation in the arbor.

He listened in silence, chewing the pencil when he wasn’t making illegible scratchings with it. When she had finished he sat frowning at what he had put down.

“The motive is new to me. The rest of it—his coming because of the mystery about Teddy Hurgraves—I guessed that first night I met him. He said, didn’t he, you might expect a message from him?”

“He couldn’t have expected things to happen as they did. When would he have had time to do any writing?”

“Well . . . you saw him shortly after midnight, you say. Ivy Hurgraves claimed to have seen him on the terrace sometime before dawn. There’s a lapse of time there. We’ll go over and run through his stuff, just in case.” He pushed up out of the rosewood chair. “Meanwhile . . .” He went to the door and beckoned to a man who stood looking in at the brassware. “Keep an eye on Rheta Hurgraves. I’ll want her here when I get back.”

“The big dame with the frozen expression?” the detective wondered.

“That’s her.”

“I’ll have her for you.”

MISS RACHEL and Captain Fuller went back through Julia’s garden to the other house. Miss Jennifer was in the kitchen, lingering over the tea-things. Chloe was chopping vegetables. Upstairs in Mr. Somplessis’ room the shades were drawn, there was still an air of secrecy and quiet. Fuller raised the shades and made a search of Mr. Somplessis’ belongings.

“Initials check with what he told you.”

“Yes. I’d thought of that.”

“This crazy tune he played. Did you recognize it?”

Miss Rachel, sniffing at Mr. Somplessis’ incense, hummed it faintly. “Graceful and
melancholy. It sounded eerie in the middle of the night."

"It meant something to Rheba Hurgraves if he expected to scare her with it."

Miss Rachel started to tell him about the scene she had overheard between Rheba and Mr. Hurgraves on the stairs, and then didn't. Fuller might be narrow-minded about such things as illegal entry. Besides, she hadn't quite made up her mind just what that conversation had meant.

"You were going to say something?" asked Fuller.

She looked at him quickly, but he seemed intent on Mr. Somplessis' small legal library.

After a moment he added absently:

"Do you play a mouth harp?"

She smiled.

"Like Mr. Somplessis'? No. Well, I guess I did once. When I was very young." She stood quite still, as though a very startling idea had come to her.

Fuller went on rummaging around. He acted quite casual and very innocent, though Miss Rachel watched him closely for any signs of guile. There was, he decided at last, no sort of message among Mr. Somplessis' things. He suggested that Miss Rachel—providing she felt up to it—might pack Mr. Somplessis' things in his suitcases. He dragged the suitcases from the back of the closet and dug Mr. Somplessis' mouth harp out of a pocket and added it to the heap of stuff on the bed.

"Had it on him," he explained. "Well, I'll be going over to see Mrs. Hurgraves."

He went out preparing to breathe fire at Rheba.

Miss Rachel dutifully packed Mr. Somplessis' belongings and attached to them a memorandum concerning his cousin and the hotel in Bombay. Then she unpacked the harmonica and put it in her pocket. She wondered if that had been Fuller's idea, after all. Or her own beautifully startling one.

She sat on the side of Mr. Somplessis' bed and thought. Hard. Mr. Somplessis had promised to leave her a message. Had he managed, somehow, to leave it inside the Hurgraves house? She had a hunch he hadn't. There was no real proof that Mr. Somplessis had been inside the house or any nearer it than the terrace.

He had said that the message would be left in an obvious place.

"Obvious. Had he used the word in the way she had taken it? Obvious. . . . She slipped down to find Julia's dictionary in a shelf of books in the living room. It was, incredibly, next a copy of Elsie Dinsmore. Only newier. Miss Rachel searched out her word.

"Obvious: evident, in plain sight, not to be mistaken.

In plain sight. . . . She recalled the view from Somplessis' windows, no doubt the vista of his fixed attention for so long, and she remembered what Ivy had said about his actions on the terrace.

With a heart beating like a new drum she went through Julia's garden again, through a cloud of warmth and fragrance, to the Hurgraves' lawn and the canopied chair with its canvas cushions.

At a corner of the redwood frame her finger tip rustled a bit of paper. She drew it out, thankful that Mr. Somplessis had taken the English language so literally. It was the paper covering of a cigarette, split jaggedly as though a nail had been run its length. She saw then that at her foot was a little flattened heap of tobacco.

The message was written hurriedly in a script unaccountably foreign, with a fine, wavering line.

I do not know whom I shall see.
The face of death, perhaps.
It is later than I thought.
The music was being played when he disappeared.

She could almost hear Mr. Somplessis' impassive voice, see his slowly vanishing smile in the gray pallor of his face. The message was unbelievably like him: careful and courteous and obscure.

She recalled Ivy's account of his movements. He might have received some signal of invitation from the front of the house, paused long enough to scribble this and stick it in the chair.

Could he have been going to that rendezvous he had determined to have . . . with Rheba Hurgraves?

Or was Ivy lying? Miss Rachel shut her eyes against the bright glare on the terrace. Could it have been Ivy herself who signaled to him, who came out to kill him?
The part about the music seemed plain enough. There was a minutiae in the world which meant nothing to Rheba Hurgraves but the death and disappearance of her husband. How terrible a tool was music, the sort of music Mr. Somplessis played at midnight.

The memory of Ivy intruded again, the bitter rebellion, the outsize clothes she wore, having no knack at remodeling.

**MISS RACHEL** roused herself out of reverie and went upstairs to knock at the door Ivy had slipped through after her quarrel with Bob Grennel.

There was no answer. Miss Rachel turned the knob and put an eye to the crack. Ivy Hurgraves was sitting cross-legged in the middle of a bed. It was an old-fashioned bed reminiscent of the furniture in Mr. Hurgraves' room. She was wiping her eyes on the sleeve of an old sweater thrown over her shoulders.

"Come in, then, since you've got the door open," she said ungraciously.

Miss Rachel came in as though just asked for tea. She made a ceremony of accepting an invitation to sit down; inwardly she studied the room's bareness, its ancient wardrobe, the single chair of ugly oak.

