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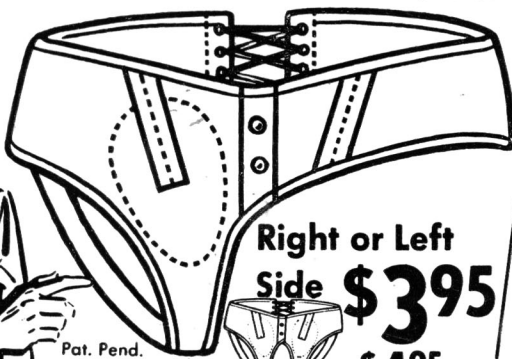
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by Richard Sale

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PASSING STRANGE

By **RICHARD SALE**

Dr. Peter Merritt's knowledge of the facts of life enabled him to solve the facts of murder. An ugly trail of murder that speeds cross-country from a busy hospital operating room in Hollywood to the quiet streets of suburban New Rochelle. . . . A thrilling, bizarre tale of birth and burial.

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The COCKTAIL MURDERS

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

Among the debris of the last big party the gay Elwyns tossed was a corpse. So they buried it in their backyard garden, in the heart of midtown New York, and spoke uneasy prayers that the city's thousand eyes would overlook the burial ground. But murder will out . . . this time, in a most strange fashion.

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PASSING STRANGE

By RICHARD SALE

Dr. Peter Merritt's knowledge of the facts of life enabled him to solve the facts of murder. An ugly trail of murder that speeds three thousand miles cross-country, from a hospital operating room in dazzling Hollywood to the quiet streets of suburban New Rochelle. . . . A thrilling, bizarre tale of birth and burial.

ON NOVEMBER 13th, a Friday, I received a telegram from Evelyn and should have realized that it was hoodooed right then. Anything out of the Merritt ménage on a Friday the thirteenth was beyond the remission of sins. The telegram said:

COME AT ONCE. GOING TO HAVE BABY. SOMETHING WRONG. NEED YOU DESPERATELY. EVE.

I received this macabre intelligence in my office at the Professional Building, New Rochelle, N. Y., where I practice obstetrics, and was, at the time, extremely worried over an extrauterine case I had cooking, which did not look good. Eve alias Evelyn Merritt was my young sister-in-law and she resided in that distant city of tinsel, manna, and uxorious actors—Hollywood. It was her misfortune—although she didn't share my opinion—to be married to a rascal named William Merritt, an agent, and he handled some of the biggest movie stars in the industry, at a rate of ten per cent of their gross earnings.

Evelyn's wire surprised me. I don't know why, since she was a very attractive girl, capable of performing all womanly functions, including child-bearing. But up to the time that Western Union telephoned me I hadn't even known she was pregnant.

The obvious cheek in assuming that I would toss up some nine pregnancies I had due within the week, and just dash out to the West Coast, amused me at first, then made me angry.

I wired back:

IMPOSSIBLE TO COME. GET IN TOUCH WITH DR. GEORGE BAKER BEVERLY BOULEVARD BEVERLY HILLS. FINEST MAN

IN CALIFORNIA. LET ME KNOW DIAGNOSIS. PETE.

That should have settled it. I trained at Lenox Hill with George Baker, and we'd shared everything from cigarettes to underwear. My telegram, as you might have suspected, did not settle a thing.

Back came Evelyn's second:

IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTACT DR. BAKER. URGENT THAT YOU COME AT ONCE PETE PLEASE. EVELYN.

My extrauterine case had finally gone into labor, so that I was compelled to ignore the second message. By the time the birth was finished, successfully to my great relief, there was a third wire from Hollywood which a cold and resentful messenger delivered to the house late on the night of the seventeenth. It read: *Evelyn dying*. And it was signed by that genius of overstatement, Bill.

Being one of those half-civilized guys who still believe in the great reforming powers of a good right cross, I wished vainly that I *were* out there and within swinging distance of Bill's dimples; but since I wasn't, I telephoned long distance to their home in Van Nuys. The first person who answered the phone kept saying, "What? What? Who? Who?" until I thought I'd growl, and then she said, "Oh, Bill, for heaven's sake darling, Texas or something is on the wire and the illiterate bastard can't even speak English."

Then I heard Bill's voice asking who was it over and over, without giving me a chance to reply, and in the background there was the high, shrill sound of hilarity and alcohol and party. "It's Peter!" I finally said.



*The white-clad murderer slipped out of the operating room leaving
Dr. Ward Hollister dead on the floor.*

"Peter who?" Bill said.

"Listen, you fool, it's Dr. Peter Merritt, your brother, and I'm not calling from Texas, I'm calling from New Rochelle, New York!"

"Petah! Oh, it's Petah! Good old Petah!" Bill declaimed. "Why didn't you say so? You're a four-way louse and a profligate and a black sheep! Why the hell can't you come out and take care of your very own sister-in-law? Evelyn is in terrible shape; she's going to die. Everybody says so. The butcher she has for an obstetrician doesn't know his *derrière* from a well!"

"Who is the doctor?" I asked.

"His name is Ward Hollister."

"I never heard of him," I said. "Why didn't you get in touch with Dr. Baker?"

"My God, Pete, I can't do that," Bill said. "Hollister is the fashionable medico here. He does all the work for the Mutual Studios. We have to have Hollister even if it kills us. Don't you figure it? If we didn't have Hollister, they'd figure I was slipping, and my clients might pull out on me. Hollister delivers all the big-name star babies, so we have to have him or we might be ostracized. Also, Hollister is a friend of Al Roche's, and if Al thought I was snubbing Hollister by not having him, Al would be sore. Al controls some of my biggest clients. You see, darling? One and one is three. So if we don't have Hollister, they think we're slipping, and if we do—"

"I never heard," I said, "such damned nonsense in my life. How is Evelyn?"

"She says she's going to die," said Bill blandly. "Something is wrong with the baby, and she's going to die. I think I'm a little tight, Peter dear."

"You're drunk!" I said. "And for an approaching death, there is an awful lot of party going on there."

"It's Evie's farewell to Hollywood," Bill said. "She's going to die, and so she wanted to throw a last party to see all her friends. A sort of pre-wake."

"Put her on," I said wearily.

There was a long wait. I could hear a racket in the background with music and high, shrill laughter; finally Evelyn picked up the phone and started crying. "Oh, Pete," she said. I could hardly understand her. "Pete, it's very bad, really it's very bad. Something is wrong, and Hollister does

not know what it is, and I'm scared and I'm going to die." She was wailing, and it sounded perfectly awful.

"You're drunk too," I said. "Won't you ever grow up? Keep away from that liquor. God knows I don't lay down many rules for expectant mothers, but alcohol is one thing I forbid. Damn it, Eve, use your head, you know I never allow a patient to drink during a pregnancy. Go up to bed and don't be a fool!"

There was no reply from Evelyn. Another long pause while the sound of merriment continued, and then a crisp, cool voice said, "Hello? Dr. Merritt?"

"Still here, by the gace of God, and the patience of Job," I growled. "And who is this?"

"This is Sylvia Denim, doctor," she said. I liked her voice. It was low, sane, and pleasant. "I don't think either Eve or Bill are in any shape to talk, doctor, so perhaps I'd better explain. I happen to know the story because Eve is one of my friends."

"O. K.," I said. "Would you mind setting me straight?"

"I wouldn't mind at all. Because of a social process too intricate for any normally intelligent person to understand, Eve is hog-tied to a chap named Hollister, who has been riding his luck for a long time. But something has developed here, doctor, that isn't right. I don't know a thing about babies myself, but I think you *had* better come out and take care of her. Even more than that, she needs a brake on her, because she is frightened and doing extraordinary things. And finally, Hollister is perfectly oblivious to any complications."

"You can't describe the complications over the phone?"

"I'd really rather not, doctor. I might garble them."

"O. K.," I said. "I'll take a train tomorrow sometime. Tell Bill that I'll wire him from the train."

"Righto."

"And thanks for the assist, Miss Denim."

II

I LEFT for Hollywood the next afternoon at quarter of five and I invested in two of those movie magazines so that I could check on Sylvia Denim. The name seemed

quite familiar, and I felt that I had surely seen her on the screen, but I couldn't remember the picture or what she looked like.

Anyway, there she was in *Screen Guide*, in an article describing the opening of George Raft's Copacabana night club in Hollywood. There was a picture of Sylvia Denim seated at a table with Cass Libano, and he was laughing and she was smiling. Hedda Hopper had written the comment underneath, and it said, "You can put the quietus on those rumors of a remake between Sylvia and Cass Libano. The most famous bachelor girl dates 'em all consistently, none steadily. They do tell that since her brief twenty-four-hour marriage to Cass a year ago, Sylvia Denim has been exceedingly shy of anything like wedding bells. Her performance in *Wild Hills* is wowing the hard-boiled New York critics and there is talk it may win her again the annual Oscar, comes the day."

I admired her. She was a neat, composed, beautiful woman, without any razzle-dazzle and with considerable poise. Her hair was dark and full, her face rather thin but trim, her eyes skeptical, her mouth passionate. She was wearing a modest white dinner gown (as contrasted with some of the others in the photo, cut down almost to the umbilicus) and she was smoking a cigarette. I liked her looks, and I began to feel rather thrilled. After all, I'd talked with her on the phone.

I'D HEARD descriptions of Bill's lean-to in San Fernando valley but none of them aptly described the place. The cab driver let me off at the front gates at my request and drove off.

The house sat on one hundred and seventy acres of land, which had a sprinkling of every kind of fruit from avocado to Malaga vines and berry bushes, not to mention the usual orange groves. The house itself was a bastardized Monterey rancho, all on one floor, U-shaped, the open side of the U leading out to a gorgeous terrace, where a seventy-foot swimming pool and bathhouse sat in the sun. Two tennis courts, a badminton court, a squash court, a nude sun-bathing chamber, stable for horses and no horses, completed the balance of the ménage.

I knocked on the front door, and there

was no reply. This went on for some time. I had seen no living soul and I began to wonder if it were possible that Evelyn and Bill had left the house for some far clime. I never considered the normal possibility—that they might be downtown—because they did not have normal habits. I examined the garage, found three cars there. I went around the rear of the house and found a door that wasn't locked, and went inside.

I found a room that looked like a guest room (it had none of the homespun impediments in its bathroom as did the master bedroom). I was damned if I was going to worry about their absence, so I unpacked my bag and washed up. I was in the process of shaving with cold water when I heard a noise in the room outside and glanced out.

I came face to face with a .38-caliber revolver and as dirty a face as I have ever looked upon.

"Hands up," the face said. "Don't you move."

It was said with the authority of a worm. The guy had long ear lobes which seemed to hang to his shoulders, his nose was sharp, his mouth crooked, and he hadn't shaved in forty days and forty nights. His hands were grimy, his clothes practical. He was the caretaker.

The gun was cocked. I took a long careful look at the chamber and failed to find any sight of the dull lead heads of bullets. You can see them in a revolver, you know.

"That gun isn't loaded, bonzo. Suppose I were to pull out a real one and have a shooting match with you?"

"It's loaded," he said. "One move and you're dead."

He was sweating. He was scared stiff.

I shook my head. "It's not loaded. I can see that from here. Put the gun down and I'll talk to you. Who are you?"

He put the gun down slowly. "It won't do you no good to hurt me anyhow," he said. "I've called the police."

"That was silly," I said. "I'm Dr. Peter Merritt, Mr. Merritt's brother."

"You tell it to the cops," he said.

Presently, a car came rolling up the drive to the house, and two men got out. They moved fast and confidently, and the caretaker let them in.

"There he is," the caretaker said.

ONE of the men—they were detectives—started across the room toward me, and he had a real revolver in his hand, a .38. He was a big, mean-looking cuss with the aspect of Third Degree all over him. The other man, however, looked like a gentleman. He was dressed very neatly in a brown suit, he certainly did not have the ubiquitous flat feet we so often read about, and he looked clean and fit. He was around forty-five, with extremely shrewd eyes and the tight mouth of a nonconversationalist. "Skip it," he said to his friend. He took a seat in a chair opposite me (I was seated by the fireplace, smoking a cigarette and trying to look like God in his glory) and he said, "You're no housebreaker, Mac."

"Thanks," I said. "That's the first normal remark I've heard since I arrived in California."

"Just got in?"

"Yes, on the Chief, this afternoon. My name is Merritt. Dr. Peter Merritt. I live in New Rochelle, New York. Mrs. Merritt is my sister-in-law. She's having a baby, and there seemed to be some trouble, so she asked me to come out, and I obliged."

The little detective looked at me. "My name is Webster," he said quietly. "Daniel Webster."

"The Senator from Massachusetts, I believe."

He ignored the jest. "This other guy is Haggerty. Haggerty likes to tear them apart . . . Wait in the car, Barney. I'll be out . . . Well, doc, if you can show me some papers or something—"

I showed him some papers, a picture of Evelyn, a license, the telegrams—then he stopped me.

"All right," he said.

"I wish you could help me out. First, who is Fido?"

"His name," said Daniel Webster, "is Joe Halley. He's the caretaker."

"They went to New York," Halley said.

"They *what*?" I said. "But they telephoned me and asked me to come out here!"

"They went to New York," Halley said. "Mrs. Merritt said she was dying, so they went to New York. They took a plane."

I got purple, color and language.

Daniel Webster frowned at me. "That won't help a bit." He had a way of speak-

ing in which he never raised his voice, and yet you never missed a word, each one penetrated.

I was stunned. I didn't know what to do. The servants were on vacation. The house closed up. Just this Halley.

The ingratitude, rudeness, and general lack of responsibility on Evelyn's and Bill's parts infuriated me. But it was a frustrated fury. There was absolutely nothing to be done.

"I'll return to town and take a room at a hotel," I said. "You couldn't run me down by any chance?"

"Sure," Daniel Webster said.

"And the next time I have any prospect of seeing Bill," I said, "I'll give you a ring, and you can restrain me from committing premeditated fratricide."

"O. K."

Angrier than ever at Bill, I registered at the Roosevelt. I decided to spend my week there anyhow and see Hollywood and enjoy myself and the hell with Evelyn's baby. After all, I'd left my patients in the good hands of Dr. Henry Pyke.

III

FOR the first two days, I didn't know what to do with myself. I didn't know a soul. I tried to get in touch with Sylvia Denim, but this process became so intricate and unsatisfactory that I gave it up. I knew that she was a Mutual actress, and I tried to get into Mutual, but it was out of the question. They regarded me as a saboteur. The thought that someone at Bill's agency on Hollywood Boulevard could have given me the proper credentials occurred to me, but that was the last thing in the world I'd do. I wanted no favor from Bill, in person or *in absentia*.

I went to movies and saw them through for the first time since I had been practicing.

On Wednesday, my third day in Hollywood, I decided to take a plane back home. So, of course, everything instantly transpired to keep me from doing so. I had been trying to reach Dr. George Baker, in Beverly Hills, hoping at least to say hello to my old friend, but he was in San Francisco, and his secretary had promised to have him call me when he got in.

So when my telephone rang on Wednes-

day, around noon, I was delighted, instantly assuming it was George, since he was the only one who could possibly know my location.

"Hello," I said.

"Merritt?"

Instantly, I disliked the man. It was not George Baker. It was someone else, his voice having the scent of vulgarity and coarseness, that smack of familiarity when there is no familiarity. "This is Dr. Peter Merritt," I said.

"Don't give me that stuff, Pete," he said, laughing hoarsely. "You sound like a stuffed shirt, kiddo. This is Ward, your old L. H. chum."

"Ward?" I said. "Ward who? I don't know any Ward."

"Ward Hollister, dope," he said. "Have you forgotten so soon? Ward Hollister, M.D. I was at Lenox Hill with you for a while. The little plump guy who could drink more beer than the rest of you butchers put together. We used to—"

"Yes," I said slowly. "Sure." It began to come back to me, very slowly, but it came back, and I wasn't too happy about remembering it. The plump little fellow who could drink more beer and who could tell the vilest stories, who borrowed money and cigarettes and never repaid either, and who insisted, even then, that he was in the racket, as he put it, to dig gold.

"You don't remember me," he said.

"Yes, I do, really," I said. "You were going to mine gold in medicine, and you picked obstetrics because women had babies, and there were more women than men in the country, right?"

He laughed harshly. "That's pretty good, Pete. Nice memory. Yeah, that was it, all right; I guess you remember."

"What are you doing out here?"

"What am I doing out here? Where have you been? Haven't you heard anything? I'm the biggest baby operator in Los Angeles County. I practice here. I'm chief physician for Mutual Studios besides. Listen, I'm coming down from Beverly Hills; be there in ten minutes. Meet you down in the Ciné Bar for a couple of snorts and we'll chew the rag and talk over the good old days!" He hung up.

I went down to the Ciné Bar, which is a star-foto-studded taproom in the

Roosevelt, and, to my surprise, he arrived within ten minutes as he had said. When I saw him, I recognized him at once, although he was no longer plump; he was fat. Fat and flaccid and florid. He had high blood pressure, liver trouble, and potential hernia. He had tight, piggy eyes and a ready, meaningless smile and a Falstaffian aspect which was phony. His handclasp was moist and soft. He had been drinking.

"Well, if it isn't the white knight himself," he said. "How the hell are you, Pete? My, but you look distinguished with the silver threads among the black around your ears. You look like a bloodsucking banker, not a butcher. How are your heels? They look pretty good. You must be doing well."

He hit me on the back and we went to the bar and sat on stools. "What'll you have, Pete?"

I said, "I'm not much of a drinking man—"

"Sure. Scotch and soda and Scotch without soda, Tony," Hollister said. "Well, Pete, you look fine, specialized in obstetrics too, didn't you? To hear Eve talk you'd think you were the finest gynecologist and obstetrician in the East! Eve talks about you all the time."

"Thanks," I said coldly. "How did you know where I was? In fact, how did you know I was here?"

"Well, I called the house in the valley, and there wasn't anybody there but Halley, and he told me you had arrived, so I just kept buzzing hotels until I located you! Where the hell did Eve and Bill go to?"

"New York," I said. "I'm just as surprised."

"New York? They can't have gone to New York. I was talking with Al Roche this morning, and he said he saw Bill at the studio."

"He did?" I exclaimed, not knowing or caring who Al Roche was. "But that's impossible—"

"Maybe they changed their minds," Hollister said. He threw off his drink in the twinkling of an eye and he dropped his voice. He cleared his throat, too. "Uh—look, Pete. I'm—uh—in sort of a jam. How'd you like to help me out? Five hundred bucks in it for you."

"Five hundred dollars?" I said. "For what?"

"Delivering a baby, that's all."

I was astounded. Obviously, I wasn't getting the whole fee. He saw my face and said, "Well, I could make it seven-fifty, but I'm only getting fifteen hundred for the delivery."

It was stupefying. Fifteen hundred dollars to deliver a baby. My regular fee was two hundred dollars, and I usually pared the figure to suit the individual income. After all, it was a matter of helping with a natural function, not profiteering. Two hundred was a fair fee. But fifteen hundred was not only robbery; it was preposterous.

"I don't understand," I said. "If you're being paid such a ridiculous fee for a delivery, why don't you deliver the child and pocket the whole fee?" I didn't really want any part of it. I didn't like it. It was fee-splitting, a practice I've fought against in the A. M. A. for years.

"Look," he said, acting mildly ashamed. "I'm in a jam."

"What sort of jam?"

"Another Scotch," he said to Tony. "Ever hear of Faith Normandy, Pete?"

Naturally, even I had. There were few people outside the reach of radio who had not heard of her. I had seen her on the screen too, but mostly I had heard her on the air. She was one of the finest actresses of the motion-picture industry, Oscarified twice by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. I nodded.

"She's the patient. Montaflores Hospital on Wilshire. Labor started this a.m. Dystocia. To tell you the truth, there are complications, Pete, and I don't fool around with complications. I had a pretty unhappy experience over the border last May with complications; so when I find 'em, I hire another guy to come in and take care of them, a specialist, see? Usually I get Dr. Sampson; he splits fees with me on a lot of stuff. What the hell, I've got the name and drag here, I get the clientele that pays high and big, and so what's the dif if another guy who specializes helps me out, see?"

"I see," I said, with loathing. It was lost on him. "In other words, you make with the book words, and the other fellow does the dirty work and assumes the responsibility."

"All right, all right," he snapped. "Don't

get snotty. All I wanted was an assist. You could assist, couldn't you? I'm pretty rocky. Sampson is down with appendicitis, and I need somebody. There's nobody I can trust at the hospital. I can't mess this thing; she's too big a star; there'd be hell. I need someone who isn't after my neck. George Baker, that bastard, he's out to get me. A lot of other guys. All jealous of my dough and my connections, see? I'm not in good shape—party last night—pretty nervous."

Yes, and nearly drunk. But I didn't say it. He disgusted me, and I decided to go along with him if only to make sure that Miss Normandy, along with her child, wasn't murdered by his muddling.

"All right," I said. "I'll assist. What's wrong?"

"Will you?" he blubbered. "That's sweet of you, Pete. Not here. We'll run down to the hospital, and you see for yourself. You take a look. I need another drink."

"No," I said, hard.

"All right, all right, let's blow then."

We went out and got into his car. It was a golden-painted Cadillac, not unlike the one that Tommy Manville used to drive to Schrafft's, back in New Rochelle.

We finally reached the hospital. It was a fine modern building on Wilshire Boulevard. Another Cadillac had pulled up at the hospital, not far ahead of us. It was jet black, with a black top and silver wheels. It had good rubber, too, I thought dryly, recalling how my own buggy back East could have stood retreading. "Here we are," Dr. Hollister said dully. But I was watching the girl who got out of the other car. There was something about her that was familiar; she was very lovely. She stumbled suddenly as she left her car. I heard the sound of a shot, quite sharp and loud. She dropped her bag and fell.

I leaped from Hollister's car and ran toward her as she sprawled there. She recovered her bag and raised herself to her knees, and for a moment I thought she was all right, but then I saw blood on her white silk shirt. As I ran, I scanned the street for a sign of the person who had fired that shot. There were cars moving by on Wilshire, but I saw no loiterers, or anyone running from the scene, and there was no building across the street from which she could have been bushwhacked.

The shot had been loud. Could it have come from one of the windows of the hospital which rose six stories above us? It seemed like the only explanation at the time, and the chance of seeing who had done it at that moment was small. I gave the building a quick glance, saw no head poking out through a window.

Reaching her then, I lifted her to her feet.

"Thank you," she said faintly. Her voice was low, pleasant, and direct.

I said, "Good Lord, but you're Sylvia Denim."

"Yes—" she said. She frowned from puzzlement and pain. "Something burned me—"

"NO, YOU'RE wounded." I turned. "Hollister! Come on! This girl is shot! . . . My name is Dr. Peter Merritt, and I had the pleasure of talking to you at Bill's house last week during that party. I was on the telephone—" It was a hell of a fine time to bring the subject up, but I was rather excited. Meanwhile I had taken a good look at the approximate location of the wound saw that it certainly wasn't mortal. We rushed her into the hospital and took her to emergency, where we turned her over to the house doctor. The bullet had grazed her, cutting a gutter about a quarter of an inch deep which had bled brightly, but was not serious. There was no sign of the bullet, of course, and meanwhile I had telephoned the police and related the event.

I left Sylvia Denim with the house doctor finally and went upstairs with Ward Hollister. "Maternity" was on the fifth floor—gray halls and large rooms and a cleanness about the whole setup that was very nice to see. Reminded me of the new "maternity" setup at New Rochelle Hospital, which was the last word. Miss Faith Normandy was in 505. The incongruity of the "Miss Normandy" struck me then. Only a cinema star would call herself "Miss" while in the first stage of labor. We went in, Hollister leading; he was very nervous.

I consulted the chart with him. Miss Normandy had been given a dose of nembutal, a drug which I have found excellent, when it reacts upon the patient. It does not, however, always react, in which case it has

no effect. But when it does react, the patient remains conscious and lucid, although she may say odd and queer things; but the element of anesthesia is in the aftereffects, when the patient, upon coming to, remembers nothing of what happened during the period of doping.

There was a screen around the bed.

Faith Normandy came to while we were standing there. She let out a groan and gripped the sheet and bore down on the pains. You know a woman instantly in labor. She was a good sport. The groan was involuntary, or she would not have made a sound. Without opening her eyes, she said, "Hollister, you old butcher, is that you?"

"Yes, dear," he said. "Everything is going to be all right."

"The hell you say," she said hoarsely.

"Get me out of this, get me out of it. When do I go up? Isn't the baby coming?"

"The baby is coming," he said. "I have an old friend here—finest obstetrician in the country—he's going to assist. Dr. Merritt of New York. A sweet guy."

"Tell him to get me out of this," she said. "My God, how long does it go on?"

Another contraction, and she was up, bearing against it, and when it passed, she said, "Hi, Merritt. Knew you were coming. Glad you're here." She was a little high from the nembutal. She would not, I clearly saw, remember me when it was over. She wouldn't remember a thing. The stuff had reacted wonderfully.

I examined her. Afterwards I took Hollister out of the room and before he could ask me what I thought, I said, "A Caesarean section is absolutely indicated, Hollister, unless you wish to perform a destructive operation and kill the child."

"A Caesarean section!" he said, horrified. "Jesus, I'm in no shape—I'm not going to do any Caesarean section on her. She might die. Do you know who she is? Two-time Oscar winner? I'd never live it down, I'd be blackballed in the movie colony. I'm not going to take any chances."

"Chances?" I said. "Good Lord, man, it's a simple operation, the best thing to do now."

"Not in my condition. I won't take a chance on Faith Normandy. I'll hijack the child, and that's that. That's the easiest thing to do under the circumstances."

"I'll be damned if you will!" I said savagely. "There is absolutely no justification for it. She has only been in labor six hours on a first child, she is a strong woman, the child appears to be perfectly normal, and we have excellent conditions for an aseptic operation. A Caesarean section is the only logical answer, and that is what is going to be performed at once. I'll assist."

Again he was cowed. He passed his hand to his head unsteadily. "All right," he said. "Take care of the arrangements. I've got to get a drink. I could never go through it without a drink."

I went in and told the private nurse, Miss Kane, that the patient was to be taken to the delivery room and prepared for a Caesarean section. She was a queer little nurse with sharp, shifty eyes. She had been looking terribly strained. I found the floor superintendent, for want of someone else, and asked her if "delivery" was open.

"Yes."

"I'm Dr. Merritt, assisting Dr. Hollister. Will you prepare 'delivery' for a Caesarean, please?"

"Miss Normandy?"

"Yes."

"Very well, doctor. Dr. Hollister—"

"Yes, he has ordered it. Here he is now."

Hollister, his face florid, came down the hall. I said, "Where is the husband? We've got to see him, Ward."

"There isn't any husband," he said.

I didn't stop for explanations. I went to 505 and caught Faith Normandy between labor pains. "Miss Normandy, Dr. Merritt. Can you hear me?"

"Sure," she said faintly. "Get me out of this soon, will you?"

"You're a damned good sport," I said. "Do you want this baby very much?"

"I do, I do," she said. "The baby is all right, isn't it?"

"The baby is fine," I said. "But a Caesarean section is necessary for delivery. It's not without some risks to both of you. May we proceed?"

She sighed and opened her eyes and looked afraid. She stared at me. "O. K., kid," she said. "I leave it to you. Don't let that bastard Hollister touch me. I leave it to you."

Then the mad dash for sterilization. When Hollister and I finally reached

the table in starched white and masks, we found the four masked nurses on delivery duty standing by, and Dr. Bruno, the anesthetist, at the head of the table with the gas and ether. Hollister had arranged for him.

The operation started. Dr. Bruno had put Faith Normandy under. I assisted at the wound, two of the nurses handled the instruments, ligatures, and sponges, and the other two stood by to receive the child.

Dr. Hollister received the scalpel and started the incision in the *linea alba*. Then he shivered and stepped back and passed his hand to his head. "Don't feel well," he groaned. "Take it, Merritt."

Damn him, it was what he had intended to do all along! He stepped away from the table. One of the free nurses assisted me. Two minutes later I seized the baby by its left foot and extracted it. Some baby. A nice plump boy. "Nine pounds if he goes an ounce," I said cheerfully. "Any bets?" None of them spoke. They were all as grim as death. Two clamps applied to the cord then, the cord severed, the baby handed to the waiting nurse. It sounds quick, and it was quick. It's a quick operation up to that point.

As I began suturing, Dr. Hollister joined me at the table. "Feel better?" I grunted. "Now that you know the baby has arrived? You're a louse."

That was an unethical thing to say in front of nurses. At that point, as far as Hollister was concerned, I didn't give a hoot for an ethic. I went ahead with the suturing—always a difficult job, even at best. I became aware, presently, that someone else had joined us. There he stood, white trousers, white coat, white gloves, white mask, horn-rimmed spectacles, white cap. I saw this at a quick glance, busy at my hemstitching, but at the time I wondered what the devil the white gloves were for! You couldn't possibly identify the newcomer.

Without warning there was a shot. It scared me green. It was deafening. In the tiled confines of the delivery room, it was earsplitting, sharp, oppressive. It echoed, and my ears were ringing instantly. Then two more shots, so close together that they almost sounded like one. The din was appalling. Yet remotely I heard the tinkle

of empty cartridges rolling on the tiled floor.

The three bullets hit Hollister, the first staggering him, the second two dropping him. They did not knock him down. He dropped from the simple plaint of death. The newcomer in white backed to the door, and a quick glance—all I could spare, for I was at the crux of my suturing—showed a small pistol pointed at the rest of us. Being interested in guns, I recognized it as a Colt .32 automatic, a very lethal and compact little pistol. Nothing was said. The murderer did not warn us. But the pistol's nasty little muzzle was eloquent.

Miss Kane had screamed. Dr. Bruno, gray with terror, held to his place at the tanks gallantly. Naturally, I was fixed; I couldn't leave my patient. The assistants were needed, could not move, did not move.

Then the door of "delivery" swung closed, and the killer was gone. All we had left was the corpse of Ward Hollister and three empty brass shells on the floor.

Miss Kane, after my nod, ran to Hollister, reported three hits. One in the kidney, the other two in the heart, through the back. "You have permission to leave," I said. "Call the police. Try and follow that man, Hurry."

She was gone.

When I finished the operation, and Miss Faith Normandy had been returned to room 505, I had a look at Hollister. There was little blood on him, and the three black holes were like flies. He looked very natural. I wondered if there was a soul in the world who would weep at his bier.

IV

THERE were police. There were newspaper reporters, more to the square inch in L. A. County than in any other county in the world. There were doctors. There were nurses. There were patients. And when the news had reached the outer world, there were telegrams. There were telephone calls. And there was I.

It wasn't even a good busman's holiday.

You can only take so much. As for the police and reporters, they were all confused in my mind; a phantasmagoria of jumbled questions. No one was much interested, it seemed to me, in who had killed

Ward Hollister, but everyone was interested in who had performed a Caesarean on Faith Normandy, while Hollister's corpse stood by. For five hours that afternoon, there was a Roman holiday on Wilshire at the Montaflores.

I checked up on my patient in 505 as soon as I had changed and washed up. I found Sylvia Denim in the room, and the private nurse, Miss Kane. Faith Normandy was unconscious and would remain so, naturally, nor was she going to feel anything but sick when she came to. But I was surprised to see Miss Denim.

"How are you?" I said. "Did they fix you up?"

She looked a little pale but game, and her left arm was in a sling. I could see the bandage on her left scapula where the bullet had grazed her. "Dr. Ferris said it was just like scraping yourself on a nail," she replied. "But every time I think that it was a bullet that did it, it makes me sick at the pit of my stomach. There's something cold and horrible about a bullet coming so close to you. As if it had violated you."

"It sure violated Hollister," I said. "You've heard?"

"Yes. It's ghastly," she whispered. "I hold no brief for Ward Hollister. But for someone to do something like that during an operation and imperil Faith—"

"She was safe enough," I said. "Well, I suppose there'll be a hue and a cry. Do you really remember me, Miss Denim?"

"Of course I do," she said, smiling. "You were in such a sweet self-righteous huff on the phone. I'm glad to know you, Peter. Eve and Bill have often spoken of you."

"I can imagine. When I got out here to help Evelyn, she'd gone to New York. You knew that?"

"No." She laughed politely. "I'm sorry. It *is* funny."

"As a crutch. Then I tried to get in touch with you. I thought the least I could do would be to woo a glamorous star so that I could tell all my prospective newborn babies about it, and I had no luck at all. You're harder to reach than Mrs. Roosevelt, and *she* travels."

"I'm sorry. I'll try and make it up to you," she said.

"Miss Denim," I said, "I've struck oil."

Faith Normandy was all right, so I took Sylvia—she asked me to call her that—out and thought I would be leaving. At that point, the police and reporters took over, and I had her request to get in touch with her as soon as I was free, and she was gone.

I didn't finish with the melee until seven P.M., by which time I was an exhausted and nervous wreck. At last, I saw a familiar face, the quiet, introspective face of the Senator from Massachusetts, Detective Daniel Webster. He rescued me from the wolves, who sprang upon the other survivors of the operation (Faith Normandy could have thanked God for her etherized coma!) and I was free again.

DANIEL WEBSTER drove me down Hollywood Boulevard to a place called Pig'n'-Whistle. "You've got to eat," he remarked. "You look like something the cat dragged in."

"That is a masterpiece of understatement," I said. "Thanks for getting me out of that mess."

"Sure," he said. "Mind if I join you?"

"Have I any choice?"

"Sure."

"No, Senator, I don't mind a bit," I said. "You're one of the oldest friends I have in California, being the only one."

"Thanks," he said.

We went in, and a waitress gave us a table. We sat down and looked at each other. I felt very tired. "You can ask questions if you want," I said. "You must want to. Only don't shout them the way everybody else did."

"I could have spared you all that," he said. "I was down at Douglas Aircraft. They had a little trouble . . . Who killed him, doc?"

"Ha-ha," I said.

He smiled. "Man or woman?"

"Man," I said. He smiled again. "At least it looked like a man, but it could have been a woman."

"Good," said Daniel Webster. "An open mind."

"Well, trousers don't make a man. The killer wore white gloves, possibly to hide feminine hands—"

"More possibly to prevent prints on the gun in case the gun was lost or dropped.

Never mind, doc. Here's something you don't know. There was a patient in the hospital, girl having a baby, named Susan Alcock. When Denim left you, that was the mob scene, Denim had to pass the maternity rooms, and this kid beckoned her in and said, '*Send the police to me. I saw him, I saw the gun.*' I happen to know Sylvia Denim, and she kept this info for me because everybody was running around half-cocked. When I got to her, the kid she mentioned, the Susan Alcock, had gone up to delivery, so I couldn't see her. I've got a date with her and her sawbones first thing in the morning. Just one of those lucky things. She saw the killer."

"My God, that's one high stroke of luck," I said. "Are you sure though—"

"Yep," he said. He was damned sure.

"What makes you so certain?"

"The discarded operating outfit was in the girl's room and so was the gun. .32 Colt, nice and new. Clip held six bullets, had only two left. Muzzle had no acrid odor, though. We'll match the slugs in Hollister, but I think it's the gun all right. And it's the outfit. Horn-rim specs, white gloves."

The waitress brought us shrimp cocktails, and we ate. "By the way," he said.

"Yes?"

"Bill Merritt is in town. Alone. He telephoned headquarters to find out where you were. I wasn't there, and I was the only one who knew. But anyway, he's looking for you."

"Where the hell is Evelyn then?" I asked.

He shrugged. It was none of his business. Thereafter we ate in silence, and silence was as golden as rubber.

V

A FINE long shower at my room in the Roosevelt and I felt incomparably refreshed. I was mildly ecstatic in my physical rebirth when the phone rang and I answered it in thorough dishabille: a Turkish towel.

The desk clerk said, "Dr. Merritt? We had a call for you previously from William Merritt, who left the following message. 'Have been trying to locate you. Meet me at Ciro's tonight at nine o'clock and will

explain everything.' "

"What time did he call?"

"Around six, sir," said the desk clerk. "We would have informed you sooner, but we didn't know you had come in."

"That's all right, thanks," I said.

CIRO'S was a lush and lovely dining house which took ads in the local puff sheet, the *Hollywood Reporter*, usually publishing its nightly menu in French on the last cover.

I didn't know the headwaiter's name, so I called him Waldo. He looked like a refugee crown prince, lacking only the brilliant red ribbon across his shirt front, and he fixed me with as cold a stare as I have ever had and denied me entrance. "I'm viddy sorry, sir, but unless you have made reservations—and you have not, I know—you cannot join us this evening."

"Booked to capacity?" I said.

"In a manner of speaking," he said austere.

He was one of the few gentlemen who have ever managed to awe me. His look of chill, dispassionate contempt told me I was a bum.

"Waldo," I said, "I am supposed to meet William Merritt here this evening. Doubtless he has made reservations."

"Doubtless, sir. But Mr. Merritt has not arrived yet."

"I'll wait," I said, and could not resist, "You have kidney trouble, Waldo."

That failed to ruffle him, although it was true. He said politely, "If you will wait in the lobby, sir . . ."

So I waited.

Many groups came. None went. I watched them all with the open-mouthed fascination of a star-struck farm boy. The women, as a whole, were much smaller and not as pretty as on the screen. The men too did not seem tall, but they were all rather handsome guys, deeply tanned and very fit. The gowns were daring and gorgeous. I finally tired of this idolatry—it was then nine-thirty—when another group came in, and Waldo said in ecstasy, "Good evening, Mr. Roche." Waldo was awed, and this made me look up to see the miracle man. Simultaneously, someone called, "Hello there, Peter!"

I came to life. It was Sylvia Denim, in

a party of some size. Before I had a chance to reply she said to her friends, "It's Dr. Merritt who delivered Faith's baby this afternoon!"

"Merritt?" said the miracle man who had awed Waldo. "The butcher who pulled Faith's rabbit out of a hat? Where is he?"

The man was quite a sight. A tight, thin, wiry guy, dressed in a tuxedo of midnight blue with a Homburg to match. He had a sharp, crooked face, with the eyes of a ferret and the mouth of a fox. He was smoking an exaggerated cigar which defied the law of gravity. It would have been dead weight in my jaw, but he not only held it firmly, he cocked it at skyward angles with more self-confidence than Admiral Yamamoto. His overwhelming self-assurance was a trifle ridiculous and distinctly annoying. He was surrounded by three beautiful women, including Sylvia Denim, and four repugnant men. I'll qualify that. Harvey Kane was not repugnant, he was pathetic. A plump big fellow with high cheeks, who should have been, traditionally, a jolly old Cole. Instead, there was an eerie and remote sadness deep in his eyes and he moved with the group like an automaton.

"My name is Dr. Peter Merritt," I said. "I'm an obstetrician, not a butcher."

"Ha-ha," God said, chewing his cigar. "What the hell is the difference? Me, I like sawboneses, but I draw the line at your kind. Not that I ain't grateful, don't get me wrong. But you baby bastards are butchers and bloodsuckers, and it was a shame when women stopped having their kids normally and called in you guys to lend a hand."

There was nothing to say to such a horrible thought, and I stared at him, numb with anger and amazement.

"Al," Sylvia Denim said. "Be polite, Al."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Al said to me. He brushed my lapels. "I love you, doc, you're a sweet guy. I ain't an ungrateful guy. Hell, I owe you dough for pulling Faith outa that sand trap when Hollister was getting his licks. No kidding, that was nice work, and I've gotta talk to you about it. I guess you know Sylvia. This is Louise Stafford. Ain't she a dar? This little blonde is Shirley Morris, and don't make passes at her because the little lug with the pyrex

cheaters is her You Know What and he'd have you buried by morning. Sammy Carnes, one of my directors."

Sammy didn't look at me, but he beamed at Al. "You tell 'em, Al," he said.

"This is Harvey Kane, my walking encyclopedia"—that was the spiritually moribund fat man—"and this tall drink of water is Tony Zaperro who makes hoss operas you never heard of, but do they gross!"

I NODDED all around and then said to Al, "I'm happy to know them all, but just who are *you*?"

"Me?" God said. He laughed and waved the cigar. "Ain't it funny how you can tell a Hollywood pilgrim? Tell him, kids. Who am I! That's not bad. Tell him."

"Mr. Roche is executive producer at Mutual Studios," Sammy Carnes said. "And the man who made the picture they'll never top, *Polynesian Shadows*."

"Al Roche?" I said, remembering the name vaguely.

"See?" Al said. "You do know me." He was relieved. He slapped me on the back. "Well, you're just about the most heroic punk in L. A. tonight, you know that? You pulled in luck."

"There's nothing lucky in a Caesarean section," I said.

"Sure, but you had to have the breaks, didn't you? I mean, look at Faith. She had a lot to do with it, being preg at just that time, and the biggest slice of box office in ten years, and you taking a sleigh ride on top of her publicity, and that old bag Hollister getting his lead at just the climactic moment. My God, some show, eh? Was it not stupendous? All on account of Faith."

"The substance of things hoped for," I said with a sigh. "The evidence of things not seen."

Al just eyed me carefully. "Nice wording. You a writer, too? Seems like every scalpel monkey I meet has written a book. What does it mean?"

"It means what it means," I said.

"Never mind, never mind," he said. He smiled upon the others. "Is it not ludicrous we should stand around like a squad of duckpins, my dears? Should we not be seated and partake of the wine and nectar? You can come too, doc, but I still don't

like obstetricians. You personally, I like. Your racket is a louse's racket. And the pleasure is mine."

"Thanks," I said. He sounded like a man with a vicious personal grudge against obstetricians, and I wondered. "I'm supposed to meet my brother here."

"Who's that?"

"Bill Merritt."

"Are you his brother? Are you Eve's brother-in-law? Well, my God. Come on along with us, you dope; Bill is gonna be in my party anyhow. Well, I didn't know that. Why, it's amazing. Come along."

He strode off, and I stood there. His party stretched out behind him like a winding snake. Only Sylvia remained. She was smiling at me quizzically and good-humoredly and she shook her head. "Don't look so wind blown," she remarked. "The hurricane has passed."

"Is he always like that?"

"Always," she said. "Please come."

"With you, anywhere," I said.

When we were finally all seated, and Zombies ordered all around, Al said, "Well, doc, what's the dope on the murder?"

"I understand it's finished," I said. "There didn't seem to be much mystery."

He frowned. "Come again."

"Why," I said, "the killer ran into one of the private rooms where there was a patient, and she saw the killer get out of the disguise and discard it and the gun. She called Sylvia, who was leaving—that was when we had taken Miss Normandy down from surgery—and Sylvia told the police. The girl, by that time, had gone into her own delivery, so she couldn't be questioned, but the police have a guard on her, and when she comes around again tomorrow, she'll tell who it was."

"Damn it," Al breathed. There was a malevolent look in his eyes. He turned to Sylvia. "Why didn't you tell me? Why did you run and blab to the cops? Who was the cop?"

"Daniel Webster," I said.

"That guy! The only cop you can't fix she has to pick on. Dear, I'm disappointed in you," Al said.

"Sorry, Al," Sylvia said, looking composed.

I wasn't. "What difference does it make?" I asked. "And what business of yours was

it, anyhow?"

Everybody looked horrified. Al Roche studied me. Then he shook his head in contempt.

Sylvia said, "You see, Peter, Al is afraid that someone in his studio—in his employ—may have murdered Ward Hollister, and that if the police find a murderer and the murderer comes from Mutual Studios, it'll not only hurt business, it will hurt Al's reputation, Mutual's reputation, and throw off the box office generally. The public doesn't like scandal among its idols."

There was a long silence around the table, and then the music began, and it was a godsend. At the same time, I caught sight of my brother Bill coming across the floor with two women and another man. Bill waved enthusiastically. He was tight. I had not seen him cold sober in years. He was not unpleasant tight, never brawly, always cheerful.

"My dear old one," he said with peculiar feeling, "how I hast worried for thee. How I hast been with pride reading of your exploits . . . Good evening to you all, and *bon nuit* to you, King Albert, and to all you lovely creatures. Petah, you old os, meet Miss Roberta DuPrés pronounced, do-pray, one of the most pulchritudinous of my new clients, and over there are the inimitable Winnie Tobin and Count Cass Libano. Ladies and gents, wouldst have you meet my brother Peter, the obstetrician, the man who unlimbers the umbilical and lends us each our very own navel base."

"Bill," Al Roche growled, "don't be vulgar."

"I've had my pun and now I'm done," Bill murmured dreamily. "Be seated, Bobsy, and you, Winnie, and you, Cass." He sat down himself. "Petah, my old one, what are you doing in California?"

I sighed. This wasn't the time or place to have it out with him. "We'll talk about it later, Bill. Only, where is Evelyn? Did you bury her somewhere?"

"Oh, no," he murmured. He sipped a Zombie which the waiter had brought him, and took mine in the bargain, with a bland "Petah doesn't like to drink" to the others. "Evelyn is in New York, Petah, waiting for you. In fact, you shouldst have remained there as she told you in her third wire."

"I never got any third wire from her."

"That was very careless of you," Bill said.

"Careless of *me*?" I said. "How the devil was I to know that Evelyn was coming East if I didn't get the wire? The last thing I said on the phone was that I would take the first train out."

"Why," said Bill, "then Eve and I thought it over, and it was so sweet of you and all, so she wired you that we were coming and we took the plane for New York. Only, you see, at Kansas City, my office reached me and I had to come back on business."

"Monkey business."

"Na-na," he said wagging a finger. "Money business. A five-year contract with options for my sweet Roberta Du Prés with Twentieth Century-Fox."

"Well!" said Al. "Congratulations, Miss DuPrés!" He sat up and took notice instantly. "You should have come to me, dear, I could use a pretty like you, and not for the chicken feed Zanuck is going to pay you. You've got a lousy agent."

And so it went, good-natured banter with saw-toothed bayonets on the side. I noticed when Sylvia said hello to Cass Libano, she remarked, "And how is business these days with the Cantharides Kid?"

"You must have your joke, dearest," he said quietly.

Sylvia said to me, "This is the father of the baby you delivered today, Peter. Cass Libano. The best we can hope for the baby is to have his father's looks, and nothing else."

"Why, Syl, you little rogue," Cass Libano said, speaking slowly, as though he were not used to English, "how spiteful of you."

"You're Miss Normandy's husband, then," I said. "I needed your permission urgently today for that Caesarean."

"Unfortunately," he replied with a faint, warm smile and the most polite eyes, "I would no longer have been of such authority. It is grievous, doctor, but Miss Normandy and I are divorced . . . We were of such different temperaments, it did not last long."

"It lasted long *enough*," I replied. "Miss Normandy would be the first to tell you that."

There was laughter; others had listened in. But I hadn't meant to be funny. He smiled, too. Politely. He was most polite.

Music again. I asked Sylvia for a dance, and off we went.

"Well," she said, solemnly, "what's the verdict?"

"Verdict?"

"What do you think of us?"

"How can I think anything of you?" I said. "You're all acting. Every one of you. I don't know a soul here. Not even you. And I wish I knew you."

