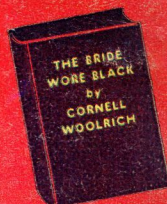


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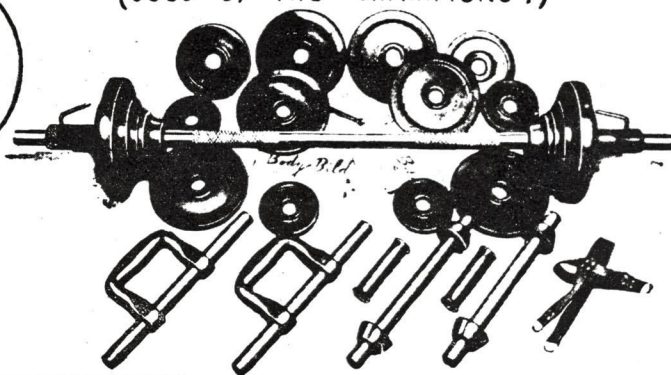
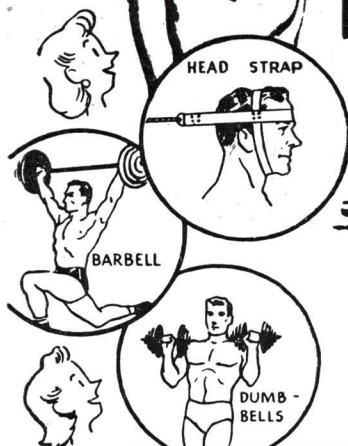


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THE BRIDE WORE BLACK

By **CORNELL WOOLRICH**

Not a flicker of remorse ever appeared in her eyes, nor a shadow of fear in her heart. Jealously she hugged vengeance to herself; nursed her bitterness; played the role of Grim Reaper four times, setting up a mysterious pattern that offered no clues, no motives . . . and no warning for the fifth and final victim of the sinister bride who proudly wore black.

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The Paper Thunderbolt

By MICHAEL INNES

A single folded sheet of quarto paper . . . holding Formula Ten . . . sinister and secret . . . all-powerful and invaluable. For written on it in neat and bold strokes was the key to the most horrible violation of human personality—the Great Pacification. In the wrong hands it could enslave the world—and the wrong hands had it.

THERE was a wait in the bank. Routh's insides felt empty, flabby.

The man in front was paying in cheques and a lot of cash. The teller ticked off the amounts that were already filled in on a long slip. *Making only three pounds ten precisely, madam.* If only you had the guts for a hold-up. Smash and grab. Smash the teller's silly face and grab all that. Routh's right hand in his trouser-pocket—the one where the lining was only a big ragged hole—trembled as it touched the woman's mean, creased check . . . And all this for three pounds ten. *Uncrossed and made payable to bearer, madam, if you don't mind.*

It was here once more, the bad moment. The chap in front had closed his shabby leather bag, was having some fool joke, was going. Routh took the check from his pocket.

Routh saw his own hand tremble. He would remember afterwards—he always did—that it had been with anger, not fear. It was with anger at the pettiness of the thing, at all this for three pounds ten. The teller was looking at him.

But it was all right. The man's pen was poised over the signature to scribble. In a second he would say indifferently "Notes?" and flick the petty amount off the orderly piles in his drawer. Don't say anything more. Wait. A normal commercial transaction. Routh repeated the phrase to himself. He found himself repeating it again and again. A normal commercial transaction. A normal . . . The teller had gone.

A big clock ticked on the wall. Its ticking queerly struck in at Routh's pounding heart, fought with it rhythm against rhythm. His

knees went wrong, so that he had to lock them, to press them against each other. The bank swayed. All right . . . *all right.* It's happened before. Nothing to do with *you*. The woman has a shaky account, a tiny balance and no arrangement for overdraw-ing. She's been a nuisance for a long time, and now they won't even honor her blasted check for three ten—not if the credit isn't there. That's what he's gone to see.

But what if it's something else? He tried to think about the woman and her cheque. It was the woman with the hare-lip, with the window curtains that had seemed more morbidly secretive than anybody else's in the drearily respectable little road. She had been one of those that open the door on the chain. With that sort, to get in is to triumph. *Our senior sales manager knows your standing.* In a quarter of an hour he had sold the non-existent contraption. *Making only three pounds ten precisely, madam.*

There was a sudden cold sweat on Routh. He wrenched his eyes up from the counter. The teller had become the baldish back of a head, and blue serge shoulders shiny in the beam of the bleak October sun. He was whispering into a sort of box or pen behind him. Routh heard the undistinguishable whispering and heard the tick of the big clock and heard still his heart that now had something slack and impotent in its throb like the sea idly pulsing deep in a cave . . . He knew with a quick rush of lucidity that he had lost his head. There was a sharp relief in knowing, in knowing that now he could only act out the logical consequences of panic.

Rage and humiliation and naked fear swept over Routh. There was nobody on this



"Roger," breathed Jane, "your luck has finally perished."

side of the counter. He turned and ran from the bank, ran for the two-stroke round the corner.

PULSING sturdily between his calves the worn old engine thrust the miles behind it at a steady thirty-five. Suppose the bank rang up the police and told the story. That would be five minutes. The woman hadn't been on the telephone—he had noticed that—and it would be another ten minutes before they had one of their C.I.D. men on her doorstep. Another five and he'd have the type of fraud taped and his report back at headquarters . . .