"Hideous, isn't it?" Ivy said. "I'll bet you expected a padded satin headboard, a lace spread, and a white fur rug. Something like the rest of the house. Didn't you?"

"It is rather plain for someone as young as you," Miss Rachel admitted.

"It isn't plain. It's naked. The way I'd be if I didn't wear her hand-me-downs."

In an effort to plumb her bitter mood, Miss Rachel said: "Things will be different for you when Rheba disgorges your father's properties."

"Disgorges. That's a good word. Makes me think of a snake. Yes, you're right. We'll have quite a different time of it."

Miss Rachel nodded agreeably. "What do you think you'll do first?"

"Get out of here, of course," said Ivy quickly. "Donald and I know the sort of place we want. Everything newer and bigger and more splendid than Rheba ever dreamed of. A swimming pool like a lake. Bedroom walls all nothing but mirrors. A white stone fireplace you can stand in. Rugs you can sleep on. A guesthouse. A stable. Horses. A faucet full of cocktails and a million friends." She fell back to look up at the ceiling. "Heaven. Heaven in an ermine wrap." She giggled with almost a touch of hysteria. There was a twisted, hollow set to her mouth, as though the taste of poverty was bitter.

"How were things before Rheba took over?" Miss Rachel wondered.

"Oh, Dad was always conservative. Then there was my stepmother, Rheba's mother, all the while we were growing up. She spent money, but always for something she wanted. There was the feeling you could look but mustn't touch."

A rap came at the door, and the introspective bitterness fled from Ivy's face and she was on guard again and flippant.

A maid put in a starched white cap.

"The police want you downstairs, Miss Hurgraves."

Ivy sat up and wriggled off the bed. "I can't even get it through my head there's been two murders. It's all so meaningless. Nothing here. You can't count a flower bed as involving one of us, can you? Of course, the Parmenter woman. . . . I thought some old lover might have hunted her up and made trouble when he found out she was after Dad."

"Turn that around, Miss Rachel thought, and you have someone making trouble because she was after Bob Grennel."

"Then—well, this Somplessis fellow, he might have seen something, known something about the other crime, and was killed for it."

"That's possible," said Miss Rachel.

"I told you we had a quarrel," she said, looking straight into Miss Rachel's eyes. "Well . . . that didn't amount to anything."

"I'm sure that it didn't," said Miss Rachel, following into the hall.

"I know what everybody thinks," Ivy flung out suddenly. "They think I care because Nettie Parmenter had made a fool of Bob. Well, I didn't care."

Miss Rachel felt sorry for her; it was such an inexpert and obvious lie.

"And I hadn't any motive for the Somplessis creature."

*You were terrified over his threat of revenge about the slap, Miss Rachel thought. And you believed he was acting,*
with Rheba to keep you from your inheritance.

"That's what I shall tell Captain Fuller," Ivy flung back, moving toward the stairs.

Miss Rachel had been the dress rehearsal. She waited until Ivy was gone, then peeped in at Mr. Hurgraves. He was lying as she had left him. The breast of his pajamas moved with a shaky breathing, and he seemed very old and tired almost past waking.

She went back to the kitchen, where the cook helped her prepare a tray with some cocoa, a rennet pudding, some cookies, and a sliced orange. Miss Rachel left it in his room without disturbing him. She went away wondering whether he was asleep or just didn't care to talk. She passed Rheba Hurgraves on the stairs.

Rheba stood near the top landing, her fingers spread on the thin iron rail, a toe pressing the grillwork, and her eyes on the door of the reception room that Fuller had taken for his purpose. From her expression, Miss Rachel judged that she had just come from an interview with the detective and that she had paused here to think over some of the things that had been said. When she saw Miss Rachel she nodded mechanically. She looked, Miss Rachel thought, somewhat like a queen who has caught her footman sitting on her throne. Her shoulders were high, her manner outraged.

Miss Rachel went quietly away.

The afternoon wore on. One of Fuller's men came to stay at Julia's house, ostensibly to read in the living room. Miss Rachel was not fooled. He was there to keep an eye on them. She had Chloe woo him with lemonade and cookies, but he remained engrossed in a book and uncommunicative. Once in a while, as evening came on, he yawned.

His name was Bonner; he was big and young and black-haired. He had dinner with Miss Rachel and Miss Jennifer. The last Miss Rachel saw of him before going up to bed, he was inspecting the lock on the front door.

She gave him time to go to sleep, then crept down far enough on the stairs to see him in the living room. He was still reading. Presently he put down the book, looked at his wrist watch, plumped a pillow under his head, and shut his eyes.

The cat seemed to have made up her mind to accustom herself to Miss Rachel's unusual hours. She scampered off the steps and into the living room; Bonner opened an eye at her.

"Hiya, puss." He shut the eye again.

Miss Rachel slid off the stairs and away into the gloom of the rear entry and the utter darkness of the garden. She had Mr. Somplessis' harmonica in her pocket and a wild idea in her mind. She felt foot-loose and a little lonely, not having her cat.

She crouched in the shadow of Julia's stone wall and began to play. The night was warm, with a feeling of cloudiness and a river smell. The moon was nothing but a hazy smudge on the horizon, rising earlier, banked with mist. She found that Mr. Somplessis' melody came easily on the harmonica.

She stopped to listen. She heard something creeping toward her over the lawn.

XVIII

SHE LISTENED. The oppression of the dark was like the closing in of a hand around her. Through it, through the far-off echo of a steamer's whistle, came the drag and pause, the slow step and the cautious waiting.

She felt like the magician's assistant who has spent his spare time fishing for imps and finds that he has raised the Devil.

All at once she was quite sure about the person who was creeping toward her over the Hurgraves' lawn. Some cold intuition warned her, tuned her nerves as tight as a drawn wire, sent her shaking limbs to crawling in the opposite direction. She was as sure as she would ever be of anything that that other crawling form was armed with its tools, with a bludgeon and with some stout thin thing — another piano string, perhaps — with which to do its job.