She watched my eyes, with a wistful smile playing across her lips. Then she squeezed the hand I was holding as we danced. Her other arm was curled between us, since her wound did not permit her to hold me with it. "Give me time," she said. "You're a very swell guy, Pete. But there's nothing else to do in this town but act. I'd like to be friends with you."

"You're lonely," I said. "I know that."

"Then you're very shrewd," she said. "I'm supposed to be the most ascetic self-sufficient woman in pictures. Don't you hear gossip?"

"Nonsense," I said.

When we went back to the table, Bill gave me instructions, and they happened to be sane ones. Evelyn was waiting in New York for me, so obviously the only thing to do was to return and see that she was all right. I told him I wanted to see him at the hotel to discuss it, and that I didn't want to leave until I heard from Daniel Webster next day. We agreed, generally.

VI

BY TEN A.M. the next morning there was no sign of Bill, and I called the house in Van Nuys, but he wasn't there. He wasn't staying out there. He was at some hotel, and I was annoyed with myself that I hadn't asked which one, for he had been tight and probably wouldn't remember that I wanted to talk to him.

While I was looking up his agency number to ask for information there, my phone rang, and I picked up the handset and said hello.

"Doc."

"Hello, Senator."

He sounded dreary. "Can you come to

the hospital, doc?"

"I think so," I said. "Did you get that information from the girl—from the one in labor—Mrs. Alcock, I think."

"No," he said. "That's why I want you to come."

I was appalled. What rotten luck! "You mean, she died in childbirth?"

"No, no," he said, "she's fit as a fiddle. Nice kid. But all of a sudden, she don't remember."

"Be right down," I said.

I took a taxi down to the Montaflores Hospital and went up to the maternity ward. Daniel Webster met me in the waiting room. He was pacing to and fro like an expectant father, and he looked worried.

"Glad to see you," he said quietly. "Come on in."

"I'll join you in a moment," I said. "Patient first."

Miss Kane was on duty again. Odd—though there were three nurses in a daily shift, I had only seen her. She was on duty from seven to three, and I had arrived on the scene during her hours. She said good morning evenly and avoided my eyes. I consulted the chart and was gratified at Miss Normandy's condition. Very good and mending.

Then I went to 501, Susan Alcock's room. She was a sweet young girl, looking marvelous and very happy. I inquired first after her infant, and she had had a seven-pound girl and was delighted. What pleased her no end was that she had not felt a thing, not a thing!

"Doc," said Daniel Webster, ill at ease and not able to root in one spot, "she doesn't remember. I called Denim and she's coming down, too. I don't like it. I had a guard on Alcock all night, no one got to her, no telephone calls for her, and she don't remember. If she can't remember, I've got a long job cut out for me, and I'm apt to be a little jammed up. I told the D. A. it was over."

I appreciated his position. I had considered the case finished too, and it was a shock to be up against it again. "Look here, my dear," I said. "Someone came into your room yesterday afternoon and discarded a disguise. You saw the whole thing and—"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Merritt," Mrs. Alcock said, shaking her head. "Mr. Webster told

me the same thing, and honestly, I don't remember anything. If I did it, I did it in my sleep. I was trying to remember the last thing I did remember and I can't even do that. I think I remember someone giving me ether and it stung like the old harry, and then—it's no good."

Her medico came in then, and I was disturbed lest he think it unethical that I hadn't got in touch with him. But he was a very decent sort, young and capable, and he seemed glad to know me. I explained the circumstances to him, and he smiled grimly.

"Well, you're out of luck," he said. "It's just too bad. I'll get you a copy of her drug chart."

He did, and I saw what he meant. The youngest had had a dose of nembutal at two P.M.

"Oh hell," I said. "No wonder."

"It took," he said. "That's all."

"Sure."

Sylvia Denim had arrived.

I said to the Senator and Sylvia: "That girl will never give you evidence. Bad news but the truth. She was given nembutal yesterday and reacted positively to it, meaning the patient is perfectly conscious, in a manner of speaking, and able to co-operate with the doctor in the mechanics of delivery, but when the effect of the drug has dissipated, the patient has no recollection of what took place."

"Oh," said the Senator gloomily. "Would hypnotism bring it back?"

"I doubt its efficacy," I smiled. "It's just one of those things."

"I never heard anything like it," Webster said. "It's the oddest sort of reaction—"

"But perfect for childbirth, when it reacts. Well, that is that."

"How's Faith?" Sylvia asked.

"Very well. Have you seen her baby?"

"I saw it yesterday," she replied. "He's a bouncer, isn't he?"

"Now I'm getting to know you," I said, and we both smiled.

"All right, you two," said the Senator gravely. "I'm in the soup. I've got a lot of work to do, so I'll thank you both and say good-by. It's a nasty anticlimax, but it's damned funny, too. For instance, did the guy who hopped into Alcock's room know

she was doped? Did he know she wouldn't remember? Or did he just take any room? Did he think it was an empty room? And just how in hell did he get hold of a pistol that was registered in the name of Faith Normandy?"

I said, surprised, "It was *her* gun?"

"It was," he said. "And nobody is going to tell me she did it."

VII

SYLVIA and I ate lunch at the Vine Street Derby, where we ran into Bill. He was squiring Roberta DuPrés once more, and I didn't like the way she looked at him.

She was a dark and lovely brunette, extremely pretty, with fine features, though tending to be big-headed, big-breasted, and big-hipped. She said very little, always listening with a sweet small smile on her rosebud of a mouth, her eyes always a trifle young and lost and dazed.

I questioned Bill, at last, on the eccentricities which had frightened Evelyn. It did not take much to frighten Evelyn; she was never capable of much reasoning and tended to be a screwball.

"Really, Petah," Bill said, imbibing as usual his inevitable Scotch and soda, without much soda, "I haven't the damnest idea what's the matter. Evie just says she's going to die. She seems to have picked up enough information from you in the field of obstetrics to have some funny ideas, and she's convinced. Incidentally, how do you rate with Faith Normandy now, old boy? Could you put in a good word for your beloved kin and try to get her to change offices?"

"What the hell are you raving about?"

"Well lookie, Petah, that old commission-snagger, Hayward, has got her, you see? And since she garners two hundred grand a picture, one-picture contract stuff, she is some pumpkins, and who am I to shudder off a two-grand cut? Leland Hayward, I mean, one of my *dearest* friends. Faith might be so grateful to you that she'd switch agents, so why shouldn't she join the Merritt agency?"

"You're incorrigible," I said. "I'm asking about Evelyn. Aren't you interested?"

"Of course I'm interested, dear," he said

blandly. "But I don't know what's wrong with her." He smiled at Miss DuPrés. "And this is hardly the time and place to talk about such things, is it, Roberta? After all, Petah, this sweet young thing has barely reached puberty, and there is no need to frighten her with the appalling facts of life. She's never even been kissed."

"Oh, Bill," Miss DuPrés said. She smiled her rosebud smile. She could smile till hell froze over if it were the right thing to do.

I could have choked him with complete *sangfroid*, but Sylvia broke in, "I'm not exactly conversant with the literal facts of life myself, Bill, but at the same time, you're acting like an ass." She looked at me with that nice directness I liked. "I believe there was no fetal heartbeat. That's what worried her. Hollister heard no fetal heartbeat and he dismissed it and said the baby was all right and that it was just in a position where he couldn't hear it."

"Did Evelyn tell you this?"

"Yes."

"Tempest in a teapot," I said. I was trying to be cheerful, but I made up my mind instantly to head East and see what was what.

"I do hope you take good care of her," Bill said. "You know, old swig, she's wanted this progeny for ever so long, and you wouldn't want her to be disappointed."

"Aha," I said.

"You know Evie," Bill said. "She's still a little girl. Likes to play with dolls, so naturally she wanted a doll of her own."

"Yes," I said. "Well, I'll fly out on the five o'clock plane. It's been a mad chase, and the only bright light in it has been Miss Denim. I suppose I'll never see you again."

"Don't be too sure," Sylvia said. She wrinkled her nose. "I want to do a play in New York. I've been trying to buy out of my contract with Mutual, but Al has been adamant. Still, he doesn't like people to behave with him as I did last night, as you noticed. So you may see me L. A. to N. Y. yet, Peter."

I made my adieus at lunch to Bill and Miss DuPrés and then took Sylvia to Mutual by cab and dropped her there.

"Good-by, Peter," she said.

"Good-by, Sylvia. I hope I do see you again."

"I'll promise. It's been nice meeting you. I'm sorry it couldn't have been under happier circumstances."

"Any circumstances would have sufficed," I said. "But I still don't know you."

"Bless your heart," she said. "You really want to."

"I do."

"In New York, I'll let my hair down."

"All right," I said. "I'll hold you to that."

VIII

TO THE ROOSEVELT to pack. It was two P.M. I called American Airlines and got a reservation. It was good-by Hollywood. Almost. But not quite. At three-thirty, Daniel Webster called.

"Doc?"

"Yes, Senator. I'm awfully glad you called. I'm leaving town at five. Wanted to say *au 'voir* and the best of luck. I'll be reading the newspaper to see the answer to that murder."

"I hope you read it," said the Senator. "Right now I got something else that's come up. I need you again."

"Got to catch the plane at five," I said.

"I'll stop by for you. This isn't very far from the hotel. A truck driver's found something up on the mountain behind Grauman's Chinese."

"I'll be waiting," I said.

I went down and was on the street when he came by in the police car. He picked me up, he was alone, and we took the road that wound up toward the summit in sharp S curves. When we reached the summit, there was only a U loop, and you had to go down again. The view was breathtaking.

A small vegetable truck was stopped in the loop. Its owner was one of those door-to-door peddlers, rare in a clime where you can step out of your door and into a serve-yourself market dealing in the finest fruits and vegetables at amazing prices. He was a little man in shabby clothes, his face unshaven. There was another detective with him, Mr. Haggerty, his hands in his pockets. The peddler looked scared, and I didn't blame him. Mr. Haggerty was quite a shock trooper.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi," Mr. Haggerty said, never friendly.

"This guy," said the Senator quietly, "is Joe Swick. He stopped at a house below on the hill and he had to come up here to make the loop and go down again. You see?"

"Of course." I wondered if he knew that Swick was also a lower-case word, "swick," which meant treachery. It almost prejudiced me for a moment as to Joe Swick's ability to tell the truth.

"He parked the truck here and he got out and went over the side of the hill here into the bushes," Daniel Webster explained without raising his voice, "and that's how he found it."

"What?"

"The coffin."

I swallowed. Coffin! "Why on earth would a peddler go foraging around here, finding a coffin?"

"Nature's call," Haggerty growled.

"Yeah," said Joe Swick, speaking excitedly and fast. "I hadda see a man about a dog. Geez, did I expect to go sticking my foot in a grave? Geez, it scared hell outa me!"

"He's lying," Daniel Webster remarked unaccusingly. "It didn't scare him in the slightest. Come down here."

We all went over the brim of the summit and down the hillside some thirty feet until we reached a fairly level glen, deep in a ring of protecting bushes. There was a hole in the ground, fresh. There was a small maple box, which appeared to be a child's toy chest, standing to one side, in excellent condition. The lid was closed.

"It didn't scare him," said the Senator, "because when his foot sank into the softer earth of the grave, our friend Swick took the trouble—having seen the outline of the mound—to dig it all out and remove the coffin."

Swick looked shamefaced. "I thought maybe it was some buried treasure."

"But it wasn't," said Haggerty.

"It turned me green," said Swick. "Geez. I never seen nothing like it before. It wasn't human. I called the cops right away."

I said to the Senator, "That's a toy box, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's doubling as a coffin. Let's take a look. I want an expert opinion, doc. So think it over. A good look and think it over. The corpse is fresh, the box is fresh,

it hasn't been in the ground very long. Maybe a week or two, I don't know. There's a cadaver scent . . ."

There was, that sickly sweet odor of death.

I opened the lid, and within the toy chest, there was a small basket-bassinet, of the type used to carry new infants home from the hospital. Usually, these bassinets are trimmed in either pink for a girl or blue for a boy.

This bassinet was trimmed in black.

The cadaver was two weeks dead, but this was a guess. Decomposition had commenced, and the belly was distended with gases. It was the body of an infant. The infant, a boy, was rather large; you have some indication of age from size in babies. But the horrible miracle was that the baby should ever have lived at all past delivery. An examination of the lower jaw showed a lateral incisor in place. Just the single tooth. It usually erupts at five months or so, but maybe as early as the third or as late as the tenth. Normally, around the fifth or sixth, I hazarded the child's weight at sixteen pounds, the height as a little more than twenty-six inches, and by averages this bracketed it either five or six months old.

The shape of the baby's head was that of a pear with a fat, meaty bottom, rising to a pinnacle where the stem would be. There was no stem, of course. It was as though the child, with a big, fine rounded head had had its skull compressed between a crusher which elongated it to a high peak. Which is exactly what had happened, at its birth.

The child had not been murdered. The child had died a natural death, apparently, though it was impossible to tell the cause without a post-mortem.

But the youngster had never had a real chance.

Here was a baby who obviously could have been delivered by Caesarean section, by forceps and traction, or even by normal labor. He was distinctly average, he should have been no trouble at all, and any doctor, from the pelvic measurements of the mother, would have known the proper course, almost before labor began.

Yet someone had bungled, criminally, someone had lost his head, panicked, and performed an obsolete and discarded opera-

tion which, unfortunately, had not killed the child.

I shuddered.

Then I explained all this to Daniel Webster, and he took it, pale-faced, without a dissenting or inquiring word.

While we were there, Black Maria arrived on the hilltop, and the small corpse, with its bassinet and toy box were trundled into the van and went off to headquarters for the attention of the coroner.

Daniel Webster drove me back to the hotel. When I said good-by, shook hands, and got out, he murmured, "Doc?"

"Yes, Senator?"

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I said: "Doubtless."

"It was Hollister did it. It was Hollister bungled it."

I said, "I'd bet my bottom dollar on it."

"And the baby's father killed him for it."

"Yes. Probably. But why did he wait six months to do it?"

He struggled. "Well, have a nice trop. Maybe sometime I'll see you again. It's been a pleasure. You know I'm grateful."

"Oh, nothing of the kind."

His eyes were distant, his mind working. "That bassinet in black ribbon," he said softly. Then he shook his head, waved once, and drove off. But I knew what he meant. Only an actor or an adolescent would have been so theatrical in his grief.

I caught the five-o'clock plane for New York, and I was rather sorry he had brought me in on his find, for there was a bad taste in my mouth all the way.

IX

WHEN I left the plane at La Guardia airport there were some newspaper reporters looking for Dr. Merritt, but I didn't want any more of that, and I misdirected them to a government official from the Defense Communications Board who had been a good scout and would, I knew, handle the ruse deftly. I was given a telegram at the front office.

The wire was from Bill.

FORGOT TO TELL YOU EVELYN IS STAYING AT THE WARWICK BILL.

I went to the Warwick at once, determined to be done with Evelyn's per-

sistent dying and to clear up the difficulty of her pregnancy at once.

When I knocked on her door, I heard her scuffle inside and she called, from some distance, "Who's there?"

"Peter," I said.

"Oh, Pete," she wailed. "Just a minute. I'll unlock the door, and then give me a second to get back into bed and then come in and I'm so glad you've come, Pete."

I heard her unlock the door, I gave her some respite, and then opened and entered.

I went into the bedroom and found her lying in bed.

"Darling!" she cried tearfully. "Don't ever let Bill cremate me! I can't bear to think of burning!"

"Well, I'll be damned," I said, never having got used to her.

"I'm so glad to see you, Pete, you'll never know," she said, blubbing and wiping tears from her cheeks. "I've dreamed and dreamed of being embalmed and buried and everything. Oh, it's been dreadful. You can't run away from it."

I think the last sentence explains Evelyn and Bill.

"Don't be an ass," I said. I kissed her. Funny kid. I sat down on the bed and held her hand. She looked wonderful. For a moribund lassie, she was one live corpse. It was not rouge on her cheeks. She'd had so much exercise weeping, she had a normal color. I'm proud to say that the Merritt clan have always been reputed for marrying beauty, and though up to then I may have been the exception to the rule, Bill was not. His wife, though wacky, was a good-looking girl, blonde, with short hair in a halo of curls. Her eyes were like tinted snow under a blue evening sky in the dead of winter. I don't mean to be poetic either. It was a color my father once described to me as we drove home to Round Hill from North Castle, some five miles west, where he had set a man's leg. She had soft round cheeks and a full and boldly passionate mouth, and her eyes were shrewd.

Afterward, we settled down and discussed the unimportant little things. (Yes, Bill is fine though he was squiring a nasty little piece I'd keep my eye on if I were you . . . No, I haven't seen Aunt Harriet since May, perhaps you and Bill and I could all run up there if you're going to be

East for a little bit . . . No, I'm not in love, or maybe I am, but I want to talk to you about that later. I met her in Hollywood . . . Well, let's see about this Merritt baby and what's wrong.)

"But, Pete," Evelyn said, wide-eyed, "there's nothing to see. I mean it's all different now, it's very different, everything has changed."

"What are you talking about, Evelyn?"

"I've been to a doctor," she said. "Dr. Emil Forman on East Fifty-seventh Street. When I got here from the coast and called your office, they said that you had gone to the West Coast, and I was devastated, darling." Her eyes were big as stars and a little moist as she recalled her awful predicament. "You never got my telegram that I was coming East. I got so scared I couldn't wait, and we didn't think you would come, anyhow. It was so mixed up. Then when I got here you were gone, so I went to Dr. Forman and he fixed me up."

"He fixed you up," I said. "Just what was wrong and how did he fix you up?"

"Well, golly, Pete, I thought the baby was dead. I thought it was ossified or something."

"And what did this Dr. Forman say?"

"He said Hollister was crazy," Evelyn said. She shifted in bed, drawing her legs up toward her as she lay on her side. "I'm just fine." She smiled, showing her perfect teeth.

"Well," I said, I sat down on the bed. "There you are. All the sound and fury for nothing. By God, I ought to be angry. Do you realize you had me chasing all over the country, thinking your condition might be grave? Honestly, Evelyn, aren't you and Bill ever going to settle down and gather a grain of responsibility?"

"Petey," she said, mously, "don't get angry at me."

"You're a wack," I said bluntly. "And Bill is a wack. Two of a kind. And stop being cute. Did you wire Bill and tell him everything was all right?"

"No, because he said he was coming East—"

"He's not so much of a wack," I said, "that he wouldn't like to know. For all his sanguine sophistry, he really is in love with you. I know him well enough to know that . . . Never mind, I'll wire him. When does the doctor figure your confinement to

take place?"

"Around May seventh," she said. "And he says it's going to be a girl. Bill would love a girl."

I smiled indulgently. She seemed very happy and pleased, and it was infectious.

"A baby will be good for both of you," I said. "For one thing, it'll make Bill a little more careful about these pretty things he runs around with under the guise of shepherding his clients—"

Evelyn shook her head violently. "Don't you talk about Bill like that, Peter. Bill may be odd, but he's always been faithful to me, and I know it."

"Oh, stop defending your hearth and home," I said. "Come off it, dear. I didn't say Bill was a lecher, I inferred he had potentialities. So have you. That nonsense last summer when you tried to have an affair with some fool producer—"

Her eyes flashed sharply, and there was a warning signal in them. "Don't you talk about me like that, Peter. I had no affair with anyone, and Bill was a perfect louse to make such a stink about it, and I won't forget it. Al and I were just friends, and besides, I was trying to wangle a contract with Mutual—"

"But Bill didn't want you—"

"—to be an actress? I know, but why not? After all, I sacrificed my career to marry him. Oh, that's water under the dam."

"Bridge," I said. "Or water over the dam."

"Water under the bridge," she said. "And it wasn't an affair." She laughed without humor. "An affair, indeed. Al just isn't the type. Not Al Roche."

"Good heavens," I said. "Was he the other party?"

"Yes," she said, "and Bill behaved stupidly and I still haven't forgiven him. Anyway, let's not talk about it any more. And I'm very sorry if I caused you any trouble." She sniffled imperiously and her eyes began to moisten. She was very amusing with her histrionics.

"You're mad," I said. "But there's nothing to be done about it. Well, back to New Rochelle for me, to take up the gauntlet once more. You'll be staying East?"

"Yes," Eve said. "Bill is coming on."

I kissed her good-by.

"Don't forget," she called. "You've got to tell me all about your love life!"

"I told you, Sylvia Denim."

"Ye gods, Pete, why did you pick Sylvia?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, she's a doll, Petey, but what I mean is you'll never get to first base."

"Why not?"

"She's a hard-to-get gal, my friend. Many have tried and all have failed. Sylvia takes marriage seriously, and she picks her men but carefully. So damned carefully everybody's given up hope. Cass Libano looked like he was in there pitching for a while, but he got the heel, too."

"Cass Libano," I said darkly.

"I know, I know," she said. "But he has a certain way with him, Pete. And he gets the ladies. He hasn't been married seven times for nothing. He must have *something*!" She rolled her eyes. "Boy!"

I began to understand why Sylvia had called him the Cantharides Kid that night at Ciro's.

X

MY ESCAPE should have been over. I returned to my office on the second floor of the Professional Building and took back my confinements from Dr. Pyke. My nurse-secretary, Miss MacArthur returned to work after a vacation of her own, and we went back to mothers and babies.

I didn't hear from Evelyn again. The whole Hollywood affair began to seem like a bad scenario.

A few days later, however, I was stunned when Miss MacArthur told me that an Alithea Kane had telephoned twice, asking for me, and had said it was urgent.

"Alithea Kane?" I exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," MacArthur said irreverently. "We have known each other for a long time and are friends. 'Alithea Kane. She's from California.'"

"She didn't leave a telephone number?"

"Now, doctor, honestly. If she had—"

"I know, Mac, I'm sorry." I puzzled. "It wasn't a long-distance call?"

"No. It was local. She said she was right here in town."

"I wonder what the hell brought her East

and what she wants with me?"

"Who is she, Peter?"

"She's a nurse," I said. "In fact, she's *the* nurse, Mac. She was Miss Normandy's nurse during that business, and she stood by her patient in 'delivery' when the murderer walked in and killed Hollister. I sent her scooting for the police and told her to try and track the killer, and she should have done a better job than she did. A very odd girl, Mac."

I was on tenterhooks after that, waiting to hear from the migratory Alithea Kane, and when a call came which pulled me out of the office and over to Lawrence Hospital, I was bothered the whole time by the thought that she would call while I was out.

She did. Mac reached me at Lawrence. "That woman called, Kane. This time I wheedled a telephone number out of her. Hamilton 6-4994."

"O.K.," I said. "See you later."

I gave the number a buzz. She answered at once. I said, "Miss Kane, this is Dr. Merritt."

"Hello, doctor," she said breathlessly. "I guess you're surprised to hear from me."

I recognized that tone. She was scared.

"I hadn't thought about it," I lied. "Where are you?"

"In New Rochelle. I've got to see you. At once."

"Certainly," I said. "Is something wrong?"

She laughed harshly. "I'm going to come clean." She paused so that I could be surprised or puzzled, but I didn't say anything. "I'm going to confess, and you're the one I want to confess to. I hope you don't think I'm crazy. I'm not. But I know a lot. I know enough for a gas-chair execution at San Quentin. I have to talk. I don't want to, but I've got to!"

"Good heavens," I whispered. "You didn't do it! I would have seen—"

"You're a fool," she said harshly.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Miss Kane."

"Oh, don't be so respectable! This isn't doctor and nurse any more. I've quit that. I was going good, I was going fine, and now it's shot to hell. Listen, Merritt, I've got to see you right away, I can't talk on the phone. Can you come over?"

"Not until you talk some sense, Miss Kane. Just what do you want to tell me?"

"I want to tell you a couple of things. I'll tell you who the parents of that pear-headed baby were, and I'll tell you what happened when Hollister delivered that child—I was present—and I'll tell you who shot and killed him."

"*You know?*"

"Yes, I know."

"*Why didn't you tell the police?*"

"You poor damned fool!"

"Then why tell them now?"

"Because if I don't, I'll die myself! I'm next, do you understand? I can't play it safe any more, the risks are too much. You don't think I want to talk, you fool? I'm throwing away thousands of dollars, don't you realize that? But I don't want to die, I don't want to die!"

"Where are you?" I asked, breathlessly.

"I'm at the Brown Jug. Damnedest name. It's a rooming house on South Maple. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, of course. I'll be right over!"

"Hey." Her voice was as tremulous as the reed of a clarinet in the upper register.

"What?"

"There's one thing. I hope you've got it through your head why I'm singing to you instead of the police?"

"I haven't, no."

"God help you, you're stupid," she said bitterly. "But you're one of those simple souls with a sense of honor, that's why. I'll talk on one condition. I tell you every detail, tell you where you can find all your evidence, but then I'm out of it, see? You give me your word you'll never implicate me, see? Otherwise it's all off!"

"I don't know about that. You're an accessory after the fact—"

"Merriitt, listen—"

I didn't want to lose her. Even if I never brought her into it, certainly the police were going to realize that she had played her part. So hastily I said, "Very well. My word that I won't implicate you in any manner after the information."

"Thank God. Hurry up." She banged up the receiver with a crash that hurt my ear.

I found Alithea Kane in her room, after being directed by the housekeeper, and Miss Kane was irritated and unnerved. "Take me out of this rathole. Isn't there a respec-

table bar where we can talk? I need a drink," she rasped quickly.

"We can go over to Schrafft's," I said.

"They have a cocktail bar on Centre."

"Anywhere," she said. "Just out of here. I've got claustrophobia. I need a drink to loosen my tongue and give me courage."

I didn't argue with this delusion, but agreed, and we went downstairs and out onto the street. I drove her to the Centre Street entrance (or exit, as the case may be) of the Schrafft store and let her out there and told her to wait a moment while I parked the car. There was a parking space a few yards down the street, and since the meter-parking spaces on Centre were all filled, I put the car in the parking lot.

I started walking west on Centre toward where I had left her, and then I noticed the little knot of people gathering, and other people running toward the spot, and Joe Burley, the traffic cop on duty at Proctor's there, was blowing his whistle and making a beeline.

That much provocation was hardly needed to goad me into a gallop, and I beat Joe to the scene. "Hi, doc," he said. "What's a matter?"

"She fainted," someone said. "She was standing right here and she just moaned and fainted."

"Stand back and give her air," a man said. He had read that one in a book. "She's gotta have oxygen."

"Come on," Joe Burley said. "Blow out of here, you people, or I'll run you in. Keep moving, keep moving, let the doc get a chance at her." He nudged me. "Better take her into Schrafft's, doc."

That was unnecessary. It was Alithea Kane all right, but there was no point in taking her anywhere but to the morgue. She had collapsed on her side. The instant I had a look at her I saw it was over. A damned good or lucky shot, dead on, through the heart. She died while I held her, her left arm making an involuntary movement while her jaw moved open spasmodically, her eyes wide, glazed, not seeing a thing. Then she was gone.

"The wagon, Joe," I said.

"Holy smokes," he said. "Shot!"

"Yes."

"I heard a bang, but it wasn't much and it sounded like a backfire!"

"It wasn't."

"Here, cover her with my coat. I'll call the wagon."

There was no chasing the killer this time. Not a soul on the street had seen it happen, actually. Not a soul had seen anyone run off. No one had heard the shot as such. And Alitheia Kane was dead.

XI

THE only clues we ever got out of Alitheia Kane were the bankbooks, the letter, and the bullet. Oh yes, and the empty cartridge.

The coroner, Dr. Amos Squire of Westchester County, retrieved the bullet, its shape still good. It was a dark, oil-covered .32-caliber pill. The shell which was found on the scene beside Miss Kane's body was a .32 auto. The letter was undated. It read, "Keep out of my gold mine, Kane, and stick to your own, Cass Libano." The bankbooks were in her handbag, along with ninety dollars in cash, her feminine paraphernalia, a package of cigarettes, a handkerchief, and nothing else. The bankbooks mentioned four different Hollywood and Los Angeles savings banks. The girl had more than twenty-two thousand dollars to her name.

From this evidence, several deductions could be and were made. I was capable of making them myself. Dr. Squire had pointed out the flecked powder burns on Kane's left lapel, low. Perforce, she had been shot point-blank, if not contact. Someone had walked up to her in the street, stuck a gun against her breast, and fired a bullet into her heart. The killer had then walked off. Or even stayed on as a spectator! That was a cold, unnerving thought! The shell meant a pistol had been used.

The motive for the murder became obvious when you examined the bankbooks, although it had been fairly clear before. Up until May of 1942, the balance in a single account—the others had not existed *until* June 1—was one hundred and eighty dollars. The end of May, she had made a deposit of five thousand dollars. Then a second bankbook took up the trail. In June, there had been a deposit of five thousand dollars, even. First and last deposit in that bank. (Miss Kane observed the Federal

insurance of all accounts up to the five-thousand-dollar limit!) In July, early, she put in only two thousand, but near the end of the month, another three thousand. August saw a new book and only two thousand dollars. September found another five thousand added to this account. More than twenty-two thousand dollars in all.

Private nurses don't earn that much money except by blackmail. And I was convinced, from what little she had told me over the telephone, that she had blackmailed Ward Hollister.

"I'll tell you what happened when Hollister delivered that child . . . And I'll tell you who shot and killed him."

She had said that. Then Hollister had paid for her silence. But had anyone else paid for her silence? She had not kept silent long. It was not more than two weeks since I had stood in "delivery" at the Montaflores and heard the shots which dropped him to the floor. Why hadn't she spoken the killer's name in those two weeks? More money for silence? Her sudden decision to tell the truth, even hazily to me in an effort to keep herself from the law, indicated that the attempt which finished her life had not been the first upon it. Possibly the killer had not been as amenable about blackmail as the weak-willed Hollister.

The police and detectives of New Rochelle are clever, obdurate, and astute, but they were up against a losing fight in this one from the start. There was nothing to go on. It seemed to me that a fellow named Daniel Webster, three thousand miles away in Los Angeles, had a better chance of striking home, assuming he made use of the flimsy and unsatisfactory clues unearthed in New Rochelle.

Something told me, when I rode to the police station with Alitheia Kane's corpse, that my part in the drama was no longer academic. This turned out to be true. But even so, I had no idea that I myself would become the intended third victim of the fitter of the black bassinet.

XII

"I SEE by Winchell," Miss MacArthur said to me next day at the office, "that your brother is in town, doctor."

"Bill?" I said sharply.

I read through the column and found the item "William Merritt arrived here yesterday on the trail of new clients from the Broadway pick, and joined his wife at the Warwick . . ." But I didn't stop there. I saw a lot of other familiar names and they began to jolt me with sinister emphasis that made me think. For instance: "Count Cass Libano, who dropped the phony title when war was declared, because he considered it more democratic, is toting the torch for socialite singer Alyce Whitcomb, who hugs a mike nightly at the new and bawdy Coxcomb Club . . ." When the devil had *he* arrived in New York? And another, "Al Roche, the boy wonder of Mutual Studios, arrived on the Twentieth Century to take over negotiations for B. G. DeSylva's *Mr. America*, the smackeroo Merman and Lahr are playing to a packed house. Price rumored to be 250 Gees . . ." And still another: "Loretta Wayne, not in widow's weeds over the recent untimely demise of husband Hollister, still doing the town . . ."

Was it not passing strange?

I said, "From the beginning I suspected Loretta Wayne of killing her own husband, Mac, and it's peculiar that she should have been here in the East when Alitheia Kane died."

"I didn't read that," she said.

"Well, she is! I wish I could do something about it. I wish the Senator were here. She should be stopped and questioned. But I can't telephone the New York police and tell them to hold her."

"Somebody sent you a box of candy," Mac said. "Here's a card. The candy is from Mrs. Merritt. It says 'Hello Peter Let's get together just as soon as Bill arrives. Love, Eve'."

"I can't believe it," I said. "Such courteous concern is touching. It's also miraculous. I didn't think she had it in her." Mac had opened the candy and she passed it to me, her mouth watering. "Oh, keep it," I continued. "You know I don't touch it. Candy is as deadly as whiskey, and besides it gives me headaches."

"Thanks," Mac said. "It's very good stuff. I can't afford this brand myself." She ate one.

It was office-hours day, and the ladies started arriving on schedule. Same old rou-

time.

The humdrum morning, however, turned out to be quite exciting. Around eleven, Western Union called and said they had a telegram for me from Los Angeles. "Read it," I said.

YOU TABBED IT RIGHT DOC STOP
KANES BANKBOOKS AND AGE OF
BABY WE FOUND BOTH DATE FROM
MAY STOP BUT UNABLE TO FIND
ANY HOSPITAL RECORDS HERE OR
IN HOLLISTERS FILES WHICH MENTION
BIRTH OF CHILD STOP HAVE
YOU ANY IDEAS?

DANIEL WEBSTER.

Whereupon I instantly wired:

CONSULT BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
FOR BIRTH CERTIFICATES LATTER
PART OF MAY ISSUED IN HOLLYWOOD
FOR BABY BOY AND RUB A RABBIT'S
FOOT STOP BEST TO YOU.

PETER MERRITT.

At this time, Mrs. Wilson from Larchmont called in—a third baby. I sent her up to United Hospital in Port Chester and went rooting up after her.

At 2 P.M. en route back, I paused at New Rochelle Hospital to visit with my recuperating brood and was struck dumb when the super in "maternity" said at once, looking terribly upset, "They've got MacArthur over in the other building, doctor, not here."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you know?"

"Don't be silly, would I ask? You don't mean Catherine MacArthur, my nurse?"

"Oh yes, I do! You haven't heard! Dr. Willoson has the case. You'd better go over right away!"

"Mac?" I said. "Ye gods, what happened to her?"

"She was poisoned," said the super.

I ran. My God, it was such an old one, poisoned candy. It had been in every Broadway meller from time immemorial. I had even remarked on the unbelievable thoughtfulness of Evelyn in sending me a box, for never in her life had she sent me anything but a bill to be paid, an illness to be corrected, or a problem, always her own, to be solved. Poisoned candy. But not meant for MacArthur. That candy had been meant for *me*!

When I found Dr. Willoson over in the other building, he calmed me down and said there was no point in seeing MacArthur, she was unconscious. "I've done everything for the time being," he said. "She was in agony, of course, I think she'll pull through, Pete."

"It's horrible!" I said. "What was it?"

"Cantharides," he said. "Not a lethal dose, fortunately. If she had eaten more than one piece, it might have been a different story. There were about fifteen grains in each candy piece, and the pieces themselves were large. I have the box down in the laboratory, and Swanson is going through it. Each piece in the top layer was adroitly spiked, Pete. Sharp knife cut a circle up through the bottom of the soft pieces—the chewies and brittles were harmless—and the cantharides was inserted, the cream and bottom replaced, sealed to seal, and put in the box. Remarkable, took a lot of patience."

"Cantharides!" I said.

"Yes, think of it," Willoson said. "Cantharides! What an extraordinary poison to employ! The layman is not aware of the fact that cantharides, or Spanish fly, is a deadly poison. The layman would think of it more as an aphrodisiac."

"Cantharides is not an aphrodisiac," I said. "It's an irritant."

Dr. Willoson said, "It has powers as an aphrodisiac, no doubt of it. But who would realize its potentialities as a poison? Here we had MacArthur hemorrhaging. She had a ghastly time of it until I put her out."

"What have you done?"

"Oh, emetics and gastric lavage. How long ago—"

"She ate the candy at ten."

"She was here at eleven. I fancy we got the stuff out of her. Magnesium oxide by mouth and an intravenous injection of suprarenalin and stimulants. I guess the stuff had burned her inside, badly, but she is much more comfortable."

"Nothing else to be done?"

"Nothing. Except call the police."

"YES." That I didn't want, but it had to be reported. "Keep me informed, will you, John?"

"Certainly," he said. "Now don't worry. She'll be all right, Pete. She's in a master's

hands." He smiled faintly.

I wasn't worried about MacArthur any more. I knew what had happened to her and the fact that she was going to beat it. What worried me was my own ultimate destiny. Obviously, the candy had been meant for me. When I considered all the possible means of inflicting death, directly, from ambush, or remotely, I felt that I didn't have a chance. I kept beating at myself, *why?* Why me? What did I know? Why should the killer of Ward Hollister pick on me? I was a babe in the wood.

I invited Captain Johnny Trumble down to my office from headquarters and told him the whole story. "I think it ought to be kept out of the newspapers, Johnny," I said. I had known him for some time, and he was in charge of the Kane case. He was a little tyke, around forty, but he did not seem as old, due to his athletically wiry little build. He was a meticulous, friendly little man with none of the suspicion in his eyes with which most ferrets regard civilization at large.

"I think so too, doc," he said. "But saying and doing is a different thing. They may pick it up from someone besides me. That's a chance we'll have to take. Did you check with your sister-in-law?"

"Not yet."

"Better then."

I telephoned the Warwick in New York and reached Evelyn. "Petey!" she exclaimed. "How marvelous to hear you! I was going to give you a ring one of these days! Bill got in from California."

"So I read in the paper," I replied coldly.

"Oh, you're in a big-bad-wolf mood, eh, darling?"

"You're a fool."

"I know I am, Pete, but I can't help it."

"Oh, stop it," I said, short-tempered. "Did you send me a box of candy yesterday?"

"Did I—are you teasing me, Peter? Should I have?"

"No, but did you?"

"No," she said. "Did someone send you some candy? Was it a valentine?" She laughed merrily. "Maybe Sylvia sent it to you. I was talking with her yesterday and she likes you very much."

"You don't send valentines in Decem-

ber," I said. "You talked to Sylvia? You mean she's in New York?" I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry.

"No, but she's coming to New York."

"Where is she?"

"In Hollywood. She telephoned Bill yesterday. Mutual accepted her offer. She bought out of her contract with them. She is a free agent . . . She'd been trying to get away from Mutual and Al Roche for some time, you knew that. The Guild Group in New York had offered her the lead in a swell new play (which Bill handled, of course), and she wanted to do it, but Al Roche wouldn't hear of it. So she started disagreeing with Al, and being unimpressed with him, and Bill says that drives Al crazy, so he told the studio to get rid of her and blackball her."

Lord, how quickly and effortlessly and cheerfully she could gossip. Never even had to pause to think. It just flowed, like a phonograph record. I began to feel pleased. If Sylvia Denim had telephoned from Hollywood the same day that Alitheia Kane had been shot in New Rochelle, that was one less potential I had to worry about. Beyond this, if she was coming to New York, all my inhibitions were going to go into storage. I'd made up my mind to that. The awkward approach, the blurring approach, the simple approach, but I was going to approach her.

"She said to remember her to you and she sent her love and she hopes you'll see her after she arrives."

"I will," I said. "But if Al Roche blackballs her, Evelyn, won't she have a hell of a job getting back into pictures?"

"Bill says if she makes a hit in this play, Al Roche will come eating crow and wash her feet with his tears. Bill says that is a stolen situation out of the Bible, only reversed. He's awfully clever, isn't he, Pete?"

"Oh, Bill is a genius," I said. "A veritable genius. That's all I have to say, Evelyn. Good-bye." I hung up.

Captain Johnny Trumble was grinning. "The ladies can talk a guy's ear off," he said.

"She didn't send it."

"O.K. Of course she didn't. I'll check back on the candy. I got the mailing wrapper right here on your desk, with the store

on it. I'll get the box from the lab at the hospital and go to work."

That night, a Western Union messenger came to the house.

The telegram he delivered said:

NO DICE.

DANIEL WEBSTER.

An answer was expected. I wrote:

YOU ARE IN WRONG STATE STOP
SOMEONE TRIED FOR ME WITH BOX
OF CANDY STOP SEARCH KANE'S REC-
ORDS FOR POSSIBLE CONFINEMENT
CASE DURING MAY AND SEE WHAT
THAT DOES.

MERRITT.

XIII

IT SEEMED to me that Cass Libano had evidence to throw into the fire, particularly since we had found that letter among Alitheia Kane's effects. I telephoned Bill next morning and asked him to arrange a luncheon just for the three of us, because I wanted to ask Cass some questions.

Bill obliged, and I went into town and met them at Gassner's down near City Hall. "Hi, Petey," Bill said. "You remember Cass, don't you?" He was smiling a fixed, strange smile which was completely artificial.

"Yes," I said, shaking hands.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, doctor," Cass Libano said. He always spoke slowly. He also had a set smile. For all I knew, I had one too. After all, Bill didn't trust me, I didn't trust Libano, and Libano didn't trust anybody.

We sat down, ordered drinks, broke the bread, and talked for a short while about inconsequential things, and finally I said, "The police found a letter among Alitheia Kane's effects, Mr. Libano."

"Indeed," he said, with a roguish Boyer lip. "And do call me Cass, doctor. We are friends. A friend of Sylvia's is my friend. A brother of Bill's—"

"Thanks," I said. "The letter they found was from you. It told her to keep out of your gold mine and to work her own. Now it isn't any of my business, and you can tell me to go to hell, but I'd like to know what you meant in the letter. You'll have

to tell the police, I imagine, if you haven't already. I'm curious. You didn't mean a real gold mine?"

"Of course not, doctor," Cass Libano smiled angelically. "Of course I did not mean that at all."

"I'm very curious," I said cheerfully.

"Indeed," he said, just as cheerfully. "Are you an amateur detective then, Dr. Merritt? For when we come right down to it, my letter is none of your business."

Bill said, "We'd better have another drink."

"Not at all," I said. "Don't evade the issue all your life, Bill. For this *is* my business. What I mean is someone tried to murder me with a fine dose of cantharides. Since you had been given a *nom de guerre* like the Cantharides Kid—"

His eyes flashed and his mouth grew hard. "That is very amusing," he said. "You mean Sylvia, of course. Sylvia insists that it was not my charm which induced her to fly away with me in the dark. She insists it was assault with drugs, which of course it was not. I am a very charming fellow, doctor, and I know nothing of cantharides. Oh, really, I do not. You are very curious. He is very curious, is he not, Bill?"

"He is very curious," Bill said dreamily. "And you are a liar, Cass."

"Certainly, we are all liars," Cass smiled. "But Dr. Merritt does not know that. Dr. Merritt is trying to play this little tragedy too honestly. You should tell him the facts of life. Indeed, he is under the illusions drawn from reading many stories. He has taken it upon himself to become Sherlockian, and it is ridiculous."

Very polite boys. I said, trying to be as polite as they, "But it is only that I don't like a grave, Cass. And I don't like to die from cantharides."

"My dear friend," Cass said, "if I wanted to kill you, I would not go to the trouble of using cantharides."

"What would you use?"

"Something quicker, and something much more final," Cass said. "I would not shoot you, of course, for the bullet would tell its own tale, and guns are amazingly difficult to dispose of. Even in sewers some poor souls stumble upon discarded weapons. No, doctor, I would use something quick and something more anonymous like cyanide

or curare. I might even push you into a hole some dark night, or brain you and bury you. But I would not use cantharides and I would not shoot you, particularly because my pistol is missing."

He announced this loss with intent, watching me. I said, "Your pistol is missing?"

"Quite," Cass said, unsmiling. "Someone has stolen my pistol, and I do believe that someone is using it upon the citizenry with every intent of using me as the culprit in the end. People have such bright and original ideas. But I shan't be a culprit for anyone."

"What sort of pistol?" I said.

"A nice new .32-caliber automatic pistol. A Colt, doctor, one of the last new Colts obtainable after the war began. My very own, and stolen from me. Is it not heinous?"

"If it were true, it might be heinous," I said. "But we are all interesting fellows, we are all men of the world, and we are all liars. You said so yourself."

"LET'S have another drink," Bill said, making a face. "Does anybody want any lunch? It was only an excuse to get together."

"Another drink," Cass said, no longer cheerful. "Doctor, I was inclined to like you when we first met. You had a stupid, harmless look all your very own, which was very interesting. One does not meet naïveté today, not frequently. I see you are in love with Sylvia. She deserves you."

"How do you mean that?" I asked hotly.

He smiled broadly, pleased, his eyes sparkling. "What fine, righteous anger! The white knight who would defend his princess from the Jabberwocky? For a man of your age, your behavior is almost silly. I said she deserves you. You are two of a kind . . ." He laughed quietly. "Ah, doctor, I can see into your mind, I can see your anguish at the possibility that I should have lain waste this white flower you adore. How, you say, could she have tempted him to touch her caducous petals to wither them with stain? How, you say, could Kismet have suffered her purity to have been tainted by this snake without rattles?"

I said coolly, "Very good. A very accurate bit of mind reading. He is quite a

card, isn't he, Bill?"

"The joker," Bill said solemnly. "Yes siree, yes siree."

"But she is naïve, too!" Cass Libano said, throwing up his hands. "Thank God, with me, it was a marriage of finance. I cannot stomach a naïve woman, I regurgitate at the prospect. That was the one time in my experience that I had a tiger by the tail, and I cheapened my price to be rid of her. I left her pure as the day she met me, my dear friend, and I leave to you the consummation which will make a woman of her, instead of a fearful child."

"Thanks so much," I said, colder and colder. "I'd like to sock you in the jaw."

"And I," he said, "would not advise it. The defense of one's person is legal, even to the administering of death to the assailant."

"Oh, brother," Bill said. "You chaps better drink. Each of you is getting cornier and cornier."

"All I wanted to know was about the gold mine," I said. "It sounded to me as if he had been blackmailing somebody, and Alitheia Kane tried the same trick on the same victim."

"How analytical of you," Cass said. "And quite right."

"You wouldn't amplify?"

Cass smiled, very toothily. "That might be embarrassing to you. Or perhaps to Bill. Or Al. Or Faith. Or many people. The poor victim might be close to one of you, and think of the sadness if the perfidy of my knowledge were brought to light through my arrest. And, naturally, you would consider police and arrest, doctor, because you are so simple. That fine approach to life." He sneered. "Have at it. One and one makes two. Something is right or something is wrong." He shrugged. "Sagacity may show you one day that one and one is three and that nothing is ever fully right or fully wrong . . . Now you are worried again. You are worried that it was Sylvia I blackmailed. Oh, perhaps so, who knows? You are in anguish again. What would I know of her that she should pay me for silence? I pity you . . . You should take a lesson from your brother. Bill is unworried. And yet it might be our sweet comrade, Eve, paying me to hide the secret of her harlotry—"

Bill never moved, but I did. I went across the table and hit him so hard it hurt me back in my shoulder. He went head over heels off his chair, his feet high and ludicrous, and he lit with a tremendous crash, the crash of the dishes which went to the floor as he held to the tablecloth.

Bill rose to his feet; he was very white. Cass got to his knees and had a snap-knife in his hand. He pressed a button, and the wicked blade snapped out. He held the thing in the palm of his hand, pointing it toward me, an expression of cruelty and cold rage in his face and eyes.

Bill said, "Cass, you fool!"

Cass glanced at Bill, then put the knife away quickly. He got to his feet and went out quickly, without another word. The owner was ready to dispense with our presence too; we paid off and left. No sign of Libano.

"You cowardly jellyfish!" I snapped at Bill. "It was your wife! It was Evelyn he insulted! Why didn't you—"

Bill didn't say anything.

"You were afraid," I said. "You were scared stiff of him."

