Two Complete DETECTIVE BOOKS

The DEAD TYCOON

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GREEN DECEMBER FILLS THE GRAVEYARD by MAUREEN SARSFIELD

No. 60
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Murder-millions C. O. D. was the red-headed Baby Doll's spite legacy—

The DEAD TYCOON

by RICHARD WORMSER

TWO COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH MYSTERIES

GREEN DECEMBER FILLS THE GRAVEYARD

by MAUREEN SARSFIELD

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Two Complete DETECTIVE BOOKS

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THE DEAD TYCOON

By RICHARD WORMSER

If you told fast-talking, wide-shouldered Martin Cockren he'd be running around Los Angeles with two of the loveliest girls in the world, helping them to hang fourteen portraits of a strange man in fourteen strange places, he'd have nodded sadly. Things like that happened to him. If you added that he, Marty Cockren, would also be the target of fists, knives, bullets, gas, poison, runaway automobiles and other forms of mayhem dreamed up by parties trying to prevent the hanging of those portraits, Marty would have shrugged. Things like that also happened to him. Only if you told him he had a chance of living through all this would Marty register shock. Then he'd laugh hysterically. He knew better!

GREEN DECEMBER FILLS THE GRAVEYARD

By MAUREEN SARSFIELD

It is an old proverb . . . and for the folk of the little English village of Shotshall it was suddenly, terribly borne out. For, out of the fog that wreathed in from the Channel, out of the sloughing mud, through the wet, tangled hedges, the leafless, dripping trees—slimy and vicious—came cold death stalking, striking down its innocent, helpless victims. And, as they fell, police and people alike turned their fury-slitted eyes toward the war-shattered manor, where a lone girl chipped away at a green stone, as if she were a sculptress. And the chisel trembled as she drove it—for she knew too sickeningly well that the thread tying the corpses together was being woven into a hangnoose to fit her own white throat!

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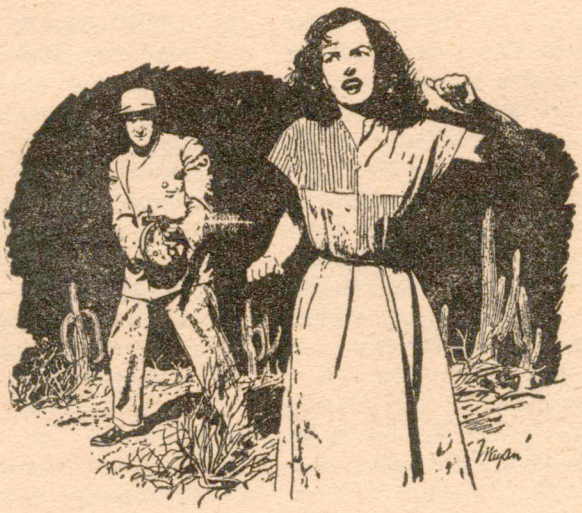
THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS WILL BE ON SALE AT THE NEWSSTANDS ON JANUARY 1st, 1950

The DEAD TYCOON



by

RICHARD WORMSER

THE DEAD TYCOON

By RICHARD WORMSER

MARTIN COCKREN WAS A character. Not in the mean, Hollywood sense, where a character is a showoff, possibly perverted person, but in the quiet, Los Angeles fashion, where a character means what it meant to our grandfathers, a man who goes his own way, unable to temper the winds of fortune to his shorn sheep, if that is the proverb.

Marty had worked on three of the L. A. papers, which is par for the course; he had been let go by the Times when he asked the president of a large—and freely advertised—chain of markets whether he didn't really think cooperatives gave the consumer a better break. The News decided to get along without Mr. Cockren when he got a quote from a visiting British M.P. that phony liberals, not reactionaries, were the true enemy of reform. The quote got printed, was the trouble, right alongside the editorial by the owner of the paper saying just the opposite.

Why the Hearst paper fired Marty doesn't matter. Being fired by Hearst, he said, was no worse than a bad cold.

The point is that Cockren didn't do these things to be funny, or because he was drunk. As a matter of fact, he was a moderate, normal drinker, what the Alcoholics Anonymous call a social drinker, tying one on occasionally, but never on the job. And while his sense of humor was okay, he never thought the funniest things he did were funny at all until his friends laughed, and then he'd grin sheepishly, and decide he'd been a dope.

Getting fired by both the Times and the News—not to mention—Hearst—is final in Los Angeles. You can get a job as a press agent with a studio, planting stuff if you are popular with the working press, which Marty was, but that was obviously temporary. Inevitably he was promoted to writing publicity, and inevitably he wrote —and sent out—a story on how a lady star's chief interest was sex. "Being sexy is what pays off at the box office," said this little lady, "and you can't fake it. I like men—old men, young men, almost any kind—and if I didn't the public would stop coming to see my pictures; and the studio wouldn't take up my option."

The A. P. picked up the handout like a vacuum cleaner, and another Marty Cockren story was added to the legend.

A LITTLE GUY named Andy Aarons read the story in the papers, and called up Marty. He said: "Mr. Cockren, do you remember me?"

Marty lied, and said: "Sure, Mr. Abrams."

"Aarons," Andy said, "with a double A. You don't remember me, and why should you? But you wrote a story about me once, for the Monday Times, and my girl read it and decided to marry me."

Marty was lying on the daybed of his one-room apartment on Miramar Street. "Oh, sure," he said, "you're the private detective."

"That's right," Aarons said. "You were writing a series on how Angelenos live, and you picked me because my name was first in the classified directory. My girl read it, and found out this wasn't such a dirty business I was in, and now she's Mrs. Aarons."

"With a double A," Marty said.

"Sure," Aarons said. "Since then, you might say we were fans of yours. When I read you were going to work for that studio, I began watching their publicity. You wrote the story about Dimity Cole, didn't you?"

"You just know I did," Marty said.

"What are you going to do now?"

Marty put a cigarette in his mouth, and rolled back on the pillow. He scratched a match on his fingernail. "Start swimming," he said. "Coast to coast Cockren. I've been fired from New York to California. Get a pair of waterwings and try for a

job on the North China Mail, I guess."

Aarons laughed. "Mr. Cockren, did you ever think of being a private detective?"

Marty said: "No."

"Well, it isn't such a bad trade," Mr. Aarons said. "You said so yourself. And my office, we don't take divorce cases and like that, and—well, Mrs. Aarons and I, we're sort of grateful to you. And we thought—she's my office manager now—that maybe we could return the favor you did us, you know, like the mouse and the lion."

Marty sat up and put his feet on the floor. "Now listen," he said. "You're no mouse, and I'm no lion. Of course, I'd like to work for you."

"I couldn't pay you what a big journalist ought to get," Mr. Aarons said, "but you would be eating while you looked around, without dipping into your savings account."

"Thanks for the compliment," Marty said. He took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"What?" Aarons thought a minute and then laughed. "Oh, yes, I get it. Well, you come down to my office whenever you get around to it. If I'm not here, Mrs. Aarons will get you started. It will be a laugh a minute, she says, to have a man like you around. And believe me, Mr. Cockren, if you say anything to me like what you usually get fired for, I will treasure it in my memory book."

Marty said: "I never knew Santa Claus started with a double A. I'll be right down."

"The pleasure is all mine," Mr. Aarons said.

SO Marty Cockren went to work for a private detective named Andy Aarons. The name is important, because if Aarons hadn't been the first detective agency in the classified phone book, he would have gone on all his life doing little petit larcency work, like he always had done.

For instance, the first case he put Marty on was a super-market job; about ten dollars a day disappeared between the meat counter and the cashier. Marty worked on the case about three days and came up with a new method of collecting for meat that eliminated the pilfering; he also reported that he'd been unable to find out who had been responsible, the butchers or the cashiers, one or severally.

Amazingly, Mr. Aarons didn't fire him. He said: "That's right, Mr. Cockren. For the few dollars a day a little agency like this charges, we wouldn't want to send anybody to jail. The people who hire us can catch their own dishonest employees; we stop the stealing, and that's enough. Now, there's a movie house over in Glendale where sometimes the house is crowded and sometimes it isn't, but the money at the box office is always the same. You go over there and see what's wrong."

"Listen," said Marty, "if they play double features, and I have to sit through them, I want a day off with pay when I get through."

"Did you hear that?" Mr. Aarons called through the partition to Mrs. Aarons. "Mr. Cockren said about double features—"

It was a very happy job.

This went on for six or seven weeks. Once or twice Marty did file information leading to an arrest—a guy who was stealing bread that bakery trucks left in front of stores, a man who was playing dirty with drive-in carhop girls—but most of the time he just put his mind to it and worked out a system that made the stealing stop, and the clients were happy, Marty was happy, and Mr. and Mrs. Andy Aarons continued to feel distinguished because such a smart and talented fellow worked for them.

This Andy Aarons, by the way, had been a war-time deputy sheriff, but he had not gotten a permanent appointment because he was too small. But on a cop's salary, he had saved enough money to open his little bureau. With Marty working for him, he began to make real money, because Marty had a much better brain than the sort of operative who usually works on pilfering. He raised Marty's pay to seventy-five dollars a week, put him on a five-day week, and Marty was thinking of writing a book on Short Change and How to Give It when the phone rang at eleven o'clock one night, and it was Mrs. Aarons.

She said: "Mr. Cockren, Andy just got a call on a big case, and he wants you to meet him in Beverly Hills."

"Boy," Marty said, "in Beverly Hills they must short change ten dollars at a time. But, Mrs. Aarons, I have been sitting in my little nest drinking and—"

"Take a breath killer," Mrs. Aarons said, "and some black coffee. I never saw Andy so excited. Two hundred dollars a day, this lady wants to pay."

Marty said: "I wish I had time to get my shoes half-soled and a haircut. I'm practically there."

He wrote down the address Mrs. Aarons gave him, and it was on Crescent Drive, North, which is very tony, a neighborhood confined to movie people and the owners of *big* delicatessen stores and retired gangsters and the inheritors of famous fortunes founded on products advertised in national magazines. He got his car out of the apartment house garage and followed the old car tracks to Beverly, and started rolling.

Marty had an impulse to go much too fast and then to snoot the cop who stopped him: "Listen, brother, I'm a two-hundred-dollar a day detective, I don't talk to you uniformed boys." But he fought it down, because cops in Los Angeles have no more sense of humor than the law requires, and Marty had gotten extremely fond of the Aarons's, and also of his work. This was one time he was going to keep it under wraps.

THE address was one of those Beverly Hills jobs that look like an electric fan had played over the architect's desk: Virginia colonial columns and a New England gazebo and some Gothic windows and a Spanish patio. There was also a driveway, and a covered place to leave your four cars, and a cement tennis court of the kind that is called *en tout cas,* which means cement, and no doubt there was a swimming pool behind it and maybe an aviary for peacocks or a nursery for Giant Pandas.

Marty parked his car alongside Andy Aarons, and gave his gray flannel suit a couple of swipes with his hand to knock the dust off. He was no more impressed than the next guy with two hundred dollars a day, but no less, either.

Then he pushed the doorbell, and someplace in the house some bells played the first bar of what he thought was Stravinsky or Beethoven or something. Anyway, it was the theme song of a famous brand of chewing gum on the radio.

A little, well-tamed guy in a white coat opened the door, and Marty handed him his hat. "I was to meet Mr. Aarons here," Marty said. The servant bowed and took the hat, and called Marty sir while he showed him through a great big room without much furniture and with a very slippery floor, and into another room with a tile floor and too much furniture and a lot of philodendron growing around, and Andy Aarons, sitting on the foot of a wicker chaise longue and balancing a highball. Aarons looked very happy when Marty came in. He jumped up and said: "Here's Mr. Cockren now. Mr. Cockren is the head of our bodyguard department but I'm going to get him to take this case himself, though he doesn't usually."

Marty bowed at the woman in the bamboo arm chair, and said: "Mr. Aarons is so right. I can't remember when I took on a bodyguarding job myself."

Poor little Andy Aarons choked. This was big money, and maybe he even saw a chance to crash Beverly Hills. Though if you don't take divorce cases, word of mouth advertising will never get a detective agency into the big brackets.

"You have a gun?" the lady asked. She waved a hand at a side table full of bottles and glasses and soda and ice and things. Marty made a quick decision and started pouring himself a very weak one. "Isn't that rather a silly question to ask a private detective?" he said. He heard Aarons let out his breath in a hurry; Andy knew that the only pistol Marty Cockren had ever owned was a Japanese signal flare thing.

"You'll need your gun," the lady said bitterly. Marty was seated now, and he had his drink in his hand, and a chance to look her over. She was pretty good looking, he thought, in a quiet enough way for Beverly Hills, about four or five years younger than Marty, who was thirty-five. Even if she hadn't had a nice figure and good green eyes, her hair was such a bright red you noticed her.

Aarons was trying to be inconspicuous about patting the bulge on his own hip, meaning that he would loan Marty his old police .38.

Marty said: "All right. A bodyguard is supposed to be ready to use his firearm if he has to. I always tell the men in my department that, don't I, Mr. Aarons?"

There it goes, Marty thought, looking at Aarons face, I've said another one of those

things that are always getting me fired.

But the lady didn't seem to notice. "I'm Miss Grosvenor," she said, "that's the named I rented this house in. But I'm also Mrs. Chounet. Mrs. Joseph Chounet."

MARTY gulped. Joseph Chounet was a name almost anybody knew. He was about as important as General Motors, and that well-known fellow, U. S. Steel. Also, even if you'd never heard of him before, you would have just then, because he had died of a heart attack two days before, and the obit had made big black headlines. Page One.

Marty stalled for time. He'd read the obituary, because he had been curious as to the motives that make a man roll up his forty-first and forty-second million dollars. He hadn't found the answer—or any answer suitable for a man who had not yet rolled up the first hundred—but he had read enough to know that there had been no mention of a widow.

Maybe Mrs. Chounet read his mind. Because she said: "I'll be in tomorrow's papers. The will was read today." She bit at pink-enameled fingernails. "Read all about it. Tycoon Was Secretly Married—"

"Wed," Marty said. Andy Aarons shot him another dirty look.

"Wed," Mrs. Chounet said. "Leaves All to Estranged Widow."

"Estranged?" Marty said.

"Look," said Andy Aarons, "this is none of our business, Mrs. Chounet. You want a bodyguard, the Aarons Agency supplies a bodyguard. We don't want to pry into our clients' private business."

"I disagree," Marty heard himself saying. "If I'm to guard Mrs. Chounet, I have to know whom I'm guarding her against." He cleared his threat. "Estranged means divorced, or at least separated."

The woman stood up, and moved between Marty and the light. Her figure was very good; he didn't doubt that she knew it. "Divorced," she said. "Ten years ago."

Marty said: "You couldn't have been married long. It seems queer he'd leave you—everything, did you say?"

"All," said Mrs. Chounet. "Leaves All to Estranged Wife. Or Widow."

"Look, Marty," Andy said—

"Joseph Chounet was a rat," his widow—estranged—said. "He hated me because I got alimony from him for ten years. A lousy fifteen hundred a month!"

Marty said: "Tsk, tsk. But then, nylons are cheaper every—skip it. I didn't mean to be rude. He hated you, you say. So, he left you a blinking, swilling fortune. Ten, twenty, I don't know how many million dollars . . ."

Andy Aarons sighed from deep down in his number seven shoes. "Mrs. Chounet, I'll be glad to guard you myself, and we'll let Mr. Cockren—"

"You're not big enough," the client said, without looking at Andy. "You can scram. I'll take the one with broad shoulders and the fresh tongue. Nobody knows how many millions, Marty, if I may call you Marty for two hundred dollars a day."

Marty set his glass down. She was drunk. There was no question that she was drunk, though it didn't show at all. Except in the way she talked. She was still talking, standing between him and the light, moving a little to remind him that her figure was female, human, and well girdled and brassiered. "Nobody'll know how many millions till they get through adding it up. Hell, no one man even knows how many companies the jerk owned. A hotel company, a steamship company, a mining company, an airplane company, a—name it and he owned one or two of them. And they're mine, all mine. . . ."

"Like the fellow says," Marty put in.

"Like the fellow says," Mrs. Chounet agreed, "with a condition. Or two."

"Ah," said Marty. "Ah, and also oh."

Mrs. Chounet turned and walked toward him. She blocked out all the light from the lamp she had been using to silhouette herself. "Condition one," she said, and raised a finger. "That I take a bunch of oil paintings of the old coot that he had in a vault, and—with proper and due ceremonies and—and—"

"And pomp and circumstance," Marty said.

"Yes. With all those things go around and hang one, publicly, in the entrance room of every company he owned."

"So far," Marty said, "nothing that any girl wouldn't do for a mere single million. After all, you don't have to look at the pictures, you just have to break a bottle

of champagne over them."

"All right," said Mrs. Chounet. "All right. That's condition one, which must be fulfilled within a month. And condition two—" She shook her head. "That is where the rat in Joe Chounet came out."

"Let's hear it," Marty said. "I've spent a lifetime in the care and study of the rat."

"Condition two," said his client, "is that after that month I'm still alive."

Marty stared at her. He said: "I'm just beginning to get it. If you're not, who gets the oughday?"

"The head of each company, enterprise, corporation or undertaking controlled by said Joseph Chounet," his widow said, in a singsong. "The hotel manager gets the hotel the president of the steamship company gets the boats, the lumberman gets the whole damned forest to play with, the—you get it."

Marty swallowed. "I get it," he said. "What sort of guys would they be?"

Mrs. Chounet put her finger to her chin, and stood considering. "Be?" she asked finally. "Be? Why, what sort of guys could they be, to have played marbles with the late, great Joseph Chounet, from the picture of the same name? Rats! Unscrupulous, hard, grasping, ambitious—"

"Whoa," said Marty, "either stop, or ring for the butler to get you the thesaurus. In other words—"

"In other words," said Mrs. Chounet, "if there's a single man among them who wouldn't kill me for what he'd make out of it, he got in there by mistake. And what do you think of that, broad shoulders?"

"I think," said Marty Cockren, "I'll go home."

II

HER SKIRT FLARING, THE widow whirled away from him. She tugged at a bellrope on the wall, just like in the movies, which is the way Beverly Hills homes are built. The small butler stuck his head in, cautiously, like his boss sometimes threw things at him, and she said: "George, get me the yellow phone book."

She turned to Andy Aarons. "All right," she said, "get out of here. There's a whole lot of detective agencies in the book. I've just used up the double A's is all."

Marty Cockren stood up, but Aarons just sat there. Marty looked at his boss, and it was a sad thing. This would have meant a lot to the little man; big money, big publicity, fame and glamor and dough. Marty reconsidered. "I think I go home," he said, "and take you with me, Mrs. Chounet."

The butler was back with the phone book. She yelled at him to take it away and looked at Marty. "Keep talking," she said, "and call me Eve."

"When this breaks in the papers," Marty said, "you'll be swamped with guys selling white elephants, mink coats, and specially built limousines. Also—if there is any truth in anything you've said—with guys to kill you."

"How d'ya like that?" the dame named Eve asked Aarons. "If there's any truth in anything I've said! I pay the guy two hundred—"

"Five hundred," Marty said. "This is a three-person operation. Three and some extras. Look. You and I, we move down to my little cave in the hills of home, as I always call it."

"He's nuts," Eve said.

"Believe me," Andy Aarons corrected her, "that is not so. Mr. Cockren is a very distinguished journalist, a man of great brains." Aarons looked quite happy, for him, because Marty was going to take the job.

Marty said: "My boss is the only man left in the world who thinks I'm smart, but see what you think of this: Mrs. Aarons moves out here. She's the only person who knows where we are. You stay in my place, and from there we can foray out, hang a painting, and duck back in again. Andy here works outside—buys tickets, and so on for us, makes all arrangements. How does it listen?"

Eve Grosvenor Chounet—if any of the names were true—said: "It listens two thousand bucks a week. That's not hay."

"Done," Andy Aarons said.

The woman plunged at the bell rope again. She screeched: "George, back a pag."

"She means pack a bag," Marty said. "Toothbrush, change of clothes, some good, serviceable pyjamas."

"I don't like the sound of that," she said. "Serviceable?"

"I mean, nontransparent ones," Marty said. "It's a one-room apartment. I got to be able to keep my mind on business."

"A one-room apartment?" The noise she made was suspiciously like a snort. "Me in a one-room apartment?"

"You," Marty said. "Also me and my horse. I used to be a mounted cop, and I keep my horse out of sentimentality."

Poor Andy Aarons began to look unhappy again.

"It's all right," Marty said. "I just remembered. The horse is in the country visiting friends."

The redhead began to cry. Suddenly, without warning, tears rolled down her uncontorted face. They were silent tears at first, and then they were accompanied by sobs, and then her face broke up and twisted into the mask of violent grief. "You wouldn't talk to me like that," she said between sobs, "if I was sober. And I would be sober if I wasn't—if I wasn't —so damned scared."

Marty said: "I'm sorry," and put an arm around a pair of shoulders that were warm and firm, and young-feeling. "Look," he said. "I know I'm a heel. Always have been."

"Well, y-you could try and change."

Marty looked at Andy Aarons, who was plainly relegating the whole thing to the newly founded bodyguard department, Martin Cockren, mgr. Aarons was doing this by staring fixedly at the Spanish tile fireplace, which was full of flowers.

George the Whitecoat came back carrying an alligator skin weekend bag. With his arm still around his client's shoulders, Marty took the bag in the other hand. "George," he said, "there's a lady going to stay here for a while. She'll tell you she's Mrs. Aarons, and that is what you'll call her, but between you and me, George—and don't tell Jimmy Fidler—if anything happened to Mrs. Aarons, so called—the royal house of England—" Marty finished by making, twice, the noise described in print as "tsk".

Little George stared, his eyes popping until he looked more like a rabbit than ever. Under his right hand, Marty felt Eve's shoulders shake a little. It was possible that she was laughing.

Andy Aarons looked as startled as George.

BEFORE the effect could be broken, Marty had the girl outside, and going towards his car. The door closed behind them, and Andy Aarons' tapping footsteps brought him even. "Marty, forgive me, but you shouldn't make jokes all the time."

Marty said: "Look, Andy, I'll bet you all her life Mrs. Aarons has wanted to live in a house like that, with a butler. I just wanted to see that she got the works."

His boss said: "Oh. I see. I don't think as fast as you do, Martin."

"Who does?" asked Eve. "Where did you find this character, Mr. Aarons?"

They had gotten to Marty's somewhat dingy two-door now. He put the girl inside, and said: "I'll have plenty of time to tell you the story of my life, now that we're roommates. Doggone, you know I always did want to go to a coeducational school."

Aarons said: "I don't know, but I think they put the boys in one room and the girls in another."

"Yeah," Marty said. "They would. Look, Andy, I want to talk to you." He led his employer over to one side of the portico. Out beyond stretched the lawn, and somewhere there was jasmine blooming in the night. Mocking birds sang their song of Los Angeles in the palm trees out on the street. "The gun," Marty said. "You'd better give me the gun."

Aarons handed it over. "You know, Marty, I— we— the agency expects to split this fee with you. This isn't something I'd ask a man to do for seventy-five dollars a week."

"We'll work that out later," Marty said. "You get Mrs. Aarons out here to answer the phone. She phones you, you phone me, and nobody can possibly guess where Mrs. Chounet is."

"Mrs. Chounet's kind of a funny woman," Aarons said. "I don't feel easy about this. I feel like I'm making you do something—"

"I'm a big boy now," Marty grinned, "and I've got a gun in case she starts chasing me around the apartment."

"What a character," Andy Aarons said.

Marty started his car and went down Santa Monica towards the beginning of Beverly. Santa Monica in Beverly Hills is not the grim, cartracked thing it be-

comes down where the working folk live; it is a wide, beautifully planted boulevard. Marty shot down it to where Beverly starts, and then made his right turn too fast; his client slid over and her head rested on his shoulder. She left it there.

It was pleasant enough work, Marty thought. With Eve Chounet warm against his side that way, some of her details blurred; the ones that had annoyed him back in her too-elaborate house. Such as the hard lines around her mouth and the corners of her eyes, and the liquor-blurred brightness of her eyes. She became a pretty girl, a companion to take the chill off the night.

Like many single men, the low ebb of his tweny-four hours was always now, going home to an empty flat, a time when everything seemed to end; you go home, and there's no one to talk to, and the ashtrays you have forgotten to empty are cold, the paper you left scattered on the floor annoys you, but it isn't worth picking up, there are dirty dishes in the sink, and the radio seems to get nothing you want to listen to.

She moved, pushing her head deeper into his shoulder, and said: "You're not married?"

"I was just thinking the same thing," Marty said. "No, I've never been."

He kept his eyes on the road, but he could feel her moving away, looking up at him. "I don't know when it's been that I met a guy that had never been married. The men a gal runs into! The rich ones that would divorce their wives, except for the children, and the poor ones that want to move right in and stop worrying where the next herring is coming from."

"Tough," Marty said.

"Can't you drive with one arm?"

"I haven't practised in fifteen years," Marty said. "I was in love with a girl the year I graduated from high school. But she married my best friend's uncle, which is a twist."

"Twists and heels," the redhead said. "That's the world for you. I look at a pretty little baby in a baby carriage, and I say, 'Baby, your mama is probably a twist and your daddy is a heel.'"

"You've had a nice life," Marty said. "A good man is hard to find, huh?"

"Oh, then there are the playboys," Eve Chounet said. "They want you to stay up all night running around, and then they ditch you because you look like you been up all night."

Suddenly she sat up straight. "Say, talking of playboys, I got one is crazy about me, and he's got a great big old plane . . . You and he and I could get in it and—" She stopped. "Sure, and the third time we came down to hang one of those damned pictures, some airport guy would have been hired to saw the wings off the plane. No, Jimmy's out." She came back against his shoulder again, but it was more from weariness this time.

MARTY cleared his throat. They passed an apartment house where a bunch of people were coming out in an oblong of light from the open front door; the women had on long evening dresses, salmon and blue and ice green, and it was a pretty sight, including one man who was wearing a hound's tooth checked sport jacket.

He had to say something to get his client cheerful again. "Maybe we can use your friend Jimmy after awhile. Jimmy what?"

She giggled. "Gayhart, Jimmy Gayhart. It's his real name, too. Isn't that a kick, from the wildest playboy a girl ever ran into?"

Her head against his shoulder was again alive, burrowing for friendship and warmth rather than leaning for support. "It's a kick," Marty said.

"I guess I like Jimmy better than anybody I go around with. He never wants to go to bed, though."

Marty said: "I imagine most guys with you are vice versa."

She got it after a minute and giggled almost soberly. "You're a kick," she said. "That girl in high school cured you of women?"

Marty laughed. "Women cured me of women," he said. "I never manage to hold a job more than a few weeks. Most girls ditch me after the second time, or I have to leave town looking for work. I almost got engaged, just last year; she stuck through three jobs, and then I began to feel like one of your friends, ready to move in and stop worrying about

eating. She's a lawyer downtown."

"A lady lawyer," Eve said. "That'd be a nice thing to come home to. Woosh!"

The car was going fast through the almost deserted town. Past dog and cat hospitals, retail stores claiming to be wholesale shoe outlets, past doctors with their M.D. in neon, and churches whose crosses revolved electrically; it slowed down for a little crowd of cars around the night club called The Bar of Music, and slowed down again for a whole rash of traffic around Fairfax; then it speeded up again for the long, lonesome stretch through the golf club south of Hollywood.

Eve put her hand up, and rested it lightly where his arm crooked to hold the wheel. "I'm glad you work for a guy named Aarons," she said. "I'm—well, I was going to call a detective but I didn't think it would work. Now, maybe it will."

Marty said: "Thanks, kid. Thanks a lot."

She said: "It's only a month, isn't it? After a month nobody will want to kill me, nobody'll get anything out of it. And that cockeyed brain of yours could out think anybody for a month."

"We aim to please," Marty said. "Our motto is service."

Maybe he had looked down, momentarily, at the top of her red head. At any rate, he had looked some place but at the road, because he never saw where the car came from.

THE first thing he knew was the noise, steel on steel, and the horrid squealing sound his tires made as the two-door went slithering across the road.

The girl was screaming by then, and Marty was fighting the wheel, hard, as the left hand wheels hit the curbing, hesitated, and the car rocked as though it was going to go over. Then, while Marty remembered all the cars full of corpses he'd stared at as a reporter, the wheels bit and the car went up on the curb.

It hung there, half on the sidewalk and half off, and this time he saw the other car—a convertible coupe, big, an old one that had cost five grand in its day, and that weighed as much as when it was new—twice what Marty's little bus weighed. He saw it because the convertible had followed him across the boulevard like a polo pony, and now it hit him again, broadside.

The coupe went all the way up on the curb, and hit the woven wire fence that spared the golf players from having traffic drop on their heads while putting. The noise must have been clearly audible in Pasadena, and the motor of Marty's car died.

He pressed the starter button with his finger, pumped at the accelerator with his foot, and his right hand dug in his clothes for the gun Andy Aarons had loaned him. He got it out, as the motor caught, and somebody was yelling: "Get that window down," and the someone was him, though he had not told his lips to shape the words.

Eve Chounet, groaning, cranked at the window, and when air showed at the crack above the dusty glass, he fired point blank at the windshield of the other car, which had backed off and was coming at him again, determined to knock them through the wire fence.

His car was running now, and he took his left hand off the wheel to shift into low and get rolling, as the windshield of the convertible started out into a crazy pattern of broken glass that kept him from seeing much of anything inside and then they were moving away, fast, Marty shoving the gas pedal half through the floor.

Behind them there was the noise of all the pants in the world tearing on the corners of all the tin roofs. Marty, shifting into second, looked back, and the convertible was teetering, half through the fence. There was another noise, almost indescribable, and it stopped teetering and fell to the golf course below. It broke off a couple of small trees in passing, and the noise of green wood splitting was added to the chaos.

Marty bumped the car off the curb, and drove back across the boulevard, and turned right at the end of the golf course to get off Beverly. He went south on Third, and turned left again and continued downtown.

At the corner of Western and Third two cops sat their motorcycles and compared the tickets they had given out that night. They did not look up as Marty drove the battle scarred two-door by them.

They were young, long-legged, vigorous looking cops, of the exact type any wise mayor would pick for patrol work.

III

AFTER YOU LEAVE WESTERN, going downtown, the next fairly important street is Normandie. Halfway between Western and Normandie, Marty stopped the car and got out. He walked all around it, shaking his head, and then got back. "We're going to have to ditch this bus," he said. "I'll leave it five, six blocks from the apartment and tell the cops it was stolen."

There was no answer. For the first time he realized that he had not looked at his passenger, his client, since the collision; he had been dimly aware that it must be her hand that was cranking the window down for him to make the pistol shot that had enabled them to get away, but he hadn't really seen her.

He looked. She was crumbled in her own corner of the seat, and at first he thought she had been shot. But then he didn't think so; the tears that rolled down her face were too big and too frequent, she was putting out too much liquid to have sustained a blood-letting wound.

He slowed down, without stopping. Parking would undoubtedly attract a cop; that was the way the law worked in L. A. "It's all over, Eve," he said. "After all, it was just a slice of life."

She said: "You hit me. With your elbow when—" The sobs started.

"Damn," he said, "that's what I like about women. I save your life, and you get mad because I hit you. I'm sorry. You hear me? I'm very sorry!"

"You don't have to yell at me," she said. This seemed to restore some basic feminine right, because she stopped sobbing, and opened her bag. She fumbled around in the bag, and got out a handkerchief. "I know I'm silly," she said, starting to repair her face, "but it was an awful shock. I was leaning on your shoulder, and then all of a sudden—you brought your elbow up. You're bony."

"Poverty," Marty said. "I don't get enough to eat. Where did I catch you?"

"Where—where my brassiere goes around."

"What a choice of language," Marty said. "Calculated to shock no one." They had crossed Vermont. "Pretty soon we start hiking," he said. "Somebody was after you, baby, with force and determination. They must have been watching your house, and followed us. . . . Well, they're shaken off now. If I didn't kill whoever was in that car, the fall probably did."

Beside him the compact snapped shut. Now it was all right to look at her. "I've decided to elect you the girl I would most like to be shot at with," he said.

"Don't you ever keep quiet?" she asked.

"Sure. I sleep ten or twelve hours a night. You'll see."

He parked the car carelessly a couple of blocks west of Belmont, and got out. He walked around, and opened the right hand door; the girl had apparently waited for just that, because until he took her elbow, she didn't make a move to get out. He helped her to the curb, and then got her bag.

"It's only a couple of minutes' walk," he said, "and then I'll phone the cops, and we'll have the car back in the morning."

"Must you?" she asked. It was very still, and her heels clicked on the pavement echoing off the walls of apartment houses.

"Lady," Marty said, "I'm a poor man. That's four, five hundred dollars' worth of car. Anyway, the cops would trace it to me sooner or later, through the engine number."

"Later," she said, "might mean after my month was up. And—and I'll buy you another car."

"That's the sort of thing to feed the troops," he said. "I'll go back and get the white slip."

He set the bag down in the doorway of a doctor's office, and went back. He reached in and felt the steering wheel post. It felt very cold, it was naked. The white-slip—required by California on the post of every car as proof of registration and ownership—was gone. It had been there earlier.

Marty stood there, thinking. Then slowly he went back and got the suitcase, and they continued walking. "I'll call the cops," he said, "and save you some money. I'd rather anyway, in case they try and

hook the car up with that— accident on Beverly."

"But they—the people who ran into us, who—they'll—I'd rather you didn't."

Marty said: "The white slip was stolen while I was in your house, it's got my address on it. We'll take a chance—maybe the guys in that car stole it, and they won't—" he stopped. He had never before wished anyone dead; it made him feel funny now. "Anyway, there's nothing to lose. Tomorrow we'll move, you and I. From motel to motel, like lovers in a pornographic book."

Eve said nothing. He took her arm, and guided her down Third to Witmer, and up Witmer to Miramar, and up the steps of the apartment house to his home.

HIS apartment was on the second floor —a living room with a Murphy bed and a couch, a kitchenette and breakfast nook, a bathroom. He was rather proud of it, the building was red brick and fairly new, furniture inexpensive but well padded, nothing in too bad taste; he had taken down the prints that came with the lease, and hung some photographs of scenery and horses and things that he was ready to defend against any interior decorator in the world.

But now, looking at it with the eyes of this Beverly Hills dame, it was kind of mean looking, dingy.

But the dame was looking at the couch. "Is that—where you sleep?"

"Yeah, sure." He put the alligator skin bag on the coffee table, scooped up an empty coffee cup and three spoons that had been there awhile, and quietly knocked some furry dust to the floor with the edge of his hand. The cup and spoons he dumped in the sink in the kitchenette. Then he came back, and Eve Chounet was still staring at the couch.

He said: "Oh. Why there's a bed in that door there." He opened the door, let the bed down a few inches, shoved it back again. "I don't bother to use it, but it's all made up, and all yours."

She sat down on the couch, and rubbed her chest with the heel of one hand. "It's late, and I'm not sleepy. You look like the type that would have a drink."

"You're a great judge of character, Mrs. Chounet," Marty said, and went into the kitchenette. There was a bottle of domestic Scotch-type and a bottle of near-Bourbon blend, and part of a bottle of soda. He knocked ice cubes into a bowl, and put a glass under each armpit, the bottles in one hand and the bowl in the other, and carried the whole bar back to deposit next to the weekend bag.

"What big hands you have, grandma," the girl said. "Can you ride a bicycle and do all that at the same time?" She grabbed for the Scotch-type bottle and poured herself a healthy slug. She made a face. "Am I glad I'm not poor," she said.

"Were you in vaudeville, Madame Chounet?" Marty was taking his time, mixing whiskey and soda and ice just right. Only expensive liquor can be drunk carelessly.

"How old do you think I am?" the widow lady asked. "And don't call me Chounet. I hate the name. No, I was working in a night club when I met the stinker I married. If I talk like I was in vodvil, it's because there was always a lot of old timers around those joints." She gulped more Scotch-type, made another face. She took a deep breath. "And what joints!" This time the joints were almost jernts. "I'd a married anybody to get out of there. Well, I did. I was just a kid, jus' seventeen years old, and I didn't know a damned thing, and he was a smooth guy, this Joe Chounet and—"

Those huge, silent tears had started again. Marty, who had caught the act a couple of times sighed. First the tears, then the sobs, then the face breaking up like the ice in spring. "Have a drink," he said, "poor kid. So you're only twenty-seven now."

"Twenty-eight," Eve said, taking him up on the drink. It apparently forestalled the two later stages of her crying, but it emptied the Scotch-type bottle. "I wouldn't lie to you. I'm twenty-eight."

"Poor kid," Marty said. "Imagine, and only fifteen hundred dollars a month alimony."

She took him seriously, and the globules started down her cheeks again. Marty hastily shoved the bourbon bottle into her hand. "Oh, I couldn't," she said. "I'm drinking up all your whiskey."

"G'wan," Marty said. "I'm drunk already."

"Oh, I couldn't," she said again, and tilted the bottle to her mouth.

"You didn't do a goldfish bowl in the nightclub, did you?" Marty asked. "You can hold your breath like a champion swimmer."

She set the almost empty bottle down, and said: "Well, if you weren't such a cheapskate, you'd have another bottle. And better liquor. What kind of a girl do you think I am, drinking bar-varnish?"

"Please," Marty said, "you're embarrassing me."

She took another gulp, and said: "Poor lil fella, don't you have any money? Well, lemme tell you, I got enough for two. You know who I am? I'm married to the richest fella in the whole United States and he—"

Her eyes closed. She grabbed desperately for the bottle, desperately she swallowed, lest she pass out before every cubic inch was filled; Marty caught the bottle, set it down, twisted the top tight. He sighed, and got up, took off his coat, neatly hung it on a hanger, pulled down the Murphy bed.

He took off his client's shoes, and a pearl necklace that seemed to be real; he left the rest of her clothes on, foreseeing an extremely dull conversation in the morning if he didn't. Then he pulled back the covers, shoved her under them, and considered putting the bed back vertically in the closet; decided against it, and took off his shirt and socks and pants. He was just ready to go to bed in his shorts when the phone rang.

HE grabbed it quickly; he didn't want Chounet waking up and talking again. It was Andy Aarons.

"Marty," he said, "Mr. Cockren." He sounded very upset. "Mrs. Aarons went out there—like you said—"

"Good," Marty said. "Our client's asleep. I'll call you in the morning."

"No," Aarons said. It was almost a bleat that came out of the phone. "She got out there—and—Marty—the butler's dead. Somebody shot the butler!"

Marty shook his head. He sat down on the couch, and with his free hand put the small amount of whiskey the woman had left him in a glass, added soda, and drank. "Somebody tried to knock us off the road coming home," he said. "I—look, Andy. Tell Mrs. Aarons to call the cops—"

"She has," Andy said. "What do you think? She's a law abiding woman. She called them right away. Then me."

"What?" Marty spoke fast. He no longer cared about waking the dame. "All right. Call her right back. Tell her to tell the cops everything except where we are, Chounet and I. Tell her to tell them I was going to call in in the morning, and tell her—"

"She doesn't know where you are," Andy Aarons said. "I didn't tell her."

Marty let out a sigh. "Okay. Good boy. You'll hear from me in the morning."

He hung up, and went and put on clean socks, shorts, a shirt and the same suit he'd worn. In his stocking feet he went over and looked down at the woman in his Murphy bed. He shook his head, whistling silently between his teeth. Then he went and packed a bag for himself.

He hoisted Eve Chounet into a sitting position, put her shoes back on. The pearls he dropped into his pocket; she'd have to go out in a semi-nude condition. He laid her back down, picked up the bags, turned off the lights, and went out.

The car was where he'd left it. It's radiator was bashed and leaking, its fenders were ruined, but it was the only car he had. He drove it back through the quiet, tree-lined streets, to the front of the apartment house, left the motor running, and went upstairs. She was still asleep.

She seemed accustomed to being led around drunk; she even helped a little by moving her feet as he took her downstairs, carrying most of her weight on his arm. He got her into the car.

He looked at his watch. Four o'clock. The bars would all be closed, and they would be conspicuous, but— He drove down to Third, and along it until he passed the taxicab garage. Then he parked on a sidestreet, where the ruined parts of his car would be least conspicuous.

He got the girl out, and she leaned on him, but again her feet tracked. He carried the bags to the corner. After while a cab came by, heading for the garage. He signalled and it stopped. "Mister," the driver said, "I'm on my way in. I'll send somebody out."

Marty said: "Look, my—wife has passed out, and me, I'm too drunk to drive. Take us someplace to spend the night, will

you?"

The driver said: "Brother, you're lucky you got this far. The cops is getting rugged in this town. Get in. They pinch you just for being drunk in a public place."

"The way I feel," Marty said, "A good cell'd be a nice place."

"You never been in the drunk tank," said the driver. "There's a motel over here aways." And he drove off. Marty was delighted to see that he kept his flag up.

The motel didn't ask any questions—took his money, gave him a key. He came back to the cab. "You'll be delighted with this joint," he told Eve. "Philodendron all over just like home."

The cab driver made no move to help as Marty loaded himself with woman and bags. "You look like Santa Claus," he said, and Marty gave him five bucks and he drove off. A good cab driver gets so he can smell illegality.

Marty hauled his client into the cabin his money had paid for, threw her on one of the twin beds, and sank down on the edge of the other one himself. "Wake up, lover," he said. "There's some questions I'd like to ask you."

Eve Chounet went: "Gobble gobble mumbler," or something like it.

"Such as," Marty said, "why you didn't call the police instead of or as well as a detective bureau? There's nothing illegal—"

Eve said: "Mobbler gumbler bum," or almost, stood up. She kicked twice, and her shoes went flying. She bent over—and why she didn't go on her face defied Newton's and Einstein's finest laws—and caught hold of the hem of her dress, and straightened up.

The dress turned inside out and went flying after the shoes, "Mobbler," she said. "Strom-bumbley," and half fell, half crawled into one of the beds.

"Damn all amateurs," Marty said, "including myself," and proceeded to go to bed.

IV

LIGHT STREAMED HORIZONTALLY through the window at six in the morning and awakened him. He sat up, and counted drinks from the night before, decided he didn't have a hangover, and went into the tiled bathroom of the little nest without looking at Eve Chounet, asleep in the other bed. After he had brushed his teeth and shaved, he came back out; she was still asleep, her bare shoulders and the white straps of her silk slip framed on the pillow. Her red hair was tumbled over her face, but at least she slept with her mouth closed.

He went out. A fat man was working around the motel, hosing off the sidewalk; he mumbled a greeting at Marty, and went on working. Marty walked three blocks up the boulevard, and found a lunchroom just opening. He bought the Hearst paper and the Times and the News, and ordered coffee and soft boiled eggs.

The story of the Chounet will had shoved Russia out of the headlines. It was all there; including a list of the companies that Chounet's lawyer thought he controlled. Marty finished his eggs, put the will aside for further reading, and turned to the crime story.

The butler had been shot by burglars according to the Beverly Hills police. It was thought that a professional holdup man—from outside Beverly Hills—had gotten hold of an early edition of the paper, realized that the house on Crescent Drive held a lady of great wealth, and made his move accordingly.

"Mrs. Chounet, however, was not at home at the time. According to information received by the police, she has temporarily moved to the home of a friend. Police expect an arrest early today."

This was the Examiner. The other two papers had nothing about the butler at all.

Far back in the News, was a head: "Gang Killing On The Eighth Green." This was the big convertible that had rammed Marty. Due to the peculiar organization in Los Angeles County, this had not been connected in anyway with the Chounet case; it was in the hands of the Los Angeles City cops, the Beverly Hills officer had nothing to do with it, and Marty was the only link. His car might not be picked up for days. Apparently no law was after Marty and his client. Andy Aarons wasn't mentioned in the story.

A truck skidded around the corner outside and a bundle of papers thudded against the lunchroom door. Marty finished his eggs while the counterman went out and cut the cord on the papers and put

them in their racks. Then Marty went over to get one. He started to put a nickle in the rack.

"Just shove that earlier edition back in," the counterman said, "and take one free. We get our money back from the Times."

Marty said: "Thanks," and took the new paper. Things were getting hotter. "EVE CHOUNET SOUGHT BY POLICE. HEIRESS FEARED VICTIM OF FOUL PLAY."

He sighed and folded the paper. He didn't have to read the story; he'd written too many like it. He drank his coffee, slid it over for a refill, and laid two dollars down on the counter. "Gimme a lot of change," he said. Then he shoved the paper listing Chounet's properties in his pocket, and walked further up San Fernando Road to a drugstore. He made up a telegram to a man he'd liked in the sheriff's office when he was a reporter, Lieutenant of Deputies, Harrison. "HAVE GOT EVE CHOUNET. WILL BE IN AT NINE TO TALK THINGS OVER." He signed his name, and phoned the telegram to Western Union.

JINGLING the rest of his change in his pocket, he went back to the motel. The fat man was now watering the plants that ornamented the office. Marty gave him money for another day, six bucks. The fat man's lack of curiosity annoyed him, which was queer.

He wet a washrag, and mopped Eve Chounet's forehead with it till her eyes opened. She groaned. "Okay," Marty said. "You're awake, you got a hangover, you're all right. Now, listen. I'm going out for awhile. You can go take a walk, have some coffee, but come back here where I can find you."

She moaned. "Don't talk so mean. Don't talk business so early in the— Lemme sleep."

"Good," Marty said. "Go back to sleep. Just don't get in touch with anyone till you hear from me. I'm on my way down to the sheriff's office."

Now she was wide awake, sitting up. Marty thought that he should have found the situation intriguing, but he didn't. A readhead,: half dressed, in bed—a young dame, a motel—nuts with it.

"The sheriff's office!" she said. "The cops! Whatdaya think I hired you for—"

Marty said: "Last night I was a sucker. So was Andy Aarons. If you wanted protection, a bodyguard, the cops were the place to go. Why didn't you?"

She stared at him. One hand came up and pushed her hair out of her eyes, tried to straighten it. The other pulled the bedclothes up over her shoulders. "Everybody knows how the cops are," she said.

"How are they?" Marty asked.

"Well, you can't trust them—"

"But you can trust a guy you get out of the phone book. Nuts! Even if you'd been reading too many detective stories, you couldn't be that dumb."

She chewed her lower lip, and tried again: "I'll have to go—all over the country. A policeman—well, a Los Angeles policeman wouldn't do me any good in—say—Seattle or New York—"

He shook his head.

"Look the other way," she said. He turned his head, and heard her slipping out of bed. She groped around on the floor for her shoes and dress, and disappeared into the bathroom. Marty lit a cigarette, and transferred to his own bed, where he stretched out.

When Eve Chounet came back in, she was made up beautifully, her hair was a masterpiece. Only her slightly bloodshot eyes showed any signs of last night's activities. "For the kind of money I'm paying you, you stay away from the cops," she said, without preliminaries.

Marty rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. "Now," he said, "the big round tears start rolling."

"Only when I'm drunk," she said. "Look —All right. I'll level with you. I owe a lot of money. To a gambling house. To Ray Fresno. I—borrowed—anyway I owe him a lot of money."

Marty felt as though a mule had stepped on the center of his solar plexus. A mule with new shoes on. He said: "Lady, lady, you have made newspaper history. You are the sole news source of L. A. County." He gathered up the paper, spread Page One out on the bed. That half of the front page that was not concerned with the Chounet will was all about the search for Eva Francisco and Ray Fresno. . . .

GANG WAR IMPENDS AS FRESNO STILL AT LARGE. . . .

EVA FRANCISCO BELIEVED IN NEVADA

He rapped the papers with his knuckles. "You're Eva Francisco."

"That was my stage name, yes." She tossed the bright hair with dignity. It was a story that had happened before, and each time it happened, the papers played it big. Two gangs of bookies had been running locally; the one headed by a lad named Ray Fresno had caused the demise of the head of the other gang, a lad charmingly known as Ratsy Patrick.

"You know where Fresno is," Marty asked. He added: "Miss Grosvenor?"

"I never said I was named Grosvenor," Eve said. "I just said that was the name I took the house in."

It was all coming back to Marty now. The cops had really tried to get Mr. Fresno, convinced that it was he—to use a phrase from the lower classes—who had ventilated Mr. Patrick like a Swiss cheese. They had tried for him at his latest wife's house, they had questioned his first two wives. Wife Three had finally broken down.

"He hasn't been here in months," she said. "He went back to his old gal, a lady he danced with in night clubs. Fresno & Francisco."

Eve said: "My real name is Mrs. Chounet, I—"

Marty said: "Shut up. I never would have known you from your pictures." Because there had been art. Cheesecake with icing. Old professional pictures, ten years old, in fact, of Ray Fresno in a straw hat, Eva Francisco in tights, and no hat at all. Eva in an off-the-shoulder number, leaning forward confidingly. Eva—

"Joe Chounet was getting old," the woman was sniffling. "If he croaked, I wouldn't get any more alimony—"

"Alimony, hell," said Marty. "You and Fresno were blackmailing Chounet." He glared, "And never mind the tears. I like to see women cry."

"I was under the age of consent when Chounet married me," she said. "He was a big shot then, but not like he got later. He couldn'ta stood the publicity and—"

MARTY sat down on the bed. Sometime while she was talking he had jumped up and started pacing the little room like a caged animal. "Listen," he said, "was any of that story true about the will?"

"You saw it in the papers," she said.

Marty shook his head. "I'd hate to be in your girdle," he said, "outside of the fact that it would be loose on me. Ratsy Patrick's guys, the cops, and a bunch of greedy tycoons all gunning for you at one time."

He got up and got his hat and bag. "Lady love, I'm bowing out."

"What's the matter," she asked, "yellow?"

"The very word I was fumbling for," Marty said. "Look, babe, Andy and I were putting on an act last night. We're not big shots. He and I and his wife to answer the phone, that's all there is to the Aarons Agency."

"Okay," she said, "the less guys involved, the less chance of somebody selling me out to Patrick, or the cops—or Ray."

He moved to the door, but fast. "You sold out Ray, too, huh? Well, don't tell me about it." He waved a hand. "So long. I'm giving you a break. I'm taking the street car downtown. I'm going to call on a lawyer, and then I'm going over to the County building and talk to the sheriff. It gives you time to get out of here."

He stood in the door a minute. For the first time, she really looked her age, only twenty-eight, a battered twenty eight, instead of a well preserved forty. She'd just been high school age when she got in with Ray Fresno, and then with Chounet, and no doubt, worse complications and messes and—

She was crying, now, but it wasn't the big tears act. She was genuinely frightened and lonely and—

He shut the door, firmly, and walked away. The office door of the motel was open, and the fat man was sitting at his desk, feet up, listening to a soap opera.

Walking over to Glendale Boulevard, Marty tried hard to shut his mind to everything but what he was going to do about keeping himself and Andy Aarons out of prison. But random thoughts kept coming back to him. Eleven years ago, when she married Chounet, there was still a big depression, and nobody knew when it was going to end. The next meal was a thought shared by almost everyone in the county, the next meal, and where it was and going

to come from. Prohibition was only gone a few years, but the melody of lawlessness and wildness lingered on, and you couldn't really blame a pretty girl if she'd rather swallow or scruple or two and make a couple of hundred a week—or fifteen hundred a month—rather than ten bucks a week when as and if the dime store needed another salesgirl.

There was something wistful, almost appealing, under the hard veneer that life had put on Eve Francisco Grosvenor Chounet. Something elusive and—

He was on Glendale Boulevard, and at a drugstore. He swore at himself for a sentimentalist and shoved a coin in the slot. But a maid's voice said that Miss Summers had already left for the office.

That was a break, if she didn't go someplace else in the meantime. Marty debated calling another lawyer, decided against it, and just happened to look out the window at the street.

An olive green convertible went by at eighty miles an hour. There were two guys in it but they were going too fast for Marty to tell anything about them. Behind them, siren wide open, came a black and white police car, and then another, and then a third.

Marty frowned, and was very cautious about venturing out on the street. But nobody seemed to be following him, nobody seemed to be shooting at him; he paid his fare on a street car, and rode downtown unmolested.

V

MISS NANCY SUMMERS—Attorney-at-law—had an office across the Civic Center from the Hall of Justice. What had ever inclined such a pretty young lady to be a criminal lawyer nobody knew; but, of course, Nancy Summers was a godsend for newspaper photographers trying to do something about illustrating the passage of a new law or the installation of a new judge.

Despite her frequent publicity, Miss Summers had very little criminal business; Los Angeles juries are largely feminine, and the crooks with enough money to retain an attorney preferred someone solider, more masculine, and probably shiftier. So Nancy made just about as much money as she would have as a big lawyer's secretary; but she was her own boss.

On this morning, as on all weekday mornings, she had opened her office—a cubicle with phone service supplied by the neighboring public stenographer—at eight thirty.

She had read the comic strips and the movie columns over coffee in her apartment, reserving the front page as being more dignified if anybody walked in and found her reading.

She read the Fresno-Francisco story first, as being in her line of work. A methodical girl, she made notes as she read. It was her intention to some day write A Criminal History of the United States, and the gambling wars that periodically rocked Los Angeles were to her an important and symptomatic phase, a transition in the progress from what she was pleased to cell The Rule of the Protestant Myth to the Rule of the People.

She wrote, in her fine small hand: "Fresno and Francisco both whipping boys. Will be surrendered by powers above them shortly. Interview Eve Francisco in jail." Then she filed the note in her To Do compartment, and turned to the other big local story, the will of Joseph Chounet.

This meant nothing to her, this was more the domain of a corporate lawyer than a criminal one, and she read on idly until Martin Cockren's name—as a friend's will—jumped out of the type at her. Then she went back and read the whole thing over again, and was still at it when the door opened, and Marty himself walked in. It was now eight minutes to nine.

Her first thought was that she was glad she'd worn the gabardine suit that she usually saved for court appearances. Her second thought was that Marty looked more battered than ever, and needed a haircut. Then she felt like whistling Fish Gotta Swim, and then she said: "If you want me to be maid of honor, the answer's no."

Marty drifted over to sit on a corner of her desk, just like it hadn't been seven weeks since he'd called her. "I'm a little slow this morning," he said. He fished in the pocket of his pants, and brought out some crumbled bills. Spread out they came to nineteen dollars. From the left side pocket of his coat he got another dollar

bill, from the right side some change. "Twenty-one bucks," he said. "I'm retaining you."

She said: "Wait a minute. If you're being sued for breach of promise by someone else—"

"Someone else?" Marty asked.

"Besides me," Nancy said. "I haven't brought suit yet because I didn't know you'd gotten rich." She pointed a natural colored fingernail at the twenty-one dollars. The last dollar of it was in silver.

Marty jiggled four pennies in his pocket, and said: "Nancy, I haven't called you because—Well, after I lost my job at the studio. . . ."

"You decided to take up with rich widder ladies," Nancy said. "I read the papers. How is the window Chounet?"

Marty shook his head. He leaned against the door-jamb, and said: "I told you I was a little slow. My name in the papers?"

"No, I'm telepathic," Nacy said. "Yeah, in the final Times." She pointed at the paper. "Is Eve Chounet retaining me, or are you, because if it's she, I'll want—"

"It's me," Marty said. "Or I. As the case may be. And get your hat, because I'm due at Harrison's office at nine and—I'm glad there aren't chain gangs in this state. You know who Chounet is?"

"He's dead," Nancy said, and then was sorry she'd said it; Marty really looked worried, which wasn't Marty; it had seemed impossible in the past that anything could ever worry him, a bad characteristic for a guy to have when you're in love with him.

"I mean, Mrs. C.," Marty said. "She's Eve Francisco."

Nancy said: "Oh, you poor thing," and got up to get her hat from the corner cupboard. "Marty, you can get into more trouble— How in the world, or out of the world—"

Marty looked at the hat she had taken out of the closet. "Those things are bad luck," he said. "I mean the peacock feather. . . . But becoming. Oh, I don't know. She's a rumbunny. She picked Andy Aarons out of the phone book. . . . I already called Bill Harrison, in the sheriff's office."

"You should have brought her in with you," Nancy said. "Where is she?"

"We spent the night in a motel out near Glendale," Marty said. "She's still there."

The good criminal lawyer must never look shocked at any confidence of his—or her—client's. Apparently Nancy needed practise in that phase of her work, because Marty burst into laughter. "It wasn't like that," he said. "Look, let me tell you about last night . . ."

THE hat with the long peacock feather on her head, Nancy sat down, and made notes. But the mind that was operating on recording the incredible story was only in the upper level of her consciousness; underneath was something else: Marty. He was the smartest man she had ever known, and had the least self-confidence. He'd been blundering around—

Happy herself because she had chosen to help others rather than to get rich, she believed she'd found a panacea for all others' ills; you could sum it up with the corny word: service. She said: "You say she's a rumbunny, Marty, but you don't know. As she said, you'd be drunk if you were as scared as she was."

"Hey," Marty said, "I retained you to get me out of this."

The girl looked back at him with a warmth that had been noticeably lacking in his life of late. He stepped forward, his hands half raised, and she stepped away, settling the hat with the ridiculous feather, hardening as he watched her. . . .

Nancy Summers slammed the cupboard door, and put the hat on as she walked across the room. "Well, let's go, client. Who we going to see?"

"Lieutenant Harrison," Marty said.

"A very important joe," said Nancy. "Can't keep him waiting. Oh, boy. Portia to Defend Private Eye. Beautiful Attorney Defies Eve Francisco—Marty, this is the break I've waited for. I'm going to be rich and famous."

This last was delivered on the way to the elevator. As he watched his counsel shove the elevator bell, Marty said: "What'll I do, marry you and carry your lawbooks?"

But Nancy wasn't listening. She got into the elevator and impressed the girl operator by saying: "Tell me everything that's happened. How did Mrs. Chounet hire you? Have you had any actual contact with Ray Fresno?"

The operator was disappointed. Marty waited until they were crossing the park toward the county building to tell her what he knew. It seemed to him that she wasn't paying very much attention; she was lost in her dream of publicity and fame and glory and wealth.

He'd dated—to use an expression that always annoyed him—this lady-lawyer for a couple of months on his last job. After he'd started working in Hollywood he hadn't seen as much of her, exhausted by the demands of a job that didn't make much sense to him. Then, when he'd been fired and gone to work with Andy, he hadn't called her at all, some feeling of insecurity, of doubt in his future as a detective had kept him from wanting to talk to his old friends.

But she'd been a fine girl to go around with, a girl with—it had seemed—the same careless attitude toward life he'd had. Now he wasn't so sure. People changed, even Andy Aarons had changed some, when they saw the chimera of fame and fortune on the near horizon.

This was the County building. They climbed worn-down marble steps to the office of Lieutenant of Deputies William Henry Harrison—who had always been a very nice guy for a cop, or anyone else.

But his office was jammed. Marty saw Andy Aarons shoved off in a corner, gasping like a fish. And he saw a lot of other people he knew, too; the working press of Los Angeles. Bill Harrison came up and grabbed his hand; Nancy shoved in between them, and flash bulbs went off.

"Now," Bill Harrison was saying, "you people will have to get out of here. My friend, Cockren has come in for advice on how to handle the matter of Mrs. Chounet's security, and we're going to have a private conference. You can say that from the basis of my twelve years' experience in detective and police work, I predict that there will be absolutely not a sign of trouble and—"

"How about the butler?" a guy from the News asked.

"Beverly Hills is handling that," Lieutenant Harrison said. "Just an ordinary prowler job."

Marty said: "Bill, what I came in for, really, was to give myself up. I had some trouble on the golf links there in—"

"We know," Harrison said. "The gun found on one of the men was the same one that shot the butler—"

Marty said: "They were dead?"

Harrison nodded. Marty gulped, and then tried grinning. It worked, sort of half way. He said: "Bill, I didn't have much choice." The grin got better. "And I've got a fine lawyer."

"Who can't do you much good," Nancy said, "if you persist in doing all the talking. You understand, lieutenant, that was off the record—"

Levine of the Hearst papers said: "The lieutenant's already given us a statement—hit run driver, and they lost."

Marty said: "Hit run drivers usually have a bullet hole in their windshields."

Nancy said: "Marty, you benighted fool, please keep still. Please, Marty."

Bill Harrison said: "As Miss Summers said, this is all off the record, boys. I'm not handling the case, it's in the hands of the city police, but the two dead men were both wanted. Also, they were full of heroin at the time, a couple of snowbirds."

Marty said: "I don't get this. Not at all. I came in here to try and straighten a rap, a couple of crimes I seem to have committed—"

Nancy said: "Nobody ever had a worse client. I wish I had studied chiropractics."

A GENT in a tweed suit stood up, a very expensive looking pipe between his teeth. "A wish I've often shared, though I didn't put it that well, Miss Summers. Lieutenant, I'd suggest there wasn't anything more for the press just now."

Harrison nodded, and stood up. "Boys, thank you, and I'll let you know if anything breaks."

"Such as me," Marty said.

Harrison laughed and the boys—the gray headed boys, the bald boys, the one female boy, and a reporter who actually was under thirty—began filing out.

Finally there was just Marty and the lieutenant, Nancy Summers, and the gent in a tweed suit smoking a pipe. And Andy Aarons, who wasn't noticeable at first; the small man seemed to have gotten smaller. But he spoke first. "Marty, I'm not sure what I've gotten you into, but

believe me, anything you decide to do from now on, I'm with you. And I'm sorry. Mrs. Aarons said—"

Marty grinned at Andy, but the private detective got drowned out about then; the tweedy gent spoke around his pipe-bit: "I'm Galbreath Vanning," he said. "Joseph Chounet's lawyer. And I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Cockren."

"Why?" Marty asked. "I don't play golf."

Vanning laughed appreciatively. "Well, I also drink at low bars and discuss philosophy with Irish bartenders. That more to your taste?"

"The sport of kings," Marty said. He turned to Bill Harrison. "Lieutenant, I came in to surrender myself. On the way over here, I retained a lawyer, because—oh, let's get on with it. My boss, Mr. Aarons told you the whole thing. The only thing he left out he did because he had to. I had the woman hidden out in a place called The Happy Hour Motel, out on San Fernando Road. At least she was there an hour ago."

Marty expected the sheriff's officer to dash for the phone. But nothing happened.

Finally he had to break the silence himself: "Bill, did you know that Mrs. Chounet was also Eva Francisco?"

Harrison nodded. "But we've had information that convinces us that she knows nothing about Ray Fresno, hasn't seen him for years. Since they danced together."

Marty said: "I've got information that says your information is full of termites. I got it from the horse's mouth, which is an awful way to talk about a lady, I'm sure."

Harrison said stonily: "We are not interested in Eva Francisco, as such. Even if we were—"

"Some other department is handling the case," Marty finished for him.

Nancy said: "You mustn't talk to Lieutenant Harrison like that."

"Now the law is heard from," Marty said. "Okay. You've earned your twenty-one bucks. Go home and read up on torts." His temper slipped, he grabbed at it, missed—and it was gone. "Have you all gone crazy?" he asked. "Didn't any of you ever go to Sunday school? Yesterday this dame was a gun moll, hiding out under an assumed name, blackmailing a rich ex-husband, and also getting dough from Ray Fresno, who seems to be the contemporary version of Public Enemy Number One. Today you want to roll out a red carpet for her because she might inherit a load of legitimate if-money; *if* she fulfills the conditions of a screwy will—"

"I wrote that will," Galbreath Vanning said.

"Which probably won't stand up before the first court that reviews it," Marty finished.

"Oh, but you're wrong," Nancy Summers said. "Mr. Vanning is a wonderful lawyer."

Galbreath Vanning bowed. "Praise from youth is real praise," he said. "And from youth and beauty—"

"Heady, isn't it?" Marty said. "We're still dodging the issue. I walked out on Eve Chounet—Eva Francisco—when I found out who she was. When Andy and I took the case, I thought I was going to protect her from a bunch of tycoons like Vanning here. Amateurs. That would have been a cinch. When I found out Ray Fresno was interested—man alive, even in books detectives aren't supposed to be that brave. And—I never took being a detective very seriously."

BILL HARRISON looked at Galbreath Vanning, and then rummaged around in his desk till he found a pipe. He wiped the dust off on his sleeve, and started rummaging again. Vanning held out his tobacco pouch, and the lieutenant gave up searching and filled the pipe. It did not smell like Vanning's, even so. "Marty," he said, "we had a little talk with your boss, Mr. Aarons last night."

Marty said: "If you got rough—"

"Nothing like that," Harrison said. "Of course. Mr. Aarons tells us you have Mrs. Chounet's confidence. Now, as a personal favor to me, I want you to go on protecting her. Of course, you'll get all the cooperation you can—from me, from the sheriff, who wants to meet you personally as soon as he gets back from Mexico City—"

"Ye gods," Marty said, "are they having another parade down there?"

"And from our whole department. I'm sure the city, the various smaller forces, and the California Highway Patrol all feel the way we do, but really, there's no need, Marty, for you to go outside the sheriff's office. And at this point, and in front of witnesses, I want to thank you for remembering our past friendship and calling me instead of anyone else."

Marty sat down. He looked around the rather dingy office; he looked at Nancy's pretty face, which was now eager and almost hard; he looked at the perfection that was Galbreath Vanning. "All right," he said. "I'll bite. Why?"

Vanning laughed. "Let me explain, Mr. Cockren. Even though you hadn't heard of me—and why should you?—I am a good lawyer. That will is not contrary to the public welfare, which is the only reason it could be set aside. It will go through probate without difficulty, and the provisions — hanging twelve or thirteen paintings with due ceremonies—are nothing. Which will make your client —and mine, I hope, as her husband was —a very important person."

"And to think I took her to a motel," Marty said. "Why it's like crumbling up five dollar bills to stuff in a mattress."

Vanning said: "I am not talking about money."

That stopped Marty. He had been looking out the window at the green grass down below, and at a beer sign across the street. "No? What else is there besides dough?"

Vanning said: "If you really mean that, I take back the invitation to philosophize over a bar."

Andy Aarons said: "He doesn't mean it, Mr. Vanning. Mr. Cockren cares less about money than anybody I know. That's why Mrs. Aarons and I think so highly of him. When you're a little guy like me, no looks, not too smart, you've got to have money or be stepped on. But Mr. Cockren, he doesn't care if he's paid or not."

"A glowing testimonial," Vanning said. "Why, above money, beyond money,—the ultimate—power. The heiress you have been guarding will be, at the conclusion of probate, one of the most powerful people in the country. Power to move factories from other places to this city —and vice versa. Power to employ millions—literally millions—of people—or arbitrarily close down factories and start a depression."

Marty said: "On Tuesdays I'm a little dim-witted. This must be Tuesday."

"And I'll tell you something else," Vanning said. "So long as Mrs. Chounet committed no felony leading to the death of Joseph Chounet—or to his deception in naming her in his will—she inherits that power—in or out of jail, prison,—any place but an insane asylum. And even there, there have been cases where a court held that the particular mental derangement of a given patient did not render him incompetent to manage his own affairs."

Marty felt around in his pockets. Finally he turned to Nancy Summers. "Gimme a cigarette, will you, mouthpiece?" He lit up and sat, brooding. Finally he looked at Harrison. "And so, because it would not be a good thing for all this power to be in the hands of a lady in the hoosegow—that bullet hole in that windshield last night still left it a hit-run case."

Harrison said: "A couple of hoods, Marty. Wanted in Nevada and in two, three Eastern states."

"Fresno's boys?"