She found a thicket of jasmine and honeysuckle and crouched in its deeper shade, breathing an almost suffocating fragrance. She heard the creak of Julia's little gate. The other person was going through.
For a moment she thought of Jennifer lying asleep and unprotected, of the detective slumbering on the couch in Julia's living room. There was no way she could warn them without endangering herself. Then, raising her eyes to the level of the top of the wall, she saw that the light was on in Julia's service porch. Between her and it was a tangle of giant fig, of arbor vine and oleanders, concealing the creeping figure that must have gone through Julia's gate. But the light being on meant that the detective was up and about, keeping a watch, perhaps aroused by some sound of Miss Rachel's own departure. Miss Rachel breathed easier. She also made a beeline for the other house.

A french window stood open, and the odor of the living room—a plushy, polished smell—drifted through it. Miss Rachel slid inside. She thought again of how the room's air of luxury managed to permeate even the dark. She slipped across the thick carpet to stand beside the piano. She was literally frozen with fear, but there would always be this tag end to haunt her if she failed to search out its cause. She stood quiet, and she thought her ears grew a little while she waited.

It came, the breath that was harsh and labored. It came from near at hand, from the other side of the piano. And then with it was the faint humming of a string.

Miss Rachel dropped to the floor and crept without a sound to a point she judged was just beneath the piano's opposite edge. She put out exploring fingers. Something inside her told her that she had been a fool.

As a hard grip closed across her wrist fear exploded in her and she tried to back away.

The harsh breath came nearer; the grip did not relax.

She was about to meet the Breather face to face.

MISS JENNIFER woke with a light shining in her eyes, a round yellow light like a probing eye, and she sat up and opened her mouth to scream.

"Wait a minute," said Bonner. "It's just me."

Miss Jennifer choked off the scream. She pulled the bedclothes up to cover her outing-flannel gown. Presently there was nothing for Bonner to see but a pair of eyes and some white hair. "What do you want?"

"Have you been outdoors?"

The eyes got wider. "Do you think I'm quite crazy?"

"There's something going on out in the yard. I wanted to be sure you and your sister were O.K. You're my job."

"I'm quite all right, outside of being frightened half to death by your flashlight in my face."

He turned the flashlight to the floor, and Miss Jennifer saw his big shoes and his drooping socks, which didn't match. She decided irrelevantly that Mr. Bonner was a bachelor.

"Where is your sister?"

"Upstairs."

"You mean there's a third floor?"

"My sister sleeps in the attic." Miss Jennifer made it sound as though Rachel had gone joyfully to keep company with bats and spiders.

"How do you get up there?"

"You try to go to the bathroom," said Miss Jennifer crossly, "only you don't. You turn to the left and go up some stairs."

Bonner was not comforted with the thought that Fuller would be angry when he found that this part of the house had not been checked. But Bonner had thought that the little old ladies must sleep together. How could he know that one of them was a fright fan?

"Would you mind awfully going with me?" he asked.

"Rachel won't mind you jumping in at her," Miss Jennifer assured him. "She'll probably even be waiting at the top of the stairs to say 'Boo!'"

"Would she have been apt to try to sneak outside?"

"Sneak describes perfectly what Rachel is busy doing day and night. Now go away. Go and try to get into the bathroom and when you see some piles of sheets and things on some shelves, turn left and you'll find her."

He went away, the ray of his flashlight probing through the dark and making temporary and erratic yellow blobs on
walls and doorways. Miss Jennifer leaned from under the bedding so that she could watch him. She saw him disappear into the passage to the bath. There were hesitant steps going up to the attic room. Then came a silence that Miss Jennifer didn't like.

The hall was very dark, too, and a board snapped in the wall of Miss Jennifer’s room and she jumped. She got out of bed and threw a robe over her nightdress and went after Bonner.

He was in Rachel’s room; he had the flashlight fixed on the bed, and Samantha stood restlessly in the middle of the yellow light, claws digging the coverlet, green eyes angry at Miss Rachel’s absence.

“Your sister isn’t here,” he said lamely.

“Obviously,” snapped Miss Jennifer. “What are you going to do?”

“I’ll try to find her.” He swung the light around the room, and it spotlighted Miss Rachel’s nightgown folded at the foot of the bed.

“Perfidy,” said Miss Jennifer. “She didn’t even get into bed.”

“Where do you think she might have gone?”

“That’s the silliest yet. Of course, she’s over there with that gang of murderers. Snooping.”

“I see.” He flicked the light back to Samantha, who made a short sound of protest. “I’ll run along over there, then.”

“I am not,” said Miss Jennifer firmly, “going to be left here alone.”

He moved his big feet in uncertainty. “Would you care to come along while I explore the grounds?”

“Since that’s what you're determined to do, I'll come.”

Bonner waited in the hall while Miss Jennifer got into her numerous petticoats, a dress, and a coat. She came out looking small and nervous and very determined to be sensible. She let Bonner take her downstairs, and she followed the tunnel his light made in the warm, leafy darkness of Julia’s garden. They wound their way through the arbor, under the giant fig, past hollyhocks which showed pink faces to Bonner’s light. They came to Julia’s little gate.

Ivy Hurgraves was lying in front of it, her head surrounded by a stain which had seeped darkly into the brown earth.

Miss Jennifer tried to faint, but Bonner wouldn’t let her. He made her go to telephone while he investigated Ivy.

Late that evening, feeling that he was unobserved, Captain Fuller had gone out to the flower bed where Mr. Somplessis had been found. He carried a trowel and a sheaf of newspapers. Under the twilight sky the earth was dark, the flowers faded, and all the garden looked a little weary and thirsty. Fuller studied the house and failed to find anyone peeping at him from a window. Then he knelt where Mr. Somplessis had fallen and began to explore.

He removed some of the stock and placed it, roots and all, upon the spread papers. Then he ran big fingers into the dirt. He did this in several locations, replacing the flowers as he went. Finally he sat quietly on his heels and studied the bed. There was, as far as he could see, no sign of wilt in any of the blossoms such as there should have been from some previous disturbance. The place where Mr. Somplessis had lain was clearly marked; the blossoms were beginning to revive, but there were still traces of pressure, of broken stems, of crushed petals. There were, though, no plants that seemed to have had their root system disturbed and so were wilted from the ground up. Fuller sighed, patted the last earth back into place, and moved out again upon the lawn.