"Not at all," Bill said glibly, when he could find his voice. "Why should I have hit him? How do I know it was an insult? Maybe it was true. Let's get a drink, after that."

I said, emptily, "Well, that's a new low. Your wife is having a baby, and you think maybe it's true that she was a harlot, simply because a ruthless rapist like Libano—" I shook my head.

I left him at the first tavern and went home.

XIV

THREE DAYS later, the office telephone rang and I answered it to find to my pleasure that it was Sylvia Denim. "Hello, Peter!" she said. "I'm here!"

"Sylvia," I said. "I've missed you."

"Still want to know me?"

"I certainly do. Where are you?"

"At the Warwick. Come see me. Now you can know me. I'll let down my hair. I've wanted to let down my hair to you ever since you left. But I couldn't while you were in Hollywood, Peter. Al was holding me to a contract that I didn't want and he was

being very nasty about it. Now I'm free. Come and see me!"

"I will," I said. "I have one case I expect at any moment, Sylvia, and then I'll be free for four days unless a couple of babies decide to be a little early—which they often do. I'll come in tonight and see you."

"Good. I'm anxious to see you."

"You sound very happy."

"Oh, Peter, I *am*. Until tonight, then."

The telephone caught me at the hospital later and when I answered it, a voice said, "Dear sir, you are cordially invited to attend a dipsomaniac's dream party this evening, so please wear your dinner jacket, the Crawford Clothes \$19.95 one that has pants—"

"It's out," I said. "Feenee."

"You mean," he said in horror, "you don't wish to consort with your lady friend?"

"I mean I wish to do *just* that."

"But Syl is coming, you sil!"

I said, disappointed, "She is?"

"Of course. She said she'd be delighted! Oh, Petah, old boy, you can join us and then leave at a respectable hour and get back to your blithering obstetrics—"

"What time?" I couldn't win.

"Come in around nine," he said. "And don't bring me a box of candy." He was laughing when I hung up.

AT THE Warwick, I announced myself to the desk clerk; he called upstairs and got Sylvia for me.

"Hey," she said, "you're early!"

It was only seven-thirty.

"I know," I said. "But I expected to see you all evening and this party of Bill's threw me off. I thought I'd steal a march on the party. I might be called away later; I've a future President of the United States due any moment."

"Come on up," she said.

I took the elevator up to the seventh floor and found her door. I'd scarcely knocked when she opened it and let me in.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," I said. "Glad some sight."

Then she kissed me lightly and took my hand and we went inside. She had a fine suite with a living room and bedroom. We sat on the sofa. She looked wonderful, very happy. She had on bright mules and a

blood-red negligee pulled around her. "I wasn't dressed," she apologized. "Fixed my hair and put on my war paint, but no dress. That's the way a lady works, Peter. She gets all beautiful and then finally pulls a dress over her head and spoils everything and has to rearrange again."

She smiled, still holding my hand, and we just looked at each other. Finally I said, "I'm damned glad to see you. I've thought about you ever since I left you."

"I too," she said. "I've got lipstick on you."

"The hell with that," I said. "You can put it on me any—"

"Here, here, Merritt," she admonished. "No boldness now!"

"I'm going to be bold," I said. "I've been nerving myself for it. I'm too damned conservative."

I kissed her and held her very tightly. She was warm and soft, and she responded ardently. Finally she held her hands on my cheeks and whispered, "Darling, you're an awful mess."

"Is that a general or a literal observation?" I grinned.

"Literal. Lipstick. And I feel a shambles . . . Peter, I've got to get dressed. We can talk later, but I've got to get dressed for the party."

I said suddenly, "I think I'm in love with you." It came out easily. I was surprised myself.

She paused by the door of the bedroom.

"Do you want to marry me?"

"Yes," I said.

"Are you sure you're not just glamour-drunk?"

"Sylvia," I said, "I'm not interested in making a one-night stand. I'm interested in a wife and home."

"Bless your heart!" she said. "And you don't know me. You're in love with an actress. A Hollywood star. I was acting when you first met me, I may still be acting now. I'm an excellent actress, Peter. Some day I'll be America's greatest."

"When Helen Hayes retires?"

She laughed. "All right, I had it coming. I'm going to get dressed."

Evening gowns can make an ugly duckling attractive, and what they do to a beautiful woman is sinful. Sylvia's gown, if that is the case, committed the major sin.

She was captivating.

"You're out of this world," I said, when I saw her.

"You ought to see me in at seven A.M. in the morning. I'm out of this world then, too. And you'll wish I'd stay out. That's the test of a girl, darling. Stringy hair, no make-up, puffy eyes—"

There was a knock on the door and I opened it. Coxie's army came in. Evelyn and Bill first. Evelyn looked gaudy. "You look awful," I said.

She had on a lurid purple dress which made her look like a juke joint hostess.

"You're just old-fashion," she said.

Behind them came Al Roche in his exotic midnight blue, and Roberta DuPrés—of all people!—in a lush and form-fitting scarlet-satin item which not only revealed the declivity of her umbilicus, but also announced the fact that she had a fine scar in the middle of her faint puff of tummy. Believe me, the gown was that tight. She had not been poured into it; it had been zippered around her. But the scar fascinated me. You could see its lips plainly, the satin dipping into the brief valley where the wound had healed. I doubt if anyone else would have noticed it, for it resembled a dress seam. But there was no seam there. It was the same kind of scar that Faith Normandy was going to find when she looked at herself in a mirror. A Caesarean-section scar.

I was feeling smug in my new-found knowledge when Bill hauled us off to the night club.

XV

CIRO'S (remember?) was a restaurant which doubled as a night club, a peculiar product of a movie town. Conversely, the Coxcomb was a night club which doubled as a restaurant. Of the two I think I preferred Ciro's. It was newer, more honest, cleaner, and not as tawdry. There is nothing so tawdry as a New York night club.

We shed our coats and found our table, where there was a group of size waiting. Champagne was in evidence. The salutations rang around shrilly. Everyone talked high and loud to break through the interference of noise. Cass Libano looked his sleekest; at his side sat a pretty blonde

without the reddish tinge to her hair which shows camera work. He introduced her to Al and me; she knew Bill. This was Alyce Whitcomb. Her figure was indecent, her voice husky, her eyes honest. She had a tendency to peer. I put her down as near-sighted, but they'd rather die than say yes to an ophthalmologist. Cass and I glared at each other.

Then I was introduced to Leonard Kams, a columnist, with his wife, and Dr. E. Zeller, whose status in this crowd I did not understand, and whose companion turned out to be Louise Stafford. I hadn't realized that she had followed Al Roche to town. Then Sylvia and Evelyn and Roberta DuPrés rejoined us, and the panic was on.

Cass looked very wary of me. Funny, because he should have been sore. His chin was sore where I had hit it, and I hadn't had any ring on either. That had been a good punch. The side of his face was a little swollen. "What happened to your chin?" I asked maliciously.

Miss Whitcomb looked soberly sympathetic. "Isn't it a *shame*?" she said. "He fell in the shower and nearly slayed himself. Poor Cassy, what would I have done without you?"

"Saved money," I said.

Cass laughed quickly. "Dr. Merritt doesn't approve of me, Alyce. That should be quite obvious. The doctor thinks I'm a desperate character who has designs on your wealth!"

"I never heard anything so silly," she said, staring at me. "With all your money? It's the first time I ever fell in love with anyone who wasn't after my money."

"Of course," I said. "But then no one could fall in love with your money, Miss Whitcomb, when you are so beautiful."

"Why, you're sweet," she smiled. "And I thought you were going to be stuffy."

Bill interrupted us. "Hey—there's Loretta—Loretta Wayne!"

It was old-home week.

Yes, Loretta Wayne was there. She was dancing on the postage-stamp floor, and she looked striking and stunning in her glittering rhinestone gown, her patrician face held upward in its fixed mold which told nothing at all about her. Her companion I did not know.

It is impossible to record the conversa-

tion, there were so many people saying so many things. Evelyn, in her flighty voice, was saying that she had seen Dora Chase. "I did, just as plain as day, right on Fifth Avenue in front of Saks," she said. "I called to her, but she didn't hear me, and went on. I couldn't catch her."

Sylvia said, "Uh-uh, Eve, darling. Too many cocktails. I left Dora in Hollywood when I flew in yesterday, and she was all set for a couple of days at Palm Springs."

"Then it was a dead ringer for her," said Evelyn, and went on some more. I had no idea who Dora Chase was.

Dr. Zeller said to me several times, "We must speak in private, Dr. Merritt. I have things to tell you and show you, and perhaps you may do me a favor sometime, with my collection, if you would be so good."

"Of course," I said politely, forgetting him at once. But he persisted now and then, in his slow and bassoonlike voice, which was effortless. I finally asked Sylvia who he was.

"I don't know, Pete," she said. "But he looks like something out of *Arsenic and Old Lace*."

He did. He had a misshapen face, the left side thinner and longer than the right, and his skin was oliv. I asked Bill, and Bill said, "I don't know. I think he's an undertaker. What difference does it make? He's a friend of Al's."

It got late. Sylvia and I had danced some, but the floor was terribly crowded and we were knocked about with considerable force. She was worried about her shoulder, and so was I, so we desisted. But around midnight, Bill said, "Seventh inning, everybody dance, and then we'll feed all the beautiful faces." Everybody, including Sylvia and me, rose obediently and joined the throng. The press was terrific. One moment you'd have free space and start to dance, and next you would get a sharp elbow in the back that would drive the wind out of you.

Finally Sylvia said, "You've been awfully quiet tonight, Peter."

"I don't give—ugh!" Someone had jabbed me in the back.

"Yes, Peter?"

"I was going to say—ugh!"

The lights were out and they were playing multicolored spots over the heads of the crowd dancing. I tried to get a look at the guy who was banging into us. The

couple was doing some sort of step that had no place on such a crowded floor. I couldn't see them, it was too dark. Sylvia said, "Let's leave, Peter. It's a mess here."

Another jab, hard and sharp.

"Let's go," I said.

There was a sharp pain in my back on the lower left side, as if someone had caught my rib with that last jab. We walked off the floor, and I found myself getting light-headed. My God, I thought, I'm drunk. Sylvia said, "What's the matter, Peter?"

"I don't know," I said. The strength was draining out of me and my back ached. I began to feel dizzy and my knees felt as if they were too well oiled. I put my hand to my head.

The music stopped. The lights came up again. I said, falteringly, "It's—like something—was stuck in my back—"

Suddenly Evelyn screamed and pointed at me.

"My God," Bill said. "You're stabbed!"

"Stabbed?" I said.

He rushed toward me. "It's still in you!" he said. "Holy mackerel, look at the knife still in you! It's Cass' knife! It's Cass'!"

"Don't touch it" Sylvia cried sharply. "Fingerprints!"

But Bill gripped it, disregarding her, and he yanked hard and pulled it out. It was as if he had pulled out the stopper which kept my consciousness closed up. Everything that was me poured out through the opened stopper, and I keeled over in a dead faint.

XVI

THERE WAS little pain, only the nasty twinges of the stiches next day when I awakened in the Tenorio Hospital on Forty-first Street. I felt very good indeed otherwise, quite bright, a little feverish, but of sound mind, if not body. Except for a private nurse who instantly introduced herself as Miss Sard, I was alone. "Let's see the chart," I said.

"You're a patient now, Dr. Merritt," she said severely. "You know I can't let you do that unless Dr. Weiss allows me."

"I feel too good," I said. "What happened to me?"

"You had a blood transfusion," she said. "That was your whole trouble—loss of blood. By good luck, the wound—you know

I shouldn't be telling you this?"

"I'll be just as surprised when Weiss tells me," I smiled. "Go ahead, Miss Sard, and thanks."

She began to thaw a little. "The wound wasn't much. All flesh. It went in—the knife—at an angle so that it laid you open superficially. If it had gone in straight, you'd be dead this morning."

"Lucky plucky me," I said. "Where's the knife?"

"The police have it."

"Swell place for a murder," I said. "I never saw who did it, and then my stupid brother had to mess the fingerprints on the handle by yanking it out without using a handkerchief."

"Oh well," she said. "It belonged to this Cass Libano, and the police are after him. Your brother told about the fight you had with Cass. They'll get him. He did it all right."

I didn't say anything, but my own remark about Bill spoiling the fingerprints stirred in my consciousness, and the seed of suspicion took root in fertile ground. Maybe he hadn't 'spoiled' any fingerprints. Maybe that had just been a clever stunt to explain the presence of his own fingerprints on that knife. I thought of the black-ribboned bassinet; after all, it was entirely possible for Bill to have been the father of someone else's child. I thought of Hollister's murder and Bill's alibi; his departure for New York, and his sudden unexpected return to Hollywood on business. And the business had fallen flat, because Miss DuPrés, on whose account he had returned, had lost her contract after all. *Had she ever had one?*

I said, "Miss Sard—"

"Shh," she said. "Here's the doctor."

Dr. Irving Weiss was a young and handsome sawbones with a fine grin. "Someone kind of kicked you around, eh, Merritt? Weiss is the name, and you're my baby because I was on when they hauled you in. Glad to know you."

"You did a good job on me," I said. "I don't feel like dying, which is more than I can say of last night."

"Oh hell," he said, "you're fit as a fiddle. The jab must have been off balance in the dark, because it slanted off instead of going

in, but you lost a bucket of blood. That's what weakened you. I stitched you up, and you ought to be O. K."

"When can I go home?"

"Tomorrow, if you don't try to go to work. Don't spring the lips and start bleeding again. Go home and take it easy for a week and then have the stitches taken out."

"Thanks," I said.

"You were a pretty lucky guy."

"Sure. To get stabbed."

He smiled and shrugged.

"Listen, I'd like to send a telegram," I said. "Will you send it for me?"

"Shoot."

"To Daniel Webster, Police Headquarters, Los Angeles, California."

"I can remember that," he said, his eyes twinkling.

"And the message—*Think you had better come at once.*"

"I'll deliver that one," he said. "Take it easy, doctor."

He walked out.

I thought there was something strange about his behavior. The door opened again then, and to my utter amazement—indeed, stupefaction—the Senator from Massachusetts walked in. In the flesh, no moving picture, Daniel Webster was standing at the foot of my bed.

"Hello, doc," he said quietly.

"My God," I said. "That is quick service. I must buy stock in the Weiss Telegraph Company."

DANIEL WEBSTER pulled up a chair and sat down. He glanced at the nurse and I nodded at her, and she left at once. "Mind if I smoke?" he said.

"Not at all. Light one for me."

"That's all right?"

"Sure."

He lighted a pair of cigarettes and passed me one. I found myself smiling at him like a benevolent monk. "Always around when a man needs you, Senator. We seem to have an affinity. I could have used you last night."

He lifted his brows; it was unusual to see him surprised. "You did use me last night. Didn't Weiss tell you?"

"No."

"How do you like my blood? Make you think any better?"

"Your—did you give me the transfusion?"

"Uh—huh," he said. "I was the only type around to match you. Bill matched you, but he'd been drinking."

"I'd rather have your blood," I said. "Thank you, Senator. It saved my life."

"Not exactly. But it helped."

"How in heaven's name—"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a coincidence, doc. I've been in two days, checking on stuff. I called you last night from the hotel, and your office said you were at the Coxcomb. When I got there, they'd taken you to the hospital. I came over just in time to be typed for the transfusion."

"I *am* glad to see you, Senator. I've been scared stiff. Did you get my wire about the poisoned candy?"

"Yes. That's why I came East."

I smoked in silence for a few minutes. Then I said, "Why am I the goat? Why is the killer after an idiot like me who doesn't even know what it's all about?"

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, doc?" the Senator said. "You've been on the level with me? You're being level now?"

"Of course I have," I said, astounded that he would have questioned me.

"You wouldn't hold back anything on account of family ties of blood, would you?"

"Absolutely not," I said.

"Hmmm." He shook his head and rumbled ruminatively. "So it's like this. If I was a killer, and Alitheia Kane knew I was a killer, and Alitheia Kane called you, and you went to pick her up, and you saw her, I'd want to knock her off right away before she could blab any more. Right?"

"That's what happened."

"Yeah. But would that be enough? Don't you suppose I'd be thinking, *Did she talk? Did she tell him? Is he just being cagey?* I couldn't keep worrying about it. I'd kill you, too. And somebody has tried twice."

"But she didn't tell me anything! She never got the chance! I tried to make her talk, but she wanted a drink first—"

"All right. But the killer doesn't know that, and would not believe you anyhow."

The prospect was frightening. It meant my life was to be in constant danger until we had run the case to its end, and I saw no sign of that end in the cards. "We're not getting anyplace. That's the empty part

of it. We're not getting anywhere at all."

"Don't be silly," said Daniel Webster. "You are always getting someplace when you are thinking. We haven't been thinking. Now we have a great deal to think about."

"Thinking!" I said in disgust. "It's all we've done! Who lanced me? Thinking won't answer that one."

He declined a direct answer and replied, "Cass Libano was dancing with DuPrés right behind you. Your brother and your sister-in-law were just to one side."

"How do you know that, in the dark?"

"There was a spotlight. Miss Denim saw both couples. And Lenny Kams saw them both."

"He was the newspaperman."

"Yeah. He was at the table. Watching. Lenny is a friend of mine. We worked on the *World* together. He knows his way around this town, and his column is very good. So Lenny has been riding the plains, scouting for me. He was scouting for me last night, and he had his eye on you. He knew about the candy."

"I'll be damned," I said. I began to tire.

The Senator rose at once. "I have a lot to tell you and this is not a good time. There's a warrant out for Cass Libano. I think I'll see you again tonight or tomorrow and tell you what I've learned."

"All right, Senator," I said. "Thanks for your blood."

"Be careful not to spill it," he said without smiling. "So long doc." He went out, then popped back again. "Here is a very interesting item you might like to know in regard to your brother, doc. Roberta DuPrés never signed any contract with Zanuck. That was all a wonderful lie. . . . See you later."

XVII

I HAD a fine nap and a nice lunch. There were beautiful flowers from all and sundry, and Sylvia sent salmon gladioli and a card, "Sorry I can't come over, Peter, but Evelyn will explain. Love you. Syl." That worried me, and I worried a long time because Evelyn and Bill, with Al and Roberta in their wake, did not arrive until four P. M.

"Well, golly," Evelyn said, "you look

good, darling. Here, I brought you some candy."

"No, *thanks!*" I said.

"Oh, don't be silly," she said. "I didn't send the other one. And if this one poisons you, here are witnesses so that they can put me in the electric chair, or whatever it is they do to you . . . And I've been up to Round Hill to see your Aunt Harriet, and she sends her love and everything to you and wants you to visit her . . . No candy, dear? Really?"

"I don't like candy," I said. I winced. "I could never eat candy again as long as I lived."

"Take it home, Eve," Bill said, "he isn't a bit appreciative, and me offering my blood last night." He grinned.

"It would have made me dead drunk," I said.

"It might have drowned you," said Bill. "The doctors tell me there's no difference between it and the Atlantic Ocean. Who stuck you, dear?"

"You probably did," I said, "but since one must always choose the least likely person, I'll choose Al Roche."

Al Roche dropped his cigar. "That's no thing to joke about," he said.

"Why not, Al?" I enjoyed his discomfort. "You did it, and Cass knew it and was blackmailing the life out of you."

Al said, "You're kidding, doc."

"No, Al, I think you did it. You don't like obstetricians, you had a nasty experience with one in the past, and now you've gone mad and you're taking it out on every baby-man you meet. First it was Hollister and then it was me—"

"Ha-ha," Al Roche said. He looked pale. "You're quite a card, doc. Quite a card. Isn't he, Bill?"

"The ace of spades," Bill said sepulchral.

"I hope my accident didn't spoil your evening, Al?"

"It was," said Al, "a very splendid evening. Was it not very splendid, my dears? Did we not have an elegant and intellectual charivari? . . . Look, I gotta go up to the Mutual offices and see a guy about some very important business, so I'll leave you dears here to cheer up the doc, and I'll see you all anon."

"Good-bye, Al," I said. "Remember

crime does not pay."

"Ha-ha," he said. "Take care of yourself, doc." He was glad to be gone.

"Whew!" said Roberta DuPrés. She sank into a chair. "Thanks for scaring him off, Dr. Merritt. Enough is enough."

"You should kick," Bill said. "He signed."

"He did?" I said. "Then the evening was a success in some respects, wasn't it?" I added bitterly.

She set her jaw briefly, and I thought she would let down her hair for the first time. But I was wrong. She relaxed and leaned back, with the rose-bud-smile mask on once more, and she lighted a cigarette. Nobody answered my question.

"Petey's getting tired," Evelyn said. "Besides, we're supposed to be at the Biltmore for that tea dance. Bill, you said—"

"I know, I know, we'll be going."

"Hospitals stink," Evelyn said. "Were you going to say something, Petey?"

"Yes," I said. "To Miss DuPrés."

"Mm?" Bobsy said.

"Suppose I were to tell you that you never had a contract with Zanuck, Roberta."

She put out her cigarette. "I don't understand what you are getting at, doctor," she said sweetly. Her eyes were hard.

"Well, I do know it," I said. "So do the police."

"Come, come, chickens," Bill drawled. "Petah's getting tired and unpleasant."

Evelyn put a hand on his arm. "Wait a second. What is cooking, darling?" Her voice was peeved. "You told me—"

"Look. It was all a gag."

"But you said you went back to sign her—"

"Sure, but the whole thing was for Al's benefit. Zanuck didn't sign DuPrés. But I was trying to get her a deal with Al, and you know he's never interested unless someone else gets interested first. I think that was nasty of you, Petah, dear, and I hope you get maggots in your wound." He turned and walked out. Roberta DuPrés followed without a word.

Evelyn kissed me. "He's too sober," she said. "We'll have to stop and get him a drink right away. I've never seen him so sober."

Then she was gone.

EVERELYN had not explained to me why Sylvia hadn't come near me. I found I had a telephone in the room which I could not reach, and Miss Sard got it for me after she brought me my dinner. "I'll get the number for you."

"It's the Warwick Hotel."

She asked information and then called the number. "Who do you want there?"

"Sylvia Denim."

"Gosh, doctor, do you know her? Could you get me her autograph?"

"Sure, Sard," I said. "You've been more than a mother to me."

She asked for Sylvia, but the clerk said Miss Denim was out. That was that. I wondered where Sylvia was. It was as if something had happened to her.

Something had.

Daniel Webster came back that evening at seven o'clock and sat down. "Brought you some cigarettes," he said. They were Parliaments, which he had seen me smoke. I thanked him because I had none; it was damned thoughtful of him.

"Now," he said, "they tell me I have to get out of here by eight o'clock, so I am going to talk. First, I have some bad news for you. Miss Denim isn't well."

I went cold. "Good God, Senator—she hasn't been—"

"No, no, she isn't well. She had an attack of appendicitis this morning. She called a doctor, and it didn't get better. So she went to a hospital for observation. She's at the Godfrey. It's a private pavilion. You can call her there . . . Now I want to impress upon you that she is in no danger, and she has not been operated on, and that she wants to talk with you on the phone before she makes any decision."

"Is she frightened?"

"Yes."

"Poor kid, I know how she feels," I said. "Should I call her now?"

"You'd better, you won't hear anything else I say."

He had the number, and I called the Godfrey and got through to Sylvia. Her low strong voice was husky and tight. "Oh, Pete," she said, "I'm so glad you called. I've been scared sick."

"How do you feel?"

"Much, much better," she said. "He's put an ice pack on my side, and the pain

is gone. But it hurt terribly this morning . . . How are you, darling?"

"I could be out tomorrow," I said. "I'm fine. I'll have to take it easy, but I'm all right."

"I wish I could see you," she said. "I'm all alone here. I've worried about you and missed you."

"Maybe I could make it tomorrow for just a bit . . . Who's your doctor?"

"Edward Adams."

"You've got a good man there," I said. "He looks as gloomy as an undertaker, but there isn't a finer fracture specialist in the country, and an appendectomy is just routine with him. I'll call him and see what is cooking."

"All right," she said. She was still worried.

I called Ed Adams and talked with him about it. He gave me the details, the blood count. "If she were my own daughter," he said, "I'd be damned if I'd operate. I think it's licked."

"Good," I said. "I leave it to you, Ed."

"How's your own wound? I hear you backed into a dagger."

"Oh, I'm fine."

"I'll keep in touch with you."

That was that, and I felt a lot better. I relaxed and lighted a cigarette and smiled at the Senator to show him the news was good. He didn't ask. My smile was enough.

"In that case," he said, "let's get down to brass tacks. There is no point in asking who did this and who did that, because that only confuses the issue. So we start at the beginning. The beginning was that wounding of Sylvia Denim. I have absolutely nothing to go on. The empty bullet case has never been found. I've assumed that she was hit by accident. Somehow she got in or near the line of fire when you and Hollister first arrived at the hospital. This seems obvious because no one has attempted to injure her since. Also no one would have known she was due there, because she just dropped off to see Faith Normandy; they were close friends. The only possible way anyone could have shot her was from a window in the hospital itself—a hopeless task to locate the window. From there we go to Hollister."

"I know," I said, "but a recitation of what happened only confuses me more.

Did you ever check on alibis and things? Did you check on the gun? Did you ever locate the parentage or even the birth date and place of the little monster we found in the black bassinet? Those are the things—"

"Keep your shirt on, doc." He sighed, staring out the window. "I've checked on many things. The pistol we found in the Alcock girl's room was a .32, but, oddly enough, it was not the pistol that fired the bullet that killed Ward Hollister."

"It wasn't?" I said. "Then why—"

"Just a red herring. There is nothing like a red herring or three to screw up a case. The killer left that gun there to bollix things up. It was Faith Normandy's gun, brand new, and as a matter of fact, it had never been fired."

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

"It took the heat off a gun hunt," he said. "That's what it was meant to do. But the bullets did not match. So much for that. Now the uniform. The uniform was taken from Ward Hollister's offices. It had his name sewed inside the neck. That means that any patient of Hollister's might have snatched it at some time for future use. Or his wife could have taken it."

"Go ahead. It's still very vague and unsatisfactory."

"I know, I know, but you have to be patient. Things narrow down a little. Anybody couldn't do all these things. It narrows. I checked on the kid and never found the parents. I never found the birthplace, no certificate of birth that checked. No hospital had a footprint record of that kid's feet, and I combed every one in Los Angeles County."

"Then it didn't happen in Los Angeles County."

"That doesn't follow. It could have happened and been shushed. Now look. First we take Bill Merritt. This is his alibi. He left Hollywood two days before you arrived. He and his wife left by plane for New York, and in Kansas City he got a telegram from his office. It was a phony which he had arranged for them to send. He sent his wife on to New York and returned by plane. He was in town the day before you arrived on the Chief. He and this kid DuPrés worked a phony contract with Twentieth Century which never existed. His office—that would

be his confidential secretary—admitted it was all a gag to get DuPrés a good job with Mutual. They were really gunning for Al Roche. But the point is: Merritt was in town. Merritt could have shot Hollister."

"Why?"

"Motives aren't in this roundup. These are circumstances. Those who could and those who couldn't."

"O. K. Go ahead."

"Your sister-in-law Evelyn looks out. She was in New York."

"That throws her out."

Webster swiveled around impatiently.

"Never throw anyone out completely," he said. "Nothing is impossible."

"All right. Give me the dope on Cass Libano."

HIS eyes flickered. "He was in Hollywood at the time. His movements for that noontime are not known. That's all I have."

I shook my head.

"The same goes for Al Roche. Only more so. He was at the hospital before the killing. He had a visit with Normandy. Then he left, presumably."

"Wait," I said. I was getting tired. "Never mind that stuff. When you get through, we're at the same base. Any one of them could have done it in Hollywood. Any one of them could have done it in New Rochelle. Any one of them could have sent the poisoned candy. Any one of them could have stabbed me in the back."

"Oh no." He shook his head. "Not the stabbing. The stabbing was done on the dance floor, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then the killer was on the dance floor. Cass, Roberta DuPrés, Evelyn, your brother, yourself, Sylvia, Loretta Wayne, and DuPrés' husband, Harry Erikson, were on the dance floor. They are the only people in this case who were on the floor and who could have done it."

"Are we that narrowed down really?" I said, excitedly. "Because we can narrow it further. I didn't stab myself. Sylvia Denim didn't stab me, she was dancing with me. That leaves Cass, Evelyn, DuPrés, Bill, Loretta Wayne."

"Denim could have stabbed you while dancing with you."

"Don't be silly."

"O. K."

"Al Roche is out?"

"Sure. He was never in. I've known that guy a long time, doc, and he is a heel with more aggression than the Axis boys ever handled, but he doesn't have the guts for murder."

"Then look here. Here's your angle. Check on the remaining five from this angle. *Where were they last May? That baby was born in May, I'm sure. Check where they were and we may find the birth certificate and the parentage.*"

Daniel Webster smiled. He had finished his cigarette. "That has all been done. Checked on everyone, including you."

"Where was I?"

"In New Rochelle."

"Where was Sylvia?"

"In Reno, Nevada, getting a divorce from Cass."

"Where was Cass?"

"In Santa Barbara, golfing. And wooing Normandy."

"Where was Bill?"

"In Hollywood."

"Where was Loretta Wayne?"

"Whereabouts unknown."

"Where was Roberta DuPrés?"

"In Hollister's private maternity hospital, the Florence. She had a baby. According to the certificate of death, it was stillborn. The certificate was signed by Hollister, who could have faked it. No birth certificate would ever have been issued in that case. Maybe she didn't want the public to know the child was—"

"No, no," I said suddenly, remembering. "She's innocent. She's capable of anything, but she's innocent."

"I'm glad to hear you say that because it worried me. Why?"

"She has a Caesarean-section scar. Hollister performed a Caesar on upon her. From his record, he might have caused the death of her child. But in any case, she was never delivered of the baby we found. That was a delivery with a cephalotribe. It was not a Caesarean."

The Senator looked pleased. "I never appreciated the possibilities of detective work in medicine and obstetrics before," he murmured. "A dick can't ever get that personal, but the fact is that black and white evidence must be present in many human bodies, only

the public would think it indecent if we called such a turn."

"Nevertheless—" I said. "Where was Al?"

"In Cedars of Lebanon. Gallstones. Operation and convalescence."

"Where was Alithea Kane?"

"I don't know."

"*Where was Ward Hollister?*"

"I don't know," he said. "By God, I wish I knew."

"But look, Senator, if DuPrés had the baby by Caesarean, Hollister was there. You said—"

"That was May fifth. Directly after DuPrés had her operation—and Kane was not the nurse on that job—Hollister left on a vacation. He told his office that he would be away for three weeks and that he was going to Santa Barbara. He went to Santa Barbara for a couple of days and then vanished east. No one knows, to this day, where he went. Now I checked Alithea Kane against this. She roomed at that time with another nurse, a girl named Willis. Willis said that Alithea Kane left on May first, acting very odd and speaking of being rich one of these days, and said she was going to visit home with her mother in Montana. Her mother never saw her in Montana to the day she died. Obviously, Alithea Kane and Ward Hollister went to the same place."

"Was it possible for Alithea Kane to have been pregnant at that time? My point is, did Alithea Kane have the deformed baby, and are we after a father? Do you think Hollister delivered her somewhere, and that the father—"

"The thought," said Daniel Webster, "occurred to me too, and the answers were inconclusive. Did you have some ideas?"

"I thought Bill might have had an affair—"

"But he remained in Hollywood the whole month. . . . However, Cass Libano did not remain in Santa Barbara. He made various trips, I have the places. Palm Springs, San Bernardino, Jacinto, Coronado Beach. Trouble is I haven't been able to plant Hollister or Kane in any of them." He coughed. "As to Miss Kane's pregnancy, it was entirely possible. Miss Willis, her roommate, said no, but that Kane had been getting a little plump and potty, and that after all it is possible to go through a

pregnancy without showing much size."

"Quite," I said, "if you happen to be the type. I don't believe the father of the crushed-headed baby ever knew about the child until it was six months old. I think he must have learned of it when it died. Then he went crazy, killed Hollister, killed Kane to prevent her blackmailing him, tried to poison me, afraid she had told me the truth, stabbed me for the same reason. Your man is Cass Libano," I said.

He said, "The knife in your back belonged to him."

"The cantharides in the candy undoubtedly belonged to him too."

"Uh-huh. In any case, he has flown the coop for the time being. He's blown, and I'm going to blow, too. I've talked too much, and you're tired. Good night, doc."

"I'm glad it's all over," I said. "Good night."

He waved without enthusiasm and went out.

XVIII

NEXT morning, Captain Johnny Trumble, of the New Rochelle constabulary, arrived and asked to see me. I told Miss Sard to send him in at once. He didn't stay long. He seemed ill at ease in the hospital. "How do you feel, doc?"

"Very good," I said. "Glad to see you, Johnny. I hope you have some good news."

"Well, I dunno," he said. He gave me a report he had in his hand. "Just wanted you to read this over. See if it makes any sense to you. Or maybe it's old stuff. I dunno."

The report was typed and it consisted of the following:

Description of person who purchased cantharides candy at Barricini Store on West 42nd Street. Seller, Mr. Witten Daniels, finding it difficult to recall purchaser, was very vague. Not absolutely certain of anything, but under questioning he did recall a woman who asked specifically for soft creams, and mentioned her insistence several times. He reports that she wore large horn-rimmed spectacles. He thinks she was rather pretty, despite these, and she had perfect teeth. She was dark, of medium height, with a nice figure. He doesn't remember what she was wearing.

There it ended. Johnny Trumble said, "I don't suppose this suggests anybody to you? You see, it was a woman, and she took the candy with her and mailed it herself after she doped it. That made it hard for Daniels to remember her, because she was just another customer. I tried to check the wrappings and the handwriting, but that was block-printed and there is no telling. Black ink, probably done in a post office with a stub pen. The thing was mailed in the Lexington Avenue Post Office next to Grand Central. How about it?"

"Hell," I said. I shook my head. "It could be anybody."

That afternoon, Miss Sard brought me a *World-Telegram*, her eyes sparkling, and she said, "Here's all the dirt, doctor. They haven't caught that bird yet."

I read the headline which looked remote and unimportant under the war news.

CASS LIBANO STILL MISSING AS DRAGNET TIGHTENS

Police Unearth Poison and Bullets In Fugitive's Rooms

... They had broken into Cass Libano's suite at his hotel and rifled his personal effects. They had found a ten-ounce bottle of tincture of cantharides, five grains of cantharides, a fifty-bullet box of Peters .32 Colt auto ammunition, and a phial of coramime. It was the most damning collection I ever heard of, and it made a closed case as far as the poor devil was concerned. God knows, I didn't like Cass, but the relentless manner in which his own past sins were closing a trap around him was frightening. Since he owned a .32 pistol, it was entirely natural for him to have ammunition. (But not in New York, where he had no pistol permit!) Since he was reputed, on the West Coast, to be the great and irresistible lover, due to his love potions, it was not surprising that they should have been found in his effects. (But, unfortunately, they had been used in the poisoning of MacArthur!) I knew what Daniel Webster meant then. Cass was clever, not stupid. The last thing in the world he'd have used for murder would have been his own gun and a drug like cantharides with which he was so romantically associated.

I wondered sadly where he was cringing in his foxhole. . . .

At three that afternoon—after I had decided in a chat with Dr. Weiss that I was ready to leave the hospital on the morrow—the telephone rang, and the operator said, "Dr. Peter Merritt?"

"Yes," I said.

"This is long distance," she said. "I have a telephone call for you from Hollywood, California. Miss Faith Normandy is calling."

I repressed my rising sense of excitement and waited, and I could hear the operator talking to someone else at the other end. I waited a full minute. Then the operator said, "I'm sorry, sir, the other party does not answer at this time. I will call again."

"All right." I hung up. Faith Normandy had put through a person-to-person and probably had had to wait until the call was completed. When it was completed, she had probably been called away from the phone: studio work or something. I burned with curiosity.

Then the phone rang again, and I grabbed it.

"Peter?"

"Yes, Sylvia?"

"How are you darling?" she said.

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm leaving here tomorrow, Sylvia. How are you? I've been worried about you."

"I'm all better," she said. "Dr. Adams said I could go back to work. I'm calling from the Barrymore Theatre. Been rehearsing here with the Guild Group. Gosh, Peter, I'm lonely. I've missed you and been scared."

"Come and see me."

"I can't," she said. "I can't stand hospitals. Not that kind. If you were having a baby, yes, but I'm sure I'd faint as soon as I smelled the antiseptics and stuff. Darling, I'll be there first thing in the morning. What time?"

"I'll leave at nine."

"I'll meet you downstairs, darling."

"All right. And you take it easy. Don't overdo things and get another attack."

"I'm really all right, Peter."

"See you in the morning."

Next morning, I paid my bill and left the hospital. Sylvia met me downstairs. I had breakfast with her. The reunion was warm,

even though public, and it was wonderful to see her again. You could see she had been through the mill a little; her eyes were a trifle tired and she had lost some weight. "But I feel grand, Peter," she said. "Dr. Adams was a brick, and I was so relieved that I didn't have to have an operation. I'm just scared stiff of that sort of thing."

We rode the top of a Fifth Avenue bus, one with a shelter, and sat right up front where you always feel you are going over the edge every time the driver brakes the monster. It was very fine. Nobody recognized her—she wore dark glasses, a Hollywood habit which tends to make one conspicuous, I think—and I put my arm around her and we watched the frigid Hudson, saw the unhappy camouflaged freighters anchored midstream, shivered at the bleakness of the cliffs.

I felt as close to her as I could ever feel. I was happy. We drank in the lights of Fifth Avenue and the sights of stags and snow in the windows, of Santa Claus and silver bells and giant sleighs and fir trees.

I left her at the hotel, kissed her good night, and took a cab for Grand Central. I boarded the New Rochelle train, where I promptly warned the conductor to wake me up in time. Then dropped off. When I reached my own house I found Bill and Evelyn there. Evelyn looked worried, and Bill was crying. The sight was amazing. He was cold sober. Ice-cold sober. The result was frightening.

XIX

I SAID wearily, "Now listen, both of you. I don't want any of your damned nonsense. I'm just out of the hospital. I've had a long day. I'm tired. And there isn't a thing you can tell me that I'd be interested in, except how Bill can stay alive in such a sober condition. Good night, I'm going to bed."

They stared at me as if I were crazy. Evelyn said finally, "You mean you're not even interested? I'm going to divorce Bill and you're not interested?" She screwed up her face and began to cry. "He never even went up with me to see Aunt Harriet! He let me go all alone up there to Round Hill. I might have had the baby—"

"Oh, my God," I said. "What did I ever

do to deserve either one of you?"

"She's going to leave me," Bill blubbered, like a big kid. It was awful to see. "She's going to divorce me, and it isn't true at all, not a word of it is true!"

"He's been unfaithful to me!" Evelyn said. "Here I am, going to have a baby, *our* baby, and what does he do? He gallivants with that stinkin' little blonde."

"Shut up!" I roared. "Both of you!"

They dropped into silence with a thud, and both of them sat down, awed by my thunder.

"Now just what the hell is it all about?"

They started to talk together, but I pointed at Eve and said, "You tell me first."

"Bill's been wooing with Alyce Whitcomb."

"That's a damn lie!" Bill shouted. "She found a letter from Whitcomb and she thinks—"

Evelyn shoved the letter at me, and it was innocuous enough, knowing Bill. It was from Alyce Whitcomb, saying what a heavenly night it had been, and how she was glad he had found her, and that nothing would ever break them apart, and how they were going to go on together to new heights of glory and ecstasy. It was a typically over-written and dramatized thing, with much underscoring of words, and you could see that Alyce Whitcomb was going to be the new blonde bombshell in Hollywood or bust.

"Well?" Evelyn said.

There was an hysterical edge to her voice.

"How about it, Bill?"

Bill said, "I wined and dined the little fool and flattered her up to her ears! It was the first chance I'd got to be alone with her. Cass had been monopolizing her all the time, he wanted to marry her, and he wasn't going to let me get in an inning! When he took it on the lam, I made pay dirt. I whirled her around the burg and all but committed bigamy, but I didn't sleep with her! All I wanted was her name on a contract with my agency, and I got it! That's what she's talking about in the letter. I told her she would knock off an Oscar a year with me to guide her, I made her feel that she was the new Garbo. I got her so high on her own flattery that she wrote the letter, telling me how firm and fast we would always be. Professionally! I didn't clip her."

"New heights of ecstasy," Evelyn sniffed, looking unhappy again.

"Can I help it if she overacts?" Bill said. "Gosh, of all the people in the world *you* ought to know your own husband well enough to realize I couldn't drive anyone to ecstasy. Not even you!"

"Heavenly night," sniffed Evelyn.

"Oh, Eve, don't be a fool!" Bill said. "Peter, it's just some fool idea she's got in her mind."

"I'm so unhappy," Evelyn said. "I'm frightened. I'm afraid I'm going to die. Petey, do many die?"

"No," I said. "Not many. . . . Listen, Bill, calm down. I admit you've got grounds for righteous indignation, but cool off. She's having a baby, and when you're *enceinte*, you sometimes get very screwy ideas and you act unreasonable. That's all. She's just scared, and she probably doesn't sleep well. You take Evelyn home and put her to bed. Now listen to me, Bill. Put her to bed. Then get in touch with her doctor and have him look at her at once. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," he said. "I get it. Come on, darling."

MY DAILY journal for the following day says briefly, "*To the office. Things piled up. MacArthur looks good, says she has missed me. Thought it too soon to start deliveries. Still weak. A very curious story in Herald Tribune this morning. Half inclined to investigate.*"

That was a rank understatement which I never revised. I was not only half inclined to investigate, I *did* investigate, and with astonishing results.

The story was only a stick or two and it read,

The body of a young woman, identity unknown, was discovered this evening in her room at the Broadway Hotel. She had been dead for at least twenty-four hours, from an overdose of sodium amytal. She had registered as Shirley Trent of Hollywood, but the address proved false. Only identification was a pin clasp with the initials D. C. on it. The body was removed to the morgue.

The first time I read this, it went in one eye and out the other. But then Mac said something which gave it a great deal more sense and fascination.

Mac sat there looking glum, with the paper in her lap.

She said, "There isn't much of cheer in the paper these days. Even Walter Lippmann is gloomy. And everything you read about is death or destruction or self-destruction, like this girl who took some sodium amytal and stepped out. I once knew a girl who tried that, but we were able to perform gastric lavage before she died and saved her. She was training as a nurse. But her name was Dora Fitch. These initials are D. C. Poor kid."

Dora! Dora Chase! It hit me suddenly and clearly. Dora Chase! It was only a name. Where had I heard it?

My mind went back to the Coxcomb. Evelyn had mentioned meeting Dora Chase. No—she had seen Dora Chase and called to her, but the girl had not answered and had disappeared. And Sylvia had said that Dora Chase was somewhere else on vacation. I telephoned Sylvia at once.

"What, you again?"

"Sylvia, listen, please. Do you remember the girl, Dora Chase, you and Evelyn talked about that night at the Coxcomb?"

"Certainly, darling. What about her?"

"Do you know where she is?"

"I imagine she's out at Palm Springs, Peter," Sylvia said. "Last I saw of her, she was at the Mutual Studios when I washed up my contract. She's an awfully nice girl."

I said, "Who is she?"

"Why, she was my nurse during my breakdown," Sylvia said. "She's the one who took care of me when I was ill in Reno. She looks very much like me, except for her hair. She's blonde. Darling, you aren't falling in love with my alter ego, are you?" She laughed dryly.

"Not a bit," I said. "I'll tell you about it later."

I hung up and looked perturbed. Mac said, "Hey, hey, what goes on? Brow striations, and your color isn't good. Besides, someone just came into the office. Are you receiving?"

"No," I said. "I'm going to be busy."

I DID not go to the New York morgue, but telephoned first. There was some delay in reaching the proper party, but I finally got through to a man who knew what I was talking about. I identified myself to his complete satisfaction and then said, "I'm calling about the unidentified suicide with

the *nom de guerre* of Shirley Trent and the initials D. C."

"The nom duh what, doctor?"

"I mean the girl who died of an overdose of sodium amytal. I'm calling about her. It's possible I may be able to help—"

"Oh, you mean the pretty blonde kid. Dorothy Canton," the man said. "Yeah, we identified her. She's been released for burial."

"Potter's field?"

"No, someone claimed the body and is giving it a regular burial."

"May I ask who claimed it?"

"Guy named Albert Roche."

"I see," I said. "Do you know where the body was removed to?"

"Sure. The Zeller Morticians called for it when the M. E. gave it a release."

"Thank you," I said and hung up.

After lunch, I went into town via New York, New Haven & Hartford, and at the phone booths, lower level, Grand Central, I looked up Zeller Morticians, and found that there were three different undertaking houses in Manhattan. Then I saw Dr. E. Zeller listed, his place of business East Eighty-sixth Street, so I chose the establishment located on East Eighty-sixth and taxied over.

Dr. Zeller's undertaking parlors were spacious and finely done. The chapel was on the main floor, akin to a church, with its row of wooden pews, an organ to wrench the mourners' hearts, and the small altar where the coffin on its roller-stemmed stand would repose. The body did not lie in state here, this was only the last stopover en route from embalmer to gravedigger. Each body lay in state in its own private room, respectively known as the Cerise Room, the Gold Room, the Silver Room, *et al.*, each banked by flowers, fronted by a miniature amphitheater of folding chairs, not to mention the row of solemn candles, the ever present Bible on the near-by table, and the hushed whisper of the assembled host.

I didn't look up Dr. Zeller at once. Following the index of conglomerate corpses, I saw that Miss Dorothy Canton's reposed in the Purple Room, second floor, and I went up. The room was small, but otherwise had all the necessary gloomy claptrap. The room was empty, and the cadaver slept alone. Unfortunately, the lid of the coffin

was down, and when I attempted to raise it (they are built in the manner of Dutch doors, these coffin lids), a bespectacled and outrageously grave individual warned me against it.

"I want to see Dr. Zeller," I said with finality.

Dr. Zeller was sent for. He took his time, but I recognized his half-crooked face instantly when he came in, solemnly dressed in a Prince Albert, his hands gray-gloved. "Dr. Merritt!" he grinned with delight that was sacrilegious in the atmosphere of "you-coulda-heard-a-pin-drop." "This is a surprise and a pleasure. Fully recovered, I trust?"

"Yes," I said, "thanks." I shook hands with him.

"How do you like the house?" he asked.

"Very impressive," I said.

"I wanted to see this girl," I added.

"So?" he said. He was smiling, but his eyes had narrowed very shrewdly. Not suspiciously. He knew I knew. He was considering which way the wind was going to blow him. He was a somberly astute individual. "Are you sure, doctor, you have the right party?"

"Isn't this the young woman suicide who reposed at Four Hundred East Twenty-ninth Street until Al Roche, Esquire, claimed her corpse for burial?"

"Four Hundred East—" he paused then smiled. "My word, of course, that *is* the morgue, is it not? I know where it is so well, and yet I never do recall the address."

"I have the right cadaver?"

"Yes," he said. He sighed. "I'm afraid you have. You wish to look at it?"

"Absolutely."