"The opposition," Bill Harrison said. "Look, Marty. We'll make you a deputy sheriff, and the sheriff wired to get you appointed special investigator for the Attorney General. That gives you state wide police power. We could give the lady a dozen deputies to guard her, and believe me, we'd like to, but if she wanted that, she'd have come to us in the first place. What she wanted was you, and we'd like to see she gets what she wants."

"And me," Marty said, "I'm supposed to represent the Chamber of Commerce, the All-year Club of Southern California, and the sheriff of L.A. county. Whoosh."

Then, he stood up, and put the cigarette out in the crowded ashtray on the Lieutenant's desk. "There's only one trouble," he said.

"We can fix it up," Harrison and Vanning said together.

"I don't know where the lady is any more," Marty said, and walked, unmolested, to the door.

VI

MARTY WAS dipping his beak. Aware, sharply, that he had made a jackass out of himself—that he, the cynic, wiseapple newspaperman, had been the only one unable to see the absolute necessity of whitewashing Eve Chounet, he was courting oblivion.

He lay on the daybed that—only last night—she had regarded with such horror, and he spoke to her image on the ceiling. "You gotta tell me, Eve," he said, "how does it feel to be born again? Full of the cheap whiskey you'll never have to drink again—how does it feel? Is the transition from Eva to Eve painful, or is it unalleviated joy?"

With each drink, the face on the ceiling became nicer; the hard lines faded, the wistful eyes became more prominent.

Then, abruptly, the face became harsh and forbidding, mean, cruel, and clever. And, amazingly, masculine. The face said: "From what she told me, you're not the type to try anything, but if you are—don't."

Marty sat up, and the liquor rocked back and forth in his head. The face steadied, and was no longer on the ceiling, but on a body. It was a man's body, thin, in grey flannel pants and a tan sports coat, a nice white shirt and a quiet tie. On the feet of the body were very clean saddle shoes, and on the top of the face was receding hair, very neatly parted and smoothed.

"You're Ray Fresno," Marty said.

"And you're a smart boy," Fresno said, and sat down.

"I'm a dead one," Marty said.

"I'm your friend," Fresno said. "Believe it or not." The saddle shoes twinkled as he crossed his legs. "Eva's got a yen for you, brother. She wants you should come back."

"And that makes me your friend?" Marty said. "What kind of a go-round is this?"

"Between me and Eva it was over years ago," Ray Fresno said. "She quit me to do a single when we couldn't get work. Me I tried raking it in over a roulette table at a joint we'd been dancing in—and after a while there was another dame for me, and Chounet for her."

"Both of you in the big money, eh?" Marty said. He put his legs down, and his feet hit the floor. The sensation was a long time coming up to his head. "I'm awful dumb," he said.

"I'll put a pot of coffee on," Ray Fresno said. He walked into the kitchenette. His voice drifted back. "Yeah, the gal goes for you, Cockren. You do what the fellows call inspire a feeling of confidence in her Don't you have a percolator?"

"No, I'm an advocate of the old fashioned boiled coffee."

"Me, I can't see it," Ray Fresno said, coming back.

"Boiled coffee, or my desirability?"

"Well, neither, but I was talking about the coffee." The gambler was gone again. He came back with a cup of coffee in either hand. "At least it's fast," he said. He took a swallow, and made a face. "But lousy."

"You and your girl friend," Marty said. "She doesn't like my whiskey, you can't stand my coffee."

Ray Fresno laughed. He reached over and picked up the bottle Marty had been leaning on. He read the label, removed the screwtop and sniffed, and said: "Gawd. Don't you want to be rich, and drink something besides shellac?"

"No," Marty said.

Ray Fresno shook his head. "That's what Eve said. You're maybe right. I ain't really been happy since I give up hoofing for—" He made a gesture with his hand to describe what he now did for a living. It didn't describe anything; but it was a remarkably smooth gesture; it was apparent that he had been, could still be, a very good and graceful hoofer.

"Brother," he said, "you're gonna take the job with Eva"

Marty swallowed the hot coffee in a gulp. He felt a little soberer. "No," he said. He got up and poured himself another cup in the kitchenette. "You oughta pour the coffee off the grounds as soon as it boils," he said. He strained it out, tasted it. "Pretty rugged. I could teach you how to make boiled coffee. No, I'm not taking the job, Ray. I quit it when I found out who she was. It's bad enough dodging whatever these tycoons would have done to her and me

in order to keep her from inheriting Chounet's control. It's too much for a simple guy dodging Ratsy Patrick's boys."

OUTSIDE a whistle sounded, gently but repeatedly. It could have been a mockingbird, but somehow it wasn't. Ray Fresno frowned. He shifted his dapper legs, and said: "You shouldn't mention names like that. Bad luck. Hear my guys whistling?"

"I thought I heard something," Marty said.

"I'm living like a coyote," Ray Fresno said. "Like a mangy fox Cops are after me, Ratsy's guys—I'm on the run all the time. I gotta get going, Cockren. You go take care of Eva—or it's going to be else. I don't fool around."

He stood up, held out his hand as though to say goodbye—and a small pistol appeared in it. He spread his fingers, and the pistol disappeared; he did that two or three times.

"That's quite a trick," Marty said.

"Yeah. I'm as good with my hands as I was with my feet, dancing. It's supposed to scare you, that trick. It's scared a lot of guys."

"It scared me," Marty said.

Fresno moved to the door. "Okay. Eva's at the big hotel downhill from her house. You know, the one with the bungalows. She's got Bungalow Three."

"Hey, wait a minute!"

His right hand on the doorknob, Ray Fresno put his left out; a gun came and went out of his cuff like a snake's tongue. He switched hands, and there was a gun on the right side, too, and then the door opened, and he was gone

Marty sighed, and rubbed his hands on his head. He got up and filled his coffee cup again, and went to the window. He gulped the coffee, and now he was sober. He rubbed the heels of his hands against his forehead while below him cars roared away; three of them, fast ones. One was maroon, and one was emerald blue, and the third was tan. But if they ran into Ratsy's heirs and assigns, the newspapers would have them all listed as "fast black cars." Why?

He rubbed his head harder. It was silly to tell himself he wasn't scared of Ray Fresno. He was, he was very scared. It would be childish to imagine that Fresno had been bluffing—

I'm yellow, he told himself. Quit this morning because I was scared of the cops, got over that, now I'm going back because I'm scared of Ray Fresno.

The phone rang. Marty looked at it with loathing, but when it kept on ringing, he picked it up. A man's voice said his name, and Marty admitted it.

The voice said: "Mr. Cockren, if that cheap slattern you are working for ever takes control of Chounet Interstate, both you and she will be killed. Understand?"

Marty started to say something—anything—and the phone clicked, and there was nothing but dial tone for him to talk to. He hung the phone up. "It's a hell of a spot for a guy who's scared," he said. He said it out loud, because the room was too quiet

A voice behind him said: "You're not scared, Marty."

VII

HE TURNED. "The mouthpiece with the pretty gams," he said. "The big help!"

Nancy Summers tossed her hat on his couch, and sat down on the edge of the table. "Well, you retained me to keep you out of jail," she said. "And you're loose."

"Ray Fresno just left," he said. "I wish he'd run into you. You could have slapped a mandamus ducestecum on him—"

"There's no such thing," the girl said. "How about giving your lawyer a drink?"

Marty picked the bottle up, and held it out to her. "Help yourself, counselor. Only you're not my lawyer. You earned the twenty-one dollars. We're back on a purely personal basis. How would you like to go to some cheap hotel with me, unfortunately not for the weekend because it is only Wednesday, but *until* the weekend. Of course, you pay the expenses."

"Hey, is this a proposition?"

"Certainly, but not the kind you think." Marty was beginning to enjoy this. "There will be nothing sexy about this. I will spend the charming interlude under the bed, and you will occupy yourself sitting on the front steps, whistling like a mock-

ing bird whenever anyone shows up to shoot at me And believe me baby, if I may call you baby, counselor, you will get plenty of practice. At the end of two or three days you will be in adequate shape to do birdcalls on the radio. It's a career for you."

"You really are scared," Nancy said. She pushed her brown hair back from her forehead. She still held the bottle. Now she poured a little into a glass, and sipped the straight whiskey.

"At least you don't make a face at my liquor," Marty said. "Scared. I told you. Ray Fresno was here. I either take care of the lady Eve, or—as he put it—else. Right afterwards a voice like ten dollars worth of ice in Alaska calls up, makes a crack or two about Eva's morals, and informs me that if I did take proper care of Mrs. Chounet's future—it would be else."

She stared at him, then drained the straight whiskey with a gulp. "You poor kid. You *are* scared."

"I was a newspaperman a long time. Life does have its seamy side, counselor."

"Stop calling me that."

"Corpses do get found in rivers, in barrels of cement, in ditches. Or just on the floor. You're not scared because you don't know enough to be scared. I am, because I know—plenty."

"It's just a question whether you're more scared of Fresno or the voice on the phone."

Marty laughed. He laughed until tears rolled out of his eyes. Then he got up, and went into the bedroom, and started throwing clothes into his suitcase. "Counselor, you just earned those twenty-one smackers. You solved the unsolvable, you shoved the irresistible force against the immovable object, and she moved. I *couldn't* be more scared of anyone than I am of Ray Fresno. Let's go."

"Go?" Nancy Summers asked.

"Beverly Hills," Marty said. He was carrying the bag. "We are going to resume bodyguarding where I last left off."

"Me?"

"You, counsellor. Listen, Fresno says he has no yen for Eva. He *says*. But if that old love starts blossoming in his heart again—sister, I want him to know there was always a chaperone along."

"I'll have to go home and get some clothes."

Marty set the bag down, and crossed over to her and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Spoken like a lady. It never occurs to you I'm asking you to step into a trap, a lynching party. Just what'll you wear?"

"I'm not scared."

"You don't know enough to be scared," Marty said. "And at that, there's no particular reason for you to be in the path; you're just a lawyer and chaperone. Why, babe, skip the clothes."

"How you talk, Mr. Cockren."

"Eva's a little bigger around than you, but not as tall. Wear hers. Or she'll buy you some more. We're all going to be as rich as Croesus twice."

"As—Oh."

She followed him quietly down the stairs. She had her car there, a nice little Ford coupe, post war. "Crime pays," Marty said.

"The car? I got it when an uncle died. Life insurance. Twenty-one hundred and forty eight dollars. It would have been more, but he'd borrowed on the policy."

"That's life for you," Marty said.

THE girl drove. The same trip, out Beverly—the wire at the golf course was patched, but a steel fence post was still crazily bent—to Santa Monica, and then up to the hotel, a beautiful place, tennis courts—both *en tout cas* and clay—two swimming pools, bars, ball rooms, and large private houses—two bedrooms, two bathrooms, living room, bar a piece—sitting around to be deprecated by the word bungalow.

"Fresno said Bungalow Three," Marty said.

"Can do," Nancy told him. Bungalow Three had a garage, for two cars, and its own little patio. Nancy started to drive into the garage. Marty said: "Goodbye, Portia."

"Huh?"

"This is the end of the line, baby. I take the ball myself now, all alone like a big boy, and I run for the goal post, yelling: 'look at me, see how I do.'"

Nancy Summers stuck her head out of the car. Lights were set about on poles

among the hotel's numerous and stately trees. They drew a pattern of leaves across her face and neck and shoulder. Marty again kissed her, still on the cheek. "You didn't really think I was going to take you into this fishnet, did you?"

"You are, or I scream. There's money there, Marty, and money is what I'm in business for."

"Nuts. I'll send you half of what I make."

"You won't make anything if Ray Fresno gets jealous of you."

A shadow moved under the trees, coming towards them. A man in a white shirt. Nancy said: "We're making too much noise. Come on."

She slipped past him, and to the door of the bungalow. Marty shrugged. There was certainly no dough in attracting attention to Bungalow Three. He grabbed his bag, shut the car door, and stepped into the shadows where Nancy was ringing the bell.

The guy in the white shirt was still coming through the trees towards them. He was about thirty feet away when the door opened, and the light framed him; the white shirt was a boiled one, he was in a dinner jacket; his hair shone as brightly as his lapels, and he wore a white flower in his lapel.

Eva said: "You came back, Marty. Marty, you came home to mama."

He pushed Nancy forward with one shoulder, through the door, carried his bag after her, and shut the door. Idiotically he said: "Miss Summers, Miss Grosvenor." Of all of Eva's names, he thought she liked that one best. "Eva, Nancy. Nancy's my lawyer, Eva."

Eva's face was hard again. "You didn't have to bring a counselor."

"No, but I had to bring another girl. How can I get fought over with just one girl?"

Eva said: "You've come back to stay?"

"Till death—" He swallowed. "Until I cinch your inheritance for you. I've dropped Andy Aarons and his wife for the time being; haven't even heard from them."

"The big time was too hot for them," Eva said. "I got no use for people like that. They plan and talk about when their ship comes in, and then as soon as they see the sail, they get off the dock."

Marty said: "Very well put."

"I've been learning to talk like you, Marty. You talk better than anybody I ever knew, and I once live—I once knew a college professor."

Nancy Summers had said nothing. Her nice hazel eyes turned from Marty to Eva, following the conversation like a tennis ball in a championship match, but she hadn't said anything. She was frowning a little, and her brown hair moved each time she turned her head.

"You're drunk, Eva," Marty said.

As once before, she said: "Of course I'm drunk. You'd be high, too, if you'd been sitting in a hotel room, just waiting, just sitting, nobody to talk to, run out on. And then the guy comes back, the guy that makes you feel you're riding a one-wheel bicycle no hands—"

"You need practise," Marty said. "You're a little trite."

Eva's voice rose to a wail. "What chance have I got? I don't even know what trite means!"

Nancy Summers broke what had been, for a lawyer, a very long silence. She looked mad. "I'm getting out of here! Marty Cockren, if you think I'm going to sit here and listen to you throw verbal spitballs at a common—"

Eva started for her. "Don't call me common—"

MARTY caught Eva around the waist, stopped her, and then held her waist a minute before whirling her neatly into a big, deep chair. "Extraordinary, Nancy. Not common. And Nancy, think of the money. You came for the money, the fee, the cut in the world's biggest melon, grown without irrigation. Nothing else matters. Remember?"

Nancy said: "Marty Cockren, you can quietly take your hat and go to—" She was walking towards the door as she said it; just as she put her hand on the knob, somebody rapped the brass knocker on the other side. She jumped as though the door had been wired by a Hollywood prankster, and Marty laughed. At once he stopped, though, and said: "Who's a guy in a soup and fish, watching the place, Eva?"

Eva said: "I don't know. Maybe Ray

left him till you got here."

"I hope he's amiable," Marty said. The knocker cracked again.

Marty sighed, and moved Andy Aarons' gun from his hip to his coat pocket. He left his right hand around it, and opened the door with the left; it was indeed the smoothie in the upper-class suit.

He bowed, and said: "The manager sent me down."

"Sir," said Marty, "you have been misinformed,. We have not been smoking opium in the elevators."

The man laughed. "And how could you, in a one story bungalow? No, the manager has just learned that Mrs. Chounet is our guest; he wanted to make sure that everything is being done for her comfort. And—is it?"

"Come on in, Marty said. "I'm susceptible to drafts from open doors."

The man bowed, professionally, and stepped in. There was no doubt he was a hotel man; he positively reeked of commercial charm. He bowed to Marty, who was shutting the door, he bowed to Nancy.

"I'm Mrs. Chounet," Eva said. "This girl's just a lawyer."

Nancy said: "And don't call me an ornament to any bar."

"I wasn't likely to be that trite," the hotel man said.

Eva let out a pantherish scream. "There's that word again."

"It means radio, as in soap opera," Marty said. "I'm Mr. Cockren," he told the visitor. "I've just decided."

The visitor eyed him warily. "I'm Mr. Brunner," he said. "What have you decided?"

"To be Mr. Cockren. All my life, I've just been Marty. It's time I grew up."

"I'm not at all sure about the opium now," Brunner said.

"Those are teeth you hear chattering," Marty said. "You made us nervous standing outside, watching the place. Eva, how about drinks?"

Eva said: "Can do," and went towards the kitchenette. Marty looked at the hotel man. "I don't want to sound old maidish, but I'm being paid untold sums for bodyguarding. There are two things I'll have to ask you: one, to prove you really are connected with the hotel. Assistant manager?"

"No," Mr. Brunner said. "I'm with the holding company that owns this and some other properties . . . Let's see. My membership card in the International Boniface Association, would that satisfy you?"

Marty said: "Sure." Mr. Brunner started to reach in his inside pocket. Marty said: "Just a minute. The other thing I'll have to ask you is to stand up and let me search you for a gun."

Eva, coming back with the drinks stopped dead in the door. Nancy gasped.

"I'm learning," Marty said. "Getting tougher—"

Mr. Brunner, smiling, stood up and raised his hands shoulder high, palms out level. Marty gestured with his chin: "Nancy, he'll mind it less from you."

"What do I do?" Nancy asked.

"Don't you ever see double-features? You pat him all over."

"I'm looking forward to this," Mr. Brunner said, smiling his professional smile. The girl's face was as red as Molotov, but she had apparently seen a movie; she overlooked none of the places Bogart has ever concealed a gun.

She sat down again, and Eva handed her a highball. Marty said: "Now the card."

Mr. Brunner handed it over. Then on second thought, he dipped into his wallet again. "Here's my credit card."

The credit card read: "The Tenouch-Angeles Corporation, owner of—" Below there was a list of a dozen of the biggest hotels in the country— "will appreciate any courtesy extended to Mr. Raoul Chassey Brunner, Vice-President in Charge of Operations."

MARTY handed the two cards back. "Fair enough." He turned and left the room. In the bathroom he found the card required by state law, stating the room-rate and conditions under which the Tenouch-Angeles Corporation was prepared to allow you to use the bungalow.

He came back: "Right company and everything."

"What a suspicious nature," Eva said.

"For you, dear, all for you. You haven't gone quite far enough, Eva." He pointed at the tray she had brought in; makings, but, except for the straight shot she had handed Nancy, no drinks

"Allow me," Mr. Brunner said. "My old profession." He walked to the tray.

"Don't tell me you used to be a bartender," Nancy said.

Marty was watching Mr. Brunner, whose hands on the drinks were as graceful and practised as Ray Fresno's feet. "Why, I have been everything you can be around a hotel," he said. "Even night detective. Nightman we call it. Yes, I was the first American bartender in my father's hotel in Switzerland, the very first in our whole canton." He laughed his nice laugh again. "I'd never been out of Switzerland at the time."

He bowed, gave Eva a drink, Nancy a light highball, and raised an eyebrow at Marty. Marty said: "Very blonde, please. Pal, you talk wonderful American for a Swiss."

Mr. Brunner put a very little whiskey in a glass, was deft with ice and soda. "We talked it at home, in our own apartment at the hotel. My father was very advanced, the other places were still specializing in English Tourists, but he was sure the future was in Americans. You can tell I'm Swiss by my name."

Marty nodded, and got up and went over and sat on the arm of Eva's chair. She was politely waiting for Brunner to mix his own drink before tasting hers. "Talking about names," Marty said, "how in the world did you ever arrive at Tenouch-Angeles?"

Mr. Brunner completed his own drink, which was almost as light as Marty's. He raised it in salute, his brown eyes glowing with good will. "That was before my time," he said. "I was just manager of the hotel in Detroit at the time. You know the silly names companies take."

Marty put his arm around Eva's shoulders, and caught her arm, affectionately; but it had the effect of keeping her from using the drink Brunner had mixed so nicely. "Sure," Marty said. "Of course, Tenouch wouldn't be a mix-up of Chounet, would it?"

Eva said: "I like you getting chummy, Marty, but just now my weakness is liquor." She tried to get her arm loose from Marty's grasp.

"Why, yes," Brunner said evenly, "Mr. Chounet had an interest in the company. He was, in fact, president."

Marty smiled, and took the drink out of Eva's hand, crossed over, put it in Mr. Brunner's and took his drink. He spiked it a little, and took it to Eva and handed it to her. "Just in case," he said.

Brunner laughed, and drank freely of the glass he had prepared for Eva. "A wise precaution, but you don't know hotel men. I'd never do anything in my own hotel."

Marty said: "But it isn't your hotel, friend. It would be your hotel if Eva dropped dead in the next thirty days—but it isn't now." He tried smiling as neatly as Mr. Brunner did it, but he had to admit it would take more practise. "If you were to end up owner of this chain, it would really make all the Brunners in Switzerland happy, wouldn't it?"

"They would be the most important people in the canton," Brunner said, laughingly. "It isn't true that all Swiss are in the hotel business, but it is almost true."

"And you want to tell me you wouldn't commit one little murder for that?"

Mr. Brunner laughed: "Oh, I never said that," he said. "All I said was, no hotel man would kill in his own house. It's very bad for the reputation of a hotel."

"Get out of here," Eva screamed suddenly. "Get out of here." The drink she had taken from Mr. Brunner went back in a shining parabola, the liquor splashed in his face. Marty pulled his gun, not knowing what else to do, but his eyes never left Brunner's face; the soda in the drink foamed whitely on what was surely the best shave in Los Angeles County.

Brunner stood up, bowed, and took a gleaming handkerchief from his sleeve. Mopping at his face he went out.

Eva was sobbing, brokenly. "He—he sat there, smiling, just grinning like a—like a—"

"Chesire cat," Marty said.

"—and talked about killing me. Ohh—"

Nancy said: "You weren't very nice yourself, Marty."

MARTY held Eva's shoulders against him. Her sobs were genuine; if the last twenty-four hours had done nothing else, they had taught her how to cry from the heart. Slowly the shaking stopped; Eva groped, took a swallow of his drink, and then the loan of a handker-

chief that Mr. Brunner would not have used to shine his shoes with.

"No," Marty said. "I wasn't very nice. I wanted Eva to see what she was face to gun with . . . I don't know how many companies like this one Chounet controlled—"

"Fourteen," Nancy said. "As your lawyer, I got Galbreath Vanning to give me a list. There may be more, but fourteen that we know of."

"All right," Marty said. "Eva, you saw that guy. There may be others even worse. Now, listen. Mr. Brunner will have a hundred grand, or he can borrow it on the Chounet stock. They all can. My idea, Eva, is that Nancy holds a conference of all these guys that inherit if you die, and we offer them to sell out for a flat hundred thousand dollars each."

"We?" Eva asked. "You're mighty free—why, Marty, this one hotel's worth more than I'd get out of the whole deal."

"If you lived," Marty said. "This way, the heat is off you, and you have a million, four hundred thousand dollars left. Sweetheart, you could live on that."

Eva said: "No. There's a dozen dames staying at this very hotel now, who have more than that. I want it all, I want to be so rich Barbara Hutton and Doris Duke have to creep in to talk to me."

"A beautiful picture," Marty said. "Why, in God's name?"

"I been kicked in the teeth," Eva said. "All my life, I've been kicked in the teeth. Why, I know lots of guys, Ray Fresno for one, with more than a million dollars, and they get kicked in the teeth too. But the big money—"

She jumped up. She was so excited that she had forgotten that her make-up was tear stained, ruined. She took a couple of turns on the floor, trying to express what she wanted to say, and having trouble. She stopped and kicked off her shoes, and Marty remembered that practised gesture from last night. Only this time the dress didn't follow the shoes; but apparently stocking feet helped her to think: "I want to be able to say—"

"Thirty days from now," Marty put in. But she didn't listen.

'I want to be able to say, everybody I meet is trying to get in good with me, like cats with a milkman. Always, from now on, wherever I go, I'm the biggest shot in the room, and if I burp in someone's face, burping is done that season."

"Pretty," Marty said. "A noble ambition."

"Power," Nancy said. "Just simple power."

The tirade was over. Still in her stocking feet, Eva went to the coffee table and mixed herself a perfect blockbuster of a drink. She gulped it down, without pleasure, and her eyes got blank.

"Watch this," Marty said. "It kind of restores my faith in human or some kind of nature."

EVA swayed twice. Then she bent over, straightened, and her dress flew at a chair. In her slip, she turned, and walked with automatic and wonderful precision through a door she couldn't possibly have seen, and at a big double bed in the backroom. She hit the bed with the same inspiring navigation, and was passed out.

Nancy's eyes were worth watching.

"Give me that company list," Marty said. "And I'll make up an itinerary. We've got twenty-nine days, and fourteen ceremonies to go through. You sleep with Eva—no back-talk, counsellor, I'll have your fee cut—and I'll haul a chaise longue or something in and sleep at you-all's feet like a harem-slave."

"You'll behave like one, too," Nancy said grimly. She took a sheet of paper out of her handbag, and gave it to him.

"Like one who's a product of a Johns Hopkins honor student," Marty said. "You know I'm beginning to dislike women, as a species and individually."

"It'll save you money in the long run," Nancy said, and shut the bedroom door in his face.

Marty grinned, and mixed himself a better drink than he'd had. Then he sat down at the writing desk, put a single sheet of paper on the blotter, and using a pencil heavily, wrote out an itinerary that had the headquarters of the Tenouch-Angeles Corp—which were in Los Angeles—down for three days from then, Friday.

He shoved that one in his pocket, cryptically marking it N. Then he made another list, writing on the back of a fashion magazine he found on a sidetable, and using several sheets of paper under

the one he was writing. He marked this itinerary Y, and put it in his pocket, too. Then he burned the backing paper and the magazine.

Squatting down, he stared sideways at the blotter; the impress of his writing was plain. But he didn't really think a dime-store trick like that would fool Mr. Brunner; it was just the best he could do. On the new, or Yes itinerary, Tenouch-Angeles came up tomorrow, at noon.

He took his suitcase into the bathroom and got undressed. His pyjama pants were four shades lighter than his pyjama coat because he never wore the coat unless he had one of the well-known Los Angeles colds. But tonight he put on the coat. Then he folded the itinerary named Y and put it in his breast pocket of the coat.

There was a chaise longue in the bedroom. By putting a chair at the foot of it, it became enough bed for a middle sized man. He dragged covers in from the other bedroom, made up a bed of sorts, and reached for the light switch.

But before he turned it out, he looked at the pillow of the double bed. Hell, it was his duty to. Eva's red hair flowed above the shoulder straps of a pale pink nightgown that went particularly poorly with her hair. Nancy's brown hair was beautifully set off by an equally sheer pale pink nightgown identical with the first. Well, it was nice of his lawyer to undress his client so she would sleep more comfortably. Sure it was.

VIII

GRAY LIGHT CAME IN FROM the windows, gray light and nothing else. His watch said that the sun was over California, but fog had rolled in off the ocean, and the bungalow was a pebble in the bottom of a pail of murky water.

He pulled on his pants, and went into the living room. He leaned on the window, idly watching a drop of water roll down the pane. It rolled slowly, at first, and then hit another drop, they merged, and became a heavier body, moving with force; then this new, large drop collided with a grain of dust, and hung there; it leaked on the bottom, suddenly, and its weight dissipated in a little sheet of water, spreading without speed.

The opaque windows gave a wonderfully warm feeling of safety; Marty had been a Californian long enough to feel, instinctively, that nobody moved on any purpose when the atmosphere clouded, when there was precipitation.

If you listened carefully, you could hear water dripping from the expensive trees . . .

He snorted, suddenly, and went for his clothes. Hell, an army of guys could have used the cover of the fog to surround the bungalow, and he wouldn't know it.

An army in tin armor, and they could now be standing ten feet away, arranging the union scale for the battle of Cockren-Chounet.

He was dressed by six fifteen. He ordered coffee from room service, and thought of insisting that it be boiled coffee, remembering Ray Fresno. Then a better thought occurred to him. "English breakfast," he said. "Some small steaks, kidney stew, bloater, kedgeree—"

Room service said, "What?"

"My dear young lady, don't you mean: 'I beg your pardon?' Kedgeree. I cawn't eat breakfast, and call it breakfast without it. Also, scrambled eggs, muffins—oh, you know what an English breakfast is like."

Room service said: "Served on hot plates?"

"Of course. My word yes."

Room service said: "I beg your pardon."

Marty said: "Not at all."

"You forgot to order tea."

Marty suppressed a chuckle, and said gravely: "My dear young lady, in my part of England, we never drink tea till the sun is over the yardarm."

It was seven before three waiters with portable steam tables dragged in the English breakfast. Marty dismissed them and prowled among the hot water dishes, unable to decide which of several odd objects was the kedgeree.

At quarter of eight, he rapped on the bedroom door. There was no answer. He rapped again, and finally went in. He stopped grinning. Eva Chounet was now in a very light green nightgown that went beautifully with her hair; Nancy Summers, rather amazingly, was asleep with full make up on and undisturbed. It seemed unlikely.

Leaning over the foot of the bed, he grabbed two handsful of toes, and shook gently. Four eyes opened, four lips smiled

at him. The eyes had eye-shadow and mascara, the lips had rouge on them. Women!

Marty said: "There are nasty old men right in Beverly Hills who'd pay fifty bucks to be where I am now. But I'm not an old man. Get up. Rise and shine. We've got to go out and be clay pigeons."

The lips and the eyes stopped smiling. "Marty, you stink," Nancy said.

Marty nodded. "Nevertheless, get up. There's about forty dollars' worth of breakfast in the other room."

Behind him as he closed the door he could hear noises as the girls got out of the bed. Suddenly he grinned without too much pleasure. Since Eva knew enough not to wear pink nightgowns with her hair, and Nancy had brought no clothes, the pink nightgowns must be a gift. Eva's recent life—

He shrugged. Los Angeles had a vice squad and a brace of Hearst papers to take care of morals. It was not his business.

He got out the phony itinerary. Had Mr. Brunner or a minion been in to examine the blotter? He went over and squatted as he had last night. There were now no indentations in the spotless green surface, the blotter had been replaced. "The service with a smile," he muttered. "While you sleep." Behind him Eva said: "What?"

"Nothing," he said. "I was just wondering whether hotel schools have a class in walking without noise, or whether good hotel men take injections of cat blood." He picked up the phone. "Line, please."

AN operator who could have been room service's sister said: "Give me your number and I will connect you."

"Sister, this is Mr. Cockren, Mrs. Eva Chounet's private eye, her shamus, her op. I want a line without extra phones on it, and believe me, sister, a dick of my experience can tell when's he's being tin-eared. Get it for me, and I'll give you two passes to the next Transom-peeker's Ball. Don't get it, and you'll be walking the sidewalks looking for a job until your knees are where your soles used to be. Get me?"

"A private line, yes, sir."

Behind him Nancy was giggling, Eva sputtering over a cup of coffee.

"But," said the operator sweetly, "how can you use it, sir? Our room phones don't have dials. I have to dial for you." Marty said: "Is my badge tarnished?" He gave her Andy Aarons's home number. It was only eight-five now. Mrs. Aarons answered. "Marty, Mrs. Aarons."

"Oh, Mr. Cockren, Andy and I have been so worried about you. I made him go over to your apartment when we didn't hear from you, and you were gone. You aren't in trouble, are you?"

Marty said: "You shouldn't worry, Mrs. Aarons. No, I'm not in trouble. I'm back on the Chounet case. And Mrs. Aarons, I want you to do me a favor. Get four tickets on the noon plane for Chicago." The first dedication on the phony list was the Mid-Columbia Power Company there. "From Burbank."

She said: "Of course, Mr. Cockren, but—"

"Now don't you worry, Mrs. Aarons." He hung up the phone.

Eva said: "I wish you'd talk as nice to me as you do that woman, Marty."

Nancy said: "Wouldn't it be just like the heel to be having an affair with his boss's wife?"

Marty looked at them. They were sitting opposite each other over a white linen covered table that had come with the improbable breakfast. They were each perfectly beautiful, Nancy in her intellectual, rather Vassar way, Eva still looking like any nightclub would make her cigarette girl, or let her run around with a camera and flashgun. But—

"This dame," he said, "this Mrs. Aarons, wouldn't marry Andy when he was a deputy sheriff. She wouldn't marry him when he became a private detective, because she'd read a lot of books and seen a lot of movies that made her think private detectives aren't nice. But when she found out that Andy wouldn't take cases that weren't what she calls nice, she married him. He's got a little business that I swear'll never make him a hundred dollars a week, but do you think she'd let him get rich dredging up divorce evidence? Hell, no. Instead she gets up a half an hour before he does to see he has a nice hot breakfast, and then cleans the house and follows him down to the office at ten o'clock so she can watch his telephone and keep his books. And leaves a half hour before he does so she'll have a nice hot supper."

"She's a sucker," Nancy said.

"That's what I thought you'd say," Marty told her.

"No, she's not," Eva decided. "If you could find somebody like that, I'd marry her myself."

"I know guys would consider themselves lucky to be staying in a hotel with either of you," Marty said, "not to mention both. And to think I promised my mother only to know nice boys."

He picked up the phone. "Get this, sister, and get it right the first time. I want Lieutenant Harrison in the sheriff's office, and when I say sheriff, I don't mean the sheriff of Podunk County, South Dakota."

"I catch, bud," the operator said. There was no trace of a giggle in her voice.

Harrison was there; his office hours were eight to four. "Bill, Marty. I'm going to take the cargo to Chicago on the eleven a.m. from Lockheed. Got a man can go along?"

"Marty, of course I have. And thanks for calling me. He'll meet you at the airport?"

"Check, Bill, and thanks."

Marty hung up and went to the window. The fog wouldn't burn off till ten, at least, unless they had changed the relationship of Beverly Hills and the Pacific Ocean. So he took time to drink a cup of coffee. Finally he said: "Eva, we need a lot of cash. Call the desk and tell them to send a thousand dollars down."

"Will they?"

"Lady, your credit's the best in the West. Got a bank account?"

She nodded. He said: "Call Vanning and tell him to put ten grand in your account. You'll see, he'll do it." He moved aside and waved her to the phone.

Chewing an English muffin with preserves on it, she took up his place at the desk. She laid the muffin down, picked up the phone, and said: "What?" Some rather confused noise came from the earpiece, and then Eva said: "Well, I want the manager. No, not to complain about you." Covering the mouthpiece with her hand she said: "Damndest girl. Said: 'Shoot, pahdnuh,' instead of 'Hello' . . . Is this the manager? This is Mrs. Eva Chounet in Bungalow Three . . . Yes, fine, thanks."

Behind Eva's back, Marty gestured Nancy into the bedroom. "Got any dough?"

"About twenty of your dollars. Why?"

"Give it to me, and then go back in there. Start talking; I don't want Eva or any hotel people who happen in to hear me." He couldn't count on the girls being good enough actresses to play like he was in the other room if they knew he was gone. The lawyer gave him all the bills in her handbag off the bureau, and went back in. As she opened the door to the living room, he could hear Eva phoning Vanning.

THE door closed, and he went to a window, opened it. There was a screen outside, but he managed to unhook it. As he climbed out, he began to worry about being shot at; but they weren't after him unless they could get Eva at the same time . . . he thought. Getting him would put the fear of God into the heiress, and that was a fact.

But no shots were heard, no knives came flying, no poison gas drifted at him. It was so foggy he couldn't see the shrubbery of the hotel grounds; but he knew the boulevard lay vaguely down hill, and angled that way till he tripped and fell over the curbing of a driveway. Afterwards it was easier, he watched his feet on the glistening paving, and then was on the boulevard. A wind swept it a little, and the fog was thinner; he found the cab rank. He told the driver the name of the studio that had employed him a couple of months ago.

Cab drivers, in Los Angeles or other cities, disregard little things like fog and blizzards and cloudbursts. This one made it to the studio in twenty minutes. Unfortunately, it was the wrong studio, but that error was corrected in five more minutes of mixed driving and explanation of the error.

It was still something short of nine. Lou Branigan, who had been Marty's boss, never got to work till ten, usually later. The studio cop remembered Marty, phoned Branigan's secretary while he was writing the pass. "Marty Cockren to see Lou . . . Okay . . . He isn't in yet, Marty, but you might as well wait in his office."

Lou's scrawny secretary giggled as Marty gravely broke a rose bud off the flowers in her desk vase, and tucked it in her hair. "What are you doing in at this hour?"

She had to be there at seven to catch New York calls, and had a deep conviction other people slept till noon, all other people.

"Haven't been to bed yet," Marty said. "The unemployed live dangerously. Mind if I wait in Lou's office?"

"I don't want you cluttering up mine." But she said it nicely.

In Branigan's office, where the thick ranked autographed pictures of stars were carefully culled each month to reflect trends and politics, Marty dialed 9 for an outside line. Then he dialed Central Casting. "This is Cockren in Lou Branigan's office."

"Yes, Mr. Cockren." Those operators knew everything; she would know he'd been there and been fired, would assume he'd gotten his job back.

"I want three extras for a little job," he said. "We'll pay dress. I want one redheaded girl, about five-four, a hundred and twenty—"

"What shade of red, Mr. Cockren?"

"A little lighter than auburn. About thirty years old. And one brownhaired girl, long bob, five-six, a hundred and twenty, maybe twenty-five, and one man, five ten, a hundred and sixty, thirty years old. The two girls are to be well dressed, the brownhaired a little quiet, the other rather gaudy, and the man—well, like he's seen better days. Got that?"

"Of course, Mr. Cockren."

Marty eyed the door nervously. It would be just dandy if the secretary walked in now. "They're to be at Burbank for the noon plane, tickets will be arranged to Chicago, but they'll get off at Las Vegas—the plane company wouldn't sell us transportation to Las Vegas. They'll get their orders at Las Vegas, we'll have a second unit director there in a company camera car. If there's any trouble, I'm at the studio."

"Right, Mr. Cockren. Mr. Branigan's office."

Marty said thank you, and hung up. He lit a cigarette and eyed the door again. Should he have tried bribing the secretary? He could have told her about the case, shown her the papers. She never read anything but the movie column herself. The phone rang. He pushed his cigarette out nervously. "For you, Marty."

Central Casting said: "Oh, Mr. Cockren, on that order for three extras, you did say Burbank, not Municipal Airport, didn't you?"

"That's right," Marty began to grin. The call back, of course was to make sure he was really back in Branigan's office, not still fired. It had worked!

Marty stood up, reached for his hat. Maybe he had a future at this sort of thing. Maybe he really was a detective!

He wandered to the other office, kidded the secretary for three sentences, said he was going out for coffee, and was back at the hotel at twenty minutes of ten. The screen was still out of the window; he climbed back in the way he'd left.

IX

THE GIRLS WERE STILL DRINKing coffee, and arguing over the ads in the morning paper. Eva said she, personally, wouldn't be found dead in the redingote that Nancy thought was such a dream; but then, being in show business, she'd had to learn to make the most of herself, and not to count on a thing being attractive just because it was expensive.

Nancy said—

Marty gently shut the door and went and shaved. He came out wiping lather off his face, said: "Well, boots, spurs, horses and away."

Nancy looked up startled out of a lecture on how something or other would take inches off Eva's hips. Eva looked up a second later, and her lower lip began to tremble. "Where?"

"We're going to pin a laurel wreath on Mr. Raoul Chassey Brunner," Marty said. "We are going to honor the Tenouch—Angeles—I can't say that without flinching—Corporation with a dedicated, hallowed portrait of its founder." Marty slapped the paper Nancy had gotten from Galbreath Vanning. "The bank that has the pictures opens in ten minutes, and it's ten minutes away from here."

Eva said: "No. I don't want to ever see that awful nance again, that Brunner."

Marty sat down on the arm of her chair, and then got up again; it was an unpadded wooden arm, undoubtedly hardwood. Instead he put a hand on the back of Eva's neck and gently massaged. "Baby mine, we may not see Mr. Brunner. I've gone to unparalleled brilliancy to make Mr. Brun-

ner think we're taking the noon plane for Chicago. Want to hear what I did?"

Nancy said: "No."

"Stop undermining our client's confidence in me, counsellor."

"Your client, not mine. I'm just your lawyer." She laughed. "On a contingent fee."

"You'll get fat off his contingencies," Eva said, "and he's right. What business is it of yours? I'm the important one here, it's me that's going to get oceans and oceans of money, and if I want to go down and hang an old painting, I don't see what right you've got—"

She got up. "If you want to come, you can wear my second best coat. It's got a fur collar fox, and the fox is a little moth-eaten, but—"

"I'll wear my own coat," Nancy said, getting ready to follow the heiress's red hair into the bedroom. As she passed Marty, she winked, and he gasped. She was a better actress than he had thought. In three seconds she had goaded Eva into doing something he was prepared to spend fifteen minutes at.

Marty picked up the phone, and said: "Madame, I wish to speak to an attorney named Galbreath Vanning." He spelled it. "If he isn't at his office, try his home, if you would be so kind. And if I have to go out—Madame simply tell him this, from the basic courtesy of your so great heart —that Mrs. Chounet will be at the bank to get a picture at ten sharp, and will he make the arrangements?"

It wasn't the same operator, but she said: "Can do, Mr. Cockren. At the bank at ten to get a portrait."

"I see you read the papers."

"After that going over you gave Marian a couple of hours ago, we're your breathless fans. We follow you like Dick Tracy."

"I don't have quite so much jaw," Marty said. "Do they pick the operators at this hotel for their voices or their looks?"

"Why don't you drop around and see?" the girl asked. "The switchboards are on the mezzanine."

As he hung up, the girls came out of their bedroom. He was willing to bet that the coat Eva Chounet had on had been saved over the years, worn only for big occasions — dinner with a millionaire, a chance to get a job with glamor—and had now been relegated to everyday. She might even try and give it to Nancy pretty soon; he hoped he'd be there when that happened. "You two wait here while I throw out a hat," he said. Outside sunshine was beginning to filter through the fog.

The only hat he could find to throw out was himself. Gripping Andy's gun in his pocket, and feeling silly about it—because, surely, he wouldn't get convinced someone was really trying to kill him until long after he was dead—he walked around the corner of Bungalow Three and to the garage. Nancy's car was still there, and a big foreign job that looked vaguely familiar. Well, there weren't many seven-passenger convertibles made any more—

He stood in the front of the garage while more fog burned away, lit a cigarette, puffed it. This was what Eva was paying for, this was bodyguarding, and you could have it. But nothing happened. He walked back. "Come on girls. Eva, somebody left you a present."

THE red-headed girl exclaimed over the car. "It's one of those dago ones," she said. "Ray musta left it. He knows how I am about dago cars."

"Please," Marty said. "Italian."

"Why?" Eva said. "They're made in Belgium." She started for the big job. It did look like Ray Fresno's idea of a beautiful gift; but it also looked like the quickest route to the heart of a dame like Eva Chounet.

"Nevertheless," Marty said, "we go downtown in Nancy's sturdy but modest conveyance."

Eva turned and stared at the Ford. "That?" She shook her head. "It's an okay car, but I'm one of the richest—"

"And most alive," Marty said. He was beginning to feel very tired. "How do you know Ray put this car here for you?"

"Because, you dumb cluck, he picked out this hotel. He came and told you, and nobody else, because when Ray Fresno says he isn't going to tell anybody where a girl is, he is not going—"

Marty stopped her by putting his fingers gently around her throat. "I'm sure Ray didn't tell Mr. Brunner," he said, "but he knew. Supposing this gift is with the compliments of the management. Supposing it

is a Swiss music box?"

Eva stepped back, and shuddered. Marty had often read about people shuddering; now he saw it. The gooseflesh he had felt rise on himself when he walked to the garage rose visibly on Eva; her skin turned a little green under it. "Okay, Marty. Stop it." She took his wrist in both her arms, and pressed down, putting all her weight on his arm, for support. Then she shook her head, and it was again possible to see what complexion she had on under her makeup. She turned to Nancy. "I'd be glad to ride downtown in your car. And I'm sorry I made that crack. I guess all this money's curdling me up like last week's milk."

Nancy took the heiress's other arm, the one that wasn't still clinging to Marty. "It never happened," she said. "We're all under a strain."

Eva Chounet chortled with glee. "That was a trite remark. Wasn't it, Marty, a trite remark."

"A word a day with Cockren," he said. "Get cultured in ten easy years. You drive, Nancy."

The long brown bob tossed, a silken knee flashed as she slid behind the wheel. It may have been a trite remark, but it was true. They were both nice girls, each in her own way, fun to be around. Nancy was one of the brightest kids he'd ever known and Eva was what any man in his right mind would classify as a hell of a good sport. And if they weren't both crazy about him, so long as he was the only man around they gave a damned good imitation. And still you're not happy, Cockren.

Eve was getting in the car from the right-hand seat. "Marty can sit in the middle," Nancy said. "The gear shift's on the wheel, out of the way of his legs."

"Please," he said. "Limbs." He slid in, and then Eva on the other side of him. He reached across Eva to shut the door.

"Damn, damn, damn," Nancy said. But there were more tears than profanity in her voice. Marty crooked his arm away from Eva hastily, and then smiled faintly at his own egotism.

"What's the matter?" he asked Nancy. "Runner in your stocking?"

"The key," she said. "I left the key on all night." From the sound of her voice, the Ford was her only child, and she had dropped it on its head.

She pressed the starter button, but only the faintest growl answered her. Marty said he'd push and they could get a start going down the driveway, but as soon as he said it, he saw there was no use; he remembered noticing how the fog hung around the bungalow this morning, and now saw why; it was set cosily in the bottom of its own little valley.

Nancy said: "Go call the hotel. They'll send someone down with a battery."

Marty shook his head. "I've gone to too much trouble now to keep people from knowing we're leaving." He rubbed his head, shoving his hat back until it nearly fell.

Nancy said: "You look like Will Rogers doing that."

He grinned at her. "The thing is, is it more dangerous to let Mr. Brunner know when we're going, or to use this car here that we don't know anything about?"

Nancy said: "Or to use a taxi. No, take that back. We can't trust any cab driver we pick up within a mile of the hotel." She turned to Eva. "Why couldn't you have been a little dame with hair-colored hair and eye-colored eyes?"

"You'd like that," Eva said, "but would Marty? Oh, Marty, let's take the car. I'm sure Ray Fresno left it. It—look!"

MARTY jumped and went for Andy Aarons' gun. But she was just pointing at the car door. By peering closely, it was possible to see that the monogram R.F. had been on there, recently. Covering it was an elaborate E.C.

Marty said: "I'll take a chance. Either it was Ray Fresno or the Republic of France, and I got nothing against either of them."

Eva ran for the wheel. Nancy promptly started for the right-hand front door. Marty grinned and said: "No. This job deserves a chauffeur; the manufacturers would never forgive you if you let it get owner driven." He waved, noting at the same time that his shirt sleeve was frayed. "Ladies in the rear."

But as he climbed into the front seat and searched for the starter button, he felt distinctly nervous. He remembered the

gangster wars that were going on when he was in college, remembered the stories of motors wired with bombs, gas tanks filled with nitro.

A voice from nowhere said: "These heaps don't have starter buttons. Just switch her on and step on the gas, all the way down."

He turned. The glass was up between the front and back seats, and Eva was talking to him through a speaking tube. He remembered more stories—about car doors that only opened from the outside, and carbon monoxide tubes that filled the car with death. Oh, yeah, and once you turned the motor on, you couldn't turn it off.

He told himself there wasn't a motor in the world he couldn't stall, but nevertheless he tried the door. It opened from the inside all right. He slammed it again, and turned the ignition switch, holding his breath, his belly already feeling like two hundred horsepower of motor had just landed in it. Nothing happened, except a dry clicking. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor, the motor purred like a cat full of hamburger, and—he was still alive.

Now he let his breath out again, and slowly, cautiously — but with a certain amount of satisfaction in the general situation—he let the gearshift into low, and slowly released the clutch pedal.

They curved down the hotel driveway and onto the boulevard, and were free of Mr. Brunner's grounds. There was still a little fog on the boulevard, but not too much; they went by the cactus garden that Beverly Hills thinks is beautiful, and slid downhill further until they were on Pico.

At the first really big filling station with an empty grease rack he stopped, drove in, and onto the rack. He pulled the rear door open, and snapped at Nancy: "Go phone for cabs from all the companies in the classified," and handed her his loose change. He pulled Eva out, pushed her toward the filling station building. "Go powder your nose and keep on powdering it till Nancy comes for you. And keep the door locked!"

She started away, and he called her back. "Give me that dough you got from the hotel."

She just stared at him. The filling station boys were coming, all three of them; he didn't want them to see her. He snatched her bag away, and started her toward the Ladies' sign wailing "how can I powder my nose without—"

He grinned, and said to the leading gas-pumper: "Hoist this baby, will you?"

THEY were just kids. Just kids, and on Pico where nobody could expect him to take Eva. They looked delighted at the idea of getting to see the undercarriage of the beautiful crate; one of them leaped to the hydraulic lever, and the other two were peering under the car before the wheels were a foot off the ground; they straightened as it rose, and when they could step under it, Marty joined them.

Kid One said: "These babies are really built!" He sounded like he was talking about Miss America of next year.

Kid Two said: "Mama, look at them mufflers!"

In front two cars were honking for gas. None of the kids paid any attention. Kid Three had said nothing so far. Now he pulled a flashlight out of his hip pocket, and went to the front wheel and stared. Kid Three was the kid for Marty's dough. He said: "Leapin' Moses, she's been goofered."

Marty joined him. "Goofered?"

"Just a word, mister. I mean—look, you're lucky to be alive." He pointed with the light. Important bolts—bolts that obviously held things to parts, and vice-versa—had been sawed through. Whoever had done it had not even bothered to rub grease over the saw cuts—they shone brightly with new metal. Several nuts had already started to spread.

"I don't see how you came a mile," said Kid Three.

Nausea rode Marty, bringing cold sweat to his palms and his forehead. "We came just a mile," he said. "Because I was too dumb to go over twenty miles an hour." Kid Three said: "Anybody'd expect, you give a fella a job like this, he'd step on the gas, see what she could do."

"Wouldn't you," Marty said. "Anybody but an old dope."

Nancy came up. "There's a cab here. It looks all right. What—"

Marty reached in Eva's bag, got the bankroll. He handed the bag to Nancy. "Here. This bag doesn't suit my type. Stand by." He gave Kid Three twenty-five

bucks. "Look kid. For all I know, the pink slip's in the car, endorsed in blank. If you find it, make it out to yourself, and take your girl riding."

Kid Three said: "Mister, I'd give an eye and two ribs for a heap like that. But this one—I dunno. Mebbe something else—. He brightened. "Hey, there's a used car dealer sold my father a heap of sawdust and glue once." He began chuckling, and walking around the beautiful job.

Marty gave the other two kids five-dollar bills, and said: "If any cabs show up, give 'em each a buck, and say I'm sorry." He turned to Nancy. "Okay. Get our heiress out of the place."

Just as they were stepping into the cab, Kid Two said: "That's Eva Chounet!"

X

RESPECTABILITY, STABILITY, strength all flowed down the gray front of the building like syrup off a waffle. The windows were high, two stories at least, and carefully guarded with heavy steel bars, bronzed over. The guard at the front door had not a spot on his blue uniform, his buttons were shiny, the leather of his gunbelt shone with the best wax.

His arm was branded, as was the bronze plate on the front of the building, with the magic gold letters, Argonaut State Bank, N. A.

He looked as if he'd shoot at the drop of an interest rate.

Opposite the sign of the bank, but without an attendant, it said: "Argonaut Safety Deposit Co."

The whole effect was such that any pedestrians would automatically speak in hushed tones while passing the structure.

Marty put his hand on the glass of the door, just over the gold letters that reassured you that the bronze plate had not lied in calling this the Argonaut State Bank; the glass added the information that Mr. Johathan Oakes Trumble was president.

To the right was a clock; it said ten-fifteen. It also said, in neon, that the Argonaut Safety Deposit Company was at the end of a neon arrow pointing down marble, or near-marble steps; and it soothed your further worries by saying that Mr. Jonathan Oakes was president of the subterranean cache. Marty herded his females down the stairs.

Galbreath Vanning was in the downstairs office of the vault company under the bank; he still looked like the most expensive lawyer you could hire.

"Everything's ready, Mrs. Chounet." He introduced an elderly lad with pink cheeks, sparse white hair, and a flower in his buttonhole, a cornflower to match his eyes. "Mr. Oakes, who's president of the Argonaut Vault Company."

Mr. Oakes said he was charmed, and if Mrs. Chounet would just step into the vaults, after signing here—"Ah, thank you!"—the portrait would be forthcoming.

Marty said: "Mrs. Chounet has signed. Now drag out the painting."

Mr. Oakes and Mr. Vanning looked distressed. "And while you're doing it," Marty said. "I'll read a copy of your annual statement."

Mr. Oakes raised a white eyebrow. Marty went over to an empty desk marked vault manager, and picked up one of a pile of folders. "I don't trust companies that crawl with nepots," Marty said. "Especially reverse nepots."

Mr. Vanning said: "Mr. Cockren is a character, Mr. Oakes. His friends make allowances."

Marty said: "This Oakes-Trumble, Trumble-Oakes business, now."

Mr. Oakes' laughter rumbled in his well-padded chest. "Simple. I am Jonathan Oakes. A grandson of the founder of this bank, Mr. Cockren. My nephew, my sister's son, is president of the bank."

Marty said: "You could start somebody getting those paintings out, then. You ought to rate that much around here." He flapped the spotlessly white statement of assets and liabilities of the Argonaut State Bank, National Association. "How does it feel to work for your nephew?"

"Really," Mr. Oakes said, "you're somewhat less than polite. I used to be president of the bank—if it's any of your business—"

Marty said: "Pal, it is. You'll never know—"

"Well, then," Mr. Oakes said. He was frowning. "I retired, got bored, took this more simple job—"

Marty said: "I'm satisfied." He took a quick glance at the statement of the bank. Joseph Chounet — surprise, surprise — had been a director. Marty grinned. "The painting. Get going."

His voice did not sound like that of a gentleman to him. Oakes and Vanning started away. Marty said: "G'wan. They got flunkies here can take the other end of an oil painting, Vanning. You stay here and chat."

Vanning stared. "You've changed in the last day, Mr. Cockren." The lawyer turned to Oakes. "Go ahead, Johnny, I don't have to be there."

OAKES went off, followed by two gray coated vault guards. With guns. Supposing one of them was to shoot and plead temporary insanity? His family would be fixed for life, and—

Marty said: "I've changed. When that car hit us, I thought it was hoods, trying to get Ray Fresno's girl. Now I don't think so. Not since this morning. Somebody turned the switch on Miss Summers car here so we'd have to use another one, a planted one rigged to ruin anybody who went more than around the block in it. And maybe that was the work of the late Ratsy Patrick, but I don't think so. For the first time in my life, I'm beginning to believe a red-headed woman; Eva and Ray Fresno haven't been anything but friends for ten years, she's not connected with the Ratsy business."

Galbreath Vanning said: "When the stakes are high, the play is fast."

"Okay," Marty said. "I advised Mrs. Chounet to sell out, a hundred grand to any company head who wanted to buy the late Joe Chounet's interest in his company."

"Wise," Vanning said. "Very—"

"She turned me down," Marty said. He was aware from the looks on the girls' faces that he was impressively mad. He felt that way. "And I thought she was greedy and crazy. Now I think she's right. Why let a bunch of—of tycoon vultures—fight you off from the corpse of their leader? Let's all dine on dead tycoon ourselves, I'd like to get my teeth into some of that power, too."

"Very impressive," Vanning said. "But meaning what?"

"You called it," Marty said. "High stakes, fast play. I'm charging you with murder. As soon as I can get Bill Harrison up here. You're the only guy knew what hotel Eva was at—"

"Obviously not, Vanning said. "The person who attempted murder knew, too."

Nancy Summers said: "Marty—"

He didn't mean to snarl at Nancy, but snarling had become a habit. "Yeah?"

The girl said quietly: "As your lawyer, I'll have to advise you that you'd never make any charge like that stick. You'd only be in trouble for a false arrest."

Galbreath Vanning said: "Thanks, colleague. If you're looking for a good junior partnership—"

"She's not," Marty said.

"—consider our firm," Vanning finished. "Why, Mr. Cockren, I stand to gain nothing by Mrs. Chounet's death. I was not head of anything but the law firm that handled the late Mr. Chounet's business, and with tact, I hope we can keep on handling it for Mrs. Chounet."

Oakes came back with a big package, carried between the two guards.

"Take the wrapping off," Marty said. "Vanning, if you're on the level, why wasn't this bank listed as one of the Chounet holdings?"

Vanning shrugged. "I'd forgotten about it. Mr. Chounet controlled a much larger bank, in New York, and a small chain of them in the San Francisco bay area. The will doesn't say each company must have a dedication on—just fourteen of them, the number of portraits. So—"

Marty said: "Eva, sign again, baby. We knock off a sitting duck. Mr. Oakes, serve up another likeness, a counterfeit presentment of a king—"

The guards had removed the wrappings now. The back of the canvas was visible; they pulled it out from the wall where they had leaned it, and turned it so Marty could see. He stepped back. "Eva," he said, "any dough you get, you earned."

Mr. Oakes said earnestly: "He didn't look like that at all."

Eva said: "He looked just like that —after you'd been married to him a month." Her face was pale as an expensive sheet under makeup that she'd learned on the stage.

Feature by feature, the portrait was un-

attractive, but not awesome. Pale, high brow, hooked nose, long jaw, paper thin lips, bluish-beard and low cheekbones—the dead tycoon had been what Hollywood calls type-cast. But the complete effect, captured by a portrait painter who must have loathed each sitting, was one of overpowering evil and brutality.

The most likeable trait in the face that stared out at them from a plain gold frame was the acquisitiveness of a packrat.

Marty waved for the guards to turn the face back to the wall. They didn't obey. He said: "We'll take two of those."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Marty sat in Mr. Jonathan Oakes Trumble's office, and dictated to Mr. Jonathan Oakes Trumble's secretary:

"For immediate release: Fulfilling the conditions of the wild Marathon for Millions that her late husband, Joseph Chounet set up, Mrs. Eva Chounet today dedicated the first of the fourteen corporations to be honored with a portrait of her husband.

"In the directors' room of Argonaut State Bank, N. A., in Hollywood, the glamorous red-haired widow conducted a ceremony attended by associates of the late tycoon, including Jonathan Oakes Trumble, President of the bank, Jonathan Oakes, president of the Argonaut Vault company and former president of the bank, the bank's counsel, Galbreath Vanning, and—"

When the stenographer had flipped the pages of her book five or six times, Marty broke it off. He said: "Mark the end of that Add to Come, and put my name in the upper right-hand corner of each page."

He glanced at the clock—an electric one that looked as though it ought to be marked: Time is Money—on Mr. Trumble's desk, and said: "Baby, is there a back door to this cash register?"

"The name's Jean, not baby, and banks don't have back doors."

Marty nodded. "I suppose not, Jean. Well, I am on my tortuous way, doing a little broken field running with a redhead under my arm. Jean, hail and farewell."

He got to the door of the office before she said: "Mr. Cockren?"

He turned. "All ears, my dear, all ears."

"Isn't it dangerous for Mrs. Chounet to go around hanging those paintings? I mean, so many men could get so very rich if something happened to her—"

"Jean," Marty said, "that's a hell of an idea, and I'm going to think about it. But don't tell Mrs. Chounet. It would worry her."

"I won't" she said. "I think she's cute."

"I'll tell her."

Marty went and unlocked the padlock on the broom closet where he had confined Eva and Nancy. Surprisingly, it was Nancy who looked most angry; she came out fighting. "How many of these things you think up are necessary to protect Eva, and how many are just the results of an infantile sense of humor?"

"About fifty-fifty," Marty said. "Eva, you feel all right?"

"I guess so. Why?"

"You're awful quiet. There was enough air in that closet, wasn't there?"

Nancy said: "How about worrying if I could breathe?"

Eva said: "Oh, it was air-conditioned. We even found the electric plate the janitor uses and made coffee."

"Swell," Marty said. But he continued watching her as they went through the bank, past a subdued Mr. Trumble and his even more subdued uncle, who were now standing in one of the little enclosures that banks think give class to their officers.

Marty said: "You know, just dedicating a company doesn't put its head out of the running. You have to launch fourteen, or no soap."

Eva brightened. "Marty, if they kidnaped me, and held me for the month, that would do it, wouldn't it?"

"Hell, yes, but—"

"They wouldn't have to kill me to take it all away, would they?"

Marty stopped in the front door of the bank. He looked right, he looked left, he looked across the street. Two cabs were lined up, waiting for fares, but this was not a regular cab rank; there was no fancy phone on a wall any place. "That's a fine way to talk," he said. "If you're going to be like that, we'll have Nancy set up the deal I talked about, the one that gives you a million, or a million and a half—"

Eva said: "No. I still want it all. I want to *try* and get it all. But seeing Joe Chounet's picture, the way he looked—the

way he was—Marty, there's just one of you, and you could never be as tough in a thousand years—"

"Picture!" Marty said. "The other picture! He turned to the bank's doorman, blue-uniformed, gunned, standing between the curb and the building. "Hey, Grant, mind dealing with the Confederacy? I'm Mr. Cockren, this is Mrs. Chounet, and we left a big oil painting downstairs with the gray coats in the vault company. Have them bring it up, will you?"

A five-dollar bill started the blue toward the gray. Marty at once leaped out into the street. There was a signal light at the corner; when it turned red traffic stopped, and Marty went up to a guy with practically no chin, but with a '36 Chevvy coupe. He shoved fifty dollars through the open window. "Bud, my car's broken, and it's important. Take these two ladies where they want to go?"

The chinless face marveled at fifty dollars. Marty spooned Eva in, grabbed Nancy as she was climbing in after the heiress, and whispered instructions in her ear. "I'll be right along," he said.

Nancy said: "Can do." As the coupe started rolling again, she was already talking a mile a minute to the owner.

Back at the curb, the front one of the yellow cabs started its motor. Marty got a foot on the running board. "Mister, you got a fare."

The driver ground his gears a little; but Marty was holding on. "I got a call—"

"Where?" Marty asked. "Maybe it's on my way." Behind him, the doorman was back with the painting and two tip hungry vault guards.

DESPAIR rode the cab driver's eyes as the coupe got away from him in traffic. Marty said: "Oh, there's a cab behind you. I'll take it and you answer your call," and took his foot off the running board. As he walked back for his painting, signalling the second cab to come along, he thought, Bill Harrison made me a deputy sheriff, I could pinch that cabby.

And what would I get? He's probably as legitimate as the next hackie. Just was promised a bill to find out where some people went. You can't hang a guy for that.

He and his painting got in the second cab, and rode it to Santa Monica and Highland. Then, with difficulty, he wrestled the big package aboard a San Fernando Valley car. As the street car moved up Highland toward Cahuenga Pass, Marty, on the back platform, could look back and see the cab he had just paid off following. Then the car went over the pass, and picked up speed for the run out to the Valley; but when it came to the grade crossing the taxicab was one of the cars waiting for it to pass.

But after Universal City, the street car tracks took off across the Valley, with no streets along side. Marty got up and, followed by curses, shoved the painting to the center door; the minute the door opened in North Hollywood, he was off, and struggling toward a Valley taxicab. The hack from the city was not in sight yet.

He got rid of the Valley taxi at Glendale and Beverly, rented a drive-yourself stake-side truck—paying a terrific fee—drove it to the Glendale railroad station, and got there just as an Eastbound S.P. train was getting ready to pull out. As it moved, Eva and Nancy swung off it; it was too late for anybody shadowing them to disembark too.

He loaded the girls into the cab of the truck with him, jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Probably the first time your late unlamented ever rode in a truck. Nancy, can you drive this thing?"

She said: "If a motor came with the deal."

Marty got in on the other side of Eva. He took out the corporation list Nancy had made up for him, and studied it. "If we had a private plane—and a pilot we could trust—we could make it three paintings today," he said. "Maybe more. We could hit San Francisco, and maybe Portland—"

Eva said: "I have a friend who's a pilot. Well, not a friend—I've had two or three dates with him."

"Just sort of a kissing acquaintance," Nancy said. "Marty, I hope we don't have to back up; I've tried everyone of these gears, and they all go forward."

"Well, I didn't specify a reversible truck when U rented it."

Eva said: "I'm glad to hear you rented it. The way we're spending money. Nancy and I left two perfectly good rides to El Paso on that train."

"Maybe we can turn in your tickets," Marty said. "Or maybe we'll meet some-

body who wants to go to El Paso. In a democracy, anything can happen." He went back to studying the list.

They put the truck in a parking lot downtown, and Marty turned the keys over to one of the parking lot boys. "There's a deposit on this heap," Marty said. "If you want to drive it back, you can have what's left of it."

"That's why I moved to Los Angeles," the boy said. "Something screwy happens every day. Other day, a dame gave me five bucks for sitting with her Pekinese while she went shopping. Dog got lonesome in the car alone, and she didn't want to take it in the store, because it hated crowds. No, not crowds. Hoi-polloi, she said. Know what it is, mister?"

Marty said: "You and me, Mac."

"That's what I thought," the boy said. "Want me to help you with the package?"

"If you're referring to the redhead, no. If you mean this painting I'm lugging, yes, to the elevator of the building there."

"That redhead ain't a package, boss. That's a dish."

"Hey," Nancy said, "I'm here, too."

"Lady, I'm saving you to write to my mother about."

Marty got his end of the portrait up in the air. "Keep on like that, son, and you'll be ambassador to France before you're thirty."

"I'd rather stay in L.A.," the kid said.

XI

FROSTED GLASS LISTED THE Tenouch-Angeles Corporation, and below it, in smaller letters, a double rank of hotels from one end of the country to the other. Inside all that was visible were two unmarked glass doors, a receptionist in a shiny black satin dress, and a brass sign, saying: "Housekeeping Salesman Interviewed Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays Only; Furniture Salesmen Tuesdays and Thursdays. No Buying Saturday."

The receptionist gave Marty and the parking lot boy a cold stare. "No packages are delivered here," she said. "Our warehouse is over on North Mission Road."

Marty said: "I just want to borrow your hammer." Nancy and Eva came in and closed the door to the outside corridor. Marty grinned the parking lot boy out, and turned the latch on the door. "So we can be alone," he explained to the black satin dress. She looked scared, started to get up, and then remembered that the whole Tenouch-Angeles Corporation was behind her; she pressed an electric button on her desk. Her eyes never left Marty; it was dubious if she knew that Eva and Nancy were there; she felt herself, probably, alone with a madman and a large package.

Her bell brought results. "These are our furniture buyers, Mr. Gahagan and Mr. Levish, sir," she said. A bright, malicious spark shone in her eye, unexpectedly; she had won the first round with the madman, she now had two men to deal with the package. Only, from the way she moved her body under the black satin dress, she thought of them as Men.

"One of you buys, and the other sees he doesn't pad the bills, eh?" Marty asked. "Who watches who?"

Mr. Gahagan—or Mr. Levish—asked: "You've something in that package you want to sell us?"

"I told the young lady," Marty said, "I just dropped in to borrow a hammer. But—first let me introduce your new boss. Mrs. Chounet, Mr. Lahagan and Mr. Gevish."

"You've got it backward," one of the men said. But they were both looking at Eva with love in their eyes; the love of a guy who sees a promotion become possible. The same man—he looked Gahaganish—said: "Believe me, Mrs. Chounet, we are yours to command. There may be employees of the Tenouch gang who fear a change of ownership, but they will not be found in the furniture buying department."

Black satin slid a purple fingernail across the desk at the bank of buttons. Marty sat down on the edge of her desk and took her hand in his just before it reached the electric buttons. "You are my ideal," he said. "Leave us hold hands."

She didn't look malicious now.