Around Routh, this morning of an autumn that had come early held shafts of sunlight through vapor, held dark rich ploughland backed by a dozen greens turning to russet and gold. Already there was a litter and soon there would be a mush of chestnut leaves on the macadam. A leaf caught in the spokes and flipped at the mudguard like the whirr of a flushed bird. Routh rode blind, deaf.

The wash of fear that had swept over him in the bank and robbed him of three pounds ten was mounting, and as it mounted was meeting some strange new chemistry full of menace. He could no longer think about the number of minutes it would take for the police to begin enquiries there behind him.

Routh swerved at the side of the road and came jolting to a stop. There was now no dissociated part of him to control the machine. His eyes were misted with tears in which his anger, his resentment, his enormous self-pity welled up and out. That he should have been balked of three pounds ten was a wrong deeper than any plummet of his mind could sound. At the same time it was a deprivation so squalidly insignificant that the spectacle of his own helpless anger at it was unbearable. The tears released by the sorry conflict had no power to assuage, afforded no relief to the weedy figure astride the old Douglas by the roadside. That figure in its pinched and mannikin stature, was too vividly before him. It seared his vanity. To banish it, to vindicate in himself the generous inches that all the world had conspired to deny: this was the clamant need of his whole being . . . He looked ahead up the empty road and saw the figure of a woman.

She had overtaken and passed him regardless—a girl in slacks whom one would have taken at first for a boy. She was whistling. And her whistling picked out, as with a sudden strong accent, the stillness and loneliness of the place. As he looked, the woman turned to her left and disappeared down a lane. It could be distinguished as winding between high hedged banks to a hamlet nearly two miles away. Routh slipped from the saddle and pushed the Douglas behind a near-by thorn.

He turned by the sign-post. It pointed to a place with a queer name—Milton Porcorum. He followed the whistling woman rapidly, exalted by the fierce purity of his intention. Beside him walked another Routh, a new and triumphant externalization, Routh gigantic and terrible, Routh the destroyer. He was ahead. Through this gap, as she came up with it, he would spring.

In fact, he slithered. It was less effective. But the woman pulled up, startled. She was older than he had thought—about thirty, with pale blue eyes and a thin, firm mouth. She was suddenly quite still. Routh gave a queer cry. At his first grab she quivered. At his second she vanished. The woman vanished and as she did so agonizing pain shot up Routh's left arm. It was such pain that his knees crumpled beneath him. He was kneeling in mud and his head was going down into mud. He struggled and the pain sickened him.

"Rub your nose in it."

The voice of the woman from behind and above him carried to him inexorably his preposterous fortune. He put his face in the mud and moved it about feebly.

"And now in a bit of gravel."

Throbbing to quickened pain Routh was kneed and twitched across the lane. Again his face went down.

"Rub it harder."

The voice, mocking and excited, ended in a low laugh. Constrained by his agony, Routh did what he was told. He felt the skin of his nose and cheek go raw. He heard a quick controlled intake of breath, sensed skilled hands passing swiftly to a fresh hold, felt the earth drop away from him and swing back with shattering force low in the belly. For a long time he lay semiconscious and helpless, deeper beneath his nausea than

ever child sunk powerless in a chill brown pool.

WHEN at length Routh got to his feet it was early afternoon. His left arm was numb and his face felt bruised and scarified. He fingered over it tenderly with his right hand. His mind was an unfamiliar chaos. Staggering up the lane, he fumbled for a pocket mirror, and had to empty his pocket of slivers of glass. Into one of these, held up in a trembling hand, he peered apprehensively. At a first glimpse he felt a surge of mortified vanity, of fierce resentment. This was an outrage. He had been brutally assaulted. Under the mud it looked like three long scratches and one raw patch over a cheek bone. He felt a flicker of returning conceit. Willy Routh. He hadn't rubbed his face in the gravel half as hard as he'd pretended. There was some salve to injured vanity in that. But he needed water.

He realized that he was moving in the wrong direction. The two-stroke was up the lane, behind him. He was following the path that the woman must have continued on. He stopped, scared. She might come again and take him and twist him about. But something told him that the apprehension was unreal. He would not see her again. He went on, remembering that earlier he had passed no water for miles, and guessing that in a very little valley into which the lane presently dipped there would be a stream or spring.

He had come upon a high wall. Blank and curving, it followed the line of a concealed lane with which his own had now merged. It was no more than the sort of wall, which, running perhaps for miles round a gentleman's park, speaks in the simplest picture-language of a vanished social order.

And then Routh saw the man.

At one moment the wall stretched unbroken before Routh, every foot of its well-pointed surface void in the bleak and shadowless sunlight. And at the next moment the man was there.

The man was standing in front of an iron-sheathed, stone-colored door set flush in the wall. Tall and with square shoulders carried high as if in a frozen shrug, he was dressed in what Routh knew to be a high-

class tailor's job in homespun tweed. His features were irregular and ugly, but they had the controlled mobility that tells of a mind schooled to work swiftly through complex issues. He belongs, Routh thought, at the top of one of the big-money professions—a leading surgeon, perhaps, or a successful K. C. A gentleman.

Well, that's what *you* are—see? Routh—muddy, dusty, torn, scratched, and with the toes hurting in his thin, pointed shoes—Routh braced himself to fill out the role. A gentleman taking an afternoon stroll in unfamiliar country. That was the formula. And better pass the time of day. *Good afternoon.*

The man made no reply. In his silence the uncertain flame of confidence that had leapt up in Routh flickered and went out.