He saw that on the opposite side of the grounds, near a flowering hedge that shut out the sight of the street, was a similar bed. An idea, a half-formed conviction, came over him, and he walked toward it. He kept an eye on the terrace and on the windows overlooking this side of the house.

The stock and the taller delphinium made a pale half-moon of blue and lavender blossoms. The stock threw out a sharp, earthy fragrance. Fullet put his feet carefully among the green stems, studying the petals as he went. He came to a place near the center of the bed where some delphinium looked a little strange. He pulled at a blue head of bloom, and it was leathery, withered, inside his fingers. He knelt and ran his hands into the earth, and
the delphinium toppled. Fuller brought up what he wanted—Rheba’s Bombay box.

He blew the snow off it, shook gently against his ear, and listened to the rattle of its contents.

It was of dark wood, almost square in shape, a design cut deeply into the wood upon all four sides and the lid. Fuller thought that the design was a little like a water lily or a tulip. He made out a cobra circling the flower and grunted in distaste. He kicked a little soil back into the hole he had made and walked from the flower bed to the house.

Rheba Hurgraves was in her office. She had a demitasse at her elbow, a cigarette in a jade holder in one hand, and she was staring, as far as Fuller could see, across the room at nothing. She looked up when he walked in on her, and an expression of anger came into her face. Fuller thought that Rheba Hurgraves was a rather good-looking woman, but he wouldn’t put anything past her. She was the kind of person who never thinks of anyone else because she knows her own strength and despises the weaknesses of others.

When she saw the box that Fuller carried she put the cigarette into a crystal ash tray and held out her hand.

“Give me that,” she said.

Fuller just looked at her. She met his eyes for a moment and then glanced away.

“It belongs to me,” she said in a different tone. “I should like very much to examine what is inside.”

“So would I,” said Fuller. He didn’t make any move toward giving her the box.

She picked up the demitasse, then put it down without touching the gilded cup to her lips. “Don’t I have a right to forbid you to search my things without a warrant?”

Fuller squinted his eyes, pushed his hat back with a thumb. “This box was buried in the flower bed that Smplessis fellow was killed in,” he said, lying a little for the effect on Rheba. “Just you try holding me off with that stuff about a warrant. I’ll take an ar to it if you don’t produce the key.”

“I haven’t had the key for ages. It was stolen. By Mrs. Parmenter, probably.”

“The ax it is, then,” Fuller grunted.

“Wait.” She stood and came around from the other side of the desk. She was wearing a hostess gown—at least that’s what Fuller called it in his mind—of peach-colored brocade. The skirt was wide and flared stiffly when she walked. She had on silver slippers, and there was a silver gadget in her dark hair. It came over Fuller at once that Rheba Hurgraves rather fancied herself as an aristocrat. He knew at the same moment how to throw her off her guard.

“Come with me into the kitchen and I’ll open the box for you,” she instructed him. “It takes a screw driver and a little time. The lock is a rather simple one.” She swept out through the door.

On the stairs in the circular entry stood Ivy Hurgraves. Fuller thought she looked somewhat worn and edgy. Her eyes had a pin-point expression that reminded him of a sleepwalker. She watched Rheba’s sweeping skirt and then she looked at Fuller and at the box he carried.

One of her hands jumped out to catch at the curving grillwork. Her eyes winked twice. She didn’t say anything.

Fuller raised his hat to her and followed Rheba through the living room. He had always had the feeling here that he ought to pull up his pants before wading through the plush. Or tiptoe. He kept a grim eye on Rheba’s back. She had a straight spine and a slender waist, but there wasn’t much femininity in her shape. Fuller wondered what her marriage with Teddy Hurgraves had been like.

She switched on lights in the kitchen and turned to a drawer and pulled it open. Fuller pretended to stare at all the chrome and the tile.

“Quite a place you’ve got here,” he said. “Did you plan all this?”

“The architects planned it,” she said coldly. “Here. Give me the box.”

“My old lady’d give a leg for a stove like that,” said Fuller, putting the box on the sink. “Always wanted a built-in griddle. And a clock. I’ll bet the oven turns itself off an’ on.”

She began to work with the box, holding her head to one side so that the overhead light struck the brass keyhole. “It does,” she said expressionlessly.

“Has it got a fireless cooker in it?”
“Yes.”
He leaned on the sink, and his big face took on a confidential grin. “You know, if worse come to worse, I guess you could go back to cooking, couldn’t you?”
She raised her very slowly, her face a mask.
“What do you mean?”
“Oh, I don’t know. I guess I was remembering about your mother. Didn’t she run a beanery before she married Mr. Hurgraves?”
“My mother had a tearoom,” said Rheba stonily, “in our front parlor. We were careful about the people we admitted. We saw that they were always”—her gaze on Fuller grew ironic—“ladies and gentlemen.”
“And you cooked?” queried Fuller, who seemed to have the sensitivity of a mule.
“Sometimes I made cookies.” Her hand on the brass lock was suddenly a trifle unsteady. “I wonder if Mother really served them? You see, I was just a child.”
“Wouldn’t be so easy to go back, I guess,” Fuller ruminated, “after all this.”
She dropped the screw driver. “Why do you keep hinting about it? What do you mean?”
“You know what all this’s working up to, don’t you?” said Fuller crassly.
“Murder, publicity, headlines like a punch in the puss?”
Her throat seemed to have gone dry.
“What?”
“The truth’ll come out about your husband. Somebody, somewhere, will begin to remember. Perhaps it’ll be a little while, but I’m pretty sure about the end result. You can’t beat a homicide for bringing in all the related dirt.”
She cast a single glance around the room, and Fuller thought she took in the white tile and the chrome and the stove with the built-in griddle with a fresh surge of possessiveness.
“But you’ll know how to run a tearoom,” Fuller told her.
The possessiveness died out of her face, and Fuller thought for an instant that she was about to cry. She looked at the Bombay box. She touched its flower design with a finger, softly.
“I’ll be glad,” she said quietly but with passion. She turned her head, and Fuller sensed how she struggled for self-control. When she turned toward him again he remembered, suddenly and unaccountably, that she was a widow.
She looked like a widow.
She touched the box again. “Now you’ll see what’s inside.”