Eva said: "Gentlemen, I want to thank you for your feelings toward me."

Marty said: "I want you to prove it."

Gahagan and Levish looked less happy. Marty restored their beams by saying: "Tell Mrs. Chounet—in a few short, unaccented words—why the furniture buying department is the best run in the organization."

The silenter of the buyers raised an eye-

brow.

"Oh, my name is Cockren," Marty said. "I'm Mrs. Chounet's private investigator. I know what a magnificent job's being done in the F.B.D., as I call it, but I want her to hear it from your own lips . . ."

Marty sat at a typewriter in the basement of a Western Union office; one of the typewriters that the telegraph company provides for out of town newspapermen. He typed: "For Immediate Release." Then he grinned, and wrote: "Because of their long record of efficiency, economy and loyalty to the firm, the staff of the Furniture Buying Department of The Tenouch-Angeles Corporation, owners of hotels from Coast to Coast, were today exclusively invited by Mrs. Eva Chounet to unveil a portrait of her late husband in the anteroom of the company.

"Speaking to this exclusive group, Mrs. Chounet said: ". . .

He typed what Mrs. Chounet said, what Mr. Gahagan replied, what Mr. Levish replied. He felt like typing: "Among those not present were—" but let it go. Too frivolous. He finished his story, paid the telegraph company to distribute it to the wire services and local press, and walked grinning across the street to a Turkish bath. To the manager of the ladies' department, he said: "Wring out Miss Barnum and Miss Bailey and tell them Mr. Ringling is here."

HE HAD to wait fifteen minutes but while he waited he grinned. When they did show up, the steam had taken all the curl out of Nancy's hair; she looked murderous. Grinning, he escorted them to the street.

"Two down," he said.

"Twelve to go," Nancy answered. "And you must have just about used up all the ingenuity in that pretty little head of yours. I give you another day, or maybe two—"

Eva had not put her hat on when she came out of the Turkish bath. She strolled along the street, the bright afternoon sun cutting through her curls—which must be natural, from what happened to Nancy—and she had looked happy. "Stop it, Nancy. Stop trying to make me feel bad again. I wouldn't keep reminding you, if it was you that—" She broke off.

Marty was still grinning. "The sun's shining, you're both pretty, and we're one seventh of the way to getting into the biggest hole in the world and pulling it after us. And brains? I'm beginning to think I'm brilliant. I've got more brains than Einstein and an elephant combined. I'm an entirely new creature, an Einephant—"

"With a grin like a hyena," Nancy said. "May your counselor have a thought?"

Marty continued to look happy. "Mouthpiece," he said, "shoot."

"I think—" Nancy said . . .

They had been walking slowly west along the street; Marty felt safe, he felt the hounds were several laps behind him. Half listening to Nancy, he was happy, holding each girl lightly by an elbow.

A newsboy slid past them for the corner, yelling, and he listened to him with as much attention as he was listening to Nancy.

"Plane crash. All about big plane crash."

Marty stopped listening to Nancy, caught the boy with a hand, and got a paper for a nickel.

The headline said: "Plane crashes an hour out of Burbank."

Marty stopped grinning.

XII

THEY WERE IN HIDING AGAIN. This time there was nothing playful about Marty's choice of a hole; they were in his apartment because he didn't think that the howling pack that pursued them would expect them to return to such an obvious place. Eva was lying down on the couch, crying; Nancy sat with her elbows on the little breakfast table in the kitchenette, pretending to read a magazine. She hadn't turned a page in twenty minutes. Marty alternately walked up and down the limited floor space, tramping on newspapers, or stopped and picked one of them up, staring at it.

He did this now, turning the papers in fingers that felt as though they had heavy work gloves on. There, on a back page, it was: the veiledly insolent story of the ceremony in the bank that morning. He tore the clipping out, put it in his wallet; it, and thirteen like it, would be necessary if any court held that Eva Chounet had not fulfilled the clause of the will that said that the paintings must be presented and dedicated with proper ceremonies. The pub-

licity would be the best sort of proof that . . .

He dropped the paper. It turned in mid-air, and the second page was exposed again, the carry-over of the big scarehead story. "Among the passengers were three Hollywood people, actors going on location. They were—"

The names didn't matter. A man extra, and two girl extras, and they were dead, they would never drift Hollywood Boulevard again in their aimless, foolish, harmless fashion, chattering their magpie talk and—

Dead because Marty Cockren had been so very damned clever.

He started walking again. The newspaper crackled under his feet.

Nancy raised her head, and said: "Stop that, will you? You've been crumbling paper for an hour."

"Have I?" Marty asked. "Then we've got to get out of here before dark. We can't turn on a light. No one was watching when we came in, but they may come by, they may—" He stopped. "Nancy, just when I saw that paper, what were you saying?"

She dropped her hands to the table, stared at him with her head unsupported. "I don't remember . . . Oh, yes. I was just being silly, or Marty Cockren smart. I was going to say we ought to dye Eva's hair, that red hair is so conspicuous it makes it impossible to hide her."

"You're right," Marty said. "I'll go right out and get something. What do I ask for?"

Nancy's stare became as bright and hard as a diamond. "You're going on with this —this minstrel show?"

"We quit it," Marty said, "when Eva tells us to." He turned and looked at Eva. She was lying on her back on the couch now, staring at the ceiling; her skirt was rumpled carelessly above her knees, her red hair was tousled; only her staring, tear-stained eyes showed that she wasn't asleep.

Marty sat down opposite Nancy at the kitchenette table. He reached out and took her hand. "Correction," he said. "I'm going on—not we."

The slim hand in his twisted and got free. Nancy supported her chin and cheeks between her palms, and stared at him without expression. But the pressure of her hands gave her cheeks a faintly childish, chubby look. "Ditching me, Marty? I ought to be used to it."

He smiled slightly. "I'm getting on to the system," he said. "I am becoming an authority on women. The point of this is to get the conversation switched to who does and does not love whom—note that grammar!—and the next thing you know—zippo, we're nine miles from where I wanted the conversation to go."

"Golly, you talk a lot," she said. "Okay, Captain, and where did you want the conversation to go?"

HE said: "To you putting on the hat with the long peacock feather and going home. On account of six people have been killed and I don't want you to be number seven. And don't ask me if it's because I love you. Does a guy have to be madly in love with a nice girl not to want her killed?"

"I wouldn't be seven," she said, "I'd be eight. Right after you. You can't go home, because you're there, but you could go to—oh, Arrowhead, Palm Springs—"

"Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe," Marty said. "Using what for money?"

"Mine," Nancy said.

"Hey," Marty said.

But she didn't smile. "I feel like I'd been a jerk. Yesterday morning, in the Sheriff's office. I helped talk you into taking on this job."

"You didn't," he said. "Why should you?"

"Because I was tired of seeing you not get any place, losing job after job, always broke. Because, I guess, I missed you when you stopped calling me up, and I thought, this'll put Marty on his feet, maybe even give him enough to buy a small time weekly—"

He stared at her in astonishment. She said weakly: "Isn't that what all reporters want?"

"My God," he said. "What every man wants is to run his own life, not have it planned for him by a—a lawbook in nylons." He pushed back from the little table. "Get out of here, Nancy. Go on."

"Because you're mad at me?"

"Because you might be killed. And because you give me a pain. Scram, baby, and stay not on your scramming."

She stood up. She looked at him a

moment. "But you're sticking?"

Till Eve finds somebody better to protect her."

She shrugged. He stayed in the kitchenette while she got the hat with the silly feather, carried it into the bathroom to use the only mirror in the flat, shrugged, without assistance into her coat, and then took the chain off the door. Only then did he start moving towards her, and only to relock and rechain the door after her.

Then he walked back to the middle of the living room, and punched one fist into the palm of the other hand. "My God," he said again.

From the couch, Eve said: "I heard all that."

"I didn't think you were deaf. Did you hear the part that applied to you?"

He turned to face her. She still lay flat on her back, her green eyes staring, her clothes and hair rumpled, a line of flesh showing unattractively over the top of one stocking.

Marty said: "About sticking till you find somebody stronger than me to look after you."

She swung her legs to the floor, ran her fingers through her hair. On the second pass, the red mop returned to its usual shining order; it must have had a lot of time and money spent on its schooling. She pulled her dress down below her knees. "Marty, I've thought and thought. There isn't anyone."

"Well," he said. "Let's see. Try the next detective agency in the phone book."

She looked up at him levelly. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

He said: "No. Do you want a drink?"

Eve shook her head. "I'm only a lush when I'm scared. As long as you're looking after me, I'm not scared."

Marty said: "There's got to be someone . . . You're so pretty, Eve—"

She laughed. "Here comes the old knife. Marty, sit down. You make me nervous."

"I was just going to say, a gal with your looks, there must be a dozen guys who'd go down the line for you."

She shrugged. "I told you. Gamblers, playboys, Hollywood Boulevard wolves." She blew a raucous raspberry.

Marty said: "If you don't need a drink, I do . . . Hey. You said something about running around with a pilot—"

"Private pilot," she said. "Jimmy Gayhart. Playboy."

"He'd be rugged—"

"No," she said, "he wouldn't. Anyway, love's one thing, and a fortune like Joe Chounet is another. Me, I've seen a lot more love than I have fortunes."

Marty was silent. It was not the first time that he had seen a seething under her pleasant, comradely manners; a past that he didn't like to think about.

"Talking about love," she said, "the college girl's in love with you."

"Nancy?" He laughed. "I doubt it. She just sees a chance to do some good in the world."

"Me," Eve said bitterly, "If I ever marry again, I don't want too much love mixed in it."

"You'll get some dandy offers, when we've clinched your money for you."

"I like that 'when,'" she said. "I also like that 'we.' You in love with the lawyer?"

"Hell no," he said. "A Cockren never loves but once. Mine was a kitten I had when I was three years old. Let me tell you about that cat! It was gray with—"

"Shut up," Eve said, "and kiss me."

MARTY pressed her shoulders against his chest. Her head turned, and he kissed her; she kissed very well, with a firm, but not rough or wild pressure; it was perhaps the most satisfactory kiss he had ever had. His other arm came up, and he pressed her closer; they kissed again; but when his hand automatically sought for greater intimacy, she shook her head, and moved away from him without changing her position on the couch.

"No," she said, "that's all."

After a moment, Marty dropped his arms. He lit a cigarette, wondering what men who don't smoke do at a moment like that. "Sometimes a girl needs to be kissed," Eve said.

"Amazing," Marty said. He carefully removed nonexistent ash from the tip of his cigarette. "Sometimes a man needs a good deal more than that."

"So I've heard," Eve said. "A fellow told me once. But supposing the college girl came back and caught us?"

Marty shrugged and put his hand out.

"She's in love with you," Eve said.

"She's gone," Marty said. "For good. She's part of our glamourous past."

Eve sat up straight. She stared at him, her eyes bright with conjecture. "You finally got some sense in your head."

"I doubt it," Marty said. "What makes you come to that amazing conclusion?"

Her hands went to her hair. She got up and walked up and down the little room, kicking newspapers out of her way. "I go for you, Marty," she said. Her eyes were bright, she licked her lips a little feverishly. "I never knew a guy like you before, you're a laugh a minute."

Marty leaned back against the couch, his mood changed.

Eva went on, quickly: "And you must kind of like me, or you wouldn't have sent Nancy-pants packing. Look, baby, we can have all the fun in the world, when my month's over, when you've cinched the money for me. I'll marry you, I swear I will—"

"This seems to have gotten turned around," Marty said. "Isn't it the man who's supposed to promise eternal devotion? Who's seducing whom?"

"Marty, with my kind of money, I'm a good thing to marry."

"Better than to burn," Marty said. "I never thought of it."

"That's what I like about you," she said.

She came over to sit next to him, but Marty moved. He went and got a drink of water in the kitchenette, and carried it back. Leaning against the wall, he said: "How do I get in touch with Ray Fresno?"

"Ray?"

He nodded. "If I'm going on with this, I need help. He's the only person in the world I trust just now, except maybe Aarons'."

"Those dopes," Eva said.

Marty said: "Exactly. How about Ray?"

Eva ran a hand over her face. She stared at him coldly, peculiarly, and said: "Any little store that has a red neon sign of a horse running, advertising a tip sheet called Post-Time, that's one of Ray's bookie stands. They'd pass a word for you."

Marty nodded. "I won't be gone long. You stay here, and be a shining beacon to guide me back."

"Some day you're going to kid the wrong girl at the wrong time, and wake up with a shiv in your back."

"When you talk like that," Marty said, "you're like a lovely flower."

The green eyes sparkled. Marty grinned, and then stopped it at once; someone was knocking on the apartment door. He looked at the door, and then, idiotically, at Eva, as though she would surely know who was there; but the rapid draining of color from her face was answer enough.

Marty said: "Go in the bathroom and shut the door." He took out Andy Aarons' gun, and pointed it at the door, and moved slowly out in that direction; behind him he heard the bathroom door close. "All right," he said. "Who's there?"

A GIRL'S voice said: "Me, Marty," and as though in a dream he slid the chain off, unlatched the lock, stood back, and stared at Nancy as she came in, carrying a small package.

Automatically he looked up again after her. "What in the world—"

She held up the package. "Hair-dye. Don't you remember? We're going to change the color of Eva's hair, make it easier—"

The harshness of his own voice startled him. "I thought I told you—"

"Gents don't tell ladies," she said. "They ask them." She stepped closer to him. "I'm sticking, Marty. I've got a little faith in you, even if you haven't."

Her face was only six inches from his; he wondered if there was lipstick on his mouth; there undoubtedly was, and—

He did the only thing possible under the circumstances: eliminated the six inches, and made sure that there was red on his lips; made sure by getting plenty more there.

As he was telling himself, silently, that companions are caddish, the inevitable happened; the bathroom door opened, and Eva said: "For Pete's sake."

Marty stepped away, feeling like a kid caught peeping through a keyhole, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Well, it was not his lawyer's worry if he kissed his client, or vice versa.

Or was it?

"Lock the door behind me," he said. "Put the chain back on, let nobody in. I gotta get out of here."

"You never said a truer word," Eva said.

XIII

BY AGAIN WALKING to the taxi company garage, and getting the first cab the dispatcher called out, he was reasonably certain that he was not getting a planted driver. Without Eva along, it seemed to him he was not much of a target. The worst his shadowy opponent could do was try and trail him back to the (ex) red-head.

He told his driver to go down Hollywood Boulevard. When the street came to life at Vine, he got out, paid off, and took time to light a cigarette while the cab got out of sight. Then he turned back the way he had come, caught a street car, rode a few blocks. He spotted a bar called Della & Jim's, and went two blocks past it to turn in under a running red horse.

It was a magazine store, displaying pulps and national weeklies and newspapers and all the daily form sheets. He bought a form sheet, idly thumbed it, and laid two dollars down on the cigar counter. "On Blystone's nose," he said.

The guy behind the counter was plumpish, young, with one eyebrow perpetually higher than the other; it had probably gone through the windshield of a car once. He looked at the deuce, looked at Marty.

Marty said: "That is, if you happen to know someone you could call who'd take a bet for me."

The fatty nodded. "I could do that," he said.

Marty still held his wallet in his hand. He slid out his driver's license, neat in a cellophane case. "And—I'll be in a bar down the block, Della & Jim's, if Ray Fresno wants to see me."

The guy just stared at him. Marty said: "Don't answer me. Just think it over, and if it seems right to you, make a call, pass the word up the line."

The eyes under the mismatched brows finally dropped, and studied the driver's license. The windshield guess got further confirmation when the guy's hands appeared; both of them had scars from old cuts that looked very much like glass. The hands pushed the driver's license toward Marty.

Marty put it back in his wallet, and went a block and a half the other side of Della & Jim's. The man there was tall, thin, middle-aged and with a Navy tattooing on his right wrist, but his reactions were the same as the fat youth's had been.

Marty displayed his driver's license in a third bookie stand immediately across the bar, and then went for a beer at Della & Jim's. The bartender, according to a replaceable sign supplied by a whiskey company, was Jim; and no doubt the girl in the slacks and tight sweater examining a dope sheet at the back end of the bar with three or four customers was Della.

It would be very nice to be Jim and to have a Della and to own a little business that paid its own rent and yours and kept you in food and liquor, clothes, and provided a place where you could lean and philosophize.

Who had said that about philosophizing?

Galbreath Vanning. He had said that he also leaned on bars and philosophized.

Vanning, Truble, his uncle Oakes, Brunner the hotel man—he'd met just a handful of the men who stood to be rich if Eva Chounet dropped dead. Despite Vanning's denial, he still included him in the list, but—he liked the lawyer better than the hotel man or the bankers.

Brunner had been definitely sinister; old Mr. Oakes suspiciously evasive. In a lot of ways, it was ridiculous to think that rich men, men of position, wealth, country clubs and real estate would kill for money; but it was so much money, it was all of security and ease for one gesture. And they could rationalize the gesture until it was no crime, but a duty; a man could say it was criminal to turn the destiny of a huge industry over to a girl who at best had no previous experience, and at worst was immoral and flighty.

Say, when all the returns were in, there were seventeen or eighteen corporations the control of which had rested in the predatory claws of Chounet; only one of the men whose life had been spent in that corporation of which he was now head would have to feel enough uncertainty, greed, or moral obligation to make it impossible for Eva Chounet to draw a safe breath until—

A guy sat down next to Marty. He said: "Y'ever been in Fresno, pal?"

"No, but I'd like to see it. Yes, sir, I want to see Fresno."

"Well, pay for your beer and let's go."

MARTY SAID: "It's paid for," and stood up. He followed his guide to the street; it was not the most reliable looking back in the world to be following; guns either were pressing out the man's cheap coat at armpits and hips, or he was the damndest built fellow Marty had ever seen.

"It didn't take you very long," Marty said.

The guide didn't answer. He got into a V-8 tudor at the curb; he seemed completely indifferent as to whether Marty followed him or not. Marty got in on the right hand side, and the car started at once, or as soon after that as a weakish battery would whirl the motor.

Marty said nothing. His driver twisted in the seat a couple of times, and then said: "I ain't supposed to talk to you."

"Okay," Marty said.

The man said: "Aw—" in an aggrieved tone of voice.

They drove down Hollywood till it ended at Vermont, and parked behind another car on the edge of Barnsdall Park. "Yah get in that car," the driver said.

"Thanks for the buggyride," Marty told him, and feeling a lot less secure than—he hoped—he looked, walked up to the other car. There were two men in it, both in the front seat of a four door sedan. The driver was watching the rear view mirror; no doubt he got some kind of a signal in it, because he muttered something out of the corner of his mouth, and the other man opened the door.

Marty got in. This car had no battery trouble; it started at once, and turned into one of the side streets east of Vermont that wind interminably around hospital parking lots and the deep sunk streets that are tributary watercourses to the Los Angeles river as it comes in from the valley . . .

The man beside the driver said: "You're supposed not to look where you're going," and Marty bent forward, elbows on knees, head on his elbows. He was somehow aware that the man beside the driver was slewed around backward, watching him. The car jerked and twisted. One of the men said: "I sure hope to God you got something for Ray, he's feelin' low."

The car jerked up a steep incline, throwing Marty back on the seat. The man beside the driver said: "Okay, fella, we're there," and the car came to rest in a garage. The man who was not driving hopped down and pulled the overhead door shut. A small light globe shone nakedly in the ceiling; there was a workbench at the rear of the garage with some gardening and car tools scattered on it; a small door leading into the house in the regular California manner.

One of the men took out a key, and then they went through this door, and through a living room where two more men, lounging in wicker chairs, paid no attention to them, and then through a kitchen, which was full of men, phoning and writing and copying horse odds off a blackboard that a fellow with earphones on was posting; then upstairs where four men busily ran adding machines. These men wore earphones, too.

And finally into a room where only one man leaned on the wall, and one on the bed. The man on the bed was Ray Fresno, and he looked like hell.

He said: "I'll talk to Cockren alone," and his voice was just an echo of the man who had done the derringer trick in Marty's apartment.

When they were alone, Fresno said: "The doc says I mustn't talk too much. If I could only get my clothes off, pal! It's awful to be sick, and have to keep your clothes on."

Marty said: "What's up?"

Fresno snorted, feebly. "The Patrick outfit, and me, brother, I'm down." He rolled his head on the pillow. "Never saw the guy that did it. A lousy little .22 hole in my guts, but it's doin' the work."

Then the hoofer grinned, and his hands moved with some of their old dexterity. "How's Eva, pal?"

"Not good. Not bad. I'm keeping her one jump ahead of the teeth."

Fresno said: "Don't I know how it is! On a dame it must be tougher. What can I do to help?"

Marty said: "It seems to me you're busy enough."

"Busy?" Fresno shook his head. "Just lyin' here. I'm full of penicillin and stuff. More holes than a sieve. What kinda help do you need?"

"A plane. An airplane with a pilot I can trust."

FRESNO SAID: "You trust anybody these days, and you're on the spit like a rotisserie chicken. . . . Y'know what made me think of that? When Eva and I played the Palace—only hoofing act held over that year at the Palace, Fresno & Francisco—we usta walk up Seventh afterwards, and there was a rotisserie where they cooked chickens in the window, all the time turning them on a spit in front of this red hot grill. Cook in a big white hat would hit one with a cleaver, and we'd each take half and—"

"The plane, the plane, the plane."

"Yeah, sorry. I'm kind of rambling—"

It was with a distinct shock that Marty realized that the dapper man was dying. His body, his face looked just as they had; trim, muscular, in wonderful condition for a man who must be pushing forty. But the animation was all gone, the amazing muscular control; it seemed now that there had never been anything else to Ray Fresno but muscular control.

The gambler said: "Why doesn't Eva want to use Jimmy Gayhart?"

"I never heard of him?"

"He's a guy who's soft on Eva. You know, we trouped for eighty weeks, and I never made a pass at Eva? If you ever have a big time act, brother, keep it in mind; a partner ain't a dame to you, she's half the act. Make a pass, and it hurts the act. You wanta—"

"A pilot, Ray."

"Yeah, yeah, but it carries me back, talking about Eva. This Gayhart is a rich guy, he makes planes or something. He's got a big four-seater of his own. One time he took me and a twist, a bag of sugar I thought I had to have, and him and Eva and us flew up to—"

"If this Gayhart's a pilot I can trust, I'll want to get in touch with him right away, Ray."

Ray Fresno sat up, away from the pillows. Two spots of color glowed on his high cheekbones for a moment. "Trust —you can't trust no one—Got a pilot. Got a flier named Monkey Ward. Of course, his first name isn't really Monkey. One wrong step, and I'd—I'd—"

He coughed, and the color faded, as though an electric current had been switched off. He sank back on the pillow.

Marty took a deep breath, and, feeling that he might be killing the thin guy, persisted. "Monkey Ward. Where do I get him?"

Ray Fresno said clearly: "Keeps my plane at Grand Central. He'll fly for dough, and never, never talk. Silent as—"

THE DOOR burst open, and the room filled with guys. Big guys, little guys, some of them nice lookin' and some out of a Monogram gangster picture; thin guys, young guys, fat guys, old guys. They had one thing in common; they were all armed.

One of them stepped in, fast, and took Marty's gun away from him. Two more stripped the covers off Ray Fresno's bed and ran hands under the edge of the mattress, and under the pillow. They came up with two automatics. They pocketed these and nodded. The door opened again, and an unarmed man came in. If he was not called Ratsy it was only because his brother had pre-empted the title first.

Marty said: "It's obvious these guys have been seeing gangster pictures, Ray."

Fresno grinned wanly. "Sherman," he said. "So you're here."

"Say it twice, Fresno," Sherman Patrick, brother of the late Ratsy, said.

Ray Fresno said: "I don't think I got time, Sherman."

Patrick squinted the eyes that had given his brother his sobriquet. "So that sharpshooter got you. I give him two hundred bucks for one shot, and I think he misses."

"He hits," Ray said. "The doc says it's peritonitis."

"I got an uncle dies of that," Patrick said. "His appendix burst."

"I had mine out years ago," Ray Fresno said.

The man standing near Patrick said: "Me, too, Ray. Boy them gas pains was awful, wasn't they?"

Ray Fresno said: "Awful . . . Look, Patrick, you gotta let this guy out of here."

Sherman said: "I don't gotta. No, Ray, I don't gotta do nothing."

"How many of my boys did you have to buy to get in here?" Ray Fresno asked.

"All of 'em. I promised 'em a ten percent raise, and they sell you like bologna."

"Oke. Then they'll tell you. This guy's a legit. You let him have it, and it stinks

on page one all over town."

Sherman Patrick looked wise. There was no doubt that he had managed to get through the third grade in school without a headache, though possibly he had had to take the last year twice. "Don't hand me that. Legits don't wear guns."

"A private detective," Ray Fresno said. "And it ain't doing me any good to talk."

"Good's not what I'm trying to do you," Patrick said. "And since when is private dicks legit?"

"This one," Ray Fresno said slowly, "is. Also he's a newspaperman, or used to be. Got a lot of friends on the papers." Some strength came back into his voice. "You can see the shape I'm in Sherman. But I'm leaving a lot of friends, and I kinda would like to think they're going to eat. Hurt this guy, and you might start a newspaper campaign."

Patrick frowned. "Got a name, mister?"

"Martin Cockren," Marty said. "I've got a middle name, but you don't care about that."

Sherman Patrick considered this. "Naw," he said finally. Then his face lit up with simple, honest pride. "You're the guy's bodyguardin' Fresno's old partner, Eva. One of the boys reads it to me in the paper."

"That's right."

"Well, let this guy outa here. He's a very important fella," Sherman Patrick said. "Sure, he's a legit."

To Marty's amazement, the gunman at the door stepped aside. Marty looked at Fresno, he looked at Patrick; everyone seemed anxious for him to go, and get back to work. He walked to the door. Just as he stepped through it, one of the men said: "You forgot something," and handed him Andy Aarons' gun back.

Marty found he was too astounded to be frightened any more. He continued out the door. Sherman's voice stopped him sharply: "Wait a minute, Mr. Cockren."

Marty stopped, his shoulder blades getting that naked feeling again. "Bein' a legit," Sherman said, "you wouldn't know, but, honest, that ain't enough gun to take care of a redhead."

Things became clearer. This was another —oh, God—admirer of Eva's. That girl had a past like a Mayan pyramid. Dear little Sherman came up, and thrust a revolver into Marty's hand. "Take this," he said. "She is a .38 on a .45 frame. You can really blast with that."

"Thanks," Marty said feebly.

"Plenty more where that came from."

Marty went out the door. As it closed behind him, he heard Sherman saying: "Fresno, you shouldn'ta put the blast on my brother Claude."

Marty continued through the house, past the adding machine boys, past the boiler room boys and their blackboard, and out the front door to find himself only a couple of blocks from Sunset and Vermont.

He walked to the second nearest bar and had a drink and considered the bright hopes of a Mrs. Patrick someplace, some thirty odd years ago, and her two little boys, Claude and Sherman.

XIV

TWO BOURBONS, STRAIGHT, managed to take the chill out of his blood. He used the phone at the back of the bar, and called Andy Aarons. The little detective was very glad to hear from him.

"I was afraid to call you," Marty said. "They might have your line tapped. Go out some place and call me here." He gave him the number of the phone booth, and waited till it rang. The bartender started towards it, and then saw Marty; Marty pointed at himself, the bartender went away again, and Marty answered. It was Andy, all right; the fellow was as dependable as a pebble off the rock of Gibraltar.

"Andy, I want you to do some detecting for me. I want you to find a guy who has a private plane; that shouldn't be too hard."

"No," Andy Aarons agreed. "Even for a detective of my limited experience and facilities, that should not be beyond my powers." His grave formality cracked. "Marty, you are all right? You would not believe how Mrs. Aarons and I have worried about you." He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Aarons was saying, we got you into this, and we never should have. It is all—"

This was not the time to hear the saga of Mrs. Aarons' worries, of Andy's devotion to Marty. "Sure, sure, I'm fine, Andy,

never felt better. But listen—this is important. This is the break that gets Eva Chounet out of town. This pilot is called Monkey Ward. I dunno what his first name is—"

"Surely not Monkey," Andy Aarons said. "Nobody would name a child that. Mrs. Aarons and I—"

"Oh, Lord," Marty said. Then he hoped Andy hadn't heard him, and talked fast. "It doesn't matter what this man's name is. There can't be many pilots who call themselves Monkey Ward. Get in touch with him, and tell him I want to fly out of the Grand Central, about two hours out of dark. Tell him to check his plane, see it's full of gas and in repair, and tell him to watch himself; he may run into the opposition."

Marty paused, and Andy said: "I can do all that."

"Especially the plane," Marty said. "To see that the wings haven't been pulled off and put back on with mouse-spit. Use Ray Fresno's name. Get that? And promise him big money, five grand, or more—if he sounds unenthusiastic about five!"

Andy said: "Of course I'll do it, but Marty—"

Marty hung up. He at once left the bar, and walked to another one; he used the phone there to call Bill Harrison. "Lieutenant, this is where your cooperation pays off; I'm about to make a fast run up to Mount Wilson."

The sheriff's officer was very executive. "Mount Wilson. Check."

"As soon as I leave there, I want a road block thrown up; a twenty minute delay will be all I need."

"Can do," the Lieutenant said. "That's a one way road, should be a cinch. We'll stop them at the Red Box Forest Service Station and—"

"You're just the man can do it," Marty said. "Mrs. Chounet will certainly be grateful."

"Say Marty," Bill said. "Did you ever know I used to be cowboy? I've been thinking, there's a spread up in Amador County that could be bought reasonably. Be a cinch to be elected sheriff, with my experience, if I was a resident of Amador—"

"I'll speak to Mrs. Chounet," Marty said. "She'll be looking for some good investments."

He restrained an impulse to spit on the floor of the phone booth, and made it to a third bar. "Nancy, is everything serene?"

"I'm having the most awful time drying Eva's hair."

"Tsk, tsk," Marty said. "Well, the speed of our passage should create a draft."

"We're off again?" Nancy asked. "Oh, golly."

Marty said: "Now look, sugar baby—"

"One pet name, and I'll scream," Nancy said. "That's a sure sign I'm about to be hit with something."

"Keep you eye on the future," Marty said. "Wealth, position, ease power. All yours for clipping this simple coupon. There's a back door to that apartment house—"

"Since when have we used front doors?"

"Shut up," Marty said. "This one doesn't come out where you expect it to. That apartment house connects up with a bunch of smaller ones, and you go right through them—well, you'll see. Just follow the exit signs."

"That's what I should have done when you walked into my office."

MARTY SAID: "Break it off, kid. This is the payoff. In a few minutes, you're going to hear the sound of sirens, which should be familiar music by now. Be ready, have your hats on—wet or dry—and as soon as you hear the fire engines at the front door, make a quick run for the back. I'll be waiting there."

Nancy said: "All right, but—"

"The most famous last words in history." He rang off, and mopped sweat off his face. But then, it is always hot in a phone booth.

He was as sure as he had ever been that he had not been spotted. The efforts of Ray Fresno's men to throw off any shadows had been professional and practised; he had a confidence in them that he did not have in himself. Acting on this, he stopped the first cab that came along, and climbed in. He told the driver to head downtown.

Leaning forward, he opened the glass between him and the cab. "Son," he said, "are you interested in making a hundred dollars?"

The cab swerved, and nearly hit a beer truck. The driver said, as he recovered control of his wheel. "I was just thinking, if I had me just fifty bucks, I would push in the face of a certain dispatcher who works for a certain taxicab company and then I would—"

"We are going to share many a happy hour together," Marty said. "You can tell me later, okay." He reached in his pocket, took a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet, tore it in approximately half. "They always do this in stories," he said. "You get the other half when the job's finished. You break no laws—you'll see later, we're going to get the full cooperation of the sheriff's office."

"If driving a hack was always like this, mister, I could put up with that dispatcher. The trouble with me and him is—"

"Later," Marty said. "Stop at the next drugstore."

"A drugstore, okay."

A nickel put in the right slot at the drugstore got the fire department; the answers to a few questions convinced said department that Marty's apartment house on Crown Hill was a holocaust, a perfect gem of a place for ambitious firemen; then a quick run back to the cab, a quicker run on the part of the greedy chauffeur, and they were at the mouth of the alley. Sirens screamed nearby.

"This may be all law-abiding," the driver said, "but—"

"Sh," Marty said. "Lean back and dream of the blood running down the dispatcher's chin."

The girls came out of the alley, Nancy first, Eva second. They jumped in, and Marty barked at the driver: "Hit Beverly and head west, fast."

"Which way is west?" asked the driver. But he at least started the car.

"And I thought that was an executive bark," Marty said. "Turn left on Beverly."

He leaned back, and looked at the girls; even in their hurry, they had managed to get on either side of him. He put an arm around each firm young back; they were comforting to the touch. He leaned back, resting, thinking how nice it would be if a man had two girls like this, both deaf mutes.

Eva confirmed the thought by saying: "I'll ruin your suit. My hair is dripping. If I'd just had time to go to a beauty parlor—"

"You might have left your head in the sink," Marty said brutally. "A thing that would have upset the operators for weeks."

"I've always taken such good care of my hair," Eva said, "and then to have it ruined by an amateur."

"You know," Marty said, "if I had to select a lady lawyer, isn't it nice I picked one you could get along with so well." He stuck his head forward. "Turn right here, skipper."

At exactly ten minutes of five a cab stopped in front of Mr. Trumble's safe deposit company. Marty said: "Follow me, and let me do the talking."

"Who else?" Nancy asked. Eva said nothing, crossing the sidewalk. Soon she was busy using the window of the bank for a mirror, poking at her nearly black hair—but surely it would dry lighter—with her fingertips. The curl was natural, not even Nancy's tender ministrations had wiped it out.

The blue coats of the bank were gone, the gray coats of the safe deposit company were getting ready to close in ten minutes. Mr. Oakes himself appeared at their request for the remaining pictures; but he never said a word. Remembering past tips, the guards were alert and efficient; the twelve portraits went into the cab.

THEY pulled out again, but this time riding was not pleasant; the pictures started at the front end of the floor, tilted back, and a sideview was all they got of the world of Hollywood. "Downtown again, to Virgil and Beverly," Marty said. Crammed back behind the wrapped frames, he didn't even get much satisfaction out of Mr. Oakes' silent wrath as they had left him.

He wriggled around to look out the rear window. "A gent never kneels on a lady's lap," Eva said. Marty said idly: "You read it in a book."

Before Nancy could say a word, Marty said: "Shut up, Nancy. What you're thinking is obvious."

Eva began her slow-crying act. "Laughing at me because I didn't go to college," she said. "I'll have you know lots of troupers read books, they know more than

a bunch of saps that took a free ride through a university on papa's money."

"Isn't it wonderful," Marty said, still looking through the rear window. "Just wonderful. We've gotten so we can read each other's minds. This may be the great love affair of all time."

"You're making fun of me again," Eva said. "You don't love me. I like to be loved! I don't care who knows it, it's very comforting for a girl to be loved, and I like it. I don't mean I have to do anything about it, but it's just awful, going around with a man who doesn't even think you're pretty, and then having your hair ruined as well."

"I do love you," Marty said. Having satisfied himself there was no one following him, he settled back, resumed his old stance, an arm around each pair of shoulders. "I love you, but I don't dare do anything about it, as you say, because we are about to cross a state line, and you know how the law reads."

"She probably knows that law better than I do," Nancy said, "and I spent four years in law school—not on my father's dough. I worked my way through."

"I'll bet I know how," Eva said, stopping crying.

"Girls, girls," Marty said. "Teacher is getting a frightful headache. Left here, driver."

XV

UNDER MARTY'S DIRECTION, the cab left Los Angeles, and wound its way through the smug suburbs—Glendale, Montrose, La Canada, which is pronounced in the Spanish way, and not like our neighbor to the north. Then, without warning, State Highway 2 became a mountain road, winding up Mt. Disappointment to the spur, and towards Mount Wilson.

Approaching the junction at the Federal fire station where the road branched, Marty held his breath; if Bill had misunderstood, and stopped them here, the plan wouldn't work. But no police cars were visible at the fork; in the station yard itself, one lone green pickup was being washed by a couple of guys in khaki shirts and green pants.

The last glimmer of the day was gone; as they went up the narrow and winding road to the observatory, their headlights picked out trees and boulders, and their limited side view began to show them howling chasms below them. Then they came out at the top.

Marty left the girls in the cab, and got out near the parking lot. Bill's hoarse voice called from the dark parking lot. "Marty, boy?"

They had been acquaintances a long time; Bill had never called him anything but Cockren. Marty answered: "In person, sheriff."

Harrison came out of the gloom. "Everything okeydokey, pal? I've got a car parked in the Forest Service garage down there, under wraps; if we need help, we can get it from the rangers."

"We won't need it," Marty said. "I just wanted to be absolutely certain that I had shaken off anyone following me or Mrs. Chounet. I'm going to wait five minutes, and then head back down; as soon as I get through, have them close the road, and hold up anybody following me for twenty minutes; it's all I need."

Two cars had already come in after Marty; they parked, joining another twenty, people staying at the resort, or up to attend the nightly lecture at the observatory. A deer walked calmly past them, not five feet away.

"I never been up here before," Harrison said. "There's deer as tame as dogs. And you oughta see the view—"

"I've seen it," Marty said.

"Sure. Well, look, you want me to follow you down or—"

"I want to be inconspicuous," Marty said. "Being followed by a police car is not my idea of that. I can't cut you in on this, Bill, not just now. A man in a job like yours, he'd have to tell someone over or under him where he's going. And I can't trust anyone."

Harrison cleared his throat.

"Except you, Billy boy, except you," Marty said, and walked to his cab. In the gloom, Harrison's white cuffs showed waving; then they were rolling back down the mountain. Marty rode on the jump seat with the driver, preferring it to the strained relations back in the ladies' compartment; but he made the mistake of saying: "An extra fifty bucks if you get

to Burbank air field in forty minutes."

The view of the road going down at high speed was not calculated to soften anybody's arteries. Marty began to feel sick. He lowered his head to his knees.

"It gets me that way too," said the driver.

They shot past the sign: Red Box Guard Station. Marty cranked down his window.

When he stuck his head out, wind whipped at his hair, made his ears ring; but behind him was the reassuring sight of cars with red headlights rolling out across the road.

Then they were back in La Canada, "Keep on Foothill," Marty said.

"Take five minutes more thataway," the driver said. "I been to Roscoe way, but it's slower."

"Okay. You get the fifty anyway. I forgot to tell you, no fair taking it off my dead body."

Marty gave his head another beating craning back. Nothing was following! He'd been smarter, all along the way. The old feeling of accomplishment came back to him, the one that had been wiped out when he heard about the crash of the airliner. But now he was using no decoys, leaving no innocent parties behind to be hurt by his stratagems; and still, he was outdistancing them all, the successful people, the rich people, the powerful and ruthless people; the people who had had so much more experience thinking voraciously than he had.

THEY turned off Foothill, they went through Roscoe and bumped over railroad tracks, they rolled down San Fernando Road; the traffic lights were marked 30 M.P.H., but the driver went sixty, and seemed to manipulate them all right.

He had the sheriff's credentials Bill Harrison had given him, if they were stopped.

Then they went through a gate, and around some buildings, and the driver stopped, and said: "Forty minutes, anyway."

Marty gave him his fifty, and the other half of the hundred dollar bill. The cabby took them, looked shrewd. "Ya don't have to give me that other half," he said. "My piece was the bigger, an' the law is, a big piece of a bill can be cashed. Bet you didn't know that."

"No," Marty said, "it's very educational to meet a man like you. Help me out with those pai—packages."

The driver and he pulled the portraits out. At once the girls piled after them; in the floodlights Marty saw that Eva's hair was dry now, and was no darker than Nancy's; he saw that much, but he didn't wait to hear anything, because he wasn't in the mood to listen to women; he would have liked to sign on as cook on the Monkey Island in the St. Louis Zoo. A neon sign flashed across the back of his eyeballs:

TIRED OF WOMEN?
TRY OUR HIGHER APES.

The fancy pleased him. He ducked inside the terminal building and headed for a desk marked Service for Private Planes. "I'm looking for a pilot named Monkey Ward."

A very neat looking woman with silver hair and a young face smiled, and said: "Mr. Aarons?"

"I work for him," Marty said.

The woman reached in a drawer and took out a letter; it had Andy Aarons' name on the outside. All the happy feeling left Marty; it was starting again. He held on to his courage, his optimism, as though they were physical things; the pilot was out by his plane, he wanted Marty to sign a charter or—

The letter was simple: "Had to go into town for some parts; somebody cannibalized my ship. Should be back before morning. Ward." Whoever Monkey Ward was, he was not chatty. Marty would have liked him, he knew that. He said: "I wonder if there's a pilot who can fly three people and a little freight out of here, right now?"

The pretty lady said: "I shouldn't be surprised. Give me fifteen minutes."

"Make it five, and I'll love you for ever."

He turned away, and froze. Five minutes was too much, one minute was too much. Time was now negative, they had dipped under zero; Eva had made a pickup. She was standing, talking to a guy, a guy in a blue coat and gray flannels. He said, dully to the lady: "What does cannibalize mean?"

"On a plane? That somebody has bor-

rowed some of your parts."

"What I thought." Marty walked slowly towards Eva and her beautiful guy. Nancy stood there, guarding the packages, the paintings, looking as distressed as Marty felt. All around them the foot traffic of the building surged and swung, students with pilots, pilots with other pilots, a group holding a meeting, voting about something.

And there was a possibility that this was not the guy that had crippled Monkey's ship. Or that nobody had crippled Monkey's ship, that it was just a stroke of bad luck. Monkey had not written as though he was very alarmed.

He said: "Eva." He hoped he didn't put into it all the disapproval he had felt.

She said: "Oh, Marty, this is Jimmy Gayhart."

Marty had heard the name before. Where? Oh, yeah, Fresno. Eva's boy friend who flew a plane. Fresno had seemed surprised that they didn't use him. Fresno had been in no shape to go into detail, or ask questions, but like the good friend he was—or had been—Marty thought dully—he had supplied an absolutely fool proof guy. Who had been fooled with.

Marty said: "My name's Cockren, Mr. Gayhart."

GAYHART was distinctly a man of distinction. His prematurely white hair had probably never been darker than duckling fluff when he was young; he had the light blue eyes that cost a lot of Scotch and bonded bourbon; his massaged face was red and round.

"Of course, you're Cockren. Saw a picture of you with Eva here, in the papers."

This guy had enough good will to float a balloon. If he flew you, you couldn't crash. "Most newspaper pictures are readily interchangeable," Marty said. The neon sign came back on, and he added: "They make everyone look like a higher ape."

"Yes," the red face said, "but higher than what?"

Marty had the feeling of a man who had been creeping along on his belly in a jungle, not sure whether he was hunting or being hunted. Now he could stand up. "You've known Mrs. Chounet a long time?" he said.

"I'm mad about the girl," Mr. Gayhart said. He almost said "gel." He was almost English, not not quite. "Though I think of her as Eva, you know, not Mrs. Chounet. Damn funny."

"Want to fly her—and Miss Summers here—and me?"

"Oh, but rather. All I ever do you know, fly pretty girls around, here, there—anyplace. Can leave on a moment's notice. Got a dandy plane."

"Rripping?" Marty asked.

"Ripping," Mr. Gayhart said. He laughed. "Mustn't mind the way I talk. Mind telling me where we're going, old sock?"

"Old fruit," Marty said, "Plumas. Know it?"

"Don't I just," he shook his head. "Filthy place. But I know where it is. Down near the border, the Mexican border."

Oh, good. Mr. Gayhart knew that the United States was bordered on the south by Mexico. "That's right," Marty said.

"But there's nothing there," Mr. Gayhart said. "Nothing! One bar, full of redfaced fellows, engineers, you know. No girls, no hotel, no night club. Been there, you know, it's near the gulf, Gulf of California that is, not Mexico, and believe me, old man, the Eva I know isn't going to like it there."

"Business, old man," Marty said. "Dull old business."

Mr. Gayhart pursed his mouth over his shining white teeth. "Eva, on a business trip?" Then a light dawned; everything—his fine shave, his clear eyes, his sunburned nose—beamed. "I know. That stupid will!"

"Right," Marty said. He restrained himself from telling Mr. Gayhart to go to the head of the class.

"I say," Mr. Gayhart said, "it's going to be fun to get in on that."

"The pleasure is all yours," Marty said . . .

MARTY opened his eyes; he looked left, and there was Nancy's profile, darker than the night sky outside the window of the plane. He looked right, and down below were lights; Yuma, he thought. He looked straight ahead, and there were Mr. Gayhart and Mrs. Chounet; her jaw was going up and down, but the

motor noise drowned her out. As he watched, her chattering jaw stopped, her head went back, and a bottle appeared from below the level of her seat back; bottle went to mouth, jaw closed, bottle came down, and jaw started wagging again.

He thought of a wisecrack about being fond of mechanics to tell Nancy; he thought of a sexier wisecrack about crossing the state line, which they just had done. He let them both go, though they weren't bad. It was too nice to lie there, half asleep, to lie with his left cheek against the genuine leather seat cushion, to just lie there and look at Nancy's profile and the stars behind it.

She was a very pretty girl, in profile, and quiet. Fullface, her eyes were too bright, too aggressive; talking she was too fast, her humor a little too barbed. In profile, against the stars, it was hard to believe she was the tough lawyer.

Marty wondered drowsily what made a girl with that profile go in for criminal law. Not money, not love of notoriety. Certainly not lack of opportunity to do anything else. Not fate, not drifting the way Marty had drifted into everything he'd ever done.

There was only one answer, and you'd never guess it unless you saw her profile, against the stars, flying through a lovely night. Nancy was in love with the underdog, she was a fighter for righteousness—and she'd kill you if you accused her of it. But there was no underdog in this mess, there was only—Marty.

He reached out, and fumbled for her hand. He put it against his cheek. "I just fell in love," he said. "With your profile."

He couldn't tell whether she heard him or not; the motor was roaring, and he was not talking very loud. But she let him hold her hand against his cheek, and then she bent over and kissed him, very softly, on his forehead.

"Go to sleep, Marty," she said. "You're doing just fine. You'll fool 'em all, Marty."

He smiled. She straightened up again, and then he saw her profile change, her jaw jut out a little, her lips purse. He looked forward.

Eva was standing up, her life belt holding her back. As he watched, she bent forward, caught her skirt, and pulled it up; but the belt defeated her. No doubt her shoes had just banged against the cowling.

Defeated in her purpose, she dropped back into her seat again.

Beside him, Nancy was shaking with laughter, just audible over the roar of the motors. She reached over and got Marty's elbow, shook him. "Laugh," she yelled. "Where's your sense of humor?"

But he didn't feel like laughing. Eva's dress-saving act had been very funny the first time he saw it, funnier yet when he showed it to Nancy. But then Eva had stopped drinking; she had said she only got drunk when she was scared.

Marty said: "I thought I had her calmed down."

"You're a bodyguard," Nancy said. Her voice was shrill, unattractively so, but that was to carry over the racket of the plane. "You trying to reform her?"

Marty said: "She's got a lot of guts."

The profile had hardened now, the jaw jutted, the lips were thin. "Not thinking of marrying money, are you, Cockren? Not thinking of retiring?"

"In a sense that I could use sleep," Marty yelled back, "yes." He turned on his other shoulder, so that he couldn't see Nancy; but sleep was a long time coming. . . .

The plane had wavered in its course; now Mr. Gayhart got back to business, and they flew along levelly in the still and starry night. . . .

Mr. Gayhart's plane—like Mr. Gayhart—had everything Mr. Gayhart wanted. When the sun was level with the nose of the ship, he picked up a telephone that didn't seem harder to operate than the one in Marty's apartment. He phoned a few moments, then yelled back: "Car'll meet us at Plumas Airport!"

Marty unbuckled his belt, and went forward, down the short passageway. "Didn't tell them we had Eva aboard?"

"None of their business," Mr. Gayhart said.

MARTY sat back down in his seat, satisfied. He rubbed his legs, which felt like garden hose that had been left out in the sun. Nancy was asleep. Her hair was stringy and tumbling over her face; her skirt had slid over one knee, to disclose not glamor, but a run; her nose was shiny,

and mascara had run down from one eye. Her hands, slightly soiled, fluttered over her face, trying to keep the dawn out of her eyes. But still she looked good to Marty, better than the wisecracking jurist, or the glamor dame who competed wilh Eva.

He looked over the side. Below was desert, more desert, and nothing but desert. Away south on the horizon was a purple shimmer that might well mean moisture, lying over the Gulf of California; you couldn't prove it by Marty. There were no newspapers to be fired from on the Tiburon Islands; he'd never been there.

Mr. Gayhart looked around at Marty, a gesture that made Marty nervous, though there was certainly no danger of running into anyone up here. Mr. Gayhart continued to look at Marty until Marty went forward.

Now, in daylight, he saw why the plane had a passageway, a strange thing for a four-placer. This had been conceived by its designer as a vehicle to carry six people, or possibly more, but the middle two seats had been removed, and a miniature cocktail lounge installed.

It was a hell of a big plane. Two motors. It seemed queer that a man as simple-minded as Mr. Gayhart—to put it politely—should be so good a pilot. But someone, probably Arthur Brisbane, had once said that a gorilla could be—

Ye gods, the higher apes again.

"Yes, Mr. Apehart?" Marty asked, leaning on the back of the pilot's seat.

But Mr. Gayhart didn't notice. He gestured over towards Eva. "What in the world happened to her hair?"

"Too conspicuous." Marty said. "I had her dye it."

"God Lord man, you're courageous," Mr. Gayhart said. "Awfully glad to know you." He put a hand back and Marty shook it. "Eva's frightfully vain of her hair. Natural curl, natural color. Heard her brag about it a hundred times."

"I may be courageous," Marty said. "But you can take it."

Mr. Gayhart didn't get it, but he laughed. After all, he was the host. "Didn't you like it?" he asked.

Marty took a deep breath. He didn't know a soul in Plumas, didn't know anything about the town that was now nearing the horizon except that it was the official address of the Arizona Baugnite Company, and presumably the location of its mines. He might need this simple joe to help him; and the egg did seem wholeheartedly an admirer of Eva's. "Look, Mr. Gayhart," Marty said. "An awful lot of people, some of them rough, some of them unscrupulous—stand to make an awful lot of money if Eva doesn't get those pictures hung. Within a month."

Mr. Gayhart turned to look at him, and again Marty wished he'd look at the road before he remembered that there wasn't any road to look at. Before he opened his mouth, Marty knew what Mr. Gayhart was going to say. He said it. "You mean—"

"I mean that Eva is very likely to be killed, if they—that mysterious, unidentifiable they—catch up with her. Therefore the disguise."

"They?" Mr. Gayhart shook his head. "But surely you know who *they* are. I mean, who stands to benefit?"

He was making better sense than Marty had expected. "A half dozen big shots. And the whole thing isn't made up in the mind of a romantic ex-newspaperman." Briefly he told Mr. Gayhart about the car that had tried to knock them off the road, about the car with the sawed-through bolts, about the killing of the three extras.

"By Moses," Mr. Gayhart said, "they're not going to do things to Eva like that. I've got some influence. Rich man, y'know. Give me a list of the possibles and I'll have the police pick them up, hold them till Eva's finished what she has to do, spent her month—"

MARTY laughed. He looked over his shoulder, and saw Nancy was awake, her face and poise restored, and seeing him laughing, she started forward. When he looked back, Mr. Gayhart was deftly, absentmindedly trimming ship so that it stayed on a dead level keel despite her passage.

"Did I say something funny?" Mr. Gayhart asked. He was paying no attention to his hands, or feet, he was a wonderful flier, if vapid.

"Brother, you are the Marx Brothers and three radio programs all rolled in one. Sure you've got influence, you're rich.

How far does that go against such lads as the president of the Tenouch-Angeles Hotels, the president of a couple of banks, the president of the Arizona Baugnite Company?"

Nancy joined them now, and Mr. Gayhart turned, gave her one of his meaningless smiles, then frowned forward into space. He seemed to be concentrating, and that was right, because Plumas was dead under them—a city a quarter mile square—geometrically laid out, identical white stucco houses all in one part, wooden shacks in another, four big red tiled mansions on the only hill—a factory with a huge blue reservoir, a pile of tailings or slag or slush or whatever is left when baugnite is extracted from the ore—and a railroad cutting its heart, separating the wooden shacks from the stucco and the red tile.

There was an airport off to one side, and white letters: PLUMAS—ARIZONA BAUGNITE CORP.

"Company town," Marty said. "Bad." He wished he had the undoubtedly—since recommended by Fresno—tough Monkey Ward with him instead of a flying polo-player.

Mr. Gayhart circled the airport deftly, and then laughed, and it was apparent that it had not been concentration on the landing that had made him frown. Hardly looking at what he was doing so well, Mr. Gayhart said to Nancy: "This fella's quite a card, isn't he? Been telling me boogie stories to scare me."

Marty said: "Mr. Gayhart—"

But Nancy had seen something he hadn't. She put a hand on his wrist to quiet him, and nodded at the pilot. Mr. Gayhart's broad beam seemed to rival the desert sun. "Trying to scare me of the president of the Arizona Baugnite Corp," he said. "Nonsense."

"Even if you knew him," Marty said. "You don't know what he'd do to get control of the company he works for. You can't know a man that well—"

"Oh, but I do," Mr. Gayhart said. "I do." The wheels of the plane went down, the ground bumped almost imperceptibly, and they were taxiing for a hangar. "I do know him that well. You see—I'm president of the Arizona Baugnite Corporation."

He stopped the plane, and men came running to open doors. Eva woke up, and looked for her shoes, and there seemed to be nothing to do but follow Mr. Gayhart out into the blinding sun that shone on Mr. Gayhart's town of Plumas, Arizona.

XVI

THERE WAS INDEED A CAR waiting at the airport. In fact two cars—a shining Cadillac, five passenger convertible, hot and cold running water, and a station wagon; both cars were ornately monogrammed, but not so ornately that Marty couldn't make out the initials J.G.

Marty thought, the guy has one car for us, one for him, and ours is gimmicked; he'll think I won't expect them to use the same thing twice. But that wasn't why there were two cars; the station wagon was to take the driver of the Cad back to town. As soon as the two—uniformed, of course—chauffeurs had taken what luggage there was out of the plane and loaded it in the station wagon, they both started to get into it.

Marty said: "Just a minute. The paintings."

Mr. Gayhart said: "Of course, I imagine the lads thought they were not luggage. Well, paintings really aren't luggage, are they?"

He called the chauffeurs over. The portraits came out of the plane all right. "They ride with us," Marty said, "or Eva and I ride with them."

"Come now," Mr. Gayhart said. "You can't expect me to ride through town with a monstrous big package like that in my car? They don't often get to see me here, and—well, it would be bad for morale, y'know. I'm hardly ever here, old fellow, and when you see Plumas, you'll know why. Hardly know a mine from a hole in the ground." He stopped and laughed. "More salesman type myself, don't you think?"

"The paintings," Marty said. "The paintings."

"Quite so. Well, old man, you hardly expect me to steal a bunch of paintings of old Chounet, do you? Ugly old chap."

"No," Marty said. "Of course not. If you stole them, any court would say

you had been acting in your own interest—Yeah, I wish you would steal them. Solve all my troubles."

"Quite so, old boy. Knew you'd come to it. Any man smart enough to get such a pretty lawyer—" Mr. Gayhart beamed at Nancy.

"He worked that one out for himself," Nancy said. "He's getting to be quite a big fellow. Next year I'm going to let him eat in the cafeteria instead of taking his lunch to school."

The sleepy Eva—hung over—stood swaying. "Jimmy, baby, I gotta have coffee. Jimmy, you couldn't refuse me a little thing like coffee, could you?"

"Nor the whole world with a string around it," Mr. Gayhart said. He hadn't shaved, he had been piloting a plane all night in those clothes, it was beginning to be terribly hot—an hour after dawn—but Mr. Gayhart looked wonderful. He looked as though he was about to be presented to King George at whatever was the pilots' equivalent of the Cowes regatta.

Marty, remembering the contempt he had felt for Mr. Gayhart just a short while ago, felt ice form in his belly, contradicting the heat on his skin in a most uncomfortable way.

Down the field a highly painted car must be a taxicab. Marty whistled at its driver shrilly; the cab started up from where it was waiting in front of the main building and ran down the glaring white road towards him.

Jimmy Gayhart said: "Come now, you don't want to ride in that thing! My car's big enough for us all or—I say—we'll leave the boys here and you and Miss Nancy ride in the station wagon, one of the boys at the house can come back for the—oh, you know what I mean."

Despite what was a good deal more than just a suspicion, Marty found it hard to be rough on the foolish looking president of the Arizona Baugnite Corporation. He said: "I'm sorry, but it's my duty to Eva to protect her from anybody who might benefit by her death. We'll ride a public taxicab, we'll stay at a public hotel."

MR. GAYHART looked as if he was going to cry. "That's most awful rot, Cockren. If I'd wanted to hurt Eva—why, Lord, man, I'd have hit the silk last night, and you'd all have been conked out."

"I realize that and appreciate it," Marty said, "with every ounce of insincerity in my body. Nevertheless, taxicab, hotel, thanks a lot for the plane ride, and—see you unexpectedly later."

Eva said: "I feel awful. I don't care who I ride with, or what I do, but—I gotta have coffee."

The taxicab was standing there waiting. Marty said: "Nancy, take her down to the main building there and get her coffee."

"Don't call me 'her,'" Eva said. "I can't stand being called 'her' or 'she.'"

"Come on then," Nancy said, and led the heiress away.

Mr. Gayhart said: "At least you'll let me lend you my boys to stow your stuff?"

"Sure, sure." Marty said. At the brilliant happiness of Mr. Gayhart's face, he winced; it was so easy to like this guy, so easy to make this likable guy happy, and he was so happy when he was happy at all. He stood and watched the millionaire giving orders to his chauffeurs and the driver of the taxicab; the paintings went on the roof of the taxicab, and an airport employee brought rope, and Mr. Gayhart lashed the big package to the roof. Marty climbed up there; he was no Boy Scout but the job seemed superbly tight, the knots genuine.

"Don't worry," Mr. Gayhart said. "I've been in the Navy, you know, Naval aviation I ended up, but they really teach you knots in the Navy. Don't get to use it often," he added, wistfully.

Marty turned on him. "Listen, pal. If you'll tell me one thing, maybe we can be playmates again. What did your father do?"

"Do? Do?" Mr. Gayhart frowned. "Oh. He was a motorman on a street car in Boston."

Marty sighed. "Sorry. That does not earn you the trip to the moon on our special Crunchie Wunchie rocket ship." He waved a hand. "You earned all this yourself?" The hand included the airport, the desert, the cloud of black smoke beginning to rise from the baugnite plant over the slope of the ground.

"Well, not all at once," said Mr. Gayhart with the air of a man trying to be scrupulously honest. "I sold steel first,

railroad steel and bridges and so on. Just did it by loving my fellow man, y'know."

"No," Marty said. "My fellow woman, yes."

"Oh, I say. I just acted the ass, and everybody liked me, and after awhile my commissions were something stupendous, and we bought baugnite for our plant, and old man Chounet—no disrespect to the dead, y'know—gave me a chance to buy in here as second largest stockholder and president."

"Oh." Marty said. "I've been acting the silly ass, as you say, all my life, and I'm not up to being second cook on a garbage scow . . ."

Mr. Gayhart said: "I wish you'd trust me. I'm a good salesman, and all good salesman are unhappy unless they are making friends and influencing people."

"At the end of the month," Marty said. "It's a date. I'll like you all over when Eva's estate is secure."

"I say," Mr. Gayhart said. "I am glad about Eva getting to be chief stockholder. Bit sticky doing business with old man Chounet."

"No disrespect to the dead," Marty said.

"Of course not," said Mr. Gayhart, his face becoming serious. "But it was a bit sticky doing business with him. Met Eva when he asked me to look her up and see if I couldn't get anything on her, so he could stop paying her alimony. Told her so, of course. After all, even for money, a man can't be a complete cad."

"Tell me one thing more," Marty said, "Though there's no payoff on this. Did you talk like that when you were in the Navy?"

"Well, love me, no. Made it up when I started selling steel. All the office boys and little stenographers in my customers' offices would imitate me, kept me in the customer's mind, y'know."

"I'l be damned," Marty said. "I'll be seeing you, Jimmy." He started to get into the cab.

Mr. Gayhart said: "Thanks. Thanks a lot for calling me Jimmy."

LOOKING back through the rear window of the cab, Marty watched the round red face put out its best, ten carloads of tool steel smile. He shook his head, and told the driver to stop at the airport building.

Nancy and Eva came out arguing, "I don't see why I can't stay at Jimmy's place. I've heard about, it's fabulous. It's got everything you could ask for, and instead we have to go to some crumbag of a hotel so you and Marty can show off."

Marty climbed wearily out of the cab, shoved the dames in, climbed into the front seat next to the driver. "This window crank up from the front?"

The driver cranked it. "I know how it is. My wife's two sisters live with us. Dames."

"Dames," Marty agreed. "The ladies, bless them. Do they really talk as much as I think they do?"

"I don't know," the driver said. "I thing maybe it's just because if a guy talked as much as some dames do, you'd walk away. With dames, you gotta be polite."

"A fact," Marty said. "Not eight o'clock yet, and I've heard a fact for today."

"You hit me good," the driver said. "Sometimes I go three weeks and don't think of a thing ain't dumb. Ya goin' to the hotel?"

Marty nodded. They were going through the wooden shack part of town. Wooden shacks were apparently inhabited by Mexicans, or maybe they were Indians. Purple baugnite dust lent a spurious gaiety to the scene. But the people didn't look gay, despite white teeth and bright colored clothes.

Marty said: "How do people think of the Arizona Baugnite Corporation here?"

The driver said: "Aw swell people to work for. Swell, mister." He looked straight ahead, his chin drawn down to his chest a little. His lips thinned out.

"No," Marty said. "On the level."

"Wasn't that Mr. Gayhart you flew in with?" the driver asked. "The guy you called Jimmy? Swell guy, Mr. Gayhart."

"Swell," Marty said. "I don't work for him. Now that I learn how swell it is, I wish I did. Swell. Gee it must be swell to work for such a swell corporation with such a swell president."

"G'wan," the hackie said. "Have a good time. You're paying for the ride."

Marty said: "Yeah. That's right. And you get what you pay for—" He reached

to his hip for the magic wallet, in which a good part of Eva's money still rested. "What do you get a week, fella?"

The driver looked at the long green out of the corner of his eye. "Forty a week, tips, if any which there ain't, and a company house to live in, rent twenty-five a month."

"Company? Never heard of a taxicab company having houses."

The driver snorted. "You're in Plumas, mister." He was still driving with an eye and three-quarters; the other quarter of an eye remained on the money. Marty peeled off two hundreds. "We'll be here a day, maybe a little longer. You drive us. This ain't for that—it's in case I turn out to be a company spy, and you do get fired."

The two hundred dollars disappeared inside a khaki pants pocket. "Mister, you just made a friend."

They bumped over railroad tracks, and now the houses were stucco . . . the children dressed in the very latest thing Margaret O'Brien wore in her new picture, the women in shorts and halters that they thought made them cooler than the Mexican gals' rebosos and full skirts. There were green lawns for work-tired engineers and clerks to cut when the Arizona Baugnite Corp. released them from their day's labor. There was a view, if you didn't mind getting a stiff neck, of the hill where the red tiled mansions perched.

IT WAS a perfect, scientifically designed, architecturally-supervised stable for the goats who led the company's Mexican sheep.

"What was the meaning of the crack about this being Plumas?" Marty asked. "Why should the—" he craned his neck out of the side window to read the name on the taxi door—"The Plumas Cab Co., Inc., be in the real estate business more than any other taxi company?"

The driver snorted. "You're in, brother. You ain't a company spy; the ABC wouldn't hire one that didn't know more than you. Mister, the cab company's six taxis and a telephone in the garage are marked ABC."

"Arizona Baugnite Corp.?" Marty asked.

"Locally known as Ask Before Chewing. Some fella said that once, meanin' a company employee puts a bite of food in his mouth, and then calls the office to find out—"

Marty said: "Yeah, yeah, I get it . . . So the cab company's a wholly owned subsidiary of ABC."

"And so is everything else in town. What you called it, a wholly owned—"

The taxi made a right angle—there being no other angles in Plumas—and was in a square. Facing the square the Baugniteers Bar, the Plumas Mercantile Corporation, the ABC Grocery. There was a building that flew an American flag, so either the USA had sent a consul to the ABC or that was a postoffice. There was another building that flew both an American and an Arizona state flag, but that was easy, because that building was plainly marked Court House.

There was the Baugnite House, which was a hotel, and there they stopped. It was a big place, only four stories high but long, and fronted with an arcade that protected the sidewalk from the sun, and made a shopping street for a restaurant, a bar, and a bunch of little specialty stores.

"Welcome to Plumas," the driver said. I'll be in front here when you want me; all I gotta do is call the garage, and tell 'em a friend of Mr. Gayhart's hired me by the day."

"A deal," Marty said.

"Ask for Bud if you want me. Call the doorman and ask for Bud."

"I'll do that," Marty said. He got out, and opened the door for the girls. Nancy climbed out first; she looked tired. Then Eva, and he still wasn't used to the red hair being brown. Bud told the doorman—sotto-voce more or less—that these people flew in with Mr. Gayhart, and the doorman ran off to get a squad of bellboys to handle the luggage and take the paintings off the roof of the cab.

Marty said: "What's the local opinion of Mr. Gayhart, as a person?"

"He's all right," Bud said. "He's swell. It's swell working in such a swell town for such a swell company that has such a swell boss. The son of a b——"

XVII

BECAUSE OF THE ARCADE, YOU stepped away from the cab in shade,

and the shade was hot and sticky where the little strip of sun between cab and curb was hot and burning and dry.

Marty stood there, watching his little group cross from the gray shade under the arcade to the absolute shade inside the hotel, and he noticed a curious thing; the passersby had stopped, as though they were afraid to get in the way of characters important enough to stop at the Baugnite House.

The passersby were just what you'd see in any southwestern town; redfaced mining men, cowboyish looking guys off the ranches, Mexicans, Indians, a sprinkling of Chinese. But the Mexicans didn't look gay, the Indians looked gray instead of copper; the cowboys' lips were a little too thin. Or maybe it was his imagination.

Bud had pulled into a U-turn, and nothing blocked Marty's view. Across the street there was a public park, oleanders and smoke-trees, very green grass—at what expense of water only the city knew—some Washington palms. Three little kids, two of them coppery-colored and one tow haired, played chase or tag or some one of those games distinguishable only to the players. Marty stood watching them, entranced; because they ran and whooped, They slapped at each other and fell to one hand on the curves—just like kids anyplace else, just like kids all over the world—well-fed kids, that is.

But—and it was maybe the grimmest thing Marty had ever seen—no matter how exciting the game got, how excited the players—they stopped short of putting so much as one bare foot on the city's park grass.

Marty shivered, and went into the hotel.

Signing the register, he saw that the hotel was owned by the Gaychou Corp., which was at least better than the Tenouch-Angeles. In a way it was funny that the Tenouch didn't run this, but apparently Chounet had kept everything separate, the one from the other, like a kid piling all the blue blocks in one corner and all the red ones in another and—

"Ye gods, I'm tired," Marty said.