"Come here."

The words, spoken quietly behind Routh, had, in his already shaken state, the effect of a needle thrust into his spine.

The man beckoned, without again speaking. He beckoned, strangely, with a downward pointing figure.

Resentment rendered Routh articulate. "Look here," he said, "—what do you think I am?"

But his legs were carrying him back to the waiting man. The feeble truculence he had heard in his own voice gave him no encouragement to rebel.

"I think you are the ruffian who has attacked a girl in my employment." The man was well over six feet, and he contrived to look down at Routh as at a cur. "Where do you come from? What are you?"

"I'm a clerk, and out of work. I've come down from the north."

"Do you think you're likely to get work in the heart of the country?"

"I'm going through to Reading."

"Motor-bicycle?"

Routh blinked. Very faintly, as if some hatch had been opened deep down in his mind, cunning stirred beneath his rage and terror. There was something queer in the way that, underneath, the brute was interested in him. "I'm walking. I've hardly any money left."

"And no possessions?"

"A chap took my suitcase on a lorry. I'll pick it up at the station."

"Let me see your identity card."

"It's in the suitcase. And you haven't any right—"

For the first time the tall man faintly smiled. "A deserter on the run—eh? Your people help you at all?"

He was softening. *Hard luck. Let the poor devil off. Give him a hand. A square meal and ten bob.* It was a stage in the well-to-do man's triumphant detection of petty crime that was familiar to Routh. Automatically he played up to it. "I haven't any people. I'm an only child. My father's in a mental hospital and won't ever get better. My mother's gone to New Zealand with another man. I haven't heard from her for five years."

Routh became aware that the tall man, whose hand should now be going to his pocket, was once more swiftly glancing up and down the lane, as if he had a momentary sensation of being watched. Then the man's eyes met his. Fear leapt anew in Routh. There *was* something queer about him. That he was softening was dead off the scent. On the contrary, there was some hard design in him.

But even as Routh grasped this, the man's manner changed. Expression had come into his face. It was an expression of judicial contempt—a sort of judgment that had been impassively deferred until Routh in all his seediness, weediness and cowardice had been bared before him. He took a step forward and made a movement that Routh momentarily interpreted as the prelude to an ironical handshake. Instead, he slapped Routh's face, paused, slapped it again back-handed. "I don't know about your father being a lunatic," he said, "but I certainly believe that your mother—"

Routh sprang at him, screaming—groped for him through a red haze. When he came to he was on the other side of the wall.

"I APOLOGIZE."

At first the words seemed to come to Routh from very far away. There was a burning sensation in his throat that ran deep down into his body. The words repeated themselves and the tall man swam into focus. He was standing over Routh with a brandy flask in his hand, and looking down at him with an appearance of whimsical

benevolence. He screwed the top on the flask and thrust it away in a hip-pocket. "A bit of a test," he said. "Don't take it hard, my good fellow. Something of a test—no more."

Routh, helpless on the grass, wished that he had a revolver or a knife. He sat up. "You can't do this to me," he said—and his voice was shaky by necessity and plaintive by design. "I don't care who you are. You can be jailed for this."

"Then it looks as if we are about quits, my friend." The tall man laughed shortly and produced a cigarette-case. "Smoke?"

The tall man was holding out a match. Routh, swaying, managed to get his cigarette drawing. "What do you mean—a test?" he demanded.

"I think I can put you on rather a good thing." The tall man now smiled easily. And he took without a trace of hesitation the transition from country gentleman and outraged moralist to a world of evidently shady proposals and dubious confederacies. "Only it needs guts. I don't mean that it's particularly risky—nothing of the sort—but it does need a *man*. I liked the way you came at me. It was damned plucky." He paused. "There's big money in what I'm thinking of."

Routh felt his always facile resentment stir in him. "Big money?" he said—and managed to get quickened interest into his voice. "Look here," he added, "who are you anyway?"

"You can call me Squire. And now, come along. We'll get up to the house."

Routh got painfully to his feet. He began moving by the tall man's side. "How do you mean?" he asked. "Mr. Squire? Or just Squire—of all this?" And Routh waved his hand at the park through which they were walking.

The tall man looked down at him slantwise. "Whichever you please," he said.

Routh bit his lip. The brute couldn't mask his contempt for a couple of minutes on end. It came into his head that he was going to be in some way enslaved, cast into thrall. Or that he was going to be killed. Very conceivably he was going to be killed in order to supply a body for, say, some insurance swindle. Routh's eyes widened on these conceptions as he walked, and his breath came faster than need be, considering

the easy pace which his companion set. But still his mysterious and unaccustomed confidence failed to desert him. It was about him like a borrowed garment, unexpectedly bestowed and of surprisingly good fit.

He puzzled over the kind of racket that could support such wealth as he had stumbled upon. The park was large and there were deer in it. To encounter such features outside the Zoo was, in Routh's mind, to be on the fringe of a magnificence positively ducal, and he stared in wonder at the creatures as he walked.

They had come to a halt before a tall wire fence. It was the sort of thing that runs round a tennis court to keep the balls in. Only this fence ran off indefinitely in either direction with just the same air of formidable enclosure as the high wall bordering the park. Squire had produced a bunch of keys on the end of a flexible silver chain and was proceeding to unlock a gate. Routh looked at the keys covertly. One of them had already been used on the stone-colored door behind them. It looked as if the man who would get off Squire's property in a hurry must have that bunch of keys at his command.