He opened the lid of the coffin. He said, "It was a very easy job. She was quite natural. Sleeping powders. Of course, there was an autopsy, but I did well with her, don't you think?"

"Yes, quite," I said. He had done well indeed. The girl was very pretty, even if dead, and her blonde hair was dressed nicely. She looked very much like Sylvia, although her features were not as fine and her face tended to be broader at the cheeks. But there was little doubt that it was Dora Chase and not Dorothy Canton.

Dr. Zeller waited to hear me.

"Don't bury her," I said. "Unless you

want me to get a restraining order from the district attorney's office."

"I don't understand, doctor," Zeller said.

"This girl's name is Chase, not Canton."

Dr. Zeller flexed his fingers. "I would like to know exactly where I stand in it."

I said, "I think the girl was murdered."

He paled. "In that case, let us go to my office."

We went to his office and sat down. He was perspiring a little but quite at ease. I could see a mild confession coming; he was going to clear his skirts of taint; no accessory after the fact for him.

"Believe me, I know nothing," he said. "I will explain at once. Mr. Roche telephoned me to say that he had identified the young woman at the morgue and asked me to take care of the burial. He would pay the expenses. If she was murdered, doctor, would the police have released her corpse for burial?"

"Yes, if they didn't know it."

"But *you* know it?"

"Not exactly." I said. "But it's strange that—well look at it. A girl named Dora Chase, a Hollywood private nurse, is supposed to be vacationing in Palm Springs, California. Instead she winds up in the morgue, a suicide by sodium amytal, is claimed by a man who knows her real name, yet he calls her Dorothy Canton. Considering the amount of murder and assault which has threaded through all this, the conclusion is that she was murdered. Unless you or Al Roche can supply me with a good reason why she would commit suicide. And the only good reason I'd take is that *she* was a murderess, which I don't believe."

"Well, I'll admit," Dr. Zeller said, "that Al Roche is paying for it. Only what difference does it make?"

"I don't know," I said. "Somehow, it makes a difference. It makes a difference or Al would never have bothered to claim and identify the corpse. In fact, how did he know—" I paused. How did Al know that the corpse was at the morgue? Had he read the story in the paper, instantly assumed it was Dora Chase, instantly gone to claim the girl?"

"I've known Al for a long time," said Dr. Zeller. "He is a very strange man. He isn't normal any more. Too much power. Once he was a pleasant boy who lived on Ninth

Street and was married to a fine girl named Rose Kahn. I think she, Rose died; it made Al's mind go tiptop, and he began to rise. After Rose died, he became ruthless."

It was incredible to believe that Al had once been young, had once been married, like any other normal human being.

"What happened to his wife?"

"She died in childbirth," said Dr. Zeller. "Have you noticed that Al does not like you, Dr. Merritt? There is nothing personal in it. He hates all obstetricians because he felt that it was his doctor's fault—what happened to his wife. It wasn't, of course, but you could never tell him that."

"Well," I said, "thank you for the information."

AL ROCHE was staying at the Waldorf Towers, and I found him in bed, smoking a cigar and dictating letters to a secretary.

"Hi, doc," he said, regarding me shrewdly. "What's on the myth you call a mind?" He laughed, guardedly.

"It's about Dora Chase," I said.

He clamped his teeth on the cigar and looked startled. "All right, dear," he told the secretary, "run the hell out and get yourself a cuppa coffee someplace, come back in ten or fifteen minutes." And when she had gone, "For the love of hell, doc, do you have to bust in here like that and go spoiling my day? Why the hell can't you be nice sometimes? Bad enough I should hate your guts without your acting like a crum whenever you get the chance. What is this bunk about Dora?"

"Didn't you send one of your stooges to identify and claim the body?"

His eyes blinked ingenuously. "Sure," he said. He was less aggressive and he looked mellow. The old friend, true and tried friend, was coming to the surface. "Sure, I did. Poor kid. I gotta heart, ain't I? She worked for me once, took care of me. . . . You don't think a humanitarian like Al Roche would let her sweet little figure repose on a cold slab in a morgue, do you?"

"Tell me, Al. Why did you identify the girl as Dorothy Canton?"

He smiled thinly. He had me. Boy. I've got this smart schlemihl, he thought. You could see it. "Because, my dear doctor," Al replied grandly, "Dorothy Canton hap-

pende to be her real moniker. You see, my dear doctor, when the kid left home and went to Hollywood, she had to change her name because her parents were so infuriated, they forbidded her the use of her true name, so under my guidance—she was so young and appealing, I felt sorry for her and made her my sort of prodigy—we changed her name to Dora Chase. Unfortunately, she did not have the stuff to make the grade as an actress."

"Is there anyone you haven't slept with?" I said wearily.

"Don't be vulgar," Al said. "It's astonishing the vulgarity a man meets these days."

"All right, Albert. Why—since she was known to all her friends in Hollywood as Dora Chase—did you identify her as Dorothy Canton?"

He looked annoyed. "So, if she's dead, ain't it nicer to bury her under her real moniker?"

"Possibly," I said. "But at the same time, burying her under her real moniker, as you put it, does not inform the world at large of her true identity. Did it ever occur to you that she was murdered?"

It had occurred to him because he was not surprised. He tapped ashes from his cigar carefully onto the rug. "Ridiculous!"

"Did it ever occur to you that she might have been put out of the way cleverly by someone who thought she was Sylvia?"

He looked pleased. "Say, that's an idea! But how could anyone have made her commit suicide? The cops had her and they didn't have doubt—"

"How did you know, in the first place, about the body? How did you know it was Dora Chase?"

He took a long time, thinking. "There was a union card on her. Nurse's card. The cops called me up—"

"In her real name or her stage name?"

"I dunno. They called me up—"

"In that case, why was she in the morgue? If they knew who she was—"

"They called me up and asked me—"

"What was the name of the policeman who called you?"

"I forget."

"You're marvelous," I said.

"Get the hell out of here," he said. "I don't have to take this from you, you

butcher. Get the hell out and don't come back. You sicken me, doc. You are repugnant to me. Scram, will you?"

"Al," I said, "I'll tell you what I think. I think you have been relatively clean in these murders up to now. But at this point I think you know the killer of Ward Hollister, of Alitheia Kane, and of Dora Chase. I think you know who stabbed me. And I want to point out to you that you are in New York State, where it is going to be hell to fix the powers that be. And if you are caught in this thing, as an accessory after the fact, you are just as much a candidate for the electric chair as the killer himself."

"Your concern," Al said darkly, "is touching. I will remember you in my will. Now blow the hell outa here, will you, doc? Leave me alone. I'm a busy man. I've got the worries of the world on my shoulders. I can't be bothered with a guy like you. Why does everything happen to me?"

"Because you ask for it," I said. "And you are certainly asking for this one."

I LEFT him. I telephoned the Warwick and found Sylvia there. "How's for tea for two?" I said.

"All right, Peter," she said. "I feel low. Everything has gone wrong. Come on over."

I went over and met her. She looked unhappy. We had tea in the dining room downstairs. "What's wrong?" I said.

"Pete, I'm going to pull out of this Guild Group thing. I'm going to pull out before it falls on me." She shook her head. "It's a flop. I can tell a flop from here to Timbuktu, if that's still Allied territory. Seriously. Peter, it isn't going well, and I can't afford to get caught in the crash. Right now, I've got to have a hit or nothing."

"Didn't you see the play before you signed?"

"Yes," she said. "And it read beautifully. It was poetry. It was like Maxwell Anderson at his best, only it had a dash of that Odets realism. It was wonderful stuff. I think the author ought to publish it. But it doesn't act. It just doesn't *act*. It's cold turkey."

She was upset, and I felt sorry for her, but I didn't know what to say. "Look, Sylvia," I said, "has this anything to do with you marrying me?"

"Peter!" she said. She looked hurt. "Don't you want me any more?"

"Don't be silly!"

"No, darling, I only mean—I can get out of the contract all right, I'm sure of that, but I don't know what to do. Bill wants me to sign with Selznick, and Al Roche has made me a perfectly tremendous offer, two hundred thousand dollars a picture, two pictures a year. It's insane, but he offered it."

My face fell. "You'll go back to Hollywood?"

"No," she said. "But I can't sit either. It's either the stage or radio, if not the cinema. The stage is out, until I get a good play. I don't want to fall into the kind of luck Katie Hepburn did with *The Lake*. I can't stand a floppa any more than she could at that time. Why do you look so worried?"

"I see you back on the West Coast, and I see me on the East Coast, and I see a most companionate marriage."

"Peter, I didn't mean that," Sylvia said gently. "I'm going into radio until a play comes along. And if I get a chance to do a picture, it might be on the East Coast. I'm going on the air Friday night from WABC, in a workshop broadcast. No salary involved there; it's one of those guest appearances. But I hope to make it good enough so that I ride in my own program shortly thereafter. I could have guest-starred at fine salaries with any big program, but I want my own, not just a one-night stand, and I think this is the best way to swing it. If it doesn't work out, then I'm afraid it's the West Coast, at least for a little while."

"'Good-by, Sylvia,' says the handwriting on the wall."

"No, Peter, you're wrong. It's all confused. After all, *I'm* not running out on you. I want to marry you, I love you, and I think we should be married as soon as possible and take up these other problems as they come along."

"I'm going to take you up on that," I said. "Damned if I'm going to worry myself out of wedlock by crossing bridges before I come to them. Make a bargain with you. I'll get the license and have everything ready, and we'll be married after your broadcast Friday night."

"All right," she whispered, and we

kissed, and a waiter snickered. He was just jealous.

I took her over to the theater then, and in the cab, I said, "Sylvia, tell me something. Do you know whether Dora Chase had anything to do with Ward Hollister?"

"I don't think so," she said.

Then I told her the whole story, about Al and Harvey and the Dorothy Canton business, and I asked her what she thought of it.

She looked pale and shaken, and I realized like a fool that I hadn't broken the news very gently and that she had only learned that the girl was dead. She cried quietly, and I cursed myself. I took her back to the hotel.

"That girl," she told me, "never did anything to anybody. She was a sweet kid who had had hard breaks. Yes, she was a protégée of Al's once upon a time because she thought it would get her a break, and it did, but she didn't measure up. All I know is she was a sad sweet child, and she never—"

"Do you honestly think she would have committed suicide?"

Sylvia shook her head. "I can't answer a question like that. How could I know? You never know what people are thinking. She was sad. A quiet sort of sad person. No, I wouldn't have thought she would take her life, but so many do, frustrated, disappointed. I can't understand why she never got in touch with me when she came East. When *did* she come? She hadn't intended to, I know that. Did Evelyn really see her that day? If so, why did Dora run from her?"

"Those are answers to the puzzle," I said. "If we find them out, we may find out the whole answer, the greater answer. But we may never find them out. Syl, I'm a damned awkward oaf for having broached it so un-diplomatically, and I'm awfully sorry."

"I'd have found out sooner or later. I never thought when you called and asked about her this morning—"

"Forgive me."

"Forgive you?" she said. We kissed gently.

"Anything, Peter."

"Thanks," I said. "See you in wedlock Friday night."

Then I left her.

XX

I PUT in an appearance at the office next morning.

It was not an appointment day, and there should have been no patients, but you never could tell. I only wanted to get back into the swing of things and see how strong I was. I told Miss MacArthur all the details of the Dora Chase thing, and we were having a wonderful time when the buzzer sounded, meaning someone was in the waiting room.

"Go see, Mac," I said.

She came back in a minute. "For you, doctor. And is she dressed! Boy, if I had clothes like that—but why dream, with what *you* pay me?"

"Don't be fresh," I said. "What's her name?"

"Normandy," she said. Suddenly she looked shocked. "*Normandy!* Good gracious, Peter, it's Faith Normandy, the movie actress! I knew I'd seen her before!"

"Let her in," I said, smiling, "and don't split a blood vessel. I'll get an autograph for you."

"Let me stay when she's in," Mac said, pleading.

"All right."

Faith Normandy came in when Mac held the door open. She wasn't as tall as she had looked in bed. She was dressed in a stunning suit which had an orchid on the lapel, and although she wasn't really beautiful, she gave you that impression. She was a talent star, not a body-beautiful star.

She looked at me, somewhat amused at herself, and she looked me over thoroughly as I rose to meet her, and she said, her voice deep and rich, "Hi, Merritt."

"I'm glad to see you again, Miss Normandy," I said.

"You aren't half as glad as I was to see you," she said, and she laughed huskily, throwing back her head. Then she came over and planted a wad of lipstick on my cheek. "That, my boy, is for the perfectly beautiful little daughter you gave me an assist on. You've got to look at her pictures. She's a dream. If you'd drawn and quartered me, it would have been worth it." She shoved the photos of her baby at me and shook hands with Mac and introduced herself. Mac nearly died of joy. I enthused over the pic-

tures, although all babies are alike to me, pretty or homely. Normandy sat down, passed cigarettes, and we smoked. She was a marvelous person, instantly at ease, always poised, and so damned frankly friendly that it warmed your heart. Mac's eyes were big as saucers; this was going to be a day she'd tell her progeny about until the end of aging set in.

"Didn't expect to see me?" Faith Normandy said. "And call me Faith, if you will. Normandy is phony anyhow. My real name was Faith Gallicuddy, and that just wouldn't do. I see by the papers that you've been through a little excitement, beginning with the day you planted this monstrous scar on my tummy."

"Quite some," I said. "How'd you like Dr. Baker?"

"A swell guy," she said. "He thinks you're all right too."

"We went to school together. Your next baby, hire a guy like him instead of a quack like Ward Hollister was."

"Uh-huh," she said. "Don't worry. But I have to get another husband before I have any more children. They haven't caught up with dear old Cass, have they?"

"Not yet."

"He didn't stab you," she said. She puffed deeply on her cigarette, until you thought smoke would come out her ears. "He really didn't, doc. I put in five months, yes, sir, with him."

"You think not?" I said. "Why?"

"Because he isn't that stupid," she said. "He's a bright boy. But bright. He's not a dope, Merritt. Anyway, that isn't why I came. Say, I called you the other day."

"I know, but you weren't there when they got me."

"Had to go to the studio." She glanced at Mac with a grin. "Look, darling, stop gawking. I'm mortal, just like you. Would you like an autograph or something?" She scribbled her name on my prescription pad and passed the sheet to Mac. "There, darling, it isn't worth the powder to blow it to Tokyo. Now run out and let me see Merritt alone for a few minutes, eh? Like a good girl?"

"Sure," Mac said. "Thanks a million, Miss Normandy." She ran out.

Faith lighted another cigarette from the one she was finishing. "Tell you how it is.

I was under the dope, Merritt . . . What's your first name. Pete, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"Well, ever since I came back to consciousness and they told me what had happened and what you'd done, I've been trying to remember things. That nembutal fogged me all up, funny stuff. I don't remember you or Hollister being around at all. But something else stuck in my mind. I knew it was there, and I thought if I could ever remember it, it might help. Well, I tried like hell, but it was no good. Then I read in the paper about someone trying to poison you with candy—" She took a deep puff and exhaled a finger of smoke, punctuated with a perfect smoke ring. "So I says, Faith, you've got to help Merritt out of the spot. Just when I was going to sleep at night, in that funny twilight state, I'd think and think and try to dream it over again. And finally some came. Maybe it'll help. It certainly won't hurt. You want to hear it, Pete?"

"I'm all ears," I said seriously.

"**N**ONSENSE," she grinned. "You're really very pretty." She laughed. "Don't mind me. I feel good. Well, look. The first thing I remembered was the screen. Now, according to the chart, they gave me that dope about twenty minutes before you and Hollister arrived, and the stuff really hit me pretty quickly. Everything was hazy as hell. Then here's how things went. I remember looking out the window and concentrating on a clock across the street when I bore down on the pains. I'd sort of watch the clock and think that by the time it reached a certain point, everything would be finished, see? All of a sudden, there was no clock, just a white haze, and I thought I was dying and I think I began to cry. Then someone said, 'Be still.' That I remember. Plain as day. And I was still. I thought it was the nurse, and I said, 'Kane, Kane, what's happened?' I couldn't see who was on the other side of the screen. And she said, 'Be still, be still.' This was all fogged up."

"You're doing well," I said. "Keep going."

"Well, finally I strained to one side. I wanted to see that clock. It was something I was clinging to, while in labor. And I

just saw the edge of this figure, all in white, and I must have seen a gun. Now I don't remember it clearly, but I must have seen one because I know I said, "Don't play with my gun, you'll hurt yourself, Kane. Put my gun back in my bag or I'll tell the doctor." "

"You know you said that?" I asked.

"For sure," she said. "And since then, I've been thinking it over, and I probably tipped the murderer then that my gun was right there, and that's how it was used as a red herring. It was never fired, really. The killer took my gun, just for an extra, and discarded it when Hollister was dead, never really having used it, except as a phony clue."

"What else do you remember?"

"Not much, Pete. Really not much. I kept calling for the doctor—but everyone ignores you when you're making a racket. It seems to me I knew you were coming before you came. It seems to me the killer in my room said, 'Here comes Hollister, old girl, and there's Merritt with him, so I'll take Hollister and leave you Merritt. You'll be safer with him, anyhow.' "

"Where was Alitheia Kane all this time?"

"Someone had telephone for her, and she went out and said it was important, and that she would be right back. That's why I thought it was she who had come back. I never remembered her coming back. Everything hazed up after that. Don't remember you or Hollister or Sylvia. I think the killer tried to shoot Hollister from my window, though, and hit Sylvia instead, because it seems to me there was an explosion, but it might have been a backfire or something. The trouble, Merritt, is that it's all so damned dreamy. I couldn't swear to any of it. But it's quite real to me, nevertheless. It took a long time to reconstruct it. I've been thinking about it for a long time."

"I tell you why I believe some of it," I said. "When Hollister introduced me to you, you did say, 'I knew you were coming, Merritt.' We put it down to the dope. You might have meant it."

"Mmmm," she nodded. "Does all this do any good?"

"Yes it does," I said. "A lot of good. How much of this could you honestly swear to in a court of law?"

She thought it over carefully. "Well, Merritt, I'd swear this much. I'd swear

someone in my room had a gun and put a screen around my bed and told me to be still and told me that Hollister and Merritt were coming."

I smiled broadly. "That's the important part," I said. "It was good of you to come." The telephone rang. "Pardon me . . . Hello."

"HELLO, doc," Daniel Webster said.

"How are you, Senator?"

"Still fishing."

"Any luck?"

"Some," he said. "Lots of bites, but the big baby keeps throwing the hook."

"That's very quaint," I said, chiding him. "Faith Normandy is in town. Maybe you'd like her to tell you what she just told me."

"I would that," he said. "For a stuffed shirt, you're getting around. Of course, I know about you digging into the Dora Chase thing. Was that blind or were you in the know?"

"Senator, you've got me," I said. "I don't follow."

"Then it was blind. Dora Chase is the answer, doc."

"The answer to the whole thing?"

"Uh-huh. I've checked. She took over the mothership of that crushed-headed baby we found on the heights. I traced her to a cottage in San Fernando Valley. She ostensibly gave up nursing and adopted a child. That was in June. She just disappeared from practice and society at large. I've had L. A. working on the angle for some time. Her name kept cropping up in the case."

"You never told me," I said.

"I haven't told you lots of thing," he said. "I like to be a shade smarter than the next guy on a case . . . The L. A. police found this cottage in the valley. Chase lived alone with the kid. There was quite a nursery. That toy-box coffin was part of the set. The baby died there. She was taking care of it, and it died there. Post-mortem said the kid died of spinal meningitis. I've been looking for Dora Chase ever since. Sylvia Denim said Chase was in Palm Springs."

"And she wasn't?"

"Yes, she was. For two days. Then she checked out. Funny, but she checked out the day the story broke that someone had tried

to poison you with the cantharides candy. Now wouldn't it be touching if she left for New York—which she certainly did—on account of that story?"

"Touching indeed, but since she didn't know me from Adam, I'd suspect she left Palm Springs because of the Alithea Kane killing, which would have meant a great deal more to her, under the circumstances."

The Senator coughed. "You may be right. Anyway, Dora knew all the answers, and it's a shame we had to find her dead. Dora got her wind up and came East to see where she stood. And now she knows."

"Murdered?"

"Want odds?"

"But how?"

"You sit down with an old trusted and true friend, and you have a friendly drink, and the trusted friend slips you a drink loaded with sodium amytal."

I said, "No word from Cass?"

"They haven't caught him yet, no. I wasn't sold on Cass, to tell the truth, but now I'll buy more. This Chase one was a beaut, very smartly done, and it has his touch. Well, O. K., doc, thanks. Take care of yourself and don't be careless. I can't lose the feeling that somewhere in this your life is a gimmick. Otherwise, why the hell would you have been stabbed?" He sighed.

I said, "Faith is staying at the Barbizon Towers. You can see her there."

"I'll do that. So long, doc."

I hung up. Faith Normandy smiled. "Everything is murder," she said. "It's worse than that blood-curdling *Still of the Night* I made once for Warner's. They used more ammunition in that lulu than the boys at Bataan did. Did you see it?"

"No, forgive me."

"You didn't miss anything. Get Eve and Bill to play you the recording we once made of a scene from it. Cass and I played a bit for Bill's library. Some stuff. Well, here's a girl who's heading for the big city and begging for your company en route."

But I couldn't go. I had to go up to Grasslands for the rest of the day. I invited her to the approaching wedding and thanked her for coming to see me, and when she said, "So long, Dr. Kildare," I said, "Best to the brood, Stella Dallas."

She laughed so heartily I knew I had

hit the wrong picture and that she had never played it. But I didn't care. I'd meant well.

XXI

WHEN I got home, it was quite late, but I saw a light on, and since my housekeeper had not been given the signal to return to work—I had prolonged it intentionally so that I wouldn't be bothered by her until I went back to the humdrum—I knew that Bill and Evelyn were back again, since Bill had a key.

But only Evelyn was there. I found her in the kitchen, trying to drink some tea she had prepared. She didn't seem glad to see me but she wasn't sorry either. She just didn't give a damn.

"You look ill, dear," I said. "Where's Bill?"

She sniffled. She had been crying. "Gone back home," she said. "He left me and went back."

"What?"

"He got disgusted with me and went home. I couldn't go with him, Petey. I was afraid to. I've had nothing but aches and pains and I was afraid I'd lose the baby in the airplane. He took the five-o'clock plane tonight. He said he had important business. He took Bobys with him . . ." She began to bawl as she thought of it. "And Whitcomb . . ."

"Take it easy," I said. "Now take it easy, Evelyn. Bill isn't in love with that girl. I know that myself."

"But she's got—sniff—such a beautiful—sniff figure—I don't mean Bobsy—I mean Alyce—"

Suddenly her face went green and her eyes got wide. She ran out of the kitchen. I could hear her vomiting in the maid's bathroom. She was gone a long time. When she dragged her tail back, she looked awful. "I'm going to die," she whispered. Her voice was hoarse. "Petey, I guess I'm finished."

"Get upstairs," I said. "You're going to bed."

I took her up. Lord knows I'd rattled around that big house alone. It had plenty of room. I put her in the guest room. "Have you got a nightie with you?"

"My bag's downstairs," she said. "Petey, don't send me to a hospital, Petey. I'm sick

and dying, but don't send me away from here. Wire Bill, will you, darling? Take care of me. But don't touch me. I'd die if anyone touched me now! Send for the doctor. Bill never got the doctor—"

I brought up her bag and left it with her.

"Take it easy, Eve," I said. "Nothing is going to happen to you. But do you have labor pains or what?"

"Just go away, Petey, just leave me alone," she said, breathlessly. "No labor pains, I'm sure, but I feel so sick."

"Get in bed and keep warm," I said. "I'll make some more tea for you."

"No, please."

"Shush," I said. "You've got to keep something on your stomach. What line did Bill fly?"

"American."

I went out, and she locked the door. I called Western Union and told them to wire Bill care of American Airlines, New York to Hollywood, the following message:

**EVE HERE WITH ME VERY ILL STOP
TELEPHONE ME SOON AS POSSIBLE
PETE.**

Upstairs again. Knock, knock. "What was the name of your doctor, dear?"

"Forman. Damn him. He went to a convention."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I'll talk to you about it. Just a second while I make you some tea."

When I brought the tea, she looked a little better. She sipped the tea and held it down.

"I think something may be wrong. And at this term, it's not so good, dear," I said. "You've got to have a doctor working on you. I won't send you to a hospital, but you've got to have a doctor."

"No," she said. "I'm so tired, Petey. Can't I just be left alone for a while?"

"Dangerous," I said. "It really is, Evelyn."

"No," she said. "I'm sick of the whole business. Not tonight, maybe tomorrow. Maybe I'll be all right. Maybe I should just stay off my feet."

"Would you like me to examine you and make certain?" I asked.

"No," she said. "No, no, no, darling. I don't want to be poked and hurt any more!

Just let me rest!"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Blew my top, darling. Look, Petey, don't be noble tonight." She stared at me. "Just let me take it easy. I feel better. Tomorrow I'll talk sense with you, huh? Run out and get a newspaper for me, I'll do a crossword puzzle, and then snooze, and tomorrow I'll feel better and I'll talk sense."

"Always tomorrow," I said. "You've got to face this thing, Evelyn."

"Tomorrow," she said. "Get me a newspaper, Petey."

I GAVE in. I went down to the corner and got a newspaper and brought it back to her. After that I turned in myself. I was very weary and my back hurt around the wound. At midnight, Bill telephoned from Kansas City. He sounded frantic.

"Is she all right?" he kept yelling. "What is it, Peter, what is it?"

I said, "Shut up. No, she hasn't had it. Be still and I'll tell you." I lowered my voice. "She's staying here. Won't go to a hospital. Bill, I think she may lose the baby. Prognosis for this term is not good."

"She was fine when I left her," he said.

"I'm going to take care of her," I said.

"So don't worry. I'll get a good man over here first thing in the morning and let him go to work on her. But she may not lose it. May take some time. These things do. She's here, she's safe. I won't leave her until I get a good nurse to stay with her. If there's any news, I'll wire your office day or night. All right?"

"All right," Bill said. "Thanks, old pal." He hung up.

Back to sleep. Almost. I had barely shut my eyes when I heard Evelyn, and there she was in the doorway, in a nightie. She said quietly, "Was it Bill, Petey?"

"Yes, go back to bed."

"I heard you. I heard what you said."

"Now, Evelyn."

"I don't want any nurse and I don't want any doctor."

"Damn it," I said angrily, "just who do you think you are, anyhow? You're in my house with a disorder of some kind, and I'm a doctor. I've got my own reputation to think of if you don't give a damn for your life. Tomorrow Henry Pyke takes you as

a patient whether you like it or not, and you get private nurses whether you like it or not. You'll not die on my hands!"

She laughed, without warning, and it had a horrible sound, in the dark, as if it were without reason.

"Stop it," I said.

She stopped. "All right, Petey," she said.

"Go back to bed and stop acting childish."

"I'm not tired," she said. "You know why I laughed?"

"Why?"

"Because you didn't want me to die on your hands."

"What's funny about that? You sound a little nuts. Go on to bed, Evelyn, or I'll send you to a hospital. You're more trouble than you're worth."

She stood in the doorway. "Petey."

"Go away," I said, and put my head down in the pillow.

"Petey, you know what?" she said.

"What?" I said wearily.

"I'm going to murder you," she said evenly.

"Not tonight, dear," I said. "I'm too tired."

"No, not tonight," she said. "I'm going to murder you tomorrow afternoon."

"Good night," I said.

"Get up," she said. "I'm not tired. Let's talk. Come on."

There was something unpleasant and real in her voice. As if she had taken herself very seriously. I sat up in bed and stared at here in the dark. Then I switched on the light.

"See?" she said. Her face was pale and passive, her eyes sharp, but rather glassy, and there was no color in her lips. She had Cass' pistol in her right hand, and it was cocked because I could see the hammer back. The gun was cocked and her finger was on the trigger, and the trigger didn't take more than a three pound pull. The muzzle of the .32 was on a line with my eyes. Nothing was funny any more. My guts went watery. Nothing was funny at all.

"Evelyn," I said. It was a croak. "Are you mad?"

"Just mad enough," she said. "You have to be for this kind of thing. No, don't get up, Petey darling. Stay right there. Let's have the revelation. Stay in bed. Let's

have the revelation now with you in attendance. All right?"

She sounded as crazy as a bat to me. "All right."

She held the gun in her right hand. There was absolutely no chance of jumping it or charging at her. It was cocked, and I had twenty-five feet to go. That old bedroom was as big as a barn. Besides, I was under the covers.

To my astonishment, she smiled slyly, her eyes like marbles, and she said evenly, "No baby, Pete. No baby at all. I'm not pregnant, I haven't been since last year, and I'll never be again. See? It was all a trick, just a trick. I'm not with child, darling. Not a bit."

Nothing came out of me. Not a word out of my gaping mouth.

"Wasn't it clever of me, Peter, to fake an alibi for those scars on my tummy?"

"Striae," I whispered. "Then you were the mother of that baby in the black bassinet! You—"

"Surprised?" she said, cocking her head. Her gun hand was awesomely steady.

I said nothing. I couldn't.

"You shouldn't be," she said. She waited for a bit while I still stayed silent.

She stared at me sadly. "You look awful," she said. "Dying isn't as bad as all that, Petey. As a matter of fact, you're about the only guy in this thing I didn't want to kill. I'd rather have killed Bill than you. He's a rotten louse. You always treated me nicely. You always treated me like a lady, and you were very sweet, but hell, Petey, it's me or you and I want me. So it's got to be you."

"You're insane," I whispered in horror.

"Don't kid yourself, darling," she smiled. "Insane like a fox. If you think anything I've done in this is insane, except when I lost my head and sent you that box of candy and then stabbed you because I thought Alitheia had sung to you, then you're nuttier than a fruit cake. Come on, Petey, get up. From now until tomorrow afternoon, you've got to stay ten feet away from me and within my sight all the time. You might as well get dressed. You can't sleep any more."

I still couldn't quite believe it, and she knew it. She said, "Take a run up into the attic when you get some clothes on, Petey. And listen, darling. Don't try anything. And in case you have hopes, drop them."

"People won't believe this," I said.

"People believe anything, *anything*," she said. "It's amazing. You don't know how much you can get away with until you start trying. I never expected to get away with all this, I'm really going to. I can see it. Get dressed"

"Get out of here then."

"Not a chance, darling. You turn the other way."

I dressed with her standing there, holding that gun on me. I knew that it shot what you aimed at, and she had it aimed at me. When I finished dressing, she said, "I didn't want to bring things to a head this soon, darling. But you might have phoned Pyke and a nurse first thing in the morning, and we couldn't have anyone else here, you know. You forced my hand."

She compelled me to follow her to the guest room, where she got into slippers. She did not dress herself. She stayed in the night gown. "You need a drink," she said. "So do I."

"There's a small bottle of brandy the cook uses for flavoring," I said. "I'll get it."

"With me." She smiled at my face. "Poor Petey. Let's go down. You really do need a drink badly."

XXII

WHAT do you do in the dark with a killer who is going to shoot you dead sooner or later?

I'll tell you.

You stare, you sweat, you strain, and you think. Nothing works out. You plot: how you will jump that gun, how you will leap through a window, how you will trick her. Nothing works out. Nothing works because the impetus of horror dulls your good nerve, and you become a coward. You aren't dead yet and you cling to life cravenly, thinking maybe you will be spared. An act of God, a bolt of lightning, the hand of justice. Something.

And yet, though never natural, our association became faintly civilized. All through the night we sat in the kitchen, and when that got cold, we moved to my lab, which was always warm. Always, I sat across the room, where she could pot me easily if I tried for her. She was so cool and self-assured, her cheeks in bloom, and her

eyes bright and clear, sometimes it seemed ludicrous to think that she had done it all.

But she had.

"Who disturbed my medicine chest here?" I said, once, rearranging the bottles in the glass cabinet.

"I did," she replied. "Had to, Petey. What the hell, you won't have any use for it anyhow. I don't mean to prey on your imagination, darling."

The nux vomica had been disturbed, and that accounted for her earlier sickness when I found her alone. No actress could have done that well. But nux vomica certainly would have made her sick as a dog. "Where is the cyanide of potassium?" I said.

"I have it," she said. "Just in case something goes wrong. Does it hurt to take it, Petey?"

"Try a few grains," I said savagely.

She laughed merrily.

After that, hot and cold anger, tempered me alternately, and I got cannier. I lost my shakes and I began to hate her. When the shock of surprise, stupefaction, and horror began to dissipate, I hated the sight of her. Yet I smiled at her with Machiavellian grace. I said, "I wondered why you were afraid of Faith Normandy. Of course I can see why you killed Dora Chase. She knew you were the mother of that baby."

"Listen, Petey," she replied pleasantly, "when Faith turned up in New York, I had the cold shakes, and I had to rush things."

"Yes. You were wary she'd remember things in the fog."

"I talked too damned much, I was hopped up with the idea that I was going to pot Ward Hollister. I knew she was drugged. I knew all about nembutal. It never worked on me, though." She shook her head. "I made one bad break. I said to her when I saw you and Hollister get out of the car: 'Here comes Hollister, old girl, and there's Merritt with him, so I'll take Hollister and leave you Merritt.' Gosh, Petey, that was a bad one. I forgot myself. Because no one in Los Angeles had ever seen you before except Bill and me. So how could anyone have recognized you on sight? Except Bill or me?"

She made it sound so perfectly simple.

"The thing about murder," said Evelyn wistfully, "is that you can't stop once you start. The first one is hard, but the rest get

easier and easier because you have nothing to lose and you're fighting for your life." She sighed. "But I knew it would be this way. I planned it ahead this way."

"Right from the start you planned to kill me?"

"I'm sorry, darling, but yes. It had to be that way . . . It's getting dawnish, I think."

"Why did it have to be that way?" I said desperately. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You were sweet to me, you didn't do anything. But you were my pregnancy confirmation. Funny thing, Petey, but nobody would believe an expectant mother could commit crimes like these. I played it that way from the beginning. Want me to tell all?"

"Please."

"Take a drink," she said.

I had brought the brandy bottle with me from the kitchen. I went over to the cabinet and poured myself a snort. It tasted like water. I didn't feel it at all. I sat down and lighted a cigarette and puffed like an incendiary while she talked. She was very smart. She never left my eyes. You can always tell what a man will do by watching his eyes.

"Cass Libano was the father," she said. "I did have an affair with Al Roche, but he wasn't the father. I really fell for Cass. He was wonderful. He was so strange and exciting . . ." She took a breath. "But he made me pregnant. I was scared stiff. Then I thought I'd just make believe it was Bill's baby, but Bill was suspicious, and I didn't want to take a chance. So I went home to see my mother in Montana in May. So everyone thought. Instead I went to Tia Juana, and Ward and Alithea Kane came down and they delievered me." She shuddered as if she had been struck. "God save me, it was agony, and he gave me an idiot. I couldn't take that child back with me. I knew Dora could be bought. I paid Dora to take care of the baby out in the valley. I hated Hollister for the way he had hurt me, he nearly killed me, the pain—"

She paused and her face was wet in recollection. "Give me a drink."

I poured her a drink and pushed it across the table. She downed it. "Well, that was over. Everything was fine. I'd pulled it off. But Cass knew. See, I'd told him, frantically, in the beginning. And he knew when I'd

had it. That son of a romantic louse began to blackmail the life out of me. On top of that, he baby got sick and died . . . We couldn't bury the kid legally, there'd never been a birth certificate on him. I didn't know how much I loved the boy until I saw him dead. When I thought of all I'd gone through for that baby—"

Her eyes grew visibly wet. There was no doubt that she had felt a deep and honest love for that baby boy. I thought of that black bassinet, the pitiful monster it had held.

"I WAITED too long. I was afraid, afraid to tell anyone. I waited much too long. I had to go through. Anyway, I fixed a bassinet in black because the baby had no mourners but me, and one night I took him up on the hill and buried him there in his toy chest. I was very sad. I thought it was done then, but Cass knew it could be proved I had had a child, and he kept blackmailing. Bill began to wonder where I was spending the money. You see, Petey, the striae would have given me away. The childbirth lines. Some have 'em and some don't. I did."

"What then?" I said. "It's an ugly tale."

"Then this Alithea Kane came to me one day and she told me what Hollister had done. She told me the whole thing and why it was such agony and what that butcher had done to my baby. She wanted money for telling me. I paid her. But the leeches were growing fast, and I hated Hollister so cold black I knew what I would have to do. I knew it. And I did it."

"You faked this pregnancy."

"Instantly. I faked it, told Bill, and began to worry. Bill got a little worried too. He was really pleased. Then started the idea that something was wrong and that we'd better call you. I wanted you to lend an honest plausibility to my pregnancy and also to give me an alibi. Bill and I left for New York before you arrived because I didn't want you to examine me really, and because that would prove I wasn't in Hollywood. When Bill was called back from Kansas City, I went back too, by a different line."

"What did you do?"

"I got Cass' gun first. I knew where he kept it. I took his gun and the bullets, and

some of the stuff he used on his ladies fair. Good enough. Then to get Hollister. Faith was in labor, that meant Hollister would be at the hospital. I knew how busy everyone would be in "delivery" at a time like that. Bingo."

"Faith's gun," I said.

"Spur of the moment," she said. "She thought, in that coma, that I had hers, so I took hers too, and figured to use it as a herring. Anything to mess up the evidence. I never shot it. I almost got Hollister when he got out of the car, which would have been simpler, but I was a lousy shot and I missed and creased Sylvia. I never meant to hit Sylvia at all."

"You nearly killed her," I said coldly.

"What the hell, said Evelyn, shrugging. "Just her bad luck. Do you want to hear the rest, darling, or are you going to get unpleasant?"

"Go ahead. But I know the rest. You tracked Alitheia Kane, got panicked when you saw her with me, and shot her right in New Rochelle."

She smiled grimly. "She was one surprised baby, that gal. She was set to sink her hooks. She knew I'd killed Hollister and she knew why. I tried for her once in New York, day before she went to New Rochelle. I missed. She got her wind up . . . Know what I did? I walked up to her in the street and never took my hand out of my bag. I said to her, 'Nice day, darling, isn't it?' And let her have it. Then I walked into that restaurant and sat down and had lunch. Just like that. People really don't see much around them. I've learned it."

"Then you sent the candy."

"Yes. I thought you knew and were wondering whether to hurt Bill by disclosing me. That was risky. Shouldn't have done it. But I threw it on Cass with his cantharides. That didn't work. That's why I stabbed you with Cass' knife in the dark on that dance floor, to finish the job. But when you lived and didn't sing, I saw Alitheia hadn't told you."

I sighed. "Where is Cass?"

"He's deader than a silent movie, but he is the one they'll look for. He is going to be your murderer."

"He's dead?" I said. "Where is his body?"

"Remember the old well on Aunt Har-

riet's place in Round Hill? The one they boarded up when they drilled the artesian?"

"He's down there," I said grimly.

"Uh-huh. Dropped him there the day I visited her. I had shot him first, of course. He thought I was helping him hide."

The dawn was up, and the sky brightened, and the lab had a little chill in it. There we sat.

"Let's eat," she said. "Breakfast for two. Hands across the table. Just as if we were having an affair, eh, darling? I bet you'd be a bearcat of a lover, if you'd let yourself go."

"That is one thing you'll never know," I said.

"Nor Sylvia," she said, and laughed nastily.

XXIII

I HAD NO stomach for food. I watched her go through a rigamarole of corn flakes and bread and jam and all the sweet things, just like a child. An evil child. I drank some coffee, but it threatened not to sit well, so I quit.

The strain told on me. I knew then that nothing would make her change her mind. She thought a thing one way and then played it that way. And in her game, I was a dead man. As simple as that. For she was simple. Simple and conscienceless. Never mind the retribution. Put that off for tomorrow.

"This won't work," I said. "You're not going to get away with it."

"Oh, stop," she said. Her eyes were hard. "You don't know anything about it. Don't be such a bad loser, darling. You have to die sometime. Do you want to live forever?" She kept looking toward the door. The front door. "What time does the mailman come?"

"Around nine," I said.

Then I reached a subject I had thought of but had not dared to broach. I finally asked, "Why do you spare me until this afternoon, Evelyn?"

"Two reasons," she said, "First, I'll say I had a miscarriage yesterday and I want a little time to pass with you alive so that my story will be more credible. Everyone is going to think the reddish striae are from this baby I was supposed to be carrying. Actually they are from my own dead baby."

I shook my head dismally.

"Then too, I'm waiting for the clincher," she said. "A real clincher, Petey. It was what first gave me the idea of having Cass kill you *after* you had delivered me of my false child. Just one of those things that makes its perfect."

"What's that?"

"A phonograph record," she said. She smiled sweetly. "Just something that existed before all this began, and something I planned to take advantage of when the right time came. I forgot and left it in California and I had to send for it. I had to wire Halley to send it on. I signed Bill's name to the wire and told Halley to send the record to Cass Libano, care of you here."

"What does the record do?"

"Oh, I'll show you."

She did too. She was worried about that record, but it arrived safely. It had been airmailed. That's why she didn't kill me. She didn't want my body to tell that I had been dead before the record spoke. You'll see what I mean.

We went into the living room and she gunned me into a chair with my hands behind my neck, and she put the record on my Capehart. It was an acetate home-recorded disk. She and Bill had a six-hundred-dollar Presto recorder in their home. When the tubes had warmed, she put the playback head on the record and we listened. What came out was the voice of Cass Libano and the voice of Faith Normandy. Bill was in it at the beginning. He announced:

For the home-recorded library of the Merritts, Mr. and Mrs. Cass Libano in a scene from one of Faith's forthcoming pictures. Go ahead, kids, and remember no blowups. (Laughter. Then silence.)

Bill again:

Scene one, act two of Still of the Night. The scene, a lonely hotel room where Louie Gass, dethroned gang leader, is hiding out with his moll, Sally. Curtain. (Silence.)

CASS: *I hear them, baby. They're coming. Take a gander out the window.*

FAITH: *Yeah. They're here. Squads of them. We gotta keep back from the window, Lou. This is it. Cops and tommies, and just you and me alone together to stand 'em off. But I don't care. I love you, Lou. Just dying with you is O. K. Just so's we're*

together.

CASS: *Lemme at that window. (Sound of a shot.) Yeah, copper, up here, that's where I am. And still alive and kicking. Still got a bullet or two left for you. I'll kill again like I've killed before, it's all I ever knew and I do it damn well. Come on and try to take me! Ha-ha, you'll never take me, not me. This is one ginzo who'll hit the high road, shooting his way clear and free from now on, and nobody'll ever take me, not alive. (Sound of a shot in the distance.) So long, copper, and the next time I see you, it'll be over a gun sight. (Sound of shots very close.)*

FAITH: *Lou, come away from that window, they're shooting—*

CASS: *They can't hit me, they can't ogh! (A shot.) They winged me, kid . . .*

It went on for three minutes, and he died in her arms in the scene, and obviously, although this first part built up the man, the sob scene at the end by Faith was hot stuff, and you could see why she had chosen to record it for Bill's library.

Cass, however, was not an actor, and he did not try to be. He was only feeding her cues and he spoke quietly without much emotion. After he was shot, Faith took a soliloquy that was a fine tear-jerker and then the record ended.

"What do you think of that?" Evelyn smiled.

"It doesn't make a grain of sense to me," I said.

"Petey, I'm getting nervous," she said. "I can't wait. Petey, darling, I'm very nervous and I think the time has come. Are you religious? You can pray a little while if you want. I've got to fix the record. Pray, Petey, and forgive me, but this is the way I planned it and I've got to go through with it. I'm going to kill you in about ten minutes, Petey."

My breath hung heavy and my heart pounded. I looked all around and put my hands in my lap and over my face. They came away wet with sweat. I wanted to yell and scream, to do something, but I couldn't move.

SHE PLAYED the record again and made a mark on it. She turned up the volume and set the needle at the mark. Then she took the telephone from the table and held

it over the Capehart's loud-speaker. Then she telephoned a number.

There was a pause and finally I heard the voice of Daniel Webster at the other end. "Hello? Hello?"

Evelyn clicked on the switch, the turntable revolved, and Cass Libano, evenly and unemotionally, said, "*Yeah, copper, up here, that's where I am. And still alive and kicking. Still got a bullet or two left for you. I'll kill again like I've killed before, it's all I ever knew and I do it damn well. Come on and try to take me! Ha-ha, you'll never take me, not me. This is one ginzo who'll hit the high road, shooting his way clear and free from now on, and nobody'll ever take me, not alive.*" She shut off the set instantly and hung up.

It was monstrous. That speech pulled out of the play was real. It was Cass. It was damning.

Evelyn broke the record into bits. She opened a window and scattered the remnants, and they were tiny. She closed the window. "Into the lab," she said.

I moved woodenly. We went into the lab. "Break the cabinet," she said. "Make it look like a struggle, darling. Put some instruments and stuff on the table as though they had been used and were ready to go back."

I smashed the cabinet and put instruments and cotton and gauze on the table, the rest of the impedimenta scattering on the floor.

"That's it," Evelyn said. "Good-bye, darling. I'm really very sorry, but I'm nervous too and I've got to hurry now. He'll trace it and come out here, and I've got to be sick in bed when he arrives. Cass was here, killed Dora, killed you, spared me because I was innocent of complicity and also was out of sight in the guest room, ill and recuperating from my miscarriage. Perfect?"

"For God's sake, Eve—" I rasped. "Give me—"

"Take a drink," she said. She was shaking now. She had the jitters when the time came to shoot. "I'll take one too. But don't slip me any cyanide, darling."

"How can I?" I said, croaking. "You have it."

"Hurry up, Petey, hurry, hurry, I've got to kill you! I'm all warmed up to it now!"

I pushed her drink across to her and she

grabbed it and threw it off. I took my drink and threw it at her face and then I ducked as the gun went off.

The gun fell on the floor, cocked for another shot. It was Cass' gun, the .32. She hadn't fired at me. She'd only pulled the trigger out of reflex action. My pony of brandy had caught her on the bridge of her nose.

It couldn't have hurt her much.

But she fell off the chair and she began to die. It didn't take her more than fifty seconds to die, but those fifty seconds chilled me to my marrow. She died damned hard, violently, her neck rigid, her eyes bulging hugely from their sockets, her tongue stuck out like a stick, her color purple, blue, and scarlet.

That's the way you die from strychnine. That's the way strychnine hits you.

True, she had the cyanide. But she didn't have the strychnine. It was right in the cabinet. I knocked the cover off when I broke the glass. I had put forty grains into the brandy. One quarter of a grain is the minimum lethal dose.

She was right about one thing. She'd said, "People don't see much around them. I've learned that."

I'd learned it, too. Thank God.

XXIV

I FELL into a chair and I sat there for a long time, panting and sick. My stomach felt like jelly, turning over and over. All the life was out of me; the relief was so great, I had no strength. I could feel my scalp crawling and if I hadn't known better I would have imagined that my hair had turned snow white. It hadn't.

The telephone rang. It jerked my heart action when it startled me. I grabbed it awkwardly and dropped it, then picked it up and breathed, "Hello?" My voice was strange.