"Aren't we all," Eva smiled. "I could sleep for a week."

Nancy didn't say anything. She stood in the back of the elevator, her head bent slightly, her feet apart, apparently staring at a space between her feet. When they got to the fourth floor, she followed Marty, who followed Eva, who followed the boys with the luggage, who followed the boys with the paintings. The procession ended up in the hotel's only suite, two bedrooms, a living room, but only one bath. Marty distributed tips, and the happy bellboys went away. Marty wondered idly if they had to split their tips with the ABC.

Nancy came out of her reverie, and said: "Eva, baby, you get the bathroom first."

"Why, thanks," Eva said. "I'm going to soak for an hour. Is it all right to wash my hair?"

Nancy started; whatever thought occupied her had dragged her back into its depths. They did not look like a happy place to dwell.

"Sure," she said. "Certainly, if it comes off, it's served its purpose, it got us out of Los Angeles. Right, Marty?"

Marty said: "Right." He knew now what was depressing Nancy. Eva went through the room where the bellboys had left the girls' bags, and flopped the alligator case open; carrying a negligee and a makeup box she disappeared into the bathroom that separated the two bedrooms. Nancy waited until the bathroom door closed and the water in the tub stopped running before she raised her head; she was still standing as she had in the elevator, looking at the floor. She looked at Marty, and her eyes were very shiny. "I wish—I know it sounds funny—but I wish I hadn't dyed her hair. Maybe you don't understand, but she's so proud of her red hair, and she'd hate it if she knew it was never going to be red again."

"Hey," Marty said. "You're just tired. Don't talk like Eva's already dead, it's bad luck. They haven't got her yet."

"Haven't they?" Nancy asked.

MARTY took her elbow, and walked her, like a sleepwalker, to a chair. He pushed her a little, and she sat down. She let her head, with the long bob go back against the upholstered back of the chair, and her moist eyes stayed full on Marty's face. "Haven't they?" she asked again.

"Yeah," Marty said. "Yes, I guess they have." He laughed, and the sound of

it grated on his nerves. "I was so smart. I went all over the list, and picked this town because it was the only one that had a Chounet Company without a Tenouch-Angeles Hotel. I thought, a little desert town, a square-shooting desert sheriff—and I walk her into a place where one guy controls the whole town, everything, lock stock and barrel." He walked to the big deep set window, and his fist pounded the gritty sill. "Walked her, hell. Flew her in, with that one guy at the controls." He shook his head. "I might as well have put Andy Aarons' pistol to her head and pulled the trigger." He walked back into the middle of the room, stared around. "I hate phony Spanish furniture," he said. "And speaking of phonies—she's got one chance."

"If Mr. Gayhart is on the level."

"Sure," Marty said. "And the chances of that are what—one in a hundred, one in a million, one in—how many grains of sand are there on that desert out there?"

Nancy patted the arm of her chair, and went over and sat down. She leaned her head against his hip, and he stroked her hair gently. "Kid, you get out. Will you? There's nothing left to be done. They may not hurt you, but there's no use taking chances. There's nothing left to be done."

"Coming with me?" Nancy asked.

He shook his head. She couldn't see him, but she must have known he would, because she said: "But if there's nothing left to be done?"

"Well, hell, I did it," Marty said. He was trying hard not to sound noble. "I have to ride it down, like a broken bridge to a river bed."

Nancy jumped up from the chair, stood facing him. "Why? Why, Marty? It wasn't your fault. You were wonderful, you thought of things nobody could have thought of, you did a marvelous job. And then a coincidence comes up and smacks you in the face, the most impossible coincidence, you pick the one flier in a million—"

"No coincidence," Marty said.

"All right then," Nancy said. "I wanted to hear you say that. Because you know what it was, but you're too much of a gentleman to say it. Her own stupidity. She was too damned dumb to see through Jimmy Gayhart, too stupid to remember what it was he did for Chounet, or even that she'd met him through Chounet. So, because there aren't any brains under that red hair—" She stopped.

"Ex-red hair," Marty said. He stood up, and went back to the window. Nancy sank back in the chair. "You don't quit what you start," Marty said.

The girl's voice was spiteful. "Marty Cockren, noble! That's wonderful. Wait'll I tell the boys in the back room about that. She dropped her head again, and stretched her legs out, staring at the toes. Her voice went up a full octave, became childish. "I wouldn't want you noble, Marty."

"You don't want me, period," Marty said. "I've fallen in love with Eva."

"Nuts. That's more of your nobility. To make me go away."

Marty said: "I can't imagine where this is getting us."

Behind him, as he stood staring at the window, Eva came back. "Your turn, Nancy." Marty turned, to find her looking from one to the other. "Have you two been fighting again?"

Marty said: "Sure."

Eva continued to look at them. "You look different than you do when you've been fighting. You look worried. Is it about this being Jimmy Gayhart's town?" Marty gasped. "Yes. How in the world—"

"Didn't you know it?" Eva asked. "Why, Marty, I thought you knew everything. When I saw Jimmy last night, and you said we were going to Plumas—he used to want to bring me down here, he hardly ever came himself, but he said he owned a whole town, he wanted to show it to me— Why, Marty, Nancy, you look surprised! I thought Marty'd looked into Jimmy, and found out he was all right. Didn't you, Marty?"

"A small detail I overlooked. I was so upset about Monkey Ward not showing up, I grabbed at Jimmy. I might have known there are no breaks in this world."

Eva laughed. "Oh, well . . . You mean you didn't look into Jimmy, and he might be the one who's been trying to kill me? You know, I wouldn't be at all surprised. I never trusted him much, I always thought

there was something sneaky about a man who pretends to be dumb, when you and I and even Nancy know that Joe Chounet wouldn't have had a dumb bunny working for him. No, I wouldn't be surprised at all."

Nancy said: "And you're not scared?"

"Pooh," Eva said. "In fact, nuts. Marty'll think of something."

Nancy jumped up. She ran over and kissed Eva on the cheek. "If Marty hadn't just said he was in love with you, I'd almost begin to like you, Eva."

"He tells me he loves you," Eva said. "I'm going to take a nap."

Marty stared at them. "I'm sure glad two of us think I'm competent to handle this," he said. "The third one sure doesn't." But he couldn't help it; he felt better. He had been given a two to one vote of confidence.

EVA wandered into the bedroom, and fell flat on her face on the bed; Nancy, unzippering the side of her dress as she walked, went into the bathroom. Loudly she said something about people who didn't wash out tubs, and then there was first the noise of splashing, and then the noise of water running steadily. She came out of the bathroom, in stocking feet now with her dress gaping open modestly but sloppily, and saw Eva asleep; she came back into the front room. "Marty, you'll wait until I'm bathed?"

"I'd better," he said, "but how did you know I was going out?"

She shrugged. "My tub'll run over. What am I supposed to do. Can I help?"

He reached for his hips. "Take this gun," he said. "It's Andy Aarons'." A gangster gave me a second one that's supposed to be better. Are you any good at knot tying? Rope the front door of the suite to your foot, so you'll be sure to wake up—you're so tired you couldn't count on it—and I'll rig up something for you to sleep on here in the front room. I'll tell the hotel you're not to be disturbed, you repeat that to any casual help that might not have gotten the word, and shoot to kill if anybody comes in after all that."

She looked ghastly. "My tub'll run over," she said, without answering him, and disappeared. Not an immodest or casual or thoughtless girl, it was significant that, from the sound of the splashing, she left the bathroom door open when she bathed. She was scared, frightened of being alone even in her tub; and she was no fool.

If being scared was any indication of a high I.Q., Marty was right up there with the best. Cold sweat ran steadily down his chest.

Thinking about the sweat reminded him of something else; he got up to see if the windows were fastened, and what the chances were of somebody coming in through them.

They were, he found, permanently fastened, built into the outside surface of the thick walls, not to be opened. Of course, this was an air conditioned suite, otherwise he'd have been feeling the desert heat. And there was no cornice for anyone to human-fly up to the windows and shoot through the glass; the building was either adobe or imitation 'dobe, and the outside walls were smooth and impassable to anything less competent than a lizard.

He sank back in the chair. The tide was turning, his luck was coming back. He had picked a place by sheer accident that was impenetrable as a wine-cellar. As a bank vault, a vault not run by Mr. Oakes Trumble or by any other associate of the late, great Joseph Chounet. . . .

He tried to open his eyes. He was flying through the air in a two-motor plane with the Mt. Wilson Observatory set in the middle between a frame house where book was made and a hoist on which an expensive car was being greased.

Mt. Wilson's dome was open, and a sign on it said Galbreath Vanning, Navigator-at-law, and that was right, the lawyer was in there, finding out where the plane was going. But in the frame house Ray Fresno and Sherman Patrick would give you ten to one that it didn't matter, because the pilot knew everything, and anyway why bother because Raoul Chassey Brunner was bending over Marty and pouring a magnum bottle of the best glue on Marty's eyes. Which was very nice of Mr. Brunner because everyone knows that glue is the finest kind of sleeping medicine, and that was what Marty needed because—

The glue wouldn't go away, but whenever a bright space went by, that was the window, which was going around and around, and the plane was not in a tail-

spin, because this wasn't a plane but the suite in the hotel at Plumas, and—and that was Claude Sherman's gun in Marty's hand, and as the bright spot went by he fired.

The bright spot stopped going around, and there was ample noise, and the glue began to thin out, and Marty staggered to his feet, his sight returning, the room no longer whirling. He stuck his head out the shattered window, and gulped air, and was sober again, and he put the gun back into his pocket.

Eva was still lying on her face on the bed, her figure slight under the flimsy house coat, one bare foot crossed over the other ankle. She was flattened on the bed like—

Marty plunged past her, and into the bathroom where dark hair floated on the water, a long bob, its ends stringy, and he remembered that Nancy's wave wasn't natural, and she hated to get it wet. He grabbed her up, dripping, and the water wasn't cold yet; he thought of that and half his mind calculated how long he'd been out while the other half concentrated on making his still sick body stagger through the bedroom. He put her feet down near the window, and caught up the seat cushion from the chair in which he'd been sleeping, put it on the jagged glass edge, and laid her head there.

Then he went and got Eva, and put her on the floor next to Nancy, picked up a desk chair, and heaved it through the other living room window. He used a small Navajo rug to protect Eva's neck from broken glass, and stepped back, panting.

BUT the exertion, instead of weakening him, had cleaned his lungs out; he felt pretty good now. Nancy was beginning to move, and he went and pulled a candlewick spread off one of the beds, and put it over her. "Always the gentleman," he said, and felt for Eva's pulse; Nancy was coming to without difficulty.

There was hardly any pulse in the thin wrist. He had Eva down on the floor on her belly and was giving her artificial respiration when Nancy said: "Good lord, what's going on?"

"The sexiest scene since the fall of the Roman Empire," Marty said, without stopping his resuscitation. He looked over at Nancy. Now that the air conditioning was shorted, it was getting hot; he was dripping. He grinned, however, as Nancy looked down at her candlewick bedspread, and snatched it around her.

"What in the world are you doing?" she asked.

"Her pulse had almost stopped," Marty said, panting. "Somebody pumped something or other through the air vents."

"She may have no pulse," Nancy said, "but she certainly has a wicked gleam in her eye."

Marty stopped pumping, and bent over. Eva had regained consciousness, and was lying there smiling gently. He got up, restrained an impulse to paddle his client's rear end, and said: "Self-analysis is a difficult thing. Anger or passion, which am I suffering from?"

"Dust off your knees," Nancy said. She was not pert any more; reaction was setting in. "What was it, carbon-monoxide?"

"How do I know?" Marty said. "I'm a worse chemist than I am a detective."

Eva rolled over, and sat up, her shoulders under the sill of the broken window. "Someone's been pounding on the door for quite a while," she said.

"The management," Marty said. "I'll complain about the way this room's dusted." He slapped at his knees. "I'd like to get out of here. Eva, get back in the bedroom. Nancy, go get that gun I gave you, and get ready to mount guard."

"If you'll look the other way," she said.

"Locking the horse after the stable's burnt down," Marty said. "Who do you think pulled you out of the tub?" But he turned and stared out of the broken window. Craning out, he saw that there was no change in the street; a Mexican boy was sweeping up broken glass from in front of the arcade, more broken glass glittered on its roof.

Nancy came back, in a housecoat like Eva's. She had caught up her hair in a ribbon that matched the housecoat. She carried the gun in her right hand, letting it hang down against her thigh; it might not have looked like much gun to Patrick's mob but in the small hand, against the soft pattern and line of the housecoat's skirt, it looked tremendous.

"Don't get in front of a window if you have to shoot that thing, Marty said. "Or

the recoil'll knock you clear into Nevada."

He moved to the door. Nancy wished him good luck silently, with shaped lips and glistening eyes. He put his hand on the knob, and she cried: "Wait, Marty."

He stopped, put his back against the door. With the air-conditioning shorted, they were all sweating; the heat made the housecoats cling to the girls' figures. Eva's eyes were brighter than Nancy's. "If you go out, Marty, they'll kill you."

He shook his head. "Why? It's you they want."

"You've done too well," she said. "They know they can't get me while you're around."

"Nuts," he said. "If they think that way, they'll get me, as you call it, here. I'd rather be shot down in a bar room than starve to death up here."

"I'm going to phone Jimmy Gayhart," Eva said. "Tell him I quit. I'll sign over a paper or something to him."

This wasn't getting any place, but leaning against the closed door was pleasant, putting off the moment when he had to go throw himself to the wolves. He rolled his head sideways against the door. "Swell of you, but they'd never believe you, redhead."

"Is it really?" she asked. "Is the color coming back?"

"Sure," he said, lying like a gentleman. "Sure. But the brains under it aren't any— Hey!"

"You've got an idea," Eva said.

"Here we go again," said Nancy.

"It's an out," Marty said. "Check if legal, Nancy . . . Call up Jimmy Gayhart, and offer to marry him. As your husband, he gets half the whole thing, hotels, everything, instead of just all of ABC."

Nancy said: "There'll have to be a written pre-marital agreement. Under the community—"

Marty didn't look at her; he kept his eyes on Eva. He waved to Nancy to be quiet. "His own lawyer can draw the agreement," he said. "How about it, Eva? The guy loves you."

"But you don't," she said. "Or you wouldn't be—"

"Nuts," Marty barked. "I like you well enough to want to see you live. How about it?"

Eva said: "He asked me to marry him in the plane last night. I said no."

Nancy cried: "You idiot. Marty's right, it's the only way out. Why in the world—"

There was a certain dignity about Eva as she stood up, barefooted, slight, the light cloth touching her figure at all points. "Because I don't love him," she said, quietly.

Marty lifted his shoulders to his ears. "I'll be damned," he said. But he felt strangely proud. He turned, and opened the door, went out, and waited till he heard the latch clicking behind him.

Walking to the elevator, he was met by one of those hotel men they seem to turn out in marshmallow factories. "There was a chair found on the—"

"On the bill, bub," Marty said. "Put it on the bill."

XVIII

BUD HAD THE GAILY PAINTED taxicab waiting right in front of the hotel; the "flew in with Mr. Gayhart" line seemed to work, because it was parked under a sign saying, "ABSOLUTELY NO PARKING—RESERVED FOR POLICE CARS."

When he saw Marty, he ran and got behind the wheel. Marty climbed in next to him. "Bud, drive someplace where we can talk. I weesh to be alllone wiz you."

Bud said: "Swell," and cut the desert air leaving the curb at an immediate twenty-five miles an hour that almost tore the universal joint out of the cab. He took a road that seemed to go South; remembering the dreary expanse of desert behind Plumas as they came in for their landing, Marty asked where the road went.

"May-hee-co," Bud said. "There's a fishing port down there, they truck shrimps and fish up to the railroad thisaway. Useta truck bottle goods, before my time."

The road was nice and smooth, and there was no traffic on it. A couple of miles out of Plumas, Bud turned quickly to the right, his tires screaming; this road was dirt, and they bounced and chattered up it until the car lost momentum.

"You drive rough," Marty said.

"Wanted to show you I could ball the jack," Bud said. "In case you need it."

"You do a lot for two hundred dollars."

Bud stared at the dreary expanse of rocky hills and sage brush flats. "I expect more. It's all over town, you're the guy's gonna make the ABC change hands if they don't kill you and the lady first."

"Yeah," Marty said. "That's right. You get the big city papers here."

"Yeah," Bud answered. "They let us read the outside news. Which lady was it?"

"The one with the curly hair and the figure," Marty said. "Not the one with the long bob and the face. She used to have red hair, but we dyed it. . . . The papers say anything about a gambler named Ray Fresno?"

"Found dead," Bud said. "In the Los Angeles River in some water."

Marty shook his head. "Bud, you are a perfect compendium of sad information."

Bud said: "Huh?" and then waited while Marty watched a jack rabbit chase another jack rabbit across the desert.

Marty said: "It just occurred to me that it would be pleasant to be a jack rabbit, and then it occurred to me that it wouldn't . . . You married, Bud?"

"I tole you. Got a wife, she's got two sisters; we all live together. Some fellas would think I was lucky, living with three good-lookin'—"

"Yes, that's right," Marty said hastily. "You did tell me."

"They run aroun' with nothin't on to speak of—"

"Well, don't then," Marty said.

"You think I'd like it but—"

"Bud," Marty said loudly, "this is business. I asked you because what we're going to do is dangerous, and I wouldn't want a family man killed."

"You pay enough, and I do it," Bud said. "So it's enough to get me outa Plumas. Both the girls is engaged to guys here, and they wouldn't leave. But I wait around, for the comp'ny to give those guys raises so—"

"I'll pay enough," Marty said. "Two grand for a couple of days' work. And silence. I am one of the fine brains of the world, and I can't think when people are talking to me."

"No fooling?" Bud asked.

"There are five other cabs in Plumas, you said," Marty said. "And I drew you. The Cockren luck is still holding."

Bud said nothing. He looked at Marty with admiration. He had apparently always wanted to meet a fine brain.

MARTY SAID: "Who's the leading opponent of the ABC in Plumas?" When he got no answer, he said: "It's all right to answer my questions, Bud. Briefly."

"There ain't none. If opponent is a guy against the company."

"Well, listen," Marty said. "This is the U. S. A. There's always an against. Isn't there even a union in Plumas?"

"Yeah, sure. A brother of Samuels, he's vice president of the ABC, this brother is head of the union."

"Company union, eh?" Marty shook his head.

"You might call it that, yeah," Bud said. "On account of everybody who works for the company belongs to it. Yeah."

"And everybody works for the company," Marty said. He ran his hand over his face; it was drenching, sitting in the car; the sun beat down on the black roof, with the general effect of a telephone booth in Hell. Marty stepped out of the cab.

He leaned on the door, letting the full force of the sun hit him to dry the sweat. He began to itch.

"Yeah," Bud said, "you might say everybody works for the ABC." He shook his head. "There's some guys own little candy stores and beer bars, and so on. But they own 'em on company land. Y'see, there ain't nothing around here but the baugnite, not for almost a hundred miles. . . . Never even was Indians in here before the mine opened up."

"Cattle?" Marty asked.

Bud nodded. "Sure. Some cattle. Lots of these sections'll run a cow to forty acres. Some big cattle company over in California owns 'em."

Marty sighed, and burnt his hand on the chrome doorhandle, getting back into the car. "Probably the Choucow Cattle Corp.," he said.

"I dunno," Bud told him. "Just some big cattle company."

Marty settled back on the cushions, dropped his hat beside him. "Back to town," he said. "We're making no money out here."

Bud started the car. He drove half the distance to town in silence, though he occa-

sionally opened his mouth, then shut it again. Marty got fascinated by the spectacle, ambition and garrulity warring in the weak but friendly face. Finally Marty said: "Go on, Bud, speak up."

Bud said: "I was just thinking, you shouldn't a come to Plumas." He cleared his throat. "And you with such a fine mind."

This sounded like rebellion in the ranks.

"Really fine minds like mine," Marty said, "can get pearls from clams, diamonds from gutters."

"No foolin'," Bud said. He tsk-tsked to himself for a while, then came up with another mighty thought. "Well, you got dough."

Whether this was proof that Marty must be smart or a reason for Bud to go on working for him even if he wasn't smart, Marty didn't find out. Because just then, Bud stepped on the brakes. The car slowed a little, and its tires squealed, but it kept on the highway, decelerating fast. "Border Patrol," Bud said.

"What border?" Marty asked.

"Backup line," Bud said. "They work pretty far north of Mexico, looking for wetbacks. . . . No, they ain't. Those cars ain't U. S., they're county." He came to a stop alongside some guys in five gallon hats. The driver of the county car was uniformed in khaki as a cop; the others wore plainclothes, but were well, almost gaudily, badged with silver stars. They were also well and visibly gunned.

Two of them got on either side of the taxicab. "Place of birth?" one of them asked. He asked it just the way Marty had heard the Federal men ask it.

"Pennsylvania," Bud said.

"Ohio," Marty said.

The man on Marty's side said: "This guy doesn't sound like an Ohioan to me, Dave."

Dave was the one who'd asked the first question. He was the smallest of the sheriffs. He came around to Marty's side. "Got any proof you're from Ohio?"

Marty thought. Then he said: "I've got proof I'm an American citizen."

The big man next to Dave laughed. "He's changing his story already, Dave."

Dave said: "You don't have to worry, mister. We're here to help legal citizens." He motioned, and the big man opened the cab door; Marty sat still; the big man reached in as though to pull him, and Marty got out. "Make sure he hasn't got a gun, Matt," Dave said. And then to Bud: "You can go on into town, fella. We'll bring your fare in if he's okay."

BUD looked white and strained around the mouth. He didn't look like he'd sold Marty out; he looked like he was sorry because he was going to lose such an important piece of change, money to get him away from his half-naked sister-in-law. He put the car in gear.

Marty just stood there while Matt took his gun away.

The cab started to roll. Matt said: "How about paying for that cab, mister?" Marty shrugged, and reached for his wallet. Matt snapped the edge of his hand down on Marty's wrist; shock ran clear up to the armpit. "Thought you were going for a gun," Matt said. "Sorry." He reached in, got Marty's wallet.

Marty had to use his left hand to slide the money out; his right was still numb. He gave Bud two dollars; the driver's lips said: "I'm sorry." But he made no sound.

"I'll have to take that arm to a doctor," Marty said. He looked at Bud when he said it.

"I apologized once," Matt said. "G'wan, driver, get going."

They all stood there in silence until Bud had driven off. Then Marty turned to Dave. "If your big friend here won't break my other arm when I reach inside my wallet, I'll be glad to show you my identification."

"I thought you was going for a gun," Matt said.

"You'd already searched me."

"I forgot."

Marty shrugged. He knew it was no use, that they had no belief he was an alien nor any interest in his birth at all; but he couldn't see anything to do but go on with the game as they had laid down the rules. They were human beings with two eyes, ears, one nose apiece; it was always possible that they could be reached by reason. Nothing in his past experience had taught him that they couldn't; he'd never met anyone completely oblivious to decency.

So he got his cards out, his California

drivers' license, his identification card from Andy Aarons' agency, a card from an insurance company saying that he carried automobile insurance, the police identification Bill Harrison had given him. They looked at them, turning them as gravely in their sunburned hands as a monkey turns a bit of food he's not sure about eating. Finally Dave made his judgment: "Ain't nothing here says you're from Ohio. Says you're from California."

"And so I am," Marty said. "But I was born in Ohio."

"Well," Dave said. "If you'd said that in the first place . . ." he shook his head. "Now I got no choice but to hold you. Bein' this close to the border and so far from anything else, like, we can't take no chances on law and order in this county. We'll give you a chance to send off for papers and stuff to clear you."

Marty said: "Okay."

"On account of you was carrying a gun," Dave said. He was sympathy and friendliness incarnate. "Matt," he called, "he's all yours. Take him in and book him on suspicion of being an alien, and carrying a concealed gun without a license."

"Okay," Matt said. He stepped close to Marty. "Raise your arms. I'm gonna frisk you good, on account of we'll be alone."

He was rough doing it, clapping Marty's arms up and down, whirling him around, stepping on Marty's toes a couple of times. Then he said: "Jerry, watch him a minute," and walked away to the other side of the road and into the bushes.

A middle aged man stepped over to Marty, his hand on his gun butt. When he got real close, he whispered without moving his lips: "You'll never get to town. That Matt'll kill you."

Marty didn't say anything.

Jerry came even closer; his lips still didn't move. "That was a lot of money in your poke. I'd sell you a gun."

Marty tried talking that way, but he was sure his lips moved. "I'm scared of firearms and other loud noises."

"Mister, this is no time to be funny."

"What jail," Marty asked, "did you learn how to talk that way in?"

"Not all the dough," Jerry said. "For fifty bucks I'd loan you a gun. You—" Marty stopped listening. This was corny, it was so old. Ley fuega, the law of flight. Give a prisoner an unloaded gun, give him a chance to run away, and then shoot him, and who's to blame you? He stood there, feeling very old, feeling out of his class. Jerry stopped talking.

Matt came back, and tried to conceal his surprise at Marty still being there. He gestured at a car, and he and Marty got in. The rest of them tried to look like running a road block on the highway to the border was their regular business.

XIX

THEY DROVE NORTH. LOOKING back, Marty saw the rest of the men still standing by the road and their other car; a truck came up, and they made no effort to stop it. They had dropped the pretense of running a road block.

"My last foolish gleam of hope just went glimmering away like a will o' the wisp," Marty said.

Matt said: "Shutup. You ain't supposed to talk."

Marty said: "Why not? I'm not going to get back to Plumas, am I?"

Matt said: "Shut up."

"Did Bud sell me out, or were you fellows watching?"

Matt swung the car off the paved highway and up a dirt road that wound through sage and greasewood and ironwood and mescal and similar undesirable growth. The road was smooth, because there weren't any rocks in that particular stretch of country; they passed a few white-faced cows, browsing on the mescal, and the cows were probably the reason for the road being there.

Matt swung north and then east and then north again. He got red in the face, and not entirely from the heat, which had grown much worse when they left the breeze of their travel on the highway. Now they were crawling, going ten an hour and worse; the cow who had laid out this particular stretch of path had apparently been drunk.

Matt broke first. "Shortcut," he said. "No use lettin' any friends in town see you in custerdy."

Marty laughed. "Relax, pal. You must have done this before. Get used to it."

Matt stopped the car. They were in the bottom of a dry wash. The trail went up

ahead of them, up behind them; drainage had made the brush deep here, and the bottom of the wash was covered with round, dull colored rocks, some of them the black of malapie, most of them the purplish sandstone of baugnite ore.

"Gotta stretch my legs," Matt said. He opened his door and got out. "How about you?"

Marty said: "I'll die the way I am." He hoped he sounded brave; he didn't feel it. "Unstretched I perish."

Matt, standing beside the car, bulky and beefy in his western hat and his hog-bristled face, said: "You sure talk like a dope. I wouldn't think you was—"

"The man you were supposed to pick up and kill," Marty said. "But Dave knows best. He picks 'em, you pluck 'em. Right?"

"Shut up. I never heard a guy talk so much. Get out."

Marty said: "Why . . . Who's Dave. Sheriff?"

"Undersheriff," Matt said. "Al Holcomb's sheriff."

"And you're chief deputy?"

Matt laughed. "Me? Brother, there's a dozen guys between me and chief deputy. Then there's three undersheriffs."

Marty said: "Give me a cigarette, will you, Matt?"

This made Matt feel better. Maybe it was in the tradition of some movie he had seen; the condemned man having a cigarette before the firing squad, hangman, electric chair or what-not did its work.

He gave Marty one from a leather case. "That's a good looking case," Marty said. He accepted a light from what looked like a sterling silver lighter. "I can see you're either a married man, or one who gets along with the ladies."

Matt blinked. Marty had stepped out of the scenario again. At this point he should be sending messages to some woman of his own, instead of worrying whether Matt's love life was well attended to. "I'm married," Matt said. Suspicion threw his eyes into the same pig-mold followed by whiskers and neck.

"I'll bet your wife thinks you ought to be chief deputy," Matt said. "Or is it undersheriff?"

"Well, chief deputy," Matt said. "What's it to you?"

"I could make you sheriff," Marty said. "Next election. Chief till then."

Matt said: "Now I heard everything." He coughed. "Better get out for a minute. Long way to town."

MARTY restrained an impulse to point out that it was only two miles to Plumas. The time was not now to start an argument. He said: "Cold turkey. There's no one here but you and me—no witnesses, no undersheriffs to correct you—if I had a table and some cards, I'd lay said cards on said table—to wit, Matt. You know why they're giving me the works—which, incidentally, you will have to give me in the car, and to hell with the county's upholstery."

Matt only got part of that. "You won't get out?" It worried him.

"And you'll catch hell for leaving blood and a hole in the seat cushion," Marty said. *Is this me? Am I sitting here discussing my own death this way?* He took another breath. "Instead of thanking you, some undersheriff'll eat you out. Okay. Now, who am I?"

The human hog just stared at him.

"I'm the guy who's standing between Jimmy Gayhart and absolute control of the ABC. You know, you read about it in the papers. Eva Chounet. She lives, and she owns the Ask Before Chewing. And—you know I'm in with her—and you know I am not going to love Dave and the boys—if I'm around."

The hog saw food. His jaw moved, his eyes gleamed.

"But if I love anybody," Marty said, "it'll be the guy who could have given me the business—and didn't."

Matt was genuinely interested now. He leaned toward the open left hand door of the car. "Yeah," he said. "My wife thinks I'm not smart to be a reg'lar deppity."

Marty sighed. "Now I know how it must feel to be a missionary to darkest Africa." He took a deep breath. "And she'd treat you nicer if you were sheriff."

"Brother," Matt said, "you ain't never been married." He moved his jaws uneasily. He was a hog hungry but scared of barbed wire. "Dave'd kill me . . ."

"Not if your sponsor owned ABC."

Matt knew what a sponsor was. He nodded with understanding. He looked nervously over his shoulder; he was not

used, yet, to selling out Dave and the smart boys. "I gotta think," he said.

He thought. Fear of Dave and fear of his wife probably battled within the tight confines of his skull. And then Marty saw himself lose, saw the light go out of porcine eyes. "Naw," Matt said. "Get out of the car."

"Why?" Marty asked.

Matt said promptly: "I read all about it in the papers. She's gotta do this fourteen times. Only two so far, ABC would make three; mister, you ain't gonna be this lucky eleven times more."

Marty let his own breath out. He was a kid's balloon on a hedgehog's back.

Matt's gun crept to his belt. "You're not a bad guy," Matt said. "Get outa the car. What difference it gonna make to you?"

Way behind Matt the chapparal moved. Bud? Marty stalled for time, got his breath back. "If I have to I have to," he said. "I wasn't going to tell anybody. But I have a plan for getting around those other eleven pictures—"

It couldn't be Bud. But had to be. Marty's only friend in Plumas—and he needed a friend. He gestured Matt forward. He stalled. "I hate to tell this to anyone," he said, thinking desperately.

Something crashed through the brush behind Matt. He whirled, going for his gun.

Marty brought both feet up, fast. Matt went on his face, Marty scrambled out of the car, and landed on him.

The deputy had not been picked for his brains or beauty; he got to his knees as though Marty had been a leaf on his back; his weight was on his knees and one hand, and the other hand was trying to get his gun, three inches from his hand.

Marty groped; a stone, round and smooth as an orange fitted into the palm of his hand.

Matt's five gallon hat wasn't protection at all; he went flat on his face, his hand no longer groping for the gun. Marty found his own arm coming back to hit again, to smash the stupid skull under the now-reddening hat; he shuddered, and scooped up the gun, got to his feet.

The deputy lay perfectly still, and flies came from nowhere to settle on the wet spot on his hat.

Marty remembered the friend in the brush who had distracted Matt, undoubtedly saved Marty's life. He called. "Bud," he yelled. "Hey, Bud. You can come out—"

The brush parted, and a white face with brown rimmed eyes peered at Marty with interest and congeniality. Then the steer saw Matt lying on the ground, and ran snorting up the arroyo.

When I'm rich, Marty thought, I'll build a monument to a desert cow.

Then the big hand on the ground closed. Matt stirred and groped for his gun, taking up his life where he'd left it off. Marty shifted the gun from one hand to the other, and decided he was not going to be sick to his stomach.

XX

BIG MATT SAT ON THE GROUND propped against the shady side of the car, and drank from the canvas waterbag all cars carry in that country. He drank sparingly, and then spat. "You couldn't kill me," he said. He kept his eyes on the ground.

"I thought I had," Marty said.

The deputy reached up and touched his badge. "G'wan and finish the job. Dave'll take this star and make me eat it."

"What's he got on you?"

Matt shrugged. "Enough. There ain't a guy in the sheriff's office would be loose if Al Holcomb and Dave talked."

"And the state doesn't do anything about it?"

Matt said: "I ain't no lawyer. But the ABC's about the only taxpayer in the county. I guess that makes them able to say how they spend their own taxes . . . What happens to me?"

Marty laughed. "When I felt how glad I was to see you move, I found out something about myself I'd long suspected. I am not the rugged type." He gestured off into the brush.

"Take the waterbag and start walking."

Matt nodded. "Thanks, friend. I'm gonna try and get a ride on a fishing truck south. My wife and Dave can fight over which misses me most."

"Mexico," Marty said.

Matt nodded, and got to his feet. He took off his crushed hat, and felt his skull gingerly. "What was it?"

"Piece of baugnite ore," Marty said.

"Maybe I'll see you down there."

Matt started back on the trail. "Not me, mister. There's fishboats stink so bad they don't ask questions of the crew. I'm shipping out on one as soon as I get there." He took the star and the empty gun belt off, threw them at Marty's feet. "You keep right on the way we was goin'. Take every left fork till you can see the highway." His battered hog face cracked into a mirthless laugh. "Naw, you can believe me. In the desert nobody ever lied to a man gave him water." He trudged off.

Marty stared after him. He couldn't say that he liked the big man, but certainly on closer acquaintance Matt wasn't as deep-dyed a heavy as he had first seemed. Maybe nobody was . . .

Slowly Marty's head drooped. He sat down on the running board of the car, Plumas County's proud and shiny car, and stared at the sand. Heat came down from the brassy sky, and pounded at the base of his neck; heat came up from the sand, which sparkled with purple baugnite grains, even this far from the plant.

He was dully aware of a great many things. Of the fact that he was undoubtedly sweating copiously, though no moisture was discernible on his skin; he had rewritten enough stories about men found dead on the Southwestern desert to know that moisture was leaving him, fast; and he'd given Matt the waterbag. There was only a certain amount of time left in which to get out of here.

He sat so still that a little black lizard ran halfway up the toe of his scuffed shoe. Having gotten that far, the lizard paused, and his throat swelled up and down a couple of times; then he started doing pushups, exactly like a muscle boy on the beach at Santa Monica.

"Lizard," Marty asked, "what are you in training for?"

The lizard looked back at him; Marty could have sworn there was a gleam of affection in his bright eyes. Then the little arms bent and lizard went back to his pushups.

Another lizard came out of the brush, and stopped a few feet away; Marty's friend gave a farewell flirt of his tail, and started chasing the second lizard, who ran away, but circularly, so as to be sure of being caught.

Sex, Marty thought. My new fact for today; lizards attract lady lizards by doing pushups. Why, hell, those boys on Muscle Beach knew something all along!

He said: "Lizard, thanks," and got up, revived by the fact that the Cockren mind could still get a laugh, at least from Cockren. Every man his own best audience.

He got in the shiny car, and it started; Matt had not taken the key, or done anything else inconsistent with the proper etiquette of a man who has been given water in the desert. He bumped up out of the wash, and in the direction Matt had told him to follow . . .

It was a superb car; Plumas County, whose sole taxpayer was the ABC, had spared nothing on its law enforcement. There was a radio, there was a rack overhead from the driver that held two riot guns in clips; there was a compound gear shift lever alongside the ordinary one.

In a box on the left front door were tear bombs and even a rocket pistol.

THE track forked. Matt had said to take every left turn, but a great many tracks went to the right. Curiously, using his curiosity to postpone the moment of decision, Marty steered that way.

He came out in a little clearing in the mesquite. Three shacks had been erected there, humble but undoubtedly home to some one, three shacks constructed with economy and skill from warped lumber and flattened kerosene tins.

A woman appeared at the door of one of the shacks, hitching at the skirt of her battered black satin dress. She cried sharply: "El aguacil, the law!" and men and women tumbled out of windows and backdoors of the shacks like a scene in an old time movie comedy. The brush rustled with their passing—and that of the lady who had given the alarm—and Marty was left in possession of the old homestead.

It was now obvious that though there was no star on the side of the car, it was well known as a law carrier in local society.

He backed up, and drove back to the fork, and followed Matt's instructions about left turns; the brush gave way to paving so sharply that he was nearly seen by a big reefer truck marked South-

west Piscatorial Products. Marty backed up a little, smiling at this, and when he was again hidden, he turned off his motor.

He felt a little better, because of the lizard, because of the Piscatorial Products. Time was running out, and he had to rescue two girls from a hotel suite that was as tight as a death-house; but he still had the head that had once contained the Cockren brain—only it no longer functioned—and he had a car equipped with the very finest of lethal weapons. He fiddled with the radio; if he could get it working—.

A man's voice said: "All right, Car 48." Then another voice said: "Car 63 to Headquarters. Going out of service for five minutes, Highway 242, Nan's Lunchroom." And the first voice: "All right, Car 63."

There was a silence, then, except for the click of the carrier wave going off. Then another click: "Headquarters calling Car 55. Are you in service. Car 55 report in."

Marty looked at the radio. It was Car 55 all right, which was nice, because if Plumas County owned twelve radio cars it was an amazing number. He didn't answer headquarters, because he didn't know how; also because he didn't think he could make his voice sound like Matt's. But the Cockren brain was turning over once more.

Papers were resting in a steel spring clip below the radio. He got them out. A map of the County, a smaller scale map of the state, with various police stations and radios marked on it; a telephone book for Plumas County, and a handbook on law enforcement, digesting the laws of the state and county, another one of game laws alone; a third one put out by the Federals on cooperation.

He looked them over, while voices chattered from car to headquarters. Finally he picked out Dave's voice; Dave was Car 21. "Car 21 to headquarters. Have you heard from Car 55?"

Headquarters was a little annoyed. "Have been calling 55, Car 21." Well, hell, Dave could hear. . . .

Marty lounged on the seat. Probably ought to start his motor before the radio ran the battery down— But the desert heat piled up the exhaustion that had been binding him down since the first time Mrs. Aarons had phoned him and told him to meet Andy in Beverly Hills. . . .

If I had been a little drunker, I couldn't have gone, and I wouldn't be hiding out like a sidewinder in the desert.

He fished and encountered Matt's leather cigarette case. He lit one of the cigarettes, but fatigue and heat made it taste bad. He threw it out the window. Maybe it would set the desert on fire, and bring all the police out here and settle the thing Western style with an old fashioned gun battle. It would be fun to throw tear bombs at the Plumas County Sheriff's force, their own tear bombs. Hoist by their own—

This was no time to be Shakespearean. Anyway, Shakespeare was a man of letters; this called for a man of action, sort of a J. Edgar—

HE began to laugh. Put out my hand, there is a weapon handy. I was born to kill, my friends, let me tell you how I got my start, any American boy could do it. It all started in a Log Cabin, which was then selling ham and one egg for twenty-seven cents, with coffee and toast . . .

His hands were busy turning over the pamphlets clipped to the radio. There is always jurisdictional trouble in the Southwest—the Department of Justice and the Treasury compete on the border, the Department of Interior and even the Department of Agriculture have their own uniformed cops, Indian Service, bug control, Border Patrol, Forest Service—here it was.

The call letter was 101. It could cut into the Plumas County radio web at will. Now—

A little book on radio procedure and operation. You pressed the little button—pushed the second valve down, as it were—and you didn't sound too friendly, because you thought Plumas County cops were jerks—

"One-oh-one to Plumas County One. On Channel Three . . ."

Then there was some silence, and maybe it hadn't worked. But it had. A male voice—no decent girl would work in the sheriff's office?—said: "All units on Channel Three standby. Come in, One Oh One."

"One Oh One to One," Marty said. He had a lot of trouble keeping his voice calm,

this had to sound routine. "We just passed one of your cars into Mexico, Plumas County. Was this authorized?"

He plugged over to "listen" and waited, waited for the radio, and for the Cockren grin to be reborn, like Phoenix from the Ashes . . . The radio sounded a little wild. "Stand by, One Oh One. One to Two-one, you hear this, Dave?"

Dave was apparently saying to hell with radio procedure. "Yeah, Billy, I hear. Ask'm if it's fifty-five and who's in it. This radio won't reach the border."

Life became a bowl of cherries. If Marty's voice could fool Dave—Headquarters relayed the message to Marty, like the good boy Headquarters was. Marty cleared his throat, and made his voice indifferent. "Two women," he said, "And a man with credentials from the Los Angeles, California, sheriff. You lend him the car?"

Dave screeched so loud he hardly needed a radio. "Billy, get the D.A. to clear us into Mexico. An' order all cars to the border . . ."

The radio squawked, complainingly, as though somebody had thrown too many switches at once. "Calling all cars, all cars, drop everything, and go to Puerto Plumas, contact Unit 21 there, report to Unit Two-one at the border, at Puerto Plumas—"

Marty got out of the car. The radio was still snapping orders around, a little hysterically. Marty leaned in, holding the clutch down with one hand, put the car into low, started the motor, and backed out. The shiny bus went to its grave proudly, with Dave's voice for a dirge—"Billy, I don't care what they're doing, all cars, full crews. I'm already on my way—"

The car sloughed through the chaparral until it found a dry water course; then it crashed forward, and on, the brush closed over its head, and the radio voices were still.

Dust settled, probably thirty percent of it baugnite. Marty brushed at his clothes, and walked the few feet to the curbing.

A siren blew, and Marty got down on his haunches, shielded himself with some mesquite, but he didn't have to; the guys going South were intent on the road, as well they should be at seventy miles an hour. Two buses of plainclothes men and one of uniformed men tore by him, and then he got on the pavement and strolled leisurely toward town.

Two minutes later he smelled the water of Plumas's reservoir, and five minutes after that, he was in a Mexican cantina, drinking a beer. Outside two more sirens moaned their way to the border; he wished he could hear what was happening on the radio.

It was the best beer he'd ever tasted, but he only drank one bottle; the cantina didn't have a telephone but two blocks later a drugstore did. He phoned the Plumas Cab Company, Inc. "Would you sent Bud out to the drugstore at the corner of Aguilar and Grant?"

He stayed in the back of the farmacia until the gaudy cab stopped; he was in the shadows when Bud finally got out of the taxi and looked around in a puzzled way. Marty strolled toward the hack.

"I'm not in the habit of opening car doors myself, my good man. Assist me in."

Bud's face was a fine thing to see. Bud said: "Huh?"

XXI

NOON WAS HEAVY ON PLUMAS County now; the sun rode high in the skies, and the purple shadows at the edge of buildings, trees, lampposts were wiped out; purple for baugnite ore, gold for the sun that shone on Plumas and on the free world, too.

The heat was a tangible, angry thing, there was nothing placid or accidental about its drive to rob men of every ounce of their energy, their ambition, the rebellion in their souls. It could have been an enemy of the ABC, slowing down the company's work; instead, the corporation had rolled with the punch, eliminated siestas, used the sun to rob Plumas' workers of any desire to fight back.

"Where do you want to go?" Bud asked.

Marty, sitting next to the driver, sat up abruptly. He had a horrified feeling that he had been driving around for hours, that he had been asleep ever since Bud picked him up.

He said: "It is later than you think," and then, consciousness returning, realized he had only been riding a few moments. "Just a phone," he said.

Bud nodded, and went up a side street.

He stopped in front of a frame house. "My place. The wife's out now, she was going downtown to eat with her sister." He grunted, opening the door for Marty. "An' talk about me."

A fan sucked water through a box of Spanish moss fastened to the side of the house, cooled the interior a little. Marty said: "You phone Mrs. Chounet's suite at the hotel, then I'll talk to her," and sat down in a chair carefully designed to make anyone over five-feet-three miserable. He watched Bud plant himself carefully on a little stool he pulled out from under a rickety telephone table; the top of the stool was upholstered in petitpoint.

Bud was phoning now. He handed the phone to Marty, and a woman's voice was saying: "Yes, hello?" shrilly.

He said: "Nan?"

At once her voice was more familiar, and he realized that she had been crying. Now she said: "Oh, Marty, we thought—"

He said: "So did I. Oh, baby, so did I. Wait'll you see me in my new white hair-do. Listen, Nan. You girls have got to get out of there. Now, I don't think they have been smart enough to have lady murderers on hand to dress like hotel maids. Get hold of the maid on your floor, and use as much dough as you have to get two uniforms. Then take a knife, cut the paintings out of their frames, roll them small in one roll, inside a rug, call the cleaning department—your bribed maid will help you—and convoy the rug out."

She said: "Marty, can do," and added: "Eva's got such wonderful clothes, I'll bet we could get two of the maids to wear Paris frocks out the front way and act as decoys."

Marty said: "A swell idea. Have them take out with them a package about the same size as the paintings. To make it more *convincing.* And baby—*I want you to do this just as readily, just as consistently as you've always done everything I asked you to.*"

He pronged the phone. "Bud, get going."

Bud said: "Look, Marty, I don't know much—but—golly, fella, won't there be something hooked into their room phone, somebody listening?"

Marty laughed. It was not a laugh that convinced its author. "The catch is, the girl's never done anything yet I've asked her to. She knows that. So—if I'm lucky, which I'm not—the real girls'll come out the front door, the fakes out the back."

"You may not be lucky," Bud said. "You're sure smart. Look, you gonna wait here, I wish I could give you a beer, but there ain't none. A bottle of port wine, though if you'd like a glass . . ."

"Skip it," Marty said. "Get going. Hang around the front of the hotel."

"Check. Make yourself at home."

"Stop at the first phone, call me here."

"All you told 'em to do'll take time. I could run get you some beer first."

"Let it go," Marty said. Bud nodded, and went out . . .

THE fan inside the desert cooler whirred, sucking a thin moist film into the house, so that all the fringe on all the runners on all the dinky tables in the little house stirred faintly. Marty got up and wandered around, with the guilty feeling that comes from going anyplace but the living room of a stranger's house.

Three bedrooms, about nine feet square each. Apparently the Ask Before Chewing believed that its moderately priced help should have two children, believed also—in company with the best womens' pages—that these children should have separate bedrooms.

But Bud and his wife had her two sisters instead of children of their own. Each girl's bedroom had a man's picture on the bureau, the sticky-painted bureau. Had a negligee hanging on the outside of a closet door, had an amber backed comb-and-brush set lying like a votive offering below the picture.

Bud's room, his and his wife's, was worse, because the bed was bigger, and there were two bureaus to crowd the niggardly space.

Marty shuddered. What a way to live! Outside, the lawn only spread to the front of the house; the sides were as sandy as a bathing beach. ABC had only trucked in enough dirt to make the fronts of things look cool and respectable . . .

This had all started—his part of it—with wanting to make a little money to be respectable to have a wife, preferably, Nancy Summers. Or maybe it had started back of there, with being a guy who wanted

to speak the truth, to live without hypocrisy, and therefore to live without a newspaper job, apparently.

Or had it all started with just not wanting to disappoint little Andy Aarons?

No matter. Later there had been a time when the running alone was enough, when he had actually enjoyed the game of Eva, Eva, who's got Eva.

But now there was a fierce hatred in his heart, a desire to hit the Chounet gang, to smash Gayhart and Brunner and the rest of them, every body who thought this was a way to make a man live.

And there was something else. When Eva Francisco—Eve Chounet, Miss Grosvenor, whatever name you wanted to call her—had looked at him and told him she'd turned Jimmy Gayhart down because she didn't love him—he had known then that it was no longer possible for him to quit with Eva still in jeopardy. For just that instant she was as fine a thing as he'd ever seen.

A puff of wind sent sand rattling at the windows. He jumped, and strolled back into the living room.

There was no longer much chance of winning, but he'd go down fighting. When they sent him off in the brush to die at Matt's hands, he had known he wasn't going to quit, except triumphant or dead.

He was not likely to be triumphant.

The phone rang.

His hands were slippery on the black instruments. "Yeah, Bud?"

"It's okay," Bud said. "We're on our way."

"I'll be out in front."

"Naw," Bud said. "Wait—"

"Get going!" Marty snapped. He hung up the phone.

Before he could do anything, he had to hunt out a drink of water. Glasses were hidden some feminine place; he bent his head over sideways and drank from the tap. The water was sandy and warm.

He crouched inside the front door, knowing there was no reason to be crouching, but feeling he was under guns; the brass of the knob was corroding off on his hands noisomely.

THEN the cab rolled smoothly down the street. It turned in, stuck its nose in the driveway; Bud was giving service. Marty opened the door, and called: "Thirty seconds!" and dived for the phone; he had seen Eva's face in the window, and where Eva was, Nancy could not be far behind. He played a hunch; instead of dialing any number, he put his finger in O, and almost at once, he had an operator: "I need to talk to Jimmy Gayhart. At once!"

"In Mr. Brunner's suite at the hotel," the girl said promptly; the hunch had paid off.

"Connect me," Marty said, and the girl said: "I am," and Brunner's smooth voice said: "Hello!"

Marty said: "Raoul Chassey, those maids going out the back door of the hotel really are maids. Look twice before shooting," and hung up and then was slamming the front door of Bud's—or the ABC's—house.

Eva was out on the lawn, and Bud had climbed down, and was going after her, Nancy was leaning out, calling: "Eva, get back in here."

Marty grabbed her, catch as catch can, and remembered the time she had cried because he had hit her "where her brassiere goes around." He pushed her into the cab, and got in himself.

The paintings filled most of the taxi; they crouched behind them. Eva said: "I just wanted to see you, Marty."

Nancy said: "You're all right, Marty?" and her voice was tremulous. He reached around Eva and grabbed Nancy's hand; the whole length of his arm warm with the pressure of assorted girls.

He hugged girls to him, live girls. "Head north, Bud," he said. "We're leaving Plumas. That lash-up on the border gives us an hour headstart." He laughed. "Unless you want to stop and pick up your sisters-in-law."

Bud peered in the mirror. "How many arms have you got?" he asked.

Nancy said: "We're going to stop in town and get rid of these paintings. They crowd me."

Eva let out a squeak, and it was no longer a pleasure to have two girls in his arms; he was back on Bud's side in the war between the sexes. "Dump the paintings!" Eva yelled. "You will—"

"Shut up," Marty said. "Nancy's got an idea."

"You're mighty right," Nancy said. "My

law training just paid off. Listen to this."

They listened. It was a triumph of mind over matter; when Nancy finished, Eva said: "Marty, kiss her for me."

A new era had dawned.

XXII

LOOKING STRANGE AGAINST the desert in its gaudy, urban paint, Cab Number Five of the Plumas Cab Company, Inc., rolled south. To the West the sun was almost halfway to the horizon. Marty leaned back, Eva's shoulder making sweat rise on his right sleeve, Nancy's weight making his left side uncomfortably hot.

"Bud, you're sure all the law cars are behind us?"

"Unless they've bought some new ones, or dug up the one you say you wrecked."

"Marty," Nancy murmured. "Marty Cockren. Wrecking cars, hitting policemen —it's unbelievable."

Marty said: "Unbelievable? It's fantastic. And uncomfortable."

He leaned forward. "Bud, do you think she'll hold together?"

"She better," Bud said. "It's forty more miles to the border, and nothin' in between but sage. Only, cabs was not made to go seventy." He craned around in his seat, half taking his eyes off the road. "A cab, now is made to do a lot of shifting, an'—"

"All right," Marty said. "Watch the road and pray." He leaned back. "I've looked into this fishing town. Only one street, only one road in over an artificial causeway, and the first house after you come off the causeway is a cafe with a terrace. All we have to do is get there, and for the next twenty-odd days, I sit in a chair on the terrace, and watch everyone who comes into town."

"If you're sober enough to see," Nancy said.

"My girl. Bud's going to help me. And Bud doesn't drink."

Eva said: "I still don't think—"

"You are not kidding," Marty said. "Bud, what's that?"

Behind them a droning noise was loud and getting louder. Bud said: "My gawd, a plane. I knowed we'd outrun the sheriff's cars, but I never thought of a plane—"

"Just pray," Marty said, "that they haven't got hold of any bombs."

"Mining men who can't find dynamite?" Nancy asked.

Eva wriggled over on her knees, her full weight on Marty, and peered through the back window. "Why, that's Jimmy's plane. Jimmy Gayhart!" She pounded on Marty's shoulder. "Maybe he's come to help us, Marty."

"And maybe the Pope just joined the Communist party," Nancy said.

Marty said nothing. He had known it was coming. He had known all along that brains and goodwill were nothing against avarice and—fear.

It was twilight on the road now, but up at the plane's level, the sunlight still shone; the plane was a bright-winged beast hovering over the dark and brooding earth. Then something fell, and there was a roar. The taxi wavered, and went on.

"Missed," Bud said.

Marty shook himself like a wet dog. He thrust the girls back of him, and leaned forward. "He hit you, Bud. He hit you or a flying rock did. Quick! Can you make this hack skid around?"

For once Bud didn't say "Huh?" Instead he stepped on the brakes with enough violence to send both girls piling up on Marty's back; Bud, with his hands on the wheel, and Marty, holding on to the window, steadied, and the cab slithered around on the highway. The plane droned on South; it couldn't have been more than a hundred yards off the desert floor.

Marty said: "Okay, Bud. Tip her nose into a ditch, you're hopelessly disabled. You've got a gun, but don't use it if you don't have to." His own flat voice irritated him. He tried to put some life into it. "Senoritas, adios," But it sounded flatter than ever. As he waded back into the brush, he left two crying girls behind him.

He was damned near in tears, himself. Because he had gone past the point where brains would take him. And he didn't feel at all conceited about his courage, his marksmanship, or how many of him there were. Every time he counted, he was still only one.

It was almost full dark now. Wasn't there a song about there is no dusk in the tropics? A funny song, no doubt, a—

The plane came back, and went toward Plumas. Maybe the sight of the wrecked

cab was enough, maybe they were going to give up—

No. Gayhart's ship circled, and slowed down. Of course. The wind was from the south, you had to land a plane into the wind. Even little boys knew that nowadays.

DUCKED under a paloverde, Marty saw the plane's headlights come on, and a big spotlight on the side of the plane sweep down, pick up the highway; the plane swooped lower, landed, and taxied up to the cockeyed cab, with the deftness that was Jimmy Gayhart's trademark in an airplane.

They got out cautiously, four of them. Jimmy Gayhart, Galbreath Vanning, Raoul Chassey Brunner, and the undersheriff named Dave. Marty thought fleetingly that Dave ought to have a real fancy middle name to go with that mob; he was just an afterclimax to the Gayhart, Chassey, Galbreath crew. . . .

Two of them were carrying riot guns, Jimmy Gayhart had a pistol, only Raoul Chassey Brunner was unarmed. Gayhart seemed to be in command.

"Dave," he said, "get on the portside of the taxicab, there's a good fellow; Vanning, the starboard, if you please?"

They stiff-legged toward the cab. Dave suddenly said: "Which is the port, Mr. Gayhart?"

"Left, going forward, y'know."

They fanned out. Gayhart called: "Come out, now, Cockren, there's a brave fellow."

Marty waited. Gayhart said: "When I count three, old man, Dave and Galbreath and I are going to be rough. Please, now, you wouldn't want the ladies hurt?" He coughed. "One—"

Bud's voice was a wail across the desert. "Cockren ain't here, Mister. . . ."

The three armed men—and Brunner, well in the rear—stopped walking. Gayhart said: "Then *you* come out, whoever you are."

The lights from the plane made Bud's skin look green as he climbed out of the taxi, arms held high. It only silhouetted the marauders, but it played full on him. He kept his hands high, and Gayhart flicked his left hand, and Dave's riot gun coughed, once; it didn't make much noise.

Bud's hands had been up, a perfect model of a man surrendering, a man who had seen many movies and knew how it was done. Now they came down and grabbed at his belly, and Bud staggered, and plunged into the deep ditch, the brush-choked ditch; the brush parted, and he was gone.

Everything dropped away from Marty—caution, brains, discretion. Anger started at his toes and went through him, hot and satisfying; he felt like a man dropping a hot, heavy pack and plunging into the cool surf. Some part of his mind was still cold enough to wonder that he had time to observe his own feelings, and then, as he ran out, he heard Jimmy Gayhart's voice.

Jimmy called: "Cockren, wherever you are, that was to show you we're not fooling."

But the "fooling" was not a complete word, the end of it was a cough. The fools, the self-confident fools had made beautiful silhouettes out of themselves; Marty, charging out of the brush, no longer caring about anything but killing the abysmal rats who had shot Bud, stopped, braced, and fired at Gayhart, and it didn't take much time; there was that cough that was the period to all of Jimmy Gayhart's salestalks, and Jimmy came across the road toward Marty, his pistol high, and Marty fired again, and Jimmy was dead.

Dave had brought the riot gun around, but the light favored Marty; and Dave's brain, Dave's training was to wait for Gayhart. Then Marty fired, and Dave squeezed the riot gun, and brush behind Marty crackled and broke, and Marty didn't give a damn, but kept firing, one shot, two, and Dave still alive, dropped the riot gun.

He tried to run, and Marty fired a fifth shot, and got him between the shoulder blades.

It became important to a cooling anger to turn and do something about Vanning, about Brunner. He turned, and Brunner, still unarmed, was running for the plane.

Marty shook his head. Vanning had dropped his gun, and was raising his hands. "I simply had the weapon for self-protection," he said. "Ask Miss Summers to pick up that weapon, and examine

it, you'll find it has not been fired."

"It wouldn't be," Marty said. "You never took a chance in your life, Vanning.

Galbreath Vanning said in surprise: "But why should I?" I'm a lawyer, a councellor. I'm not a principal."

Marty looked at Nancy. She said: "You'd never make anything stick on him in a million years. He knows all the answers."

Marty laughed. "He wrote the answers." His voice sounded dead, still, and that was funny; because it was all over now, he should be happy. The cabin lights of the plane came on; Brunner was there.

Marty said: "It's all over, Vanning?"

THE LAWYER brightened at being asked a question. He said: "Oh, yes. The Sheriff's force is behind us, coming down the highway as fast as they can. All they have to do is see Gayhart dead, and they'll take orders from you, as Mrs. Chounet's viceroy." Eva said: "So that's what he is?"

Marty said, "Nancy?"

Nancy said: "I think he's telling the truth at the moment."

Vanning said: "And so—I'll just draw up a little thing on the back of an envelope—and you'll have Mrs. Chounet sign it?"

Marty said: "Huh? A thing?" Then he added. "I'm sorry. I oughtn't to speak to you directly. Counsel?"

Nancy said: "What is it you want my client to get his client to sign?"

Vanning laughed. All the good-will that had once exuded from Jimmy Gayhart now came out of him. "Oh," he said, "a little instrument appointing me as Mrs. Chounet's counsel. You see—the sheriff's men will take my word that she now owns ABC."

"And she doesn't" Marty asked. "Excuse me, mouthpiece."

"Of course, she doesn't," Vanning said. "We didn't have time to find out if she had a dedication ceremony at the ABC offices, but even if she did, there are eleven more to go through, and hardly time—"

The headlights of the plane were fading, maybe the battery was running down, maybe it was only a question of turning a switch; but Jimmy Gayhart was dead, and nobody knew what to do about planes.

Marty said: "Vanning, it's going to be a pleasure—"

From somewhere a voice yelled: "Gemme outa here—" and Marty whirled, a big bubble bursting in his chest and coming out in a yell: "BUD!"

He found the hackie in the brush; Bud had spent his time well, the wound on his thigh was bandaged with a filthy looking handkerchief. "Stop lighting matches," he said. "This'd be a hell of a place to start a fire."

Nancy slid down after Marty, got Bud's other side. The slide had not been good for her; her skirt was torn nearly to her waist, her slip showed with lace at the edges, the last incongruity. They got Bud up to the road; he said: "I may be dumb, but I know when to take a dive. I was coming back to help, Marty, but you didn't need me."

Marty said: "We'll move you later, when there's enough help to do a gentle job of it. And you've made enough dough to get out of Plumas, kid. Eva Chounet—" He stopped, and looked at Nancy; she shrugged.

Hastily Marty climbed back to the highway; but he hadn't had to worry about Eva. She had picked up Vanning's gun, was holding it steady on the lawyer. She said: "Marty, you'd better get Brunner out of the plane. I don't trust that Swiss—" She paused, and added lamely—"cheese."

Marty nodded. He found Brunner in the cockpit of the plane, fumbling with controls. When the hotel man saw Marty, he stopped, sinking back in the pilot's chair. "I thought—" he began feebly.

Marty grinned: "If you know anything about planes, switch off stuff on this; we need juice for the headlights."

"It's running down," Brunner agreed. "It wouldn't run the gravity starter."

"Fly away, fly away, fly away home," Marty muttered. He gestured: "Out, scout."

Far off, like coyotes at a garbage dump, the sirens of the Plumas County law wailed. Marty, herding Brunner across the road, gestured at Eva: "Your knights come riding. All this power's beginning to pay off for you; you have a private police force to order around."

"It'll be a long time," Eva said, "before I'm happy about meeting cops."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Vanning asked.

"Sure," Marty said, "Bud. Come on, lads. Get the striped pants dirty."

He led the way down into the brush; he and Brunner took the hackie's shoulders. Nancy and Vanning his legs; Eva convoyed, her gun clicking from Vanning to Brunner. The one groan Bud gave was no louder than the sirens.

They put Bud on one of the leather covered seats. Eva, her heart as big as whale, handed the gun to the puffing Nancy, and ran to the bar to get the cabdriver a drink. Brunner stepped forward, saying: "Please, a hotel man has to know everything." And had gotten medicine from the first aid cabinet, read a label, and mixed a sedative. "With a wound," Brunner said, "nothing is so important as rest. He'll sleep now."

MARTY leaned against the back of the pilot's chair. Out there in the desert night, the pilot lay dead, and Marty leaned on the back of his seat. "[illegible]'s going to be on your side," he said to

She nodded. "Marty, Marty, I ca[illegible] hardly believe it's all over."

"There's still twenty odd days for you to live," Marty said. Nancy opened her mouth, and shut it again.

"Tom just said I had a private police force," Eva said. "I'll stay in Plumas."

Vanning cleared his throat. "As your counsel—and I am sure you will trust me as well as wholeheartedly as your late husband did—I can agree that Plumas will make a good, safe headquarters. As for the trips necessary to hang and dedicate the rest of the paintings—"

Marty enjoyed this. He said: "Catch one, Vanning. We don't have the paintings."

It staggered the lawyer. It took hold of his aplomb, wrung it, and left it in a distinctly second-hand condition.

"You don't have them?" he asked. Then he recovered a little. "But you can recover them? They're in—let me guess—the hotel storeroom with that rug, or—"

"They're scattered all over Plumas," Marty said. He gestured at the girls. "No, let me tell this—"

From his couch of pain, Bud raised a weary head. "Could I have another drink?" he asked. "For what you might call medicine purposes."

Eva grabbed the glass, hurried off to the neat little bar that had been Jimmy Gayhart's pride. Bud looked at Vanning: "Mister," he said, "you better let her mix you one, too."

Vanning was chewing his lip. He held up the paper he had been writing. He tore it up. "You made a wise decision, Mrs. Chounet," he said formally. "Let the money go. Why, dedicating those paintings might have—"

"It didn't cost her anything but a little sweat," Marty said.

The howls of the law were right on them, now. But Vanning got Marty's speech over the racket. "Didn't?" he asked. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

Marty said: "You're not likely to be counsel of the estate either. Just assistant counsel, subject to Miss Summer's appointment. She thought it up. The Plumas setup, kid."

"The Plumas—" Vanning was beginning to get it. "But that wasn't the intent of the will."

Marty said: "Wasn't it? The Plumas Taxi Company, the hotel, the county laundry, the industrial clinic, even—damn near everything in Plumas had been set up as a corporation, with Joseph Chounet as principal stockholder."

Vanning sat down across the aisle from Bud. "I tole ya," the hackie said. "Give me that drink, boss."

A head crowned with a sheriff's cap stuck itself in the plane door. "Everything oke, Mister Gay—" the face under the cap said. Then it got white when it saw what was there.

Vanning waved the sheriff away. "It's all right, Holcomb," he said. The uniformed cap went away.

Nancy said: "We could have done the whole thing in Plumas, if I'd thought of it right away, if I'd been a better lawyer."

Vanning gulped his highball in one swallow. "If you'd been any better—you'd be the first woman justice of the Supreme Court. . . . Why, I made those corporate setups myself. I wrote the will. Why, of course, all the will says is fourteen corporations in which Joseph Chounet was an important stockholder. It doesn't say how big the corporations must be. The little six hack taxi company—"

"Hey," Bud said, "Mrs. Chounet's giving me that company. No cracks, Mister."

"Hoist by your own petard," Marty said. "My favorite quotation. What is a petard, anyway?"

"A hoist," Nancy said.

Marty said: "I've got a hunch, Vanning. You wrote that will, and it appealed to Chounet's evil sense of humor. That man must have been a charming soul. Then you and your pals fixed it for him to have a heart attack?"

"That's conjecture," the lawyer said.

Nancy said: "Yes, it is, Marty. Mr. Vanning is too good a lawyer to leave clues."

VANNING mopped at his face. "I'm not sure how good a lawyer I am . . ." He ran his hand over his face. "Those dirty little companies!"

"All right," Marty said. "It's all over. Go out and tell those officers that Mrs. Chounet is the new head of ABC. I'll be covering you with a pistol. If any of them do anything they shouldn't do—you're going to be the first one dead. . . . they've got nothing to gain; by now they've found Gayhart's body."

"Right away," Vanning said. He reached over, took the rest of Bud's drink out of his hand, gulped it, and went to the door of the plane, dusting himself off as he went.

"He'll be good," Marty said. "It's all over, Eva. You can stop being scared. Three weeks or so of lying low in Plumas—and you're in that enviable spot where Doris Duke and whoever the other dame is come crawling to you."

Eva came down the plane toward him. Over her shoulder, she said: "Brunner, mix up drinks all around." She put her hands on Marty's lapels, and raised her face. "Thanks Marty. Thanks a lot, and—it'll be fun, won't it?"

He lowered his head and kissed her. He held the kiss a good thirty seconds, conscious of Nancy watching him, of Bud's eyes on his back, critically. What went on in his head for those thirty seconds he never told anyone. Then he raised his head again.

Eva shook her brown hair. She said: "That's all?"

Marty said: "All."

Eva looked at Nancy. "You try," she said. "I'm gonna get drunk. Brunner, a double shot in mine!" Then something [illegible] "Hey, Nancy. You said, [illegible] a special paper, an agreement, I [illegible]uld get married and my property wouldn't become half my husband's?"