"Short cut," said Squire briefly. They went on, and he pointed to a grassy slope on their left hand. "See anything moving?" he asked.

Routh looked. The slope had the appearance of a deserted rabbit warren. "No," he said, "—nothing at all."

Squire nodded. "No more are you likely to. Jerboa."

"What d'you mean—jerboa?" Routh remembered again his scared, sulky note.

"The most timid mammal yet known on this earth. We'll go through here."

Once again there was a high wire fence. But this one appeared to define a paddock of moderate size, across which Squire struck out diagonally. The ground here was uneven and there were considerable outcrops of rock. As they turned round one of these Routh stopped dead and gave a faint cry. There was a lion in the path.

There was a lion standing straight in front of them. For a second it was quite still except for a tail that waved slowly in the air. Then it turned round and made as if to slip away.

"Deilos—come here." It was Squire who spoke. He spoke much as he had spoken to Routh in the lane. The result too was very similar. The lion turned again and reluctantly approached. As the beast came nearer the two men his belly came closer to the ground until he was creeping forward like a scared terrier. Presently he was lying quite still, his great jowl tucked between his paws, and a single eye looking slantwise upwards as if he expected a whip.

"The lion, you see, is prepared to lie down with the lamb." Squire leaned forward and tweaked the animal by the ear. "So what about it?"

Routh stared at him. "What d'you mean—what about it?"

"What I mean is quite simple. Get down."

"Get down?"

"Certainly. But perhaps you don't believe that you are the lamb? I assure you that you are. The newest and most innocent of my lambs." Squire smiled—an odd, sweet smile that made Routh shiver. "*Lie down.*"

Routh looked from Deilos to Squire—from the unnatural animal to the unnatural man—and was by no means sure which was the more alarming. Was this mad freak before the tamed lion merely a whim or cruel joke by the way? Was it, in fact, a sudden and almost meaningless fancy prompted by Squire's knowledge of his victim's earlier humiliation that day?

Long before he had ceased confusedly asking himself these questions Routh found that he had in fact cast himself on the ground beside Deilos. The brute on this near acquaintance was rather smelly, but took not the slightest notice of him. Squire was looking down at them with his horrible smile. "You must understand," he said, "that I am a magician. If I say 'Abracadabra' Deilos will take no notice of you. But if I say 'Abracadabra' backwards, he will at once change his nature and eat you. Wouldn't you like to be able to change the nature of a living creature at a word?"

Routh made no reply. He felt frightened and ridiculous, but still his cunning didn't cease to work. It worked the more desperately, the more he hated his tormentor. And by now he hated him very much.

Squire's smile vanished. He took a quick, almost furtive glance around him. He stepped forward and kicked Delios hard on the rump—whereupon Delios got to his feet with a yelp and padded away. Routh, without waiting to be kicked in his turn, scrambled to his feet. Squire brought out a handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. "We must get on," he said abruptly—and strode forward. They passed out of the lion's paddock and moved downhill, through a stretch of sombre woodland. Presently, beyond a lighter screen of larches, the variously pitched roofs of a large and rambling house became visible.

Routh considered the simple proposition that his companion was insane. It was certainly the easiest way of explaining him. And Squire, if mad, must now be considered as harmlessly mad. For they were at length almost within a stone's throw of a house that must surely be too populous to admit even of a wealthy owner's engaging in vagaries of a markedly violent or criminal kind.

ROUTH had often enough seen such places from the road, but never before had he come so close up to one as this.

Squire's house—if it was indeed his—was very large, and Routh knew that it had grown up over centuries. The chief architectural feature of the side at which he was directly looking was an affair of high Corinthian pillars running up past three storeys. But to the left of this was warm red brick enclosing mullioned windows and rising to a succession of gable-ends behind which stood tall Tudor chimneys. Beyond this again, and running off at an angle, was a wing that had at some date been heavily Gothicized, and that now lurked behind meaningless buttresses and groaned beneath improbable battlements. These vagaries accounted for about half the building, the rest of which was a solid Georgian.

Well-kept lawns and gravel walks, tall dark hedges trimmed to severe perpendiculars, a few broad beds of massed chrysanthemums: these seemed to speak of a taste in gardens that was mature and good. There was a wide shallow terrace now steeped in sunshine and serving as promenade for half a dozen miniature poodles of expen-

sive appearance and extravagant clip. Several french windows were thrown open to the air, and gave upon expanses of turf of paving so lavishly equipped with garden furniture of the elaborated modern sort, that the effect was of handsomely equipped drawing rooms tumbling out of doors to breathe. Nor was the placid scene without its congruous humanity. A five-year-old boy, sturdy and flaxen-haired, was playing with the poodles. And on a lawn directly below Routh and Squire a company of ladies and gentlemen were enjoying a game of croquet.

A variety of impulses jostled in Routh. Here were half a dozen demonstrably sane persons, engaged in one of the mildest of civilized pleasures. Would it not be best to seize the chance of rushing forward, throwing himself upon their mercy, and claiming their protection from the abominable Squire? For whatever was the truth about Squire he was certainly dangerous.