XIX

MISS RACHEL tried to blink away the darkness, to make out that invisible face whose breath all but scorched her.
“If you don’t get away from this damned piano and let me find out who’s monkeying with it,” said Fuller, raging, “I’ll lock you up and throw away the key. I’ll keep you on bread and water, too. I’ll—”
“You!” whispered Miss Rachel, all but fainting away.
“Who else?” gritted Fuller. “Look. I’ve been sitting in that closet there for so long I’m beginning to feel like a moth ball. I wait. I go hungry, I do without sleep. Then I hear somebody sliding up to the piano and I open the door the barest crack. And who is it? Always, who is it?”
“Me,” whispered Miss Rachel modestly.
“I’m so sorry.”
“Are you going to leave this piano alone?”
“Why?”
He made unrecognizable sounds of fury.
“I mean,” she said hastily, “why are you here watching it?”
“The string,” he got out, “that killed the Parmenter woman was a piano wire.”
“Did you find where the shoestring came from that was used to strangle Mr. Somplessis?”
He stood there; she felt his bulk in the dark, grim, thoughtful. “No. There aren’t any shoes with a shoestring gone. I’ll admit I’m stumped.”
“I know where it came from.”
She sensed his big face thrust out at her. “Where?”
“Not so fast,” said Miss Rachel. “First, I want to know about the box.”
Fuller should have known better; he tried to be cunning. “What box?”
“Rheba’s box. The one Ivy buried in
a flower bed. The one Mr. Somplessis was trying to find in the dark."

"How do you know—"

"About Ivy? Oh, she was quite covered with dust yesterday morning. I thought she’d been digging, perhaps burying something. Mr. Somplessis must have seen her, too. Only one thing was missing—the Bombay box. So I judged she’d buried that. I think, too, that she’d managed to get hold of it and was waiting to try to find the key. That’s why she hid it. As for the reason she wanted it—well, that depended on what was inside."

Fuller sighed. "It held Teddy Hur-graves’ personal jewelry. His watch. A school ring. Some foreign trinkets he must have picked up on the trip. And a pair of cuff links."

"A pair? Two of them?"

"That’s right."

She sat quiet and silent so long that Fuller moved restlessly in the dark. She had found the piano bench and was sitting on it. "Of course, there would be two," she said at last. "That was the reason for trying to get rid of the third. Having three would be as bad as having just one. I wonder if she mightn’t have had it copied during that time she delayed in New York? Hmmm. Yes, I think you might ask the help of the New York police on that point."

"What are you talking about?" Fuller complained.

"The cuff link. It was Teddy Hur-graves’ way of letting his family know he was going to die. He must have managed to mail it somehow. Someone received it here. Later came the attempt to destroy it."

Fuller listened while Miss Rachel outlined the history of the link since she had first run across it in her inspection of Julia’s attic bedroom. She omitted two items: Mrs. Parmenter’s coming after the cuff link in the middle of the night, and her own subsequent finding of it in Mrs. Parmenter’s lingerie. She let Fuller think that Mrs. Parmenter had left it in the gabled room, with the thought that in doing so she probably saved him breaking a blood vessel.

"But this is an important clue," he growled when she had finished. "Why didn’t you turn it over to me before?"

"Well, I thought I'd see what I could do with it first."

"Let me get this straight. Teddy Hur-graves was supposed to mail the thing at about the time he died. It turned up in the ashes—judging by the cook's story—only a few months ago. There’s a lapse of time there—a long time."

"I know. Could it have been indecision, perhaps, on the part of the person who had it?"

Fuller remained quiet for a moment, then he said: "Rheba must have loved the guy. She hated to have me touch his trinkets."

"If this is the imitation cuff link, I think I know what happened."

"Go on."

"Wait. Listen a moment."

Across the faint whispering of a little wind in the garden came the squeak of Julia's gate.

Miss Rachel’s heart thudded up to half shut off her breath. "What is it?" growled Fuller.

"Someone. Someone I almost met on the lawn, someone who came out after me when I began to play Mr. Somplessis’ music."

Fuller groaned like an ox. "Was that you?"

"Would you mind awfully getting back into your closet? And try to breathe very lightly. The room has acoustics that are perfect. I could—"

"What are you going to do?" said Fuller. "I’d like to talk to this person who is coming."

"It might be the murderer."

"I am quite sure that it is."

"Now I know you’re crazy."

"Don’t be rude."

"The furthest I’m going to go is under the piano."

"You’d look awfully silly if the lights came on."

"You’re going to look sillier if I let you get yourself killed. You remind me of a schoolteacher I had once. You couldn’t tell her anything."

"You probably didn’t know anything to tell," snapped Miss Rachel, giving him a push in the dark. "Under the piano, and keep your handkerchief over your nose when you draw a breath."
SHE listened until she heard Fuller's bumbling crawl, the faint curse as he bumped his head on the underside of the piano, a gradual subsiding into quiet. She giggled suddenly.

"What's that?" whispered Fuller.

"Me. I'm very nervous." She reached out and felt the cool row of ivory keys and pressed one fairly high up on the scale. A minor note rang out, strange in the dark.

"What the devil's come over me, that I let her put me under here?" It was Fuller's final whisper; Miss Rachel scarcely heard it. She was watching the row of French windows, silvered with the barest trace of moonrise. Against one was a shadow, a shadow whose hand touched the pane to push it in.

Miss Rachel felt a shiver of dread race through her. She found the minor note again and spun out from it the ghost of Mr. Somplessis' graceful song.

"Don't play that again," said a voice, sharply.

Miss Rachel took her hands off the keys.

"Why shouldn't I?"