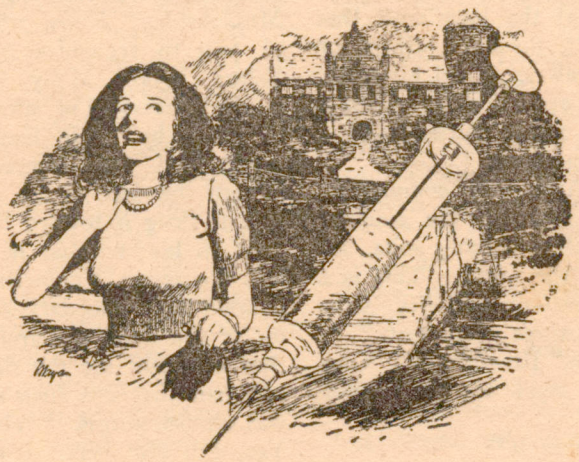
"That's right," Nancy said. Marty watched a smile cross her face.

"Whoops," Eva said. "Damn, this is going to be fun. Go on, mouthpiece. Try kissing that iceberg."

Nancy tried.

The iceberg melted.

Green DECEMBER FILLS THE GRAVEYARD



by

MAUREEN SARSFIELD

GREEN DECEMBER FILLS THE GRAVEYARD

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AT HALF PAST ELEVEN ON the night of December 1st, Detective Sergeant Arnoldson lounged at the main door of the Central Police Station in St. Arthurs. Behind him, entrenched on the other side of the long desk that cut the room in half, the duty officer for the night, P. C. Brewin, picked his teeth. Behind Brewin, an open door disclosed a small office where a fire burned and a kettle hissed on a gas ring.

"Filthy night," Arnoldson complained. "The seaside's all right in the summer with all the bits in their bathing suits, but its bloody awful in the winter. This is a bloody place, anyhow—no real life. Give me Brighton or Hastings every time."

"You can have 'em," Brewin said. "Give me London. Have some tea before you go home?"

"Anything to put in it?"

"Not a damn thing."

Conversation temporarily flagged, while Arnoldson silently contemplated, in his mind's eye, bits in bathing suits, and Brewin silently indulged in a bout of dislike for Arnoldson. Not that he wasn't matey. Tell you a dirty story any time; but he was sly. Say one thing to your face, and another behind your back. The kettle started to boil over, and then the phone bell rang.

Brewin picked up the receiver.

"Centralp'licestation St. Arthurs," he said without interest. "Who? What's that? Mrs. Ashley of Shots Hall? Oh? Oh? Oh?"

Maddened by the string of oh's, and his imagination titillated by the sound of the name Ashley, Arnoldson took the receiver away from Brewin, and ran his tongue over his rather red lips. "That Mrs. Flik Ashley? Oh, I beg pardon, Mrs. FlikkAH Ashley, quite. How're you, Mrs. Ashley? Know who this is? Clever of you to recognize my voice. What? Who? Who's Molly Pritchard? Dead, is she? Sorry, I'm sure, cooks are hard to come by." He laughed at his own crack, and then paused. He tried to picture the face at the other end of the line, to drag it toward him so that it was close to his; so that he could look right into the secret, smoldering eyes, the pale, pointed face, the dark rings, but no lines under the eyes, the arched eyebrows; so that he could see the light on the heavy soft hair that was such a deep chestnut it was almost purple. "What? Beg pardon? Yes, I'm still here. I was just thinking over what you said. Haven't you sent for a doctor then? Oh, of course, old Bannard's dead a long time, isn't he? He was your doctor, of course. Oh, come now, how can you say someone's murdered her? Of course she looks queer, people do when they die. Oh, very well then, Fl—Mrs. Ashley, I'll bring our chap along, and come up myself. Where is she? The cottage south of Shots Hall gates—— If you'll hang on—— Blast, she's gone."

Brewin perked up. "Something wrong? She started in on talking about murder."

"She says," Arnoldson grunted, "that someone's murdered her old cook that works at Shots Hall. Now why'd she jump at the idea of murder?"

"Hysterical, probably," Brewin sug-

gested. "Rattled."

"She's not the sort that gets rattled. If she says someone's murdered the old woman it's either her imagination, or it isn't, and she knows something about it."

"Oh, go on," Brewin said, trying not very successfully to hide his impatience with Arnoldson. "Why should she know anything about it? That is supposing the old woman was murdered, which she probably ain't. Just dropped off the hook from old age, or something like that. Where'd Mrs. Ashley find the body?"

Arnoldson ran his tongue over his lips again. "She said she noticed a light under the old woman's door, thought it was funny she hadn't gone to bed, and went in to look. Now why should she be wandering about in the night outside the old woman's cottage anyhow?"

"How should I know?" Brewin shrugged. "You'd better ask her."

"Get me Dr. Abbot on the phone. Then go and tell Norton I want him to come with me, and to get Roberts to bring a car round. She might've chosen a less bloody awful night."

Arnoldson slowly put on his overcoat, and wound a muffler round his neck while he waited for Brewin to do his bidding. Flik Ashley—her waist was so small and her legs so long. He'd never seen her in a bathing suit, worse luck. Now he'd have an excuse to find out how old she really was. She looked such a kid. But knowing, and she wasn't any kid, either. Bedworthy.

"Dr. Abbot?" Brewin halloed. Evidently Dr. Abbot had already gone to bed and was half asleep. "Dr. Abbot? Oh, Centralp'licestation St. Arthurs here. Detective Sergeant Arnoldson of our C.I.D. department wants to speak to you. Yes, sir——"

"Hullo?" Arnoldson said ungraciously to the far-off Dr. Abbot. "I'm sending a car for you—no, wait a minute, I'll call for you on the way. Some old woman's gone and died up at Shotshall, and I want you to have a look at her. The Ashley woman's just rung up and's in a flap saying the old woman's been murdered. Poppycock, of course, but there it is. I'll be round in ten minutes."

A POX on you," Abbot said to the telephone. "A thousand maledictions on policemen who ring me up at night when I'm trying to get some sleep." He lived alone, but for a housekeeper, and so was in the habit of sometimes talking out loud to himself.

As he dressed, he talked. The words that flowed from his mouth called on devils and saints to witness to the revolting life of doctors in general and himself in particular. Why, in the name of sin and shame, couldn't people die and be born at decent times of the day? Why always at night, or in the middle of breakfast, lunch or dinner? "A thousand revolting diseases on them," he told his shoes, jerking at the laces. "The Ten Commandments go sour in their stomachs, and may Abrabam, Isaac and Jacob spit in their eyes." Then, ruefully, he began to laugh. His private blasphemies, both biblical and medical, gave him a sort of bitter satisfaction and amusement. For to his patients, his female ones at any rate, he was a model of decorum. Inwardly, however, he was not in the least mild.

Tonight, he was not even decorous in his exterior. He stuffed his long length into his clothes, gnashed his teeth at the looking glass and was glad they were still all his to gnash, neglected either to brush or comb his hair or tie his tie properly. A lock of his graying hair fell down over his forehead, and flicked the top rims of his spectacles when he moved his head.

"You ugly old pig," he said to his reflection. "And damn Arnoldson, the greasy-haired, fat-mouthed, slick-brained moron."

Who was this woman Ashley? Where was Shotshall? Of course, it was that dreary village stuck up on a hill four or five miles outside the town. Shots Hall—some old girl by the name of Chattock lived there. If anyone had been murdered, then Arnoldson would pick on some innocent person as the murderer. He'd probably picked on someone already. Anything to get a nice case and have his name in the papers. Only it wouldn't be murder. It would be a clear case of senile decay or an embolism.

"All right!" He flung up his bedroom window as a car hooted in the road outside.

"All right, all right!" The fog slid into the room, a gray, uninvited guest.

Dr. Abbot took his time going downstairs and letting himself out of his front door. No one was dying for want of his attentions. They were already dead. He sniffed the fog. It smelled of the sea, and, somehow, decay. The long, black shape of the police car bulked outside the gate, its lights dimmed by the fog. Norton patiently held one of the doors open. The lumpy shoulders of P. C. Roberts hunched over the wheel. Arnoldson sat in the back, and invited Abbot to join him there.

"What's all this about?" Abbot asked petulantly. Arnoldson had plastered his hair, by the smell, with some sort of scented hair oil. "Can't the unfortunate cadaver wait till the morning?"

"The Ashley woman insists someone murdered this Molly Pritchard, who's the cook and what-not at Shots Hall. Seems fishy to me. If she was murdered, how'd Ashley know? She said this Pritchard looked queer. Course she does. Who doesn't look queer when they're dead?"

"Some people look better dead than alive. Who's this Ashley woman?"

Abbot could hear Arnoldson draw his breath in, and didn't like the sound of it.

"Flik Ashley. Mrs FlikkAH Ashley. Accent of the AH, please. F-L-I-K-K-A. Lives with her old aunt, Miss Chattock, at Shots Hall, and she's no good, pretty Flik isn't. She's a divorcee, amongst other things."

"A what?"

"Her husband divorced her ten years ago. Well, we all know what that means."

"What does it mean?" Abbot asked, disliking Arnoldson more than ever, and beginning to side most violently with Flik.

"Why, only one thing, of course," Arnoldson sniggered. "Another man. And more than one. When part of the Hall was burned in the blitz, of course all the Fire Services were up there, and I went up to the incident as well. Hauled Mrs. FlikkAH out of bed myself. The man was downstairs in the hall, flapping, but I know he'd been in her room because I saw his notecase lying around on her table. He was a Yank. Yer. She was had up in Court before she sold her car, too, for using abusive language to a constable on point duty down in the town.

Norton looked over his shoulder. "The chap asked for it. He held up the traffic just as she was right on top of him, and she locked her brakes trying not to run over him. If I'd been her, I'd have felt like clouting him as well. Anyway, she swore in French, so's he wouldn't understand, only he did, him being able to talk French."

For a few moments, the atmosphere inside the dark car was strained. Then Arnoldson went on, "All the men fall for her. There's something damn fishy about her. Something she's done and won't tell about. But the men think she's a wow."

"May I inquire," Abbot asked, "what your sex is?"

"What d'you think it is? What a damn silly question."

"Then you think she's a wow too?"

"Not me," Arnoldson boasted; and Abbot thought: you blasted liar.

"She and the old Chattock woman," Arnoldson said, "keep themselves very close. Hardly ever see them about. Just stick around the village. They're concealing something they've no business to conceal, to my way of thinking."

"You're a policeman," Abbot said, his dislike seething inside him. "So why don't you find out what it is?"

"You wait. I will—Left, Roberts, not right. Don't drive us into the ditch. Take it easy. The fog's always worse up here than in the town, it's so high. You get fog and clouds mixed. Stick your head out, Norton, and see if we're on the right road."

Norton stuck his head out. They were on the right road, though it was almost impossible to see more than two yards ahead. Abbot shut his eyes, and wished he were back in his bed. Why had he ever got himself mixed up with the police? Giving the once-over to drunks—harmless wretches who'd been on a night out. And his evidence got them into trouble. Once he had tried to make out a rather charming drunk was sober, but it hadn't worked. Post-mortems—bits of insides in bottles—Coroners' inquests—— Here and there a suicide, some poor devil——

FLIK heard the car in the distance, and her feelings, already overwrought, were mixed. She had stood outside Molly's cottage, now, for three-quarters of an hour. She couldn't bear to wait inside with that dead body. She hadn't waked up Aunt Bee. Why ruin her night for her? There was nothing Bee could do at the moment. So she had sneaked back to Shots Hall from Molly, when she had found her dead, telephoned the police and sneaked back to the mud and fog, and that thin line of light under Molly's door, and waited. Somewhere there was a murderer. Somewhere in the fog was someone who had killed Molly. She'd tell Arnoldson so—— "There's a murderer near here." Only why had it to be Arnoldson? But after three-quarters of an hour she would have almost welcomed the devil. The dripping of the trees like the ticking of a deathwatch beetle. There were queer noises. She kept looking over her shoulder. Her whole body was cold and clammy as ice, though it wasn't really cold. If only it would freeze, or snow, instead of the eternal fog and damp that turned the fields an unnatural green. Old Harry had been wagging his head and saying a green December filled the graveyards. Mr. Fewsey wagged his head and said the same thing. So did old Mrs. Vale, as if it was a matter for rejoicing. There wasn't much more room in the Shotshall churchyard to fill. She mustn't let Arnoldson see she was all shot to bits with nerves. Poor Molly. Now there'd be no one to get breakfast in the morning. But that wasn't it. It was Molly lying in there dead. She had seen dead bodies before, when she was in the Ambulance Service, but they weren't like that body hunched inside there in the chair by the cold fire. It was horribly dark. If only the fog would clear.

The lights of the car, pale glowworms, were upon her. The brakes squeaked a little as it pulled up. They ought to be oiled, Flik thought. Three figures, black lumps, got out of the car. A fourth figure remained inside, leaning on the wheel. The fog trailed round them as if they wore long, gray widows' weepers.

"Well, well, Mrs. Ashley?" Arnoldson greeted her. "Nasty night you've chosen, haven't you?"

"What for? It's none of my choosing," Flik answered coolly.

"This is Dr. Abbot, Mrs. Ashley. Norton, don't leave that door hanging open."

"Good evening," Abbot said to the tall bit of darkness which was Flik. Her face was a white blot in the darkness. "In my nonexistent spare time, I'm the police surgeon. Where's the body?"

He did not feel in the mood to be tactful. It was no near relative that had died. There was a body; well, let him see it.

"There'll be an ambulance come along later," Arnoldson told Flik. He moved closer to her, so that his arm brushed her side. "Now, Mrs. Ashley, let's have a look at your body."

Was that, Abbot wondered, a deliberate insult by any chance? Wrath boiled inside the doctor's long, thin frame, and words, unrepeatable, shook on his lips. "Come along, my good man," he fretted. "Must we freeze in this damp?"

Without saying anything, Flik pushed open the small wicket gate that was separated from the door by a yard of brick paving.

"Half a moment." Arnoldson pushed her on one side, and flashed his torch on the wet bricks. A pair of footprints showed muddily and plainly leading to the door and away from it again. Just one pair of footprints, going and coming.

"They're mine," Flik said briefly. "I'm wearing a new pair of gum boots."

Arnoldson opened Molly's door. The room was cold, dank. The old lamp on the table smoked a little. The grate was filled with dead, fine wood ashes. There was a clean cloth on the table, a bowl of red berries on the small, well-polished dresser. On the mantelpiece china ornaments and a photograph of Flik when she was a child gave an air of decoration. On the edge of the table nearest the fire were a cup and saucer, the cup empty, and a half bottle of port, the cork drawn, but the wine untouched.

Huddled in the chair by the cold fire was Molly Pritchard, or all that remained of her.

II

ARNOLDSON WAS ENJOYING himself. To enjoy himself at other people's expense was, to him, the height of enjoyment in more ways than one. "Now then, Mrs. Ashley," he said, "what made you think this old woman didn't die naturally?"

Flik stood up against the table, her back to Molly, her knuckles pressed down on the table's edge, rucking the cloth. "I've seen dead people before." Her voice was even, too damned even, thought Abbot. "I've seen people that've been mangled up in air raids, and people who've died in bed. Molly didn't die naturally."

"Well, of course, Mrs. Ashley, if you know all about it?"

"If I were you," Abbot said to Flik, "I wouldn't answer this man's questions till you've had legal advice. You're not bound to."

"Dr. Abbot?" Arnoldson was suddenly red with temper. "Are you conducting this case, or am I?" Without waiting for an answer, he returned to the attack on Flik. "Very well, you say she's been murdered. How?"

"I'm not a policeman or a doctor," Flik said. "As there's no knife, no blood, no struggle, then by poison, I presume. It's obvious when you look at her it must have been some sort of poison."

"Well then," Arnoldson said in a sugary voice, "take another look at her, and make sure."

"Don't do anything of the sort." Abbot's dislike of Arnoldson was nearly choking him. "Go to hell, Arnoldson. This isn't a scene from the Spanish Inquisition. Tomorrow there'll be a post-mortem examination of the remains, or, if you prefer to call it by another name, an autopsy. Until you know the result, then your job's to make routine inquiries, and not badger Mrs. Ashley by forcing her to poke about with the corpse."

A slow smile spread over Norton's face, which he concealed by wiping his nose with a large handkerchief. Flik pulled her overcoat more tightly round her. She did not look at Abbot, but her stiff shoulders relaxed a little. Her face was as white as a newly laundered dress shirt. But it was perfectly calm. Arnoldson had turned down the lamp a little, so that it smoked no longer. The room, even with the presence of three living people in it, had that unmistakable smell of death, and it was very cold; the fog seemed to seep in under the door.

"Now then, Mrs. Ashley." Arnoldson ignored Abbot. "Just tell me what happened in your own way. Begin at the beginning."

"Beginning of what?"

"Beginning of this evening. What Molly did, what you did." He was being very nice now.

"Molly got the dinner ready to serve," Flik began, her voice running evenly along, as if she were repeating a lesson. "Then she did a bit of tidying in mine and my aunt's bedrooms. While she was doing that—turning down the beds, pulling the curtains, and so on, I put the dinner in the oven."

"What time d'you dine?"

"About eight. I put the dinner in the oven about quarter to. At eight my aunt and I fed. Molly went back to the kitchen, got the breakfast trays ready, and went home at quarter past eight, as she always does."

"Did she seem all right?" Abbot asked. "In her usual health and spirits?"

"Yes." Flik gave him a nod which was more of a little, discourteous bow. "She was all right. Half past eight aunt and I finished dinner, I put the remains back in the kitchen, and went out. It was all just the same as it's been for years. I knocked on Molly's door as I passed, went in and asked her if she was all right, said good night and went off to my—to work." She paused, as if she expected Arnoldson to ask some question, make some comment. He said nothing, so she went on. Abbot noticed she was breathing quicker.

"I worked till about half past eleven. I'm not sure of the time as my watch doesn't keep good time. But it must've been round about then. On my way home, I noticed there was a light still shining

under Molly's door. So I knocked——"

"Wait a minute." Arnoldson licked his lips. "Why did you knock?"

FLIK looked at him for the first time, a look of surprise. "Why, it was so odd. She goes—she went to bed at the same time every night. Quarter to nine. So I knocked. There wasn't any answer, so I tried the door. It wasn't locked. So I went in, and there she was. I shook her by the shoulder, then I saw she was dead. I ran back to the house, phoned you up, and came back and waited out in the road. That's all.

"Is it?" Arnoldson's voice was banteringly familiar. "That was just all? I don't think so, surely, Mrs. Ashley?"

Flik pressed her lips together. Abbot got up off the hard chair he'd been perching on. "If that's all she knows, it's all she knows. D'you propose keeping Mrs. Ashley in here with her dead cook till morning asking fool questions? Blast you," he added under his breath.

"Pardon?"

"Granted," Abbot sneered.

"Now, Mrs Ashley——"

"Can't I go home?" Flik said unexpectedly.

"Just a few more minutes. For instance, this bottle of port, with the cork drawn, and nothing taken out of it?"

"Oh, that? We give—we gave Molly a half bottle of port every month. She liked it, so why shouldn't she have it? She was one of the family."

"Oh, she was, was she? Then she knew all about you?"

Flik took a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket, then put it back again. "Nothing to stop you having a smoke, is there?" Arnoldson said.

For the first time Flik showed emotion. "If you've no respect for the dead, then I have. Yes, I suppose Molly knew all about my aunt and me."

"You *suppose?* However. Did you notice, when you came in to say good night to the old woman that she hadn't drunk any of the port?"

"No."

"Did you notice anything unusual about the old woman when you came in?"

"I—I didn't notice anything. She was sitting in the chair by the fire with her back half turned. I think her teacup was empty. I go in every night, so I wouldn't notice. It's just a habit, like cleaning one's teeth. I'd have noticed if she'd been standing on her head, or singing at the top of her voice."

"You'd have noticed if she was dead or alive?"

"Naturally. She was alive. I said, 'You all right, Molly?' and she said the usual thing, 'Yes, thank you,' and so on."

"Can you swear to that?"

"She isn't bound to swear to anything," Abbot said. "This isn't the Old Bailey or the Lewes Assizes."

"I can't swear to anything," Flik said. "We say the same sentences every night, and I had the impression that the same thing happened tonight. But it mayn't. I told you, it's a habit of years. I thought she said to come in, as usual, when I knocked, but I may have only imagined it because I was so used to her saying come in. I can't have been in here more than a matter of seconds, and I didn't go right up to her."

"We'll leave that, then, for the moment." There was a nasty gleam in Arnoldson's eye which Abbot didn't like. He didn't like anything about Arnoldson for that matter. "Now then, Mrs. Ashley. Did Molly have many visitors?"

"None at all. Unless you count my aunt or me. She didn't have anything to do with the villagers, except when she went down to the butcher, or something. She thought they were a bit—well, she didn't want any visitors, anyway. She kept herself to herself, as they say. She was at the house all day, or most of the day, so when she was at home she didn't want to be bothered by outsiders."

"No little tea parties, or ports and lemons in front of the fire with her pals?"

A slight twinge of disgust twisted Flik's mouth. "No. And she knew enough about good wines not to spoil them by putting lemonade in them. She hadn't any 'pals,' as you put it. She was a cut above the villagers."

"Snobby? I see. Then her only visitors were you and Miss Chattock?"

"Yes."

"What'd she have done if someone else had come to the door and tried to pay her a visit?"

"Told them to go away and banged the door in their face."

FLIK'S calmness was doing her no good with Arnoldson, the doctor thought fretfully. She ought to cry, to be frightened of the corpse. Upset. It was as if she had steeled herself to be calm under these circumstances for days beforehand. Stupid girl, why didn't she show some emotion? Arnoldson, in his mind, saw her in the dock already.

Arnoldson sucked his teeth genteelly. "Then you can say that the only two people who had legitimate permission to enter the cottage were you and your aunt? And that the only person who came in tonight was yourself?"

"Yes."

"No," Abbot contradicted. "The murderer came in as well. Don't try and push Mrs. Ashley into admitting what she doesn't mean. You aren't counsel for the prosecution, and anyway there's no one to prosecute." The doctor's fury rose and tore inside him like a gale of wind. "Your job's to find the murderer. Well, go on then, and find him or her. And while I'm about it, as Mrs. Ashley's medical adviser, I insist that she goes home immediately."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Arnoldson made no attempt to conceal his angry resentment of Abbot. "Since when've you been Mrs. Ashley's medical adviser?"

"Since old Bannard died, and I took over. I bought his practice——"

"And Mrs. Ashley along with it, I suppose? Funny you knew nothing about her when I mentioned her this evening—or ratner, tonight."

"Last night. I didn't know her as I'd never met her. I've never been sent for by anyone at Shots Hall."

Flik moved her shoulders. "Dr. Abbot sent a card to say he'd taken over Dr. Bannard's practice, and we wrote back and said he could attend to us if necessary."

Good, thought Abbot. Lies like a trooper, and showed his teeth at Arnoldson.

Arnoldson leaned back against the mantelpiece. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes. "Well now, how odd. When I was talking to Mrs. Ashley on the phone she said she hadn't sent for a doctor for Molly. She said as old Bannard was dead she didn't know who to send for."

For the first time Norton spoke up. "If you was a young lady that'd just found her cook what she'd known all her life dead, you wouldn't know much either. You wouldn't know if you were going or coming. You'd be all arsey-tarsey, as one might say. Beg pardon, Mrs. Ashley," he apologized to Flik.

"Why?" she said. She hadn't really been listening. And anyway, Norton was right. Arsey-tarsey was the word.

"I insist on Mrs. Ashley going home," Abbot repeated. "Apart from anything else, this place'd give anyone pneumonia."

"Just another minute or two. Mrs. Ashley, we've got to check up on any fingerprints there may be around. Mind my taking yours?"

"No," Flik said. "Not in the least. Why should I?" She spoke with sudden insolence, which, Abbot thought, suited her pale face and her secret eyes. She was tall; not as tall as he was, but tall for a woman.

Arnoldson hauled a small box out of his pocket, and took Flik's fingerprints on a piece of white paper, then on a piece of black. He did the job neatly and swiftly, and managed to touch Flik's cold hands several times, which roused Abbot to a quite unreasonable anger.

Flik pulled her coat more tightly than ever round her, so tightly that she looked like a slender pole. Then she turned and made for the door.

"I've not done yet, Mrs. Ashley. When you were out tonight, after you left Shots Hall at half past eight and before I arrived up here, did you see anyone but Molly?"

"No. At least—" Flik hesitated and was lost.

"At least—who?"

"I saw Miss Merridew. I stopped outside the place I work and leaned with my back against the door and watched her. She was making curtains. Her windows

were all gold through the fog, and she was all blurred. She's making new curtains for her house. She put one pair up while I was watching."

"At half past eight, or a minute past? And you stood and snooped?"

"I was not snooping. I simply watched."

"Why?"

FLIK didn't answer. She stared over Arnoldson's shoulder, keeping her eyes away from Molly.

"How long did you stand there?"

"I don't know," Flik shrugged. "I didn't time myself. I just stood there. Maybe ten minutes, maybe quarter of an hour, maybe half an hour. I don't know. I'm not interested in how long I stood there." She opened the door, and without looking behind her, without saying anything more, walked out into the fog.

"Sssh—" Arnoldson held his head on one side, listening. Abbot listened too, not knowing what for. Half a minute passed, another half minute, another half. Then a dull boom sounded from the distance.

"My Lord" Abbot exclaimed, suddenly shaken. "What was that?"

"The Shots Hall main door," Arnoldson grinned. "It makes a row like the crack of doom when it's shut. She's gone home then. Wake up, Norton, fingerprints. Now doctor, what did old Molly-O die of? And when did she die?"

Abbot frowned. "D'you expect me to give an opinion before I can hold an autopsy? Just because her pupils are pinpricks and she appears to have died of asphyxia doesn't mean she took an overdose of morphia. There are plenty of other poisons. As for the time of death, I won't commit myself now. I'm not omnipotent, even if you think you are. Keep that teacup intact, just as it is. I can tell you this, she hasn't been dead long, but I can't tell you yet at approximately what time she took the poison. You can't lay down rules, except for things like cyanide, which kill almost instantly."

He peered into the dead face. The pinprick eyes must have seen the poisoner. Unless she poisoned herself. It was all, he thought, bloody nasty. Moving quietly, Norton was blowing white powder on the old, polished furniture. Arnoldson, wearing gloves, was poking about, avidly curious, in drawers and cupboards, prying into Molly's small and intimate privacies. I shall, thought Abbot, make a point of going home after this and destroying everything private I possess, because if I don't the same thing may happen to me. And suddenly he felt a violent revulsion against death, though he had seen so much of it.

He straightened himself, and Arnoldson, pushing him aside, proceeded to take Molly's fingerprints.

"Wonder how she got those scars on her finger tips?" he said. "Makes them easy to identify, anyhow. I wonder how old this old geyser is? I forgot to ask FlikkAH."

"Even the gods have their failings." Abbot buttoned up his overcoat and pulled on his thick woolen gloves. "I'd say she was nearer seventy than sixty."

"Where're you going?" Arnoldson asked suspiciously.

"To see if my patient's all right. You can sound your hooter when you're ready to go."

Arnoldson stuck his lips out in what was meant to be a smile. "So you've fallen for pretty Flik, have you?" he jeered. "Going to put your five bob on the mantelpiece and try your luck?"

Abbot stared at the fat, moist mouth. "I'll put five bob each way on for you, and your horse won't run."

The door banged behind him.

"One day I'll skin the pants off that old fool," Arnoldson grunted.

"Don't forget to take his shoes off first," said Norton amiably.

"Why?"

"I'd hate to tell you. There's only one pair of fingerprints I can find round here, and they seem to be the old woman's."

"I suppose FlikkAH wore gloves."

III

THE DOCTOR HAD ACTUALLY no intention of going to see Flik. It would, however, have been a pity to dis-

abuse Arnoldson and tell the truth, which was that he wanted some fresh air, even mixed with fog. He also wanted to let off steam before he violently assaulted the man.

"To hell with him," he muttered, stumbling up the muddy road, leaving the police car behind him, Roberts asleep behind the wheel. "May his skin itch with scabies and every namable and unnamable disease."

The fog gathered on the lenses of his spectacles, so that he was nearly blind. Unseen trees dripped and the silence was solid; a cloak that had wrapped itself around the hill top hiding the secrets of Shotshall. Very likely hiding a murderer. Or had the old woman committed suicide? Abbot found he had walked up against a stone gatepost, and looking over the top of his spectacles saw the faint glimmer of a light. It seemed to come from between the chinks of curtains. Behind one of the windows of Shots Hall, Flikka Ashley was awake. The doctor groped his way up the short drive. He couldn't make out the shape or size of the house at all; whether it was large or small, beautiful or ugly, built of stone or built of brick.

Shuffling his feet along, so as not to fall over any unseen obstacle, he made for the light, tripped over a step, and found himself pawing a heavy door studded with nails. The light came from a window next to it. What now? he wondered. Should he knock, or should he go back to the car? He knocked, hurting his knuckles on the hard wood. Nothing happened. He knocked again, impatient and getting cross. The door began to open, and a slit of light shone out straight onto his eyes.

"Oh," said Flik's voice. "Dr. Abbot?"

"It's me. I'm alone, I left the arm of the law poking about, and the nose of the law nosing. How I detest that man!"

Flik pulled the door open wide, and he went in, looked round him and stared. He had no idea what he had expected, but it certainly wasn't this vast, pseudo-baronial hall, like a stage setting. The ceiling disappeared high up into a mass of carving, which he could not see properly as the only light came from two standard lamps and the logs burning in the enormous open fireplace. The walls were of stone, or what appeared to be stone. In the worst possible taste they were ornamented with carved shields and emblems. There were four high windows opposite the door he had come in by, and two high windows on each side of the door. And yet, the general effect was, somehow, pleasing. For the furniture, even though the covers of the chairs, and the curtains, were worn, was very old and very good. Probably very valuable. There was not much of it, but it was well arranged. The room must have been heaven knew how many feet long—quite fifty, and its corners were dark.

"The ancestral hall of the Chattocks," Flik said, amused. "Vintage 1860. I'm sorry the drawing-room fire's out, otherwise I'd take you in there. I can't take you into the study either, as that's all cluttered up with my carvings. Do sit down."

Abbot sat himself in a huge wing chair by the fire. "I'm sorry to burst in on you like this, but I saw the light."

"What did she die of?" Flik's question shot out of her mouth with sudden violence.

"Post-mortem tomorrow. I'll tell you then. Morphine, maybe. Maybe not." Abbot sighed, tired and dispirited, angry at the same time.

"She was murdered," Flik said. "To begin with, she hadn't any morphia, and she wouldn't take it if she had. She didn't approve of suicide."

"People don't," Abbot pointed out. "But that doesn't stop them if they suddenly go unbalanced. Who'd murder her?"

"Oh, my Lord!" Flik exclaimed. "How should I know? It's incredible. There wasn't anyone who could have borne her a grudge. But Arnoldson thinks I did it, doesn't he?"

"Does he?" I'm damned if I'll commit myself, thought Abbot.

"You look tired," Flik said. "I'll get you a drink."

WITHOUT waiting for him to say whether he wanted one or not she opened a dark red and gold Chinese cab-

inet, took out a siphon of soda and two glasses, put them on the table next him and went out of a door at the opposite side of the room. She moved silently, and Abbot saw she had taken off her gum boots and stockings and was in her bare feet; pointed, white bare feet with pink toenails. Her legs, in rough blue serge trousers, were long and straight. She wore a dark blue jersey like a fisherman's, which was tight enough to show off her figure, with its small waist.

He was uncomfortably aware that his feelings reflected a little of Arnoldson's obvious wish to get as close to Flik as possible, to feel and touch her, and was furious. He then realized that he had not once looked straight into her eyes, or she into his; that in some way, she was trying to conceal what was in them, or behind them.

She came back carrying a bottle that glinted golden and inviting.

"Prewar whisky. I didn't think you'd want wine at this hour. I suppose, like everyone else, you know about the Chattock cellars?"

"No, I don't," Abbot said rather ungraciously. "What about them?"

"Laid down by great uncle Chattock when he built this place. You're sitting on top of some of the best and rarest wine in England." Flik smiled at him suddenly, and as suddenly looked right into his eyes. "Great uncle Chattock was exceedingly rich, which is more than Aunt Bee and I are. We have to sell a bottle now and then to live on."

"I see."

Flik poured out two large tots of whisky. The doctor had his neat, but she squirted a lot of soda into hers. Then she looked at him again, and he knew that he was only seeing the outsides of her eyes, and that behind them lurked lord knew what—some seething caldron of passion, or concealment, or secrets not to be told. Yet they were wary. They were probing him, trying to find out what he thought, what he knew. He wished she'd stop looking at him. And then she did, and he was sorry.

"Arnoldson thinks I killed poor Molly," she said. "I didn't. I don't know who did. I don't know why. But there's something that doesn't fit, and I can't think what it is."

"Are you shocked about it?" Abbot asked, also warily probing. "Has it upset you very much?"

Flik got up off the stool she had been sitting on, and began to prowl. "Shocked? I'm terribly shocked—— I can't tell you how much. She was one of the family. Part of our lives. For her to die like that, all alone, perhaps frightened, is a sort of nightmare. I wish I could wake up."

"Well, you're a fool," said Abbot, "if I may say so. You ought to have howled and bawled and sobbed in front of Arnoldson. Instead of that, you wear a studied calm that you might've been practicing for weeks." The whisky was making him both talkative and indiscreet, but he didn't care.

Flik stopped prowling and came and stood in front of him. "But I'm not that sort. I didn't howl and bawl. I can't howl and bawl to order. I never have. I'm past that stage."

"I see."

"Have some more whisky." She poured another tot in his glass, slopping it. "I ought to thank you for sticking up for me. I mean, for nobly lying that you were our family doctor. I'm very grateful."

"Why?" Abbot snorted, and added, "If you'll take me on officially as your family physician then I may be able to help you."

"Of course. But what help can you give? Do I want help? I suppose I do." Flik sat down on the worn and once lovely Persian rug in front of the fire, crossing her legs under her. Looking up at him, she gave the impression of being very young, only a child.

"Listen to me." Abbot put his glass down. "If there's anything you'd like to tell me, to get off your chest, then do. Sometimes it's a help."

"There's nothing," Flik said. "I don't know anything about Molly."

"I wasn't thinking about her," Abbot muttered. She was concealing something all right. Arnoldson was no fool. He was perfectly right. Flikka Ashley was afraid of something being found out. She was on her guard, almost as if she held a sharp sword in her hand.

THEN Abbot heard, far away, the sound of the ambulance bell. It brought him abruptly to his feet.

"I haven't known you ten years, or whatever the period is, but I'm going to poke your fire." He seized the poker, and began to belabor the burning logs with fiendish energy. If she heard the bell she'd go out and then she'd see Molly's corpse being taken away. She mustn't see that. She'd had enough. She'd had a damn sight too much, not only of this night, but of something else as well. He beat and hammered the logs, and suddenly the poker broke in half and fell in the grate with a crash. The bell had stopped.

"Blast it, I'm sorry. Now I've ruined your poker."

Flik began to laugh, and the sound was natural and unstrained.

Abbot gave a sort of jibbering snort. "All at once I felt as if I was hammering Arnoldson on the head. My satisfaction was enormous and quite utterly bloodthirsty. I must be getting homicidal."

The fire crackled furiously, throwing up sparks and strewing the hearth with red-hot cinders. "I do wish," Flik said slowly, "I knew what it was that struck me. There was something wrong. Something that didn't fit." She rubbed her arms, thinking, then shrugged her thin, straight shoulders. "I don't know what to do about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Abbot realized that he'd just been on the point of going to sleep. "What about tomorrow?"

"We asked some people in for drinks at six. It's Aunt Bee's birthday. I can put off people like the Ambroses, who live close, but some of the others live miles away, and haven't got phones, so I can't put them off in time. There isn't even a telegraph office in the village."

"Why put them off?" Abbot asked.

"It doesn't strike me," Flik answered, "as very pretty taste to throw a party when Molly's been murdered the day before. And of course the party's not tomorrow, it's today. How can I have a lot of people in here laughing like hyenas when Molly's being—when you're doing the——"

"Post-mortem. No, I suppose not. But I don't see what you can do about it." What the devil's difference did it make? Abbot thought. Not having a party wouldn't bring Molly back to life. "You'd better stick to your program."

The bell of the ambulance echoed hollowly in the hall. Flik sat up on her heels, her eyes wide open. "They aren't taking her away? Now? All by herself?"

"Listen to me, my good girl, you can't help her by going with her. It's too late, anyway. They've gone." Abbot sighed. He wanted to go home to bed.

The noise of the bell receded into the distance. There was a dull banging on the hall door, and it began to open.

"Can I come in?" It was Arnoldson. He treated the doctor to a juicy smile and a half wink, and eyed the whisky bottle.

Flik stiffened. Abbot thought to himself that in front of the policeman she shed all signs of emotion in the same way a snake shed its skin at the appointed time.

"You can come in." Flik stood up, the picture of polite inhospitality. "Do you want a drink?"

"Not now, thanks. Just another word or two with you before I take the doctor home."

That's bad Abbot decided. Arnoldson liked his drink. But the police didn't drink with suspects.

"I just wondered," Arnoldson said to Flik, "why you swept the bit of brick path after the first time you went into Molly's cottage to see her, and not after the second time."

Flik stared at him. Now she knew what it was that was wrong, what it was that did not fit. "I didn't sweep the path at all. I hadn't anything to sweep it with anyway. And why should I sweep it?"

"It was swept. Never mind." Horribly polite was Arnoldson now. "Now, if you wouldn't mind signing this statement. You can read it over first, and alter anything that's wrong, Mrs. Ashley." He handed her a notebook, held invitingly open.

FLIK read what he had written. It was, she supposed, her evidence. Everything she'd said down in Molly's cottage. It seemed correct enough. She signed.

"And your address, too, please."

Flik wrote her address.

"You've left the door open," Abbot said to Arnoldson. "D'you want to freeze us?"

Arnoldson shut the door. It made a noise like an old-fashioned cannon going off. The acoustics of the hall produced echoes that were sometimes almost alarming.

Flik handed the notebook back. "Oh, and, just as a matter of form, Mrs. Ashley—— Age, please?"

"Thirty-six," Flik answered without interest.

Even Abbot was surprised. She didn't look more than twenty-six at the outside. It was only her eyes that were experienced, and sometimes they, too, gave an impression of unsophistication.

"Thirty-six," Arnoldson repeated. Now he knew at last. "And your occupation, Mrs. Ashley?"

"Mainly carving and sculpturing."

"We all know that. Everyone knows about Flik's mermaid that's going to knock everyone flat when it's finished. That's where you were going tonight? To the mermaid?"

"Yes."

How could she stand this and not crack? Abbot wondered. The dead body of the old woman, the covert insults, the revolting familiarity?

"By occupation, we mean," Arnoldson said, "married, spinster, widow, and so on."

"Married woman."

"Former husband still alive then?"

"As far as I know."

"Married woman," Arnoldson muttered, writing. "Divorced?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't you like," Abbot seethed, "to know what she has for breakfast?"

Arnoldson reddened, but before he could answer, there was an interruption. Someone was feverishly tapping on the hall door, little, frightened, urgent taps. Arnoldson went to the door, and opened it. A pathetically distressing figure fell in. A small figure wrapped in a dressing gown and over it a coat; thin ankles poking up out of worn galoshes, in one hand a large electric torch, in the other, as if for protection, an umbrella—— A terrified little face peering out of a woolly shawl.

"Susan!" Flik exclaimed. "My dearest Susan, what on earth're you doing here?"

"Flik!" Miss Merridew tottered toward her. "I had to come. At first I was too frightened to go out in the dark by myself but then I thought, I must go and see what's happened. I heard the bell, you see. The first time I thought it had gone past, then I heard a motor engine start up and the bell again, and I thought, that's at Shots Hall, so I had to come. Flik! Is it Bee? What's happened? Who are all these men?" she stared in alarm at Abbot and Arnoldson as if they were an army of toughs, armed to the teeth with lethal weapons.

"Susan, darling——" Flik put her arm round the shivering little shoulders. "Aunt Bee's all right. You oughtn't to have come out. This is Dr. Abbot and that's Sergeant Arnoldson."

"But why?" Miss Merridew wailed.

"Something's happened to Molly," Flik said gently. "Susan, dear, it's Molly. Poor Molly's dead."

"Murdered," Arnoldson put in with gusto. "So Mrs. Ashley thinks."

Miss Merridew screamed. In astonishment, Abbot wondered how such a large scream could come out of so small a body. At the same time, he foggily wondered at this new aspect of Flik, so gentle and so kind. He was all fogged up, anyhow. The whisky, he thought, had made him a little drunk.

"Oh!" cried Miss Merridew. "Oh! Oh!"

The baronial hall gave back her cries like the wailing of a banshee. A door at the far end of the room opened.

"What the hell's going on here?"

It was Bee Chattock.

IV

ABBOT, IF HE HAD VISUALIZED Bee Chattock at all, had seen her as an elderly, masculine female with

cropped gray hair and tweeds. Therefore he was slightly surprised to see that she was nothing of the sort. Like the wine in the cellars below, she was of Victorian vintage. Her white hair, even at this hour, was dressed over a large pad in front, and a tight bun behind, half-hidden by a small lace cap with a lavender bow perched on it. Her crisp silk dressing gown was lavender, tight over her portly bosom, tight in the waist, flowing in the skirt, and trimmed with very good lace. From her neck dangled a lorgnette on a ribbon. Her voice was cultivated. The voice of a Victorian lady of good family. But her language was that of a Victorian gentleman when the ladies had left the room after dinner.

"Flik? What's all this? What the devil are you doing here, Susan, screaming like that? Who's that man with the spectacles, and what, may I inquire, are you doing here, Arnoldson? Lord almighty, what an hour to have a reception. Be quiet, Susan. Flik, have you been feeding these people the prewar whisky?"

Bee raised her lorgnette, and even Arnoldson quailed beneath the basilisk stare, while Miss Merridew reduced her shrieks to quivering sniffs. Abbot had an insane desire to roar with laughter, and knew quite definitely that he'd drunk too much.

"Well? I'm waiting for some explanation. Flik?"

Flik drew her breath in. "Molly's dead. I didn't wake you, as I thought it wouldn't do any good to ruin your night. Molly's dead."

"No!" said Bee. "Molly? Dead? What of? She was perfectly healthy, poor old thing. Why're you all looking so queer?"

"So far as one can say offhand," Arnoldson said, slightly cringing, but at the same time truculent, "she was poisoned, or took poison. Mrs. Ashley seems to be sure she was murdered."

"Then she's right. Molly wouldn't poison herself, not intentionally, at any rate. She hadn't been eating toad-stools, had she, Flik?"

Flik moved her shoulders in a weary gesture. "Can you see Molly going down into the woods and picking toad-stools?"

"No, I can't," Bee snapped. "Of course not. This is shocking. Poor, poor unfortunate Molly. What the devil's the use of paying the police if this kind of thing can happen?"

"D'you expect the police force should have a man stationed in every dwelling in England in case someone's murdered?" Arnoldson poked his head forward.

"Yes." Bee floored him, temporarily at least.

Miss Merridew cried quietly into her shawl, her hand in Flik's.

I'm sick of this, Abbot decided. I want to go to bed. Is this going to be an all night sitting, with a cold collation at the end of it? Poisoned coffee and baked toadstools with beards on them, and spots?

Arnoldson sucked his pencil. The lead made a black smudge on his wet lower lip. "You don't seem very surprised, Miss Chattock, to hear the old woman's dead."

"Surprise," Bee remarked acidly, "is hardly the word. What d'you mean, 'surprised'? Open your mouth and shut your eyes, and see what the queen'll give you. Surprised! A nice sort of surprise. I'm shocked, horrified. I'm sad to lose an old friend. More sad than you'll ever be about anything, because it isn't in you to be anything but greedy and curious. What d'you expect me to do? Scream like Miss Merridew? Wring my hands, with the tears pouring down my face? Sob, wail? What?"

ARNOLDSON swallowed, and his Adam's apple jerked up and down. Despite his longing for bed, Abbot enjoyed the performance. There was no doubt where Flik got her spirit. If she wasn't actually a Chattock, then association with them had produced the same toughness. Exterior toughness, anyway.

"We'd better be going, doctor." Arnoldson gave up the unequal battle for that night. "Just one thing, Miss Chattock. When did you last see Molly Pritchard?"

"When she came in to say good night to me before she went home. That must have been a minute or so before the quarter past."

"And at what time did Mrs. Ashley go out?"

"About half past. Why ask me? Ask her. I suppose you want her word corroborated? Now you can go to hell, and take the doctor along with you."

"Thanks," Abbot smiled, and was surprised to get an answering smile from Bee Chattock. He didn't shake hands with her when he went, nor with Flik. He looked at Flik through the whisky fog which was again obscuring her, and tried to convey a message that he'd get in touch with her. Like a ruddy conspirator, he thought, and tripped over the back of Arnoldson's heels, for which he did not apologize. The door crashed shut behind him, and he was out again in the fog, the watchful darkness and the sloughing mud.

Norton, on guard in Molly's small living room, put a mat up against the crack under the door hoping to keep the damp and the fog out. The curtains were pulled tightly across the windows, and he had shut the door into the bedroom, trying to get some sort of fug up. Unimaginative, he still did not like this job one bit. The only comfortable chair in the room was the one from which the corpse had been removed, and there was still the imprint of Molly's head on the patchwork cushion.

He stiffened. The latch of the wicket gate had clicked softly. The back of his neck crawled. Was the murderer creeping out of the fog to revisit the scene of his crime? Breathing through his nose, he turned the lamp out, kicked the rug away from the door, and flattened himself against the wall behind it. He did not really feel at all happy. He was not armed, and the unknown always rather alarmed him.

The door began to open. He could tell that by the cold air that suddenly came in. The door opened right up against his chest, then slowly closed. He could hear someone breathing. They were standing still, as though taking their bearings, listening.

Norton held his breath till his lungs nearly burst. The thin beam of a torch lit on the fireplace, on Molly's chair, a wandering, vagrant light. Between him and the light someone was moving quietly. The door into the bedroom opened, swung half shut, and the light went behind it. Very cautiously, he let his breath out, waited till he could breathe comfortably again, and took his boots off. In his woolen-socked feet, he tiptoed to the bedroom door. Arnoldson had already searched the whole cottage, the living room, the bedroom, the small attic above, the scullery, and taken away with him the only things that seemed of interest.

Fascinated, Norton watched the light. Its owner wore gloves. The gloved hands touched this and that, very lightly, came to rest on a little walnut writing desk, pressed the bottom of it, and felt inside the hidden drawer that sprang open. Norton had seen many such things. His old aunt down in St. Arthurs had a little desk with a drawer just the same as that, except that it was in the lid. The owner of the hands took out a bundle of letters, tied up with blue ribbon, put the torch on top of the desk, and feverishly sorted the letters in the light of it. Pulled them out of the envelopes, glanced through them, put them back, searching, reading, sorting.

THERE was a soft sigh of relief. Evidently the intruder had found what it had come for. The gloves put the rest of the letters together, tied them up with the ribbon, and they vanished into a pocket. Still Norton waited. But he waited a little too long. There was the snick of a cigarette lighter, a burst of flame, and the smell of burning paper.

"Oi!" He turned on his flashlight. "Oi, Mrs. Ashley, you can't do that now!"

In the light of his torch, Flik's face turned first red, then back to white. She dodged behind a chair, holding the burning letter out of his reach. Stumbling, he made a grab for it, tripped on a rag mat, and by the time he had righted himself saw nothing more than a pile of black ashes on the floor, which Flik stamped on, grinding them with her heel till they were powder.

"Oh, now, Mrs. Ashley," Norton gulped, "you really shouldn't have done that."

"Well then, why didn't you stop me?" Only the corners of her mouth showed that she was trembling. "You scared the wits

out of me," she added. "What're you doing here in the dark?"

"Well," he said rather uncomfortably, "Mr. Arnoldson put me on here to look after the place. It's quite usual, Mrs. Ashley, when anyone's died not quite right."

"I see." Flik gave him an odd smile. "Just in case the murderer revisits the scene of his crime?"

Norton fidgeted, not sure what the answer was. "After all," he hedged, "we don't know it was murder yet, do we? All the same, Mrs. Ashley, you shouldn't have done that. If there was anything you wanted here you could've asked."

Flik lifted her shoulders, and Norton thought, oh, Lord, what should he do now? There was a faint smell of wet leaves as she passed him and went into the small, cold living room. He followed her, and fumbling for matches lit the lamp again.

"Now, Mrs. Ashley——"

Flik waited, keeping her back to Molly's chair.

"Now, I'll have to ask you what it was you was burning," Norton went on, trying to do his duty as a policeman, and glad Arnoldson wasn't there to see him and jeer. Arnoldson would have made one of his usual cracks about everyone falling for FlikkAH.

Suddenly Flik was on the defensive. "What I was burning, as you no doubt saw, was a letter." She began to talk very quickly, almost like a child making excuses for some misdeed. "It wasn't anything that could possibly've had anything to do with Molly being murdered. It was personal. Don't you see, I wouldn't try and hide anything that'd help to find whoever murdered her? It was simply personal—I didn't want Arnoldson reading my letters."

"Oh?" Norton caught up on her. "It was a letter of yours? Written to the deceased was it? I'm afraid you'll have to give me the other ones—the ones you put in your pocket. I'm sorry, Mrs. Ashley, I am really. I'll always remember how good you and Miss Chattock were when I had to come up and see you about those ladders of yours what was stolen, and I told you my wife was ill and you gave me that bottle of port for her."

Flik moved impatiently. "D'you think I'd trade on that? I don't want to stop you doing whatever's supposed to be your duty, but I can't see how my old letters to Molly can have anything to do with what's happened. If Arnoldson thought so, then why didn't he take them?"

"Didn't find them, that's why, Mrs. Ashley." Norton, despite the cold, started to sweat, and he felt his face turning red. "He did take the old woman's bankbook, and her card of Christmas club saving stamps, but they were in the drawer of the dresser here—— The saving stamp card was full," he added foolishly. Anything to go on talking, so that he'd put off the moment when he had to make Flik give him the letters in her pocket.

FLIK's lips moved, as if she were saying something, or repeating something he had said; her eyes looked very large, and expressionless, like eyes that were turned back to front, so that they were staring inward at some idea. Groping for something. But she said nothing out loud, and Norton felt more and more depressed and uncomfortable. He cleared his throat.

"I'm really sorry, Mrs. Ashley, but you'll have to give me the rest of them letters."

He didn't quite know what he had expected her to do. But he hadn't expected her quietly to hand the bundle of letters over. It had not occurred to his usually logical mind that that was the only thing she could have done, except bash him on the head with a chair and then make a bolt for it. He mumbled a vague politeness and transferred the letters to his own pocket. Flik turned up the collar of her coat.

"Have a cigarette?" she said, and handed him a half-full packet. "I've more at home. Your need, as they say, is probably greater than mine. Why don't you relight the fire and make yourself some tea? Molly wouldn't grudge you using her tea. Or are you afraid it's full of poison?"

Her voice, thought Norton, was bitter as that stuff you put on the ends of kids' pencils to stop them sucking them. Well,

all this was pretty bloody for her. "Mrs. Ashley? You wouldn't care to tell me what was in the letter you burned?"

Flik looked at him over her shoulder, her hand on the doorknob. "No, I wouldn't. It was purely personal. A letter written years ago. Go on, it's your duty to tell Arnoldson." Then she went, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Norton listened. In the due course he heard the muffled crash of the Shots Hall main door shut. "Hoo-bloody-rah," he muttered in disgust, and feeling more disgusted at the poking and prying that went with police work, took the packet of letters out of his pocket and began to go through them. They were all addressed to Molly. The first one was dated thirty years before, in a faded, scrawling small-child hand.

Darling Nannie,

I wish Aunt Bee would tak me way from thise beastly schoul as the girls ar so stupid and when they have a fight they only fight sayeing silly things not with ther fists like Uncle Hary tourt. I wunder how my tortoiuise is.

With lots of love from your loving little Flik.

Oh, hell, Norton groaned to himself. This was something awful, like suddenly seeing someone with their clothes off. Arnoldson, rot him, would learn all this off by heart and spout it down at the station. He shuffled through the letters, one by one, filled with an abject apology toward Flik. She hadn't written often to Molly. There were two more letters, each a little less childish, from the school she hadn't liked. Another from some place in Scotland where she must have spent a summer holiday with an Uncle John. One from Paris, when she must have been about sixteen——

Darling Molly,

I haven't a thing to say against Paris. It's a lovely town, but the family I'm farmed out on for the good of my soul are as stuffy as an old feather bed. If I dare raise my eyes walking along the street they say it isn't proper for young ladies to look at young gentlemen. . . .

And so on. A faintly scornful letter, the beginning of the many shapes that were the Flik to come.

NORTON wondered when her mother and father had died, and supposed they did it when she was a kid, and then she'd been taken over by uncles and aunts. There was a letter written on her honeymoon. She must have married, from the date, when she was in her teens. The letter didn't say much, except that underneath the bald sentences there was an embarrassing streak of romance. The last letter but one was written from London ten years before, and he squirmed.

Darling Molly,

I'm writing to Aunt Bee by this same post. I'm afraid you're both going to be terribly upset, but I simply can't stand living with Mac any longer. I never told anyone, as I thought he might pull himself together, but after eight years of it he's simply getting worse. He's never sober now at all, and he's the filthiest drunk I've ever met, and I've met many. Only he won't let me divorce him. He says if I'm to get rid of him, then he'll divorce me, but he won't let me divorce him. So there's only one thing for it. I'll have to raise a tenner, bribe a young man to spend the night most respectably playing cards with me in a hotel bedroom, stage the usual scene when the maid comes in in the morning, and take the rap. I'm so terribly, terribly sorry, as I feel I'm letting you and Aunt Bee down. But I can't, I honestly can't stand it any longer . . .

Norton conjured up Arnoldson before him, and made a rude gesture.

"Stung again, you rotter," he remarked with loud, offensive satisfaction. "A divorcee, is she? Another man? Clever, aren't you?"

He bundled the letters up and tied the faded blue ribbon round them. If Arnoldson thought he was so damn clever, let

him find them for himself. He switched on his light, groped his way into the bedroom, and put the letters back in the drawer Flik had taken them from. Leave everything as it is, Arnoldson had said when he went. All right, this was as it had been, with the letters still in the drawer. Grunting, Norton bent down and flicked at the burned ashes on the carpet, till they became part of the worn pile of what had once been best Axminster. A minute corner of white caught his eye. The corner of the letter Flik must have held as it burned. He picked it up, and shone his torch on it. It was the left bottom corner of a page. All that was on it were five letters of a word, but the writing was the same.

"Morph," Norton read out. "Morph. Morph. Morphine. Morphia."

He talked out loud, incredulous, distressed. For if he hadn't fallen for Flik in the way Arnoldson said everyone fell for her, he at least thought her very lovely. Lovely and, somehow, alone.

V

THE DEPUTY CHIEF CONSTABLE'S house was more than six miles outside St. Arthurs.

"I will not," he said, when he took over from his predecessor, who had tried to let him his own house on the sea front, "live with my work. I refuse to establish myself on the front and every time I look out at the channel see one of my own constables parading in the foreground."

So Major Mahew, accompanied by Mrs. Mahew, four dogs, a canary in a white cage, a lot of luggage and some very nice furniture, had taken Marsh House, which, so Mahew said, was thus called because there wasn't a marsh within miles of it. He was the first Deputy Chief Constable of St. Arthurs for thirty years who had not started life as a policeman. No one quite knew what he had started life as, but he had been in A.M.G. for part of the war, with the temporary rank of colonel. He had left with the permanent rank of major, which he disliked, preferring to be called plain Mr.

On the morning of December 2nd, at 8:30 A. M., he went down the short stairs, picking his way between dogs. Lane Parry was in the dining room eating, with relish, sausages and tomatoes, the morning's collection of newspapers spread over the table round his place. Mahew whipped the *Sunday Times* away and sat down at the other end of the table. His worst fears were not realized. Under the silver cover of his plate were also sausages and grilled tomatoes.

"But no bacon," he said to the *Sunday Times*. "No doubt the celebrated gentleman from the C.I.D., Scotland Yard, Inspector Parry, has got there first."

"I wish you wouldn't be so damn flippant at this hour of the morning," Parry said without looking up. "Hearty. All you need now is someone to come in and drag off your muddy riding boots and gory spurs."

Mahew and Parry had known each other for quite a long time. They went on with their breakfasts in silence. Presently the telephone bell rang.

"Pay no attention," Parry said.

The bell went on ringing. Mahew dragged himself away from the *Sunday Times*, the sausages and the tomatoes, fell over the same dogs, now in the hall, and went to the phone in his study.

His end of the conversation was brief. "Mahew here. I see. Right. I'll tell him. Oh? Why can't he wait till I get down to the town? Very well. I wish people would behave in a normal manner."

He planted himself in front of his breakfast again. "That chap I was telling you about, Arnoldson, was on the phone. He has a body. It's the body of an old woman called Molly Pritchard. He appears to've started the ball rolling by neglecting to inform me about the body last night, having it removed from where it was found before I could have a look at it, and has now taken it upon himself to order a post-

mortem which is apparently already under way."

"Officious," Parry agreed. "Sack him."

"I wish I could. There's something about the man I dislike, but his present officiousness is scarcely a large enough excuse for me to have him thrown out on his ear. Blast him," Mahew added. "He's on his way up now, and he sounds pleased."

"He probably thinks," Parry said, "he's got the murderer, if it's a case of murder." He lit a cigarette and pushed his chair back from the table, stretching his long legs out in front of him. He was a long man altogether, including his memory. Ignoring the many strings he might have pulled, he had got himself into the police force by the regular way. Parry had done his three years as a constable, pounding his allocated beats and holding up the traffic to let perambulators and old ladies cross the road. On point duty he had been a great success. Never a female passed him without stopping to ask the way to some road or street the way to which they knew perfectly well. At forty he still had the same lean attraction that had fluttered the hearts of his erstwhile seekers of information.

"If this is really," Mahew said, "a case of murder, then I'm damned if I know how I'm able to handle it. D'you know, Lane, we've never had a real murder down these parts?"

"What d'you call real murder?" Parry asked. "If it's murder it's real, if it isn't real, then it's not murder."

"I'm talking about killing someone with malice aforethought. I don't call a burglar getting in a panic and knocking a householder on the head murder."

"No?" Parry threw his cigarette end in the fire. "That's just a petting party, I suppose? Don't be a bloody fool, of course you could handle a nice, real murder. You'd love it."

"I'd hate it." Mahew, Parry saw, was suddenly very much in earnest. "Messy. A real murderer's messy. Nasty human passions and desires, and greed or jealousy, or both or all. I'm all for a good, clean duel if it comes to settling scores, or a quick rage, and 'take this, you cad'."

"Hoity-toity," Parry sighed, and pricked up his ears.

A CAR was coming up the inconvenient lane that led to Marsh House. As it came closer the sloshing sound of mud being plowed through by tires percolated into the room, disturbing the peace, making the dogs bark, pushing away the serenity and the secure comfort of a good breakfast.

Mahew got up and went into the hall. Parry, trying to make himself scarce, failed lamentably to do so, and became an unwilling audience to Mahew's ticking off of Arnoldson, which was brief but to the point.

"When I want you to take the law into your own hands," Mahew finished, "I'll tell you. I dislike red tape, but there're certain formalities which must be preserved, and certain rules which must be abided by. You'd better come into the dining room, Arnoldson, and thaw out some of your initiative."

Good for Mahew, thought Parry, and nodded Arnoldson good morning.

"'Morning Inspector," Arnoldson said, his face angry and beetroot.

"Cold out?" Parry pushed his packet of cigarettes forward, wishing he could get to hell out of there. He had an unpleasant feeling that in some way he was going to be dragged into something he didn't want to be dragged into. This was nothing to do with him. This was Mahew's orphan child, begotten of the Sussex sea fogs, for the special annoyance of Mahew and edification of Arnoldson, whose hair was too greasy. But as Arnoldson told his story, he found himself listening against his will, though he still kept his eyes fixed on the paper.

"That's the story the Ashley woman told," Arnoldson said, "and here's her statement, sir."

Mahew took the proffered notebook and read carefully. "Have you any reason to suppose," he asked when he had finished, "that Mrs. Ashley wasn't speaking the truth? And while you're about it, you might refer to her as Mrs. Ashley, and not the Ashley woman. She isn't a con-

victed criminal, nor a woman off the streets. I happen to've met her."

Arnoldson licked his lips and reddened. "It seems to me, sir, she wasn't speaking the truth. I'm just coming to that. Norton, whom I left in charge of the cottage last night, can bear me out. He wasn't sure of the time, but it must've been about two A.M. this morning when he heard someone sneaking in the gate of the cottage, so he put the light out and got behind the door. Someone came in very quiet, with a torch, and he saw it was her—Mrs. Ashley—and what's more she was wearing gloves."

"I'm not surprised," Parry said. "In this weather no one but a fool would go out without them." Hell, he hadn't meant to interrupt or say anything, but Arnoldson had got into his hair.

Arnoldson gave him a vicious look and went on. "She sneaked into the old woman's bedroom and began poking about. Finally she opened a hidden drawer in one of those old desk things like you see so many of in the junk shops, and took out a bundle of letters. Norton watched her sorting them, and then before he could stop her, which was a poor show on his part, she burned one of them with her cigarette lighter."

"One moment," Mahew said. "Where's Norton?"

"I left him out in the car, sir."

"To freeze? Bring him in. You ought to have brought him in straight away. I'd like him to give his own version."

Reluctantly, Arnoldson, who wanted to keep everyone but himself out of the case, fetched Norton from the car, and levered him into the dining room rather as if he was under arrest. The wretched Norton unshaved, cold, hungry, angry and miserable, perched himself on the edge of a chair and accepted a cup of tea and a cigarette. He felt like some sort of sneak thief. Till he had been relieved at daylight, he had tramped round and round Molly's table trying to make up his mind whether he should tell Arnoldson about Flik's letters, or leave Arnoldson to find out for himself. In the end his sense of duty got the better of him, and he kept thinking of the bottle of vintage port Flik and her aunt had given him for his wife. This seemed a poor thanks for their kindness.

"Now then, Norton," Mahew prompted.

NORTON told his story, pausing every now and then to gulp uncomfortably; and Parry thought, he likes this Ashley woman, or girl or whatever she is, and he's feeling a heel.

"Mrs. Ashley," Norton hesitated, "assured me they were only personal letters, and so they are, because I read them, and she said the one she burned hadn't anything in it that could have had anything to do with the old woman's death. She said she didn't want Arn—she didn't want strangers reading them, that's all."

"Darling Nannie," Arnoldson grinned, "with lots of love from her loving little Flik."

"Thank you, Arnoldson," Mahew said coldly. "I shall read them for myself in due course. Well, Norton?"

"It was when she was gone that I found the bit of paper that wasn't burned. It must've been the corner she was holding, so it didn't get burned, if you see what I mean, sir."

"I see," Mahew agreed. "Where is it?"

Arnoldson drew his breath in, and triumphantly produced the small white corner of paper out of an envelope. It was his trump card.

"See, sir? The beginning of a word. M-O-R-P. Morphia, or morphine. And by the looks of the old woman it was morphine that killed her."

"When Dr. Abbot has finished the post-mortem," Mahew frowned, "we'll presumably know what killed her. At present we don't. Take a look at this, Lane."

Parry put aside the paper with a gesture of protest, and held his hand out. "It might be a part of many words. Morpheus, in the arms of same—Metamorphosis—Morphic—— Has anyone asked Mrs.Ashley about it?"

"And put Mrs, Ashley on her guard?" Arnoldson's scorn was ill-hidden.

"Your case, not mine," Parry said very pleasantly, and lit another cigarette.

"What's more," Arnoldson went on, "I tested the whole cottage for fingerprints,

and the only ones I found were the old woman's. So Mrs. Ashley must've worn gloves."

"Norton," said Mahew, "has already told us she was wearing gloves."

"Yes, but when she went into the cottage before."

"You mean when she found the old woman in there dead? She might very well have been wearing gloves on a night like last night. Did you ask her if she was wearing gloves when she found the body?"

"No, sir." The corner of Arnoldson's jaw began to work.

Mahew's baby, thought Parry. Let him rock it to sleep. He got up and went into the hall, patted one of the dogs and strolled across to Mahew's small study. There, a moment later, Mahew found him, and shut the door.

"Listen, Lane, I don't like the smell of this business in the least. It may turn out to be suicide, but it seems very unlikely. If an old cook was going to do herself in she'd most likely stick her head in the gas oven. But I should say this is poison."

"Well?" Parry was not very sympathetic. "Suppose it's murder by poison? Then all you've got to do is to find the motive and the poisoner."

"All I've got to do? Thanks." Mahew lit his pipe, striking the match angrily on the side of the fireplace. "The whole thing's getting in a mess at the start. First, my only really good man with a fair, unbiased mind, Superintendent Willis, is down with a bad go of flu, so Arnoldson's the only chap to take his place. Second, for some reason I don't know, Arnoldson's biased against Mrs. Ashley, which isn't fair on her. Third, as she's a lady and I've met her, and I don't like Arnoldson, I'm biased for her, and that isn't fair on the law."

"So what?"

"I'd like an outsider to run the show. Someone who isn't biased and can attack the problem with an open mind. I told you, we've never had a real murder down here."

Parry groaned. "It mayn't be murder. The post-mortem may show she died quite naturally of senile decay or fatty degeneration of the heart."

"On the other hand," Mahew pointed out, "the post-mortem may show she died of poisoning. All right, all right, say that doesn't prove conclusively she was murdered, but I've got to prove who administered the poison, haven't I?"

"Yes, dear comrade, you have. So what again?"

"If it turns out to be poison, then it looks like being a complicated case. Arnoldson'll want to arrest Mrs. Ashley on the spot, and I shan't want to."

"You dirty dog," Parry said softly. "You snake in the grass. So I'm to nurse your baby for you, am I, you unnatural mother?"

VI

PARRY, MAHEW AND ARNOLDson, driven by a constable, bumped up the bad road that led to Shots Hall, while Parry inwardly cursed. The headlights of the car were ghostly streaks in the fog which had come down again. It was cold and raw. Somewhere a cracked bell summoned the faithful to evening service. Parry had forgotten it was Sunday. Perhaps, he thought to himself, the depression on him was simply the usual Sunday feeling.

"We're here," Mahew said. "Leave the car in the road, Mordant. Lane, you'd like to see the old woman's cottage first?"

"No, I wouldn't," Parry said. "But I suppose I'll have to."

The constable who was still in charge opened the door, and looked pleased at the prospect of a little company.

"This is Inspector Lane Parry from Scotland Yard," Mahew told him, with a malicious glance at Arnoldson.

"This is where the old woman was found sitting." Arnoldson refused to take a back place. "As you see, Inspector, I haven't let anything be disturbed."

Parry stared down at the chair, picked

up the cushion pressed by Molly's head, shook it, and put it tidily back. Having seen all that was left of Molly, he felt she would have approved his action as much as Arnoldson obviously didn't.

Mahew smothered a clucking laugh, and Arnoldson cleared his throat.

"And this is the bedroom, Inspector. This is the desk where I found the letters."

"I thought Norton found them? Or rather, found Mrs. Ashley finding them?" Parry stared at the desk, the floor, the ceiling, opened and shut the drawers of the dressing table, and strolled into the small scullery. No medicine cupboard and no medicines, he noticed. Evidently old Molly had either been very strong, or hadn't approved of medicines. Or had she, and they had all been taken away by whoever murdered her if she didn't commit suicide?