"Who is this?" Daniel Webster said.

"Peter Merri," I said. "Senator—"

Odd, the mind. Not five minutes had passed since she had hung up on him. It seemed like a century. Certainly I was an old man.

"Doc, for the love of God," said the Senator, "are you all right? Did she get you? I've called the New Rochelle police,

they should be on their way! Did she get you?"

"You—*know*?" I said.

"Sure—*Eve*. I've got it on the little strumpet, I know it! But I didn't expect her to jump me! Are you all right?"

"I'm—just fine," I said.

"Where is she?"

"Dead," I said. "I poisoned her."

"Don't tell that to anyone. Don't say a word until I get there. Play sick."

He hung up noisily. I knew what he meant then. He was thinking of me. It was perfectly legal for me to defend myself by poisoning her, but it made rotten reading. I got to my feet and went to her and found the cyanide on her. I took it from her, replaced it with the phial of strychnine.

EVERYTHING turned out nicely. I didn't say anything to the police until the Senator arrived, and he and Johnny Trumble and I got closeted and we thrashed it out. They thrashed it out, rather.

The Senator said, "Look, Trumble, he slipped her the poison all right, but he's a doctor, and what kind of patients do you think he'd have if they felt he had slipped the strychnine to her, even if she was a killer . . . You see what I mean?"

"Sure," said Captain Trumble. "Not so good. So he grabbed the gun and got it from her and when she saw the jig was up, she swallowed the drink. Good enough?"

"That's what I mean," said the Senator. "It's a white lie, but damned harmless. It's his reputation. He has it coming."

"Sure," said Trumble. "Doc, you look like the last rose of summer."

"He'll be all right," Webster said. "Come on, doc. It's moonlight and roses from now on. But I had her tagged." He seemed to resent the fact that it had been so close and that he had not stopped it. "I got her handle from the U. S. Customs. She crossed into Mexico last May sixteenth, the day she was supposed to have gone home to mother. I checked with this Dr. Forman, down in Atlantic City, by phone, and he said he never even knew her and she had never

been to him for examination. You see? You're going to be all right, doc. You come into town and let your lady love take care of you.

"Senator," I said quietly, "I've been an awful fool."

"That you have."

"It comes back to me now. Something he said that morning. Ward Hollister. Although you can't blame me for not remembering everything he said. But I should have thought of this one. He said something about how he had had an unhappy—wait a minute. Here it is verbatim. '*I had a pretty unhappy experience over the border last May with complications.*' That's a dead man talking. Hollister said that before I ever agreed to assist him at the hospital."

"Post-mortem," Daniel Webster smiled faintly. "Makes it seem so easy. Was it Sherlock Holmes who said that every problem became childish once it was explained to you?" He shook his head and took a deep breath. "Let's go. You're going to marry a great girl."

"And all along," I said, "I had a tight dread that Sylvia was the one you were gunning for. All along, I thought that she was the culprit you had set your sights on."

He said, "I considered her, until the appendicitis attack. Then, of course, it was out of the question."

"How?"

"I called Dr. Edward Adams and asked him a couple of pointed questions."

"What questions?"

"Run along, Johnny," Webster said to Trumble. When the New Rochelle detective had left us alone, he continued, "You may not like the idea of me having got so personal, sonny, but it was a murder case. I asked Adams if Sylvia Denim had ever been a mother, and he said no. The gal who had done this shebang had been a mother, that much we knew. And Sylvia was out. That clinched it."

"I could kiss you!" I said.

"Bless my soul," said Daniel Webster mildly, "if you don't say the most unique things."

The Cocktail Murders

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Among the debris of the last big party the gay Elwyns tossed was a corpse. So they buried it in their backyard garden, in the heart of midtown New York, and spoke uneasy prayers that the city's thousand eyes would overlook the burial ground. But murder will out . . . this time, in a most strange fashion.

THE Elwyn home on East Fifty-fifth Street, Manhattan, was deserted this evening except for a girl named Liza.

For more than an hour Liza had been walking restlessly all around the house wondering where she could safely turn for help.

Safely—that was the all-important thing. She needed someone she could trust, someone who wouldn't blab, someone willing to follow instructions without entirely understanding them. A man, of course.

She kept prowling after the answer, and the answer kept eluding her. Presently she stopped to frown at a photograph sitting framed in silver on the baby grand.

It was a portrait of a young man of Liza's own age. He was boyishly handsome in an actorish way, almost revoltingly handsome, Liza felt, and certainly well aware of it. His smile was charming. His eyes were seductive and slightly insolent. These qualities were intentional and expertly put there as a result of long practice. His checkered woolen shirt, open at the throat, was meant to show that in spite of a touch of the Greek classic in his beauty he was really the rugged outdoor type. He had inscribed the picture in flamboyant script, *Adoring Dorian Always—Vic*, Dorian being Liza's older sister, the actress.

"Stop staring at me like that, you loathsome juvenile," Liza ordered him bitterly.

As she turned the picture face down on the piano the telephone rang.

Liza hesitated a moment before answering the call. "This is the Elwyns'," she said, her voice calm with a trained calmness that revealed none of the tension in her.

After another moment she said, less calmly, "Well? Hel-lo?"

There was no response. Liza could hear

little noises on the line—faint, busy noises suggesting people in motion, perhaps in a public place—street noises too, including the faraway beep of a taxi horn. But the person who had dialed the Elwyn number did not answer.

"Hold on a minute now." Liza spoke quickly, before the silent person at the other end of the line could disconnect. "This is the fifth or sixth time you've done this within the past few days, you clown. You keep calling this number and hanging up without uttering a single word. Why?"

The line remained silent except for the busy noises in the background.

"Don't be shy," Liza said.

Her blandishment failed. The line stayed strangely still.

"All right, then let me guess who you are," Liza went on, sounding more light-hearted than she felt. "You aren't Dorian—she's in Reno. You aren't Quig either—he's week-ending in Connecticut, and, anyway, he doesn't mind talking to me. . . . Let me think. . . . Could it be—Vic?"

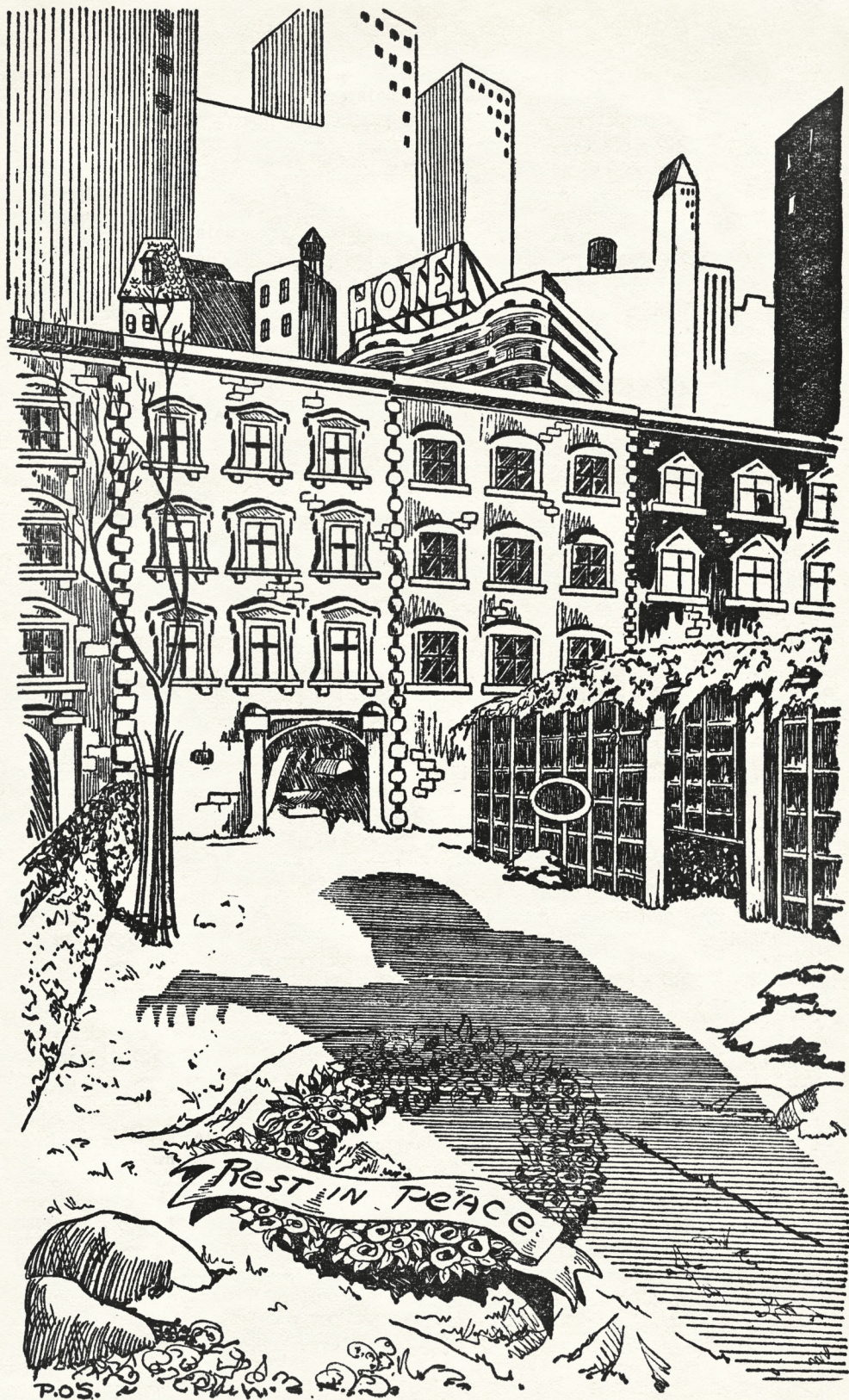
This name won Liza reaction of sorts—a sound like a gasp.

"At least you know who Victor Hedges is," Liza said, quickly pressing the advantage.

There followed a quick clatter as the distant, unknown hand replaced the receiver.

Liza turned to one of the blinded windows at the front of the living room. She peered through a crack between the bamboo slats and said to herself in a perplexed whisper, "Well, anyway, *she's* not the one who keeps phoning like that. The damn woman's still there."

A taxi sat at the curb across the street from the Elwyn home. While Liza watched,



the woman in the taxi leaned forward to peer across at the Elwyn home. She was white-haired, sweet-faced and frail—the perfect “little old lady” type. Her dress was a sedate black, her hands were dainty in black lace gloves, and her frilly little black bonnet rode high. She seemed shy, yet curious and somehow expectant as she gazed at the Elwyn door. Patient too—she had been sitting there just like that for hours.

IT WAS almost three hours ago, in fact, that Liza had first noticed her. The benign old face had appeared in the window of the taxi, the bright busybody eyes had gazed at the front of the Elwyn house, and after a moment the face had faded back. It had happened many times since, in just that same way.

It had gotten under Liza's skin. More than once she had checked an impulse to go out with a demand to know what the hell was cooking here. But the gentle old soul looked so entirely harmless. Still, it was an unnerving thing—the strange, prim little lady watching and waiting on and on, so gentle and so tireless. And so relentless.

Liza turned from the window and decisively walked back to the telephone. She asked the operator to connect her with the home of John Gaylord in New Canaan, Connecticut—John Gaylord being the senior partner of the Gaylord-Quigley advertising agency. When a servant answered, Liza asked for Martin Quigley. Her relationship to Quigley sometimes confused new acquaintances. He was Liza's ex-brother-in-law, Dorian's first husband, whom she had divorced several years ago, but still the whole Elwyn family's closest friend.

“I'm sorry to cut in on you like this, Quig,” Liza said. “She's still out there. The little old lady. Still casing the joint.”

“Look, Liz, as long as she just sits there doing nothing, what's there to worry about?”

“My nerves, for one thing. She's driving me bats.”

“You might tip off the cops—anonymously, of course. Taxi illegally parked, suspicious character in it.”

“You've never seen a less suspicious-looking character, Quig—absolutely never. Besides, a cop shoed 'em off about an hour ago. They circled the block and came right

back.”

“Just leave her alone, then. Sooner or later she'll have to go away.”

Liza said softly, pressing her toes into the rug, “But, Quig—I think she knows.”

Quigley was silent a long moment before he said, “That's just a hunch, isn't it, Liz?”

“For my money, this hunch is solid.”

“But how *could* she—”

“Who's that private detective you know?”

“Good lord, Liz!” Quigley blurted. “We don't dare open our mouths to any private detective.”

“But the one I mean is a friend of yours,” Liza insisted.

“Schyler Cole.”

“That's the boy. Can we handle him? Is he really very bright?”

“Never struck me that way particularly. They say his assistant is the real brains of the agency.”

“Then he's the man for us. We'll brush off the assistant and put it up to friend Cole. Much less risky than going to a stranger. As an old crony of yours he'll naturally be sympathetic.” Liza brightened. “I'll call him in right now.”

“Wait a minute, Liz. We're not prepared for that. We'll have to get together, decide in advance just how much he'll have to know—or how little we'll need to tell him.”

“Quig darling,” Liza said evenly, “we are not going to sit around talking things over first. We are going to do something.”

“O.K., honey, I'll tell Johnny it's some sort of emergency, that I've got to get back to town right away. Meanwhile, sit tight.”

She padded up the stairs, into her bedroom, then into Dorian's looking for her shoes. She found them in her brother Reece's study, on the third-floor front. From there she had a bird's eye view of the taxi with the little old lady in it waiting interminably below.

On sudden thought Liza pulled a copy of *Lost Egypt* by Reece Elwyn off a shelf and from its center removed a small brass key. She used the key to open a gun cabinet on the wall. The racks inside held Reece's fine collection of contemporary guns, weapons collected for purely practical purposes—shiny, well-oiled pieces ranging from a double-barreled .470 Nitro Express down to a dainty .25 Mauser automatic. Liza

reached for that smallest one, the most fitting for a female fist.

Her hand stopped short of it and she stood still, her lips parted on a grimace of revulsion.

She shook her head at herself, realizing how absurd it was to have imagined she might need a gun for protection against a frail old lady. She closed the cabinet doors, twisted the key, returned it to its hiding place in Reece's book, then headed down the stairs with her shoes on, resolved to face her adversary barehanded.

When she stepped out the entrance, directly onto the low, sun-slanted stoop, the latch clicked behind her. Instantly at the sound the old lady's face appeared in the taxi window.

Liza grasped the handle, snapped the door open, and stooped to look in.

"Oh!" the little white-haired passenger squeaked. "Oh, dear! You gave me a start."

"Well," Liza said. "Usually I'm polite to old ladies, but I must say you don't sit too well with me either. What's the idea of watching my house?"

"Watching your house, dear?" the old lady said in the kindest voice, as if speaking to a tot. "Why, I don't know *what* you mean."

She looked so guileless, so utterly innocent.

"Let's get this cleared up," Liza insisted. "That's my home, right over there. For the past three hours you've been sitting here in this taxi watching it. I would like to know why."

"But I haven't, dear," the old lady said in fairy-tale tones. "You're mistaken, you know. I haven't been doing anything of the sort, really and truly."

Liza stared at her as she sat there, straight-backed, smiling, lace-gloved hands resting on her lap. Beside her sat a big pasteboard box, a box twenty-four inches square and twelve inches deep, with no printing on the sides, turned toward Liza. The meter, Liza saw, registered \$5.40 due—most of it payable for waiting time, of course.

Liza tried threatening the driver. "I could have you pinched as a public nuisance or something."

He shrugged. With his grimy forefinger he made a circling motion, out of his pas-

senger's sight, signifying that in his opinion the old dame was nuts. Then he reabsorbed himself in his well-read *Daily News*.

Liza felt furious with herself, with the old lady, the driver, the taxi, the whole preposterous incident. She heard herself saying, on hot impulse, "I'm going in and call the police."

"But you really won't, dear," the sweet old lady said. "Honestly now, you really won't call in the police, will you."

It wasn't a question. No rising inflection, no interrogation mark. It was a statement of conviction ending with a period.

Liza felt frost settling over her face. She turned away, stunned, and crossed the street, trying not to run. She let herself into the house, leaned back against the closed door and drew in a deep, shaky breath.

"She *does* know. Somehow she *knows*."

Liza went in panicky haste to the telephone again. After a quick look into the Manhattan directory she dialed a number—even remembering Quigley's caution against premature action—and let the distant bell go on ringing until its insistence forced an answer. Then, in a this-means-business voice she said, "Cole Detective Agency? Is that Schyler Cole?"

II

TWILIGHT brought an old-world atmosphere to this mellow mid-Manhattan street. Real live trees stood in their little grassy squares of genuine topsoil imported from outlying Long Island. The houses retained their quiet centenarian charm under the disdain of the impudent young towers all around. And, sure enough, halfway between the avenues, at the south curb, a taxi sat.

I strolled toward it, still regretting that my assistant, Lucas Speare, had not been in the office to catch Miss Liza Elwyn's phone call. Being the tireless conscientious type, Speare would have responded at once, "Certainly, Miss Elwyn, I'll be glad to come right over," and what's more he would have *been* glad.

I had tried hard to convince Miss Elwyn that her emergency should wait over until Monday morning. This was Saturday night, I had pointed out, and it had long been

my policy to avoid work on week ends, holidays, and whenever possible. Somehow I had lost the argument, probably because of my hope that I might meet Liza Elwyn's older sister Dorian—the same Dorian Elwyn so often billed as “that radiant, dynamic star of stage, screen and radio.” Many times I had spent money for the pleasure of looking at Dorian Elwyn's image in technicolor, or at her “in person” from the twenty-fourth row. The possibility of seeing her close up, and even getting paid for it this time, seemed worth the effort.

Twenty minutes had passed since Liza Elwyn's call and in that time the taxi had apparently not moved. While nearing it from the rear I noted its license number. Also, seeing the taxi's passenger in passing, I was astonished to find the old lady looking so winsome. She presented a really heart-warming picture, one so altogether captivating that I felt Mother Goose herself could not have enjoyed a clearer conscience than this dear old soul.

I crossed at the corner and turned back to the door of the Elwyn house. The entrance was shiny white with bright red trim. The brass knocker sparkled. I had hardly had time to let go of it before the door was opened by a girl.

I stood there enjoying my first look at Liza Elwyn, a long one. She was a gladdening sight all over, but her hair especially stopped me. It was a unique color. All the tints, tones, rinses, and bleaches that women had forced upon their hair in my lifetime had never produced anything like this.

My first impression, that the poor girl had turned prematurely white was wrong. Her hair wasn't white, or even off-white. Next I thought she must be a platinum blonde reverting to normal—there were dark undertones playing through those waves—but that wasn't right either. Her blondness didn't fall into any of the standard classifications, such as golden, honey, strawberry, straw, flaxen, sun-bleached or washed-out. It was fascinating to behold, but offhand I couldn't tag it.

“I can't decide what color it is either,” the girl said. “It's hard to get used to, too, but on television it looks wonderful.”

“I'm used to it already,” I said. “On you it looks better than it would on anybody else.”

She gazed past me at the taxi and I observed the rest of her. Face: small but vivid. Eyes: also unusual, gunmetal blending into dark violet around the irises. Mouth: delicious, but with the lower lip rather swollen at the moment from much biting. Chassis: passed inspection easily in all specifications. Legs: long. Ankles: slightly on the sturdy side, but just slightly. Feet: the short-vamp variety, my favorite foundation for a woman.

“What are you standing there for?” Miss Elwyn said, pulling her troubled gaze off the taxi. “Holding the door open like this lets things sneak in.”

I stepped inside and closed the door firmly.

“Really,” she said, “this place is all spooked up. I've got to get rid of them before Dorian gets back. Quig says you're just the man to exorcize 'em for us.”

Letting the family references ride for the moment, I gazed about the room reflecting that if there really were any spooks in this place, here in the thick of a city not noted for them, they were exceptionally well set up. The room was a dream of smart decorating and comfortable living, except that just now it was lighted in too low a key.

“In case I sound slightly cracked,” Liza said, “I'm really not. I'm scared, that's all. But now that you're here, I feel better.” She smiled—a spontaneous smile somehow combining a teenager's ingenuous glow with a pungent worldliness. “Anyway, let's try to relax.”

Padding in her stocking feet, she disappeared into a pantry adjoining the rear of the room. Ice cubes clunked into glasses while she went on, “Dorian's in Reno,” just as if I were an old friend of the family. “Finally divorcing Vic. Been there two weeks now, four weeks still to go. I hope that'll give you enough time to clear this thing up.”

SHE was moving in at an angle. Alert-minded and bold, this Liza. Independent and self-sufficient.

“Damn shame Dorian ever fell for Vic in the first place,” Liza was saying. “Reece and Quig and I tried our best to break it up—although it really wasn't so bad, the first few months. Their marriage, I mean. Dorian wanted this one to last—bought this

place because she'd never had a home of her own, but mostly she wanted to make life solid for Vic. So we were all together here—Dorian, Vic, Reece, and I, with Quig always around too, of course, and it was nice. For a while, anyway. But now—"

She handed me a drink, scotch with a dash of soda, her gunmetal-and-violet eyes lifted to mine. "Quig's coming down from Connecticut. He'll be glad to see you again. You used to come to so many of his parties, but we don't see you around any more."

Martin Quigley was easy to remember. When Quigley and I were both with Knox and Commison, the hot-shot advertising agency in that prewar period, he had begun to acquire an odd reputation as the hand-biting type who scorned his clients and took pains to avoid ingratiating himself with them. He was slightly famous even then as a man who never curried favor by throwing parties.

"It's been a long time, all right," I said.

Liza tasted her drink. I tasted mine, reflecting that it would be smart of me to watch my footwork.

"We were talking about things that sneak in," I reminded her.

She estimated me a moment without smiling. "That's the way it feels, anyhow. That old lady across the street is no ghost, but she's part of what I mean. It's a feeling of intruders, of presences that don't belong here."

"Prowlers?"

"That's as close as I can come to it."

"How long has this prowling been going on?"

"Several months."

"What do the prowlers want?"

"I don't know."

Abruptly Liza put down her drink and padded across the room to peer out the bamboo blind.

"She *still* there. Let's *do* something about her."

"All right, let's. If she's tied up with these mysterious visitations somehow, she's probably waiting for the house to get empty. Our play is simply to give her an opening."

Liza prowled around the room until she found her shoes under the piano. She whirled a short cape across her shoulders, then caught up a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Without a by-your-leave she stowed

these in my coat pocket.

It gave me a strangely delicious melting sensation to feel Liza's hands slipping in and out of my pocket like that. I was to learn later that she made a practice of stashing her feminine impedimenta in the pockets of her escort.

We made sure the entrance locked itself behind us. Liza's hand on my arm, we paused on the stoop to gaze at the taxi still sitting there in the deepening darkness. We walked down the block together, not glancing back, turned at the corner, and after a moment retraced our tracks inside a taxi. I directed the driver to stop on Fifty-fifth just beyond the intersection.

Liza leaned forward, one hand lightly on my knee, gazing along the block.

The old lady had alighted from her long-standing taxi. She had paid the cabby and now it was rolling away. Carrying her cardboard box by its string, she went with jaunty little steps across the street to the Elwyns' door.

She paused there to remove a key from her little black purse. She opened the door, went daintily in and closed it behind her.

Liza Elwyn stared at me with her eyes and mouth all circles.

"Sit tight," I said.

Eight minutes thereafter, by my strap watch, the Elwyns' door opened again and the old lady came out.

This time no box. Except for her little black purse, she was empty-handed. Her slightly bouncy movements suggested she felt highly pleased with herself. Turning her back on us, she headed for the far corner with her same jaunty little step, but faster now.

"Get going, driver," I said. "Keep that old lady in sight."

He had trouble starting his motor. Liza and I watched the old lady mincing along, nodding cheery greetings to passers-by who took it with obvious surprise and turned to smile after her. By the time our taxi came to life she was already turning north at the corner.

We whizzed the length of the block, under my exasperated urgings, and reached that same corner just in time to hit a red light. Craning out the window, Liza and I could find no old lady bouncing up the avenue. Evidently she had already turned out of

sight at the next cross street.

"Go back home," I suggested quickly to Liza, "but don't touch anything. I'll try to catch up with Grandmother."

I left a dollar bill in the driver's hand. Liza went hustling off along the cross street and I loped along the avenue curb. After turning into Fifty-sixth I slowed, feeling foolish because the old lady had vanished.

I turned and walked fast, back to the Elwyn door. Liza had left it ajar. Going in, I found her bending into the fireplace. A little blaze was burning there now—the old lady's pasteboard box, torn to bits. Liza had plucked out one piece of it, one having a fraction of a name printed on it in red script. I slipped it from her fingers, dropped it to the hearth, and stepped on the flaming corner. There would be time soon to decipher the fragmentary printing.

"What was in the box?" I wondered. "What did she do with it?"

Liza shook her odd-colored head, frightened and mystified. While gazing all around I heard a sharp, involuntary intake of breath and found Liza gazing at the door giving into the court. She turned quickly to say, "She must've gone upstairs. You go up and look around while I—"

Suddenly Liza was clinging to me, her arms hard around me, her head of strange and lovely hair pressed under my chin.

"Oh, Schy, I'm scared!"

"That's very good," I said. "Please scare easily and often."

She looked up with a shaky laugh, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted. Tempting. But by then I had noticed that the bolt of the court door, seated firmly in its socket when we left the house, was now drawn.

I loosened Liza's arms, reluctantly. The door opened easily and Liza stayed close at my side as I stepped out into the court.

New York's eternal light shone down on vine-trailed arbors, lawn furniture and beach umbrellas. Built into one wall was an old, or apparently old, blacksmith's forge. Piled over in the near left-hand corner was a rock garden sparsely in bloom.

More flowers had just been added to it in the shape of a wreath.

The wreath was large, fully twenty inches across—a funeral wreath lying there in the garden complete with a flowing tinsel ribbon bearing the legend, *Rest in Peace*.

III

LIZA lifted her strangely lovely head to gaze at the windows above the court wall. She looked really frightened, really rocked by a staggering blow from an unexpected angle. Yet somehow, I sensed, whatever the wreath might signify to her, she feared the windows more.

This court behind the Elwyn house was, in one sense, an isolated little domain, like countless others in midtown Manhattan to which few penetrate from the world of streets outside.

If yours is a ground-floor apartment or a house in, say, the Butterfield-8 neighborhood, you may spend a small fortune in landscaping and beautifying your court. But no matter how much money you may lavish on it, the one thing you cannot build into it is privacy.

For always, as here in this spot, the Elwyns called Smithy's Court, windows look down—scores, hundreds, a multitude of windows in the buildings rimming the block—windows watching day and night, windows tirelessly gazing, endlessly curious. Most of them looked out of the upper floors of homes like the Elwyns' or small apartment buildings, but one structure in the block reared high—a hotel located only three lots eastward on Fifty-sixth Street. It was a tall, long-necked, Argus-eyed monster. Hundreds of windows in the hotel joined and dominated all the others.

The great hollow square inside the block was, of course, never entirely quiet. Always it stirred with the noises of doors opening and closing, of window sashes sliding up and down, of clothes-line reels creaking, radios incessantly babbling, babies crying, mothers calling. But the voices we heard now were none of these homey commonplaces. We listened to the voices of women under strain. Two women, one high-pitched and scolding, the other shaking with sobs.

Perhaps this had no connection with the incident in Smithy's Court. But perhaps, on the other hand, someone had witnessed the old lady's visit—someone watching from one of the many windows. The other woman was upbraiding her for it and she was pleading for forgiveness with her remorseful sobs.

Liza went suddenly to the rock garden

and picked up the wreath.

"Why, she—that old—I can't under—" The girl was still close to speechlessness. "She must be plain crazy, that's what!"

Liza hurried the wreath into the living room and stopped short just inside the door. There was a man in the room. He had just entered from the street.

An interesting encounter, this—the girl standing there with the wreath in her hands, and Martin Quigley, startled to a standstill, making a catch-as-catch-can attempt to understand it.

After a quick glance at me, and a quick swallow, Quigley went back to staring frog-eyed at the wreath. If there is a huckster type, he was not it. His face was wide and round, derived from the Irish and tending toward the gnomish. His body matched it—stocky and firm, still flat in the middle. You could imagine, correctly, that he had once been a tough-fisted altar boy. You might also imagine, incorrectly, that he was at present a Third Avenue bartender or a slightly overage and overweight ex-pugilist.

"She brought *this* in here, Quig," Liza said indignantly. "That—that lunatic who looks like such a sweet old thing."

"Well—" Quigley said thoughtfully, quickly finding a new grip on himself. "Well, it must have been Miss Christian."

Liza swallowed and repeated, "Miss Christian."

"Miss Charity Christian," Quigley said.

I reflected that what I was hearing now must be on the level. Nobody could possibly produce spontaneously, out of thin air, a name like Miss Charity Christian.

"The cook Dorian hired late last summer," Quigley explained.

"Oh," Liza swallowed again. "But I never saw this old woman before, Quig."

"Miss Christian only stayed two weeks. Came and went while you were over in Jersey, understudying at the Lambertville Music Circus. Remember?"

"Oh, sure," Liza said. "I remember now."

"Her canary died," Quigley said.

Liza brightened. "Why, of course, now I get it. Dorian told me about the canary dying and how Miss Christian made a ceremony of burying it in the garden."

"That's it," Quigley said. "That bird meant a lot to her."

"Of course," Liza said, now seeming actually dizzy with relief. "Quiggie darling, what would I ever do without you around!"

I had no immediate opportunity to puzzle over this exchange—something seemed faintly wrong with it—because Quigley then came to me with a spatulate, hard-working hand extended and an ear-wide grin on his face.

"Schy, my fine lad, it's really a treat to see you again?"

We then warmly exchanged a few random remembrances of the old days, before I went straight. Quigley had aged not at all and probably never would. He still wore his clothes as a snapping turtle wears its shell, with no ornamental touches added. We disposed of our pleasantries to find Liza still standing there holding the wreath, now at arm's length.

"How can we get rid of this ghastly thing?"

"Tear it up," Quigley suggested. "Put the pieces out with the garbage."

Liza began to hustle off.

"*But don't let Reece see it,*" Quigley added, with emphasis.

He grinned after her and went into the pantry. This was not his home, of course, but he felt he belonged here, even to the extent of carrying a key. He and Dorian had had a penthouse off Sutton Place. Following their separation, Quigley had continued to throw many radio engagements her way, to advise her on contracts and to stick around personally. I had heard from a mutual friend that he had preferred to look on Dorian's divorce from him and her marriage to Victor Hedges as caprices, both unfortunate but he hoped temporary.

QUIGLEY busied himself in the pantry and we reminisced some more about our stretch at Knox and Commison.

Liza, downstairs, had been making tearing noises and rattling newspaper. She reappeared as Quigley brought out a tray with three drinks on it. He laughed at her for looking bothered.

"Relax, sweetie pie. Remember, Schy, the trouble we had trying to please Martha Essex—or, rather, trying to find out if we had pleased her? When I quit K and C my happiest thought was that I would never see that dame again. But now, damned

if the witch isn't back on my neck. The most unapproachable woman in the whole cosmetics racket! Came to me voluntarily, dangling the Essex contract under my nose while other agencies were drooling for it. Plenty sizable. We haven't signed yet—she's seeing how difficult she can be about it—but—"

"Did Miss Christian go to another job when she quit here?" I asked.

"What? Oh, that again. I don't know," Quigley said. "Do you, Liz?"

Liza shook her head—that fascinating head. Tawny, was that the word for it? No. Taffy? Not that either.

"You don't know where to find Miss Christian now?"

"No," Liza said. "I don't know that I want to, even."

"When she left," I pointed out, "she evidently forgot to return her door key."

"I take it back," Liza said quickly. "I do want to find her and get that key away from her."

"Well," Quigley said, "that's the answer to the whole business, then. I mean the mysterious prowlings in this place. That key. Isn't it, Liz?"

Liza looked at him steadily for a moment. "It can't be the *whole* answer, Quig. I mean, Miss Christian's canary explains tonight's visit and the wreath, but it doesn't explain the other visits and the searching."

Quigley shrugged. "The old dame's probably a born snooper."

"But we can't let it go on, Quig, and we've got to make sure," Liza said earnestly. "It's really getting me. I dread to go out of the house and dread to come back—and most of the time, since Dorian left for Reno, I'm alone here. I could turn up murdered almost any day now."

"Who couldn't?" Quigley said.

Liza swallowed and Quigley said, "O.K., Schy, put a man to watching this place."

"I've already watched it myself several times, Quig," Liza said, "and nobody ever showed up. They seemed to know. We need somebody on the job who's smarter than we are—a professional like Schy."

If this was Liza's brand of butter, I found it quite tasty.

"O.K., Liz, O.K." Quigley felt she was rushing these arrangements, but he'd better let her. "Consider yourself retained, Schy.

Regular rates, of course, no discount to friends. What happens first?"

"First you get a new lock on the street door. It's a bad hour, but maybe you can induce a locksmith to do it right away. Liza's persuasion worked fine with a private detective tonight anyway."

"We get a locksmith as fast as possible," Liza agreed, "or I'm not sleeping here."

"Have you a gun in the house?" I inquired.

Certain laconic overtones appeared in the question. Liza lowered her lovely eyebrows at me but Quigley took it the way I meant it, seriously.

"Guns we got plenty of," he answered. "A case full, upstairs. Come along and take your pick."

He started up the stairs, drink in hand. I noticed something peculiar happening to Liza's face. It was alarmed and pale again and she was trying hard to keep it on straight.

She went up the stairs at Quigley's heels and I made an effort to keep up with them. We wound up in the study of a man of distinction on the third-floor front—Reece's, of course. Quigley went straight to a wall cabinet and tugged at its pulls.

"Locked," he said. "Where is it Reece keeps the key, Liz?"

She slid a book title *Lost Egypt* off the shelf and let it open itself to the concealed key.

Quigley unlocked and opened the cabinet and reached into its lower right-hand corner. His hand paused inches from an empty pair of pegs.

HE TURNED his sandy head to look at Liza inscrutably with his froggy eyes.

She said rapidly, "I meant to tell you sooner, Quig—it's missing."

"Missing?" he said. "The .25 Mauser?"

"Yes."

"Missing since when?"

"Since earlier this evening," Liza said. "While I was out of the house, trying to wrestle the old lady."

Quigley didn't move. "You left the house this evening? You left it empty, didn't you? And locked?"

"Yes. And the gun case locked too."

"And while you were outside this deserted, locked house the automatic disap-

peared from the locked case?"

"Yes," Liza said.

Quigley twisted his low-lidded eyes to me. He was poker-faced, but not so completely poker-faced as to entirely conceal a disturbance deep inside him. He looked at me hard for a minute, as if trying to read my mind.

Then both of us began peppering Liza with questions. We shot them at her fast; she had no time to answer one before the next pelted her. Finally she raised her voice in a screech.

"I *can't* explain it! I don't *know* how anyone could have sneaked in and out in so short a time, or *how* they knew where Reece keeps the key hidden, or *who* could have done it, or *what* they want the gun for. I only know I came up once to get it and it was there, and I left it there—then I came up again to get it, just a few minutes later, and it was *gone*."

Her gunmetal-and-violet eyes were aflame. Quigley and I recognized that this girl was close to her personal exploding point. Quigley reached to another of the automatics in the case, a .32 Colt, then locked the cabinet and put the key in my hand.

"O.K., baby," he said gently. "One thing anyhow you can stop worrying about. You won't be left alone here tonight."

When Quigley left the Elwyn house later that night, or, rather, early the next morning—"Promised Johnny I'd go to the mat with the Essex witch today"—the .25 Mauser was still missing and Liza was upstairs behind a bolted bedroom door. In the living room with a scotch and the .32 Colt within reach, I waited for Reece. Finally having been located by phone at the Explorers Club, Reece was expected here at any moment.

When he arrived he would find his key obsolete. There was a bright new lock on the street door.

IV

ON THIS sunny Sabbath in late May I came on the job early, mulling over in my mind last night's incident in Smithy's Court. It reminded me, for whatever it might signify, that Memorial Day, a holiday, was only two days hence. Surprisingly enough, however, I felt less reluctant to

work today than I normally felt on any weekday. The Elwyn case offered many unusual interests and inducements, most of them named Liza.

It was not yet noon when Liza phoned.

"Schy," she began—and her way of pronouncing my name seemed somehow different from the way anyone else had ever spoken it—"I survived the night. Thanks."

"Thank *you*. I consider it a personal favor."

"Schy, how did you make out with Reece?"

"Reece arrived soon after Quig left. I let him understand that you and I had been out dancing, as you suggested." I added sternly, "Falsehoods of that nature are not included in my regular rates. There will be an extra charge for that one. I mean you owe me a date."

"Just say when, Schy," Liza answered. "But did Reece—ask questions?"

"I gave him no opening."

"Schy—" Ah, melodious sound! "Quig and I want you to understand about Reece. He pooh-poohs the whole business—insists it's all my imagination, gets terribly annoyed with me over it, and before we know it we're quarreling like the hotheads we Elwyns are. Besides, Quig and I know very well that if Reece should find out the real reason you're in the picture, he'd resent you—work himself up into a fine lather of professional jealousy."

"How so? Reece is a writer."

"Reece is a lot of things—archaeologist, anthropologist, explorer, scholar and detective too in his way. He's very realistic and practical about all this. I mean he's after money principally, and his books are secondary. The point is, Reece has made a career of solving mysteries, not little personal jobs, but big, special ones. He brushes off this one, but at the same time he'd get mad at me for calling you in and consider you a reflection on his own abilities."

"I'll keep a wary eye on that lad."

"You're a nice guy, Schy. Coming over soon?"

"As soon as Luke gets back. I told him the whole story in detail when I got home. He didn't sleep a wink after that—headed out on a field trip practically before dawn."

"I may be out when you come," Liza said, "but Reece will be here, with Quig. In case

Reece begins wondering why you're hanging around, you could drop a few hints to the effect that you and I are off on a starry-eyed romance."

"That's a really fine idea," I said. "I can do that without even trying."

After another hour Luke Speare hustled in. Under one arm he had a paper-wrapped package the size and shape of a shirt box. He left it on his desk and came to a spot beside me. The bright look on his face clouded over into one of disappointed puzzlement.

"What's all this stuff?" he inquired, frowning over my desk.

"Research material," I explained. "I had to put the pressure on to get hold of this stuff on a Sunday, but this is a good beginning."

First I pointed to an array of eight photographs of Miss Liza Elwyn. All of them were remarkably fetching.

"This one is from M-G-M, these from NBC, these from Powers, and this last one, unfortunately, was posed for a line of dresses retailing at \$24.95." I was disturbed by this discordant note of crass commercialism in an otherwise perfect panorama of loveliness. "Look at the way her hair photographs, Luke. You never saw—"

"In a case like this you need to get the real lowdown on your client's character, all right," Speare said, an odd edge on his voice. "She *is* our client, isn't she?"

"Certainly she's our client—although I'm not quite sure, technically, whether it's Liza who retained us, or Quigley, or both."

"In other words, nobody's paid out any money so far," Speare observed. "Who gets the bills?"

"It's a point we can clear up easily when we—"

"This haunted house belongs to Dorian, I understand," Speare put in. "They're *her* spooks, not Liza's, or Quigley's either. So why are they messing around with 'em?"

I EYED my assistant for a moment. Normally he behaved toward his employer with quiet friendliness and a touching degree of deference. We were pals from 'way back, beginning with our OSS operations, with a deep and genuine fondness for each other. Even outside of office hours Speare was thoughtful enough to act as if I were

the brains of the agency as well as its proprietor. The hint of asperity in his manner this morning was a sign that cropped up now and then, and one I recognized. He reacted in this way whenever he felt somebody was pitching a fastie across him.

"After all, Liza has had to live with those prowlings," I reminded him. "They've become more of a menace since Dorian left for Reno."

I heard Speare asking, "Have you done any research on Dorian?"

"It amazes even me to report that I have paid a personal visit to Celebrity Service this morning and brought home a carload of notes on every member of the family."

Then he asked, "Did either Liza or Quigley mention their reason for not calling in the cops?"

"It's all so indefinite, Luke," I said. "Dangerous in its own way, but still nothing you can lay your hand on."

"There was a wreath," Speare reminded me. "That had substance. I've found out where it came from."

"Let's have it, Luke."

Speare placed on my desk a torn and partially burned bit of cardboard, a fragment of a florist's carton bearing the characters *nte* printed in red script.

"It came from Pinteau's, around the corner on Fifth Avenue," Speare began. "The old lady waited—very patiently and pleasantly, they said—while they made up the wreath for her. She paid in cash. They don't know her name or address. When she left the shop she flagged a taxi."

Speare next put a scribbled note before me.

"That's the name and address of the taxi driver. As to him, you already know all."

"The old lady used the taxi chiefly as a portable parlor," I said. "She dismissed it as soon as she didn't need it to sit in any more. She meant to walk home after the wreath-laying, so she must live nearby, probably just around on Fifty-sixth."

"The hotel in that block on Fifty-sixth is the Riviera," Speare informed me. "The management assures me our morbid old lady doesn't live there."

Speare's smile was wry. His eyes had a peculiar flicker in them. He warned me, "You won't like the rest of this, Schy."

It dawned on me then that I had missed

the true reason behind Speare's restrained acerbity this morning. It wasn't really because he suspected *he* was being played for a sucker, but because he felt fairly sure that *I* was.

Although touched by his loyalty and sympathy, I felt in no hurry to endorse his theory. "Don't worry too much about my tender feelings, Luke. Go ahead, pal, dish it out."

"To begin with," Luke said, "it was not Miss Charity Christian who laid the wreath."

I sat up. "It wasn't?"

"No."

"Then who was it?"

"I haven't found out so far who did it, but I'm sure Miss Charity Christian didn't."

"Quigley said it must be Miss Charity Christian."

"You heard Quigley say that, yes, but it was not Miss Charity Christian who laid the wreath," Speare insisted. "Miss Charity Christian denies she laid it, and I believe her."

I stared at him. "How did you find her so fast?"

"By looking in the phone book," Speare explained, unsmiling.

I reached, frowning, for the Manhattan directory. The lady under discussion was not listed in it. However, the surname of Christian appeared only a few times. Of course Speare had simply started calling these in rotation and asking for Charity or her relatives.

"Found her brother on the second try," Speare said. "That's Paul, in Morningside Heights. Charity is spending the weekend with him. I rode the subway over and had a talk with her."

I felt a little sore at Speare for making it sound so easy. I felt sore at myself also for having omitted to check such an obvious lead.

"Miss Charity Christian is a buxom woman whose hair is still brown at fifty-odd," Speare informed me. "She worked in the Elwyn home last summer, not for only two weeks but for three months."

"While Liza was understudying singers in Jersey."

"Liza was around most of that period, Miss Christian says. She remembers Liza much better than Liza remembers Miss Christian."

Luke's forewarning was not mistaken. I didn't like this at all. I disliked it to the point of rejecting it. "Miss Christian could be mixed up about it."

"Not about owning a canary," Speare added. "She says she detests canaries because their cages have to be cleaned. She asserts flatly that she has never in her whole life possessed one."

I reviewed last night's dialogue between Liza and Quigley about the canary. I had sensed something vaguely wrong with it at the time, but even now I couldn't believe it had been a piece of spontaneous fabrication from start to finish.

"If Charity Christian never owned a canary," I heard Speare going on, "then of course it wasn't Charity Christian who buried a canary in the garden—and it isn't a canary that's buried there, either."

I FROWNED at him. "You're placing a lot of weight on Charity Christian's story."

He squirmed in his chair. Speare for once, I was convinced, had let himself slip off on a bum steer.

"There's already one psychopath in this case," I added, "and Charity Christian may be another. For all the high motives implied in her name, she could be a pathological liar and chronic grudge-bearer besides. Judging Liza and Quigley on her unsupported word—"

"Unsupported?" Speare said. "I support it, Schy. It's solid."

He bounced out of his chair and began walking around.

"Frankly, Schy, I didn't believe their story *before* I saw the Christian dame. It's too thin. Somebody in that family must have a fairly good idea what those ghosts from the outside are hunting for."

"You know, Luke," I said, feeling my temperature rising a little, "I'm getting the impression you don't entirely trust Liza."

Speare put his hat on his head and the package back under his arm. "Maybe I'll be charmed into deciding that those nice people couldn't harbor any ulterior motives or have anything shady happen to them"—he smiled, shaking his head—"but there's a better way of settling this business for sure."

"How?"

"We'll simply dig into the Elwyns' garden," Speare said, "and see for ourselves what is buried there."

V

SPEARE insisted on detouring along Fifty-sixth Street. He was uneasy about the adorable old lady with the sweetly distorted mind.

"She must have laid that wreath out of pure, wacky kindness," he said as we buzzed the first door at random. "She didn't realize it might bounce back on her."

He pushed the button at another door and I asked, "What good will it do us to find her? We'll ask her why she did it and she'll gasp and say, why, she never did any such thing, really and truly. So then what do we do next, slug her around until she cracks?"

"If the sobbing you heard has any bearing," Speare answered, "the old lady doesn't live alone."

We went on.

The door opened and for the first time Speare found himself getting more than a tentative nibble.

"Why, yes," the cheerful woman in the doorway answered his question. "Yes, I have seen that dear old soul. She lives in the house right next door—or if it isn't the one next door it's two houses down."

Did she know the old lady's name?

"No, I don't, but I *do* know she lives on the third floor, though, because once, passing her on the street, I heard her saying to herself, 'Gracious, how I dread those two flights of stairs, they certainly take a body's breath away.'"

Speare thanked her with sincere gratitude. His was a smile of industry well rewarded and he had the gleam of achievement in his eye—with good reason, I saw, because the houses here, hard by the Hotel Riviera, stood backed opposite to the Elwyn house one block over.

As it turned out, however, this wasn't the jackpot quite yet. First buzzing the third floor of the house next door, then the third floor of the house next to that, Speare obtained no response from either.

Of course a man of Speare's tenacity couldn't stop at that. He went back and entered the first house under false pretenses

—in the traditional manner of ringing at random another of the occupants, who then trustfully released the electric lock—climbed to the third floor and knocked on the door there. Getting no answer from that one, he descended, moved over to the adjoining house and went through the same operation. This time, however, he knocked not merely three or four times, but seven or eight.

Worn and discouraged, I watched him pressing an ear to the door. He murmured something to the effect that he was sure someone was in there. If so, we were not entirely welcome this morning; but Speare knocked again, regardless, and again, and even said to the aloof silence inside, "Please come to the door." But results remained nil.

"Our next move," I said wearily, "is to borrow a fireman's ax from somebody and break in. Of course it might be a little bit illegal."

Speare said sobely, "We would find somebody in there, Schy. Maybe an old lady locked in her room, too frightened to stir."

He turned from the unresponsive door and trudged down to the street, reluctant and disappointed. Of course, being Speare, he would hustle back to try again at the first opportunity.

"Quit worrying about the dizzy old dame, Luke," I said. "She's not our client, but Liza is."