The shadow had glided into the room. Miss Rachel tried to keep it in focus, to make sure where it stood, but its outlines mingled with the other darkness. She had a foggy sense of being lost, disoriented, suspended in a vacuum with a row of silver panes mocking like eyes.

"Don't you know?" asked the shadow softly.

"Mr. Somplessis didn't explain."

"Then I don't believe that I shall either."

"It must obviously," said Miss Rachel, "have had something to do with Teddy Hurgraves' dying. He had heart trouble. Let's say that as he lay in the grip of his final illness some thoughtless tourist in a near-by room of the hotel played the melody on a record. Over and over. Maddeningly."

The shadow seemed to sigh. "You're quite clever. That's almost right."

"Later Mr. Somplessis recalled the tune and that it had been played at about the time Teddy Hurgraves was supposed to have disappeared."

There was a long silence. Then: "The melody wasn't on a record. A woman played it on the piano in the lounge."

A bitter memory seemed to come alive in the gloom; Miss Rachel saw in her mind's eye how Teddy Hurgraves must have died with Reba sitting over him, the drifting song like an accompaniment to his pulse.

"He must have gone at last," Miss Rachel said softly, "thinking that he had righted all the old wrongs."

She couldn't be sure that the shadow moved. The voice seemed a trifle closer, a trifle louder. "Teddy, poor lad, didn't understand so many things."

"Such as the idea of luxury meaning such different things to different people?"

There was a little pause for thought.

"Yes. I see what you mean."

"We don't all want swimming pools and cocktails and white fur rugs."

"Ivy." There was the barest chuckle.

"Some of us just want... peace."

"That's very true."

"Some of us want it badly enough—let's say determinedly enough—to fight for it."

There was silence, some breath of movement, some change in the moonrise glow that sifted through the panes.

"To kill for it, too," added Miss Rachel thoughtfully.

"You're guessing." The tone was a little hoarse, a little nervous, as though it covered other things; preparation for action, perhaps.

"I'm not guessing. You see, I knew what the shoestring meant when I saw it around Mr. Somplessis' throat."

There was stark waiting now. "What did it mean?"

"The album," she said simply. "The leaves of it falling apart on your lap... I recalled my own old-fashioned book of snapshots. It, too, was tied with a shoestring."

The tone grew guttural. "You've told Fuller all this?"

"No." She spun the melody out quickly; stopped sharp to listen. There were footsteps. She turned. A column of shadow stood almost at her elbow. "I took a little time to figure things out. I was in the house when Rheba wanted to go over to stop Mr. Somplessis' playing. I heard you argue her into being cautious. For a while I couldn't quite believe—You see, Teddy had planned it all for you."

He was panting. She sensed how all of his strength was gathered for the blow
that would stun her enough to prevent her struggling. She thought sickly how both the killing of Mrs. Parmenter and Mr. Somplessis had been a weak person’s crime—a single stroke with a heavy object, then the leisurely tightening of a wire or of a string. She shuddered, touching the minor note.

“Don’t play that!”
“Didn’t Teddy make his plan for you?” she insisted.
“No. He made it for Donald and Kay and Ivy. He was older than they; he humored them like an elder brother. He wanted them to have the frenzied, merry-go-round existence they wanted.”
“They’ll be young such a little while,” Miss Rachel whispered. “Perhaps he thought of that.”
“There was nothing I could say to change him. When I saw his mind was set, I pretended to go in with him. He left on the trip. Later I received the cuff link. I hid it away. I showed it to no one. I even—this was a mistake, of course—I even forgot to mention it to Rheba.”
“And she’d had a second one made to cover up—and just recently, just a few months ago, you discovered that between you, you had three.”
“Yes.” There was the stealthy rustle of a garment, and Miss Rachel made out the raised arm.
She felt suddenly like a bird who looks up just before the snake strikes. Her fingers fluttered on the keys, and the jumbled notes were tinkling and erratic and belonged, somehow, with the moonrise and the shadowed room.
“And Rheba told you about the music?”
“Somplessis brought it to mind for her.” She could sit and watch, impersonally, the poised arm and the floating face that looked down at her, masklike. She was too deep in the clutch of fear to do anything else. She thought of Fuller under the piano and wondered sickly if he could have fallen asleep.
There was then a rushing descent, and the sound startled her and she found that she could move.
The shape of a hammer flew past and struck the keys with a great jarring roar. The frame of the piano trembled. Fuller, a bull-like form with his head down, sprang at the other figure. The hammer raised and struck quickly again, and Fuller sank down with a sigh.
Miss Rachel had reached the opposite side of the piano. She felt the shaking of her own knees with an abstract impatience, as at the awkwardness of a stranger. The moonlight was a silver breath now, blowing in through the open window with a scent of jasmine and honeysuckle. It had begun to creep in a slow band across the sill, into the carpeted floor.
“How foolish you are,” she said stoutly, “to try to get away.”
“I know that I shan’t get away,” said Mr. Hurgraves. “I’m evening scores, though. If it hadn’t been for your meddling, I’d have gone on with the kind of life I wanted to live.”
She left the piano in a rush and fled out into the moonlight. Here the lawn was a velvet darkness made to catch jewels. The flower beds seemed towering, remote. It was fantastic and terrifying and beautiful. She took it in, running, panting Jennifer’s name.
She reached Julia’s little gate and stumbled at the latch. In the path on its other side she made out a scene she decided was nightmare: Ivy Hurgraves lying in a heap, a businesslike man’s figure—Bonner’s—bent over her.
Now I’m dreaming, Miss Rachel thought. Something flickered down past her eyes, tightened instantly on her throat. She hadn’t been dreaming, then.
The thing around her throat was thin and cutting, and the hot pulse in her head was a foretaste of death.
As a last touch of utter unreality, she saw her cat spring to the top of Julia’s gate, poised there with her toes together, then leap straight out into space. Bonner didn’t look up. Miss Rachel went down struggling in a fury of cries she did not understand.