"I don't see that it's necessary to keep a man freezing in this morgue any longer," he said to Mahew. "What is necessary is to check up on everyone's movements in the village and round about between quarter to eight and nine o'clock yesterday evening."

"I've put a man on to that," Arnoldson said smugly. "I'll get his report later. We know what Mrs. Ashley said she was doing, we know Miss Merridew opposite was sewing curtains, anyhow."

They went out into the fog and the darkness again. The man who had been on duty thankfully got into the waiting car, and Parry turned the key in the lock of Molly's door and absently pocketed it.

"Oh, excuse me, sir!" The relieved constable suddenly stuck his head out of the window. "I forgot to say, there must be something going on at Shots Hall this evening."

"Why?" Mahew asked.

"I don't know why, sir," answered the literal man, "I'm sure. But I heard some cars driving in, and that door banging and crashing."

"Thanks," Mahew said.

"Perhaps the fathering of a reception committee in our honor?" Parry suggested. "Or a wake?"

"Idle curiosity seekers, very likely," Mahew grunted. "Arnoldson, you needn't come with us."

Arnoldson replied nothing. His silence, however, said a lot. Mahew turned on his torch, and he and Parry slushed through the mud up the road and in at the gate of Shots Hall.

"Not more than a couple of minutes' walk," Parry said. "Hell and damnation, what's this?"

THERE was a crash as he walked into the back bumper of a car. Mahew swiveled his light round and Parry rubbed his shins. The car was a big, open sports M.G. In the light of the torch Parry saw that there was a hand accelerator on the wheel.

"Which tells us, my dear Watson," he remarked, "that the owner is gone in one hind leg. What's this? A very old Morris. And here we have and even older Buick, and, good Lord, bicycles galore."

"Come on, come on," Mahew fretted. "I'm frozen. If we're going to walk into the middle of a party it's going to be embarrassing in the extreme."

"Why?" Parry asked in genuine surprise. "We haven't come to arrest anyone. I simply wanted to meet Ashley and the aunt and break the ice, of which there must be tons. Where's the door?"

Mahew found it and knocked. There appeared to be no bell. Nothing happened.

"We'd better walk in," Parry said, and did so, Mahew beside him, muttering that he didn't like it.

The door crashed behind them, and they found themselves confronting the assembled company. The scene, thought Parry, was the most perfect example of suspended animation he had ever witnessed. Either everyone in some way knew who they were, or somehow guessed, and in consequence were stricken with a temporary paralysis. A young woman, in the act of bowing her head forward before tossing her hair back, remained bowed, her mouth open, staring through her hair like a Skye terrier. A young man was most unfortunately frozen in the act of squeezing the trim waist of a middle-aged but very attractive woman in brown slacks, whose mischievous smile was fixed on her face as if it would never come off. Another

young man was in the middle of pulling up one trouser leg to show the moth-ball girl his new tin leg, while another young woman had her mouth wide open like a cavern. A middle-aged man whose appearance shouted retired army, was poised with one arm high in the air, a half-empty glass in it. In some way, they all seemed to have been doing something ridiculous. All except Bee Chattock, who sat quietly in a wing chair, and Flik, who stood at the far side of a drink-laden table, her hands resting lightly on its edge.

Bloody funny, thought Parry, enjoying himself. Mahew, by nature shy, seemed unable to say anything. Very well, Parry decided, he too would say nothing until someone else did. There was nothing more nerve-racking to the guilty than silence. Not that any of these people might be guilty of anything at all. He started to make bets with himself as to who would break the silence first.

It was Flik. From Mahew's vague description of her, Parry knew at once which of the huddle was Flik. Only he had not expected anything so attractive. She had on a tight, plain black tailor-made and an immaculate white garment which he supposed was some sort of shirt.

She said, "Good evening, Major Mahew, do come in."

Mahew, who had been bordering on the verge of a nervous breakdown, somehow got across the room and shook hands. The waxwork exhibition came to life. The girl flung her head back, and was just in time to see the man who was evidently her husband hurriedly whip his arm away from the trim waist, and glare at him. If Parry had known the village habits, he would have also known that this was going to be the excuse for the Ambrose monthly row.

"Oh, and," Mahew said, "this is a friend of mine, Lane Parry. Inspector Parry, Mrs. Ashley. Er——"

"Aunt Bee? You haven't met Major Mahew, have you? And Mr. Parry—Major Mahew, Mr. Parry, my aunt, Miss Chattock. Phil and Tim Ambrose."

"We've met before," said the Ambroses to Mahew, and they introduced themselves to Parry. Phil immediately made eyes at him, defiantly, getting, rather childishly some of her own back on Tim.

The retired major turned out to be a retired Captain Belairs. He had a dictatorial manner and was a bore, which accounted to Parry for the fact that he boasted of being a confirmed bachelor. The girl with the open mouth, now shut, answered to the name of Gwen Hunter. There was a nice but dull married couple called Jessen. The young man with the tin leg was amiable and intelligent. The attractive middle-aged woman was the owner of one of the bicycles. A small, vague group of quite ordinary people must be, Parry decided, the possessors of the rest of the bicycles and the Buick.

Everyone suddenly began to talk at once. Bee Chattock took Mahew aside.

"Say you've come on business and tell all these people to get out," she said to him. "I'm sick to death of them."

"I can't possibly do that," Mahew protested. "I can't throw your guests out." He took an immediate liking to Bee, and wished his wife was there to enjoy her.

PARRY found himself marooned in the middle of the fantastic pseudoancestral hall with Flik, who gave him a drink.

"I'm so sorry we butted in, Mrs. Ashley. We did knock, but nothing happened so we walked in."

"Everyone does. I wish these people would go. You must think it very bad taste to have a party on top of Molly being murdered. There was no way to put most of them off at such short notice, so the only thing to do was to have the party."

"It wouldn't bring Molly back to life to put off fifty parties," Parry said. "Why're you so sure it was murder, Mrs. Ashley?"

She looked up at him, and he had the same impression as Norton had had; that her eyes were turned back to front and were really looking at some inward idea.

"You didn't know Molly. She never went to church, but she was very conventional in her ideas about religion. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. She thought suicide was improper, cowardly, and an insult to whatever idea she

had of God."

Lord, thought Parry, she smells nice. Not of scent but of something fresh, like grass. "I still ask, why murder? She might have died perfectly naturally of old age or a bad heart."

"But she——" Flik turned away. "Phil, one for the road?"

Phil, sulking, didn't answer. But Gwen accepted eagerly. She had had rather too much to drink already, and was getting noisy and excited. "If only someone'd listen to me," she kept exclaiming. "Listen, if only someone'd listen to me——"

"I'm all ears," said the one-legged young man kindly.

"Inspector Parry?" It was the boring Captain Belairs. "Far be it from me to teach my grandmother to suck eggs, but my theory is that Molly's death was an inside job."

"Yes?" Parry had the patience of Job. "I dare say you're right."

"Someone who knew her habits, don't you see? Very well, why not question some of these people? Some of them mayn't have an alibi for last night. What I'm getting at is this—"

"If only someone'd listen to me!" Gwen after another drink, was now almost frantic. "I'll tell you who murdered Molly. It's so clear. Of course she must've been secretly married when she was young, and either her husband or son came back from goodness knows where and bumped her off, don't you see? Because she knew something about them? She had a past, and it rose up and hit her!"

"Be quiet, Gwen." Bee was furious. "You're drunk."

"She had a past!" Gwen persisted.

"Haven't we all?" asked the middle-aged beauty, showing her excellent teeth in an amused smile.

"She had a past, that's what it was," Gwen repeated with the dreary mulishness of the tipsy. "An illegitimate son. I feel sick—Flik, I want to be sick!"

"Now then," Bee took the floor and raised her lorgnettes. There was a lot of uncomfortable foot shuffling and someone knocked a glass over. "You can all go home and to hell with you. All, that is, but anyone who's got any business to talk over. Gwen, stop that disgusting sniveling."

"I'll take her home." The one-legged young man, who, Parry saw, was not quite as young as he had at first thought, and whose name, he had now gathered, was Clive Harris, grasped Gwen firmly by the arm and limped her to the door. Over his shoulder he said to Parry. "I live twelve miles from here, but if my car's ever any use to you, then let me know."

"Thanks," Parry nodded. "Thanks very much."

Gwen was removed. A minute later came the noise of the M.G.'s engine revving up and the squelch of its tires as Clive backed it down the drive.

THE bicyclists took their departure, apologizing very nicely to Bee Chattock and Flik for being such a nuisance, and they were so terribly sorry about Molly. Then the Ambroses went, both kissing Flik as though they were going back to Africa, instead of a few hundred yards down the road. The Jessens and the owners of the Buick said how terribly sorry they were about Molly and went too. The last was Captain Belairs, who made a determined effort not to go at all.

"I feel there's a lot I could tell you, Inspector," he said to Parry, "which may help you."

"I'm sure there is," said Parry. "Good-by. Nice to've met you. Good-by."

"Don't forget to shut that door," Bee nodded.

Thus summarily dismissed, the captain departed, a little unsteady on his feet and red in the face. But no sooner had he gone when the door opened again, without knock or ceremony. Framed in the darkness outside, his black hair shining in the light of indoors, Arnoldson stared at the table of empty glasses.

"Well?" Mahew said.

"Sorry to intrude," Arnoldson said in an unctuous voice, transferring his eyes from the table to Flik's legs. "But there seems to be some sort of shemozzle going on down the road at the pub. I heard someone scream, and then doors banging

and another scream."

"Go and see what's wrong," Mahew ordered.

"My God," Flik said quietly. "What now?"

VII

NEITHER PARRY NOR MAHEW knew that anyone could move so quietly and so unhurriedly as Flik, and accomplish so much in such a short time. One moment the Chattock's hall was a chaos of empty glasses, overflowing ash trays, kicked up rugs, rumpled cushions and wet, alcoholic rings on the polished furniture; the next it was as orderly as if no one had been in there at all.

"Flik?" Bee asked. "What did you give those people to drink, may I inquire?"

"I found that bottle of gin wouldn't be enough to go round," Flik answered, "so I had to mix in what you might describe as other ingredients. I'm sorry, Aunt Bee. I'm afraid I used a little of the good whisky and what was left over from the bottle of Cointreau, and watered it all down with orange juice."

"Lord almighty!" Bee exclaimed. "Have you been drinking that filth?"

"Have you?" Flik went into a dark corner, and from behind a large vase of autumn beech leaves she had somehow preserved, produced a half-finished glass of whisky and soda.

To Parry's amusement, Bee Chattock did the same thing, except that her glass was almost empty, and she had secreted it under the footstool by her wing chair.

"Give these men a drink," she said to Flik, and Mahew and Parry thankfully accepted a whisky and soda apiece. "Well?" Bee went on. "I suppose you've come here to question us? If you have, then get on with it. I don't like shilly-shallying and beating about the bush."

"Which makes everything much easier," Parry smiled at her. "You needn't answer any questions if you don't want to. That's the law, though lots of people forget it."

"Such as Arnoldson," Bee said contemptuously. "We'll answer any questions you like."

Parry looked into his glass, then up at Flik. "I'd like to know what was in that letter you burned, Mrs. Ashley, and why you burned it."

If he had expected Flik to show discomfort, he was disappointed.

"So Norton did his duty? I suppose he was perfectly right. You've read all my letters to Molly?"

"Yes," Parry said. "I'm so sorry, but I had to. I may say that none of them appears to have any bearing on this case at all. None of them I read, that is. But I'm interested in the one I didn't read."

Flik lit a cigarette. Her lipstick made a red blotch on the end of it. "It was as entirely personal as the others," she said. "There was nothing in it that had anything to do with Molly's death, or could help in any way."

"I see." Parry felt in his pocket, took out an envelope and shook out a little corner of paper. "This is part of the letter that didn't burn, Mrs. Ashley. It's got one word, or part of one word on it, and the writing appears to be yours."

Bee leaned forward, and her stays creaked. For a few seconds that was the only sound in the hall. It seemed to Parry that the shadows deepened, waiting, and wondered how anyone could live in such a haunted atmosphere.

"Can I see?" Flik held out her hand. It was quite steady, but as she took the piece of paper from him, her fingers touched his, and they were as cold as ice. He was almost shocked when she laughed, then surprised, for it was a laugh of relief. "Morph," she read out. "Is that all? Morphia was the whole word."

Mahew blinked. The very word morphia ought to have made her shudder; but he remembered then that she didn't know that it was morphine that had killed Molly. Unless she——

"I'd burned my foot with scalding

water—— I was in Town when I wrote the letter to Molly. I was in such pain the doctor I called in gave me morphia so that I could get a night's sleep."

"He gave you some morphia tablets to take?" Parry looked into the strange, inside-out eyes.

"No. No, he just gave me an injection. One injection the night I burned my foot."

SHE spoke lightly, but Parry knew she knew what his question had meant, and that she was suddenly on guard. Poker face, he thought. She would make a brilliant poker player, if she wasn't one already. Or a champion fencer. At any rate, a worthy adversary, if she was going to turn out to be an adversary. He hoped not. She was so lovely. "I see," he nodded. "And the letter was nothing more than a description to Molly of your burned foot, and the doctor and the pain?"

Flik said nothing, but Bee Chattock made an angry noise in her throat.

"Stop trying to make Flikka say something she doesn't mean," the old woman snapped. "You and your Arnoldson seem to have put her in the dock, in your minds, already."

"He's not my Arnoldson," Parry smiled. "If Mrs. Ashley doesn't wish to answer, she needn't."

But Flik answered. "There was more in the letter than my burned foot. It had nothing to do with anything that's just happened. It was private—— A personal letter I didn't want Arnoldson to gloat over."

"You don't like him, do you?" Mahew put in.

"No. Do you?"

Mahew looked embarrassed, but was saved having to say anything by the sound of someone outside trying to open the door and knock at the same time.

"Come in, can't you?" Bee hallooed impatiently.

The door opened, banged shut again, and Parry had his first view of Susan Merridew who sewed curtains. Mahew had met her before at some appalling charity bazaar. They both stood up.

"Oh, dear," Miss Merridew apologized. "I didn't know you had company still, Bee, dear."

"They aren't company," said Bee. "They're policemen. Don't you know Major Mahew?"

"Of course," Miss Merridew twittered, shaking hands with Parry. "How are you, Major?"

"My name's Parry," Parry grinned.

"Parry? Then—— Oh, Major Mahew!" Miss Merridew looked confused, and dropping Parry's hand took Mahew's instead. "I do hope Mrs. Mahew is quite well?"

"She's got a cold," Mahew said. "Otherwise she's in her usual form, thanks very much."

"So nice—— Bee, dear, what I really came in to say was that I met Winnie at church this evening."

Bee sighed tolerantly. "Winnie? Winnie who, Susan?"

"Winnie the Pooh," Parry said under his breath. The swift changes of company, conversation, topic and atmosphere at Shots Hall were getting like some sort of transformation scene out of pantomime.

"Winnie," Miss Merridew repeated. "Bee, dear, Winnie Marsh."

"Winnie from the pub, old Marsh's girl," Flik interpreted.

"Yes, dear. All day I've been thinking, how awful, poor Bee and Flik and that big house, and no one to even wash up a cup. So after church I said to Winnie, 'Winnie, it's time you did something except get in your father's way, so you'd better try and be useful.' I said, 'Winnie, you ought to think of others. Think of Miss Chattock and Mrs. Ashley and all their trouble, and no one to even wash up a cup or clean out the grates.' And what d'you think she said?"

The interested listeners waited for enlightenment. Parry felt, somehow, that Winnie had suddenly become of paramount importance, and could hardly restrain his impatience. What the hell had Winnie said?

"Winnie said," concluded Miss Merridew in triumph, "'I will'."

"Will what?" Bee inquired, bewildered.

"Why, Bee, dear, I just explained. Come up here and do for you till you find someone permanent. She said she'd just go

home and get a warmer coat, and then she'd come up. She ought to be here now."

"Susan, dear," Flik said, "how sweet of you to think of it."

"That'll be the end of the best glasses," Bee muttered.

"What, dear?"

BARMY, thought Parry, and avoided Mahew's eye, because Mahew was on the point of sniggering. This was a nice way to conduct a murder investigation. He pricked up his ears expectantly. A car was racketing up to the front door. Now what, and who? Was this the arrival of Harlequin and Columbine? Bee made an exasperated gesture toward the door, and he obediently opened it. There was a confusion of voices, one of which cursed fluently, while another wailed hysterically. Three figures formed in the fog. He opened the door wide and they all came in together. Abbot, Arnoldson; between them, supported by a hand under each arm, a young female creature whose legs dangled limply as if they hadn't strength to support the body above them.

"Be quiet," Abbot ordered, beside himself. "Shut up, can't you?"

But the young female only wailed the louder, the tears pouring down her face. When Flik exclaimed, "Winnie, what on earth's the matter?" Parry was not surprised. Nothing would surprise him again. Here, in the flesh was Winnie, making a right and proper entry accompanied by screams. He shut the door with a bang. This must be the shemozzle Arnoldson had heard down at the pub.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Arnoldson raised his voice in an effort to make himself heard over Winnie's ululations and Abbot's swearing. "It's her father, old Marsh. She came back from church and found him dead in the chair in their sitting room. I've got Congreve down there. Marsh seems to've died the same way as the old woman."

"What?" Bee exclaimed. "Another?"

Flik's hand went up to her mouth and fell away again. Abbot temporarily silenced Winnie by smacking her head. Miss Merridew clasped her hands and began to cry, mercifully not very loudly.

"I stopped off for a quiet drink," Abbot complained, "and find the pub in an uproar, with this girl screaming, all the neighbors trying to crowd in, a body in a chair and Arnoldson laying down the law."

"I think it's about time," Mahew said, "someone did lay down the law. One body is one body too much, but two bodies in less than twenty-four hours are a damn sight too much. How did the man die?"

"D'you think," Abbot glared, "I've been holding a post-mortem down there, with the cadaver stretched on the four ale bar, cutting it up with the kitchen knife? I can only say that there's a dead body which presents the same appearance as the body did last night."

"Oh!" Miss Merridew sobbed. "Oh, oh, oh!"

Winnie started to give tongue again, but this time she was a little more coherent. She pointed a wobbling, accusing finger at Flik. "Mrs. Vale what lives opposite our back door, she came in and she—she—said she saw Mrs. Ashley go in the back door 'bout half past four, she said. Go in and come out, she said, 'bout half past four, she said. Urhur—urhur—ur—ur——" The accusation turned back into cries.

Parry automatically glanced at his wrist watch. It was just on a quarter to eight. "Did you go into the pub?" he asked Flik.

Flik nodded, then pushed her hair back behind her ears. "Yes. Yes, I did. Old Marsh had promised me a bottle of gin for this evening. I went down to fetch it."

"He was alive?"

FLIK stared at him, surprised. "Of course he was. He'd left the gin on the kitchen sink. He was in his sitting room. I called out was that my bottle, and he said Mm-hmm, so I took it and went."

"You didn't see him?"

"What're you implying?" Bee demanded. "That my niece went in, murdered the man, took the gin and came home and gave a party on it? Eh?"

"I'm not implying anything." Parry answered. "I'm simply asking."

"Just a moment." Mahew shook the crying Winnie by the arm. "Where were you

in the afternoon, before you went to church?"

"I went out with Bill—cycling. Two o'clock we started, and went to Witerlea —on the way back we went to church. I I didn't go home till—till——"

"All right."

"It's dreadful!" Miss Merridew cried.

"I think," Parry said, "we'll get down to the pub. Abbot, you'll come? Miss Chattock, can you keep the girl here for a moment? I don't want her screeching round my heels."

"Very well," Bee agreed coldly.

"Mr. Parry?" Flik's white face looked up at him. "You asked me if I actually saw old Marsh? I didn't. Not properly. I saw the back of his head showing over the top of his armchair. The sitting-room door was open. I thought, then, he was just going to have another nap."

"You're sure it was him?"

"Quite sure. And he was alive."

"I see. Thank you."

The fury that was the inward man of Abbot said, they've hung her already, by the neck till she's dead. He was too pleasant, this London policeman with his pretty manners and his good looks. To Flik he said, "I'll be back later on. I don't like the look of your blood pressure. It's too low."

He followed Parry and Mahew out of the door, the back of his neck aware that Flik was just behind them, seeing them off like a good hostess. He took no notice.

Arnoldson turned on the doorstep, and nearly trod on Flik. His mouth was very wet. He stared down at her. "Well, FlikkAH?" he whispered. "Now how about it?"

"Get out," she said, and flung the door shut so that he was nearly caught in it.

A mingled chorus of woe and horror still came from Winnie and Miss Merridew. For the moment they were ignored.

Bee glanced at Flik. "We'd better get some food together, darling."

Silently, Flik walked the long length of the hall and pushed open the swing door that led to the kitchen and the bathroom quarters. It was cold out there, and she shivered. Bee followed her, her silk skirts swishing, her jet necklace and lorgnettes making a small jingle. Her dignity was unruffled, her poise still upright.

"Flik, you don't think—?"

"No— No." Flik slipped her hand into the inside breast pocket of her tight black jacket. "No—it says quite definitely his hip was fractured. It couldn't mend in two weeks."

"He might have flown across?"

"In splints? No. And what reason would there be?"

"Someone had a reason for killing them."

"I know." Flik's eyes were somber. "I'd better burn this. If Arnoldson got hold of it, then the fat'd be in the fire."

"Over the sink," Bee said. "Then you can turn the tap on and run the ashes down the drain."

Another letter went up in flames, died into black ashes. This time Flik made sure there were no little bits left behind. The water gurgled in the sink as it ran out. She put the back of her hands across her eyes, pressing them hard.

"You aren't feeling faint, are you?" Bee asked.

"We aren't a fainting family, are we?" Flik's red lips twisted a little. "I was thinking. There's something that doesn't fit. Something that policeman Norton said to me—it rang a bell, but I've lost the echo of the note. I can't place it. It's something that's wrong, somewhere. If only I could think what it was. I'll suddenly think of it when it's too late. And there's something else. Who did brush Molly's doorstep? Who brushed Molly's doorstep after the first time I went in to see her last night?"

"What's more to the point," Bee said briskly, "is where's the broom the brushing was done with? Molly broke hers a week ago."

Flik swept her hands away from her eyes, staring. "Good Lord, I never knew that!"

The kitchen door opened reluctantly. A sniveling face peered in.

"Miss Merridew said as how I was to do for you," Winnie gulped, eying Flik with suspicion.

"Hardly an apt phrase," said Bee. "I trust you won't."

VIII

WHILE ABBOT WORKED ON the post-mortem of old Marsh, Mahew and Parry finished their breakfasts. At one end of the table Parry, his long, well-shaped hands moving quickly, sorted report forms and various bits of paper into a tidy sequence, passing the results over to Mahew.

"One," Mahew read. "Report from Arnoldson. All chemists in St. Arthurs interrogated, and all say have not had prescription for or including morphine handed in by anyone in or near Shots Hall, nor have supplied them morphine in any form. No doctors or the hospital in St. Arthurs have supplied morphine in any form to anyone in or near Shots Hall except, (*a*) Dr. Prout, who gave prescription to Mrs. Maunder, No. 2 Hill Cottages, Shotshall, two bottles cough linctus both containing minute quantity of morphine. Note.—Dr. Prout says ten bottles of said linctus could not kill. (*b*) Dr. Saunders, who gave Mrs. Fewsey, Sea View, Shotshall, one injection of morphine about one year ago when she tore ligament in ankle.

"Two. Report from Dr. Abbot. Although Dr. Bannard, from whom he bought practice just before Dr. Bannard's death, attended a few people in Shotshall and vicinity, Dr. Abbot has so far had no occasion to be called in. Dr. Abbot tore up all files to do with patients of Dr. Bannard who were deceased when he took over practice, so is unable to say if Dr. B. prescribed morphine to anyone in Shotshall or vicinity."

"Pity," said Mahew, looking up. "Bannard might've given morphine to someone in Shotshall."

"He might," Parry agreed.

Mahew read on, silent again.

"Three. Report from Arnoldson. During time Dr. Bannard practiced, the following died in or near Shotshall. 1. Mrs. Green, aged 80, senile decay; 2. Mr. Joseph Green, widower of above, aged 85, senile decay; 3. Mrs. Jim Meopham (baker's grandmother), aged 72, pneumonia; 4. Major Andrew Merridew (Miss Susan Merridew's father), aged 82, heart failure following arteriosclerosis; 5. Mrs. Hannah Willard, aged 39, childbirth; 6. Mr. Will Arnot, aged 45, pneumonia following embolism. Note, all above people died over three years ago except the last one, who died just before Dr. Abbot took over Dr. Bannard's practice, and who was attended by Dr. Prout. See Report One.

"Four. Report from Arnoldson. The death certificates of the persons mentioned as dying in or near Shotshall have been checked up with the local Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths and tally."

"So what?" Mahew asked.

"So nothing." Parry looked up. "If old Bannard were alive, he might throw some light on the dark problem. But he isn't. I suppose Abbot's okay?"

"Good Lord, yes!" Mahew exclaimed, shocked.

"Five. Report from Sergt. Congreve. All except the following, in and around Shotshall, had alibis for the night of December 1st between the hours of 19:45 and 21:00: Capt. Belairs, who said he was in his house reading. Miss Chattock, of Shots Hall, who said she was in her house doing nothing. Mrs. Ashley who said what she was doing but it is not proven. Mrs. Vale who said she was asleep in front of her fire which had gone out. Harry Fewsey the butcher who cutting up meat in his shop and said anyone ought to have been able to hear him doing it only no one did. Winnie Marsh who said she had gone round the corner, which one she would not say, to meet a boy friend she won't say either as it is not her regular one Bill Ellison, and she said not to tell about it as Bill Ellison would be mad."

Mahew gave a snort of laughter.

"Congreve's effort?" Parry grinned. "It's prime, isn't it? He paints an almost perfect picture of village life. I like the bit about the indignant butcher, and the wicked Winnie. Is Congreve a bloody fool, or has he a sense of humor?"

"He's got a sense of humor. That's as far as we've got with Molly. The next thing is the alibis for whatever time Marsh was poisoned yesterday. Let's see, Congreve's doing a tentative check up on

everyone's movements between four and six isn't he? That's the best we can do till we get Abbot's report." Mahew rubbed his eyes, which were tired after two nights of driving about in the darkness.

OUTSIDE, the trees were tossed by a southwester, which roared in from the channel, salt-laden, relentless, bringing with it spurts of rain and wisps of sea mist.

"I'll have to check up on every alibi myself," said Parry. "Check and recheck. Lord, how I hate routine work. Why did you let me in for this, you skate? This isn't my stamping ground. I'm a stranger in a strange land. Mrs. Vale's few words make it look damn black for Flik Ashley." He lit a cigarette and flipped the match end in the fire. "Damn black. The old woman swore Flik was the only person to go in that back door. Not that the old woman's oath is anything to go on." He was talking more to himself than to Mahew, who was all ears. "Motive. Motive's what we want. Did Molly know something about Flik that Flik didn't want to come out? She's got something on her mind. Her eyes're secret. And old Marsh—Flik knew him well, so the village says. Often went in there odd hours and played cards with him. Why? To amuse him? To amuse herself? To propitiate him? Did they secretly gamble, and she owed him a packet she couldn't pay?"

"What a damn fool idea," Mahew burst out. "Why not say she was secretly married to the old man, and call it a day?"

"Of course it's a damn fool idea, you miserable old codger. But I'll tell you an idea that isn't a damn fool one. The kingpin, the hub, the why of all this mess, is Flikka Ashley. I'd like to know what was in that letter she burned."

"So'd I," Mahew agreed reluctantly. "But it doesn't mean she's a poisoner."

"Of course it doesn't. All the same—" Parry got up, fell over a dog, apologized to it, and looked out of the window. He didn't want any of this. He didn't like it. As a case, it was interesting, but there was too much evidence, and yet none. Too much secrecy. The whole setting, the whole atmosphere was too theatrical.

"I suppose we'd better get going," Mahew sighed, wishing he could stay at home and talk to his wife. He went out into the hall and shouted. The driver of the police car, who had been having a cup of tea in the kitchen, hurried out by the side door, wiping his mustache, and stood by the car waiting. He was intensely interested in Parry. He had never seen anyone from Scotland Yard before. He supposed the classy inspector had solved the mystery already. He little knew that Parry felt as bogged as any country constable hoofing his beat.

Parry nodded him good morning, and got into the back seat of the car beside Mahew. "Station?" he asked.

"I suppose we'd better," Mahew said. "In case there's anything new there——"

Immersed in his unpleasant occupation, Abbot chanted an inward ode of revolted dislike for everything.

"Yes?" he said, looking up at a white-overalled figure which had suddenly appeared next him.

"There're remains of morphine in this teacup," said the figure. "Same as the one yesterday. I went straight for morphine, as you instructed. Shall I let it go at that?"

"Go on testing for every ruddy poison under the sun," Abbot said through his mask. "One can't be too careful."

IX

THE blustering, tearing wind rattled the shutters of the "Shots Arms," and gave Parry the impression that the pub was human, and its teeth were chattering. The brewery had sent over a man temporarily to take charge. Still decorously closed, partly so that the police could hunt its many corners undisturbed, partly in deference to the dead landlord,

the two bars, saloon and public, were to open again at six that evening. In the meantime, the place served as the local police headquarters, and there, in the back parlor, Parry and Mahew found Arnoldson and Congreve having a warm-up by the fire.

There was a look of lip-licking satisfaction on Arnoldson's face, which boded, thought Parry, ill for someone.

"Morning," he nodded, taking an instant liking to Congreve, whose bland and innocent eyes were windows through which peered an unholy and permanent mirth.

"Congreve's just doing a bit of routine checking up on everyone's movements," Arnoldson said contemptuously, as if such a matter was beneath his own dignity.

"At the moment," Congreve said, "I'm warming me 'ands. And as for everyone's movements, they don't seem to've moved much yesterday except when they went to church at 'arf past six, there then being what you might call a rush for the tabernacle."

"Why?" Parry asked, interested. "Is the community so holy?"

Congreve grinned. "What it was, was that last Sunday—that is, the Sunday before yesterday, the parson announced that 'is next sermon was to be on the diseases of sin."

"Oh?" Mahew stared. "Well?"

"What the villagers thought was they was going to 'ear a nice, fruity talk on venereal diseases, so they went in a body to be enlightened."

Parry let out a snort of laughter. "And were they?"

"They was sold again." Congreve explained with relish. "All it was, was a very old sermon re'ashed, about greed—eating too much and drinking too much, which the parson said was diseases."

Arnoldson made impatient noises in his throat, and Congreve, taking the hint, removed himself, to continue his investigations. Both Parry and Mahew regretted his departure, and resigned themselves to inwardly disliking Arnoldson more than ever.

"Any news?" Parry asked—unnecessarily, he thought, for it was obvious the detective sergeant was bursting with something.

With slow deliberation, he took an envelope out of his pocket, and carefully tipped its contents on to the table. Two cigarette ends, smeared with lipstick. "There you are, sir. Found them this morning first thing, when I had another rake round in the ashes under this fire grate."

Parry and Mahew eyed the cigarette ends with considerable mistrust.

"Mrs. Ashley hasn't been in since we took over yesterday evening after the body was found. That's certain, as I've had a man in here ever since then—all night, too. What's more, the girl, Winnie, told me this morning that first thing yesterday she cleaned out this grate and threw all the ashes away. So they must've been chucked in under the grate sometime since then and when she found her father's body."

"I suppose so," Parry agreed. "Yes. Well? Let's hear your elucidation."

ARNOLDSON didn't like the tone of his voice, but continued to elucidate. He took another envelope out of his pocket, and withdrew from it, gloatingly, another cigarette end. "I picked this out of an ash tray yesterday evening when we went up to Shots Hall. Mrs. Ashley'd just stubbed it out. She didn't see me."

"I don't suppose she did," Mahew said coldly. "If she had, she'd probably have——" He was going to say, given you a running kick in the pants, but altered it to, "Made some remark."

"If you'll look," Arnoldson went on, "you'll see they're the same brand of cigarettes—Maston Majors. No one else in the village smokes them and the lipstick's identical. *Looks* identical," he added quickly.

"From which you deduct?" Parry prompted, knowing the answer.

"That Mrs. Ashley was lying when she said she only came in for a few seconds, took the bottle of gin off the sink and went, without coming into this room. She must've stayed here long enough to smoke two cigarettes. Or at any rate finish one and smoke the whole of another both of which she chucked in under the grate."

"Almost too kind of her to leave so many clues," Parry remarked.

Arnoldson's mouth twitched, his annoyance ill-concealed. "I've interrogated the old Vale woman again this morning, and it appears she was a bit muddled in her statement yesterday, what with all the excitement. She says now she comes to think of it, she didn't see Fl—Mrs. Ashley go in this back door, she only saw her coming out which was about half four in the afternoon."

"I see." Parry pulled at his lower lip.

"Have you questioned anyone else as to whether they saw Mrs. Ashley come in here, or come out again?" Mahew asked.

"Been round the whole village. No one saw her at all, only Mrs. Vale. Anyway, Mrs. Vale's cottage is the only house you can see the pub back door from."

"Coming down the hill from Shots Hall? Did anyone see her?"

"No one saw her," Arnoldson said with satisfaction. "They were mostly having their Sunday afternoon naps between dinner and tea. Anyhow there're only three cottages between Shots Hall and the pub. I've done a plan of the village if you'd like to see it."

"Thanks." Parry took the plan idly, Mahew looking over his shoulder. "Ambroses down a side turning with Belairs opposite, and Miss Gwen Hunter this side of the Ambroses—Hmm—Hmm—Mrs. Vale facing pub back door. Three cottages Shots Hall side of the pub, six cottages the other side of the pub. The church right along the road—Hmm—Tom Barker's farm stuck away in the field to the south—Shots Hall, then Molly's cottage, the stone shed, Miss Merridew's opposite it. What's this?"

"That's Harry Foster's cottage. He's Miss Chattock's gardener."

"I see, right past Shots Hall and then along what looks like interminable lane. Lonely place to live. I take it there're outlying houses scattered about?" Parry asked.

"Yes, Inspector. Only I didn't put them in. They're all some long way off, and don't belong to the village itself."

Arnoldson fumed inwardly. He'd expected them to be struck all of a heap by the cigarette ends, and they weren't. To hell with the amateurish Mahew, and the stuck-up man from London. He'd enough evidence against dear FlikkAH to hang her, and they were bloody well interested.

"Well," Parry said. "Thanks. I'll now be getting about my lawful occasions. Think this chap from the brewery can fix us with some lunch later on?"

"I'll arrange it," Arnoldson said, as if he were used to working miracles. "I've got some work to attend myself," he threw at Parry and Mahew as they let themselves out.

"Phew," Mahew muttered, "but how I do dislike that oily man. I don't like this cigarette end business a bit."

Parry shivered, and buttoned up the collar of his overcoat. He never wore a hat, except on very official occasions, and the wind raged in thick, dark hair. "I don't much like it either. Either she isn't as clever as she appears to be, or someone's dumped a fine, stinking red herring in our path. I'm going up to see her."

"Mind if I drop in on Belairs?" Mahew asked.

"Mind?" Parry stared at him in surprise. "Of course I don't. What d'you expect me to do? Order you about as if you were a policeman? Take the car old man. I'll walk. If we don't meet before then, we'll see each other lunch time. Time, I said. Lord knows if there'll be any lunch. 'By."

HE started up the hill, while Mahew got into the car. A squall of rain caught him. When it died down the morning was suddenly, for a brief moment still and clear. The village itself was not beautiful, but the country round was. From where he stood halfway up the hill, he could look down on the grays and purples of the leafless woods, on plowed land and green fields, valleys and hills, in the distance the high, bare downs. The sea was a turbulent pale brown; by it, four miles away, the huddled town of St. Arthurs. For the first time he saw Shots Hall in its grandiloquent horror of gray stone, and found it had an odd attraction. Then the rain came down again, in gusts.

A nice winter resort, Parry thought, and wondered why anyone had ever settled in this bleak and dismal spot. He looked back over his shoulder, and saw Congreve on the road below, standing in the middle of it while he scratched his nose ruminatively.

"Hoi!" Parry shouted, and Congreve began to wheel his bicycle up the hill. "Anything new?"

Blowing a little, Congreve came to anchor beside him. "It's the Ambroses," he said. "Squadron Leader and Mrs. Also Miss Gwen 'Unter."

"What about them?"

"Just what I'm wondering," Congreve said. "I went along to the Ambroses place—nice place it is, too, old converted farm'ouse—just to ask what they were doing round about the time Marsh was 'aving 'is tea, and at the time Molly must 'av taken her poison, and found them in a bit of a flap."

"Flap? What about?"

"I left my bike in the 'edge, and went along to the door and banged. I thought I 'eard someone yell come in, so I went in. Only they can't 'av invited me in, as they didn't seem to be expecting me. I stood in the 'all and they was in what must be their drawing room, with their backs to me. And there was Mrs. Ambrose scrubbing some marks off the floor, and there was the Squadron Leader and Miss 'Unter arguing about some book. They was all arguing. Not that that's queer, it was what they was saying."

"And what were they saying?" Parry asked.

"Something about they'd better burn it. And something about Captain Belairs guessing what they'd been up to, and 'e might get them into trouble. That's about all I 'eard. I thought they'd better not see me, so I walks backward out the door and down the path and out the gate, and got on my bike, and 'ere I am."

"Why walk backward?" Parry goggled.

Congreve treated him to a coy smile. "So's if they looked out of the window they'd see me front ways on, and think I was coming, not going."

Parry began to laugh. "What a lovely story. And you do notice things, don't you? Have you ten pair of eyes and ears?"

"There was a nasty smell in the 'ouse, and I think they'd been burning something in the fire," Congreve ruminated. "From the cross way she was going on, I 'ad the idea it was something belonging to Miss 'Unter."

"Possibly," Parry suggested, "some more red herrings? This place stinks of them. Do something for me, will you, Congreve? Go and see old Mrs. Vale again and jog her changeable memory. See you later."

"Yes, sir." Parry turned up the hill again, to be nearly run down by Clive Harris in his M.G., shooting out of the entrance of Shots Hall.

"Hullo?" Clive shouted, braking violently, so that the car skidded.

"Hullo?" Parry said. Now what would be unearthed here? What would Clive have to say for himself? Anything? Nothing? Something to conceal, too? Or was his life an open book?

"Just ran over to see Flik and Bee," Clive explained. "And damn nearly ran over you."

"And how are they this morning?"

"Sweating their guts out. That bloody girl, Winnie Marsh, says she won't do for them. She's too upset, so she's gone out bicycling with a girl friend. Upset, is being degutted. I'm just off to the town to see if I can rattle up a lady to oblige."

"If Winnie's not really upset," Parry said, "then why won't she do her doing? Lazy, or what?"

"Partly lazy, I suppose," Clive frowned.

"And partly what else?" Parry knew what else, but he wanted Clive to say it, so that he could watch his expression.

"You know what these blasted villagers are," the young man exploded. "Muckraking and so on."

"G. I. Joe rearing his ugly head, in fact?"

"Yes. That and—well, Winnie seems to be going round saying Flik killed the old man, and Molly."

"Wasn't that liable to happen? After all, in each case Flik seems to've been the last to see the murderees alive."

CLIVE raised his fair eyebrows. "So you've definitely decided it's murder, not suicide? I think you've right. But—who can it be?"

It dawned, suddenly, on Parry, that Clive Harris was in love with Flik, and he felt sorry for him. The wind blew Clive's hair in wild disorder over his forehead. It was soft hair, like a little boy's.

"You've known them a long time? Miss Chattock and Flik?" Without thinking, Parry fell naturally into the way of calling her Flik instead of Mrs. Ashley.

"An age." Clive smiled suddenly. "Ever since I can remember. Flik often stayed with Bee before she came to live here permanently. My father had the house that I've got now. He died in 1940, and after I'd parted company with my leg I settled in—do a bit of farming. It doesn't pay, but I've enough dough without that. It's something to do. One can't do nothing."

"How old're you?" Parry asked.

"Thirty," Clive answered. "I don't feel it."

"You don't look it," Parry said. "You know all about Flik's unfortunate marriage? It was unfortunate, wasn't it?"

"Lord, yes. She was still in her teens when she fell for Mac Ashley. He was an utter heel. She didn't let it out till it came to the divorce. But he gave her hell, blast him." Clive's vehemence was like the wind's, wild and furious.

"I see. Funny she never married again."

"Why funny? Why should she if she doesn't want to? I wish she would."

"Marry you, you mean?" Parry suggested.

"Well, yes." Clive reddened. "Only she won't. She isn't in love with me. We're good friends, but she's not in love with me. She wouldn't marry anyone she didn't love. She's—romantic. Why not? I'm so really in love with her there's nothing I'd like to see better than Flik married to some really decent chap who'd look after her."

"Very magnanimous of you," Parry said. "Was she in love with the G. I. Joe?"

"Oh, blast it," Clive swore. "D'you think I poke my nose into her affairs? I don't know anything about him. It's her business. People did all sorts of crazy, reckless things at that time. Bombs and blitzes, and your next moment may be your last, so what the hell? Go to blazes—" He suddenly flinched, and his hand went down on the place where his stump joined his false leg.

"Pains, does it?" Parry asked, genuinely sorry.

Clive looked up at him, his rage gone, grinning. "It's nothing. It's only when it's cold and wet. Then I get an occasional jab of rheumatics in the old stump. Nothing to what it used to be when I had my first leg. The damn thing didn't fit properly, or something."

"Can't you take something for it?"

"No need. The pain doesn't last now. Not like it was at first." Clive was suddenly miles away, in the past with its pains, with the leg that didn't fit. "At first I did, sometimes. When it got too bad."

"Morphia?" Parry said softly.

"Yeah—What?" Clive jerked his head up, and stared at Parry. "How—Yes. Yes, I did. After I was invalided out. The local g.p. where I live gave me a prescription. If I don't tell you, you'll find out for yourself. Only a tenth of a grain. After a month or two I found it getting a habit, so I chucked the bloody little bottle of tablets in the fire and took to aspirin. I've never touched it since—didn't even bother to get the prescription back from the chemist who had it. I suppose now you want to know the name of the doctor and the chemist?" His voice was malicious. "The doctor's name was Vassard—I say was, because he's dead. The chemists were Jones, Wane and Wade of Dover Street. You can ring them up. They're in the London phone book. Did I ever give any to Flik? No, I didn't. Good morning, Sexton Blake."

The brake squeaked off, and the M. G. slid down the hill. At the bottom, Clive turned round and waved, making a rude gesture at the same time, laughing.

Parry, liking Clive enormously, returned the compliment. Rather to his embarrassment, he then found that Flik was watching him from the gate, her mouth wide with amusement.

X

SHE LOOKED BETTER THIS morning, Parry thought. Less strained, less curt. A nut-colored woolen handkerchief was tied under her chin and her hair was very bright and rich against the gray of the sky.

"Good morning," Parry said. "I hope Clive'll be successful in his search for a lady to oblige."

She nodded. "I suppose Clive told you Winnie's decided not to do for us, and why?"

"Yes, he did." Her frankness was disconcerting, and he still felt slightly embarrassed that she should have seen the exchange of compliments between him and Clive. For he had also made a rude noise as well as a rude gesture. He felt himself growing a little hot.

"What lovely raspberries you can make," she congratulated him. "Do it again."

"Bpprph," Parry said, pursing his mouth in a feeble attempt. He was, he knew, getting entirely demoralized. His office at Scotland Yard, viewed in his mind's eye from this distance, seemed quite unreal. He drew in his breath and pulled himself up with a jerk. "Were you going for a walk?"

"I was going to see what'd happened to Harry, our gardener."

"Happened?" Parry echoed. "Why should anything happen to him?"

The guarded look came back into Flik's eyes, and he knew that behind them a sudden alarm had risen like a gust of wind.

"Why—I don't mean anything awful. It's just that he hasn't turned up to work today. He had a bit of a cold Saturday and yesterday, so I thought I'd go along and see if he was all right. I mean, if I ought to put him to bed and cosset him." She moved her head in the restless way Parry was beginning to know and recognize. "He's so old. We keep trying to persuade him to give up work, but he won't."

"Needs the money, I suppose," Parry said. "Like everyone."

"We've enough of an Imperial Tokay that can't be bought now to keep him in affluence till he dies," Flik said impatiently. "That's our capital. Did you know? Rare wines and liqueurs. We've got an 1870 port we're keeping up our sleeves till it rains so hard the roof won't keep it out. I'll open a bottle for you some time."

"Thank you." Parry treated this news with the reverence due to it. "But I couldn't drink your roof. Are you going to Harry now?"

"Yes." Flik tightened her handkerchief. "I've just got to see first that there's no rain coming in on my life's work."

"Life's—oh, the famous mermaid?"

"The famous mermaid."

As she turned away from him he said, "Just a moment," and laid his hand on her sleeve. "I've been looking at Molly's account book and savings bank-book. They tally up very neatly. The items in the account book check up with the sums paid into her savings bank account. What were you paying her for?"

Flik rounded on him. But her face was perfectly calm, not angry. "When I die," she said, "everything I possess in the world's going to be burned."

"So that meddling policemen can't poke and pry. Quite. Well?" He felt a heel. But it was his job to be a heel.

"If it'll satisfy your curiosity, I'll tell you." The wind pushed Flik about so that she swayed with it. "Every time I sold an order—one of my carvings—I gave Molly a present. She didn't want to take it, but I made her. I wanted her to have what's so prettily called a nest egg to fall back on when she really couldn't work any longer."

"And you had a job to make her take your presents?"

"Yes."

"I see." Parry pulled out a packet of cigarettes, tried to light one, failed and threw it away. Flik had just flipped a dead end from her gloved fingers into the road. "Would it amaze you to hear that along with Molly's account book, her savings bank book with the Western Bank, her card of Christmas club savings stamps,

or whatever it is, there was a will? A last will and testament, properly made out by a solicitor, signed and witnessed?"

Flik said nothing.

"Would it amaze you?"

"Surely you mean surprise? Amazement is rather an exaggerated word, isn't it? Or should one say exaggerating?"

WILL I ever find the chink in her armor? Parry wondered irritably. Or hadn't she one? She damn well had, of that he was certain.

"Very well. I bow to your choice of words. Would it surprise you, then, that in her will she left you everything? That she'd somehow saved £500? And that it's all yours?"

Now it wasn't the wind that swayed Flik.

"Actually," Parry said, "Arnoldson had no business to help himself to Molly's will. Nor her bankbook. Nor her card of savings stamps. They should have gone to her solicitor, or rather, he should've been informed and come and fetched them. As it is, I rang him up this morning early, and he's got them safely."

Flik looked at him, and again he saw the inside-out eyes, groping and fumbling for errant thought, some illusive idea. Her lips moved, and he bent his head down to her, thinking the wind had carried her words away with it.

In the end all she said was, to him, meaningless. She said, "Was it completed? Full?"

"Was what?" he shouted, using the noise of the wind as an excuse to shout it down. "Was what what?"

He looked behind him as a steady roar came up the hill. Arnoldson, on his motor bike.

Flik said, "Of course it was. Norton said so."

"What? What're you talking about?"

Arnoldson's motor bike came to a standstill. A crash helmet hid his greasy hair. The wind had dried his moist mouth, and the upturned collar of his leather coat concealed the beginnings of fat under his chin. Viewed thus, he looked, in a florid way, almost handsome, and very nearly well bred. He was evidently conscious of the fact.

"Just ran up to tell you, Inspector, lunch's ready," he said.

"Lunch?" Parry repeated, looking at his wrist watch. "Now? At twelve o'clock? D'you mean lunch, or what's called elevenses?"

"I mean lunch." Arnoldson's voice was a mixture of servility and cheek. "The brewery chap said he lunched at twelve, so we all lunch at twelve. If I hadn't gone on at him there wouldn't be any lunch at all, except for himself."

"I'll be down. Keep something for me," Parry nodded curtly.

Arnoldson, looking at Flik, turned his motor bike and roared down the hill again.

"Aunt Bee and I could've given you lunch," Flik said. "If you're not afraid of being poisoned."

"Don't say silly things like that," Parry caught her up. "Such a damn silly thing to say. It's very kind of you," he added, "but I'd better eat down with the others. I've a lot to do."

He felt extremely annoyed at Arnoldson's interruption. He had been, he was sure, on the point of getting under Flik's guard. Now she had shut down on him again, master of herself, and indeed, the whole situation so far as she was concerned.

"Might I see your mermaid before I descend to the depths of the 'Shots Arms'?" he asked.

Flik pulled her mouth down, half amused. "No one's ever seen it but me," she said. "It's one of my rules never to let anyone set eyes on my works of art till they're finished. I shan't have done with my green rock for another couple of months or so. Maybe I never will."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Nothing," Flik shrugged. "All right, if you really want to——"

WITHOUT waiting to see if he followed or not, she swung round and picked her way through pools of mud and water along the road. He fell into step beside her, curious. They passed Molly's cottage, and he said,

"Was the old gardener, what's-his-name, Harry, upset about Molly?"

"Naturally he was," Flik answered. "He didn't know, of course, till yesterday afternoon."

"Why of course?"

"Because that was the first time he came out after she'd been murdered. He came along yesterday afternoon to see if there was anything we wanted such as more logs brought in for the fires."

"Used he to go and see Molly in her cottage?" Parry asked, wondering why he hadn't thought of the question before.

"No. He respected her privacy, even if the murderer didn't. He's a queer old man. His head's full of jumbled ideas, some of them charming ones." Flik turned down a rutted path, and taking a key out of her pocket, unlocked the door of the small, unprepossessing stone building. "Come in," she invited, and shut the door after him when he did so.

For a few seconds they were in pitch darkness,and for no known reason Parry was violently aware of Flik close beside him. He put out his hand to touch her, and found himself holding her hand. She had taken her gloves off, and her fingers were warm and firm. Then there was a snick, and the place was flooded with light, bright unscreened light that came from four bulbs hanging from the ceiling, so placed that there were no shadows cast anywhere. He let go Flik's hand, and saw her face was flushed.

In the middle of the bleak and dismal room, there was a mound covered by a canvas drawsheet. With a gesture half careless, half defiant, Flik pulled it back, and Parry looked on the famous mermaid everyone seemed to have heard about, but had never seen. He hadn't given much thought as to what he expected to see, but had vaguely visualized something very modern, something wild and odd. Something that reflected a part of Flik's secretiveness and smoldering fire.

"My God, how beautiful," he said, involuntarily. "How beautiful."

She lay there, the life-size, sea-green mermaid, part of, yet not part of, the pale sea-green rock she was carved from. She lay on the rock asleep, her pillow a young, sleeping seal, relaxed, innocent and sleeping sweetly, her sea-green hair spread out in tendrils that seemed wet from the sea, her tail curled half under her, her arms drooping by her sides, her breasts curved and perfect. One arm was only half finished. From the forearm downward it was still part of the rock, unformed and unshaped by the chisel. Like a light dawning in the darkness, Parry knew that he was looking on all that Flik craved for in her strange, troubled soul. Peace and quiet, a dreamless, unafraid sleep. Then, horribly, he thought of the peaceful, eternal sleep of morphine.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I didn't realize you were a genius. I won't tell," he added, and knew that he had said the right thing.

"Thanks." Flik pulled the canvas back in place. "If you'll go first, then I'll put the lights out."

He went, wishing he could linger, and look and look again. Almost roughly, Flik gave him a push, and he was out in the dank and disgusting December midday. The door banged behind him, Flik locked it, and put the key into her pocket. Against the wind, they struggled back to the road. Then the wind, with what seemed its usual unexpectedness, died down to nothing.

"What's that row?" Parry asked.

Flik listened. "That? Susan's sewing machine. She'll never be done. She's making new curtains for every window in her cottage, and they've all got ruffled frills around the edges." She crossed the road and leaned over the low, clipped hedge, which separated the little front garden from the road. "Susan? Susan?" she shouted.

THE noise of the machine stopped, started again, then stopped for good. A front window next the door opened, and Miss Merridew's small, inquiring face looked out.

"Oh, Flik, dear!" she exclaimed. "I hear that horrid child Winnie won't do a hand's turn. I'm so sorry. Mr. Fewsey told me when he brought my chops. Such nasty ones too, all fat and gristle. I said

to him, 'Mr. Fewsey, it's really too bad she won't,' and I said, 'Mr. Fewsey, when my dear father was still alive you wouldn't have brought chops like that,' and he said, 'That's what modern girls are coming to—out bicycling when their father's lying dead——' "

Parry listened, in a state of some mental confusion, to Miss Merridew's prattle, which was as inconsistent as a kitten chasing an imaginary mouse. Flik, he however noticed, appeared to be quite used to Miss Merridew's form of conversation and made all the appropriate answers. It struck him that she was very fond of the silly little old creature.

"Oh, and Major Mahew too," Miss Merridew cried. "Good— Oh, dear, no, it's Mr. Barry."

"Parry," he smiled.

"Flik, dear? I wonder if old Harry could possibly chop a tiny bit of wood for me before he goes home tonight? Could you ask him, dear?"

"I will when I see him," Flik promised. "Only I haven't. He hasn't turned up today. I'm just going to see if he's all right."

"All right?" Miss Merridew's eyes widened. "Flik! You don't think— You don't think——" The eyes filled with agitation. "It's all so— Now, after two of them——"

"He's only got a cold, or something, Susan. He wasn't looking too grand yesterday."

"Not looking too grand yesterday?" Miss Merridew repeated. "And he hasn't come today? Could it be flu?"

"Maybe," Flik said. "Yes, yes, of course, Susan, he's only got a cold, or flu. Don't let your imagination run away with you." Her voice was soothing, the kind of voice you'd use talking to a child. "Why don't you come over to lunch?"

"Flik, dear! How kind. I'll do all the washing up and then you and Bee can have a nice rest."

"You'll do no washing up, my dear. Look—Susan? Here comes Harry, so you see it's all right."

Harry himself, however, didn't look, thought Parry, a bit all right. As he doddered toward them his steps were uncertain, and his face was pinched and gray. But he seemed fairly cheerful.

"Sorry, Miss Flikka," he mumbled. "I didn't feel too good nor yesterday nor today."

"I told you yesterday," Flik remonstrated, "you looked as if you were going to be ill. You don't look any better today. Harry, do go home and stay home. You aren't to do any work."

"I got some work to do," Harry said doggedly. "And I'll do it." He peered at her, then at Parry. Then at Miss Merridew.

And with that, taking no more notice of anyone, he doddered up the road and in at the gates of Shots Hall.

Parry sighed inwardly. Now Flik would be concerned with Harry, then with lunch and stopping Susan Merridew from washing up. There was no more to be got out of any of them for the moment.

"I'll be off," he said, "and see what the Lord's provided down at the pub."

"Oh," Miss Merridew cried. "Wouldn't you care for a little homemade cordial and a biscuit first? Such nice cordial. Dear Gwen makes it every year—out of elderberries, I think? Or is it blackberries?"

Parry hurriedly excused himself, and knew that Flik was laughing at him. As he slushed down the hill, the wind got up again, though without such violence. He'd got nowhere. Nowhere at all. He'd seen what, to him, seemed a work of genius. But that was about all. Or was it? At the back of his mind little prickings and promptings were like the echo of pins and needles. There was a pattern to all this, if only he could piece it together.

Never a man to jump to conclusions without evidence to prove them, he was yet quite certain that the murderer, with or without accomplices, was right under his nose. In the village. There spread in front of him a dreary vista of interviewing every man, woman and child in the place, writing down everything they had to say, everything they had seen everything they had heard. Miles of paper and routine work, of checkings-up on everyone's statements. The fact that he'd such a small cast of players to choose from, only seemed to make things more

difficult, for where intimacy crept in, logic crept out.

He was relieved to see Congreve going into the pub. At least, lunch would not be too dull.

XI

THE BREWERY'S MAN, WITH much reluctance, had provided a tin of very nasty soup, and some sandwiches filled with something else out of a tin. There was, however, plenty to drink, which was only natural. Old Marsh had somehow managed to scrounge a pretty good supply of hard liquor, and as nearly all the villagers drank beer, mild and bitter or stout, his supply of the real stuff had accumulated.

They lunched in old Marsh's sitting room. After lunch Arnoldson got up and kicked his chair away, muttering something about if no one else had any work to do, he had. "I'll ring up the chemists in London, sir," he said to Parry. "With your permission, of course," he added.

"I told you to, didn't I?"

"Dear God," Mahew groaned, "what a bloody awful lunch. What a bloody awful pub, anyway. I've got a bellyache."

Congreve looked at him with affection and respect. Mahew was enormously popular with the St. Arthurs police force. In his office he was businesslike and formal, out of it he was almost too human to be true.

"The gent from the brewery," Congreve sympathized, "is the man we're after. 'E's a poisoner by nature, intent, upbringing and 'abit. I don't feel too 'appy under the belt neither, sir," he said to Parry. "That old Mrs. Vale won't change 'er mind. She sticks to it she saw Mrs. Ashley come out the back door 'ere at about 'arf four, and didn't see 'er go in."

"So that's that," Parry said. "I think we might go and visit the Ambroses. In the meantime Arnoldson can go and run Gwen Hunter to earth. She appears to dabble in herbs and homemade cordials. I'm not suggesting she concocted morphine from poppyheads, but she bears investigating."

Arnoldson came back from his telephonic inquiries, smoothing his hair and looking commendably cool. "Checks up neatly," he said. "The chemists, Jones, Wane and Wade still have Harris' prescription for morphine given him by Vassard. They supplied Harris with one tube of morphine tablets, twenty tablets in all, each one a tenth of a grain. That totals two grains."

"Mm——" Parry mused. "He might've got another prescription from another doctor as well."

They walked the not very long distance to the Ambroses. With reluctance, Arnoldson walked too, and they left him banging on Gwen Hunter's door. Evidently she was in, as the door opened and he vanished inside.

"How d'you get on with Belairs, by the way?" Parry asked Mahew.

"I don't like him. I don't know why, but I don't. As well as being a bore, he's got a nasty mind. Kept throwing out hints."

"Wants to make himself seem important," Parry said, banging on the Ambroses' front door. "I know the type. Travels in red herrings."

Tim Ambrose opened the door, radiating a false heartiness, which was also reflected by Phil, hovering in the background. There were dark rings under her eyes, and she was painfully jumpy.

"Do come in," she shrieked over Tim's shoulder. "Lovely to see you all." She tossed her hair back, feverishly pulling at a cigarette.

The drawing room was charming. It was also very hot, as an enormous fire blazed behind a needlework screen.

"What a delightful room," Parry said, tactfully ignoring the remains of a very nasty smell.

"Yes it is, isn't it?" Phil exclaimed, hair tossing again.

"Drink?" Tim invited. "Do have a drink?"

"We've had some, thanks," Mahew said. "At the pub."

"Oh, well then—do sit down."

They sat, Congreve perched on the edge of his chair, looking innocent.

"We're just checking up," Parry said, "on everyone's movements during the times when Molly took, or was administered, poison. What were you two doing between a quarter to eight and nine on the evening Molly must have taken the poison?"

"Tim and I and Gwen were playing bridge here," Phil squeaked in an anguished voice. "Cutthroat."

Parry nodded. He moved the cushion behind him, and Phil darted at him, her mouth open.

"That's such an uncomfortable chair!" she almost screamed, hair tossing. "Do sit in another one."

PARRY put his hand behind the cushion and brought out an ancient tome, on which was inscribed in fadea gilt lettering. *Ye Black Arts and Magicke Accordinge to Luigi.*

"I told you we should have burned it," Tim croaked at his wife.

"We traded it with Camilla for a cat, our cat——" Phil was now in tears, which struck Parry as odd, for she didn't seem the crying kind. "It made messes—the cat did—only it came back yesterday and had kittens in the kitchen— We Oh!"

"Tst-tst," Congreve remarked. "Don't upset yourself like this, Mrs. Ambrose, it's bad for the little one what's coming along so nicely."

"Oh—oh!" Phil sobbed furiously. "How did you know, you stinking policeman? I haven't told anyone, except Tim, of course. Everyone staring. Watching you swell. Oh, Lord!"

"How on earth," Parry said rather crossly to Congreve, "did *you* know?"

"I'm the eldest," Congreve said untruthfully but with pride, "of a family of sixteen, so I know the signs."

"Shut up!" Tim raged at him. "Phil, honey, take no notice."

"May I ask," Parry interrupted, raising his voice, "why you're at such pains to conceal an excellent alibi for the times during which Molly took morphine?"

"Morphine?" Phil and Tim chorused.

"Morphine."

"Oh, ye gods!" Tim stared. "Is that all? I mean, we just knew she was poisoned, and that was all."

"What you mean," Parry said with the patience of Job, "is that you thought you'd make some childish experiments with this book, and having done your cabalistic writings on the floor, you did the necessary by burning some of your friend Gwen Hunter's herbs?"

"But they were all deadly poisonous," Phil squealed. "And we were scared stiff. We burned the rest of the herbs this morning—they were dried ones—deadly nightshade, and lords and ladies, and stuff like that. Besides, it's illegal."

"What is?" Parry asked wearily. "Burning dried herbs, scrawling on the floor and reading an old book? The last executions for witchcraft in this country were in 1716. A lady called Mrs. Hicks and her small girl were hanged. You'll forgive me, I'm sure, when I tell you that you're a couple of silly young fools—the third being your friend Gwen—and that you've quite needlessly taken up the time of the police. Now, what were you doing yesterday afternoon and evening? I take it you know old Marsh is dead, and may have been poisoned too?"

"We walked over to the Jessens for tea," Tim sulked. "You saw them at Flik's party. Go on, check up on that, and be damned to you."

"Hoity-toity," Congreve murmured.

"I see. You know Fl—Mrs. Ashley very well, don't you?"

"Yes, we do!" Phil cried. "And if you think she did it, then you're damned well wrong. Yes, you are!"

"Phil, honey——"

Parry signaled silently to Mahew and Congreve, and they made their escape.

XII

AFTER A HURRIED BATH, Abbot had got into his car and made straight for Shots Hall, irresistibly drawn there by some instinct like that of a homing pigeon. It was an instinct that made him

exceedingly angry, so he was not in the happiest of moods when he stopped his car outside the front door and extricated his long, tired legs from behind the wheel.

It was getting dark. The wind howled no longer. From the sodden ground a mist rose to meet a fellow mist that descended from the sodden skies. Shots Hall looked gloomy and forbidding, secret, and hiding something, which undoubtedly, Abbot thought, it was. He shivered, tired and utterly fed up. For the first time he caught sight of Harry's rubble rock garden, and saw Harry himself crouched in the middle of it, apparently sticking labels, skewered on wire holders, in amongst the nasty mess of dead fireflowers, some of which he had cleared away into a pile. It was a depressing sight. The old gray man, the fallen, overgrown ruins which bore so little resemblance to the rock garden Harry had seen in a Sutton's catalogue. December, the unhappiest time of the year for any garden, was peculiarly unbecoming to the garden of Shots Hall on a misty evening.

The door opened, and Flik looked out at him. As it had done the first time he had met her, and ever since, her loveliness struck him like a blow in the chest.

"Hullo," he said ungraciously, and straightened his spectacles.

"Come in." She held the door wide, and let it slam behind him.

"What's the matter with that pestilential door?" he demanded. "Why does it always do that?"

"It's not properly hung. In summer nothing'll keep it open but brute force or a row of flatirons. We like it that way. It's familiar."

"I see. All part and parcel of the dear old place that means home?" Automatically, Abbot found himself jeering. "Don't the noises of incomings and outgoings disturb your aunt?"

"She's not easily disturbed," Flik said, also jeering in return. "As you may perhaps have perceived. Come into what we call the drawing room. There's a fire in there today."

As she led the way across the hall, Abbot saw that the door into what he supposed to be the study was open. In the evening's dim light, Flik's wood carvings were vaguely outlined against the pale paneling of the room. They gave a rather uncomfortable impression of a lot of heads recently severed from living bodies, staring, with eyes now dead and sightless, at nothing. The drawing room, however, dispelled the dreary and haunted atmosphere of what he'd seen of the rest of the house. The mid-Victorian pine paneling had been scraped of its varnish, its decorations attended to with a plane and entirely removed. There were one or two pleasant pictures, dulled with age; the mid-Victorian fireplace had been replaced by an Adams one which, Abbot found later, was genuine. Flik had picked it up somewhere in a junk shop. Above it, mellow and warm, hung a gilt mirror, a thing of curlicues and long-tailed birds and little Chinese pagodas. Here, as in the hall, the few bits of furniture were old and well arranged; as in the hall, the curtains, the covers, the rugs, once luxurious, were worn almost threadbare.

"Well, Abbot? Done staring?"

"What?" He hadn't seen Bee Chattock sitting serenely dignified by the fire. "Sorry. Yes. I like this room."

"We're overcome by your admiration," Bee snapped, her eyes small pin points of amusement. "You've got the manners of a hog. Sit down, can't you, and stop stamping about?"

"I wasn't aware I was stamping." Abbot sat, choosing the most comfortable chair.

"You're continually stamping," Bee said. "Inwardly. Also swearing with, no doubt, the greatest obscenity."

"Aunt Bee's partial to bad language," Flik said, and laughed one of her rare laughs. "Have some tea? It's freshly made with nice, fresh poison."

"Be quiet," Abbot exploded. "Don't say things like that. It's morbid to make a joke of something that's not a joke at all."

"I'm not joking—" her eyes turned dark. "What d'you expect me to do? Have a good cry? Oh, for God's sake——" She broke off and pressed her lips together. "Well? What about Marsh?"

Abbot told her. Marsh had taken from five to six grains of morphine in his well-

sugared tea. Neither she nor Bee showed any apparent surprise.

Flik muttered, "Poor old devil, how bloody."

"It's revolting," Bee agreed, and made the noise which can only be spelled, "Faugh."

"What about my tea?"

THE LOOK Flik gave him, he was amazed to see, was almost one of gratitude, and he thought, to hell with it, I wish she wouldn't do that—like a dog that's beaten and then forgiven. She's actually grateful I think she won't poison me. "No sugar," he said. "And very little milk. Parry been up? Or Arnoldson? Anyone?"

"At midday. I'm all dressed up to be grilled. Why doesn't Parry come and do it?"

Abbot said nothing, thinking she was all dressed up in that lovely wool dress not to be grilled but to kill. It was the color of her hair, and very tight in the waist, and plain. She'd a fancy for Parry, all right; and Parry, might the devil take him, wouldn't hesitate to hang her if needs be. Then, less unjustly, he decided it was all pretty bloody for Parry, unless he was unmoved by her loveliness, which seemed impossible, even for a policeman.

She got up and went to the window, looked out, and opened one of the casements.

"Harry," Flik called, leaning out of the window. "Time to go home. Would you like a cuppa?"

Dim and muffled, his answer came back, "No, Miss Flik, thank you. You ought to know I don't drink tea this time of the day, so you should. It's getting mighty dark, what with the fog."

"Then go home. Harry, do go home—you look poorly."

"All right, Miss Flik. I'll come round the front——" Ghostly, his voice added something about a bottle.

Flik shut the window and went out into the hall. Her shoes had very high heels, but they didn't click and patter like high heels usually did. Feeling he ought to try and show some interest in the ancient gardener, Abbot followed her. The hall seemed emptier, larger, lonelier and more full of shadows than ever.