"That's what I'm *really* worrying about," Speare answered—and I let it ride, recognizing that I'd had too little sleep to take on a major project like dissuading Speare from his convictions.

Reece opened the Elwyn door. He greeted me with the same geniality with which he would have greeted anybody else; but in Speare he found certain qualities worth special notice.

My researches had not included a photograph of Reece, and Speare was as unprepared for his appearance as I had been last night when first meeting him. In no way did he resemble his two sisters, although he had the same cosmopolitan quality—even more of it than Dorian, probably. Somehow he combined a sense of relaxation with an impression of finely honed perspicacity. His long nose was sharp, his gray eyes kept you always in pin-point focus, the thin lips above his fine chin could no doubt clip out precise observations. From his first glance

he turned the keen edge of his awareness on Speare.

Yet his manner was gentle. He was wearing soft leather house slippers and smoking fragrant tobacco in an expensive pipe, and his masculine maturity made him appear handsomer than he really was.

QUIGLEY was present, hovering about the pantry, his voodoo personality showing in his wide face after an evidently bad night's rest. While he went through the routine of an introduction to Speare, I discovered a tall, dark and sleek young woman standing beside the piano. She was the tallest person in the room, and while holding an untasted whiskey sour in one perfectly manicured hand she maintained effortlessly an absolutely perfect posture.

"Miss Belinda Willoughby," Reece said with easy courtesy, "may I present Mr. Schyler Cole and Mr. Lucas Speare?"

After we had all said howdoyoudo, Quigley observed, "Don't know how the hell Reece does it. Prettiest girls in town follow him around, purring like kittens. Where was it you happened to find him, Belinda?"

"The Stork bar," Belinda answered. "I picked him up."

"I drop into the Stork bar now and then," Quigley said. "You never picked me up."

"You don't look like a cross between a young, successful novelist and Ezio Pinza," Belinda said. "Reece does. I think men who look like a cross between a young, successful novelist and Ezio Pinza are fascinating."

"What do I look like a cross between, dear?" Quigley inquired.

"You, Quiggie? Why, you're a cross between Popeye and a bear just coming out of hibernation."

"Are you in the theater, Miss Willoughby?" I asked. Possibly as a showgirl at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe, I meant.

"Oh no," Belinda answered, sounding a little hurt. "I'm a business woman. Just now I'm looking for a position. You're a private detective, aren't you, Mr. Cole?"

Ah. Already the jig was up. It wasn't likely that Quigley had tipped off Belinda in advance of our visit, since Quigley had conspired with Liza to conceal my true purposes here, so it must have been Reece. This left open the disturbing question of how Reece had found out.

"I think working for a private detective would be fascinating," said Belinda Willoughby—evidently an easily fascinated girl. "Do you by any chance need a secretary, Mr. Cole?"

"I do," I said, "but I'm holding out for one just like the secretary all the private eyes in the movies have. It's unthinkable for her to be anything but a blonde."

"Mr. Cole is an old friend of Liza's, Belinda darling," Reece said easily. "Knew her years before he became a detective. They see a great deal of each other. It's one of life's odd little coincidences that I never met him until last night."

"Yes, ha-ha-ha," I said. "Very odd, ha-ha-ha."

"In fact, when Liza introduced us last night, Mr. Cole, she forgot to mention that you're a detective."

Keeping a wary eye on this guy, I said, "I noticed that too. Does it show on me?"

"Quig told me about you back when you opened your agency," Reece explained, smiling, and went on in his unnervingly deft way, "I imagine that like doctors and lawyers you prefer to keep your social hours free of professional matters. Otherwise you might be interested in several little mysteries here in this house."

The best I could try for, obviously, was to stay noncommittal.

"For example," Reece said, "the key to my gun cabinet, in my study upstairs, has disappeared from its hiding place."

Trying to be noncommittal was obviously no good either. "That's no mystery. I have the key here."

While Quigley watched in resigned disgust, I fished the key out of my coat pocket, where I had put it last night after receiving it from Quigley, and placed it on Reece's palm.

"Thank you," he said, his keen gray eyes questioning me.

"Liza was frightened," I explained, "because one of your guns had disappeared out of the cabinet during the evening."

Reece's face hardened a little as he asked, "How could it?"

"That's one of the interesting little mysteries here in this house."

We all spent a moment gazing at one another's blank faces.

"Which gun, Mr. Cole?"

"The .25 Mauser automatic."

"That's odd," Reece said. "Once before I noticed something strange about that same gun."

Quigley came forward. "What was that, Reece?"

"It had been used—taken out of the case without my knowledge—used, then cleaned and oiled and put back."

Quigley was poker-faced. "Remember when that was?"

"Perfectly," Reece answered, "because it happened to be Liza's birthday."

"What do you think happened?" Quigley asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea." Reece bounced the little brass key on his palm.

"Reece darling," Belinda said quickly. "This is perfectly fascinating and I *so* wish I could hear more, but I must run. Tell me all about it later, darling, won't you?"

HE BOWED, kissed her beautiful hand, and went on up the stairs. Speare, Quigley and I watched Belinda preparing to make a technically flawless exit. Her every step, her every motion showed trained precision as she picked up her handbag, let me help her into her mink jacket, and moved to the door. So well disciplined was she that the secret disturbance within her showed scarcely at all.

Speare and I smiled appreciative farewells at her as she put on a really glossy performance of going out a door. Quigley's parting shot was, "Don't pick up any more cross-breeds, sugar."

Reece returned. While upstairs he had exchanged his slippers for shoes, and he came in knotting a tie.

Reece turned to me. "So. While keeping me in ignorance of the disappearance of my own gun, Liza called you in about it? She must have great faith in your ability. Well, have you learned who stole it?"

Speare said pungently, "Give us time. Sometimes, when the case is a tough one, it takes us as long as half an hour to crack it. As a beginning, who knew where the key was kept hidden?"

Eying him, Reece answered, "Nobody but the family, so far as I can say—which of course includes Quig."

"Quigley was driving down from Connecticut at the time," Speare said. "Dorian

is in Reno. Liza said she was out of the house. How about the husband your sister is divorcing?"

"Vic Hedges. He's out West."

"Not with Dorian?"

"No, no. Vic's in Arizona, the idiot."

"What's idiotic about being in Arizona?"

"Vic was silly enough to contract a bad case of gold fever—from one of my books, no less, the one about lost gold mines. The damned fool went out there to find himself one, preferably the Lost Dutchman."

"One more member of the family to account for," Speare reminded Reece. "You."

Reece shook his head at that. "What would make it necessary for me to steal one of my own guns? However, I spent most of the evening trying to raise money. I have another appointment for the same reason right now." He smiled ironically, and went upstairs to dress.

GAZING for a moment at the closed door, I envied Reece his easily controlled energy, his ball-bearing intellect, and his talent for being unique in a perfectly natural manner.

Speare was asking, "Miss Elwyn is out?"

"She's out," Quigley answered.

"This is my first chance to talk with you about it alone, Quig," I said. "Do you think, like Liza, that the house has been searched? Systematically ransacked, she put it, but with hardly a trace."

"If so, I'm damned if I can even guess what the place has been searched for. I think Liz has let her nerves go off half cocked. The whole thing probably boils down to Miss Christian's rattlebrained business with the wreath."

"For the grave of her dear, dead canary," Speare said.

They eyed each other as I asked, "What do you want done about it, Quig?—if anything."

He answered soberly, "Liz is really scared, Schy. I'm not too sure what it is that's scaring her, but for her sake let's get this thing shaken out."

"The deadline being Dorian's return from Reno four weeks from now?"

Quigley nodded.

"Assuming we come up with the answer before that time, then what?"

"That's as far as you need to go. We'll

take it up from there."

"Strictly on your own, privately?"

"That's right."

Speare was smiling slightly on the bias.

"Why, Quig?" I asked. "Why do you want me to carry the case just so far but no farther?"

"That's not quite it, Schy," Quigley answered. "Finding out who's doing it is a job of detecting, and that's for you. The rest—making them stop it—will very probably be a personal or family matter of some sort, and that's for me to handle with Liz."

It sounded reasonable enough, but Speare's mouth stayed awry.

"Quig," I said, "Right now, at the start, is the time for us to put our cards on the table. I'll begin by telling you candidly that Luke here is rather reluctant to credit your story about Miss Christian's canary."

Quigley looked darkly at Speare. "What's the matter with it?"

"Just one little thing," Speare said. "From start to finish it's a phony."

"Well, I'll be damned," Quigley said softly. "You shellfish. You smuggler of third-rate *smörgåsbord*." Coming from Quigley, these peculiar oaths had the sound of the most scathing profanity. "Just how do you propose to measure my veracity?"

"I came prepared," Speare said.

He turned to the table where he had left his package—the same one he had been lugging around all day. Snapping the string and dropping off the wrapping paper, he removed the lid of the box and lifted out a strange gadget. It remained an unrecognizable contrivance of wood and steel until Speare unfolded it, whereupon it became a small shovel—the kind used by campers and diggers of military trenches.

Quigley, astonished to a standstill, watched as Speare went to the rear door, opened it, and carried the shovel purposefully into the court. He remained motionless until the first chunking sound of the blade driving into the earth of the garden. Then he went out the door after Speare at a panicky speed.

Thirty seconds thereafter both men reappeared in the doorway, Quigley with a grim grip on one of Speare's arms, Speare without the shovel. Once they were inside, Quigley slammed the door. He glowered at Speare and Speare answered him with a

quiet smile.

When Quigley found his voice he turned it harshly on me. "You'd better keep this unfortunate gravedigger out of here, Cole. I don't think he and I are going to get along too well."

"He's not being frivolous, you know," I said. "I think he may be mistaken, but we can't go on now without proving it, one way or the other."

"The hell we can't!" Quigley said. "A client's got rights. No damned three-eyed hawkshaw is going to dig around in our garden indiscriminately."

He looked around for his drink, found he had dropped it to the floor during his frantic dash after Speare, then went, heels thumping, into the pantry to mix another. When Quigley emerged from the pantry, with his new drink already half consumed, he had a better grip on himself.

"To go back to your assignment, Schy, I felt Liz was being a shade too impetuous to begin with." He looked through the icy amber of his drink. "In fact, I'm convinced nobody here has any further use for any private detectives at all."

"You're positive of this without even consulting Liza?" I said.

"I'm positive. All by myself."

"We're bounced?"

"Bounced. On your ear."

Speare looked immensely relieved.

At that precise moment we heard gunshots.

First, a single report, a loud bumping noise nearby, just outside Smithy's Court. With it came a woman's cry, brief and sharp, the cry of a woman caught off guard, terrified. Then a second bang, slightly muffled like the first—the blast of a gun fired inside a room.

Speare went rapidly back to the court door and pushed out. Quigley and I pressed close behind him. We spread out for a better look, gazing up. The reports had come from no definite direction and now their echoes had become lost in the ceaseless noises of the great hollow. Quigley turned his head vaguely while the hundreds of inscrutable windows stared back.

Speare looked straight at the brownstone-front building standing two lots to the west of the hotel and almost directly opposite. It was one we had visited earlier this morning.

The cry we heard next was too tenuous to be called a scream. It was a thin little wail suggesting fear and mortal resignation without fully expressing either. For a moment it sustained itself waveringly on that note of half-frightened, half-gone incredulity—until two more quick bangs silenced it.

Speare jerked, as if about to break into a run, but held himself there. His gaze remained fixed on the third-floor windows of that same house across the pit. One of the windows was open. Nothing was visible through it except a ceiling. It stayed empty and gloom-filled until a face appeared just over the sill.

It was the face of an apparition, a grotesque face, one out of a nightmare or a child's comic book, the face of nothing that had ever walked this world. It peered down at us. Then a hand rose before the face—a hand gripping a gun.

As we scattered, two bright orange spots of fire flashed out and two more reports banged, louder this time. The first bullet spanged against the stone wall behind us; the second whizzed through the open door and went *thunk* into the living-room floor.

The hideous face in the window drew back then and vanished.

VI

WE RAN up the stoop of the brown-stone front on Fifty-sixth.

In the vestibule Speare tried the inner door. The latch had not caught—a lucky break for us. We could enter without again buzzing a resident who might later furnish the police with descriptions of two strange men who had lurked about the scene. Quigley had remained in the court.

The family on the first floor had a radio going loudly. The residents on the second floor had evidently gone away for the weekend; the bottle of milk standing outside their door had been delivered not later than Saturday. On the third-floor landing, where the quiet took on a heavier quality, the apartment entrance stood open.

Speare led the way cautiously through a vestibule where a throw rug had been kicked aside by somebody's quick passage. A short hallway on the left led to drawn portieres of maroon velvet. Beyond these lay the living room, where there was no sign of vio-

lence. The blinds were drawn, the air was stagnant.

In the kitchen, on the right, was an overturned chair and, on the linoleum, the coppery glint of an ejected cartridge case.

Bending over it, Speare said, "Twenty-five caliber. Kicked out of an automatic, of course."

"A Mauser, of course," I said, frowning at him. "*Reece's* Mauser, of course."

Speare gazed at me, poker-faced, and asked, "Do you really think so, Schy?"

Soberly Speare gazed at something else on the floor—a dark wet spot of blood, not round, but ovate, showing it had been lost by a person in motion. It pointed toward the vestibule. Next Speare found a fresh break in the plaster of the wall above the sink—a bullet hole—then a second above the gas stove.

Since this evidence indicated something we already knew well enough—that a shooting had occurred in this room—I turned from it to gaze out a window. There below and almost directly opposite in Smithy's Court stood Martin Quigley looking up at me.

Speare had gone into another rear room that overlooked Smithy's Court—a bedroom. A large lithographed calendar hung on the wall. On the vanity sat bottles and jars of cosmetics, all bearing the label of Martha Essex, a woman whose name had already cropped up several times in the case. Carloads of Martha Essex cosmetics in incredible variety were sold every day "in drug and department stores everywhere" and it probably was a rare vanity indeed that had none of her stuff on it.

I leaned over Speare's shoulder to find him taking brief interest in a brooch, apparently of a plastic material, colorfully inlaid with the floral design of Martha Essex's copyrighted trademark—a hand-done job signed on its reverse side *Gaye*. The room in all other details was commonplace except for one remarkable item lying beside the telephone on a table: a powerful pair of binoculars.

I followed Speare to a door in the mid-section of the apartment. He opened it slowly and we saw her lying on the floor beside the bed, a delicate little heap—the little old wreath-laying lady.

Two bullets had struck her squarely in the

chest. The pitiful little corpse faintly, sweetly smiled.

She was not wearing her best black now—although no doubt she would soon wear it again—but a frilly little house dress. This room where she had died with such unwanted violence was a windowless box, with only an open transom to admit air when the door was shut. There was a key in the outside of the lock. On a table beside the bed was a tray brought her by her jailer—a glass of milk and a luncheon-meat sandwich, untouched. Following her well-meant misbehavior with the wreath, she had been too overweighed with penitence to think of eating.

Speare moved past her to a clothes closet. It was empty except for an ensemble one would never expect to find here—a pair of overalls, a denim chore coat and a cap to match, all as clean as new, although they had been worn.

While he looked farther I picked two discharged cartridge cases off the floor. When Speare followed me back into the kitchen I had recovered all six. I dropped them into my coat pocket and said, "Luke, we're overstaying our welcome."

"In police circles it's considered a little illegal to remove and conceal evidence," Speare said. "I've heard that in a homicide case it can even make you an accessory after the fact."

"Not until it's proved."

"I understand also that even if a private detective is lucky enough to beat a frying rap it's still possible for him to lose his license."

"Not my kind of private detective. That happens only to a private detective who gets caught. I'm the kind who has a smart assistant." I asked, "Seen any evidence around that you feel you would like to remove and conceal?"

Speare's choice was one I could not have anticipated. It was the calendar hanging on the wall of the rear bedroom. On it the months of the year formed a border for the central illustration depicting a little girl, impossibly beautiful and angelic, tearfully placing a tiny fistful of daisies on the broken body of her dear little dolly. There was a disturbing similarity between this sad scene and the old lady's wreath-laying. Otherwise its value as evidence seemed to me no

higher than its value as art, but in Speare's odd estimation he felt it was worth a fractured statute.

Then we left—I felt not a moment too soon—Speare with the rolled calendar under one arm. The occupants of the apartment on the second floor were still away and those on the first still had their radio blaring.

We went down the stoop and as we passed the Hotel Riviera, Speare paused to frown into a trash receptacle at the curb. I looked over his shoulder and suffered another bad jolt.

On a bed of rumpled paper lay a face—the same face we had seen behind a firing gun. Even more distorted now, it lay flat and flaccid. Of course it was a rubber mask of the kind worn by children at Halloween parties and lately by criminals at major stick-ups.

Neither Speare nor I felt a desire to acquire it.

VII

MARTIN QUIGLEY, opening the Elwyns' door, looked none too happy to see Speare back. Being somehow in a hurry, Speare brushed past him with a murmured apology. Quigley's low-lidded eyes questioned me while I watched Speare looking into the Manhattan telephone directory at Dorian's desk. He turned back immediately with news.

"Her name is Julia Beems."

"He means the old lady who brought the wreath," I explained to Quigley. "She's dead now."

Peering at Speare with dark intensity, Quigley seemed unable to decide which of many possible questions he should fire at us first. Before he could manage to voice any at all, Speare said, "With your permission."

He left the rolled calendar on the piano and went down the basement stairs. Quigley shifted his stormy eyes to me.

"How the hell can he find the old lady's name in an alphabetical list?"

"It's probably absurdly simple," I said, still feeling sensitive about Speare's easy discovery of Charity Christian in the same directory. "Evidently he made a mental note of the number on her phone, then checked it against the three names on the mail-boxes in the vestibule. So we don't have to wait

for tomorrow's papers to learn who she was. You see, it's not entirely inconvenient, having Speare around."

"For my money," Quigley said ominously, "that guy is still the damndest casserole of *basenjeffer* I ever met."

He went down after Speare. The stairs led into a cozy pine-paneled room equipped with deep-cushioned chairs and a full-size, well-stocked bar. A dumb-waiter connected it with the butler's pantry above. Speare had gone on through to a second room in the front of the basement.

Here an oil furnace in one corner was connected by a copper oil line to a tank in another. Several cans of trash sat near brick steps leading up to iron doors lying flush with the sidewalk. Concealed under the crumpled newspapers in these cans, I suspected, were the torn remains of the old lady's wreath. From a tool bench—first class and well cared for, no doubt Reece's—Speare had borrowed a chisel and a mallet. He was busily chipping splinters out of the ceiling.

"What's that for?" Quigley asked.

"He's recovering one of the bullets fired at us."

Even as I explained this Speare plucked the misshapen slug out of the wood. It had penetrated the living room floor almost completely. After giving it a single curious look, he dropped it into his pocket and returned the tools to their proper racks above the bench. Quigley was so distracted by Speare that he had not yet managed a question about the old lady's death, and now an interruption interfered further. From the entrance directly above us came noises.

Quigley turned quickly and was the first up the stairs. Speare ran him a close second. All this additional exertion became worth while when I found it was Liza who had come in.

Quigley was introducing Speare to Liza in a manner clearly signifying that she was to watch out for this guy; and he had scarcely finished when Speare said, "Here's your missing door key, Miss Elwyn."

He handed it to her—a flat key attached to a small metal tag stamped with the initials L.E.

"Why, thank you!" Liza exclaimed. "Wherever did you find it?"

"Over there in the apartment where the

old lady was just murdered," Speare answered.

He'd done it with skilled calculation and it was all over before Quigley could get in a saving word. I found myself hoping that Liza would react with authentic shock, in a manner of slack-jawed startlement so unquestionably genuine that even Speare would be convinced. But no; her eyes widened a little, her lips broke apart, but on the whole, to my deep regret, she retained an otherwise admirable control of herself.

Quigley took the key from her, scowling at Speare, and tossed it to the desk. Liza's next move was unexpected but most welcome. She slid a lovely hand into my coat pockets, first one and then the other, thereby giving me a playback on that delightful melting sensation, and fished up her cigs and her lighter. She beat me to the draw too. Evidently Liza smoked only in emergencies.

"Well?" she said. "I'm off my pins. You've succeeded very neatly in bowling me over, so go ahead now, lay it on."

"Let's get comfortable," Speare suggested.

He helped her out of her coat—an act of not quite purest courtesy. His purpose was to learn whether Liza was packing a gun in one of its pockets—specifically, of course, a .25 Mauser automatic. He placed the coat on a chair and turned back with no news readable in his face.

"Would you mind very much telling us where you've been, Miss Elwyn?"

"Don't answer that, Liz," Quigley said. "The guy's got hallucinations—thinks he's a cop."

"I don't mind telling him, Quig," Liza said. "I've got to alibi myself out of this, haven't I?" She then informed Speare, "I was at NBC-TV, rehearsing—substituting on short notice for an actress who took sick. I was there, working hard, for two hours. Now, for heaven's sake, won't somebody tell me what's *happened*?"

Quigley explained, "We heard shots. Schy and his boy hustled around and found the old lady murdered. Says her name is Julia Beems."

Liza shook her captivating head, signifying that the name meant nothing to her. He opened the court door and pointed.

"Top floor of that building." Then he observed, "No sign of any cops."

"The shots didn't alarm anybody else," I said. "Do you feel we should call them in?"

Neither Liza nor Quigley answered.

"The second woman hasn't notified them so far either," Speare said, "because she's wounded and scared out of her wits."

QUIGLEY echoed, "Second woman?" "There were two women in the apartment. The older one, Julia Beems, who donated the wreath, lived there. The other woman is younger and lives somewhere else, but apparently dropped in every day or so and occasionally spent the night. They were both in the apartment this morning when the killer walked in."

I would ask Speare later how he had figured all this out. We let him go on.

"The second woman was in the rear bedroom or the kitchen when the murderer called. She was meant to die too. Our murderer, however, isn't too good a shot. Inexperienced, possibly. Naturally a little nervous too. It was probably her very first murder."

"Her?" Quigley echoed.

"We don't know actually whether the killer is male or female—all we saw was a completely masked face—but I'm inclined to assume it's a woman." Speare continued, "Two shots were fired at the second woman. She ducked and ran out in a panic—wounded, but not badly. At least she got herself out of the building."

"Look here, Luke," I said suddenly. "She's not in the clear even yet. There's still a reason why somebody wants her dead. The killer may make another try for her."

"She's in a bad spot, all right, particularly if she wants to stay clear of the police," Speare agreed. "The mask worn by the killer was one of those rubber jobs that cover the entire head. You know the kind, Miss Elwyn?"

He gazed at her highly distinctive hair. She gazed back at him without answering. To me his implication seemed preposterous but I avoided arguing the point. Despite my personal bias I recognized it as a highly important one.

"It must have been ghastly indeed when the victim found herself attacked by that walking nightmare," I said. "A being dressed like a woman, but with a man's

false face, and a grotesque one at that. If she didn't already know who the killer was, the mask made identification impossible. The killer will be able to sneak up on her again, unmasked, unrecognized, and unsuspected."

"How horrible," Liza said quietly."

"At any rate, the murderer didn't chase her down the stairs," I said. "There had already been quite a lot of noise. Besides, it was the old lady the killer really wanted."

"Julia Beems was in the other bedroom," Speare went on. "She'd been kept locked in there ever since the wreath-laying. It's an odd thing, but as far as that poor old soul's mind was concerned, Memorial Day is today, not next Tuesday."

He brought the calendar. It bore the imprint, *Barloe—Fine Provisions*, meaning expensive groceries, at an address on upper Madison Avenue.

"This calendar is for 1948," Speare pointed out. "Julia Beems must have kept it because she was deeply affected by the picture. In fact the picture probably suggested the wreath-laying to her. There's no other calendar in the place, and even if there had been another she probably would have preferred to plan the occasion in accordance with this old one. Here, you see, Memorial Day falls on a Sunday."

It was strangely touching to think of the old lady living two years behind the times, all unaware of it.

"So in her own irrational way she makes sense," I said. "She'd probably noticed that the Elwyns are often out on Saturday nights but usually at home on Sundays—when, also, florists' shops are closed. So for the ceremony she chose the evening of her own personal Memorial Day."

"Wacky as all get-out," Quigley said. "Shows the wreath means nothing at all."

"It meant her finish," Speare said, eying him. "When she did it she was figuratively laying a wreath on her own grave."

Liza put in quickly, looking up toward the late Julia Beems's apartment, "Is she—all alone there? Just lying there waiting?"

"She doesn't mind," I said. "We'd better leave it to that other woman to notify the cops. Technically we don't even know Julia Beems is dead."

"For another thing, we don't want any cops looking out those windows just yet."

Speare then went back to his point in the manner of a man declining to change the subject. "Julia Beems had to be silenced because the wreath-laying showed she couldn't be trusted with her knowledge of what's buried in the Elwyn garden. And"—his voice took on a note of irony—"murder seems a bit drastic as a safeguard against further indiscretions concerning the grave of a canary."

Quigley gestured. "So now we're back to that. It's as far as you're going, brother. Liz, a little earlier in this charming visit I told this worthy pair of gumshoes we don't want 'em sniffing around the place any more."

Liza cried, "But Quig—"

"Schy can be reasonable enough," Quigley broke in, "but this curly-headed platypus of his gets out of hand. If what I've seen so far is a fair sample of his services to his clients, we'll all wind up in Sing Sing."

"On what charges?" Speare inquired.

Quigley scowled at him and Speare smiled grimly and Liza said, "You're allergic to him or something. Quiggie. Let me have a try at him."

"Matter of fact," I put it, "your objection has become academic, Quig. You can't fire us now. Whether you're my clients or not, we're too involved to bow politely out. I'm afraid you're stuck with us."

"So may I have my little shovel back, please?" Speare said.

"Shovel?" Liza looked at him, round-eyed, and swallowed twice.

WE LOOKED at one another, all on edge, and after a moment I said, "Let me make our position clear. Nobody can say so far whether the case will lead the police around the corner to this side of the block. If it does, you'll need a professional or two playing on your team. But in any event, Luke and I can't go away now, politely murmuring that we've had an entertaining time, and proceed to dismiss from our minds such matters as a missing gun, a murdered old lady and our attempts to conceal the fact that your family skeleton is not in your closet but in your garden. We are going to find out exactly what lies out there under the zinnias even if we have to do our digging with a demitasse spoon."

There followed a very long silence.

Several eloquent looks were exchanged.

Quigley's frown at Liza meant, "Dammit, I warned you not to go off half cocked." Liza's round eyes answered, "I'm terribly sorry, Quiggie, but it's too late now," and she was even more deeply frightened than before.

Liza and Quigley went on silently wrestling with a decision that was both inevitable and unthinkable. Finally I suggested, "Let me make it a little easier for you to begin. Whose body is it?"

"Does it matter?" Quigley asked bluntly.

The question struck me as possibly the most outrageous I had ever heard uttered. On second thought, I realized it really didn't matter at all. Whoever's cadaver lay out there, it was exactly as illegal as anyone else's would have been. My interest went beyond the legalities, however, and I asked it again: "Whose body is it?"

This time my answer was another silence. Quigley stared at us as if at a doomful pair of double dealers. Liza's lovely eyes were bright with fear and an appeal for understanding. Finally they were saved by the bell—the telephone ringing.

As Quigley started toward it Liza caught his arm.

She said quickly again, as she had said last night, "You answer it, Schy."

I answered it, prepared to find another of Liza's overlooked dates on the line. However, my hello brought no response. I said, "This is the Elwyn home," and the phone again declined comment.

Liza had come to my side. She brought her ear close to mine, thereby throwing six hundred volts into me, and for a moment listened to the noises on the line—busy sounds of movement suggesting a large office or a public place.

"This is an old trick used by people who are burglariously inclined," I explained to Liza, letting the phone listen. "The idea is simply to find out if anyone is at home."

Frowning, Liza informed the phone, "Sorry, whoever you are. We're at home, all right—Liza, Quig, and two friends. So try again later?"

Quietly the silent caller then disconnected.

The incident seemed unimportant, although of course it could become annoying if repeated too often. Certainly it was of less consequence than the conversation it had interrupted.

"ONCE more, now," I said. "Whose body is out there in your garden?"

Liza went away from me and sat down. Quigley's look was disgustingly cynical. Even though intended to be helpful, the question was not one to be answered lightly; but at last, in a small voice, Liza answered it.

"Vic's."

I stiffened. "*Vic's?*"

"Yes."

"*Vic Hedges?*"

"Yes."

"Your sister's husband?"

"Yes."

Staring at Liza in disbelief, I persisted, "The same husband she's divorcing right now?"

"Yes."

Speare put in levelly, "How can your sister Dorian divorce a dead man?"

Quigley answered that one, slowly and emphatically, "She does not know he is dead."

We stared at one another again. Quigley put his glass down with a click.

"Let me handle it, Liz." He faced us. "Understand this clearly. The decision was mine, and nobody else's but mine. After deciding to do it, I did it without anybody else's help. Liz didn't lift a finger, didn't even watch, wasn't even present. As to the burial, as distinguished from the death, I alone am the culprit."

After a quiet moment Liza said, "A thousand times I've regretted the day Dorian met Vic—and the lowest trick he ever pulled on us was to get himself murdered in Dorian's house."

Quigley resumed, "Vic, I suppose, had every quality a somewhat older woman would go for—good looks, a certain quality of dashing insolence, a modicum of talent as an actor, and a professional future of sorts if he cared to make something of it. I imagine Dorian was flattered that Vic, eight years her junior, should go overboard for her. Dorian tried her best to make a go of it; but Vic was a thoroughgoing stinker and no woman could have taken him for long."

Liza said, "It makes me ill to think how shabbily he treated Dorian. Dorian kept right on trying anyhow, even harder. It was Vic who made the break. He wasn't entirely sober when he announced he was leaving her, but he really was going."

"Out West, as Reece said," Quigley took it up. "To hunt for a lost gold mine, the triple-plated nitwit. He had filched enough of Dorian's money to finance himself for a year. As Reece also said—and he's bitter about this angle—Vic got the gold fever from Reece's own book about lost mines. Many gold-hungry men have gone up into the Superstition Mountains, looking for the fabulous Lost Dutchman, and disappeared without a trace—except that perhaps months later a skull with a bullet hole through it may be found. Vic, of course, considered himself much smarter than all the others who had tried—he wouldn't listen. He was pigheadedly determined to go."

"That's where Dorian believes he is now," Liza said. "So does Reece."

"Reece doesn't know, either, that Vic is dead?"

"Reece doesn't know. That's one reason we were so anxious to get rid of the wreath last night."

It was certainly a ticklish situation, I reflected—a murder having occurred in the house and two of the three members of the family unaware of it.

Quigley continued, "On that night Vic was actually packed and all set to leave."

"My birthday," Liza said. "I had an impromptu party. Vic topped it off by being nasty to everybody, then turning up dead."

"Where?" Speare asked.

"Here," Liza said, her voice small again. "Right here in this room."

"It was late," Quigley said. "Thirty or forty people had dropped in and of course there'd been some drinking. Not too much of it—except Dore. She had only a few, but they happened to hit her hard."

"Dorian was emotionally exhausted after months of trouble with Vic. Besides, he'd chosen the occasion of my birthday party to tell her, in front of her friends, that he was leaving her flat, then and there. Dorian carried it off beautifully, but then sort of caved in suddenly."

"Liz, and I put her to bed in her room," Quigley said.

"We decided we'd better lock her bedroom door," Liza went on. "Vic was down at the bar, soaking up too much scotch, and I was afraid he might turn even nastier. For another thing, the rest of us, the tag end of the party—eight or ten—were going

out to get something to eat."

"Which, we did," Quigley said. "I can't remember, and neither can Liz, whether we left the house empty, except for Dorian locked in her bedroom, and Vic down at the bar. But when we came back, about an hour and a half later—just Liz and I together—the house was deserted except for Dorian, still locked in her bedroom, and Vic, here on the living-room floor, shot dead."

Both Liza and Quigley gazed soberly at a spot near the piano where, presumably, they had come upon Victor Hedges' lifeless body.

"Very first thing, of course, we ran up to look at Dorian," Liza said. "The door was still locked. Dorian was still all the way out—hadn't moved, apparently hadn't even heard the shots."

"Surely you had some idea who'd fired them," Speare said.

Quigley answered, "No, none."

"Was the gun left here with his body?"

"No."

"It was Reece's .25 Mauser automatic," Speare said. "Remember, he mentioned this morning that once he'd noticed something strange about that gun. It had been taken out of the cabinet without his knowledge, used, then cleaned and oiled and put back. He recalled this distinctly because it happened to be Liza's birthday."

"Used on Vic, of course," I said. "The same gun that disappeared out of the cabinet last night. The same gun used to kill an old lady this morning."

"It's still gone, I presume," Speare added. "The murderer may have further use for it."

I was looking at Liza and saw her swallow hard.

Speare asked, "Where was Reece at the time of Vic's sudden death?"

"He'd left the party early," Liza said. "Reece loathes parties."

"I can imagine no reason why Reece might have killed Vic," Quigley said. "Reece disliked Vic, but Vic rather idolized Reece."

"But the guy got murdered by somebody," Speare insisted. "You've had a long time to think about it. You must have thought of something."

"The best I can say is that Vic had been acting as if he was up to something shady," Quigley answered. "He wasn't talking

about it, but he was too supercilious to hide the satisfaction he felt in putting over a slick one."

Another pause.

"So then?" Speare cued them. "After you found his dead body?"

"WE WENT down to the bar, Liz and I, and talked it over," Quigley said. "What to do. It boiled down to one question—whether to let Vic go on fouling up Dorian's life even after he was dead. He could have done it, you know. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to back up a plea of innocence on Dorian's part except Liz's word and mine, unsupported except by each other."

Quigley looked at us levelly. "You may not agree with me, but I simply decided, for Dorian's sake, that I would do what I could to avoid all that."

Quigley, the altruistic gravedigger. Had I been present, would I have lent a hand? I left the question unanswered in my mind, recalling that hindsight is often much clearer than foresight.

"The arbors were being built in the court at the time," Quigley said. "The post holes had just been dug and the surplus soil was piled up in the corner to make the rock garden."

Liza said, "I stayed up in Dorian's room all the while, watching her, to make sure the noise wouldn't wake her up. She slept soundly all through it."

"The workmen came back the next morning and I took the day off to watch them work," Quigley smiled wryly. "None of them noticed."

"When Dorian woke up, around noon, she was feeling good. She apologized for passing out and asked about the part of the evening she'd missed. Then she asked where Vic was. I told her he'd left for the West late last night, just as he'd told her he intended to do."

Quigley nodded toward the court. "He had a suitcase packed. It's out there with him."

Speare asked in quiet astonishment, "Hasn't anyone else missed him?"

"Occasionally somebody asks if we've had any news from Vic, but mostly our friends prefer to forget him," Quigley answered. "He was an only child; both his

parents are dead. A few aunts, uncles, and cousins are scattered somewhere, but all of them long out of touch. He was the out-of-sight-out-of-mind type and his friends, if he had any, just don't expect to hear from him. He'll simply stay gone, which will be entirely like him."

Speare shook his head wonderingly. "As a body suitable for hiding, his seems really ideal."

"I figured all these angles and thought I had a very fair chance of getting away with it," Quigley said, "until I got mixed up with a couple of starry-eyed evangelists disguised as private dicks."

"Not so," Speare said. "Your troubles began earlier, when strange presences began prowling this house. Was that before or following Vic's death?"

Again in a small voice Liza said, "Before."

Speare hadn't expected this answer. It bothered him. "So something other than Vic's death started them. At any rate, the funeral wasn't quite as private as you'd hoped it was. In fact, it's clear enough now that someone actually saw you digging." Sounding genuinely troubled, he asked, "Look here, hasn't somebody tried to black-mail you for this?"

"Not a hint of it," Quigley said.

"No pressure put on you in any way?"

"Nothing that ties up. Nothing but these spooky maybe-yes-maybe-no prowlings."

"And this was going on while Dorian was living here, before she left for Reno to divorce a man already dead?"

"Months of it," Liza said, shuddering. "Every day of it was nerve-racking. Dorian gets upset so fast—acts on impulse even more than I do. We were constantly afraid she might notice something wrong and suddenly call in the police."

My admiration for Liza was soaring. However shocking the situation had seemed at first, and whatever the moralities or technical legalities of it might be, it was also extremely ticklish and explosive. Liza had tried her best to cope with it solely for her sister's sake—an entirely unselfish, loyal undertaking . . . Speare, of course, could answer these sentiments by observing that crime committed with a lofty motive is still criminal, especially murder.

6—Two Complete Detective Books—Summer

"You think it's been hard, living with that thing out there?" Quigley shook his head. "The really tough part has been Dore—the way she kept talking about a living Vic when we knew for sure he was gone for good."

Quigley was eyeing us. "So, now that you know all, what are you going to do about it?"

I looked at Speare. He looked at me. Neither of us, obviously, felt inclined to call in the police. Speare's expression seemed to say, "We can get badly burned handling this one. After all, there was mention of a canary, and how much of the rest of this can you believe? But you're still the boss."

Liza was saying, "Please, Schy. Now you see why it's so terribly important to get all this cleared up before Dorian gets back."

"A tall order, Liza, and getting taller all the time," I said. "I can't even guess what clearing it up may involve—or whether it can be cleared up at all."

"Besides," Speare added, "it's always later than you think."

As we sat there silent for another moment a small galvanic sense of alarm tingled through us. A sound brought it, a metallic scratching and clicking noise. It was coming from the front entrance, from the lock. Someone was attempting to enter with a key that fitted the old lock, the one that had been replaced last night.

Quigley crossed the room. He closed his fingers gently on the knob, then gave it a quick twist and snapped the door open.

We stared in consternation at the woman whose beautiful, famous face looked in at us—stood motionless and speechless until a cry broke from Liza.

"But—but, Dorian!"

VIII

THE unexpected return of Dorian Elwyn Quigley Hedges precipitated a short period of catch-as-catch-can confusion.

She stood there in the doorway smiling a lovely smile at us while Liza and Quigley absorbed the dramatic impact of her entrance. Dorian herself, however, could not appreciate how forceful it really was. They would hardly have been more staggered to see Vic Hedges strolling in.

Traveling bags sat at Dorian's feet, and

behind her, at the curb, more of them were being unloaded from the taxi that had brought her. Her dark suit, obviously expensive, needed pressing, as well it might after a long trip. Because of her overlarge sunglasses I might have passed her on the street with only the thought that there went a woman with an entrancingly beautiful mouth, but here in her own doorway her sophisticated, stylish face instantly recalled her many plays, movies, and publicity pictures. This was my first close look at it without benefit of stage make-up or retoucher's brush. Of course it lost a degree of illusion, but despite the fine wrinkles around the eyes it was still the face of a handsome, richly experienced woman who could out-glamour any dozen of Hollywood's baby-faced starlets without half trying.

"Well, hel-lo, sweeties. Really, it's me."

"But—but, Dorian!" Liza squeaked again.

"You *ca-ai't* come back this soon. Your—your divorce—"

"I simply couldn't bear it any longer," Dorian said. "The horrible boredom, the ghastly idleness—not six whole weeks of it."

"Meaning you've changed your mind?" Quigley asked. "No divorce?"

"Definitely a divorce, Martin darling. I flew down to Mexico and got one of their kind instead."

"Mexico?" Liza said. "Have you just come from Mexico?"

"But yes, sweetie. Much more fun getting it there. Perfectly good too, unless Vic chooses to make trouble over it. I don't think he will, do you?"

"No-o," Liza said—it sounded like a moan. "I'm sure he won't."

The tableau broke up then and became an interval of refined bedlam, with Liza and Quigley hugging Dorian and kissing her devotedly, and vice versa, with all of them together talking like crazy. When it began to subside a little Quigley surreptitiously used one foot to slide a throw rug over the bullet hole in the floor. Speare and I were introduced to Dorian and immediately lost under another wave of high-pitched chatter.

"The loveliest Spanish on my divorce certificate, darlings," Dorian said. "Want to see?"

This brought on a fast series of strap-

loosenings, catch-snappings, and bag-openings. Then I was somehow at the door with Liza saying, "So sorry I can't go cocktail dancing with you today, Schy darling, but please ask me again soon." She kissed me good-bye—the first time a client had ever done this.

With mixed feelings I observed that Speare did not rate a promise for the future or a kiss either. We said, "Good-bye, good-bye, charmed to have met you, Mrs. Hedges, good-bye." Finally I found myself outside with Speare on a comparatively serene New York City sidewalk, feeling that our private detecting must wait, indeed it must, and I had never before been bounced so delightfully.

Speare, I saw now, had a cardboard box under one arm. No doubt it contained his folding shovel and Quigley had grimly put it there. In time Quigley would give Dorian a convincing but false reason why the lock had been changed—no problem at all for a man of his facile mendacity. It would be far less easy, however, for Liza and Quigley to go on being Dorian's protectors now that murder had struck across the court.

"Funny thing, Luke," I said. "That body back in there has become a surprisingly easy thing to take."

"Easier than their story of how it came there, anyhow," Speare said.

I gave him a searching look. "Don't tell me you still doubt Liza! Surely she and Quigley came clean this time."

He gave me in return another copy of that wry smile he'd been using so often lately. "I'm inclined to be a little dubious when listening to a masterly liar. My overly suspicious nature, I suppose."

We turned the corner, northward, and it struck me again that this case was calling for an excessive amount of legwork. At the next corner Speare paused to gaze westward along the cross street. Now at the curb in front of Julia Beems' brownstone stood an ambulance and a black sedan bearing the insignia of the police department. Two cops were guarding the stoop and keeping the sidewalk clear of curious passers-by. I felt relieved that the little old dead lady was finally receiving proper attention.

"The murderer didn't intend to kill us too, presumably," I said. "The two shots fired at us were just a way of saying, 'Stop

looking at me like that.'"

"I took it as a threat," Speare said. "Hands off, or better aim next time."

So, being Speare, he had hustled right over.

"How did you figure out the two-woman setup, Luke?"

"From the kind and amount of clothing there. The second woman had hardly more than a pair of pajamas hanging in the closet and a spare pair of panties drying in the bathroom, plus a pair of galoshes for high-heeled shoes, a kind which Julia didn't wear."

"Where did you find Liza's key?"

"Top drawer of the vanity."

"You forgot to mention it at the time."

"I did? Sorry, Schy. Must have been thinking about something."

"Aren't you always?" I said. "Look, I'm tired. I want lunch, with martinis. Let's take a taxi."

"What for?" Speare said. "The coffee room of the Hotel Riviera is just down the block."

In the coffee room of the Riviera we chose a table in a secluded corner where we could discuss our misdemeanors with reasonable safety. Happily I found the chairs well cushioned and I asked for two martinis made as dry as possible without omitting the vermouth entirely. I then discovered that Speare had quietly gone into a nearby phone booth. His martini, dewy and crystalline, was waiting for him when he finally came back. He tasted it while withdrawn into deep thought.

"The phone call you just made," I reminded him. "Would it interest me?"

"Hmm? Oh. Man named Bush." Forgetting to mention who the man named Bush was, he went on, "You know, Schy, legally, morally and in a practical aspect too, that body buried in the Elwyn garden presents a really puzzling and complex problem."

"When referring to the body buried in the Elwyn garden let's do so circumspectly," I suggested. "Not everyone would be as broad-minded about it as we have to be."

"One more thing," Speare added, his smile growing, "if anyone should inquire as to the possibility of a body buried in the Elwyn's garden, just remember that no person may be forced to testify against or incriminate himself."

"You have no idea how much better this makes me feel about the matter," I said. "Let's have another martini."

Speare's smile faded as his mind turned from badinage to practicalities. "Schy, why did Julia Beems and friend keep quiet all this while about the interment?"

"It does seem," I agreed, "that upon noticing a neighbor burying a human corpse in his back yard in the middle of the night, one might wish to mention it to the authorities. Julia had no doubts about the nature of it, either. The wreath proves that. Do you imagine she actually saw the shooting?"

"Not if Vic was shot in the living room, behind drawn window blinds, which seems probable."

"Then Julia didn't know who the murderer was—although she may have assumed the gravedigger was burying a corpse of his own making."

"She may not have known who the victim was either. Quigley had to do his digging without stringing up lights, of course. Quigley thought he'd gotten away with it, with none of his neighbors having noticed, until last evening when Julia Beems's wacky kindness betrayed her."

"If that wreath hadn't appeared," Speare added, "you'd have been led into the case without ever being told by either Liza or Quigley that there was a body buried in the garden."

That, damn him, I was forced to concede.

LOOKING straight at me, Speare pressed the point. "But the wreath *did* appear, thereby revealing knowledge of the body on the part of an outsider. And very soon after Liza and Quigley learned that an outsider knew of it, she—Julia Beems—was suddenly silenced."

My chair, previously so comfortably cushioned, had begun to feel like a fakir's bed of spikes.

"We know Quigley didn't do it, because we were with him when the Mauser began banging across the court."

"Liza didn't do it either," I said, "because Liza didn't know where to find the old lady."

"Didn't she?" Speare asked quietly.

"Of course she didn't, Luke. We didn't know it ourselves until the shots were fired."

Hou could Liza have found it out ahead of us?"

"The same way we did," Speare said. "Simply by asking questions along the block."

I swallowed the rest of my martini. It tasted like pickle brine. "I'd hoped you'd gotten over mistrusting Liza. To me she seems positively not to be the killer type."

"Few well-bred people seem to be that, I imagine," Speare commented, "until after the killing."

"Look, Luke, I've had a tough day. I don't want to get sore at you. Let's change the subject to a different aspect of the case. How can you explain the fact that Beems and company kept the burial quiet for so long? Not as simple indifference, certainly."

"They must have had a more important purpose," Speare agreed, "something valuable, something they kept trying to find hidden somewhere inside the house."

"Something which Liza and Quigley know nothing about," I added.

"When you come to think of it, it's really astonishing how much Liza and Quigley don't seem to know about what's happening," he said. "They don't know who shot Vic, they don't know who has prowled into their house, they don't know what the searching's for. And of course they don't know who murdered Julia Beems either."

"Go ahead," I said. "Open my eyes."

"Beginning with the burial, I see one consistent motive moving Liza and Quigley—one consistent reason for their acts, their falsehoods, their evasions of the truth. That is primarily to protect Dorian, whom they both love very dearly, and secondarily, of course, to protect themselves."

"Yes."

"I felt that motive shaping their version of Vic's death. 'Dorian was unconscious at the time. Dorian was locked in her bedroom.' Dorian couldn't possibly have done it."

"Of course Dorian didn't. She has just gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to divorce the guy under the impression that he's still in circulation somewhere."

"My point is that Liza and Quigley's account of Vic's death shows the same motive at work. It leaves no possibility at all of even suspecting Dorian. It protects her completely. Also, it's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"Liza and Quigley's story of how Vic died."

"How impossible?"

"Reece said no one but members of the family, including Quigley, knew where the key to the gun cabinet was hidden. He could be mistaken about that; someone else may have known it. But if we take it as a fact that no one else knew, then no one other than Dorian, Liza, Quigley, and Reece himself could have taken the Mauser out of the cabinet to use on Vic."