XX

She sat up, and the moonlit sky, Julia’s gate, Bonner’s anxious face and Ivy’s bewildered one all spun round like a firecracker with no place to go.
Ivy was rubbing her head where the hair was clustered thick and wet; her mouth was trembling and she kept saying something over and over about her father.
There wasn't any sign of Mr. Hurgraves.
Bonner put an anxious hand on Miss Rachel's shoulder. "Lie down, please. You've had a bad brush with death."
"Captain Fuller!" she gasped. "He's murdered."
"Only half murdered," Bonner consoled her. "He's gone in after Mr. Hurgraves. He said something about a crack on the head, but he could still run."
"I remember," said Miss Rachel slowly, "that someone had jumped up behind me and slipped something around my throat."
"That was old Mr. Hurgraves."
"You didn't look up. You were bending over Ivy."
"We'd found Ivy a minute or so before—Miss Jennifer and I. Her father seems to have run across her in the dark and struck her down."
"He thought it was I," Miss Rachel whispered. She recalled the creeping figure on the lawn, the squeak of Julia's gate.
"Don't you want to know who saved you?" asked Bonner.
"Who?"
Bonner reached beyond her to fish something out of a shadow—a black form that squirmed, two eyes spitting alarm. "She was quite wild when she found you had gone and left her," he explained. "That's what set me to checking up. I woke your sister and we came outside to look for you. We found Ivy. Your sister went to call a doctor. The cat rushed past me all at once and jumped up on the gate and off on the other side with an awful howl."
"Cats never try to protect anyone," said Miss Rachel thoughtfully through a sore throat. "She must have been trying to reach me."
"She landed on Hurgraves' chest and proceeded to climb into his face. With her claws, of course. I don't know which of them made the worse racket. Look," he broke off, "if you're feeling better, would you stay with Miss Hurgraves while I go look for Fuller?"
Miss Rachel wanted to say she felt like coming along, but she didn't. Ivy's eyes were shut and her head was drooping. She looked tired and frightened and lonely.
Bonner put a gun into Miss Rachel's hands. "Just in case. Make sure it's off the safety."
Miss Rachel displayed her knowledge of guns by peering brightly into the muzzle.
Bonner adjusted the thing for her. "If it's old Mr. Hurgraves, don't let him get anywhere near. Start pumping bullets at him and keep it up."
A sob shook Ivy; she covered her face with a hand.
Bonner walked away. Miss Rachel sat still and looked about at the moonlight and the great lawns and the Hurgraves' house, in which lights were beginning to glow.
Ivy whispered: "Say that it isn't true about my father. Please."
Miss Rachel reached for her hand, a long graceful hand with a look about it of loving and living generously. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you a lie, Ivy. I can explain a little, if that will help."
"He—he was ill. Terribly ill. Wasn't that the reason?"
"Some of it."
Ivy cried soundlessly, and Miss Rachel saw how she shook inside the worn sweater and the shabby slacks.
"He was ill, and he was very old," Miss Rachel said at last. "He had such a little time to live, and he was desperate to live it in the way he wanted—surrounded by all the things he had loved in the past. The things he and your mother bought together, when they were young, when life must have been very wonderful for him. You see, Ivy, he knew that if you and Donald had control of the money, he'd be uprooted. There wouldn't be any room in the splendid new home for his old trappings, for the past he lived in."
"Rheba was at the bottom of it," said Ivy bitterly.
"I think," said Miss Rachel after some thought, "that Rheba has lived in a very peculiar and bitter kind of hell for a long time. She has outraged the memory of a man she loved very dearly—probably in the beginning for the sake of money, but most certainly afterward at your father's insistent urging. That's why they quarreled so frequently. That's why, I think, Mrs. Parmenter and Mr. Somplessis were killed—so that they shouldn't get to Rheba in one of her black moods and persuade her to betray the plot."
Ivy said huskily: "I suppose I should have known. After I'd stolen Rheba's Bombay box and hidden it, Father was more upset than she was."
"I began to guess the truth when I saw his reaction to the burned link. Your father was terrified. It was the terror of the very old against change, against newness. He was so happy in the arrangements Rheba had made for him."

"But he complained. He complained about everything."

"That was to keep you and Donald and Kay in line, to keep you lulled with the idea he'd expose Rheba if he got the chance. I recall the first night I saw him, the little act he put on over some poor wine and some stale cookies. He and Rheba had worked it out very cleverly."

There was the sound of a shot from inside the house. The moonlight, the garden, the breathless quiet seemed to quiver with the sound. There were two more in quick succession, sharp little barks like the puncturing of a balloon.

Ivy waited. She whispered: "They're killing him, aren't they? He wouldn't give up." She slumped to one side and lay very still.

Miss Rachel shook her desperately and then sprang up. She saw two people coming toward them from the Hurgraves' house. She poised the gun Bonner had given her, just in case.

Donald's voice had a stunned, aching note in it. "Is my sister here? I've got to tell her about Dad."

But it was Bob Grennel who saw Ivy, who ran to her and cradled her head and said broken things against the moonlight in her hair. Miss Jennifer, scuttling out of the dark of Julia's garden just then, paused to choke on the words she had been about to say.

"What a fool I've been!" Bob muttered. "I thought—" He tried to stare some life into Ivy's sightless eyes.

"You thought you loved Mrs. Parmenter?"

"No. My act on that score didn't even fool Nettie. She was trying to find out what I knew, and I was doing the same with her."

"She financed your search in India, didn't she?"

He loosed a hand from under Ivy to tap a pocket of his coat. "I brought all that back to her. I didn't find anything. I didn't want to use her money in the first place."

"And... the other entanglement?"

He glanced surreptitiously at Donald, who stood aside, staring at the house. "There wasn't any. Don's going into the Army, and Kay's been upset about it. I've been half crazy, thinking my bungling might have caused Nettie's murder. We weren't normal. We were scared, and we sort of tried to buck each other up. You believe me, don't you?"

She studied him, she was young and a little uncivilized, she believe you," she said. "Be sure that Ivy does, when she wakes up."

They took Ivy to the house, to a strangely quiet house where Fuller waited for them, where Rheba sat at the piano in a cotton wrap, playing Mr. Somplessis' little song, blind with tears.