But even as Routh debated with himself this course of action, he became aware of a further bewilderment in his situation. The croquet players puzzled and alarmed him quite as much as Squire did. The sharp *clap . . . clap . . . clap* of wood upon wood as a military-looking man with a gray mustache achieved a brisk break was obscurely frightening. If Squire was patently sinister and his house indefinitely so, then this spectacle was like a calculated effect designed to enhance the fact. The croquet-players were disturbingly enigmatical. Routh didn't trust them. After all, in an environment which made the lion mild was it not very conceivable that a croquet-player upon being appealed to for protection might simply swing his mallet and dash one's brains out?

But on all this there was only a moment for reflection. Squire swung round a wing of the house and the croquet-players disappeared.

Routh now lost his bearings. Continuing to skirt the main building, Squire led the way into a walled garden and out again, using a key each time. Beyond this lay a kitchen garden, empty except for a bent old man culling cauliflowers, and they passed on to a sort of narrow alley of which one side was formed by a high beech hedge and the other by a long, low building of modern appearance and indeterminate length.

Presenting to the world nothing but a succession of frosted-glass windows, this building ran slightly downhill, so that the level dropped as by broad, shallow steps. And presently Routh caught a glimpse of its other end. It had been run out from the house as far as it could go—to the margin, in fact, of a small lake. In the middle of the lake was an island, seemingly entirely occupied by a large, blank and improbable temple. Although such fantasies were unfamiliar to Routh, he guessed at once that there was nothing out of the way in it. Much odder was the fact that this ancient absurdity was now directly linked to the new raw wing he had been skirting by a wooden bridge—a bridge lightly constructed but entirely enclosed, so that it was, in fact, a species of tunnel, relieved only by a few small windows.

But all this Routh only glimpsed. For Squire had stopped before a door near the end of the building, unlocked and opened it, and pushed Routh unceremoniously inside. He locked the door from within, while Routh took stock of a long, bleak corridor.

"Well, here we are."

Routh looked about him in the expectation of seeing walls hung with scourges and a floor dripping blood. But the walls were pervasively blank, and on the floor of the long corridor was nothing more remarkable than a thick, green rubber that deadened every sound.

"And you can wait here."

Squire was unlocking and opening a door. Routh looked at him warily. "What d'you mean—wait here?" he demanded.

"There'll be an interview."

The words were perfunctory, and Routh sensed that they were quite meaningless. He made to back away. Squire grabbed him, swung him effortlessly off his feet, and pitched him through the doorway.

"An interview with my colleagues, my dear fellow, quite soon. Did I say we were magicians? Alchemists would be a better description. You will no doubt make yourself as comfortable as you can."

Routh picked himself up in time to see the door closing and to hear a key turn in its lock. It was his first confused impression that he was in a small kitchen, but in a moment he realized that it was a laboratory.

He recognized it—as even the most ignorant can now recognize virtually any material creation of man—from the cinema. There was a bench, a sink, an affair with various gas burners and a small flue above. There were rows of bottles behind sliding glass doors. The only movable furniture was a high wooden stool. The room was lit through a large, barred skylight.

Routh surveyed the unfamiliar place. *Alchemy*. That was what Squire had said—that he and whatever confederates he had were alchemists. It meant chemists, scientists. A sense of vast illumination came to Routh. Now he understood.

He had puzzled and puzzled over the racket that could sustain a place like this. There had been a time—he believed—at which a really big operator on the black market could have lived like this if he had wanted to. But nowadays that line of country was said to be not nearly so good. No! Routh knew what he had found. He had found the people who forge the fivers.

ROUTH approached the single door of the laboratory, having now in his head no more than this inglorious notion of thumping on it. But as his eyes fell on the keyhole he stopped and stared. The thing was almost incredible. But there could be little doubt that behind that keyhole lay no more than a very common lock indeed.

From his earliest years Routh had been an amateur of keyholes. They constituted perhaps his nearest approach to a disinterested love of knowledge. And it so happened that this interest had broadened itself with the years. A keyhole had become for Routh not merely something to peer through or listen at; it had become something to fiddle with. And this substantial process of sublimation seemed likely to stand him in good stead now.

Routh fished from his pocket an innocent-seeming twist of wire. As he made his first exploratory thrust at the keyhole he felt the blood course more warmly in his veins. Reason would have told him that only the most slender of advantages was opening before him, and that in this inexplicable establishment he was likely to remain as helpless a puppet on one side of a door as another. But with the sense of power that had again

leapt up in him reason had very little to do. The Tables Turned. Routh Hits Back. His hand remained so steady that only a very few minutes passed before he was standing, tense and listening, in the long empty corridor.

Close on the right, three steps led to a higher level. Much farther away on the left, several steps made an answering descent. He remembered the appearance of this long annex from the outside—how it dipped down as by several shallow flights to the level of the little lake. So the house lay on his right, while on his left the building ended in the odd covered bridge leading to the ornamental building on the island. Routh took a gulp of air, swung left, and walked rapidly and noiselessly forward.

Most of the doors leading off the corridor were open. But at this in itself he felt no alarm, since he was intuitively certain that at this hour the whole place was empty. Pausing to reconnoitre, he discovered that this long wing was given over to a series of laboratories, for the most part intercommunicating, and the majority being considerably larger than that in which he had been imprisoned. It occurred to him that there was more opportunity in these than in the corridor to lurk or dodge if anyone did, in fact, appear. He therefore made his way forward as much as possible by this route.