I chewed hard on this.

"The same motive brought on Julia Beems's death," Speare emphasized. "A motive governing both Liza and Quigley. *Only* Liza and Quigley—and no other member of the family, so far as we know—were aware of the wreath-laying."

I stayed quiet, unable to argue that point.

Speare pushed on: "When Julia died, remember, Quigley was with us. And Liza was—"

The telephone in the booth behind Speare rang and he answered it. When he sat down again there was a look of pain of his face. "That was Bush, calling back just now. He's a program director at NBC-TV. Operator there gave me his name the first time I called. He's the one who was rehearsing this morning—the one who called Liza over."

"You see?" I said happily, reflecting with vast relief that Speare had done it for me. "It checks with what Liza told us."

"She was there two hours, she said."

"Which puts her entirely in the clear, Luke."

"Bush told me just now that while Liza was on her way over to the studio they changed their plans and cancelled the show. When she arrived he told her she wouldn't be needed at all, so she left right away. She was there not longer than five minutes by the clock."

IX

I WENT directly into that same phone booth and dialed the Elwyn home. Liza answered.

"This is Schy. How soon may I talk with you, Liza?"

As she hesitated I heard, in the back-

ground, Dorian's gay voice and Quigley sounding much happier than before.

"At my office, Liza. Not with Quigley, or Dorian either. Just you."

"Tomorrow?"

"Right now, please."

"But—leave Dorian so soon?"

"Tell her its an emergency call from NBC-TV. Somebody has taken sick, you're needed in a hurry to fill in. She'll understand that."

Very quietly Liza said, "All right, Schy," and disconnected.

Back at the table, I said, "Let's skip lunch, Luke. Liza's coming over to the office right away, alone. Without Quigley on hand, both of us working together may be able to pin her down."

I paid my check and we left in silence. The police car still sat in front of the brownstone, but the ambulance had gone off to the morgue with Julia Beems's remains—marked fragile, I hoped.

Searching for a taxi, I was forced to walk all the way back to the avenue. While I stood wearily on the corner, waiting for one to roll along, Speare touched my arm and nodded my attention toward a taxi that had just then stopped at a red signal on the farther side of the street. Inside it sat the girl with the unique hair.

Liza was preoccupied with uneasy thoughts. I did not hustle over to greet her, but stood looking at her with an added degree of disillusionment for the reason that her taxi was heading northward in a direction opposite that of the Cole Detective Agency.

Just then an unoccupied taxi stopped behind Liza's. At my first move toward it Speare said, with quiet sympathy, "I'll wait at the office, Schy."

When the light changed to green I was all set and Liza was apparently all unaware she was being tailed. I wagged so long to Speare, who stood across the street seeing us off. My driver, so instructed, followed Liza's through a right turn on Fifty-seventh Street, then across town and into that undefined section called Sutton Place, where it turned twice more and stopped at a small apartment building of white stone.

Liza alighted hurriedly, paid the driver with a piece of folding money, didn't wait for her change and disappeared at a fast

clip into the lobby.

I went through much the same procedure, but less rapidly, and from the sidewalk a few yards away I watched Liza thumbing the bell button at a door on the left of the foyer—the private entrance of a ground-floor apartment. After ringing twice she tried pounding a fist on the door. When this also failed to bring a response, she said to herself, "Oh, damn." She turned away, saw me and seemed to grow half a shade paler, but she kept coming, her pace steadied to a slow stroll.

"Going my way?" I inquired.

"Matter of fact, I am," Liza said, straight-faced. "I've an appointment with a man. Private detective, I think. Named—ah—mmm—"

"Speare?"

"Please, no! I'm afraid of him." Liza narrowed her eyes. "You followed me. Just what are your intentions, sir?"

"What were yours?" I said.

"Friend of Dorian's lives here. Borrowed one of her dresses weeks ago. Dorian wants to wear it."

"Poor Dorian," I said, reflecting that all those suitcases probably contained only a fraction of her wardrobe. "Hasn't a rag."

"Sentiment or something," Liza said. "Bitterness maybe. She wore this one at the wedding reception after marrying Vic, so she wants to wear it again when celebrating the divorce. Quig's whipping up a welcome-home party for her. There's a big night ahead. You're invited, Schy. R.S.V.P."

"Delighted." Remembering another party on the occasion of Liza's birthday, I thought of inquiring whether I should wear my bullet-proof vest. Instead, I asked, "Do your parties sometimes overflow into the garden?"

"The parties sometimes do," Liza said. "Not me."

She was smiling now and her hair was indescribable and lovely. Her hand on my arm, we went on another taxi hunt. We found one and cruised off toward my office on Lexington Avenue.

SPEARE rose from his desk politely, not smiling, when we came in. A certain glint in his eyes suggested he'd learned something important while waiting for me. In due time he would spring it.

I escorted Liza to the secondhand straight-

backed chair provided for incoming clients. Liza sat there looking slightly cornered but intently thoughtful. The phone rang.

A woman's voice on the wire sounded hushed.

"Mr. Schyler Cole?"

"Yes."

"Hold on a moment, please."

I held on and in a moment heard another woman's voice. This one was clipped in manner, efficient-sounding.

"Mr. Schyler Cole?"

"Yes."

"Martha Essex is calling."

For a few seconds I thought it must be a gag. Back when my agency, Knox and Commission, had handled the Essex cosmetics account, I had been on numerous occasions amused or wearied or annoyed and sometimes infuriated by the fantastic difficulty of getting a call through to Martha Essex personally. Martha Essex was one of the most successful self-made business women in the United States and she knew it. She commanded an extra genuflection probably because it vexed her profoundly to rank a cut below both Madame Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden. Anyhow, to find her actually calling me, with so little fanfare, was staggering.

"You remember me, Mr. Cole?"

"Of course."

"I wish to discuss a situation with you professionally."

"Very happy."

"At my town house." She mentioned its address—Fifth Avenue in the ten hundre

"Three o'clock?"

"Very well."

"I'll expect you promptly."

She disconnected.

I said to the dead line. "The name is spelled E-l-w-y-n. Liza . . . You say she has no prison record, but one commuted sentence for peddling magazine subscriptions without a license? Thank you."

Liza smiled at my little joke. I let her sit there squirming a little under Speare's watching and turned to the Manhattan telephone directory. If Speare could do tricks with the phone book, so could I, especially such a simple trick as checking an address against likely names. Luck was with me. I turned back to say, "Your dress-borrowing friend in Sutton Place is Belinda Wil-

loughby."

"Why, Schy," Liza said, "I wasn't aware you know Belinda!"

"Does Dorian?"

"No."

"But there *is* a borrowed dress?"

"As I told you, Schy—"

"Yes. You also have told me on other occasions about rehearsing a canceled show and burying a nonexistent canary belonging but not belonging to Miss Charity Christian, otherwise misknown as Julia Beems."

Liza's face lost color.

"Somehow it's easy for you to fool me, Liza—for a short time. Easy but not wise. Not if you really expect help from me."

"I don't know what it is I'm really afraid of, Schy. So how can I know just what to tell you about it?"

"Tell me everything. For example, your real reason for wanting to see Belinda so urgently. Not really a dress, was it?"

Contritely Liza shook her head.

"What was it, then?"

"Please don't ask me that, Schy. I don't want to tell you just yet—because first I want to find out what it means."

"Stop that, Liza," I said. "How can I help you if you won't trust me? Now tell me why you were in such a hurry to see Belinda before seeing me."

"I can't," Liza said. "And it's not because I don't trust you, Schy."

Speare spoke up. "Witness refuses on the grounds that it may tend to incriminate her?"

LIZA looked hard at him and answered, "Witness refuses, period."

"Let's go back and try the other one again, then," I said. "Where were you actually, and what were you actually doing, at the time of the shooting this morning?"

Liza said earnestly, "This time it's the truth, the terrible damning truth. I was sitting at a soda fountain drinking coffee."

"Liza, please. You were drinking coffee at a soda fountain for almost two hours?"

"Part of the time I walked," Liza added.

"I can't say for how long or how far."

"Where was this soda fountain, Liza?"

"Oh, good heavens," Liza said in exasperation. "Drugstore, Forty-eighth, between Fifth and Sixth. Wait. No, it may have been the one near Madison, on Forty-sixth."

She shook her lovely head. "I'm not sure. What can you do about a girl like me?"

"All right, Liza," I said. "Now we come to a vital point, so let's keep it strictly on the level now, please."

Liza raised her hand solemnly and said, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and so on and so on, so help me."

Speare studied Liz. "Vic planned to go out West, you said. By train?"

"Yes."

"He told you by train?"

"Yes."

"Would it surprise you to hear that he really had no intention at all of hunting for a lost gold mine?"

Liza exclaimed, "But of course he did!"

"No," Speare said.

"But all of us understood that," Liza said. "The starry-eyed juvenile actually believed he would get rich by finding a fabulous gold mine."

"In London?" Speare inquired.

"Who said anything about London? Vic was heading for Arizona."

"Not this trip," Speare insisted. "On your birthday, last March third, Vic Hedges had a single place reserved on a night plane to London."

This was not an instance of post-mortem telepathy, of course. Knowing Liza's birth date—it was included in the research material I had gathered early today—Speare had simply thought to make another routine check, this time with various passenger booking offices—first, logically, all west-bound trains and planes for that night. Failing there to find an unused reservation, he had gone on to check further possibilities, with this seemingly occult result.

Liza's round-eyed amazement was definitely not fraudulent. "Vic? Plane to London? I don't get it."

"At least it's something we can sink a tooth into," Speare said.

"What does this mean?"

Speare shrugged. "It's hard to say as long as we don't know the true circumstances of Vic's death."

Liza held her breath a moment, watching Speare warily. "Quig and I told you all about those circumstances."

"Which is why we don't know what really happened, because the version you and Quig gave us is false."

Liza stiffened to her feet, pale again. Speare rose also, to face her. I sensed, as I had last night at the gun cabinet, that Liza had come very near the snapping point.

"Luke," I put in, "Liza has been taking too much on the chin. How about going over this point with me first?"

Speare nodded at once, but Liza said, "Dish it out right now." She prodded him, "Go on, my fine supernatural gumshoe, polish up your crystal ball."

Speare said, "The shooting of Vic Hedges couldn't have happened the way you told it."

"Why couldn't it?"

"Because a secret burial in the back yard simply isn't enough to justify today's murder." He went on, "Suppose the wreath-laying had caused the uncovering of Vic's body by the police. It's questionable just how heavily Quig might be punished for his part. A single illegal act by a highly reputable man, one certain to win the respect and sympathy of a jury—a technicality, perhaps actually harmless. The D.A. might not even bring him to trial. As for Dorian herself and the rest of you, it would not mean criminal action at all. Sensational publicity, yes—unpleasant, but soon over."

"You see his point, Liza?" I said. "To commit murder in order to keep the secret burial concealed simply wasn't worth it. Luke feels there must be something besides, something else even more important to keep hidden."

Liza asked tightly, "What, for instance?"

This was hurting Speare. He went on unwillingly, "I doubt that you and Quig came back to the house, after your birthday party, to find Vic lying dead in the living room. I believe the shooting happened while you were still there."

An expression of quiet but almost nightmarish horror had appeared on Liza's face.

"Did you actually witness the shooting, Liza?" Speare asked quietly.

She stood motionless, speechless.

"You know who shot Vic, don't you?"

Speare said, "It was Dorian. Wasn't it?"

Liza was shaking. Her fists were clenched white, her lips pressed hard together. She turned to me with tears on her cheeks and her voice was pitched on a note of unbearable strain.

"Stop him, Schy! Please, Schy, stop him,

stop him. Help me. There isn't anyone else who can help me really. Schy, *please!*"

She ran across the office sobbing; the door banged and she was gone.

X

THE formidable door of the Essex town-house was opened by a gray-haired uniformed maid who was, surprisingly enough, entirely devoid of cosmetics. We entered through an outer vestibule, a tomblike chamber of marble entirely bare except for a pair of unlighted *torchères*. Another pair of wrought-iron doors gave into an inner vestibule connected by an archway to a red-carpeted marble staircase.

Martha Essex's family, if she had one here, or anywhere, existed behind a screen of the darkest, most jealously preserved privacy. Occasionally a person who had ventured through these unchartered realms, as Speare and I were penetrating them now, reported seeing momentarily a little man passing across the end of a hallway, or disappearing out a far door. He was believed to be Martha Essex's husband. It was rather reliably rumored that she had one. Those who knew her best, in fact—if anyone could be said to know her well—insisted she had had four husbands, if not five—consecutively, of course. At any rate, each in turn had remained almost unknown outside the Essex house and probably not too closely noticed inside it.

The maid put us on our own at a hand-carved door on the second floor. We entered Martha Essex's air-conditioned library.

We walked between tables displaying rare manuscripts and similar gems under glass—a Keats sonnet, I noticed, and a Stevenson essay in one, Washington Irving beside a group of Thackeray sketches in another.

In a far corner, inside a cubbyhole partitioned into two small rooms, one an office and the other a workshop, we came upon Martha Essex herself. She was seated on a high stool at a bench, among the tools and clamps and gluepots of a bookbinder, carefully doing something to a shabby paper-covered pamphlet.

She rose at once to face me—an impressive experience. Martha Essex's sagacious gray eyes were composed of a crystal-clear

substance that passed intelligence one way only—inward. They were fine photographic lenses, registering everything, broad masses in sharp outline as well as minute detail with pinpoint definition, all without partiality, without comment. With unnerving clarity they looked out of a distinguished face, one rich in character, neither cold nor warm, and only faintly touched with Martha Essex cosmetics.

"I expected to see you alone, Mr. Cole."

"Allow me to present my assistant, Lucas Speare. We work separately only on cases I consider rather minor, Miss Essex."

"I will be the judge of the importance of this matter, Mr. Cole," she said. "What is your usual fee for handling an important case, both of you included?"

"Forty dollars a day plus expenses. Usually but not necessarily a retainer. Some kinds of assignment I don't take on at all."

"I presume you don't draw the line at recovering valuable stolen manuscripts?"

She lifted a house phone from the workbench and spoke into it. Her lips moved but no sound reached me. She replaced the phone, moved past us and out into the library proper.

Martha Essex paused near the fireplace and her face took on a prideful glow as she surveyed her book stacks. "Get results for me, Mr. Cole, and I will pay you a substantial bonus—on the understanding that you must hold this assignment in strictest confidence. In *complete* confidence, Mr. Cole."

"We handle every client's case, big or little, in complete confidence, Miss Essex—bonus or no."

Her brief nod said that what we might do in other cases was not of the slightest concern to her. "Let us understand each other, Mr. Cole. I do not feel I am consulting a doctor or a lawyer. By that I mean I do not expect you to prescribe for me or to handle the case as you see fit. I am employing an agent to carry out my instructions."

This reversed practice, but with Martha Essex it was obviously not an arguable point.

"Do you mean you have a plan of operations mapped out?"

"Yes," Martha Essex said. "Briefly, a number of rare and valuable manuscripts were stolen from me some time ago. My

purpose, of course, is to recover them. I've a fairly clear-cut idea how to do it. Because of the press of business, I must have it done for me. Does the assignment interest you, Mr. Cole?"

"Very much." Also, I was not uninterested in the prospect of getting in soft with this woman, assuming it was humanly possible to do so. "What about the insurance companies? They do very well with this sort of job."

She hesitated a fraction of a second before answering, on a faintly grim note of humor, "This time the insurance companies are at a loss, Mr. Cole."

A YOUNG woman had come quietly into the library, no doubt in response to Martha Essex's phone call of a few minutes ago. She handed me a check written to the order of the Cole Detective Agency for the amount of a thousand dollars.

"You're still interested, Mr. Cole?" Martha Essex asked.

"In a word, yes."

"Now, Mr. Cole—and Mr. Speare," Martha Essex said in her briskest let's-get-down-to-business manner. "Step in here, please."

She led the way to a cranny in another corner of the library. There, set in the wall and not visible from the stacks, was a door of steel, black enameled, equipped with a combination dial. Conducted through it, we came into a vault. Conditioned air was flowing in silently from heavily screened ducts and fixtures flooded it with a fluorescent shadowless blue-white light. It contained a small desk whereon sat two telephones (one for outside calls, the other an intercom), a thermos jug, and a magnifying glass as large as a saucer. There was a chair, beautifully upholstered in softest morocco. On the glass-enclosed shelves lay labeled dispatch cases of fine leather. This obviously was the repository of the choicest items in Martha Essex's collection.

"Only a very few persons other than myself have ever entered this vault," Martha Essex said.

"Evidently your lost manuscripts are unusually valuable."

"Priceless."

"Can you give me a more definite idea of their worth? How much did you pay

for them, for example, or how much would you sell them?"

"If offered, they would bring somewhere between three hundred and five hundred thousand dollars."

She kept gazing at me with her bright unreadable eyes.

"Surely, Miss Essex, the insurance companies haven't given up—not in a case as big as this."

She gazed at me, saying nothing either vocally or facially.

"Miss Essex," I insisted, "the manuscripts were insured, were they not?"

"Mr. Cole," she said in her voice of frosty ringing crystal, "I will judge precisely which details you shall or shall not hear."

"All right, Miss Essex, let's get down to cases. Your manuscripts were stolen when?"

"The night of February sixteenth."

More than three months ago. Martha Essex's half million dollars' worth of scribbles had been missing three whole months. Not a word about it had been printed in the newspapers. No insurance company, no cops, no private operatives in the case until now, when it was three months cold. Cole, old kid, I complimented myself, you've a really rare knack of taking on the tough ones.

"That night I was wakened by the ringing of my bedside phone. It was three in the morning. The phone was my unpublished number, known to only three of my top executives who are instructed never to use it after midnight except in dire emergency. A man spoke to me in a voice I didn't recognize.

"The man said, 'We have just stolen your Browning holograph.' He then named it, and went on, 'I will call you about it later tonight.' Then he quickly hung up.

"I was badly shocked. I had acquired the Browning manuscript in a confidential private deal. I prized it very highly. I had left it in the vault. My very first move, of course, was to hurry down here to see for myself."

HER voice grew more frosty and brittle. "The vault door was locked, just as I had left it. I opened it, came in here and found the Browning in its case. I realized then, of course—too late—that I'd let my anxiety carry me away, that the purpose of

the phone call was simply to trick me into opening the vault. I looked up to see two men, identically dressed in top hat and tails, standing in the vault door, pointing guns at me."

Martha Essex, four months thereafter, still felt indignant over the outrage, partly because she had been robbed, of course, but mostly because she had been outsmarted.

"Very courteously the two men forced me to hand them my most cherished manuscripts. One of the men had a list. I'm completely unable to explain where he got it. It was not entirely accurate—he asked me for several items which I have never owned—but on the whole his list seemed a feat of telepathy. The other man removed each manuscript from its case and piled them together. Then while they forced me to sit here at this desk, we talked."

"Very sure of themselves in a ticklish situation, those two."

"With reason, Mr. Cole. I am unable to explain how they were able to do all this, but they did it with superb skill. My night watchman was lying in the kitchen, caught by surprise, unconscious, his skull fractured by blows. The rest of the household was fast asleep, entirely undisturbed, and would remain so. Before unlocking the library and the vault I had myself disconnected the alarm system in a way known only to myself. These men had no reason to feel they must hurry off. They stayed to talk business."

"Of course they were not stealing my manuscripts for the love of them, as a musical fanatic might steal a Stradivarius. Not at all. Nor was it possible for them to sell their loot through the usual underground channels. The manuscripts are unique, far too hot to handle. Technically this was not larceny but kidnaping. Their objective was ransom. This is what they discussed—the amount I must pay, where and how. I would later be phoned instructions as to when."

"You'll give me these details?"

"If you wish, but they hardly matter now." She continued, "They stuffed my manuscripts into an ordinary brief case, much too carelessly, then cut the wires of all the phones here and in the library, using my own scissors. They left me locked inside the library. I stayed there for almost an hour, pounding a bookbinder's clamp

against a steam radiator until finally the noise brought help. That, Mr. Cole, was the last I saw or heard from them."

"You mean they never followed up their demand for ransom?"

"They did not. They have stayed completely silent and completely gone ever since—with my manuscripts."

"But, Miss Essex, you said you know what must be done to recover them."

"I do. A certain man must be found."

Ah. This might boil down down, after all, to an easier job than I had thought at first. "And what is this man's name, Miss Essex?"

"Victor Hedges."

For a long moment it was very quiet there in the vault.

I stood studying this remarkable woman until I recovered the faculty of speech.

"Victor—"

"Hedges."

"Victor Hedges?"

"You've heard of him, Mr. Cole?"

"You know very well I've heard of him, Miss Essex. Obviously that's your real reason for pulling me into this case and jockeying me into this spot."

I had begun to bristle at this female industrial tycoon and chess player named Martha Essex. From the first she had known somehow of my commitment to the Elwyns—or rather to Liza—and she had baited me neatly and fairly deeply into this conflicting entanglement before showing her hand. To what purpose? I couldn't guess. She hadn't entirely trapped me. I could still back out—though reluctantly, considering that it would cost me at least one thousand bucks.

"Let's get this straight. Miss Essex. Are you saying you believe it was Victor Hedges who stole your manuscripts, or helped to steal them?"

"I have said nothing of the sort, Mr. Cole. I have simply instructed you that your first step in my assignment must be to find Victor Hedges."

That was as far as I could take it. I opened my billfold, plucked out the lovely thousand-dollar check and dropped it, not without qualms, on Martha Essex's desk.

"Don't be a fool, Schyler Cole," she said.

"If you withdraw I'll have to get the help I need from someone else."

My exasperation was running at a feverish level. Insolvable situations seemed to be

my special forte. Certainly I could not follow her instructions as to Victor Hedges, and just as certainly I could not stand aside to let another private operative do it instead. Martha Essex was attempting to force me to make an impossible decision.

I heard Speare speaking. Since entering the Essex domicile he had listened intently to every word without uttering a single one of his own until now.

"While Schy is thinking it over, Miss Essex," he was saying, "permit me to compliment you on the expert way you're discharging a duty that's both unhappy and ticklish. Few people could be so self-effacing as you have been in providing those last, sad considerations for poor Julia Beems."

A wave of white crossed Martha Essex's face. Something like fire shone behind the crystalline ice of her eyes. She was shaken; she moved suddenly, brushing between Speare and me. She strode stiffly across the length of the library and out.

Speare and I gazed at the vacant doorway and within a few seconds the maid appeared and stood waiting for us to leave.

XI

THE taxi rolled down Fifth Avenue with Speare and me inside it.

"You're a distinguished man, Luke. So far as I've heard, no one has ever before achieved the feat of knocking Martha Essex for a loop."

"Bad timing," Speare reproved himself. "Should have waited a little."

"A mere mention of Julia Beems and the great Essex is tossed for a loss." I frankly marveled. "Was it a shot in the dark?"

Speare shook his head. "Remember Julia Beems's calendar? Presented to her for the year 1948 by Barloe's Fine Provisions, just around the block on Madison Avenue. I phoned Barloe from the office. Barloe remembered Beems well, as a sort of assistant housekeeper for Martha Essex. The last three or four months, though, he says, her mind had begun to fail, so she's been kept in her room."

That much seemed enough proof to establish a relationship between Beems and Essex, but Speare had more.

"That pin in Beems's bedroom, the hand-

crafted one signed 'Gaye' on the back. I ran up our phone bill tracing it to the shop that made it in Bucks County. Man there said he designed it for Essex cosmetics as a business gift, but Martha decided no, so that sample was the only one in existence. Then before leaving Shortworth of the *Herald Trib* reported that a choice funeral had been arranged for Beems but nobody's willing to say who's paying the bill.

"I don't understand why I wear myself out hustling around town like this," I said. "All that really needs to be done, in order to get a case nicely straightened out, is for you to look in the phone book and call somebody up."

"Bad timing, though," Speare insisted. "Should have waited until we'd found out what Vic Hedges meant in Essex's private life."

I mused on, "Essex felt I'd make a likely cat's-paw to get her priceless manuscripts back."

"They're pretty caloric of course," Speare said.

I stared at him. "What?"

"It's why she didn't insure the stuff," Speare said.

The taxi veered around a corner suddenly, like a Coney Island neck snapper. At first blush it seemed unbelievable that a woman as eminent and well heeled as Martha Essex could have stolen property in her possession. On second thought it seemed a logical extension of the same character traits that had built her brilliant career in business.

Several previously puzzling angles of her predicament were now made clear—the fact that she hadn't dared to insure the gems (because they were already insured in the names of their rightful owners), her avoidance of publicity and the police, and her undercover attempt to recover the stuff on her own.

Questions about it came crowding into my mind—what light-fingered artist had she hired, how much had she paid him, whom had she stolen the items from and what were they? Whatever the details, it was clearly an operation requiring a planner with Martha Essex's capacity for high success in esoteric fields.

"Well, I'll be damned. You could knock me flat with an ode to a nightingale." I muttered on, "But when somebody begins trying

to pin all that on Martha Essex, I want to be there to see it."

THE taxi stopped in front of the Elwyn home. While Speare paid the fare, carefully penciling a note of it, I rang the Elwyn bell. In answer we heard a gladsome cry in Dorian's voice.

"Come in, sweeties!"

We found her at the telephone, eagerly arranging for supplies for the evening's welcome-home party.

Noises underfoot indicated Liza might be downstairs. The drinking room was deserted, but in the furnace room beyond we found Reece working at his tool bench, shirt sleeves rolled up, pipe fuming. Belinda Willoughby stood watching him. The oil furnace and fuel tank formed an inelegant background for her tall, perfectly postured beauty.

"Ah, Liza's favorite detectives," Reece greeted us in irritated tones.

"You may recognize this as the door of my gun cabinet. I'm changing this lock too."

He took up a screw driver and Belinda said, "Reece darling, this isn't too fascinating. Let's take me over to the Persian Room where I can sit and watch the fascinating people."

"People!" Reece said. "I abominate people. I will take you instead to the zoo, to look at the animals, next week."

Those obscure stresses in Belinda were seeking relief. Despite her flawless make-up her face seemed pinched. She had the look of a girl trying to ignore a toothache and wishing she were anywhere else.

"Reece darling, if you won't take me out to sit at a nice pleasant bar, then I'll go alone."

He shrugged, said, "Perhaps," puffed on his pipe and hammered.

We left them at that and went back up the stairs in search of Liza. Dorian, still at the phone was now delightedly running down her guest list, inviting more and more people to the evening's "small" party. She muffled the transmitter long enough to suggest to us in her husky voice, "Try Liza's room, sweeties, second-floor front."

Speare and I went up more stairs and found a closed door. I knocked on it. The face that looked out was not Liza's, but the less entrancing one of Martin Quigley.

"So. Do come in, my fine flagon of embalming fluid," Quigley said in scathing tones. "I want to talk to you."

Liza was seated on the edge of the bed, shoes kicked off, toes curled against the rug. She had been biting her lips and her nails and possibly she had been crying. Her gunmetal-and-violet eyes were red-rimmed, hurt, scared, and round with appeal.

"It seems to me, Cole," Quigley began, "this boy of yours, this half-witted genius twice removed, is throwing his weight around just a little too much."

Speare gave him a half-smile.

"You haven't seen anything yet, brother," I said grimly. "For a really impressive show of weight-throwing-around, watch Martha Essex."

Quigley's gnomelike face became less florid. "Essex? That high-flying witch had me on the phone here not five minutes ago."

"Pleasant little chat, I hope?"

"Damnedest proposition I ever heard. The Essex cosmetics contract is mine, she said, on one condition. Just one little condition. The firm is to rebate its commission."

Ah. That one left no doubt as to how rough Essex meant to get. It was really a haymaker and meant to hurt. Computed at an agency's normal commission of fifteen per cent, it would save Essex cosmetics a hundred and fifty thousand dollars on every million dollars of their advertising appropriation. Also, the lucky firm of Gaylord-Quigley would beat their brains out doing it the way it pleased Martha Essex to have it done—for free.

"What's even worse, Quigley," I said, "it won't surprise me at all to see you accepting that proposition."

Quigley's froggy eyelids drooped low. "Over my dead body."

I shook my head. "Over Vic's."

A DREADFUL realization began flickering in Quigley's eyes. Liza rose, biting on a knuckle, frightened all over again. I went on with it, letting it jolt Quigley all the way down to his heels.

"For this information you may thank a misguided ragpicker named Speare who works for me, thank God. He's the lad who uncovered the connection between Julia Beems, in the flat across the court, and Martha Essex herself."

Quigley said, "I don't get it. There *couldn't* be any connection back to Essex—not an accidental one."

"It wasn't accidental, not in the slightest degree, not in any sense. It was very thoroughly planned. Essex rented that flat across the court, using agents and possibly pressure in order to get it, and keeping herself out of sight. She moved Julia Beems in there, Beems having been a member of her household. She put a second woman to watching over Beems. The old lady's mind had begun to fail, but not seriously. She was harmless, and all Essex wanted her to do was simply to stay there—she'd been confined anyway—and keep an eye on this house."

"Why?" Quigley asked bluntly.

"For reasons not yet entirely clear to us, this place is associated in Essex's mind with the theft of certain rare and valuable manuscripts from her collection."

Realization brightened another degree in Quigley's mind. "So that was the slick operation Vic was putting over?"

Liza said softly, "That's what the prowlers were searching for, then—the stolen manuscripts."

"Now we know," I said. "This had been going on only a short while prior to the night Vic was killed."

Now Quigley's face turned a greenish white. "And Beems was watching from the window when I—"

Liza said with a gasp, "Martha Essex has known it all this while? What must she have thought?"

"That's when she began cultivating me about her damned contract," Quigley groaned. "I should have known there was a hook in it."

A noise below had caused Speare to turn to the window. Liza and I looked over his shoulder. Belinda was standing in the street with Reece. Clearly she was annoyed with him. Still in his shirt sleeves, he had flagged a passing cab. He helped her into it and they parted without good-byes. The cab trundled on while Reece returned to the house.

"Does Essex know *who's* out there in the court?"

"Vic's the only member of the family who hasn't been in circulation since that night," I reminded him.

"Schy," Liza said in a little wail of desperation, "what can we do?"

The answer to that question was loaded with shock and danger. In self-defense I resorted to indirection.

"There's only one possible way of getting rid of your problem."

Quigley said slowly, "You mean—get rid of Vic?"

I nodded.

Liza stared at me in horror, Quigley swallowed audibly, and Speare flinched. Unquestionably it was something to shudder over.

Liza shook her lovely head, as if to say the whole thing was utterly unthinkable.

"Vic will have to wait until after the festivities, obviously," Quigley said as he reached for the doorknob. "Meanwhile, I'm not taking this licking without a squawk. I'm going to have an intimate little tête-à-tête with Essex."

He trudged out in a truculent manner that signified a bit of unwontedly rough weather ahead for Essex. Dorian spoke to him in the living room.

Liza squeezed my arm and whispered, "Take me somewhere. We've got to talk."

Liza had picked up a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, and now she slid them into my coat pocket, thereby giving me a delightful attack of goose pimples. The phone was ringing when we went out. Liza walked fast, even faster than Speare usually tore around. Within a minute by the clock I found myself in a small restaurant in the next block, winded and falling into a chair at a mushroom-sized table beside Liza and Speare.

"I don't dare leave Dorian for long," Liza said, her jitters seeming even sharper now. "Something horrible might happen to her—like that ghastly wreath."

"All right, let's make it quick," I said, keeping my voice down—and before I could get started Speare took over.

"Think back to that night, Liza," he said eagerly—meaning, of course, the night Vic Hedges was shot dead. "Nobody knew it then, but Vic was all set to fly to London that same night. He had a suitcase ready, packed."

"Yes."

"Quigley said the suitcase was buried with Vic."

"Yes."

"Did you look inside it before Quigley took it?"

"Yes. I wonder why. I don't know now. But I did look."

"Good. Did you find anything unusual?"

Liza thought hard. "A package, maybe two—I don't remember clearly—wrapped in plastic film, the kind of stuff they make into raincoats."

"Just a quick peek."

"Papers?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Probably old letters, or some of Vic's attempts at writing."

Speare's eyes had grown intensely bright. "What did you do with them?"

"Nothing," Liza said.

Speare stiffened. "Nothing?"

"For heaven's sake, I didn't take time to read any of it. I was badly jolted. Quig was in a hurry to get the case out of sight. I just stuffed them back where I'd found them."

"In Vic's case?"

"Of course."

"And the case is still there—buried?"

"Yes."

Liza's face turned almost whiter than the tablecloth. She sat perfectly still, eyes rounded on Speare.

"Martha—Essex's—manuscripts."

Speare sighed, "Yes."

So now we knew where *they* were too. Close at hand, planted there in Dorian Elwyn's garden, alongside Victor Hedges' bones.

XII

A WAITER approached and we ordered something and remained thoughtfully silent until the drinks were delivered.

Liza said faintly, "Then—we've got to get them back."

Getting those manuscripts back into Martha Essex's hands would undoubtedly improve the situation a great deal. "It will help to take most of the pressure off," I said. "Not all of it."

"We *have* to do it," Liza said, quietly horrified.

"Yes."

Liza rose stiffly from her chair. "I'll tell Quig. I want to go back to Dorian now."

As I rose also she said quickly, "Please don't come with me, Schy. We'll see each other later—at the party."

She hurried out without having tasted her drink.

"I think we should drop in on Belinda," Speare said.

"It will be a pleasure. Why do you suggest it?"

"Getting into the taxi, she limped a little. Let's go."

I paid for the drinks and caught up with Speare on the sidewalk. Liza was not in sight on the cross street. Speare turned eastward, walking at a brisk clip.

"There's something wrong in the picture we have of Vic Hedges as a highly skilled thief," Speare said.

"There is?"

Speare maintained a wearing speed eastward as he answered, "The stick-up staged in the Essex home was a thoroughly slick job. The crooks slipped in, latched onto the swag, then bowed out with it exactly as planned, without even a single minor *faux pas*. Even Essex grudgingly admired their finesse."

"His plan to skip to London with the loot certainly didn't show it. If he was relying on luck to get the manuscripts past the customs, he was playing a very long shot. Probably they would have nailed him then and there."

Every one of those literary rarities was, of course, widely listed as stolen. Their true, or pre-Essex owners, had not forgotten them, nor had the several insurance companies concerned lost interest.

"The Essex robbery showed a nimble mind and a deft hand," Speare summed it up, "and the London move an amateurish bungling and ignorance."

Arriving at Belinda's address, I was reminded of an apparently valid observation made by a wolfish friend of mine, that one of the most attractive features a young New York woman can possess is an apartment having a private entrance.

Speare rang and we waited. Presently Speare's face took on an expression of puzzled alarm. His sensitive ears were picking up noises inside, sounds still inaudible to me. Trying the knob, he found the door latched. He said softly, "Trouble in there," listened and waited.

The knob turned and the door was abruptly pulled open, but for only two inches. Speare held it, to prevent its latching again, then gently pushed. An obstruction lay against the inside of the door. He continued to push, sliding the obstacle slowly back until he could slide in. After half a moment he eased the obstruction away and I went in after them.

It was Belinda who had loosened the door for us. She lay on the floor just behind it, in a manifestly serious condition, not unconscious, but in severe shock. There was a bullet hole in her chest, just above her heart, and another in her neck, both bleeding.

SHE had been lying in almost the center of the room, where the bullets had dropped her, when she heard us ring, no doubt as dimly as in a dream. The stain on the rug there was large and ugly. Realizing that help was at the door, she had somehow managed to drag herself across half the room. It must have seemed an interminable traverse. She would not soon move herself again. Both wounds were very bad ones, possibly fatal.

Speare bent over her, feeling her pulse and gazing sharply around the room. He was looking for a dropped gun.

I had gone to the phone on the end table beside the couch, half noticing how well the trim smartness of Belinda's apartment suited her. I dialed the zero and said to the operator, "Ambulance." All such calls go automatically through the switchboards of the Telegraph Bureau of police headquarters. I gave them Belinda's address tersely and stayed on the line just long enough to make sure they had it right. Then, turning back, I found Speare doing a curious thing.

He was sliding his hands gently down the sides of Belinda's thighs. Next he lifted her skirt a little. Just above her left knee, under her nylon stocking, was a surgical dressing of gauze strapped down with adhesive tape. He loosened her stocking, peeled up the gauze far enough for one brief look, then straightened and moved to the telephone. Beside it on the end table lay a little black leather-covered book. Speare glanced into it, then dialed a number.

"Martha Essex?" he said.

He gazed with compassion at Belinda Willoughby on the floor.

"Lucas Speare speaking for Schyler Cole, Miss Essex. From Belinda Willoughby's apartment. She has been shot. Her condition is serious. We have called an ambulance. It's coming for her now."

Whatever response Martha Essex may have made, Speare did not hear it. He disconnected quickly and said to me—too loudly, I thought—"That ambulance will be here at any second now."

He opened the door with a haste that meant we had already stayed too dangerously long. With a last grimy sorry look at Belinda I followed him out. It was not callous to leave her alone there; we could do nothing more for her; the rest was up to the doctors.

At the avenue Speare unexpectedly turned. A church stood down the block and eight or ten persons were clustered outside its open door, talking together. We paused near them, at a spot from which we could watch the entrance of Belinda's apartment. If the ambulance didn't arrive fast enough, I surmised, Speare would very soon call in again.

Anticipating my questions, he said quietly, "Belinda was the second woman, Schy—the one who missed getting murdered in the Beems flat this morning, along with Julia."

So that explained Belinda's discomfort, her slight limp.

"The murderer hunted her down," I said, hoping this would reflect favorably on Liza. "And didn't quite finish the job again."

Speare uttered a low sound of consternation, turned his back toward Belinda's apartment and flicked me with a warning glance. I looked across and saw a girl emerging from Belinda's door. The girl looked out furtively, making sure the coast was clear, then came out fast.

It was Liza, her face stiff with fear. Heading homeward as rapidly as she could walk without actually running, she kept her right hand concealed inside her jacket.

Liza went on traveling breathlessly fast, without a backward glance. Speare and I matched her speed. I was no longer tired. Anger at Liza, anxiety, the sense of an impending showdown, had shot a slug of adrenalin into my blood stream.

After almost a block, however, the chase

seemed pointless. Liza obviously was heading for home. When an unoccupied taxi came cruising up, I was quick to flag it. I gave the driver the address of the Elwyn house. A moment thereafter we passed Liza, still going full steam ahead, one hand hidden inside her short jacket. She didn't notice us.

Speare sat quietly beside me. His soaring interest in Belinda was absurdly easy to understand now. He had simply remembered that the second woman in the Beems flat had been wounded; all the rest had followed logically from his observations, and the phone number of Martha Essex's home in Belinda's little black book had clinched it.

I frowned at Speare. "Go on, tell me you told me so. You've held yourself in half a dozen times so far, but this opening is too choice to pass up."

Speare shook his head. "It dosen't add up."

"Does it have to?"

"An attempt at murder ought to make sense," Speare insisted, "but this one doesn't."

The taxi stopped at the Elwyn home. Liza was bearing down on it, still at top speed. We paid up and alighted. As we strolled to meet her she slowed and instinctively her free hand bunched her jacket over her concealed one. We turned and fell into step with her. She stared straight ahead, hot-faced, not even attempting to pretend she wasn't having the tar frightened out of her.

"Before you go into the house," I suggested, "you'd better give me the gun."

She didn't answer, didn't seem to hear, but just walked on. I slid my hand inside her jacket, closed it over the gun and squeezed until she let go. Of course it was Reece's missing .25 Mauser automatic. I stuffed it into my left hip pocket.

"You had it all the time, Liza."

"No."

"Your story was a phony. The gun didn't just disappear out of the case. You took it out yourself. You've had it ready all along."

"No." Liza's answer came from a dry throat. "No, believe me."

We had reached the Elwyn stoop. "Look, Liza. We're going to find a spot inside the house where we can talk this out privately, really get our teeth into it, Dorian or no."

Childlike in her submission, she looked

up at me and said, "All right, Schy."

She fished into the pockets of her jacket, found her key and stabbed at the keyhole three times before hitting it. We went in and found Dorian at the phone as usual. Dorian ended the conversation as Liza hung up her jacket.

"Have a good time, sweeties?"

Liza said, "J-just delightful," sounding casual enough, considering—but strain showed in her face and she turned to me in order to hide it from her sister. "Everything all set for the party, darling?"

Covering herself while Dorian answered, Liza slid a slender hand into my coat pocket for her cigarettes and lighter. I sparked the lighter for her and Dorian broke off to say, "But you're still using your old one, sweetie. Liza, you *didn't* lose the one I gave you for your birthday—the one that used some sort of gas instead of fluid?"

Liza admitted contritely that she had lost the lighter, but Dorian didn't hear her answer—fortunately, because her voice went slightly panicky over it. Dorian had turned in surprise. Reece had just appeared on the basement stairs, pipe still fuming, still in shirt sleeves, carrying the door of his gun cabinet.

"But, Reece, sweet, when did you get back?"

"Get back?" Reece echoed. "I haven't been out."

"But I thought I heard the door. I was resting for a minute in my room and I thought I heard you leaving the house. It made me feel so all alone."

Reece shrugged. "Mistaken, Sis."

He disappeared up the stairs.

THANKS to this bit of light conversation, Liza's eyes were showing a glimmer of desperation. A few more of these unwitting ironies might cause her to pop her valves. Fortunately for her, rescue was on the way—at that very moment, in fact, it was waiting on the stoop. The opening door revealed a foursome who immediately greeted Dorian with squeals of ecstatic surprise and affection.

While the vociferation continued at high pitch Liza, Speare, and I hurriedly sought refuge in the drinking room downstairs.

"This is it, Liza," I said. "Now it gets really rough for you. If anyone else

saw you at Belinda's apartment, you're sunk, you're really cooked."

Speare said, "Liza is going to tell us she went in and found Belinda already shot."

Liza said quickly, "That's true."

"Of course it is," I agreed wryly. "You went in and there she was, sprawled in the middle of the floor, all shot up and bleeding. Question: How did you get in?"

"The door was open slightly," Liza answered, gazing straight at me. "A throw rug had gotten bunched under it."

"To be sure. A throw rug kicked up in the hasty departure of the real killer. You let yourself in and there was Belinda on the floor with Reece's gun beside her. So of course, as is invariably the case when an innocent person comes upon a weapon of murder, you picked it up."

Eyes narrowing at me, Liza said, "What would *you* do about your brother's gun under such circumstances? Leave it there for the police?"

"I would do just what you innocently did. Then, hearing someone at the door, I would duck into the bedroom, as you did, to hide."

Liza put in irrelevantly, "She had traveling cases packed. She was going somewhere."

"Then, as soon as Luke and I left, as soon as the coast was clear, you took it on the lam."

"Certainly I did," Liza said. "For heaven's sake. Should I have waited for the police?"

"Did you shoot Belinda?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

"Liza, do you know who shot Belinda?"

She looked at me squarely and said, "Schy, honestly, I swear I don't know that."

"Do you know why the attempt to kill Belinda was made?"

"I—I'm not sure."

"Belinda was the emissary between Julia Beems and Martha Essex."

Speare added to that. "It must have been Belinda who came over the wall soon after Vic's death, to poke into the rock garden. Belinda wearing overalls, chore coat and cap, so she'd appear to be a workman to anyone noticing her from any of the win-

dows. Also, it was probably Belinda who later did most of the searching in this house—possibly with Essex on watch outside, if not vice versa. All of it a slick job."

"Belinda picked up Reece by design," Liza said. "Not because of his fascinating looks, either, but because he lived here."

Meanwhile Julia Beems, that gentle, wacky soul, had spied on the place from the flat across the court. She was alone there when she conceived the sweetly cockeyed notion of laying the wreath. I could imagine Belinda coming into the flat and spotting it from her window while Beems was still out. She had probably hustled down to scout around for the old lady, found her in the street on her way back home, no doubt, and yanked her inside fast. She scolded Beems and locked her up and the old lady was heartbroken with remorse.

"Belinda also reported the wreath-laying to Essex," Speare said. "Watch them, Essex ordered her. Inside and out. So Belinda dropped in this morning and soon hustled back to the Beems flat to phone Essex the news that a pair of private detectives had entered the picture."

"Belinda was still there in the flat with Beems," I reminded Liza, "when somebody wearing a mask came in and started shooting. Now, Liza. Now, at last, you're coming clean about that part of it."

"YES," Liza said earnestly. "This is the way it really was, Schy. Honestly, this time it's the truth."

She drew a breath and launched into it. "I got the call from Bush and went over there only to have him tell me the show was canceled. I left and for a while sat at a soda fountain drinking coffee and trying to think things out. I was worried about every single angle of it, including you, Schy, and especially that old lady. I decided my smartest move was to try to find her on my own and learn how much she knew. So I started out."

Just as Speare had surmised.

"I never found the old lady herself," Liza went on, "or even where she lived. But while I was asking questions about her up and down the street a strange thing happened."

Liza gazed up in the direction of the

Beems flat. "I saw a girl come running out of a brownstone front near the Hotel Riviera. I was across the street from the hotel but close enough to recognize her. It was Belinda Willoughby. She seemed terrified, actually running for her life.

"Naturally I wondered what Belinda was doing there. What had happened? It struck me as being pretty suspicious, especially since Belinda had picked up Reece at a bar. Belinda ran—she seemed to stumble several times, but kept going, all the way over to the avenue. I followed her along the block while she found a cab."

If this report of Liza's was true, then she had just missed seeing a killer leaving closely after Belinda.

"Then I was puzzled again, because her taxi didn't turn east, toward her apartment in Sutton Place. Instead, it went straight north."

To Martha Essex's stronghold, where a wounded girl could hide from a murderer in greater safety than in her own apartment with its private entrance. Liza had mentioned packed traveling cases in Belinda's bedroom. Evidently Belinda had meant to move out, perhaps to transfer to Martha Essex's town house, until the danger had passed—and had started the move not quite soon enough.

"You can see now, Schy, why I didn't tell you about this sooner. It could be tied up with Reece somehow—it might make the whole mess worse. I had to keep it to myself until I found out what it meant." Her eyes went round. "Wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't ask Reece because he doesn't know about Vic—in the garden. So when I took a quick detour over to Belinda's apartment this morning, on my way to your office, it was to try to find out from her what was cooking."

At that time Belinda was still inside Fort Essex.

"When Belinda came back here this afternoon—" Liza paused. "Why? Why did she come back?"

"Let that point go until later," I suggested. "She did come back"—with her wound and a reason."

"I couldn't find an opening to talk with her—not with Dorian buzzing around and Reece here too. So, as soon as the chance

came, I went to her apartment again—and found her almost dead, shot with Reece's missing gun."

This, then, was the final draft of Liza's story. We were to ignore the several false versions previously fed to us and accept this revision as authentic. Offhand it seemed solid enough; I could detect nothing questionable about it except the teller's record. I had grown a bit touchy about my weakness for believing anything this lovely prevaricator might tell me.