Flik opened the door, letting in the cold and the damp. It was a quite horrible evening. The howling of the gale had, at least, been alive, now it had dropped, the world was dead and watchfully silent. Harry stood on the step and peered up at Flik, blinking in the little light that shone out on him, holding out his hand, as if begging for alms.

Flik's fingers groped on the table inside the door, and Abbot saw she was looking for a small, long bottle filled with almost white fluid.

"Medicine for Harry?" he asked, his voice curt.

She looked at him over her shoulder. "I didn't know you were there. Phospherine. Harry says it suits him. I got Clive to bring it up from the town this afternoon when he went on his unsuccessful hunt for a lady to oblige. Harry, I've taken it out of its wrappings. You're so fumble fingered with anything but flowers—don't come tomorrow. I'll be along and I'll do your chores."

Harry pocketed the bottle, still peering up at Flik. Why, Abbot thought, he worships her as if she was God. Then, with unreasonable irritation, he saw that Parry and Congreve were coming up the short drive, both absorbing, in their different ways, the picture of Flik and Harry, of himself hovering, a bloody fool, in the background.

"Evening," Parry said, and nodded, including Abbot and Harry in the nod.

"Evening," Flik said, tightening her back. "This is Harry. Or have you met before?"

"Them's the police," Harry remarked, his scorn ill, if at all, concealed. "They're looking for a murderer, so they are. Restless. If they'd sit down quiet, they might find out. Everyone's restless, even you, Miss Flik, hammering at that there rock of yourn. Home, you ought to be, with a man to mind."

"Harry——" Flik's eyebrows raised in a gentle hint to the old man to pipe down in the presence of company. But Harry had something to say, and no one, not even Flik, was going to stop him saying it.

"There's too much running around, so there is. No one does enough thinking, or if they does, they do too much, and in the wrong direction. Live in the present, that's all, and no making preparations for to meet their deaths, which is what'll come to everyone and you can't stop it." He threw a baleful look at Parry and Congreve, who were, quite evidently, enjoying themselves at Harry's expense. "Miss Flik? One never knows when one'll be carried off, as I'm always saying to you. So I've labeled everything what's underground in the rockery. You might take on and weed, and dig up something what ain't showing this time of year. So I labeled everything. That's what's called foresight. See? If I died tomorrow, you'd still be able to find out just by looking at the labels. And don't you forget it—restless and higgly-piggly, and no sitting down quiet by the fire."

Without a good evening, without more ado, without a backward glance, Harry shambled off down the drive; and the mist and the grayness claimed him.

"A little cuckoo, I take it?" Parry inquired. "Poor old chap."

"I don't know," Flik said, "if he's such a poor old chap."

"Nest well feathered?" Parry went on, hoping for more information.

Flik turned, ran right into Abbot, and held the door open wide. "Sorry," she apologized. "I'd forgotten you were there."

"The monotonous regularity with which you forget my existence," he remarked, wishing he were a female and so could scratch her face, "is almost boring."

"It's because you don't get in my hair, so I don't notice you. Do come in, Parry. Congreve, isn't it?" She let the door go, and the house seemed to shiver as it crashed to.

Abbot, who had wanted to escape, finding himself shut in again instead, mentally tore his hair in abortive fury.

"Stamping again?" Bee stood there beside him, a large, old-fashioned key in her hand. Parry and Congreve had gone with Flik into the drawing room. "There's only one place in this house that seems to be free of policemen murderers and victims, and that's the cellar. I've a fancy for some '70 Marsala. It's quite excellent. Are you coming Abbot?"

"All right, all right," he raged. "It'll make me sick, but what's that? At my age one may as well die happy, in one's cup, and to hell with everything."

"I do so agree with you. When I was your age I thought the same. Now I just taste and savor the bouquet. To you the full bottle."

Rather staggered by Bee's sententious speech, Abbot asked, "Bottle, what of?"

"Damn sour grapes," Bee answered, "by the look of things."

XIII

WHILE BEE AND ABBOT crouched on a packing case in the cellar, sipping Marsala out of two crystal wine glasses by the light of a candle, the grilling of Flik proceeded above their heads.

Mahew, very thankfully, had gone home, and was sending the car back later, with another driver, for Parry. Determined that he would make things as painless as possible for Flik, Parry had sent Arnoldson off on some wild-goose chase on his motor bicycle. The detective sergeant's interview with Gwen had been fairly unproductive. She had had so many theories, each one more absurd than the other, to expound, that he hadn't been able to get a word in edgeways. He, personally, thought she was far too stupid to nominate as a suspect, though her alibi for the times between which Marsh might have taken the overdose of morphine on Sunday was very vague.

Congreve, who had once met Flik down at the pub, when he had gone in there while making inquiries about a valuable dog someone had lost, and had been treated to a pint by her, felt, at the moment, very sorry for her. He wished Parry'd left him behind, but Parry had insisted that

Congreve should come along and use his ten pairs of eyes. Awful, Congreve thought, to have to drag your past up in front of two men.

"Your American friend," Parry said. "Can you tell me his name? And, by the way, now that I come to think of it, how very odd that an American army man should've been here during the blitz. America wasn't in the war then."

Flik tapped her cigarette ash into the grate. "We use blitz in rather a loose way down here," she said. "We got raids —sneak raids—down on the coast right up to 1943. We lump all of them under the heading of the blitz."

"Another little mystery solved," Parry said amiably. Poor Flik, this was horrible for her. "And his name?"

"Jim, I think." Flik's voice was admirably careless. "Yes, I think it was Jim."

"Jim what?" Parry prompted.

"How can you really expect me to remember all that long time ago?" Her mouth turned down in scorn.

"I 'ad a girl once." Congreve put in, hoping to ease the tension. " 'Er name as Lucy, but I'm blessed if I can remember hat 'er surname as. 'Er teeth stuck out."

"That," Flik smiled at him, "must have been a disadvantage at times, I expect."

"And before Jim, I think you had another admirer?" Parry felt sick inside him, but somehow he must get a more definite line on Flik. "Please don't think I mean anything by that. It'd be very extraordinary if you hadn't. Correct me if I'm wrong, but according to the village gossip which is thrust at me whether I want to hear it or not, which is generally not, there was some chap used to stay down here you went around with quite a lot. I think, didn't he, he used to stay at Miss Merridew's before her father died?-"

"Her cousin." Flik got up and began to pile more logs on the fire. "Mervyn Crawford. I used to go for walks with him, if you call that going around with him quite a lot."

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

"Yes. In the blitz, the real blitz." She crouched down on her heels, sweeping up the ashes in the grate, avoiding his eyes.

WHAT'S wrong here? Parry wondered. She doesn't want to talk about him. There seemed no excuse, however, to pursue the subject. He had been a cousin of Miss Merridew's, his name had been Mervyn Crawford, and he'd been killed in the blitz. He really couldn't start asking questions like, "Did you ever kiss him? Did you ever sleep with him?" For that, most definitely, would be exceeding his duty as a policeman. Besides, he didn't want to know.

"Now," he said, "let's go right over Sunday afternoon again. That is, if you don't mind. You do realize, don't you, Flik, that you needn't answer any of these questions? Not at this stage of the proceedings, anyway."

"You told me before." She screwed herself round so that she was facing him, and sat down on the stone curb that edged the hearth. "Ask away."

"First of all, let's get the time you went down to the pub quite definite."

"The nearest I can say is that it must've been about half past four," she said. "I know Aunt Bee told me to hurry up, as she wanted to have tea, and we have tea about a quarter to five."

"All right," said Parry. "Let's say it was half past four. Now, do try and think back—did you see anyone on your way down to the pub, or on the way back?"

"No. No, I didn't. Not a soul. They mostly snooze Sunday afternoons in the village. One of our olde worlde merrie English customs." Her face, looking up at Parry, was suddenly impudent, and it made her look, he thought, absurdly young.

"No one at all——" he echoed. "All right. Tell me as clearly as you can just what you did when you got to the pub. Yes, I know, you told me before, but there may be some small detail you've forgotten, which might be an awful help."

Flik stopped looking impudent, frowning, concentrated. "I can't remember if I knocked on the back door. I think I did, and then went straight in. Old Marsh never locked that door unless he went out, and when he packed up for the night. I saw the bottle of gin on the sink—or rather, on the drying board by the sink. The door into Marsh's sitting room was

open, and I saw the top of his head. He was sitting as he usually did, in that big chair with its back to the door." She broke off, thinking backward. "There was a teacup on the table by him. He always had a cuppa at half past four."

"Always? Did you know all his habits, then?"

"Haven't you yet discovered that everyone in this village knows everybody's habits? Don't you see, that's what made it so desperately easy for the murderer? This is the first time in, I should think, living memory, that the usual routine's been upset and disorganized."

"I know," Parry nodded. "That's just what did make it so easy for the murderer. And so difficult for us chaps. All right. He always had a cuppa at half past four, and everyone knew it. Was the cup empty or full? Do try and remember. So much hangs on it."

"Hangs." Flik repeated the word as though it tasted horrible. Then she drew her breath in and slowly let it out again, much to the interest of Parry and Congreve. "No. No, I can't pretend I remember if the cup was full or empty. I wish I could. But I can't, I honestly can't. There was a teacup there on the table by him, and that's all I can remember about it. It was there, full or empty, I don't know."

Surely, Parry thought, if she'd poisoned him, she'd have jumped to it and said the cup was empty. Or was that too unsubtle for the very subtle Flik? "Very well, we'll have to skip that point. Just tell me what you said, what Marsh said, what you both did, and how long you were there."

"I called out, 'Oh, Marsh, is this my bottle of ruin on the sink?' And he said 'Uh-hu,' or 'Mh-hm.' Then I said, 'well thanks, I'll be down later after I've poisoned our guests off'." Flik bit her lip, and flushed. "How awful that sounds—those silly things one says without thinking. Anyway, I picked up the bottle, stuck it under my arm, called out good-by, and went. I shut the door behind me," she added.

"And you didn't actually see Marsh's face, and he didn't say more than 'Uh-hu' or 'Mh-hm' or a similar sort of noise?"

"Correct," Flik agreed. "I thought he was dozy, and didn't want to disturb him. If you're thinking it mightn't have been Marsh sitting in the chair, but someone else, then you're wrong. It was Marsh. He was bald, and he had an old scar on the top of his head in the middle of the bald patch."

PARRY pursed up his lips, and delivered what he thought was his bombshell. "Why did you throw gravel at Mrs. Vale's window either before you went into the pub, or after you came out of it?"

The bomb failed to explode. Flik stared at him in blank incomprehension which appeared to be perfectly genuine. "Gravel?" she repeated, as if she wasn't sure if she'd heard aright.

Parry jerked his head at Congreve.

Congreve said, "Yes, Mrs. Ashley. It's old Mrs. Vale again. I must say, 'er memory's what you might call tricky. Yesterday she said she saw you going into the pub as well as coming out of it, today she says that now she's quite sure on second thoughts, which according to 'er must really be the best ones, she only saw you going out. Oh, Lord, I spent what seemed hours with the old thing, and talk about talk. Anyways, she joggled up 'er memory like someone what's shaking a medicine bottle, and the next dose is that she says, now she comes to think it over, she was snoozing by 'er fire Sunday afternoon when something wakes 'er up, and she says, what it was, on second thoughts, was someone chucking gravel at her window. So she gets up to see 'oo it is, and while she's looking out the window, you comes out the back door of the pub and goes round the corner and up the 'ill."

"But who threw the gravel?" Flik's eyes were saucers of astonishment. "There wasn't anyone there, and I certainly never threw any gravel. There wasn't any to throw."

"How d'you mean?" Parry asked. "None to throw?"

"It's all tarmac and mud at the back of the pub," Flik explained. "There simply isn't any gravel to throw. And there wasn't anyone there to throw it."

"Did you see Mrs. Vale staring at you

out 'er window?" Congreve put in.

"No, I didn't; and I didn't because I never even looked across at Mrs. Vale's cottage."

Parry and Congreve looked at each other, into the minds of each coming the same, strange thought, the same question: Who, if it wasn't Flik, had armed themselves with gravel, picked up God knew where, hidden in the only hiding place, the gents' lavatory, and after they'd seen Flik go in the back door, drawn Mrs. Vale's attention to the fact by darting out, throwing gravel at her window, and then hiding in the lavatory again till Flik had gone, Mrs. Vale had finished her stare, and the coast was clear for them to depart? And why?

"Listen, Congreve?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I know it's dark, but you've got your flashlight. Go down to Mrs. Vale's, look around her front garden, and see if you can find any stray bits of gravel which might have bounced back from her window. You'd better tell the old girl you're there, else she'll have fits thinking it's the murderer come for her. And Congreve? When you've done that, drop in at the pub and keep your ears open. If I don't see you down there before Norton relieves you, then leave a report with him, and any gravel you may find."

"Yes, sir. Am I allowed, in the course of my duty, to 'ave a drink?"

"I'd be very surprised if you didn't," Parry grinned.

"Sorry." Flik stood up. "I was forgetting—I'll give you a drink now, Congreve."

"That's very nice of you, I'm sure," Congreve thanked her, "but if I don't get along to Mrs. Vale's now, I'll be fogbound. Honest, the notion of being fogbound along with Mrs. Vale makes me feel queer—like being stuck in a rowboat in the Atlantic with a radio playing the same tune over and over again, and you can't turn the rud—the thing off."

CONGREVE went, and Flik drew the curtains across the drawing-room window. She didn't press the subject of drinks, and Parry knew that she wasn't going to risk him refusing to drink with her as well. In a few minutes he'd damn well ask her for one. He wasn't there with a warrant for her arrest in his pocket. If only she'd come across with whatever it was that was on her mind, that was nothing to do with the poisoning of either Molly or Marsh. But she wouldn't. He watched her as she went into the hall, listened to her light footsteps as she went from window to window drawing the curtains. He waited for her to come back, and when she didn't, strolled into the hall. She had changed her high-heeled shoes for gum boots, and was putting on an overcoat.

"Hullo?" he said, surprised.

Her hands dropped to her sides. "I'm sorry. I thought you'd done with me."

"Where're you going to?" Parry tried to make the question sound light.

"I was going to work on my rock," she said. "That's all."

"I thought you did that after dinner always?"

"You forget," Flik answered a little bitterly, "that our routine has at last been disorganized. If it hadn't happened in such a horrible way, I'd say, thank God. D'you wish me not to go out?"

If he said he didn't wish her to go out, and went on with his probings and questionings, she might crack. Then he looked at her again and knew that she would do nothing of the sort. There was in her some quality of strength which was not the usual strength of hardness. Hers was of pure nylon. For the greatest strength was only in the finest and the best, the purest; soft, light, but enduring.

He picked up her right hand and turned it round and round in his, curiously. It was so slim and tapered. There seemed, looking at it, no strength in it at all.

"How on earth d'you hack at the bloody great hard rock with those?" he asked.

"I just hack," she said, as he dropped her hand again.

"Well, go and hack. Perhaps your aunt wouldn't mind talking to me for a bit."

He went with her to the door, opened it, and held it open as she walked past him, her torch turned on, its beam hardly piercing the mist and the darkness. There

was someone else out in the drive. Parry let the door bang behind him, and followed her to investigate. It was Abbot.

"To hell with Marsala," he said to Flik as she stopped for a moment.

She began to laugh. "Not the '70, surely? Aunt Bee's the limit. D'you feel bad?"

"Bloody awful."

Still laughing, Flik went on her way to the mermaid.

"Now what do you want?" Abbot said to Parry as Parry turned his torch on him.

"Lord, man, how long've you been out here? You're dripping with fog."

"I've been out here for, I should say, at least half an hour, and I still feel as if my head was splitting. God and his holy angels put a curse on Marsala, Madeira and all their brothers and sisters. Buzz-buzz-buzz."

"Is that what your head's doing?" Parry inquired.

"Yes and no. Listen to her. She was machining when I arrived an hour ago, she's been doing it ever since. She never stops. May her curtain rings drop off and her frills shrivel. May the rods come down on her head and bash it in—I won't say bash her brains in, as she can't have any."

Parry listened, heard the cause of Abbot's rage, and realized that he had heard it himself when he and Congreve arrived. Miss Merridew's activities reminded him that she was on his schedule. He wondered when, if ever, he would get anything to eat that night.

PRECEDED by the thin light of his torch, he weaved his way between puddles to Miss Merridew's gate. Like Molly's, it was a wicket gate, only much neater. The short, flagged path to her door was innocent of even the smallest weed. Everything tidy, well ordered, well kept. He looked for a bell, found none, and knocked with his knuckles on the white door.

The door opened a crack, and he saw that it was on a chain.

"Who's that?" Miss Merridew was evidently taking no chances.

"It's me, Miss Merridew. Only Inspector Parry. Might I come in and warm myself up?"

Thus disarmed, Miss Merridew let him in, bobbing round him like a little, friendly poodle.

"Oh, dear, yes! Do come in—poor man, such a horrid night. So muddy and damp and horrid, isn't it? Now, if only I hadn't finished my supper—I wonder if I could find you anything? I eat so little, really, that there never is. Now, when my dear father was alive, there always was—do come in. In here. This is my drawing room. Really it's a living room. When there isn't a dining room, then it's a living room, isn't it? Not a drawing room, as there's nothing to withdraw from but the kitchen."

Holy Moses, thought Parry, shall I ever get any sense out of her?

Contrary to his expectations, the room wasn't cluttered up with dozens of faded family photographs in fancy frames, useless knickknacks, whatnots and a hundred horrid little ornaments and pictures. True, there wasn't much room to move, but this was simply because the room was so small the necessary furniture would only just fit into it. Otherwise, Miss Merridew's taste was excellent. A bright fire burned in the duck's nest grate that had been imported into the comparatively modern cottage. The sensible walnut dining table was bare of a cloth, and spread in orderly array were an old-fashioned writing case, some papers, account books, an inkstand and a pen.

"I'm afraid I interrupted you? You were busy?"

"I'm only too glad to be interrupted!" Miss Merridew cried. "I was getting in such a muddle, I really didn't know how I was going to get out of it."

"You don't look as if you could ever be in a muddle about anything," Parry complimented her tactfully. "When I'm writing, I strew the whole place up."

"Muddle in my mind. The accounts—you see, Mr. Parry, the Vicar's indisposed—flu. So I'm trying to—you see, he does the accounts part of it all, and I do the collecting—I just can't remember who's had what. I've got an idea that Mr. Fewsey—he's our butcher, such a nuisance, isn't it?—hasn't bought any savings stamps

for three weeks, only I'm not sure if it's him or Mrs. Sharpe."

"Might I sit down?" Parry asked hurriedly. "This is very cosy compared to the hall at Shots Hall, isn't it?"

"Dear Bee and Flik—" Miss Merridew's mind appeared to have wandered from her accounts. "What would one do without them? I will say that hall is rather drafty, but still, very dignified."

"Most." If I ever get a fit of hysteria, Parry decided, it'll be right now. "It must be very cold for Flik working down in that stone hut of hers every night?"

"I always say, 'Flik, one day you'll get pneumonia. Is it worth it?' "

"Nothing," Parry said sententiously, "is worth it, is it? Does it worry you to hear her hammering and hacking away, Miss Merridew?"

"Indeed, no. I'm so used to it. It only worries me to think of her there all alone in the cold, poor darling. And it must be so tiring."

"Now, for instance——" Parry's mouth, opened in speech, remained open.

Inspiration is a staggering thing: the sudden parting of the clouds that shows the clear sky beyond. So, too, rather staggering, is the sound of someone stumbling past in the road gurgling incoherent cries of horror.

"What's that?" Miss Merridew exclaimed, her eyes nearly starting from her head. "Oh, Mr. Parry—" she got it right at last—"Oh, what's that?"

"Don't worry—someone drunk, probably. I'll just go and see. Everything's quite all right. Stay here, and I'll be back and tell you, and we'll go on with our pleasant talk."

Parry shot out of the door, down the path and out of the gate, and didn't realize, till he was in the road, fumbling with his torch, that Miss Merridew was clinging to the hem of his coat. He stopped for a moment, to try and shake her off, but she wouldn't be shaken. His torch wavered between her and the figure that stumbled in at the drive of Shots Hall. Miss Merridew clung. Parry ran. He caught up with the creature that was crying its animal cries just as it fell over the doorstep of the Chattock ancestral home.

"What the hell's wrong now?" he asked. "Be quiet, can't you?"

"I won't—I won't! It's happened again —Harry—dead." Gwen's face was twisted in pure, stark fear. "Harry—dead—sick all over the place—sick—and blood—oh, God!"

Miss Merridew began to scream.

The foggy night, so unpleasantly silent before, was now dreadfully filled with the noises of human terror.

XIV

ABBOT, ACCUSTOMED TO WAKing quickly and at once, sat up, fumbled for his glasses and listened. Muffled by the thick walls and the heavy door, Gwen's and Miss Merridew's screams were still recognizable as those of fright.

Damn it all, now what?

"What's happened?"

Simultaneously, Flik came through the door from the kitchen, and Bee out of the drawing room. Abbot staggered to his feet, shaking off the last dregs of sleep and Marsala, and opened the front door. Like a kind of football scrum, Parry, Gwen and Miss Merridew fell in on him, Parry still trying to shake Miss Merridew off.

"For heaven's sake, Miss Hunter, take it easy and try to tell us what's wrong," Parry fumed, grabbing Gwen's arm and shaking her. "Now then, what's all this about Harry?"

"Oh!" wailed Miss Merridew. "Oh, oh!"

"I told you!" Gwen moaned, a little more calmly. "Harry—dead—sick all over the place, and blood—in his cottage."

"Blood—?" echoed Miss Merridew, clinging to Parry. "Blood—? *Blood?*"

"Be quiet, Susan." Bee detached Miss Merridew from Parry and tried to pacify her. "Don't make such a damned row. Gwen, be coherent, if you're capable of it."

Parry glanced sharply at Flik. Her face

was the color of chalk, her mouth a straight, appalled line.

He said to Gwen, "What did you go to Harry's cottage for?"

"He'd promised me some herbs—some herbs. He promised them to me, so I went to get them."

"In the pitch dark?"

Flik was putting on her overcoat and her gum boots. Miss Merridew broke away from Bee, and attached herself again to Parry. Aggravated beyond words, he almost flung her away from him, then pushed Gwen backward into the hall, and made a bolt for it. Abbot, quick to think as to move, was already groping in his car for his bag.

"Come on," he said. "He mayn't be dead. Damn these women. Which way? Any good taking the car?"

"No—muddy lane. Got your doings?"

They began to run. Too late, Parry found Flik was running beside him, and that Gwen and Miss Merridew were hot on his tracks, still wailing. There wasn't time to stop and send them all back. As Abbot had said, Harry mightn't be dead. In which case, every second counted.

"Go back," he however said to Flik as he ran. "And take those two with you."

"I'm coming. Don't waste time—give me your torch. I know the way better than you."

They turned right, off the road, past Miss Merridew's cottage, up to the filthiest lane Parry had ever seen. The mist lay in wisps across their path. One moment the darkness was clear, the next a blanket. Their feet slipped and stumbled, the mud coming to their ankles.

"Hell, what a lane," Abbot swore. "The devil and all his devils take it——"

A faint light shone from Harry's open door. Gwen hadn't waited to shut it. Furious, Parry knew that any footprints there might be would be obscured by the tramplings of his companions, all of them except Abbot unwanted.

"Stay outside," he ordered Flik. "And keep those two out."

It was no use. They crowded in after him, though Flik did try to stop Gwen and Miss Merridew in the doorway. Her efforts were fruitless, Gwen, seeing Harry for the second time, burst forth into renewed yowls, while Miss Merridew stood there and shrieked. And even Parry and Abbot, used to nasty sights, were shocked.

HARRY lay on the floor on his front, his face twisted round so that they could see one side of it. When Gwen had screamed about sick and blood, she had not exaggerated. But Harry's face, oddly enough, though it was a dreadful color, and contorted almost out of recognition, had a strange look of content on it—the face of a man who'd done his damnedest not only in life, but in dying.

Then Gwen gave a gurgling cry, and Miss Merridew shrieked louder than ever.

"Get them away from here, Flik." Parry turned on her, authoritative, insisting on being obeyed. "Take them back to your house and keep them there. There's nothing you can do. He's gone."

"Yes."

Her eyes were black, turned inward, searching again. Very quickly, she pushed him on one side, and before he could stop her, whipped open the drawer in the deal kitchen table. For a long moment she stared down into it, then shut it again and turned away.

"Come, Susan—Gwen, come along—got your torch?"

This time they allowed themselves to be led away. Parry called after Flik, "Please phone the pub at once and tell Arnoldson or Norton to come up here—or both of them."

"Yes."

Parry shut the door, shutting them out in the mud and the mist and the night; shutting them, for the time being, out of the front of his mind.

"Is this another poisoning, Abbot?"

"You know damn well I won't give loose opinions till I've done a post-mortem," Abbot said. He bent over Harry, looking into his eyes, feeling him. "It looks to me, for your information only, that the cause of death was a seizure brought on by this appalling vomiting. The effort must have driven all the blood to his head and he burst a vessel. That's what it looks like. I won't say that's what it was."

"And the blood?"

"Maybe from the stomach. Maybe he burst a blood vessel in the throat, to put it in simple language for laymen. I'd say he's been dead the best part of a couple of hours, but I can't vouch for that now. His pupils are slightly contracted too."

"Look at this." Parry jerked his thumb at the table. "That's a queer lot. An empty teacup—a mug, a jug of water, and a packet of salt."

"And what," Abbot asked, "does that suggest to you?"

"It suggests that someone put something in Harry's tea, that he noticed it tasted queer after he'd drunk it, so he took an emetic, just in case. Do I take it the same idea suggests itself to you?"

Abbot picked up the teacup, stared inside it, then dipped his forefinger in the dregs and sucked it. "Not sugary, and a bitter taste." He put down the cup—Parry saw with approval that he'd handled it with his handkerchief—and picked up the mug. "This is pure salt and water by the taste of it, and more salt than water. I'll have to take samples of all this for analysis. Mind if I turn the old man over?"

"No. Go ahead."

Parry's agile mind darted here and there as his eyes ranged the small, bare room. He kept seeing a picture of Flik sitting on the mermaid's tail, in her overcoat and her muddied gum boots, doing nothing. In his ears he heard Miss Merridew's horrified echo, "Blood? Blood?" Blood, as if she couldn't believe her ears. Small details, scraps, superimposed themselves on more details and scraps. He opened the drawer in the table, and, just as Flik had done, stared down into it.

"Parry?"

"Yes?"

"Harry had some sort of growth in his innards. Look at this swelling. Wonder if he knew he had something fatal, took a dose of something and then thought better of it?"

"I don't think so. Do you?"

"No, I don't, to be candid. I'm not a policeman, but I somehow don't think so. It's a bloody queer business."

"Bloody queer."

THERE was a squelching of feet in the mud outside, and the door opened. To Abbot sensitive and alert, there was something repulsive about Arnoldson's face as the pale lamplight shone on it. If anything so pink, moist and fleshy could be vulturine, then it was vulturine. He's seeing the rope round Flik's neck, Abbot stormed inwardly.

Flik, too, as she calmed Gwen and Miss Merridew with strong tea at Shots Hall, saw, in her mind's eye, the loop of a rope, felt its strands touching her skin.

"Flik?" Bee said imperatively. "Have some whisky at once. You look dreadful."

"It *was* dreadful, dreadful!" Miss Merridew cried. "Too dreadful."

Gwen, now considerably calmed down, her fear replaced by excitement and a sense of importance—for wasn't it she who'd found Harry?—said, "I could do with a quick one too, thanks, Bee."

"I didn't ask you," Bee said. "So there's nothing to thank me for. Far be it from me, however, not to take a hint. Flik, give Gwen some of the whisky out of the remains of the other bottle."

"Why?" Gwen sulked. "What other bottle? Have you two bottles, one with poison and one without?"

"Your shockingly bad taste," Bee said in an icy voice, "is no more than I'd expect."

"Oh, Gwen," Miss Merridew sniffled, "how can you say such a thing at a time like this? Such a horrid thing to say—poor Flik."

Flik, silent, cold, gave Gwen a drink, not from the other bottle, which had whisky from the pub in it, but from a bottle of prewar whisky, which was running very low. Then she helped herself, and, still silent, poured a drink out for Bee.

The clanging of an ambulance bell filtered into the hall, at first far away, then close, then passing. Miss Merridew burst into a fresh outbreak of tears, and Gwen downed her whisky, looking defiant.

"I'd like to know," she said, "when you went to see Harry last, Flik?"

"Would you?" Flik had never liked Gwen. She liked her less now.

"Be quiet, Gwen," Bee snapped. "If Parry hadn't told Flik she was to keep

you here, I'd throw you out. If you're going to soak up my whisky, then kindly keep a civil tongue in your head, damn you."

"Sorry," Gwen muttered. "Sorry, Flik. I'm upset—I feel a bit faint."

Flik took the hint and gave her another whisky, a very small one. The ambulance bell sounded again, passed, died away. They'd taken all that there was of Harry. There was something else she ought to think of, but she seemed drained of further coherent thought. She opened the hall door and, as she shut it behind her, ran into a broad back. A torch snicked on, and her heart missed a beat.

"Norton."

"Yes, Mrs. Ashley? Anything I can do?" He sounded profoundly uncomfortable, which, indeed, he was.

"No, thank you. Did you want to see me, or my aunt?"

"No—no, thank you, miss—Mrs. Ashley. It was only Arnoldson said to stay up here in case—well, in case any of you ladies felt scared, if you see what I mean?"

"I see what you mean perfectly, thanks. Mr. Arnoldson needn't be afraid we'll run away, not on a night like this. It's too foggy. Not a night for running anywhere." Flik was just going back indoors, when she heard feet coming up the drive. One pair. Parry? It wasn't Parry but Abbot.

He saw her in the light of Norton's torch, and Norton, disgusted with his job, tactfully began to stamp up and down, as if to warm himself, with each stamp getting a little further away from the house. He hadn't been told to ruddy well eavesdrop. Abbot opened the door of his car and got in, leaving the door open.

"Abbot?" Flik crept in beside him, suddenly thankful for his gaunt presence. His shoulder against hers was hard. She had the queer fancy that under his flesh his bones were fine and long. "Harry? What killed him, poor old boy?"

ABBOT'S voice was low. "They've taken him away, and the—well, the necessary. I seem to've had enough sleep to get along for a bit, so I'm starting on the post-mortem straightway. Then I'll tell you. Parry's going to get the inquests on the other two postponed again, so you won't be hauled up before the Coroner to give evidence yet."

"Does he know anything? I mean, doesn't he have any idea yet who did it?"

"I don't know. He's suddenly closed up like a clam. Flik?" His shoulder moved with a jerk. "For God's sake, if there's anything you know, or want to tell, tell me. If I knew, then I could really help you."

"There's—nothing. And why should you help me?"

"You bloody little fool." He pushed her out of the car. "Why?" He started the engine, and the car roared backward, savagely driven, down the drive into the road. Then it was gone.

Flik opened the door, muttering, "Let us join the ladies."

The ladies, however, weren't to remain long in peace, if the silence of the hall, with its dark corners and drafts could be called peace. In five minutes arrived Parry, Arnoldson behind him. At the sight of him, Miss Merridew began to cry again, only not so loudly. At the sight of Arnoldson, Gwen, freshened by her two drinks, began to wriggle about on the sofa.

"Well, Parry?" Bee raised her dignified eyebrows in question.

"Did either you or Fl—Mrs. Ashley know if Harry suffered from some form of internal growth?"

The two women stared at him, then at the door. For from outside came a confusion of voices, male and female.

"Now what?" Bee said. "A deputation? A lynching party? What's going on, Parry? Are the vigilantes out?"

"I've no idea." Parry seemed just as surprised. "Arnoldson, go and see."

Arnoldson, however, had no opportunity, for the door opened without ceremony and the Ambroses, both pretty well pickled, Captain Belairs, who gave rather the same impression, and Camilla, very sober, made a concerted entrance, almost forcibly herded in by the captain, who looked triumphant.

"What the hell d'you all want?" Bee demanded. "Get out. Phil, you've no busi-

ness to drink so much when you're going to have a baby."

"What?" Phil's voice was shrill. "How d'you know? I never told you. Tim, d'you tell her, you slob?"

"No, he didn't. But it's quite obvious. And you're taking it very badly, Phil. I pity Tim, you must be making life hell for him."

"I like that!" Phil squealed. "When he's practically living in Camilla's pocket!"

"But that's so much better, honey," Camilla pointed out, "than if he was practically living in my bed." She smiled at Parry, and he thought how nice she looked. She had on a dark brown corduroy suit made rather like battle dress, and, he noticed with amusement, a pair of old American army gaiters some admirer had no doubt parted with with the greatest pleasure. "Besides, sweetie," she went on to Phil, "I've laid off Tim. I think he's a little dull, to tell you the truth. I've fallen, temporarily, for Lane, haven't I, honey?"

This rather embarrassing overstatement was mercifully drowned by a flood of speech from Captain Belairs, who was extremely angry that Camilla had stolen his thunder, ruined his entrance, and taken his mind off the job in hand.

"I brought these people up," he shouted at Parry, "because they're trying to withhold evidence from you."

"Don't shout," Bee said. "Gwen, stop that wriggling about. You aren't a four-weeks-old puppy."

Jees Murphy, Parry wondered, were all these villagers like this all the time? If so, no one could say that country life lacked variety. "Well, Captain Belairs?"

"Don't take any notice of him," Tim jabbered, swaying a little. "He's a bloody old busybody. Listening, that's he was doing. Eavesdropping, and so on. Even when I was on the phone the bl——"

Miss Merridew took her crumpled handkerchief away from her nose. "How can you use such language? And Camilla saying such things—in front of poor Bee and Flik when——"

"Miss Merridew? Please," Parry remonstrated.

"I insist on being taken notice of," Captain Belairs declared, thumping a table with his fist. "If no one else'll do his duty, then I will."

"Hear, hear," Gwen chimed in, hoping to curry favor with someone or other, preferably Arnoldson.

"Don't all speak at once," Parry said with patience he didn't feel. "If anyone's got any statement to make, will they please make it singly, and one by one? Mrs. Ambrose? Have you anything to say?"

Phil took no notice. She was comforting Tim because Camilla'd said he was dull. True, her comforting was not very original. "There, Tim, my pet. There, there, my pet. There, there, Tim, my pet."

PARRY, driven to the point which was nearly beyond endurance, looked across at Flik. Silent, serene, lovely, she contemplated Phil and Tim as a mother might contemplate her two children who, having fought, were kissing and being friends again. She's quite, quite incomprehensible, Parry thought.

"Squadron Leader Ambrose?" he prompted.

"Go t'hell. Phil, darling, you don't look fat a bit——"

"Inspector? If you would kindly listen to me. If I might take up but two minutes of your no doubt valuable time?"

"Yes, Captain Belairs? I understand you've been listening to other pople's conversations. Well?"

Camilla sat down on the arm of Bee's chair, admirable in her calm and assurance. "Don't listen to him, honey," she smiled up at Parry. "He'll only run off the rails and tell you about Poona. I'll tell you, and it's all my fault—Quite unintentionally I told you a lie. You won't believe that, but still—a couple of years ago, at least, about then, Flik rang me up about her cat. She was an old white one. She'd gone pretty nearly blind, and besides that, she had something in her innards that hurt her. Flik couldn't get the vet. One never can get the local vet when one wants him—honestly, never. Flik wanted to know if I'd anything to put her to sleep with—I said I hadn't. And then I remembered I'd got some Medinal. Five grains each tablet. Tim came over and

got them. I rang up Tim, because I thought it was a rotten job for Flik to have to do—be quiet, gallant captain. I gave Tim all I had. Four tablets—no, five. And he took them back and fed them Flik's cat. That's all. You asked me if I'd had any dope, and I told you I hadn't. I'd forgotten about the cat business."

"Medinal isn't dope," Parry said. "So why all the fuss?"

This was all very funny, Parry thought, but he'd had enough of it.

"As there's just been another death," he said, "I'd be glad to know what you four people were doing between, say, a quarter to six and seven this evening."

The eyes of the four people concerned turned themselves on him, staring.

"Good God," Tim said, suddenly sobering up. "Who?"

"Harry, who was the gardener here. Well, what were you all doing?"

"Phil and I were on our way to the pub at quarter to six," Tim said. "We got there at six, as anyone can tell you, and we've been there ever since. Phil, honey, you aren't going to be sick are you?"

She shook her head dumbly, her face green.

"Camilla?"

"I was playing rummy with those two you met. Tim rang up, and I dropped everything and biked over to the 'Shots Arms,' where I've been ever since."

"Captain Belairs?"

"I was at home till I went up to the pub at about—I forget when. Some time round about seven, I think. This is monstrous!" he exploded. "Police everywhere, so-called expert from Scotland Yard, and a murder every day. Aren't you going to arrest anyone?"

Parry swayed backward and forward from his heels to his toes. When he spoke his voice was very distinct, each word clipped and clear. "No, I'm not going to arrest anyone. I'm not going to arrest anyone for the reason that I've no idea who the murderer is. No idea at all. I've no clues. Nothing. But I'll tell you all one thing, which you can pass on if you want to—I do know that there's one person in the village, who I admit I don't know, that holds the clue to the murderer's identity. That person is therefore in danger. So everyone'd be wise if they did their eating and drinking when no one else is around who might slip some poison into their food or drink."

In the ensuing silence, Belairs dropped the card he'd been holding up his sleeve. "Damn funny, isn't it, that all three victims were old retainers of the Chattocks? Damn funny not only Molly and Harry, but Marsh, knew Flikka since she was a child. Marsh was butler to an uncle of Flikka's in Scotland. Did you know?"

Arnoldson dug his hands into his pockets, furious. For he had made that discovery about Marsh just an hour or two ago, and had been biding his time to spring his trick at the right dramatic moment.

Parry looked over at Flik. Her lips moved, but no sound came out of her mouth. When at last she did speak, with what seemed a most dreadful effort, all she said was, "He was a very bad butler."

AT LAST Parry got rid of them all, even to the clinging Miss Merridew. Bee had wanted her to spend the night at Shots Hall, but she refused. If, she'd said, she spent the night there, then she knew Flik would give her bed up to her and spend a sleepless night on the sofa. So she'd go home. Yes, she'd go home. So far as it was possible for Miss Merridew to be firm and coherent about anything, she was firm and coherent. So home she went, escorted to her door by the disgruntled Arnoldson.

Parry sighed. "And now I'm going home too," he said to Bee.

"You must be tired," Bee said.

"Tired and aggravated," he smiled. "Why didn't either of you tell me Marsh had been a butler in your family?"

"We never thought," Flik said. "Personally, it simply never occurred to me. I took it for granted you knew. It was years ago. He was a nice old thing, but a bad butler. My uncle pensioned him off, and eventually he landed down here with his wife, and Winnie—that must've been quite twelve years ago."

"Thirteen," Bee corrected her. "He

used to hiss down the back of one's neck at the table. He ought've been a groom. Parry, d'you mean to tell me you've no idea who's done these murders?"

"You all heard what I said, didn't you?" As he answered Bee, he was looking at Flik, right into her eyes. "Now I'm really going. Arnoldson'll be sleeping at the pub tonight. And by the way, Norton's going to sit up all night in Molly's cottage. Just to keep a lookout for anyone who might think of wandering round during the hours of darkness."

"By the way——" Bee smoothed the lap of her silk dress. "Have you found the broom Molly's step was swept with?"

"I haven't actually found it," Parry said. "By what Arnoldson told me, it must've been a very stiff broom from the marks it left on the bricks. A stiff broom with a chunk of bristles missing from the middle of it."

Neither Bee nor Flik made any comment in this gratuitous information. Parry thought that on the whole he hadn't expected any. He buttoned up his overcoat and pulled on a pair of ancient leather gloves.

"How're you going?" Flik asked, walking with him to the door.

"Mahew's sent the car back for me. It'll be down at the pub." He opened the door and peered out. The mist still hung over everything, dark and dismal. "You look all in. Do go to bed, Flik." He looked down at her, at her eyes that were hiding things, her polished copper head that held so much in it, her pale face—poker face, oh, poker face. "Good night. And don't forget Norton's close—just in case you want him." He held her hand for a moment and then let it go, and went himself.

When the door crashed shut, he realized that he'd got quite used to the row it made. He hadn't really noticed it all evening, and yet it had opened and shut, so it seemed, continuously. Switching on his torch, he rounded the corner and stopped outside Molly's cottage.

"Norton?"

"Yes, sir?"

Norton's head, a dim blur, appeared out of Molly's living-room window.

"I'm afraid you're in for a wretched night," Parry said to him. "I'm really sorry for you. Shall I get the gent from the brewery to bring you up something in a bottle to console you?"

"No, thanks, sir. Very nice of you to've thought of it, all the same. But I think I'd better keep my wits about me, such as they are."

"Your wits're all right. Listen, if you could possibly bear the idea of removing your regulation boots and creeping round in your socks, you might take a little stroll in the small hours."

"Yes, sir?" Norton shuddered audibly, and Parry laughed.

"To look for a broom. You know the broom I mean? You mayn't have to go far. Only don't make a noise about it. I tried to get an opportunity to have a look around today, likewise yesterday, but there was always someone about. Good night."

"Night, sir."

XV

MAHEW AND PARRY SET OFF so early on their day's work that it was still nearly dark. But at least the fog had cleared, and a soft, transparent mist proclaimed that it might possibly be a fine day.

When they got down to Molly's cottage, Norton greeted them rather like a dog that'd been chained up for days never expecting to be let loose again. He was a quite deplorable sight, unshaved, hungry, his uniform plastered with half-dried mud. He held the door open with an air of agitation, and was evidently bursting with something.

"Well, Norton?" Parry greeted him. "What sort of a night did you have? You can crack off home when you've told me."

"Oh, Lord," Norton groaned. "I don't know what you'll say, Inspector, when I do tell you. Sorry your cough's so bad, Major Mahew."

"So'm I," Mahew said, gingerly sitting down in Molly's armchair. "What's happened?"

"It was this way," Norton started to explain. "Like you said, Inspector, round about 2 A.M. this morning, I took my boots off, and sneaked off in my socks to have a look round for that broom."

"And did you find it?" Parry asked, hoping to cut a long story short.

"Well, in a manner of speaking, no. It found me, right on the head."

"What the devil d'you mean?" Parry stared, no longer anxious to curtail Norton's story.

"I got as far as the middle of the road, just outside the gate here, and then I skidded in the mud and fell down. I hadn't my light on, so I couldn't see what I was doing. It was that awful, it really was. I tried not to make no noise, but I kept falling down every time I got up, and then I found one of my socks was half off, and I was keeping treading on it with my other foot, if you see what I mean, sir?"

Parry saw, and shook with inward laughter. "Yes—I see. And then?"

"So I simply had to turn my light on," Norton apologized, "and then it happened."

"What did?"

"The broom."

"The broom?" Even Mahew's cold-muffled interest was roused. "It happened?"

"It simply came from nowhere, and landed, wham, on my head."

"But who was at the other end of it?" Parry asked.

Norton shuffled his feet. He'd been afraid no one would believe him, and behold they didn't. "There wasn't anyone at the end of the broom. It just landed," he repeated rather hopelessly, "wham, on my head. Zonk. Out of the blue, if you could call that black fog the blue."

Parry swallowed a laugh. "Then someone must have thrown it at you, mustn't they?"

"But who?" the bewildered Norton said. "There wasn't no one there at all, and not a sound. Directly I put my torch on, the broom just fell out of the sky on my head. Tell you the truth, it near knocked me out, and by the time I got my sock on, and got hold of the broom, if there was anyone around, they'd gone. I went over to Miss Merridew's, and all I could hear was her snoring upstairs. Then I went along to Shots Hall, and not a sight or sound of anyone. So then I went up the road, and down the road, and as far as I could see in the fog, there wasn't no one there either."

"Preposterous," Mahew remarked, starting in on yet another handkerchief. "Brooms can't fall out of the sky, Norton."

"This one did," Norton said stubbornly. "Wham."

THIS time Parry laughed outright. "Listen, Norton, between the time the broom descended, like the sword of Damocles, on your defenseless head, and the time you went in search of prowlers, how long elapsed? Seconds? Minutes?"

Norton scratched his unshaven jaw. "Well, I fell down again when the broom hit me, then I sat down and pulled my sock on, and did up my sock suspender. Then I got up, felt my head, looked round for whatever it was that hit me, found the broom lying in the road, decided it was the broom what had fallen on me, picked it up, looked at it, and then I started to hunt round."

"In fact," Parry suggested, "from the time the broom hit you, to the time you started off to look for the broom thrower, a matter of minutes might've gone by, mightn't they?"

"I couldn't rightly say. I was that surprised."

"Never mind. Let's have a look at it."

With great care, Norton produced a small, stiff-bristled broom, rather muddy, out of a corner. There was a chunk of bristles missing from the middle of it. "I handled it with gloves on when I found it," he said, with no little pride.

"Good——" Parry took a small wooden box out of his pocket, and in a moment had dusted the broom handle with white powder. There were no finger marks, Norton, even with his gloves on, would have effectually cleaned them off.

Not that it mattered. The murderer was always so careful to touch nothing.

"Cut off home, Norton," he said. "Anything else, before you go?"

"No, sir, nothing."

"Half a minute." Parry called after him. "If you wait down at the pub, I'll send the chap who's at Harry's cottage along, and the car can take you both home. Have a drink on me, in the meantime, you look as if you could do with it—that is, if the gentleman from the brewery'll trust me to pay up eventually."

Norton, very thankfully, went, and Parry and Mahew got into the car and drove to the bottom of Harry's lane. The morning mist had cleared, and from a washed, pale blue sky the sun shown, so that the water in the ruts and potholes were pools of silver. The fields were green, sparkling, and in the distance rooks cawed. Mahew swore as they plodded through the mud; Parry's mind went back to the evening before, when Flik had run beside him along the same track in the dark and fog, and Abbot, silent and long-legged, Gwen and Miss Merridew clinging on behind, with their cries of horror, muffled and strange.

The constable who had spent a miserable night at Harry's had nothing to report at all. He had whiled away his time by testing for fingerprints, and found none but Harry's. Everything was just as Parry had left it the night before. There, seemed no sense in searching the small, old cottage all over again. He'd been over it almost inch by inch already.

The three men went back to the car, Parry and Mahew dropping off outside Molly's cottage, while the driver went on down to the pub to pick up Norton and his bicycle.

"Now what?" Mahew said. "Lord, I wish I was home in bed."

"Now we'll search round and see if anyone's lost a broom lately." Parry still held it under his arm, as if it were a gun. "We'll take the first. And that's Miss Merridew of the curtains."

They went up the short path, and Parry knocked on the door. A face bobbed from behind the living-room window, and in a moment the door opened. Miss Merridew greeted them with her usual confusion.

"Major Parry? Oh, and Inspector Mahew—how nice. Oh, no, Major Mahew and Inspector Parry—how very nice. Do come in—isn't it a lovely morning? Too bad the weather's been so nasty for you, it always is, isn't it? Sometimes, that is, but not now."

MAHEW rolled his eyes to the ceiling, as though he prayed for deliverance, which, indeed, he did. Not looking where he was going, he fell over an electric flex, and found himeself himself clawing for support to the sewing machine, now coyly hidden under frilly cover.

"Hell," he swore with feeling.

"Oh!" Miss Merridew cried. "I'm so sorry. Oh, dear, this room's so small, isn't the room, but having to have everything in it."

"Cozy," Parry soothed. "Have you lost a broom lately?"

Miss Merridew perceived the broom, and uttered little whinnies of delight, like a child finding its lost toy. "My broom—I was wondering—I couldn't remember. Fancy, I never remembered lending it to you, how stupid of me. And I was wondering——"

"You didn't lend it to me," Parry pointed out. "It was found out in the road."

"In the road? Gracious me, how careless of me. And I can't even remember leaving it in the road, either."

How long, oh Lord, how long? Mahew champed inwardly. Was she forever going to babble those inanities?

"Very likely you didn't leave it in the road," Parry said, "it's only just turned up. Try and think when you missed it, Miss Merridew."

Miss Merridew tried to think, and at last succeeded in doing so. "Let me see, now. Yes, I remember now—yes, I did miss it, and thought I must've put it away in the wrong place, not in the garden shed. Let me see—it must've been, I think, last Friday, when I thought to myself, now where *can* the garden broom have got to? Yes, last Friday, I remember, now. And I didn't lend it to anyone, I'm sure."

"D'you keep your garden shed locked?" Parry asked patiently.

"No! Oh, dear, no. We haven't any criminals in Shotshall—— "Miss Merridew suddenly turned white and put a small, shaking hand over her mouth. "At least, we hadn't then—last week," she quavered. "And all the time we had, and they took my broom."

Barmy, Mahew thought, fidgeting. The subject of the broom was getting like a nightmare. Hoping to change the conversation before he went mad, he pointed rather wildly at an excellently done pencil sketch of a man's head. "Very well drawn," he exclaimed. "Really good."

There was a sudden silence. Then Miss Merridew nodded, her nod more like a bow of reverence. "My cousin, Mervyn Crawford."

So that was Mervyn Crawford? thought Parry. In a way, he wasn't bad looking. Fortyish. Maybe more, maybe less. Only there was something wrong about the drawing. It gave the impression that it wasn't a true likeness.

"Dear Flikka drew it for me—after—after——" Miss Merridew's voice faltered, and her mouth sagged.

"After his death?" Parry said brutally.

"He died in the blitz," Miss Merridew said.

Strange new disease, Mahew thought. "And she was brought to bed with a fine blitz." Only it was a he. "He caught the blitz, complications set in, and he died." He was, he decided, a little delirious. His head, anyway, was blazing hot. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a long, black M.G. turn up into the drive of Shots Hall. Parry saw it too.

"Well," he said, "we mustn't keep you any longer. I'm glad we've been able to return you your broom."

"So kind of you," Miss Merridew was all smiles again. "Such an old friend, if you understand what I mean?"

"Perfectly," Parry assured her, and pushed Mahew out of the door in front of him.

"She's barmy," Mahew said when they got out in the road. "Oh, Lord, where do we go from here?

"A little gravelry is indicated, I think. Clive's car and others've most conveniently scattered some nice gravel out into the road from Shots Hall drive. It matches up very prettily with the gravel Congreve picked up in Mrs. Vale's front cat run."

"Your high spirits," Mahew said, "not only make me sick, but they're out of place. You're a ghoul, Lane."

"That's rather what what I feel like."

VERY quickly, as if he was twitching one of his shoestrings tighter, he stooped and picked up a handful of gravel from the road outside the entrance to Shots Hall. Somehow, the action made Mahew feel quite literally sick. It was so cold-blooded.

"We'll now stroll a little way down the road," Parry said. "That is if you don't mind helping me with a short experiment."

Mahew made an inarticulate noise in his clogged throat and followed. Where the road took a slow bend to the left, Parry stopped. They were just in sight of the pub.

"Got a watch?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then turn your back, wait five minutes, then walk straight down the road, go in the back door of the pub, stand outside the sitting-room door for a couple of minutes, not more, walk out of the back door again, and start up the hill the way you came."

Grumbling under his breath, refusing to admit his interest Mahew turned his back. The minute hand of his watch crawled with the awful slowness of a horse-drawn hearse in a traffic jam. He stamped his feet, trying to warm them, thankful for the warmth of the vagrant sunshine. After what seemed like a lifetime, the five minutes was up, and he turned and walked down the hill, feeling absurdly self-conscious. He found that it took him four minutes to reach the back door of the pub. This surprised him, as he thought it was much closer. When he got to the back door he paused, then lifted the latch and walked in. The sitting-room was half open. He could see Arnoldson at the table, writing industriously, while Winnie halfheartedly flipped a duster over the hideous furniture. One minute passed; Winnie said,

"I wouldn't go into domestic service if you paid me £500 a year."

"No one's going to pay you £500 a year," Arnoldson said without looking round. He hadn't seen Mahew.

The two minutes were up. Mahew let himself out and began to walk up the hill. When he had got halfway to the place he'd stood and waited with his back turned, he heard Parry whistle and stopped.

"Well?" Parry caught up with him. "Did you hear anything?"

"Only Winnie and Arnoldson. Winnie said she wouldn't go into domestic service if she was paid £500 a year, and Arnoldson said no one'd pay her £500 a year. That's all except for the man from the brewery breathing heavily in the four ale."

"That's that, then." Parry looked satisfied. "If anyone was hiding in the abattoir when Flik went in to get the bottle of gin, then she didn't hear them chucking gravel at Mrs. Vale's window. It was too easy. I watched you coming down the hill through that slit of a window, waited till the back door of the pub shut, then hopped out of my hiding place, heaved the gravel across the road, and hopped back again. I think Mrs. Vale's now having hysterics, thinking my gravel's the herald of another murder."

As they went down the road, he looked back over his shoulder to where the tower of Shots Hall stood up gray in the wintry blue of the sky. Even on a fine day it seemed forbidding, watchful; remote and secret as Flik herself.

XVI

IN HIS UNCOMFORTABLE BEDroom in the town, Abbot tugged at a clean collar. He'd only just got back from the hospital. He supposed that this sort of thing was now going to happen every minute. Each of the inhabitants of Shotshall in turn would imagine they'd been poisoned, and every doctor in St. Arthurs would be hauled up to the benighted village. Now it was Susan Merridew. Nearly tearing his collar in half, he showered a thousand maledictions on her head. Why did she have to pick on him, anyway!

As he got into his car, he remembered he'd forgotten to shave. The fact that he minded what he looked like only served to make him more angry; for who but Abbot cared what Abbot looked like? And Abbot had never cared before. Shooting off the main road and turning up to the hill that led to Shotshall, he thought that if he stopped at the pub Parry might be there, and he could give him the report on Harry's post-mortem. He drove wildly, his brakes screaming at every corner, as if he was pursued by devils of his own manufacture. Outside the pub he skidded to a standstill, and with quite unnecessary violence sounded his horn. From the window of the now closed four ale bar, Congreve's head appeared, a pencil sticking out of the only mildly inquiring mouth.

"'Ullo, doctor," Congreve said placidly, spitting the pencil into his hand.

"Where's Parry? Drinking?"

"Shall I ask 'im to come out, sir, or're you coming in?"

"I'm not coming in," Abbot said.

"You aren't missing anything, then. The whisky supply's run out. I'll tell the Inspector you're 'ere."

Abbot smiled wryly. He liked Congreve, who had the rare distinction of never having irritated him.

Parry came round from the back door of the pub. He looked thoughtful, and rather worried. He was actually thinking about Arnoldson, whom he had just sent off to see Camilla.

"Hullo, Abbot," he said, sticking his head in at the car window. "Done the post-mortem already?"

"I hope I never see the inside of a pair of lungs, the outside of a pancreas, the workings of a dead heart or any of the other organs contained in the human body again. Here's the report on the post-mortem. I trust you can understand it."

Parry took the obtusely worded document Abbot thrust at him and groaned. "I'm but an ignorant policeman, dragged

up under the arches and then pitchforked into a reform home. Will you translate all this into simple words of two syllables?"

"All right, all right." Impatiently Abbot snatched his report out of Parry's hand. "Harry died as the result of cerebral hemorrhage induced by excessive and prolonged retching. He had a growth, probably malignant—I'll know that tomorrow—in his stomach, which had weakened his constitution, and judging by everything else I found he'd have died pretty soon anyhow. He must have first of all taken a fatal dose of morphine, and then very strong salt and water to induce vomiting, and I can't really tell you how many grains of morphine he did take—the dregs of his teacup showed morphine in them, and he must've died, as far as I can safely say, between, say, 5.45 and 6.30 yesterday evening. There was no sugar in the tea."

"No sugar?" Parry repeated, staggered.

"No sugar."

"And apparently he always took a lot of sugar. Jees—and the blood?"

"Burst a blood vessel in his throat from the strain of the retching. There looked to be more blood than there actually was. Here, take the report. I've got to go along and see old Merridew."

"Susan Merridew? Why?"

"She phoned me," Abbot fumed. "Talked some balderdash about her milk tasting bitter and she felt ill."

"Good Lord!"

PARRY tore open the door of the car and sprawled inside next Abbot. "Step on it—no, wait a minute—Congreve?"

"Sir?" Congreve answered from the window of the four ale.

"Come on."

Congreve climbed nimbly over the sill and got in the back of the car.

"Hell," Parry swore. "The trap's sprung. I hope we shan't be too late. How long ago was it she phoned you?"

"I didn't take the time. Getting on for three-quarters of an hour ago by now." Abbot roared the car up the hill and pulled up with a jerk outside the trim gate of Miss Merridew's small house. Parry was first inside, then Abbot, then Congreve.

"She's in here," Parry said over his shoulder. "Don't touch a damn thing but her, if you can help it."

"All right, all right," Abbot said fretfully. "We aren't fools. Get out of my light." He knelt down beside Miss Merridew's crumpled little form, felt her pulse, then, methodically, quickly, he opened his bag and took out a hypodermic syringe and an ampule of atropine. "I'd say it was morphine again," he said, lifting her eyelids. "Get a bowl of cold water, and a towel. Flap her face and neck." The needle went home. He frowned, rubbing his rough chin on the back of his hand. "I can't give her an emetic when she's unconscious like this, it'd simply choke her—go on, Parry, flap away—that's more like it."

Parry felt, somehow, repulsed. At no time was Miss Merridew beautiful, but in her present state she seemed to him quite hideously plain.

"We must get her down to the hospital at once," Abbot said. "Not that she's in much danger now, but I don't want to take any risks. I'd say she had the constitution of an ox."

"Shall I ring through for an ambulance?" Congreve asked.

"Waste of time. After they've fiddled about, we could've got her there and back again three times in my car."

"If we stuck her in the back seat," Parry suggested, "then I could hang on to her. I want to go down with you. I'll have to get a statement from her directly she's capable of making one. Abbot, can you wrap that milk glass in a handkerchief, or something, and put it in your bag? Upright——"

Abbot snapped his teeth together, champing. "What d'you think I'd do? Rinse it first and put it in upside down to drain?"

"D'you know what?" Congreve said, bending down and staring at Miss Merridew's face. "She ain't as old as she looks, to my way of thinking. Funny."

Funny was scarcely the word Parry and Abbot would have used to describe the situation, and said so fluently.

"Queer, not te-he," Congreve explained.

Very carefully, Abbot wrapped Miss

Merridew's dentures, which he'd taken out as they threatened to choke her, in a bit of paper and put them in his bag with the glass. Parry stopped flapping the wet towel and looked up.

"Why take her teeth?"

Abbot stared at him. "You've no imagination. People with false teeth, woman especially, are often very sensitive. She'd hate to make a statement to you with no teeth in her head. You're a fool. Get some blankets off her bed and then help me out with her."

Congreve got blankets, and they rolled Miss Merridew in them so that she looked like an elderly papoose. With some difficulty they bundled her out of the house and propped her in the back of the car. Abbot opened all the windows, muttered that the fresh air would help more than anything else.

PARRY took Congreve on one side. "Stay here, will you?" he said. "And use all your ten pair of eyes. You can ring me at the hospital. I'll wait there till she comes to and's as capable of being as coherent as she ever is, which isn't saying much. Don't let anyone in—you can lock the door, and if anyone calls they'll just think she's out."

"Wonder who done it?" Congreve pondered.

"The wholesale dealer in morphine," Parry answered rather impatiently. "Who else?"

"Come on, can't you?" Abbot shouted from the car. "Get in with her, Parry, and bounce her about. She's beginning to come to after the atropine, and I don't want her to go into a coma again."

Parry got in as he was bid. Then he put his head out of the window and called to Congreve. "Ring Major Mahew at the pub, and tell him what's happened and where I'm to be found. And Congreve? Will you ask him to pay a visit to Shots Hall and find out what Mrs. Ashley and Miss Chattock've been doing today?"

The fantastic drive to St. Arthurs started. To Parry there was a nightmare quality about it that he'd never encountered in his wide experience before. The air tore through the windows, so that he felt he must surely freeze to death. Obedient to Abbot's orders, he bounced Miss Merridew up and down and from side to side as if she were some horrid rag doll. Every now and then she half opened her eyes, and made queer noises, like an animal. The sun went behind a bank of gray clouds, and the countryside took on an air of gloom. A wind was getting up; Abbot's hair flew in wild disorder in the draft.

Parry marveled that this raging, caustic man was yet so sensitive to human feeling that he could think of Miss Merridew's dentures. Like Flik, in some odd way, there were the threads of that nylon-like fine strength in him.

"How's she doing?"

"All right. And I think you're right. She's tough as you make them."

"She's the tough type."

"No, no, no!" Miss Merridew suddenly wailed. "She— she——"

The car lurched round a corner, and she fell against Parry. With distaste, he pushed her back in her corner and shook her.

"Wake up!" he shouted in her ear. "Come on—Miss Merridew, wake up—time to get up——"

The still rising wind whistled in the windows. Vagrant drops of rain hit the windscreen. The fields and woods were splotched with black shadows, like some skin disease that had overtaken an otherwise pleasant face.

"Oh," Miss Merridew bubbled. "Oh, oh— She——"

Who? Parry wondered, mentally and outrageously cursing Mahew for dragging him into this unsavory mess. Flik? All the time Flik.

"Wake up, Miss Merridew," he shouted again, wishing he could sock her in the jaw.

XVII

MISS MERRIDEW WAS PUT IN a private ward, while Parry waited downstairs in the matron's office. There,

left by himself to kick his heels, he did some hard thinking. His thoughts weren't pleasant, and when Abbot looked in at the door he found him smoking his tenth cigarette, an ash tray full of half-smoked ends next him.

"You can come up," Abbot said. "She's still very dopey, but I don't suppose any more half-witted than usual. The devil himself can't have a stronger constitution than she's got. Heart and lungs like a two-year-old, whatever the heart and lungs of a two-year-old're like. I'm having the dregs of milk in the glass tested for morphine."

"Did she ask for her teeth?" Parry said curiously.

"Yes."

"When d'you think she'll be fit enough to go home again?"

"She'll have to go tomorrow."

"Have to?" Parry whistled softly between his teeth. "Why the hell?"

"She'll damn well have to go out tomorrow," Abbot said. "The ward she's in's wanted tomorrow for a mastoid. The mastoid can't be kept hanging about, if you can realize that. None of the others in the private wards're fit enough to be turned out on her account, and as for the public wards, there's a waiting list."

"Surely you keep some beds free for emergencies?" Parry asked, getting impatient.

"As you say, for emergencies," Abbot agreed acidly. "She's not an emergency any longer, or won't be tomorrow with her powers of recuperation. If you're so concerned about her, then I can get the District Nurse near that appalling village to go in and keep an eye on her in her spare time, which is nil."

"Can't you really keep her in after tomorrow?"

"I told you."

"There's no other hospital?"

"No."

"Nursing homes?"

"Damn you," Abbot swore beside himself, "if I thought I could get a bed in a nursing home I'd have told you. They're all full. This isn't London, this is a one-horse seaside town."

"Tomorrow?" Parry frowned. "Hell, I'll have to get busy."

"That'll be a change," Abbot jeered. "Come along, if you want to see the old woman."

For all that Abbot said she had a constitution like an ox, Miss Merridew, propped up in bed in a hospital nightdress, was a pathetic figure. She seemed to have shrunk to the size of a small child, and was having great difficulties with her dentures, which kept slipping forward out of her relaxed mouth. Abbot nodded his head at the nurse who stood by the bed, and Parry was left alone with his victim.

"Feeling better?" he asked gently.

Miss Merridew tried to nod and smile.

"Are you the doctor?" she asked in a clogged voice.

Parry groaned within him. Now the usual muddled conversation was going to take place, he supposed.

"No, I'm not the doctor. I'm Parry, Inspector Parry. You remember who I am, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Miss Merridew muttered vaguely. "Only I thought you were a major. Such a queer thing to happen—it was sour—no, not sour, bitter. It must be the cows. They turn sour in thundery weather, don't they?"

"Very likely," Parry agreed, curbing his impatience with admirable fortitude. "I'm sorry you were alone when you were taken ill. If Mrs. Ashley'd been with you she could have helped you, couldn't she?"

"Oh, dear—yes she could, couldn't she?" Miss Merridew plucked at the sheet puzzling. "Only she'd gone. I mean—she hadn't been there. Of course she hadn't been in at all," she added with a quick, nervous twitching of her fingers, like a guilty child. "Not at all. No one had been in. Flikka hadn't——"

"I see." Parry strolled round the room. Of course Flik had been in, and when she'd gone, Miss Merridew had drunk her milk. He ran his eyes over Miss Merridew's unromantic clothing, neatly folded and laid on a chair. On the dressing table other oddments were laid in a row with tidy hospital precision: a handkerchief, a door key, a crumpled letter. He glanced at Miss Merridew. She seemed to have

forgotten he was there. He picked up the letter and read it quickly, then opened the door. The nurse hovered outside, waiting to throw him out when his time was up.

"Nurse?"

"Yes? Is she all right? Please don't overtire her or worry her."

"She's all right. Where was this letter? I mean, where did you find it?"

"Funny," the nurse said, "we found it tucked down the inside of her blouse in the top of her—erm. Just as if she'd tried to hide it."

"People do such quaint things, don't they?" Parry smiled at the girl and put the letter in his pocket. "I'll go now, I won't bother your patient any more just yet."

ON THE staircase, he reread Miss Merridew's beautifully penned but chaotically phrased missive. There were a lot of underlinings, and a moulded account of the murders, the weather, hopes for an early spring when it would be so lovely to see the spring flowers showing, would it not? dearest Emily—whoever dearest Emily was. The letter ended:

Well, dearest, I must stop, as I see dear Flikka Ashley, of whom I have often written you I think if I remember rightly, coming in at my gate to visit me which she so often does at this time.

With dear thoughts,
Your affectionate
Susan Merridew

Screwing up his eyes, Parry reconstructed the scene in his mind. Miss Merridew laying down her pen, blotting the fine writing, folding the letter, then greeting Flik with inanities as she came in. As plainly as though she was there before him, he saw Flik sit down very quietly, in her unfidgety manner, saw her immobile face, heard her calm voice answering Miss Merridew. As surely as if he had been there himself, he knew that Miss Merridew had got up and pottered out of the room on some futile errand. He could see Flik, when she came back, saying good-by, going, her back straight, out of the gate again—then Miss Merridew relishing her milk, tasting the bitterness, running her tongue round her mouth and tasting again, somehow getting to her phone. Then she must have gone straight back into her living room, groping her way while the morphine worked on her. Then the letter—what would an old friend, a loving friend of Flik's do? Leave the letter on the table where it'd be found? No, hide it—hide it somewhere—obviously someone who'd had an overdose of morphine wouldn't have the strength to tear it up and throw it in the fire. So hide it down inside her clothes.

Parry's methodical brain clicked over and over till it came to a standstill at the ever present barrier of the motive: the motive of the motive. Only Flik could provide that. Damn her eyes, he thought angrily, oh damn her eyes.

A nurse came up the stairs toward him, hurrying, a small white mask over her nose and mouth.

"Nurse?" he said. "I'd very much like to see Dr. Abbot, if I may."

"Dr. Abbot? Oh dear. I'm afraid——"

"I'm Inspector Parry, if that means anything in your young and charming life."