What he saw he saw only vaguely, since he was without a basis of technical knowledge to sharpen his observation. In one room the benches were crowded with complex units of glass utensils and rubber tubing and little bright sheets of metal connected by innumerable wires; these, articulated into a skeleton by sundry steel rods and clamps and brackets, had to his view the appearance of grotesque automata designed in mockery of living things. Another room looked like his idea of a telephone exchange.

Routh had only such popular analogies upon which to draw. It was the more to the credit of his underlying astuteness, therefore, that a purely intellectual conclusion presently forced itself upon him. At a first blush these large evidences of scientific effort appeared abundantly to confirm him in the persuasion to which he had recently come—namely, that here were the people by whom the five-pound notes are made. But now a

sense not only of the scale but of the variousness and elaboration of what lay around him suggested that even this impressive conclusion was inadequate. Or, if Squire indeed made the five-pound notes, he had some deeper and more grandiosely scientific plot or project in hand as well.

Routh's mind had just halted baffled before this conception when he became aware of voices somewhere ahead of him.

"I TELL you he's no more than a little rat of a deserter living on his wits."

Routh stopped dead. He recognized the tones of the detestable Squire.

"Very probably. But it's dangerous and unnecessary, all the same. This is something far too big to have you acting on these sudden impulses. What do you suppose the Director will say to such a story?"

"He ought to be damned grateful—and so should you. You know that I've brought in capital subjects before this."

The voices were coming from behind the closed door of what Routh guessed must be one of the last rooms in the building. They were heard the more clearly because this door too had a keyhole. Routh's ear was pressed to it.

"And—what's more—you seem to be in an uncommonly foul temper."

It was again Squire's voice. And Squire's voice had gone sulky. In a flash it came to Routh that Squire was by no means the boss of this mysterious place. He was talking now to somebody with whom he was on no more than equal terms—if even that. And they both had above them somebody called the Director. The word conjured up a vague image of striped trousers, a gold watch chain, a silk hat.

"I'm certainly not feeling any too sweet. And in a moment I'll tell you why." It was now the other man who was speaking—and his voice, Routh realized, was far more coldly formidable than Squire's could ever be. "But first let me tell you this. We just can't afford the risk of people disappearing on our doorstep."

"But you'd find him, I tell you, so devilish suitable. A craven little brute capable of moments of real fury. You've often said—"

"I don't want him. But no more do I want him going out and gossiping about what

goes on here. Will nothing make you realize what we're on the verge of? Power such as has never been wielded on this earth before. All the gold of the Incas wouldn't buy a tithe of it. And all that you—"

Routh started so violently that he hit his head on the doorknob and lost the conclusion of the unseen speaker's sentence. The astounding conclusion towards which his mind had already been unconsciously moving had flashed upon him in an instant. Alchemists don't make five-pound notes. Alchemists make gold.

All the gold of the Incas . . . Routh had read about them—a vanished folk in America whose very fish-kettles and chamber-pots had been wrought out of solid gold.

Routh again pressed his ear to the keyhole. The missing of a single sentence, he felt, might be fatal to his own power to exploit the terrific possibilities now opening before him.

"Look here, Squire—you may as well know just how the matter stands. The stuff has gone inert again. I'm completely held up."

A low whistle conveyed the invisible Squire's first reaction to this announcement. "That's bad," he said—and Routh thought that he heard malice in his former captor's voice. "The Director won't like it at all."

"It's not in the least out of the way, and the Director understands perfectly. I have command of almost nothing, you know, in a pure form. The position is just as it is with those growth-inhibiting stuffs they play about with. You, Squire, wouldn't make head or tail of it in technical terms. But put it like this. Put it that you have a host of human beings, some tiny percentage of which constitutes a superbly efficient military force that you are concerned to cherish. All the rest are tiresome and irrelevant camp-followers who can never be of the slightest use to you. *And you don't yourself know which are which.*"

A snort from Squire interrupted this exposition. "It sounds damned nonsense to me."

"It *is* damned nonsense, Squire. Unfortunately it is Nature's damned nonsense, not mine. And the present upshot of it is that tomorrow I go back to Formula Ten."

There was a moment's silence during which it occurred to Routh to substitute an

eye for an ear. What immediately became visible through the keyhole was not difficult to interpret. Near at hand a blurred but familiar form represented one of the oddly high and square shoulders of the man Squire. In the background was a green baize door in a wall lined with books. And in the middle-distance was part of the polished surface of a table or desk. On this there was nothing to be seen except a pair of hands issuing from the sleeves of a white coat—fine hands, powerful and with long square fingers exquisitely cared for.

"So you see that I have singularly little use for your tramp, my dear Squire. Formula Ten, I assure you, will occupy me very sufficiently for the next few weeks . . . By the way, here it is."

For a moment one of the hands on the desk flicked out of Routh's field of vision. Then it was back again, immobile as before. But now between the two hands there lay what looked like a single folded sheet of quarto paper. The effect of this appearance was startling. Squire's shoulder disappeared. Squire's voice rose in something like a surprised and horrified yelp. The owner of the hands answered this with a low laugh. "Yes," he said. "Here it is."

"But you've no business to have it out like that. It's outrageous! If the Director . . ."

"The Director has some very odd ways, I admit. This, I really believe, is the only existing copy of Formula Ten. It is unique—and the basis of the whole effort. How lucky we are to have it! It was got out of Hendrik, I have been told, just before he succumbed to the persuasions that were unfortunately found necessary in his case. Am I right?"