MISS RACHEL went with Fuller to the upstairs room where Mr. Hurgraves lay. He was in the huge old-fashioned bed that he had loved, and he had died peacefully.

"I was shooting at the door, to break the lock," Fuller explained. "He must have kneeled to have gotten into my line of fire as he did. I found him on the floor, still alive but dying."

"Did he tell you anything?"

"Only that it seemed he had been living in a kind of frenzy since he knew what Nettie Parmenter was after, that everything was a bad dream and that he was glad it was all ending."

Miss Rachel looked at the pale face, the eyes that would never open again to show terror, the hands that had no need any longer to kill. There was no hint of defeat, no trace of savagery. Miss Rachel thought that this must have been the way Mr. Hurgraves looked long ago, when his first wife was alive and they had been happy together. The past seemed to crowd up about the shabby bed. The snapshot album, leaves scattered apart, lay on the floor. The dusty whatnots, the little tables, the old chairs with their air of comfort—all spoke quietly of another day. A dead-and-gone day. Miss Rachel turned toward the door.

"Rheba's bringing her husband's body home," Fuller said matter-of-factly. He snapped off the light. "She could have saved us all a lot of trouble by doing that long ago."
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They walked back together toward the light shining in the service porch. Miss Rachel took in the odors of honeysuckle and jasmine, the leafy stir she and Jennifer made in the path, with an odd feeling of farewell. The arbor closed them in, and there was, briefly, the memory of Mr. Sompless' cigarette and the story he had told her.

Miss Rachel wiped away a tear.

The cat was waiting on the steps. She made a black shape against the fan of light. She put forth a series of complaints in cat language.

"We'll be going home," said Miss Rachel. "Julia will read the papers and discover that everything's cleared up. She'll be returning on the first train."

"If she tries to send me off before I'm ready to go," said Miss Jennifer flatly, "I'll spank her. Even at her age."

"And at yours?" cried Miss Rachel. Miss Jennifer nodded grimly.

"And at mine."

"What on earth," inquired Miss Rachel, "would keep us here now?"

"If you recall," said Miss Jennifer, "there are certain historical exhibits—"

Miss Rachel stopped abruptly with one foot on a stair. "Haven't you seen those things yet?"

"I have not," said Miss Jennifer, "and I have decided now that you should see them with me."

"Candelabra?" moaned Miss Rachel.

"There is one candlestick in that collection which was used by an Indian novice to brain a bishop," explained Miss Jennifer, "and I shouldn't care to go alone to see anything so grim."

Miss Rachel stared in at Julia's light. She seemed to be considering what Miss Jennifer had just told her. One might have thought she had brightened up somewhat.

"Nor another that has a spring in it. When someone picked it up who didn't know his danger, a dart pricked him. The dart was covered with poison." She studied Miss Rachel's poised figure. "You will come with me, won't you?"

She thought for a moment that Rachel had smiled.

"We'll go the first thing in the morning," said Miss Rachel. "I wouldn't miss them for the world."

The lower hall swarmed with police and with newspapermen. Miss Rachel slipped out by way of the terrace. Ivy didn't need anyone now but Bob Grennel. Rheba could act a decent widow and show her grief. Donald and Kay could have a happy fling before he went into the Army. The murderer was dead.

There was just Miss Jennifer, waiting by Julia's little gate.

"You!" Miss Jennifer greeted her. "All because you had to poke your nose into other people's business."

"It's no bigger than yours," Miss Rachel retorted mildly. It reminds me of Mother's side of the family."

"Actors," sniffed Miss Jennifer.

"Father's was bigger. As to noses, I mean."

"Banking men, and respectable for generations."

"Then that explains it," Miss Rachel said. "They got that way smelling out money."

Miss Jennifer cried out at this outrage, and fixed her with a suddenly stern eye.

"You know, Rachel, our Father had a saying you should have taken more to heart. Really. Of course you were flighty as a girl and didn't listen to the things he tried to teach us, but still I think you might have absorbed a little more of his good sense. Now Father's saying—"

"I know," Miss Rachel admitted impatiently. "'Never trouble trouble until trouble troubles you.' I always wondered: what then? It really doesn't give you a plan of action. And you know Father was singing it right at the time that little man got up—"

"Never mind!" cried Miss Jennifer.

"—got up in church and told the congregation that Father had just cheated him in a real estate deal," Miss Rachel finished. "I remember that Father was singing his favorite motto in time with the hymn."

She spent a moment in thought. "'Rock of Ages.' He sang with that, keeping up courage, I suppose. He'd seen Mr. Trimble in the back of the church, of course, and must have known what was coming. But it didn't work, Jennifer.

"It didn't work then any more than it worked for that poor Mrs. Parmenter."
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The curtain fell on the last act, the final moment, the curtain, actor extraordinary, when his obese, alcoholic, senile figure, footing the four-foot four-inch-high water basin, rose from a fourteen inches of soapy bathtub water. But the mystery was not to be made up from here, for James Warren of Scotland Yard who, in the last probability of life, once greatest of all Macbeths had been murdered. To prove the murder against those who insisted on viewing the death as accidental, Winter turned to tear off the mask and cloak put around Winter the actor to reach the real facts about Winter the man. It was a tough job: Winter had surrounded himself with a diversely prejudiced set of characters. They included a statesman, a thief, a bartender, a widow, a strange young blonde, and a brash journalist. According to their conflicting testimony, Winter was truly a man of many parts.

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and

CATS DON'T SMILE

By D. B. Olsen

The letter from Cousin Julia asking spry-and-seventy Miss Rachel Murdock and her sister Jennifer to take over house and paying guests was plain enough, but Miss Rachel, with her nose for crime, sniffed something wrong. To begin with, the guests were an odd pair to find in Julia's home: a blowzy, blonde nurse, and a short oleaginous gent with a Cheshire smile. The family in the big house next door was equally inexplicable and became more so when tears and tension turned into murder. In satisfying her avid curiosity, Miss Rachel learned at her own peril why a burned cuff link inspired terror, why music at midnight was carefully calculated, and how the mangled corpse of a cat was a prelude to human death.

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