Apparently it did.

"He's just going to give an anesthetic," she said. "An emergency case that's been brought in. I think he's gone up to the theater already, but the patient hasn't been taken up yet, so perhaps he could give you a minute if you'll come up."

"Thanks a lot." Parry followed the girl back up the stairs, along a corridor and into a lift which sailed to the top floor. The hospital smells of antiseptic were everywhere. He liked them; they were so clean.

"If you'll just wait here." The nurse opened a wide, white door, and a blast of hot air rushed out and hit Parry in the face. He'd forgotten that operating theaters were heated to hothouse temperature, and wondered how anyone could work in such an atmosphere. He had a confused view of chromium plating, white enamel, of another masked nurse, and Abbot.

HE LOOKED almost terrifying but imposing in his white overall, his white skullcap and his mask. He stepped into the corridor, his hands thrust away from him. Behind him a nurse held out his glasses.

"Your glasses, doctor," she said.

"Never mind now. Shut the door." He looked down at Parry, and for the first time Parry, tall himself, realized how tall the doctor was, and that the unspectacled eyes that stared at him were extraordinary in their life and fire. "Don't come and plaster yourself all over me," he said. "Just as I'm cleaned up. What the hell is it now? I can only give you a few seconds. An emergency appendicectomy's just been brought in, so they got their hooks on me. Well?"

"Is there no possibility of your being able to keep Miss Merridew in here after tomorrow?"

"My God, have I got to explain to you all over again?" Abbot exploded. "If I stuck her in one of the emergency beds, then she might have to be hoofed out five minutes after she'd got into it. With this case that's just come in, that'll only leave two emergencies anyhow. To the devil with you."

Parry stuck to his guns. "This District Nurse you were talking about, would she be able to stay with Miss Merridew all the time when she goes home?"

"No!" Abbot almost shouted, seething. "How could she? With a huge district and patients all over the place? Maternity cases, influenza cases, God knows what to visit. Don't be half-witted."

"Then could some other female be found to stay with her?"

"Find her, then. Go on, find her. Now get out, will you? Here comes the appendicectomy."

Parry shrugged his shoulders, and as the trolley was wheeled past him, bearing its burden, he got out. Without looking back, Abbot followed the trolley, and the door shut. Ignoring the lift, Parry went down the three flights of stairs. When he reached the hall, he realized he was stuck for a car. He knocked on the door of the matron's office. There was no answer. He supposed she was up in the theater. He went in, and shut the door behind him. Now what? If the expert scrounger, Clive, couldn't find a lady to oblige at Shots Hall, then it was unlikely he'd be able to find a lady to oblige Miss Merridew, who'd just had an overdose of morphine. An hotel? No, she might take it into her head to hire a taxi and drive back to Shotshall. Could she stay with the Ambroses? No, they were too scatty. They'd go off to the pub and spend half the night there, leaving Miss Merridew alone. Congreve and Norton could, of course, take it in turns to stand guard over her, but that wouldn't do at all. Nothing would do. Home she would have to go, tomorrow, and that was that.

Parry, who suffered from no false modesty, had a nasty feeling that he'd fallen down over this repulsive case, and that everything was coming unstuck on him.

He took up the matron's phone, and rang London——

The answer to his last night's inquiries was entirely negative.

"No," said the voice the other end. "No trace to be found of anyone of that name. They seem to've neither been born nor died, and no identity card was ever issued to anyone of that name either. They didn't commit homicide, suicide, matricide or any other cide, or arson, larceny, bigamy or anything else."

"Hell," Parry swore, and rang off.

THERE seemed only one thing for it. He'd have to go to London himself. There was a train at five o'clock that evening. He couldn't get back that night, but that didn't matter. He'd take an early train in the morning or the afternoon. In the meantime, Mahew could take charge. Debating his many problems, he phoned through to Congreve. Congreve had used his ten pairs of eyes but had spotted nothing, so he said. Parry lit yet another cigarette, and got on to the "Shots Arms." Mahew had just arrived back from an abortive visit to Bee and Flik. He'd got nothing out of them at all.

"Damn," Parry said, and told Mahew about Miss Merridew's letter to dearest Emily. Mahew was coughing so much that it sounded as though a pack of hounds was

in full cry at the pub end of the phone. He seemed, in between his fits of coughing, to take singularly little interest in anything. Parry supposed the gentleman from the brewery was listening. He rang off, then got on to the Central Police Station and told them to send a car up to the hospital for him.

There was no time for him to go back to the Mahews' and collect what he wanted in the way of razors and toothbrushes for the night, but that worried him not at all. Everything he'd need was in his flat in town. He let himself out of the hospital, and waited on the edge of the pavement for the car. The afternoon was drawing in. Gusts of wind and rain came from the sea, and he could hear the roar of the waves in the distance. It was blowing up for a southwesterly gale, he thought. A feeling of dreariness and defeat suddenly came over him. Right under his nose three murders had taken place, and then Miss Merridew had taken morphine in her milk. And still he lacked the vital link in his chain of evidence. Damn Flik, he thought, and his mind dwelt with longing on thumbscrews, racks, rubber truncheons and other tortures designed to make people talk. Under that copper hair, inside that strange mind with its secret corners, dwelt something that was beyond all reason and logic. And there, until he found the key to unlock that mind, it would still dwell. He hoped Mahew had digested well and truly all his directions.

The police car came round the corner, stopped and turned.

"Station," he said briefly, and got in.

"Which one, sir?" the driver asked. "Police or railway?"

"Sorry," Parry laughed. "Railway. I want to catch the five o'clock to Victoria."

Five minutes later, the immensely worried driver of Mahew's car swept up to the front entrance of the hospital, and getting out, opened the rear door.

"I tell you," Mahew wheezed, "I won't see any bloody doctor. Take me back to Shotshall—I've a million things to do. How'd I get in this car, anyhow?"

"I'm afraid, sir, I pushed you in from behind," the driver said. "You wouldn't by no means let me ring up your doctor, so it seemed the only thing to do." He stared anxiously at his chief's flushed face and glassy eyes, congested by much coughing. The wheezing of his chest was like the pumping of concertina bellows, and as unlovely. It was obvious to the driver that here was someone who was very ill indeed, and, murders or no murders, orders or no orders, needed expert attention. Somehow he got Mahew into the hospital, where a nurse pounced on him with professional enthusiasm and sat him down on a chair by the hall fire.

"Just wait with him, constable," she said, "and I'll fetch the house surgeon. He and Dr. Abbot're just through with an operation. Take it easy," she said to Mahew, who was not quite capable of doing anything else but swear.

He was still swearing when the house surgeon and Abbot came out of the lift, stinking of antiseptic, and well scrubbed.

"What the hell?" Abbot said, staring at Mahew. "Here, help me along with him."

Mahew's temperature was 104°. By the time his examination was over, he was quite delirious.

"We simply can't keep him here," Abbot frowned.

"We can put him in one of the emergency beds," the house surgeon, a man by the name of Larson, said. "But I don't like doing that, as there're only the two vacant ones now, and if we had a couple of bad accident or operation cases, we'd be stung."

"Couldn't agree with you more. Listen to me, ring up his house and see if Mrs. Mahew's capable of looking after him, and get her to ring his own doctor. I expect there's a District Nurse or someone available to give a hand over his way." Abbot ran his hands through his hair. More trouble, and he liked Mahew, who, fortunately, appeared to have an excellent constitution apart from his present ailment.

The soul of competence, despite her cold, Mrs. Mahew said she'd ring their own doctor, and could certainly manage to look after her own husband. Within ten minutes, wrapped in blankets and hot-water-bottled, a St. John Ambulance team had him under way, and Abbot breathed a

sigh of relief. He shrugged himself into his overcoat, and weaving a pattern of violent imprecations in his mind which included all the crimes of the Decalogue, wrathfully took himself off on his rounds. He wondered when, if ever, he was going to see Flik again. Like a wraith she haunted him, a wraith which, when he put his hand to touch it, vanished out of his grasp.

XVIII

AND IN MISS MERRIDEW'S LIVing room, Congreve wondered what was going to happen now. They'd rung him up from the town to tell him about Parry and Mahew, and a second call had just come through from Brewin. If Congreve had had any idea that Parry had gone off thinking that Mahew was safely in charge of the proceedings, he would have rung up Scotland Yard. He'd never rung up Scotland Yard in his life. But he'd have rung Buckingham Palace if he'd known how urgently Parry was needed.

For, confident that the news he'd had that day would break down the iron wall of Flik's reserve and that she'd crack, and the honor and glory of solving Parry's case would be all his, Arnoldson took her down to the police station and shut her up in one of the cells.

Norton, struggling through the storm, gave Congreve the news when he came to relieve him; and Congreve, scenting mischief, went straight to Miss Merridew's telephone.

"You mark my words," he said over his shoulder to Norton as he picked up the receiver, "'is ruddy 'oliness, Arnoldson, ain't up to no good. This all smells to me like old fish."

"Stinks," Norton agreed.

"'Ullo?" Congreve bawled into the receiver. An ear-splitting crackle nearly deafened him. After a long time, a dim, harassed voice answered him. "London call—can you 'ear me? What?" he said.

"Sorry—main cable—can't get trunk—toll— not even— local— tomorrow perhaps——"

Congreve put the receiver back. "And sweet Fanny Adams to you," he said. "Norton, the line's gone again, bad luck to it. Know what? I don't believe the Inspector knew before 'e went that the Major'd been taken ill. 'E'd never 'av gone off and left Arnoldson in charge if 'e 'ad."

"What're we going to do about it, anyhow?" Norton asked rather helplessly. "I don't see we can do nothing. After all, the Inspector must be back tomorrow, and then he'll put things right."

"'Oo knows," Congreve debated with relish, "what may 'appen before 'e does get back? Maybe two more murders."

"Perhaps Mrs. Ashley did do them." Norton was reluctant to admit such an idea, but it seemed to him, now, more than likely. "After all, someone did."

"No?" Congreve opened his eyes wide. "Go on? I'm off now. Don't know what you'd better do—'ang on 'ere, I suppose. Gawd, what a mix-up."

The force of the wind, when he got out in the road and pushed his bicycle against it, nearly knocked him down, and the salt in the rain stung his eyes. It was quite dark. He left his bicycle by the entrance to Shots Hall, and by the light of his torch, which showed nothing but the spewing silver of the rain, groped his way to the front door of the house. After knocking twice, and getting no answer, he boldly walked in. Bee was at the telephone, furiously banging the instrument up and down, as if by so doing she could wrest from it some response.

"It ain't no good," Congreve said. "The main cable's gone."

The door crashed behind him, nearly catching his raincoat in it. All the hall lights were on, but even so the shadows still seemed to fill all the corners.

Bee turned thumping the telephone down on its shelf.

"What the hell's gone wrong with the line?" she asked.

"I said, the main cable's gone. Miss

Chattock, did Arnoldson 'ave a warrant for Mrs. Ashley's arrest, or what?"

Bee looked at him for a long time. Even this calamity had not appeared to have shaken her dignified exterior. "He hadn't a warrant. He said something to her I didn't hear, and she simply went. She simply went off with him just as if she was going shopping, the damn little fool. I tried to go too, but he shut me out of the car——"

"And off they went," Congreve finished for her.

With a calm fluency which roused Congreve's admiration on high, Bee proceeded to say what she thought of Arnoldson. "How Parry could have left him in charge, I don't know. Where's Mahew? What the devil's he up to?"

" 'E's been taken 'ome with pneumonia, and as the superintendent's laid up with flu, Arnoldson's automatically in charge, as 'e's the senior of the rest of us."

"I wanted to get a taxi and go down to the police station and raise hell," Bee said.

"I 'aven't any doubt but what you do. But it wouldn't be much good. I'm on my way there myself, if I don't get blown away like the little bit of thistledown I am."

"Have a drink before you go," Bee invited him.

"Don't mind if I do, I'm sure," Congreve thanked her, and over a glass of the prewar whisky, cheered her up by telling her an imaginary story about an imaginary funeral he'd once been to. Having thus fortified himself and his hostess, he went, leaving Bee alone with her horrified thoughts in the gray, empty, wind-beleaguered house.

IT WAS downhill practically all the way to St. Arthurs, but even so, he had to pedal as though he were riding up a steep mountain. Several times he was blown off into the mud. Outside a pub near the sea front, he got off, and thankfully went into the fog of tobacco smoke and beer. But even the noise of talk didn't drown the breaking of the waves over the esplanade, the hissing cry of blown spray, the boom of the gale. He shook himself, sending a fountain of mud and water on to the floor, and felt a hand on his arm.

It was Clive, his fair hair wet, clinging to his forehead.

"Hullo, Congreve? Have a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do," Congreve agreed for the second time that night. "Nasty evening, ain't it?"

"Bloody awful. Whisky?" Clive ordered two doubles. "I've just had to leave my car in dock. Came down again to the town to have a last try to get some sort of skivvy to oblige them at Shots Hall, and one of the big ends went. I'll have to put up at some pub, as I can't get a taxi driver in the place to turn out in this storm."

Congreve sucked his teeth slowly, meditating. "Pity," he said. "A car'd come in handy now. Arnoldson's just taken Mrs. Ashley away to the police station."

"What?" Clive stared, incredulous. "Arnoldson? That swine taken Flik? Where's Parry? And Mahew?"

Congreve told him.

Clive's face was white, and a little pulse beat in his forehead.

"I'm going to see Arnoldson," he said, and putting his glass down, limped out of the pub. He felt, suddenly, lonely and dispirited. He didn't feel young any more. His leg seemed a dead weight, a leaden limb he had to drag behind him. He was aware, yet not aware, that Congreve was wheeling his bicycle along in the gutter beside him. His whole mind was concentrated on Flik, on the leering, pink-mouthed man who'd taken her away. He didn't think he was angry, but there was an awful coldness inside him that had never been there before. He didn't notice where he was going. He didn't notice the wave that drove him down the side street to the police station. He didn't notice Congreve open the door of the police station, an unbeautiful building that, with the adjoining wing where the cells were, huddled together in company with the mortuary, the corporation yard and the police court, as though all were bound together in the bonds of some unwilling and bigamous marriage. He only knew that suddenly he was in the warmth and light, a constable looking at him inquiringly while Congreve took off his raincoat.

"This gentleman wants to see Detective Sergeant Arnoldson," Congreve said. "Important."

"He's busy," the constable said. "But I'll send through to him. What name is it, sir?"

"Clive Harris. I've got a statement to make."

Somewhere a door crashed shut and another crashed open, blown by the drafts that whirled along the bleak stone corridors. Windows rattled and shook, and against the small, barred oblong of glass high up in the wall of Flik's cell, the spray whispered walls sweated like the skin of an old, unwashed man. The one light set in the ceiling picked out the wooden bunk, the tin washstand with its tin basin, its jug and bucket, the hardwood chair, the stone floor, and Flik's white face and Arnoldson's flushed triumphant one. Outside the heavy door, a disapproving and angry policewoman, whom Arnoldson had summarily dismissed from the cell, stood tight-lipped, swinging a bunch of keys. He hadn't any right to be in there alone with that lady, not in the state he was in, whatever she'd done, she kept telling herself. No right at all.

She looked round as Congreve came along the corridor.

"Been thrown out on my ear," she complained. "And he's the worse for whatever he's been drinking."

"Oh, 'e is, is 'e?" Congreve was interested. "Well, you can just go in and tell 'im Mr. Clive 'Arris wants to see 'im particular, as he's got a statement to make."

Without ceremony, the policewoman opened the cell door wide, so that Congreve had a glimpse of Flik sitting taut on the edge of the bunk. He tried to wink at her, not in familiarity, but in reassurance.

"There's a Mr. Clive Harris outside wants to see you," Flik's unwilling gaoler said sharply to Arnoldson. "He's got a statement to make to you, and it's important."

Arnoldson's face was still flushed when he came out to Clive, and round his eyes there were beads of sweat.

"Well?" he said aggressively.

CLIVE looked at him, hating him, and leaned heavily on his burdensome leg. "I came here to tell you that I murdered those three people." His voice sounded unreal in his ears, as if it was someone else speaking from miles away.

Arnoldson burst into a guffaw of laughter "Trying to take the blame for your ladylove?"

"My—what——?"

All Clive could see now was the pink face, the wet mouth, and he hit out at it, and hit again and again. His violence, however, was short lived. There would be no need for him now to find a pub to put up in overnight. He had free board and lodging in a cell exactly similar to Flik's.

"Oh, why did you do that?" Congreve reproved him before he locked the door. "Now you'll be charged with assaulting a police officer. The Bench doesn't sit tomorrow, so you won't come up till the day after—still, lots of things can 'appen before then."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Clive said grimly, nursing his torn knuckles. "What a bloody fool I am. Now I'm no help to her at all."

Congreve sucked his teeth. "Never mind, Inspector Parry'll be back tomorrow, and I dare say 'e can fix things some'ow. One thing, Arnoldson won't go in and see Mrs. Ashley again, not with 'is face like it is. I'll see you get some tea and a sandwich. Anything else you want?"

Clive thought quickly. "Yes. Look here, Congreve. Will you get hold of Dr. Abbot and ask him to keep an eye on her? He's the police doctor, after all, isn't he? And she's his patient anyway. Will you do that?"

Congreve nodded. "I'll do me best," he agreed.

But when the weary Congreve was decanted off his bicycle by the gale on the Abbot's doorstep, he could get no answer to his persistent ringing. Abbot was out on a maternity case, hastily fetched by an alarmed husband who had run all the way; and his housekeeper had basely deserted her post and taken herself off to the nearest local for a Guinness. Usually the most

conscientious of women, she had occasional bouts of thirst, when her motto was "Let 'em all ring." This was one of the bouts.

By the light of his torch, the paper nearly torn out of his hand by the attacking storm, Congreve scribbled a message and pushed it through the slit of the letter box. The draft that whirled under the door carried the scrap of paper far across the floor of the hall, lodging it in a dark corner. So Abbot passed an uneasy night in his hard bed, unaware that Flik sat sleepless on the edge of her wooden bunk at the police station, that Clive raged impotent in another cell, that Arnoldson was cooking up trouble while he thought unprintable thoughts. And at Shots Hall Bee sat upright in her bed, listening to the noises of the storm the creakings and rustlings of the lonely house, waiting for the morning.

Of them all, of all the people whose lives had been so suddenly disrupted, only Miss Merridew slept peacefully and soundly, watched over by a night nurse with freckles and an upturned nose.

XIX

ABBOT'S HOUSEKEEPER FOUND Congreve's note when she was sweeping the hall floor. She took it up to him with his morning mail and the papers. For once he hadn't been dragged out of bed at some unearthly hour by someone who imagined they were dying, and he lay on his back for a time, staring at the ceiling, before he bothered to look at his letters. When he did, the shock galvanized him to feverish action, and he tore at his face with his razor as though he would masochistically flay the skin off it.

Why had that muddle-headed fool Parry gone off and left Flik to the mercies of Arnoldson? And what had Arnoldson found out that justified his taking this step while Parry's back was turned and Mahew out of the running? He dragged his clothes on, his fingers unfumbling but furious, and without waiting for his breakfast ran his car out of the garage. The gale had died down to intermittent gusts, and from the sea the aftermurk of the storm rolled in, a channel fog of low-blowing cloud and dark gray, fuggy rain, that blanketed the town and the country round, blotting everything out except the immediate foreground.

As he passed the hospital, he thought of Miss Merridew, and his conscience pricked him. He turned the car and drove up to the entrance. Then he thought of Miss Merridew's milk glass, and hurried to the laboratory.

"About that glass I left here," he said to the white-coated analyst, "have you done anything about it yet?"

"Morphine."

"I see—I wonder how much the total dose was?"

"Not quite the mixture as before," the young man said. "There's not such a large morphine content in the dregs of this glass as there was in those three teacups."

"I see." Abbot rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then that was why she'd made such a quick recovery. She hadn't had such a strong dose as the others. But quite strong enough.

"What a damned awful business these poisonings are," the young man pondered. "I hear Mrs. Ashley's been arrested."

Abbot's eyes narrowed behind his spectacles. So Flik's arrest was public property, was it? He hurried out of the laboratory, and fell straight into the clutches of a nurse from the public wards.

"Oh, Dr. Abbot?"

"Yes, now what is it?" he fumed.

"That gallstone case of yours doesn't seem too well today. Can you have a look at her?"

Oh, Lord, now gallstones. Champing at the bit of his urgent desire to get to Flik, he followed the nurse to the bedside of his gallstone case. She was a fat woman, and had worked herself into a panic that she was rapidly developing more gallstones in place of the ones which had been removed. Valuable time was spent in convincing her that she couldn't be growing new gallstones as she now had no gall

bladder for them to lurk in. Much more of this, Abbot thought, and I'll yell.

AT LAST, however, he freed himself from the clutches of the nurse and his agitated patient, and ran up the staircase to the private wards, shuddering at the thoughts of having to listen to Miss Merridew's meandering and meaningless attempts at conversation. In the corridor off which the private wards opened, there appeared to be more trouble, and he mentally tore his hair. Outside the door of Miss Merridew's room, the day sister in charge of the private wards was hauling over the coals a young nurse who seemed almost on the point of tears. Abbot hesitated, wondering if he could escape, and was lost.

"Dr. Abbot?" The sister approached him, rustling. "I'm sure I don't know what you'll say."

"I'm sure I don't know either," he answered, "as I don't know what it is you're sure you don't know what I'm to say about." He was rather dismally aware that his remark surpassed, in its complicated structure, one of Miss Merridew's least lucid efforts. "What's happened?" he added.

"Nurse Halliday was silly enough to tell Miss Merridew about Mrs. Ashley's arrest. Apparently Mrs. Ashley and her aunt, a Miss something, are very great friends of Miss Merridew's, and Miss Merridew was not unnaturally upset by the news."

"I suppose she would be. I'll go in and smooth down the ruffled feathers."

"That's the trouble," the sister said with a wintry smile. "You won't find any ruffled feathers to smooth. I'd just made arrangements to have a second bed put in my number four private ward, as the patient didn't seem to mind, and then Nurse Halliday went and gave Miss Merridew the news." She shrugged her shoulders, glaring at the unfortunate culprit, who still hovered in the background. "Miss Merridew insisted, *insisted* on being sent back immediately, so that she could be of some help to this Mrs. Ashley's aunt, who apparently must be all alone. I don't see what possible help Miss Merridew thought she could be in her present woolly, weak state, but she *insisted*."

"You mean she's gone?" Abbot stared. "My Lord, she's a tough old boot, isn't she?"

"Quite remarkably so. I did everything to dissuade her, but I can't lock the patients in their rooms, you know, this isn't a lunatic asylum. She was up and out of bed, dressing, before you could say knife. Poor thing, and in such a state, crying her eyes out like a child. I tried to get her back to bed, but you'd be surprised how strong she is. In the end I had to give it up, so I got Brassey's taxi from down the road, and rolled her up in plenty of blankets. Miss Merridew assured me that she'd stay with Mrs. Ashley's aunt, where she'd be quite all right. I'm sure, doctor, I can't say how sorry I am."

"Not your fault," Abbot said, not caring a damn whether Miss Merridew had gone or not. "You couldn't help it, and anyhow it's her own look out. I don't suppose for an instant it'll do her any harm. After all, she wasn't recovering from an operation. It's simply a case of her blood being upon her own head. She's quite irresponsible, as you've probably noticed."

Then he fled before anyone else could trip him up with further woes or worries. Now, at last, he could go to Flik. He weaved the car in and out of the befogged streets and roads, and drew up with a jerk outside the police station. He had no idea what he could do for Flik; no idea what had happened. Clive could look after himself. According to Congreve's brief note, the young man had hit Arnoldson and been incarcerated too. That wouldn't kill him. His heart, however, warmed toward Clive, who had done what he had so often wanted to do himself.

He nodded a greeting to the duty officer, who lifted the flap of the desk so that he could go in behind it.

"I want to see Mrs. Ashley." He found that there was an odd unsteadiness in his voice, and this roused him to anger with himself. "I'm her medical practitioner as well as yours, and her health's very groggy. Those cells'd kill off an all-in wrestler in this weather. Her chest's weak.

I take it you don't want a case of congestion of the lungs on your hands?"

"No, sir." The duty officer, like the rest of the St. Arthurs police with the exception of Arnoldson, liked Abbot. They appreciated his honesty, and his flowery language was to them a constant source of entertainment. "Only you'd better have a word with Sergeant Arnoldson first, I suppose."

"May I inquire if that slab of mutton fat is in charge of this case? Where's Parry? Isn't he back?"

"He isn't, doctor. We expected him first thing. It's a b—it's a nuisance, the line's still being out of order. We can't get in touch with no one, and no one can't get in touch with us. Maybe the Inspector'll come on the 1:45 from Victoria, I mean, the train that arrives here 1:45. He can't've come by the 12:02 otherwise he'd be here by now."

"Where's Arnoldson?"

With a dislike he took no pains to conceal, the duty officer jerked his head at a closed door with "Private" painted on it. "In there. Writing. By the pages he's written he must be doing a book."

WITHOUT knocking. Abbot opened the door and went in, shutting it with an aggressive bang. Arnoldson's back was to him. His hair shone with oil as he bent over his literary occupation. He didn't turn round or speak; his shoulders proclaimed that he was too busy on important business to deign to notice anyone. Abbot's mouth tightened, and he looked over Arnoldson's head at what he was doing. On the page on the blotter in front of him, Abbot read words here and there. "On the 2nd December, Mrs. Ashley denied . . . but on searching the grate I found. . . ." Abbot felt sickened. Then he turned cold down his spine. For carefully laid beside the blotter and the accumulating pages of close writing was a copy of a marriage certificate, Flikka Ashley, James Gene Waldron (Private, U.S. Army), March 10th, 1943, Sefton-in-the-Marsh, Yorkshire. And Arnoldson was writing, "It is obvious that Mrs. Ashley, or rather, Waldron, wished to conceal at all costs the fact of her marriage, and that having discovered that the three deceased and Miss Merridew knew of it. . . ." It seemed to Abbot that a rat was gnawing at his stomach. Two opened letters protruded from under a piece of blotting paper. Abbot could only see the halves of them, but saw they were addressed to Flik, and he guessed that Arnoldson had been to the post office that morning and impounded her incoming mail.

He reached forward his long, sensitive fingers, till they nearly touched Arnoldson's neck. But that wouldn't do. It wouldn't help Flik if he strangled the man who was trying to hang her for murder.

"Arnoldson?"

"Well? Well, who the devil's that? Get out. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You amaze me." Heaven give me strength not to kill him, Abbot thought. May the devil look after his own and protect him from me. "I'm going in to see Mrs. Ashley."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Arnoldson turned round, his battered face red. "Who said so?"

"I say so. I might remind you that I'm the police surgeon, and that one of my manifold duties is to see none of your guests die on you. Mrs. Ashley suffers from emphysema," he improvised wildly, "therefore the cold of the cells may bring on acute congestion at any moment."

Arnoldson had no idea what emphysema was, and taken off his guard was temporarily at a loss for what to say. Abbot took the opportunity to walk out of the room and shut the door. He nodded at the duty officer, and let himself through the door that led, by way of more doors and many corridors, to the cells. The policewoman was just coming out of one of the cells with an empty teacup in her hand. She smiled at Abbot, and looked relieved.

"Have you come to see Mrs. Ashley?" she asked.

"Yes," Abbot said. "I have."

"Well I'm glad you have, because she doesn't look at all well, and she's got a cough come on. Doctor, they ought to do something about this place, it isn't fit for pigs, what with the damp and the smells."

She put the teacup down on the floor

and pushed the cell door open wider. It was her duty to go in with Abbot, so she went, shutting the door behind them both. Despite her hard-seeming, plain face and her efficient feet, she was a kindly enough woman, and she felt for Flik a deep pity, which was mixed with admiration for her prisoner's quiet control and courteous manners.

"Here's the doctor, Mrs. Ashley," she said in a loud, cheerful voice.

The sight of Flik had the effect of paralyzing Abbot, so that for the moment he couldn't speak or move, but only look. She stood at the opposite end of the wretched cell, her back to the wall, her hands against it. As surely as if someone had told him, Abbot knew that she had washed herself with meticulous care that morning in the little tin basin. But Arnoldson must have taken her away without giving her the chance to bring any necessaries with her. For the first time he saw her without lipstick, without powder, just as she was; it was a shock to find she was so really beautiful, so flawless. Her eyes, which had been turned inward on her own thoughts, slowly came to life and looked at him squarely.

"Good morning," she said. "Or is it good afternoon yet?"

He must get rid of the policewoman, Abbot decided; somehow he must get rid of her.

"Good morning," he answered, and the effort of speaking was painful.

Flik coughed, a small, dry cough which seemed to shake her.

ABBOT turned to the policewoman. "Would you mind going out to my car and fetching my bag?" he asked her. "I forgot it. I can give Mrs. Ashley a linctus that'll temporarily relieve her chest. Oh, and then could you send round to Brights the chemist and ask for a small bottle of Friars Balsam? If you felt in the mood, I could do with a cup of tea, I've been hard at it all morning."

"Of course, Dr. Abbot." The obliging woman went about his errands, unhurriedly. If Arnoldson could shut himself up in there, then why shouldn't the doctor, who was respectable? It'd be a smack in the eye for Arnoldson.

"Isn't Parry back yet?" Flik spoke with sudden urgency.

"No, he isn't." Parry, always Parry. Curse Parry.

Flik moved away from the wall. "Funny," she said. "I'd never thought of you. I kept trying to think all night of someone who could give me a hand, and I never thought of you."

"I'm used to that," Abbot said dryly. "I don't loom very large on your horizon, do I? Has Miss Chattock been to see you?"

Flik nodded. "The blessed Congreve sent a taxi up for her early this morning. Only there wasn't anything she could do. Arnoldson hasn't been in today. Why? What's he doing?"

Abbot nearly said he was getting together the evidence to hang her, but stopped himself just in time. "He's too vain. His face looks like a rotten bit of meat. Didn't you know your friend Clive Harris beat him up last night?"

"My Lord. Did he? Did he? What's happened to Clive, then?"

"He's keeping you company in another cell," Abbot said with a certain amount of satisfaction. "But no doubt when the omnipotent Parry decides to come back he'll arrange matters."

"Arnoldson was drunk."

Flik's scorn somehow filled Abbot with alarm. If she went on practicing this terrible self-restraint, she'd crack up. He fumbled in his mind for words. There was so much he wanted to say, and so little time, he thought, to say it. Only he must say it.

"Listen to me. D'you know your cat's escaped from it's bag? D'you know Arnoldson's got a copy of your marriage certificate?"

"Yes. Yes, I know. That's why I came with him yesterday evening, without kicking. I thought if I didn't make a fuss, he mightn't poke about any more."

"Once and for all," Abbot said, his temper rising, "will you tell me what it is you're concealing? It's more than your marriage to that American, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"Isn't that enough? Isn't wanting to conceal that marriage a big enough motive for having committed murder?"

"Be quiet, damn you, you little fool," Abbot swore. "D'you want to put a rope deliberately round your own neck?"

She stared at him, a strange look on her face. "No." She moved her hands, a movement so suddenly helpless that Abbot softened, his fierce resentment of her and her loveliness dying in him. "Abbot? D'you know a fool when you see one? If not, then take a good look at me." She was talking, now, more to herself, as if she had forgotten he was there. "I've been nursing in the thing that goes for my mind what I thought was a sort of high ideal—No, that's not the right word. Never mind. But after a night in this charming residence I see I've been a fool. A wicked fool—After all, one often hears about people killing themselves and others by unselfishness. It isn't unselfishness, it's insanity. I've done incalculable harm. I'm responsible for Molly's, and Marsh's and Harry's deaths."

ABBOT snatched her by the shoulders, and shook her as if she had been an empty sack. "I don't know what you're talking about—a lot of bloody parables and bunk. Shut up, you lunatic. Shut up before I make you shut up. I don't want to know your damn secrets—my Lord, letting everyone think you'd been sleeping with a casual pickup, when all the time he was your husband." I don't know what I'm saying he told himself, and let go her shoulders.

Flik sat down on the bunk, out of breath after her shaking, and Abbot felt incredibly foolish. Idly, she began to turn over the selection of dreary books that had been provided for her entertainment, while Abbot watched the white curve of her neck as she bent her head. Suddenly she seemed transfixed, her eyes wide, staring at a faded reproduction of a photograph in a book on horticulture. What had struck her, Abbot couldn't imagine; she had the look of someone who, groping in the darkness, had found a light.

"How's Susan?" she asked unexpectedly.

"The old fool took herself off from the hospital this morning when she heard what had happened to you. She's gone to stay with your aunt."

"With Aunt Bee? Abbot? Abbot, don't they really know when Parry's coming back?"

"No," he almost shouted. "Perhaps he won't come back at all. Perhaps they've handed the case over to someone else. How should I know? Anyway, he hasn't phoned. He can't, the lines've broken down."

"Once you said you'd help me." Flik's voice dropped to a wildly urgent whisper. "Will you help me? Will you help me to get out of here? Today, soon?"

"Get out," he muttered. "How? How the hell can I? For Heaven's sake, what a wildcat idea."

"Please? You can think of some way. Please?"

The policewoman reappeared with the bottle of cough linctus and an enormous teaspoon. Something in Flik's manner affected Abbot with a rather terrible excitement, and he found his hand was shaking when he poured out the dose and offered the spoon to her. Her hand was perfectly steady.

"I'll come back again later," he said, knowing he was going to help Flik do the impossible and make a getaway. "Then I'll see about the steaming of your chest when the Friars Balsam comes. Good morning."

The policewoman followed him out of the cell and locked the door. "I think it's dreadful," she complained, "the way all the ratepayers' money goes on building amusement places on the sea front, when there's holes like this in the town. These cells are enough to give anyone pneumonia." She lowered her voice, looking over her shoulder. "I know I oughtn't to say things, but it's all wrong. Mrs. Ashley hasn't been charged, or anything. It's most irregular. We'll all get into trouble."

"Especially if Mrs. Ashley gets pneumonia," Abbot said maliciously, inspiration coming to him. "Which she looks like doing. I'll be in again as soon as I can."

I'm going to make a fool of myself, he thought angrily. And not only a fool.

That bugaboo, the Medical Council, would strike him off the Register. He might even be put in jail; unless they decided he was mad, then he'd be shut up in a lunatic asylum instead.

XX

THE FOG WAS SO THICK WHEN Abbot drove back to the police station at half past two that it might have almost been the middle of the night. Instead of parking his car in front of the station, he drove round to the yard onto which the door to the cells opened. In the yard, with some difficulty, he turned the car so that its nose pointed toward a narrow alley that led past the mortuary to a side street. There was not a soul in sight. The windows of the passage that ran past the cells were too high for anyone to see out of them unless they were a nine-foot giant. So far, so good, he thought, cursing him self for his folly. The bonnets of two police cars showed dimly in the open garage at the far side of the yard. Abbot eyed them, wishing he didn't feel as if his teeth were going to start chattering. He walked round to the front of the station and went in the main entrance.

"Parry back?" he asked the duty officer.

"No, doctor, he's not. And if you want to see Arnoldson, he isn't back from his lunch yet."

"I don't in the least want to see Arnoldson," Abbot said with perfect truth. "I want to see Mrs. Ashley again. Her chest's in a bad way."

"Oh, Lord," said the duty officer. "Hope she won't die on us."

Without waiting for more, Abbot took himself off to the cells. In a room at the far end of the corridor he could see the back views of the policewoman and a constable as they crouched over a smoking fire. He hadn't reckoned on the constable as well, and inwardly cursed him. The policewoman turned round, got up, and came toward him.

"Mrs. Ashley's coughing very bad," she said. "The Friars Balsam's come."

"I want to sound her chest before you steam it," Abbot said, hoping he didn't sound as agonized as he felt.

The policewoman unlocked the door of Flik's cell, and stood aside for him to go in before her.

"Well, how are we now?"he asked in his best professional manner.

"We aren't too good," Flik said.

Nor did she look too good. Her face was unnaturally flushed, and there were deep marks under her eyes, which were very bright. He'd never get her out of here, Abbot thought desperately. She began to cough, and he took out his stethoscope.

"If you'll just pull your jersey up or down," he said, and burst into a sweat. He'd seen and listened to hundreds of women's chest, he'd prodded hundred's of bare female stomachs. But the idea of having to investigate Flik's chest filled him not only with embarrassment but a sick fury. She pulled her jersey up round her shoulders, and keeping his eyes fixed on the wall behind her head, Abbot went to work, his nerves jibbering, his hands shaking.

"Yes, thank you—" He nodded at the policewoman, beckoning her out into the corridor. "Mrs. Ashley's very much worse than I thought. There appears to be considerable congestion of both lungs. Looks to me like the onset of pneumonia, and that'd be a pretty pickle."

"My gawd," the policewoman said, showing considerable signs of panic. "Is she really as bad as all that?"

"There's only one way of finding out," Abbot said. "She must have an X-ray immediately. At once."

"But we——"

"You needn't tell me she can't be X-rayed here," Abbot snapped. "Of course she can't. I'll have to drive her to the hospital."

"But——"

"Of course, if you want her to die on you, then go ahead."

The last thing in the world, the policewoman wanted was for Flik to die on her, and she said so, vehemently.

"Very well then——"

ABBOT'S heart was beating so fast he thought it would burst through his ribs. "Apparently Arnoldson isn't back from his lunch, and we can't wait for him. He may take all the afternoon about it. He mayn't even come back here after his lunch, for that matter. The only thing for you to do is to cut along to the duty officer, explain matters, see what he has to say, tell him the matter is of the utmost urgency, and in the absence of Arnoldson, get his permission to come to the hospital with your prisoner." All that palaver should take quite ten minutes he decided.

"Hadn't you better explain yourself, sir?" the woman asked.

"No time, no time," Abbot fumed. "I want to take Mrs. Ashley's temperature at once, and give her a dose of M. and B. I've got some out in my car at the back. Unlock the door into the yard, will you? Wait a minute, never mind, give me your keys and I'll look after myself."

The rattled policewoman, with docile obedience, handed him her bunch of keys, and went. Now for the constable, Abbot thought, and called to him.

"Yes, doctor?"

"Be a good chap, will you, and go along to the office and look up the times of arrival of every train Inspector Parry might come back by? Not only the trains to St. Arthurs, but to Pelsey, and Eastbourne and Hastings, in case he comes by another route and gets a car on here."

The good chap, all unsuspecting, went along. Abbot unlocked the door of Flik's cell and jerked his head at her. She got up off the bunk and silently followed him. He relocked the door, and unlocked and unbolted the door into the yard. Still in silence, Flik went out to the car, got in the back, and vanished under the motor rug. Abbot locked the yard door, and dropped the bunch of keys down a grating. There was one more thing to do. When he let the air out of the tires of the two police cars, the noise seemed to his fevered imagination like the wailing of banshees. As he started the engine of his car, he thought every policeman for miles round would come running.

"Where to?" Abbot asked over his shoulder.

"Home," Flik's muffled voice answered. "And thanks."

Past the mortuary, down the side street to the main road, Abbot drove with a reckless disregard for the fog and all it might contain. By now their flight would be discovered. But it would take some time to pump up the tires of one of the cars. Abbot raged under his breath. This was madness; at any moment the hunt would be on. The car bounced from right to left. A telegraph pole sprouted out of the fog nearly on top of the bonnet. A lorry driver leaned from his cab and bawled profanities about lunatics in charge of cars. The fog clung to Abbot's hair so that it dripped down his forehead, and his spectacles were misted up. This wasn't reality; he was dead and in hell, only there were no warming fires to soothe his cold, tired limbs. At first he didn't realize it was the "Shots Arms" he was passing. It was almost a shock to find he'd got there. Unconsciously he noticed there was a taxi drawn up outside the place. He missed his gears driving in the entrance of Shots Hall, swore, jammed on the brakes, somehow got into bottom, and shot up to the front door.

Flik appeared from under the rug.

"Sound your horn as if in rejoicing," she said.

Abbot blasted his horn in rage.

"What d'you want me to do now?" he asked. "Shoot someone? Dance a fandango?"

"Just come in and be yourself," Flik said, her voice tight. "I've been released. It was all an awful mistake."

She got out of the car, waiting for him, then opened the door. The hall lights were on, fighting against the gloom. Bee sat in her usual chair, her hair adamantly dressed over its old-fashioned pad. Opposite her, crouched on a sofa, Miss Merridew wrapped in a shawl, wailed into a crumpled ball of handkerchief.

"Flik?" Bee said. "Well, Abbot?"

"Flik?" Miss Merridew echoed, incredulous. "Flik! Oh, my poor darling child!"

ABBOT wiped his spectacles and put them on again, waiting for Flik to give him some sort of cue. Waiting, too,

for the sounds of pursuit.

"I'm back," Flik said, with what seemed to him quite unnecessary emphasis of the obvious. "Parry managed to get a call through from London. Arnoldson just made a hideous mistake, that's all."

Abbot felt, rather than saw, the flash of understanding that went between her and Bee Chattock. Bee knew damn well no hideous mistake had been made.

But she said, "I trust this'll give Arnoldson a lesson. He's been disgraceful. You'd better have a drink at once, Flik, you look all in. Susan, must you continue to howl?"

"I'm so relieved," Miss Merridew sobbed. "When they told me Flik had been taken away, I could scarcely believe it. How dared they suspect her?" She became almost belligerent, almost, indeed, coherent. "It was wicked! But now everything's all right; it is, isn't it, Flik dear?"

"Perfectly all right," she answered. She unbuttoned her coat, half took it off, shivered and pulled it on again. "I'm going to light the drawing-room fire. It's cold in here."

As Abbot watched her go into the drawing room and shut the door, he had an illusion of impending disaster and horror. When he spoke, his voice sounded so loud in the echoing hall that he thought he must have shouted.

"Parry shouldn't have rushed off to London, damn him. When the cat's away—" He left the inadequate proverb unfinished. What in the name of the devil was Flik doing? From behind the closed door of the drawing room there came an odd scrabbling noise. Bee heard it too. Not so Miss Merridew, who was trying to stifle her tears by blowing her nose. One minute passed, two, three, four—a dreadful eternity.

Then Bee stiffened in her chair, and Abbot turned colder than ever. A car was grinding up the drive; doors banged. The front door burst open and crashed shut.

"We took a taxi down to the police station to see if we could see Flik, and they told us she'd just——"

Abbot swung round and pounced on the babbling Phil Ambrose, who was clinging on to Tim's arm. "Be quiet," he glared at her.

"They said someone'd let the air out of the police car ti——"

"Be quiet, I tell you."

"They tried to take ours, but we bunged off before they could——"

"Phil, honey, perhaps——"

The drawing-room door opened slowly. There was mud on Flik's shoes, on her dark blue slacks. Behind her the drawing-room lights shone, outlining her head. But in the cavern of the hall it seemed the fog had gathered, seeping through the walls, creeping down from the ceiling.

"Flik!" Phil gulped, leaning forward till her hair fell over her face.

"We've got a taxi outside," Tim said. "It's all yours if you want it, and we'll come with you to wherever——" He stared at her, and didn't finish what he was saying.

Her lips moved, but she said nothing. The look on her face appalled Abbot. She might have walked straight out of some torture chamber.

"Dear Flik!" Miss Merridew was like some old, faithful dog as she got off the sofa and tottered toward her. "You ought to go to bed, dear." Her small hands fumbled for Flik's arm.

"For God's sake," Tim bawled, "come on, Flik, while the going's good."

Hell, thought Abbot. Hell, hell. Why couldn't he think straight? Why couldn't he do something sensible? Why couldn't he wipe that look off Flik's face and then strangle all these bloody people? This slyly watchful house—the fog—why didn't old Chattock say something? But Bee still sat in her winged chair, her eyes fixed on Flik; Miss Merridew still fumbled for Flik's arm; the Ambroses still clung to each other as though they themselves were in some mortal danger.

AND THEN the front door swung open and remained open, as Congreve held it for Parry to come in before he let it crash shut again.

To Parry, ever sensitive to atmosphere, the scene seemed as if it might have been deliberately set for the last act before the curtain came down. He pulled his hand

out of his pocket, and held out to Flik a small, sodden bundle of what Abbot thought were labels, but then saw were empty seed packets.

"You weren't far ahead of me and Congreve, were you?" Parry said.

"About five minutes," Flik answered in a dead voice. She slipped her hand inside her coat, and took out several little bits of crumpled paper, closely written on with an indelible pencil. "So you guessed too? Old Harry's farewell letter—I should have thought sooner. He trusted me too much. He thought I'd remember at once."

In front of his eyes, in a flash back as clear as the rising sun, Abbot saw the crouching figure of the old gardener on that dripping evening, a dim figure in the mist, sticking little labels in amongst the rotting fireflowers of the monstrous rock garden; and heard his old, tired voice—"Miss Flik, I've labeled everything what's underground in the rockery—if I died tomorrow you'd still be able to find out just by looking at the labels—and don't you forget it." And Harry'd died that night.

Parry held his hand out, and Flik put the bits of paper in it.

"The significance of what Harry said to you that evening before he went home dawned on me just before I left town. I got out at Pelsey to save time, and took a taxi to Shotshall."

He didn't ask how Flik had got out of the cells. Congreve must have told him Arnoldson had taken her away the day before. He smoothed the sheets of paper, spreading them out fanwise. "Page one, page two, page three— Dear Miss Flikka——" His quick eyes ran along the lines of writing. "In his way, Harry was the cleverest of us all, wasn't he?"

For one moment, Abbot thought Flik was going to crack, to cry. But she only put the back of her hand against her mouth and dug her teeth into it, leaving two regular, reddened semicircles. With a sudden, savage desire to protect her, he moved next to her, but without the courage to touch her. Phil's mouth opened, and a small sob came out of it. Abbot found himself staring hypnotized at Parry.

"It's my unpleasant duty," Parry began very slowly, and Abbot's heart contracted, for it wasn't Flik he was looking at, "to——" He jerked his head round. "Stop her!" he exclaimed.

But with amazing agility Miss Merridew had scuttled to the far end of the hall; the door leading to the kitchen quarters slammed in his face, there was a rattle of a key being turned, of bolts being shot home. He and Congreve threw their shoulders against the thick panels, heaving and grunting.

"The side door—outside——" Flik shook herself as if she were freeing her body of some invisible shackles; and Abbot ran beside her, out of the front door, down the drive, Parry and Congreve, Phil and Tim with them.

"Hell," Parry swore. "She's locked herself in."

"Wait. Listen." Flik lifted her head, stiffening.

From down the road came the bang of a door shutting, muffled by the fog, but distinct.

"She locked the door from the outside and took the key," Parry said.

"She's taken another key." Flik began to run again. "The key of my shed—it's always on the hook in the kitchen."

As they stumbled down the muddy track that led to the stone shanty, Abbot heard another car drive up to Shots Hall, and voices.

"We'll never open this door," Flik panted. "It opens outward. Oh, my God, what's she doing? Oh, God, what's she doing?"

FOR from the other side of the door came a dull, feverish hacking of metal on stone, and giggles, little bubbling giggles. Parry heaved impotent at the door; it didn't even creak.

"Just a moment, sir." With loving care, Congreve produced, with the satisfied air of a successful conjurer, a small roll of tools he had once bought off a burglar before he went down for two years. "'Ope there aren't bolts inside too, Mrs. Ashley?"

"No," Flik said wearily. "No, there aren't—Oh, God, listen to her."

Unconcerned by the noises within,

Congreve, unfumbling and admirably nimble-fingered, set about picking the lock, which he did with remarkable ease.

"You'd better stay outside," Parry said to Flik gently. "You and the Ambroses. It won't be nice."

"I'm coming in."

The door swung open. The unscreened lights blazed, hard and cruel, on the small bedraggled figure that giggled, salivating at the mouth, and hacked and hacked with the strength born of insanity, with a sculptor's maul at the face and breast of the sleeping, sea-green mermaid. Then all at once before Parry could take it away from her, Miss Merridew dropped the hammer, and pawed and scratched at the face she'd marred beyond all repair, at the breast, chipped and scarred, babbling obscenities that shocked and appalled even Abbot.

"Come away, Flik." He took her arm, and white-faced, she went with him, the Ambroses, Phil in tears, trailing behind.

Round the corner Arnoldson came pounding, his bruised face oozing sweat, his breath a white cloud in the fog, as though he was breathing smoke engendered by a fire inside him.

"What the bloody hell's going on here?" he demanded, lunging at Flik. "You tramp——"

With one accord, as though by some carefully prearranged signal, Tim and Abbot delivered two right hooks with simultaneous satisfaction, and Arnoldson went down for the count.

"That's the first time," Flik said in grim amusement, "I haven't seen him bounce." She shivered, her teeth making small chattering noises; and with inexpert fingers, Abbot tried to turn up the collar of her coat over her ears, so that she wouldn't hear Miss Merridew.

XXI

THE DRAWING ROOM ABBOT had approved of when he'd first seen it was bright with firelight, and the quiet light of shaded lamps. The crystal glasses on the low, round table sparkled with rainbow daggers; the bottle of prewar whisky was clear amber beside the deeper amber of the 1904 Amontillado sherry. And the lights caught in Flik's hair, so that it shone like a chestnut burnished from long use in games of conkers. The five men—Clive, newly released from his incarceration with his ear still full of well-directed fleas delivered by Parry, Parry himself, his dark, pointed face tired, Abbot, disheveled in body and mind, Congreve, as ever placid, Norton, perched stiffly on the edge of his chair—each seeing her from their own different and private angles, marveled that she showed so little trace of the last few nightmare days and nights. She'd even taken the trouble to change into the plain, tight black suit and crisp white shirt of Sunday's awful cocktail party.

"Sherry," Bee said without looking up. "And give these people and yourself some more whisky, Clive." Straight-backed, indomitable, she spread the crumpled sheets of Harry's last letter on her silk lap, reading them for the first time. And as she read the painfully scrawled words, she had the feeling the old man she'd known for such countless years was standing beside her as he'd so often stood, cap in hand, waiting for her orders, only to argue about them when he got them. Outwardly unbending, her heart was deeply moved.

"Page one," she read. "Dear Miss Flikka, I am taking the liberty of writing you in case things go wrong with me. I am writing on December 3rd in the tool shed at the Hall, and when I go this evening I'm going to tell you that if I died you have only to look at the labels in the rockery. Then you'll see the seed packets I used as labels is all addressed to you, and has each one a sheet of this letter inside it. Down in the village they say you poisoned Molly and Marsh, and I won't have that. I think Miss Merridew done it, but I want to make sure. Continued in packet marked Easter Roses."

Bee picked out the page headed, "Page two," and went on reading. The clock on the mantelshelf struck eleven—only six and a half hours since the wretched, raving creature'd been taken away from Flik's shed.

"I think Miss M. is wrong in her head, and no one what wasn't wrong in their head would kill people like that. I know she is queer. One evening last summer I knocked at her door to ask if she wanted any wood chopped, and as she didn't answer I went in. She was in her sitting room, bobbing and bowing in front of that picture you drawn of Mr. Crawford after he died of the blitz. She was saying, you'll hang by the neck like he did, I'll see to it. I didn't know what she meant, but I could see she was wrong in her head. Her face was all twisted up, and there was spit on her mouth. I went home. Continued in packet marked Sweet Peas."

Bee wasn't easily horrified, but Harry's ungrammatical scrawl drew for her a picture of utmost horror. "Page three," she read on. "I didn't think no more for a bit, till Molly and Marsh was poisoned, and then I thought a lot. Plenty of the villagers may be soft, but they aren't mad like I reckon Miss M. is. Only I couldn't think why she done it, except she wanted to put the blame on you. But I am sure she done it. Just now you and that London policeman and Miss M. were talking in the road when I came along, and when you said I looked right ill I saw Miss M.'s face. She looked that queer, as if she was scared I'd die suddenly before she done something to me she wanted to do. So I thought it's me next she's after. She looked crazy only you and the policeman didn't notice. Continued in packet marked Nasturtiums."

BEE was aware that Flik and Parry were talking quietly about nothing, but took no notice of them. She searched for page four with her hands, while her mind searched back into the past, remembering, amongst Harry's queer, muddled philosophy of life, the equally queer sparks of wisdom and insight.

"Page four. Miss Flikka, I never told you or Miss Bee that there is a lump in my inside what will finish me sooner or later, so if it's sooner or later it don't matter. I'm going to make sure if Miss M. poisoned Molly and Marsh or if she didn't. When I go this evening I'm going in to Miss M. like I want to ask if she wants any woodcutting tomorrow. And I'm going to tell her I heard the policeman say he hasn't no idea who done the murders. So I'm going to put the idea into her head another murder is needed to prove who done the others. Then I'm going to tell her you promised you were coming to see me half past six this evening with some medicine, which is some drops to put in my tea. You ain't of course, but I'll make her think so. Then I'm going home and I'll have a cup of tea ready on the table. Continued in packet marked Aubretia."

Oh, God, thought Abbot drearily, are we never going to get through with this night? Under his tired eyelids he watched Flik's and Parry's clear-cut profiles against the fire, and knew that Clive was watching them too.

"Page five." Bee picked up the last page. "I'm not going to put any sugar in my tea, so if she puts something in it I'll taste it when she's gone. If she does put something in it I'm going to drink a lot of salt and water so that I sick it up, and then I can tell, and no one won't say you done it any more. If Miss M. doesn't come, or doesn't put anything in my tea, then I'll burn these bits of paper and the packets when I come next morning. I wouldn't get anyone in trouble if they hadn't done it as mud sticks. Dear Miss Flikka I am your obedient servant Harry."

Bee folded up the five sheets of paper and handed them back to Parry. "Poor, queer old man," she said. "As you remarked today, he was the cleverest of us all."

"It's a pity he wasn't just a bit cleverer," Parry said. "It never occurred to him not to drink the tea at all, but to simply hand the full cup over to the police for analysis."

Bee tst-tsted impatiently. "Don't confuse wisdom with learning. Harry had glimpses of wisdom, but his learning was nil. I don't suppose he even knew what the word analysis meant, or that things could be analyzed. He did the best he could, and he died doing it."

"He'd have died anyway," Abbot said, rousing himself. "That growth of his was malignant."

Flik threw her cigarette into the fire with a quick gesture of sudden, dreadful tension. Abbot thought, if she doesn't burst into tears or something human like that, she'll have a nervous breakdown.

"He died trying to save me, anyway," she said. "All alone, so horribly. He was damned brave——" She lit another cigarette, snapping her lighter on and off with taut fingers.

"Now then——" Parry became businesslike, covering Flik's moment of emotion by talking. He didn't want her to crack yet, if anything would ever make her crack. There was a lot he wanted her to tell him. He felt immensely sorry for her, but she had to go through with it. He smiled at her, trying to look comforting. "It's hard to know where to begin, isn't it, Flik?" he said.

"What about," Congreve suggested, "beginning at the beginning?"

Bee gave him a withering stare. "My whisky appears to have dimmed your originality of ideas. Give me some more sherry, Clive, and don't wave the bottle about like that."

"Sorry," he said. He'd forgotten there was anyone else in the room but himself and Flik. She seemed to fill it so that everything else faded into a jumbled background, out of which she emerged as the one reality. "Sorry," he repeated, handling the sherry with more care.

Flik pushed her hair back behind her ears. "Parry? Poor Susan—is she——"

"She was certified insane at eight o'clock this evening," Abbot said with frank brutality. "She's been taken to Massingham asylum. She'll never be able to come up for trial." He forbore to say, however that Miss Merridew had made her exit from public life in a strait jacket, babbling that she was the high priestess of some heathen cult which existed in her disordered imagination. He thought it appalling that she should be kept alive. She'd be given treatment, probably lead quite a pleasant existence, and live till she was a hundred—after poisoning three harmless people for the purpose of getting Flik hanged. He caught Flik's searching look and added, "My good girl she's perfectly happy."

FLIK nodded slowly. "I'm glad. After all, I suppose I'm responsible for the whole horrible business, even for poor Susan going mad."

"Didn't you know," Parry asked, "that there was madness in her family? We found this evening that her grandfather died in Massingham asylum, aged," he added wryly, "eighty-seven. He was Masey Herbert's grandfather too."

"And who the hell," Bee demanded, "is Masey Herbert?"

Parry raised his eyebrows. This was a relief, anyway. "So you and Flik didn't know Mervyn Crawford's real name was Masey Herbert? I'm glad you didn't hold out on me there, Flik, at any rate."

"I never knew," she said dully. "I thought Mervyn Crawford was—Mervyn Crawford." She turned her head away from him to the fire. "It all started because of him. You'd like me to tell you, wouldn't you? I don't know if Susan said anything about him, and me?"

Miss Merridew had, in her hour of comparative sanity, when she'd made her statement before she'd started raving. But Parry wanted Flik's versio

"Go ahead," he said qui y, and, lighting another cigarette, prepared himself to listen, at last, to the unburdening of her strange, secret soul.

FLIK stood up suddenly, and faced the room, holding her back very straight. It was as if she were nerving herself to face some kind of tribunal.

She's an amazing person, Parry thought, and said, "Yes?" encouragingly.

"It was before Susan's father died, in the end of 1939, I met him first. He used to come down and stay with Susan. He seemed such a lost dog. I never asked him what his job was, if any. I don't see why one should question people. If they want to tell you, they tell you."

They do like hell, Abbot said to himself. More likely they were stricken dumb; Flik's beauty was the kind that led to incoherence. Bee glanced at Clive out of the corner of her all-seeing eyes. Tonight he'd ask Flik yet again to marry him. And yet again she'd turn him down.

"Maybe he hadn't a job," Flik went

on, her sentences becoming more and more clipped. "He just said he wrote a lot, and Susan said he was a brilliant author, that he'd once had a book published. Only I somehow guessed his brilliance only existed in Susan's mind. I don't know why, but that made me terribly sorry for him. I didn't realize he was in love with me till the end of 1940, when he asked me to marry him. I didn't want to. I—that is, I didn't know what to do, as I didn't want to hurt him. But he must have guessed at once I wouldn't marry him, and he went crack, right off the deep end. We were out for a walk when it happened. He had a sort of fit. Dreadful—horrible——"

She bit her lip, and Parry saw that she was shaking.

"I got him out of the fit somehow, but I knew, then, he wasn't sane. That evening he went back to town, to the air raids, and I never saw him again. Two days later I got a raving letter from him saying I'd encouraged him to think I loved him, that I'd broken his heart, and by the time I got the letter he'd have hanged himself. That same morning I found Susan'd dashed up to town, and I guessed he must have written to her too. Only I didn't know, I never found out, never, if she knew he'd written to me as well."

"She did know," Parry said.

"When she came back a few days later she looked awful, simply awful and twenty years older, so I knew he must've really done what he said he'd do. Only Susan told me, and Aunt Bee, and everyone, that'd he'd died in the blitz—of the blitz, were her exact words. And she stuck to it, putting him on a sort of pedestal. She asked me to draw a head of him, and I did. I expect you saw it, Parry?"

"Yes," he nodded. "And it struck me and Mahew as not being a true likeness. Why?"

"I made his eyes look normal, that's why. Anyhow, as Susan seemed to want everyone to think he'd died in a raid, we thought it better and kinder to pretend—Aunt Bee and I—that we believed her. It never occurred to me she was hating me like hell all the time, planning her plans to revenge him. It wasn't till today I knew she wasn't sane herself."

FLIK'S voice trailed off, and her eyes took on their odd look of being turned inside her. Clive leaned forward in his chair, longing to go to her, to comfort her. Staring down at his sensitive fingers, Abbot stretched them on his knees cracking the joints one by one. He wasn't enjoying himself. It was as if Flik was dragging her clothes off, to stand there naked for them all to see.

She jerked her shoulders back. "When Molly was poisoned, I never dreamed Susan had killed her. I realized things looked very bad for me, and all the time there was something puzzling me. It was Molly's savings club card being full. Norton told me. And the broom. Molly'd broken her garden broom, and yet some broom had swept her bit of path that night. It was when Marsh was poisoned too I saw a glimmer. I forget who told me, but someone said his card was full too. And neither of them should've been. There was one more week to go before everyone was due for their last stamp. That made me think of Susan, because it was she who called once a week on the villagers to collect their sixpence and give them their stamps. And I knew from something Molly said the day she died that she certainly had her last stamp to come. When I said she had no visitors, I didn't count Susan. She—poor Susan, she just didn't count. She was taken for granted, like the butcher's boy, or the baker's man. Then the broom—Norton?"

Norton shuffled his feet. "Yes, Mrs. Ashley?"

"You remember about midnight Sunday when I called out to you when you were patroling? I was really on my way to Susan's—Miss Merridew's—to look for the broom. I had an awful idea that hers had a chunk of bristles out of the middle of it."

"You ought to be in the police," Congreve said, with unwonted lack of tact.

Flik laughed a tight, bitter laugh. "My only excuse for practically handing her poor Marsh as a present was that I didn't realize, then, that she had anything to do with Molly's murder. On Sunday morning I told her I was going down to the pub at half past four to collect the damned gin,

and she knew as well as everyone else in the village did, that he had a cuppa at half past four every afternoon, and that he liked a lot of sugar. Oh, God—then Harry. Parry? You saw me look in his table drawer after he was dead? I was looking for his savings club card. And it was full. Susan had called on him too. I suppose she took my cigarette ends out of an ash tray and stuck them under Marsh's grate——"

"That's precisely what she did do," Parry said.

"After Marsh," Flik went on, the defiance in her voice dulling down to a bleak monotone, "I guessed Susan wanted me to hang for murder. To hang at the end of a rope, because Mervyn had hung at the end of a rope. A sort of just retribution."

"And still," Parry interrupted, "knowing all this, you kept it to yourself? Three people'd been poisoned, you guessed who the poisoner was, and knew the one thing I didn't know to make a brassbound case against her—the motive for the motive. I knew her primary motive was to throw the guilt on you, but I didn't know why. But you knew."

Clive blew up, his face scarlet. "Leave her alone, can't you? Hasn't she been through enough hell already without you rubbing it all in, you damned policeman?"

"Clive?" Bee was authoritative, commanding. "Be quiet. However right you are, I won't have this shouting and bawling in my house. Give everyone another drink, and in the name of the devil let's get this disgusting business over."

OH, Lord, Parry wondered, am I ever going to get to bed this side of the grave? "Let's skip the recriminations," he said as patiently as he could. "You all know the bones of the case now. Revenge. In her statement, it appears Merridew was madly in love with her cousin, imagined he was in love with her, and that Flik had stolen him from her with malice aforethought. She brooded for years, planning first this revenge, then that. Finally she decided Flik must hang, only she couldn't think how to manage it. Now then, Congreve told me that in 1942 old Dr. Bannard reported the loss of a package of Barbitone, which he said was taken from his car. Only it wasn't Barbitone. It was morphine. Bannard went to visit Belairs one night, and Merridew, on her way home from seeing some sick farmer's wife, spotted his car, and out of curiosity started poking about in it. She found the morphine, thought it might come in handy, and took it home with her. She hid it, all nicely packed in its airtight glass tubes, in that wooden candlelamp affair in her sitting room. The lamp was hollow—what d'you say, Flik?"

"I said," she repeated, "so that's why it never worked."

"To cut a long story short," Parry went on, wishing he could cut it altogether, "she had the morphine, but couldn't think how it would come in useful to hang Flik, till she hit on the idea, this winter, of poisoning the old Chattock retainers, and arranging things to look as if Flik had done it. We'll take Molly first. She melted six grains of morphine in an aspirin bottle, dodged across the road in the dark and fog just before she knew you, Flik, would be going in to see the old [illegible]an—made an excuse to sell her the [illegible]ngs stamp before it was due, and while Molly was looking for her sixpence, put the morphine in the tea. When she heard this door bang like the crack of doom, she simply said good night and went home. As for Marsh, you'd told her you were going down to the pub at half past four Sunday to get the gin, so a few minutes earlier she armed herself with some of the gravel from this drive, went down to the pub, knowing the people in the only three cottages she'd have to pass would probably be napping, dealt with Marsh in exactly the same way she'd dealt with Molly, then went and hid in the gent's lavatory."

Bee snorted in disgust, but said nothing.

"When she saw you come down the road and go in the back door of the pub, Flik she hopped out of the gents', woke up the ever curious Mrs. Vale by chucking the gravel at her window, then hid in the gents' again till the coast was clear. As for Harry, it worked out exactly as he prophesied in his letter. You know the rest, except she took a short cut across the

fields at the back of her house to his cottage. Flik? I had a bad moment that evening when I found you in your shed with mud on your bum boots, obviously having been out instead of working."

"I simply went for a walk along the road. I wanted to think."

PARRY swallowed a yawn. He was almighty tired, and, all at once, sick to death of humanity, the involved and so often unlovely working of human minds, both sane and insane.

"I got a line on Merridew," he said wearily, "when Congreve told me the Ambroses had mentioned there was one more week of savings club stamps to come. Merridew let out to me what no one else bothered to tell me, and that was that she did the stamp selling and sixpence collecting. And her three victims' cards were fully stamped. Then there was her alibi of her curtain machining. The machine was going all that time during the period when Harry must've been given poison. But it was an electric machine. I spotted it when Mahew and I went to see her and h[illegible]ll over the flex. Easy—just switch it [illegible]d let it grind away. Then there was [illegible] business of the Hunter girl yelling out about blood and sick after she'd found Harry dead. Merridew echoed, 'Blood? Blood? Blood?' as if she couldn't believe it. Of course she didn't expect blood when she'd fed him morphine."

"Why in heaven's name," Bee demanded, "did she give herself morphine?"

"Oh, that?" Parry gulped down another huge yawn, "that was the trap I laid for her. Don't you remember when we were in here the evening before I announced there was one person in the village who unknowingly held the clue to the murderer's identity, and they were in danger? She swallowed the bait."

Flik nodded, thinking of Miss Merridew's letter to dearest Emily that Parry had showed her. And still all she felt for the mad creature was profound pity. "How did you know about Mervyn Crawford coming into it? How did you find out that wasn't his real name?"

"From the way you didn't seem to want to talk about him, from the queer way Merridew spoke of him, and her queerer phrase, he died of the blitz, I was sure he fitted into the pattern somewhere." Parry looked at Flik, and thought that, if she wasn't so lovely, he could gladly strangle her. "However, Masey Herbert—I put through inquiries to London about Mervyn Crawford, and all that came of them was that he appeared never to have been born, existed or died. That struck me so really odd that I made a line for town myself, to see what I could find out. I won't bore you with the routine work I did, but at any rate I discovered that Mervyn Crawford was the name he published his one very poor book under, years ago, and that he'd used that name for most purposes ever since. But his identity card was issued under his real name, and under his real name he committed suicide."

Norton edged himself further forward on his chair. "And the broom, sir?"

"The broom? It was hers. The night I told you to snoop round for it, she heard me speaking to you. She waited up in her bedroom window with the damn thing, and when you fell down and put your torch on, she simply heaved it at you, then got back into bed and pretended to snore."

Flik's mouth twisted as if she was in pain, and her fingers clung to the mantelpiece. Weren't her other grisly skeletons going to be dragged into the light after all?

"Merridew took the most appalling risks." Parry yawned outright, unable to control himself any longer. "But she thought that, like God, she was omnipotent. Lunatics are like that, you know."

Congreve glanced longingly at the almost empty whisky bottle. "She was a one, and no mistake," he remarked chattily.

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