"I know nothing about it." Squire's voice was suddenly husky.

"Don't you? Then how much you must regret not having been present, my dear Squire, on an occasion so much in your line. But—as I say—we were lucky to get what we did. One knows people here and there about the world who would give millions for this, does one not? Or even—come to think of it—a kingdom? No wonder the Director will have it out only under circumstances of the most portentous security. I enter into your horror and dismay, my dear chap. But when I need Formula Ten, I fetch it out and mention the fact afterwards."

"I don't like it."

"That reminds me. No more do I like your friend the tramp. I don't like his being brought here, and I don't know that I like his going away from here either. I think he had better be killed at once and the body incinerated. See to it, Squire, will you?"

It is difficult to hear something of this sort said about oneself and not suppose, for some moments at least, that one is simply listening to a rather tasteless joke. Had the full force of the words broken upon Routh at once he would undoubtedly have taken to his heels and run. As it was, he remained, misdoubting and stupefied, during the few seconds in which flight might have availed him. His eye was actually still at the keyhole when that orifice was obscured by what was patently the bulk of Squire advancing to open the door. And Squire, it seemed, was now to be simply his, Routh's executioner!

That men so wicked as these could exist was at once incredible and most horribly plausible. And Routh realized that to be found crouching here would be fatal. It was not merely that the secrets he would be presumed to have overheard must absolutely seal his fate. It was also that in such a situation a passive role is fatal; that to turn the tables upon fortune at such a juncture only action will remotely serve . . . Routh opened the door before him and marched into the room.

Squire fell back with an exclamation. Squire's companion, seated still at his desk, quite feebly echoed it. Routh had undeniably caught his adversaries off balance. The sense of this enabled him to nod briskly at the seated man and to wave Squire casually back. "Good afternoon," he said.

The words came out with nothing of the anxious calculation that had marked his attempt at a similar greeting in the bank that morning. Had he not always known he would carry the big moment when it came? Routh glanced round the room with the easy command of an important person; with the sort of glance that makes enormous leather arm-chairs propel themselves forward, corks pop, syphons spurt, cigar-boxes fly open. "Director not here?" he asked briskly. "It's really with him that I'd better have a word."

Squire and his companion glanced at each

other. At length the seated man spoke. "I don't know you from Adam," he said. "And apparently you don't know me. I am the Director."

Routh again gave an assured glance round him. The room went some way to substantiate this false claim. The furniture was handsome, and all round the walls were the sort of heavily tooled books you see in expensive shop-windows in the West End. Over the fireplace was a high-class dirty picture: a lot of naked women lolloping around a pool. Underneath this a bright fire burned in an open grate. Routh walked across to it and warmed his hands. "Nice place you have here," he said. "Plenty of books. Nice picture."

"I fear I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance." Squire's companion was a small man with a high domed forehead and almost no hair. His fine hands still lay passively before him. The rest of him was insignificant and even meagre, as if his body had no other function than that of providing a line of communication between that big brain and those long and powerful fingers. He had bleak gray eyes which he now turned from Routh to Squire. "Presumably this is the gentleman whom you supposed that you had—um—accommodated in number eight?"

"Of course it is." Squire, who had still by no means recovered his self-possession, stared at his late prisoner with mingled bewilderment and malice. "But I can't think how he managed—"

"We learn that sort of thing very early in my crowd." Routh put both hands in his trouser-pockets and chinked the few coins in the one without a hole in it. "But you had no idea of that, had you, Squire?"

"Your crowd?" The white-coated man spoke sharply, and as he did so swung round upon Squire. "Did I understand you to say that your encounter with this fellow was a perfectly casual one?"

Before Squire could reply, Routh laughed harshly. "So your poor friend believed," he said. "Mind you, there's an excuse for him. The idea of attacking the girl and then hanging round until somebody appeared—well, it wasn't too bad, was it? Squire was convinced he had me where he wanted me. And so in I came. Not my own notion, I must

confess. Quite a junior colleague, as it happens."

On the mantelpiece behind Routh's head, and just below the dirty picture, a clock was ticking softly. At any moment, he realized, it might begin to affect him as had the clock in the bank that morning; it might begin to pound like a hammer inside his head. And if his nerve went he was done for. For certainly the ice on which he was now skating was paper-thin. That he had fooled Squire from the start was a notion that might now take in Squire himself. But could it conceivably take in this other fellow? Only—Routh saw—if it *attracted* the other fellow. If this egg-headed scientist disliked Squire enough to be willing to see him in a mug's role, then any cock-and-bull story having that effect might convince him for a while. The thing to do, then, was to make Squire look a perfect fool.

"Poor old Squire! Has he told you about my father in the asylum and my mother gone off to New Zealand? It would have made a cat laugh, the way it all took him in. Thought he was getting a waif and stray to keep under his thumb at some of your dirtiest work here. And all the time he was getting *us*."

The clock was still behaving normally behind him. Squire was flushed and his shoulders had gone even more unnaturally high and square. The other fellow rose from his desk and walked away from it. "Haven't you," he asked, "taken on rather a dangerous mission? The colleagues you speak of must be uncommonly obliged to you. It's a pity"—and with sudden dangerous sweetness the egg-headed man smiled—"that they won't be in a position even to send a wreath."

Once more Routh contrived a convincing laugh. "If you ask me," he said, "it's your friend Squire here that's about due for a wreath. If he were with our crowd he'd have been taken for a ride long ago. But as for me—well, naturally I've taken my precautions."