The living room overhead was in a hubbub. There were more voices now, and louder ones. Dorian's friends appeared to be dropping in in swarms, to judge from the mounting decibels and the accelerating activity at the entrance, and unquestionably they were in the mood for revelry. This drinking room would momentarily receive the overflow, then inevitably become the vortex of the libations. Even now a man came hurrying down the stairs—but it was Martin Quigley.

Quigley's froggish face was flushed with harassment. One look at it caused Liza immediately to pour a stiff drink for him.

"Here we go again," he said grimly, grabbing up the glass. "Let us trust that tonight's jubilee will not result in any fatalities."

"Perhaps not, if you can keep your hands off Essex," I said.

Quigley blurted, "Is Essex invited?"

"It not, she's the only person Dorian ever met who hasn't been." This from Liza.

"The great cosmetician would not talk to me," Quigley said. "The monumental two-headed sphinx listened but spake not."

He was fuming with a deep-burning animosity toward Martha Essex.

"For all this trouble," Quigley went on in tones of corrosive rancor, "we must thank that wet-nosed cockatrice, that fribbling male hellbag who never should have been born, who at least should never have happened to Dorian. You may count it a blessing never to have experienced the nausea of knowing him. I refer, of course, to the late Vic Hedges.

"There he lies." Quigley pointed. "Just there beyond the wall."

We stared at the wall, not having realized until now how near the grave lay. Outside the rear door of this room stone steps led

upward some four feet to the court, where the rock garden occupied the rear, left-hand corner. Reposing just outside the basement wall, then, as Quigley had indicated, Vic Hedges could be found only ten or twelve feet to the north and slightly to the west, at about the level of the bar.

"MY ONLY regret has long been that I did not sink him deeper, preferably into a sewer," Quigley said, "but I'm glad now that I did not. It will simplify the task of getting him out of there."

"Quig," Liza was shuddering. "Please."

"Let us face the requisites," Quigley went on relentlessly. "We shall do what must be done. Those vile remains must be removed. The job naturally falls upon me."

"Qui-ig," Liza moaned.

"Of course Dore must be gotten out of here first," he continued matter-of-factly. "I have already arranged that. Johnny Gaylord will invite her to his Connecticut estate tomorrow to discuss a highly important, highly urgent and highly unlikely television show. If she notices any disruption on her return, we will simply tell her we were obliged to call in the plumbers."

Liza asked softly, "What about Reece?"

"Johnny Gaylord will hint a new-found willingness to invest money in expeditions. That will draw Reece away very effectively."

In a smaller voice Liza inquired, "Where will I be, Quiggie?"

"Standing guard," he informed her. "My plan is to work from the inside. This time there will be no activity in the garden for any watcher in the windows to spy upon. The entire exhumation will be engineered on this very spot."

Quigley had obviously given thought to the practical problems involved.

"A pickax will be required," he continued, directing a calculating gaze at the strategic spot, "and possibly two shovels, one long-handled, one short. Ready-mixed cement for repairing the foundation afterward. Reece's tools will do admirably for the carpentry. I'll begin the operation as soon as Dore leaves and have it finished well before her return."

The oddest aspect of this discussion, I reflected, was that it did not seem in the least fantastic.

"As to the further removal, I have not

yet decided upon a suitable container or containers. I imagine a large, ordinary suitcase or two will suffice."

During this exchange Liza's face had turned white.

"Quiggie darling," she said softly, "nobody else could be so wonderful in such a ghastly way."

"It's nothing," Quigley said grimly. "Glad to be of ghoulish service."

"Speaking of suitcases," I said, "it's important to recover Vic's. The one he has out there with him, I mean. Inside it you'll find a bundle or two wrapped in plastic fabric. It contains Martha Essex's stolen manuscripts. They may not be in mint condition now, but there they are."

Quigley stared at me, muttering soul-scorching oaths to himself. His face glowed with an almost demoniacal delight. This knowledge placed a powerful weapon in his hands.

Armed with it, he could drive a hard bargain with Martha Essex—or so he hoped.

Quigley said something which was lost in the flooding noise. Men were tramping down the stairs—delivery men bearing cases of liquor and concomitants followed by a caterer's crew in monkey jackets bearing heavy stores of tidbits. Necessarily we surrendered the room to them. We went up the stone steps and into the court.

XIII

THE door connecting the court with Dorian's living room had been opened. Approximately thirty persons were present now and more were coming in from the street. Presently, several hours before the time the hostess had set for it to start, the party would be in full cry.

"It's rather like a wake in reverse, if only the participants knew it," Quigley said. Contemplating Speare, he added, "Cole, I'm almost ready to concede that this eager-eyed bush-beater of yours may not be quite two hundred per cent malefic after all."

Gazing back at him unsmiling, Speare answered, "You may be going soft prematurely."

Quigley's eyelids dropped a little lower. "Meaning?"

"One question about Vic Hedges is still

a little cloudy. That is, who really killed him?"

Liza moaned, a soft sound of pain and despair.

Quigley countered, "Does it matter?"

Actually, in a way, no. If disaster should strike, we would all feel it, no matter whose finger had pulled the trigger. On the other hand, it seemed only fair that we should share the knowledge as well as the danger.

"Who really killed Vic Hedges?" Speare insisted.

Quigley said, "I do not intend to answer that question."

"There's only one way it could have happened," Speare said. "Only one way that makes sense, that fully accounts for everything that's happened since. It happened after your birthday party was over, Liza. All the guests had gone. Reece was out. Four of you were here—Vic and Dorian, with you, Liza, and Quigley. It had to be one of the three of you who got Reece's gun out of the cabinet and shot Vic. It wasn't you, was it, Liza?"

She stared at him in silence.

"Or you, Quigley?"

Quigley glowered.

"So it was Dorian who killed Vic. Dorian, who had simultaneously taken too many drinks and much punishment from Vic."

It was all too clear now, although it started old questions buzzing around in my mind, chiefly questions concerning Dorian's behavior since the shooting. For example, the divorce. At once, however, Liza answered them in a few whispered words.

"Dorian doesn't know she did it."

After a dazed moment I echoed, "Doesn't know?"

"When Dorian drinks too much she draws a blank."

Speare asked, "Did you see her do it?"

Quigley made a growling sound as if to warn Speare not to push too far into this; but Liza answered, "We both saw her. She shot Vic right in front of us. It happened so fast we didn't have a chance to stop her. We just stood there, too stunned to move, and watched him holding his stomach and falling. Then Dorian dropped the gun. Next she began keeling over herself, and Quigley caught her."

From the house came the shockingly incongruous sound of carefree laughter.

XIV

THE NEXT morning I found Speare as busy as a beaver when I reached the office. He answered my lugubrious greeting with his customary friendliness but seemed nettled. For several hours now he had been keeping the phone wires hot, and although he had accumulated a little pile of notes he appeared to be beset by frustrations.

I went to my desk to glance over the mail and found there wasn't any. Speare continued to dial numbers and make exasperated noises while I sat there thinking about Dorian Elwyn.

It gave me the willies to think about her but I couldn't stop. The whole thing was almost as vivid in my mind as if I had witnessed it. A stormy quarrel reaching an explosive pitch with Dorian rushing up the stairs. Her sister and husband and ex-husband thinking it the dramatic exit of a great dramatic actress. None of the three, particularly Vic, aware that Dorian was fishing out the hidden key of Reece's gun cabinet and snatching out the ladylike Mauser automatic. None of them prepared for murder until Dorian's quick entrance with the gun in her fist.

With a chill in my blood I found it also easier now to understand the murder of Julia Beems and the attempted murder of Belinda Willoughby.

First on my agenda for today, I must see Liza and have a really serious talk with her. The early flowering of Dorian's party had prevented it last night. One remaining point must be fought out, and it was that big one, that biggest of all: nobody but Liza would have killed Beems and shot Belinda.

Catching Speare between calls, I asked him, "Any late news on Belinda?"

Speare said he had inquired several times through his friend Shorty, on the *Herald Trib.* "Still unconscious, condition still critical. Three surgeons in consultation."

"Presumably Essex will pay the bills?"

"She's staying behind the scenes but making herself felt. Call the hospital and inquire how Belinda is and you will hear them tip-toeing over the line. They're giving out brief bulletins only. Cops also clammed up and evidently getting nowhere."

"A great deal depends on which way Belinda goes," I pointed out.

Speare nodded soberly. "Either way, shooting Belinda was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened."

"You could say the same thing about any killing. Cool, rational thought does not often lead to murder. Emotional outbursts do. Obviously this was one."

Speare said noncommittally, "Mercurial family, the Elwyns."

LIZA, opening the door, greeted me without cries of joy. She knew why I was there.

Martin Quigley was sitting on the back of his neck in an easy chair, his eyes bloodshot, suffering wretchedly from a hang-over.

Dorian, also present, wore a smart dark suit and five years more than yesterday, which wasn't bad, considering. She refilled her coffee cup from a silver pot while gazing at me quizzically.

"Schyler Cole—that's you, isn't it, sweetie?—why didn't you come to my lovely party?"

"I was here," I said. "Most of the night. Don't I look it?"

"Oh, no-o," Dorian said. "That settles it, I've got to stop drinking."

The telephone rang. Liza hurried to answer its ring, then turned back.

"For you, Schy."

A female voice.

"Most important that I see you immediately, Mr. Cole," it was Martha Essex.

"I thought I made it clear to you yesterday. Miss Essex—"

"This matter does not conflict with your present commitment. On the contrary, it coordinates. It will put you in a worthier position than your present one, in fact. A position of service. Valuable, conscience-free service, Mr. Cole. You need not hesitate this time to accept liberal payment for it."

Something very foxy was being pulled off here. Offhand I couldn't guess what it was.

"Mr. Reece Elwyn is there with you?"

This was coming a little too fast for me to catch it all on the fly. "Reece?" I looked around. Liza's gesture informed me Reece was upstairs.

"Yes, he's here."

"I'll expect you at my Park Avenue salon in twenty minutes, Mr. Cole," Martha Essex said, and added with emphasis, "With Reece Elwyn."

She disconnected. Quigley was watching me with one catchup-colored eye, Liza with two round ones. I could not guess how much I might discreetly say before Dorian. Reece made the incident even more uncertain by coming down the stairs at that moment. He brought two overnight cases, one of them evidently Dorian's, and was all ready to set forth to Gaylord's place in Connecticut.

"Before you get away, Reece," I said, "I'd like ten minutes with you at my office."

"Oh, must you, really?" Dorian put in. "Reece is driving me up to Johnny Gaylord's, sweetie, and we're already late."

Reece shrugged, feeling that boredom lay in either direction.

"I'll bring him back as soon as possible," I promised Dorian, and steered him toward the door.

REECE preferred a brisk cross-town walk but I insisted on a cab. I instructed the driver, "Martha Essex's salon, just over on Park," and Reece turned a searching look on me.

"Command appearance," I explained. "She didn't say why."

Reece seemed to know why, but he didn't say either.

"Look here, Reece," I said as we alighted in front of the salon, "what's between you and Essex? She's up in arms over the loss of certain rare manuscripts from her collection."

"I know," Reece said. "I stole them."

I stood there on Park Avenue looking at him. His candor was a marvelous thing, but somehow his confession did not roll me too far back on my heels. I had learned to expect almost anything from an Elwyn.

As a literary Raffles, come to think of it, Reece was a natural—keen-witted, audacious, urbane when he chose to be. I should have seen it much sooner, in fact—when first hearing Martha Essex's description of the skillful plan and suave daring of the operation. Robbery in top hat and tails—Reece, of course, with Vic Hedges assisting.

"You were about to learn it anyway, from Martha Essex," Reece explained. "It was a very well-executed robbery and also one of the best pieces of detective work I have ever done. Being a detective yourself, you will appreciate it."

"Go ahead, but fast," I said uneasily.

"We're a few minutes early, but only a few."

Pleasantly Reece went into it. "My curiosity was aroused when I began noticing a series of little items in the news, reports mostly only a few lines long, concerning the theft of some rare manuscripts. A certain element of consistency ran through them, especially, as I learned from talking it over with several collectors, dealers, and librarians, the fact that all the stolen manuscripts without exception stayed missing. Completely missing—no sign of them anywhere along the usual channels used by book thieves and fences.

"It fascinated me. A challenge—my wits against the clever, crooked collector. Irresistible! But still only a mystery to solve, you understand. It was not to be entirely overlooked, though, that the insurance companies were offering substantial rewards."

"Speed it up," I said. "One never, never keeps Essex or the Queen of England waiting."

Reece smiled genially and continued. "It cost me many months of question-asking and sleepless brain-beating before I came near the answer. Finally I picked up the spoor of a known book thief named Brady, reported to have reformed. He had taken a modest cottage in Flushing and was traveling as a salesman of chintz. Or so they said. The insurance detectives were persuaded by the chintz because he was actually selling the stuff, but to me it didn't ring true. I kept on checking his movements. Each time another manuscript vanished from a collector's library, or that of a college or a historical society, Brady, by a peculiar coincidence, was not too far off. Next question, of course, and the crucial one: Who was he working for?"

"Essex. And you found her. How?"

"By tapping his phone. His wife delivered the loot while ostensibly getting a finger wave. I had the answer—and by now I had also found an excellent opportunity to improve on it.

"First I tested Essex. From a friend, also a collector, I borrowed a group of Keats letters and sonnets. Approximate value, forty thousand. I contrived an appointment, offered to sell them to her for twenty. Fascinating to watch her struggle between temptation and prudence! She knew this stuff

could not be my property. The mere fact that she hesitated proved she was not above buying stolen goods.

"I returned the Keats items to my obliging friend and told Essex I was sorry, but I had let them go to one of her rival collectors. I then tempted her with other tidbits, also borrowed, pitching the prices outrageously high. I saw her, of course, in her library, often enough so that one day I could say casually, 'Don't bother the maid to show me out, Miss Essex—I know the way.'"

Instead of leaving, he had disappeared into one of the many unused rooms upstairs, and hidden himself comfortably there until the house was asleep, then had quietly explored, avoiding the night watchman and the burglar alarms. In this way he had learned the layout, Essex's super-private phone number, and anything else he might need to know to insure a successful burglary. When repeating this stunt on the selected night, he had let his apprentice in and then the pair of them had pulled it off together in high style.

"It all culminated in one of the most gratifying and stimulating evenings of my life."

"**I**N NOW," I insisted, and such was Reece's fearless aplomb that he could enter his victim's salon door without seeming to be aware of it.

One of the ranking angels, perhaps a lieutenant angel, junior grade, and an exquisite brunette, wafted up to us and spoke. She only said, "Mr. Cole and Mr. Elwyn? This way, please," but her words were lyrical, her voice flutelike.

Soon we found ourselves inside Martha Essex's own inner-inner-private office and actually in the presence.

Martha Essex stood behind her desk looking upon us inscrutably with her crystal-clear, one-way eyes.

Gazing first at Reece, she was expressionless but intense. He retained his easy on-his-toes air, not minding it at all, and smiled at her faintly.

She turned to me. "Mr. Cole. The responsibility you feel toward the Elwyns is to protect them from me. At first it was to protect them from the police. It is still that. But now it is chiefly to protect them from

me. You need not commit yourself on the point, Mr. Cole."

That odd and ominous quality I had felt in her yesterday—a quality of taut and deadly resolve—was even stronger today.

"Very well," Martha Essex said. "When we have finished this discussion you will find yourself with a splendid opportunity to do just that. I will begin, Mr. Cole, by informing you that this"—she dipped her hat at Reece—"is the man who stole my manuscripts."

"I know," I said mildly. "He just now happened to mention it."

REECE'S smile grew. "As the saying is, look who's talking. You stole them first, Miss Essex."

"You admit you stole them from me, Mr. Elwyn?"

"Why not?" Reece shrugged. "It was a first-class job. I'm quite proud of it. Have you suspected me for long, Miss Essex?"

"From the first," she answered. "More strongly as I went deeper into it. For some time now I have been quite certain."

"I foresaw that, of course," Reece said. "Once the robbery had been committed you would realize my approach to you was part of the plan."

This was what had turned Essex's undercover investigation immediately toward the Elwyn home.

"But of course your suspicions would be of no consequence," Reece added. "As you know, I had intended to return the manuscripts to you very soon, for ransom. You would have had to leave it at that. A thief finds certain advantages in stealing from another thief."

Reece could call himself a thief far more easily than Martha Essex could hear him call her another; but she stood still, her face frigidly unreadable.

"Unfortunately, as it turns out, we are both the losers," Reece went on. "Your suspicions still don't matter, your accusations will get you nowhere. I do wonder why you have done nothing about it all this while."

Nothing? Essex had buzzed right into it. She had rented an observation post above Smithy's Court, had put Beems on watch, had often come there to study the Elwyn household herself.

It was almost too much to believe Reece

didn't know this. Perhaps he was actually well aware of it and pretending ignorance for reasons of his own. Essex herself was caught up with wonder during a moment of silence.

"Your invitation to an interview wasn't entirely unexpected, you see," Reece said, "but it has been a strangely long time coming."

"I preferred other methods," Martha Essex said. "I might never have faced you with it at all except that certain developments are forcing the issue."

Developments such as Beems murdered and Belinda almost.

"It is an urgent matter now," Martha Essex said. "Most urgent. The manuscripts must be returned at the soonest possible moment, Mr. Elwyn."

After all her undercover maneuvering she was now simply asking for them outright. A last resort?

"Returned at the soonest possible moment—listen to this carefully—not to me, but to Mr. Cole."

Ah? The champion chess player's hand had moved again.

"To Mr. Cole," she insisted, "without the payment of one cent of ransom."

Then what? She didn't say; she went no further with it. Obviously the point was vital in her tactics—but to Reece it was of no moment. He shrugged again.

"Sorry."

"What do you mean, Mr. Elwyn?"

"I don't know where the damned things are."

Essex stiffened. "Mr. Elwyn—"

"I don't know where they are, my dear Miss Essex," Reece repeated, his voice edged. For him the conversation had taken a painful turn. "Believe me, I would make excellent use of them if only I knew that."

I WAS watching him. The question of what he actually knew and what he might be pretending not to know was not answered in his face.

Essex herself was at a loss. After a moment she said, "I don't believe it."

Reece gave her an annoyed frown. "It should be obvious. To you those scribbles are rare prizes; to me they are a means of obtaining money for the most important project of my life." He laughed at the

ironical contrast between them. "My interest is in recovering the matchless literary treasures of our civilization—manuscripts of Homer, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Aristophanes—while you concern yourself with a few latter-day, small-bore hacks such as Dickens, the Brownings, Thackeray. Please, Miss Essex, make sense."

Miss Essex, a shade paler, said evenly, "You have sold the manuscripts to another collector, one able to pay more than I."

"I only wish it were true," Reece sighed. "I would not be here, but in Alexandria. But it is not true, I'm sorry. The fact is, all your precious trash is gone, disappeared I know not where."

Essex repeated with stinging flatness, "I do not believe that."

Reece stepped closer to her desk. "I don't find it pleasant to admit this." His voice went bitter again. "It rankles, and not merely because it is a failure. It means very much to me."

Martha Essex said, "The manuscripts could not disappear entirely."

"You have tried to find them, haven't you, Miss Essex? Have *you* any idea where they are?"

"Inconceivable that they could vanish without a trace!"

"In reality it is very simple," Reece answered. "It is all because—as we thieves say among ourselves—my pal double-crossed me."

He went on, throwing light into my mind and profoundly troubled doubts into Martha Essex's. "I'm speaking of my brother-in-law, Victor Hedges. He was my accomplice. After leaving your house with the manuscripts that night, we went directly and safely home. I locked them in my desk in my study, feeling they would be safe enough there until you bought them back—a matter of only a few days, I hoped."

Reece smiled wryly at himself. "Vic was to share generously in the spoils and come to Alexandria with me. I imagined him satisfied with our bargain. I didn't know, of course, that he was planning to decamp with the booty, but that's what he did. Thievery seems to breed thievery, doesn't it, Miss Essex?"

"Surely—"

Reece slapped his palm down on the desk. "It infuriates me that this supercilious ama-

teur could outwit me so neatly. He talked about going West with no intention of going. He reserved a seat on a plane to London, but didn't use it—another false trail."

Reece had actually preceded Speare to that one.

"He left me not the slightest thread to follow," Reece said heatedly. "He left nothing, absolutely nothing that might lead me to him."

Essex turned to me. "Mr. Cole, is this man telling the truth?"

I answered her, treading the tightrope with care, "I sincerely believe he is, to the best of his knowledge."

Those bright eyes of Martha Essex were no longer expressionless ice. They took on an almost fierce shine of elation. Yes, elation over the possibility that a half million dollars' worth of literary rarities might be lost forever—irreplaceable rarities which only yesterday she had valued beyond estimation. I didn't get it. I would need a little time to figure out that one, and I would welcome Speare's help on it.

"If the manuscripts have not come to light within twenty-four hours," Martha Essex said, "I will take it as a fact that they will never be seen again."

"And if by some long chance they do turn up?"

Her answer was an enigma of a smile.

Martha Essex was training her firepower for a devastating broadside on the whole Elwyn clan—and if anything at all could stop her, our move must be the fastest possible return of those bedamned, scratched-up, priceless scraps of paper.

XV

THE CAR waiting in front of Dorian Elwyn's home was a resplendent char-
treuse convertible with its top retracted.

Reece had made the return trip in silence. He rang the bell and Dorian let him in. Quigley still half lay like a propped-up corpse in the same easy chair, still suffering, the cup of coffee at his elbow now stone-cold. Liza was not present.

"Reece, sweetie, you look so out of sorts," Dorian said. "Never mind, darling, a wonderful lazy ride in the country will make you feel better."

"Only because there are fewer people liv-

ing out there," Reece said, picking up the bags. "I like people much better who are twenty centuries dead." At the door with Dorian he paused to ask, "Where's the kid sister?"

"Out," Quigley said. It sounded like a groan. "Said tell you good-bye."

Reece and Dorian went out to the car and drove away. Quigley pushed himself wretchedly to a sitting position.

"Where's Liza?" I asked.

"You may have heard me say she's out. She's out still."

"She can't keep on dodging me. We've got to have this out, and the sooner the better."

"Stay away from her, Cole. The kid's had all the badgering she can take without cracking up. That's why she's sitting out the disinterment."

"She's not standing watch for you after all?"

"Would you care to fill in for her?"

"No, thank you just the same."

"Behind bolted doors, while the rest of the world goes by, I will play my solo, my impromptu concerto written in one flat for pick and shovel."

Quigley's acrimonious mood was not the best atmosphere for it, but I couldn't avoid telling him the worst.

"If you feel at all hesitant about the excavation, that's too bad. It's now more essential than before."

"Why?"

"The reason is Martha Essex."

I briefed him on her. He listened with his reddened eyes narrowed, muttering baleful nonprofanities under his breath.

"Does she know where those accursed manuscripts are?"

"Who other than Essex can say how much Essex knows?"

"Then guess at it," Quigley urged me grimly, "but guess good."

"She knows a body is buried in your garden but she doesn't know for sure whose it is. She may suspect it's Vic's. If so, she may have reasoned the manuscripts are there with him, since practically all other possibilities are now exhausted. However, she prefers not to do the spadework herself, which accounts for her ultimatum to us. All this is a guess of mine and it's anybody's guess how good it is."

"So we dig 'em up," Quigley said. "What then?"

"One thing we must not do under any circumstances. Don't let Reece get hold of them or even wind of them."

"All right, Reece stays out in the cold. What do I do with these pestilential manuscripts? Hold them to use for bargaining purposes?"

"Essex is beyond bargaining."

"Let's get rid of the stuff, then. Worth a fortune, is it? It's only money. Irreplaceable? So am I, so are we all. Let's chuck the stuff out with the wastepaper."

"That would be playing straight into Essex's hands."

"What? How?"

"I distinctly have the impression those manuscripts are much less valuable to her today than they were yesterday. Something that's happened has drastically lowered her esteem for them."

"So?"

"They are still important to her, but in a new way. I think she sees them as an uncertain and potentially dangerous factor. Essex, being Essex, wants to calculate her risks, so she can move accordingly."

"So we sit on the stuff and keep her guessing?"

I shook my head. "There's a twenty-four hour deadline on her ultimatum. After H-hour she lets us have it regardless."

Dark-faced, Quigley snarled. "What the hell's *eating* that woman?"

"I would like to know."

Anger was building up pressure inside Quigley.

Unlike Reece, he was not scornful of Essex's power, and unlike Reece he was highly vulnerable to it. Like me, he was scared of the woman.

"'Twas the night before Christmas," he snarled in tones of brimstone and hellfire. "So what *can* we do?"

"Play it her way. Actually, we have no choice. Until we get a better slant on what she's up to, the best we can do is let her tick, like a time bomb, and watch her."

"And look hard for a chance to stop her."

"Putting those manuscripts back into her hands won't stop her, but if we handle them right, as a teaser, we may manage to delay her. So let's get 'em up."

Quigley removed his coat.

XVI

WHILE I slept that night the curtain went up on the third and last act . . .

A brassy clangor woke me—the phone ringing. I groped around and found it.

"H'lo."

"Schy?"

"Liza!" I hoisted myself on an elbow. "When did you come down off your flagpole?"

She let it pass. "Schy, I'm at a friend's apartment—"

"Gender, please?"

"Please, Schy. A girl. But this is serious. Have you heard from Dorian?"

"No."

"Quig just phoned me about her. We're all worried half out of our wits."

"What about Dorian?"

"She's disappeared."

I pulled myself to a sitting position, trying to clear my head.

"Apparently she's gone off somewhere in her car. Reece phoned Quig from Johnny Gaylord's place in Stamford that they'd found Dorian missing and her car gone too."

"What do they think?"

"Nobody knows *what* to think. She—she *couldn't* have been kidnapped!"

"Keep your head, Liza."

"She must have slipped off by herself. Left her traveling case there. Nobody knows where she went or why."

With Quigley's prolonged task in mind, I said in alarm, "She may be coming back home."

"There's been time for that, Schy. She'd evidently been gone for hours when Johnny noticed."

"No hunch at all about this?"

"None, Schy."

"Quigley done anything?"

"He's decided to wait a little longer. Dorian may show up at the house still. If she doesn't, soon—" Liza let it hang in uncertainty.

Ticklish proposition. This wasn't quite the best time to call in the cops.

"If Dorian does show up, Quigley will have the problem of keeping her out of the basement," I said. "Alterations are probably incomplete down there. I'll go over and join him."

"Please."

"Where will *you* be?"

"There, with you."

Standing on the Elwyn stoop, I listened for certain sounds from below, but heard none. I pressed the bell button. It was not answered. I knocked. No response. I tried the door. It was locked.

High heels came tap-tapping rapidly. Liza hurried up the stoop, quick of breath.

"I can't get an answer here," I said. "Got your key?"

She fished for it in the small pockets of her jacket—the same shortie jacket she had worn for the Belinda shooting—but stopped as a taxi veered to the curb. Quigley came out of it. He said to us, "Found her car."

Liza hurried to him. He added while paying the fare, "Not Dore, just her car, up on Riverside Drive."

He tramped up the steps and stabbed his key into the lock. His hands had been thoroughly scrubbed. His face was haggard. Once inside the living room, he dropped into a chair.

"I decided to report her car stolen," Quigley explained. "Would do no harm. Good way of finding her. Prowl car spotted her convertible almost right away, near Grant's Tomb." His weary scowl turned grim at that. "Does Dorian know anybody special living in or near Grant's Tomb?"

"I can't think," Liza said.

"Soon as the cops spotted it I went up to check. Dore's convertible, all right. Illegally parked, no key, no signs of violence."

"Quig, I don't understand this at all."

"Nor I. Nor do I know what more we can do except wait for her to turn up somewhere."

NOW Liza was gazing at the floor—not really at the floor, but through it, in the direction of the northwest corner of the room below.

"I was interrupted," Quigley informed her. "Reece's message came right in the middle of it. Rather, a little *past* the middle."

He pushed himself exhaustedly to his feet and went down the stairs. Neither Liza nor I made a move to follow him. I even preferred not to visualize the present appearance of that room. After half a minute Quigley was back with two small bundles

in his hands, two very similar bundles, both contained in a covering of gray, translucent plastic film.

Quigley passed them to me. I had formed no preconception of what their present condition might be. They felt a little clammy, but that could be the normal tactile response to the plastic material. Externally they seemed in remarkably good shape.

I flattened the papers, shuffled through them, and became increasingly amazed at the famous names and classic titles, one after another: Shelley, Byron, Burns, Scott, Lewis Carroll, Washington Irving, Stevenson, and of course Reece's bushleaguers—Dickens, the Brownings, and Thackeray.

I left the half million dollars' worth of paper there on the table, went to the phone, drew a breath and dialed the number Speare had found in Belinda's address book.

The answer came immediately, "Martha Essex speaking."

"Schyler Cole calling from the Elwyn home. I have your manuscripts, Miss Essex."

She did not speak.

"Did you hear me, Miss Essex? I have your manuscripts."

She remained silent.

"When and where should I deliver them, Miss Essex?"

She disconnected.

I stared stupefied at the phone. Too many incomprehensible things were happening tonight. With some heat I again dialed Martha Essex's unpublished number. This time the distant phone rang repeatedly without being answered at all.

"I don't get this and I certainly don't like it," turning back to Liza and Quigley. "She pulled her sphinx act again. No instructions, no word at all."

"It's her move now," Quigley said, his froggy eyelids drooping low. "She'll make it, too, you can count on that."

Liza had brought a large envelope from Dorian's desk. We stuffed the manuscripts into it, one priceless sheaf after another, carefully, until it was full and flat.

Liza went to a chair, sat in it stiffly and gripped its arm in her white hands. "We're just waiting. Waiting to hear from Dorian. Waiting for Essex to make a move. Waiting for a chance to finish the job downstairs. Waiting for the sky to fall on us. Why don't

we do something?"

At that instant the doorbell rang.

Liza said in sudden hope, "Oh, it's Dorian."

Quigley pulled the door open and Liza moaned. It wasn't Dorian; instead, it was Martha Essex.

For a moment we were all motionless, Martha Essex gazing in, we staring at the staggering unexpectedness of her. She entered slowly, quietly, not speaking.

She turned her clear gray eyes from our faces, turned them all around the room and let them settle on the fat envelope on the table. She seemed to divine that the envelope contained the long-missing manuscripts, yet she made no move toward them. Instead she opened her handbag and proffered me a folded paper.

"This is an itemized list of the legal owners, Mr. Cole. You are to return all the manuscripts to them at once."

I took the paper.

"You will ignore the rewards offered by the insurance companies and send the manuscripts directly, by ordinary first-class mail, not registered, in plain envelopes, without a return address."

She had said all she had come to say. As she returned to the entrance the bell rang again. Opening the door for herself, she found a caller on the stoop—Luke Speare.

Motionless, Speare gazed at Martha Essex with compassion in his face. She brushed past him and he turned to watch her go.

Speare had news and we waited for it. He looked saddened. Something had touched him profoundly.

After a moment he said, "Belinda Willoughby is dead."

Another moment passed before he could add, "Belinda Willoughby was Martha Essex's daughter."

XVII

NONE of us spoke for a long moment. We looked at Speare and thought of Martha Essex—how her chess playing had taken on a tragic significance, now that all these conspiracies and collusions—including her own—had cost her daughter's life.

Speare said quietly, "A man named Willoughby was Martha Essex's second husband." This information had evidently come

from Speare's friend in the State Department and it had helped to unplug other pipe lines. "Julia Beems was the sister of her first. She has had four husbands in all, but Belinda was her only child."

Quigley said heavily, "Now we can see what we're in for."

"And we're in for it right now," I said.

"What I would also like to see," Quigley added, "Is how we might stand half a chance against that woman Essex."

I shook my head. "She has put herself in the clear. She has us dead to rights."

They looked at me.

"She knows an Elwyn murdered her daughter."

Quigley said, "And she's going to get us for it."

"Yes. She's going to get us for it. All she needs to do is speak and we're got."

Liza asked thinly, "You too, Schy?"

"I seem to be in it too. Perhaps not quite all the way up to my ears, but almost." I stood over her. "Essex may even know definitely that you're the Elwyn who killed her sister-in-law and her daughter."

Tears in her eyes, Liza shook her lovely, indescribable head. "No, Schy."

LIZA gazed at me hopelessly, beyond words. I expected rough treatment from Quigley for this, but something held him back. Instead, an answer came quietly from Speare.

"Liza didn't kill Belinda, Schy."

I scowled at him. "This is a funny thing. Last I heard from you about it, you felt there was nothing left to do with Liza but throw the switch on her."

"Look, Schy," Speare said patiently, "Liza went from the restaurant, from talking with us, straight over to Belinda's apartment. Right?"

"Right!"

"Wearing the same jacket she's wearing now."

The shortie jacket with the small pockets.

"No handbag," Speare added.

Dawn began to break.

"So," Speare inquired, "where was she carrying the gun?"

I felt immeasurably and unforgivably foolish. I clearly recalled Liza hastening away from Belinda's apartment with the gun held inside her jacket—inside her jacket

because she had no handbag and no pockets large enough and no other way of hiding it. She had come out with the gun, but she couldn't possibly have taken it in first, for the simple reason that she had not had it in her possession, as I myself was in excellent position to testify.

It was so unbelievably simple, so crystal-clear, now that Speare had pointed it out.

"I am an even bigger knucklehead than I thought I was," I said, gulping.

Then another incomprehensible thing happened. Liza came to me, pried up my hot face and kissed me—a good, solid one.

"You mean you forgive me?" I blurted.

"It's what I've always wanted." Liza sounded like a soap opera but I fervently hoped she meant it partly too. "You to believe I'm an honest woman."

Quigley put in, "All right, all right, break it up. I applaud your conversion, Cole, but we're still in a bit of a jam, remember? Quit interrupting. This boy of yours is all right. Let him talk."

I said quickly, "Go on, Luke."

"You won't like it," Speare said.

Liza, Quigley, and I looked at one another, none of us entirely willing to ask him what he meant.

"About Beems, Schy. Liza said she was ringing doorbells across the street at the time of that shooting."

"She was, absolutely," I said.

"She said she followed as Belinda ran eastward. At the avenue Belinda caught a northbound cab and Liza turned northward too, watching it.

"Very soon after Liza started after Belinda, traveling eastward, the killer hurried out of the Beems' house. Killer also turned eastward. That's shown by the fact that Killer dropped the rubber mask into the refuse basket near the front of the Hotel Riviera."

Yes.

"Meanwhile you and I were hot-footing it from this place and around the block. We turned into that cross street, toward the Beems flat, westward, traveling our fastest. We should have met Killer heading straight for us. We should have, but we didn't."

"No."

I said, "Killer ducked into the Hotel Riviera," and Speare nodded. "If only we

had thought to look into the lobby. There's that difference between foresight and hindsight again."

Speare shook his head. "It wouldn't have paid off. By that time Killer was safely out of sight."

"How come?"

Speare didn't answer the question. His train of thought had switched onto another branch line. "Killer had done for Beems but had bungled Belinda. Belinda's escape posed a dangerous problem. Killer must find her as soon as possible to have another try at her and this time silence her."

"You've said half a dozen times that the shooting of Belinda didn't make sense," I reminded him. "It certainly makes sense the way you just put it."

Speare shook his head again. "No, Schy, it still doesn't. Not as the act of a person who knew Essex was in the picture. It makes sense only as the act of a person who was *unaware* that Essex shared Beems's and Belinda's knowledge of the grave in the garden."

"You mean that in silencing Beems and Belinda, the killer mistakenly believed all outside knowledge of the grave would thereby be wiped out."

"Which is another point that vindicates Liza. We told her all about Essex's part in the game just before Belinda was shot."

Thinking back, I could see that the circumstances of the Belinda shooting had swung Speare over to believing Liza innocent.

"The vital question is, then," I said, stirring with excited enlightenment, "Who at that point *didn't* know about Essex?"

Speare asked gently, "When was it Dorian arrived back home?"

"Late Sunday morning," Liza answered.

"May twenty-eighth."

"Yes."

"Gone how long?"

"Two weeks."

I knew the signs in Speare. He was about to hand us another jolt. He looked hurt by the unavoidable necessity of it. From his pocket he removed a scrap of notepaper and he reluctantly began to read from it.

"Dorian Elwyn left New York City for Reno by sleeper plane the evening of May fourteenth.

"She arrived in Reno the next morning,

May fifteenth."

This of course was more information he had pulled in over the telephone.

"Dorian Elwyn left Reno by plane the next day May sixteenth, for Mexico City."

I asked, "The *next day*, Luke?"

"A matter of record, Schy."

LIZA gazed blankly at Quigley.

"All right," he said uneasily. "I don't remember that Dore mentioned how soon she decided to favor the Mexican variety of divorce. She's very fast with her mind-changing."

Quietly, regretfully, inexorably, Speare went on reading from his notes. "She flew out of Mexico City on Saturday, May twentieth, and arrived back in New York City on Sunday, the twenty-first."

"You mean Sunday the twenty-eighth," Quigley said rancorously.

"I mean Sunday the twenty-first," Speare insisted.

Quigley stood, his face darkened again. "She hit New York on the twenty-first? Didn't show up here at her home until the twenty-eighth?"

"A whole week's difference?" Liza protested incredulously.

"A whole week to taxi from the airport to this place?" Quigley went on in a challenging voice. "Or possibly you mean she was holed in somewhere for that entire week—for no conceivable reason."

Speare said softly, "On Sunday, May twenty-first, a beautiful dark woman, wearing sun glasses, engaged a room at the Hotel Riviera."

The Hotel Riviera, standing just to the northeast, the tallest of the buildings across the hollow center of the block.

"She registered under the name of Dorothy Q. Lee. According to the desk clerk, Miss Lee would have nothing other than a room with south and west exposures and accordingly she was given Room 515."

Speare did not need to point out that the room in the southwest corner of the hotel, five floors up, was a perfect vantage point from which to observe Smithy's Court.

Quigley said angrily, "How could she do this? Why should she? She had no reason for it—at least none she could remember."

"Actually she did remember what she had done to Vic," Speare said gently. "Ob-

viously she did remember all along. This proves it."

In stumbling silence, badly shocked, Liza and Quigley tried to keep their feet. It was much easier for me to absorb the revelation that Dorian had not really blacked out. For one thing, it clarified her. All the rest, in fact, practically explained itself. That one fact brought meaning to another, which then shone on still another in a sort of chain reaction of enlightenment.

Liza had wanted so ardently to exorcise the presences haunting this house before Dorian became aware of them, but Dorian, not in the least unaware, had already sensed the danger behind them. She had let Liza and Quigley send her off to Reno in order to give them a better opening to tackle the mystery. Of course she could not stay far away and out of touch for six unbroken weeks—the uncertainty and the suspense would be unbearable. After a quick detour to Mexico City for the divorce certificate—evidence in support of her skillfully counterfeited amnesia—she had hurried back to watch.

Perhaps Dorian hoped in this way to learn who the prowlers were. Perhaps Quigley intended to move the body, and Dorian would certainly wish to know if it were actually done. If nothing at all were learned and nothing changed, she could choose any favorable moment for her "return"—the more dramatic the better.

But something frightening and totally unexpected had happened. Watching her own home from the hotel window, Dorian had seen a strange little old lady lay a wreath in her rock garden.

If Dorian, in her understandable consternation, had then hurried down to the street, she would have seen the same little old lady passing by with her cheery smile and bouncy walk. She may have seen, also, the little old lady taken severely in hand by a tall, dark, alarmed young woman and hustled into the brownstone house.

Now it all came crowding in on me. Those one-way phone calls—Dorian calling, from a nearby pay station in order to avoid a record of it on her hotel bill—perhaps from the lobby of the Riviera. Her purpose, to learn whether the house was deserted. If the phone went unanswered, Dorian knew the way was clear for her to pay her home

a fast visit without dispelling the illusion of her absence. If by mischance she were caught there, then of course she had "just returned from Mexico City," baggage following separately on the next plane.

XVIII

THESE surreptitious attempts to look for and read the signs inside the house were Dorian's way of keeping herself posted on developments—an unreliable way at best, but her only one. But these visits were not many, and in between times she watched. Upon witnessing the wreath-laying and interpreting it as a threat to the security of her secret, she had slipped in again, during Liza's short absence, to get one of Reece's guns—the same gun she had previously used on Vic.

Then, very shortly after turning that weapon on Beems and Belinda, she had staged her unexpected "return from Mexico," with Reece's gun hidden in one of those many traveling cases. Her reappearance at that juncture was forced by the necessity she felt to watch from the inside the effect of the murder across the court. She must have been particularly apprehensive of two strange men named Cole and Speare.

Prior to their deadly encounter in the Beems flat, Belinda and Dorian had never met. In Belinda's eyes the masked Dorian was a nameless creature out of a murderous nightmare. It must have come as a nasty shock to Dorian shortly thereafter to see her intended victim entering her home with her brother. Dorian must have realized that Belinda was on the hunt for her. Belinda may or may not have satisfied herself that it was Dorian who had tried to kill her, but in any event she had made a second attempt on her life inevitable.

When Speare and I hurried back from Belinda's apartment Dorian was here in the living room and Reece downstairs at his workbench. In suggesting then that Reece had gone out, Dorian had had no thought of turning suspicion on him; instead, she was covering her own absence from the house, during which she had gone after Belinda again, with finally, fatal results.

Quigley was staring at Luke Speare, his face stony. He made another of his bluntly jarring but grimly reasonable statements:

"Well, what real difference does it make?" To him personally it made none at all. "I'm still covering for Dore."

Speare looked heartsick. "Nobody can cover for her now. That's why I told you all this—so you'll realize just where Martha Essex is going to hit you."

Liza said in a frantic little whisper, "Where is Dorian?"

"We've got to find Dore," Quigley said rapidly. "Find her somehow, and fast."

"Take her away somewhere," Liza urged. "Someplace where they can't reach her."

Quigley broke off. He stood stiffly still. Liza looked at me in puzzled alarm. Speare frowned downward at a spot where a scatter rug concealed a bullet hole in the floor. A noise was coming up from the room below us, the sound of rapid blows.

Someone in the basement was chopping at something.

Quigley started for the stairs. Liza's impulsive move to follow him was stopped by Speare. I hurried after Quigley, down into the drinking room.

The lights here were out. Whatever disruption Quigley may have left in the far corner beside the bar, darkness covered it.

He stopped short, staring at the base of the door connecting with the furnace room beyond. The door was closed and a brownish liquid had just begun to flow through the crack above the sill. It spread rapidly across the floor toward our feet. With it came the pungent smell of furnace oil.

QUIGLEY jerked the door open. The one shaded light burning above Reece's workbench left most of the room in semi-darkness. A shadowy figure stood against the far wall, between the furnace and the fuel tank, where the light was dimmest. A metallic shine on the floor beside the tank was a sharp-edged hatchet. It had been used to hack open the copper oil line. The oil was gushing out, pooled all across the floor, still flowing out the door and now around our shoes.

Then a brighter light flared up, a naked flame. It showed us the white face and desperate eyes of Dorian Elwyn.

She had been here all the while, listening to the voices speaking in the living room directly above her. She had heard that doomful conversation.

The paper match burned brightly in Dorian Elwyn's fingers. She touched the flame to the cluster of match heads in the folder and a fiercer fire burst up.

"Dore!" Quigley yelled. "Don't!"

She dropped the flame into the oil flowing around her feet.

I grabbed both of Quigley's arms from behind. While he tried to pull himself away a small blossom of fire floated on the floor beside Dorian, like an evil lily on a dark pend—a blossom growing before our eyes. Dorian stood still in its smoky glow, her eyes rounded at us.

It came seconds later with a resounding *poom!* Rolling orange fire filled the whole room and the house shook above us.

The fire poured across the ceiling like an upside-down flood. When Quigley and I reached the top of the stairs, scrambling like mad, the blaze was filling the drinking room and the court windows were bursting.

Speare was forcing Liza out the street door. Quigley and I ran, our wet shoes leaving tracks of oil. I somehow thought to snatch up that envelope stuffed with manuscripts, then sprang on.

THE tragic fire on East Fifty-fifth Street, one of the worst of the year, was shouted in great black headlines. The Elwyn home was reduced to a shell, but surprisingly little damage was done to the adjoining properties. The fierce blaze had left almost nothing recognizable in the debris and ashes piled in what had been the basement. There was a shapeless thing that had once been a fuel tank and another fused mass that had been the furnace, but the copper oil line between them had melted entirely away. One of the newspapers, in describing the intensity of the holocaust, used a shocking but apt phrase: "... as hot as the inside of a crematory oven."

Dorian Elwyn was unaccounted for and she was "presumed to have perished in the flames." Liza and Reece Elwyn, grief-stricken, could offer no explanation, nor could Dorian's ex-husband, Martin Quigley. "Her present husband, Victor Hedges, somewhere out West, has not been reached." The investigators satisfied themselves that those who had escaped the fire had had no hand in causing it—the testimony of two private detectives of good reputation, Schy-

ler Cole and Lucas Speare, bore importantly on this point—and within a few days it had faded from the news and from official memo pads as well.

Several more days passed before I saw Liza. She came to the office, looking worn, with Quigley, who was still ill-disposed but somewhat inclined toward reasonableness too.

He said, looking from Speare to me, "Damned if I can figure out just how to feel about you two vitamin-enriched hawk-shaws. I concede your intentions were the best. You really did shake it down for us in the very nick. In weak moments I'm almost ready to believe that except for your peculiar brand of helpfulness we would all be foundering in some very hot soup."

"I'm sure of it, Schy, and so is Quig really," Liza said. "You and Luke showed us the real danger."

"But it was very rough, friends," Quigley said. "It was very, very rough, and it still is."

"It will get easier, easier all the time." Liza lifted her chin. "No matter how others might judge Dorian, I'm proud of her courage. She saw so clearly there was only one way out, and she took it—not so much for herself, but for us."

"That's my girl," I said to Liza.

Quigley left her there with us, muttering something about an appointment. Watching him go, I was reminded that nowhere along the line had I been paid a retainer, or even expenses; and by this time I no longer wanted either.

I had scarcely decided that point when the postman brought a letter from Martha Essex. It read in full: Dear Mr. Cole: Thank you for completing your assignment so capably. Sincerely yours, Martha Essex." She was referring to the manuscripts, of course. Just today little items concerning their mysterious return had begun popping up in the news. Accompanying the letter was a check written to the order of the Cole Detective Agency, to the amount of five thousand dollars.

For the first time in my life I felt at a loss as to how to react to five thousand dollars in pocket. I slipped the check into my desk drawer without commenting, but with a mental note to do a rash thing—give Speare a nice raise.

Speare was keeping a thoughtful eye on Liza. A mixed-up girl might cling to a confused reason for hating us, but Liza was seeing things clearly. The child she had partly been was all grown up now; her sophistication was no longer an acquired quality, but solidly hers.

"Could you face dinner with a pair of guys named Luke and Schy who like you very much?"

Liza smiled—her old smile, her first in days, I was happily sure. "I'd love to, Luke and Schy."

Her hair was so lovely and so becoming to her and so baffling. Was it sunrise citrine? No, not quite that either. Someday I would find out what color it was, but only after devoting a great deal more time to firsthand observation of the problem.

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