"It's damned nonsense." Squire had taken a stride forward. "The little rat's bluffing. He's simply making fools of us."

"It may be nonsense. But it's a sort of nonsense that requires getting to the bottom of." Egg-head turned his eyes slowly on Routh. "You have a crowd," he said. "You

have colleagues. You have come here by design. You have taken precautions to ensure your personal safety. If there is any sense in all this, I am quite ready to hear it." He turned with a sudden flash of temper upon Squire. "And as this whole piece of folly is your responsibility, you had better do so too."

"I tell you, it's all—"

"Be quiet and hear the fellow out . . . Now then, what do you mean by your crowd?"

"I mean a crowd that knows about *your* crowd. All that science stuff." He jerked his head in the direction of the long line of laboratories he had shortly before traversed. "We know what it's about. We know what you're making. Valuable stuff, I'd call it. We think it needs protection. And that you need protection too."

"Expensive protection, no doubt?"

"You mayn't like the bill, I agree. But it's probably very much in your interest to pay up, all the same."

"I see." The meagre man in the white coat again gave his disturbingly sweet smile. "But suppose we are not interested? And suppose we are minded to give these precious colleagues of yours a little practical demonstration that they rather need protection on their own account? If they exist—which is something I am by no means convinced of—we can certainly make you tell us where to find them. We could then return you to them—or return some significant part of you—just as an indication that we were not minded to do business with them. Don't you agree with me?"

Beneath the unfamiliar Routh a Routh all too fully known stirred uneasily. He knew that one falter meant that he was done for. Conversely, however wild his story, unflawed assurance might yet carry him triumphantly through. "You just can't afford it," he said. "If our lot simply let the truth about you seep out, where would you be? The moment we simply *knew*, don't you see, we had you where we wanted you."

There was a brief silence. Squire and his companion were once more exchanging what was a purely disconcerted glance.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us what you *do* know? Particularly if I admit frankly that there is a good deal of force in

your proposition?" Egg-Head spoke with a new mildness.

"Know? Why, that you have the means of making gold, of course."

"Thank you." For the first time Egg-Head looked really nonplused. He was staring at Routh as if considering whether here was something really very deep indeed. "And Squire here is a sort of mad Midas? In imagining that he was luring you here it was his intention to transmute you into a full-size statue—the Golden Dustman, perhaps—and exhibit you at the Royal Academy?"

"I don't know what Squire was fool enough to think." Routh spoke almost at random. Had he made some wrong move? Perhaps the concern of these people was not with gold at all. Gold, after all, had been no more than a clever guess. Quickly he endeavored to retrieve himself. "We'll call it gold," he said. "Perhaps we don't know for certain—and then again perhaps we do. But it's certainly something you can't afford to have talked about. And—mind you—I'm no more than a messenger." Routh paused, displeased at thus having demoted himself. "Or say an envoy—that's about it. And what I require now is simply this: a substantial sum on leaving as an earnest of good faith—"

"I beg your pardon? Of what?" Egg-Head had returned to his desk and sat down again.

"There's no need to be funny." Routh's voice rose a pitch. He realized that he was near the end of his tether, and that he must bring the thing off within the next few minutes if he was to bring it off at all. "I'm to have a reasonable sum down. And after that my crowd will communicate with you by means that you will be told about later."

"I see. Well, I think we can settle this matter almost at once. Only we shall first have to consult higher authority." Egg-Head had a new note in his voice; it was almost a note of humor, and Routh was unable to find it reassuring. "As you very acutely suspected, I am not the Director. Squire, will you slip across and explain matters? No, my dear fellow, you need not be apprehensive. I can keep a very sufficient eye on our friend. And although I dislike firearms . . ." Egg-Head's right hand vanished into a drawer of his desk, to reappear again holding an automatic pistol. "Explain to the

Director that we shall not occupy his time for more than five minutes."

Squire's departure was by the green baize door that Routh had first become aware of when peering through the key-hole. There could be no doubt that the Director lived, or at least worked, on the island at the farther end of the enclosed wooden bridge. Supposing that there was no delay, Squire would presumably be back with him within five minutes. Meanwhile Egg-Head continued to sit at his desk, his back to the baize door, the revolver ready in his hand, and his eye never straying from Routh for an instant. A minute went by in silence, and Routh became aware that the clock behind him was beginning to misbehave. Looking at those two bleak eyes and the muzzle of a pistol, he found it, in fact, difficult to remain convinced that he commanded the situation. And no sooner was doubt admitted than it grew. Routh realized that he had shot his bolt. When a fresh mind was brought in—and moreover a powerful mind such as the Director presumably possessed—it would be all up with him.

Egg-Head broke the silence. "Do you know, I think you have put up rather a good show? I no longer have the slightest inclination to believe your story, but as an improvisation it is thoroughly creditable to you. You are presumably just what poor Squire took you for: a mere vagabond that nobody is going to worry about, and regularly in some petty way on the wrong side of the law. That's it, is it not?"

Routh made no answer. He was chiefly aware that his stomach felt bad, just as it had in the bank.

"What I like is the way you really have tried to exploit the situation rather than simply wriggle out of it. I wish we could take you on, my man. You'd at least, one day, be more use than Squire. Unfortunately it's dead against the rules. So you see where you stand."

Routh heard his own faint voice, speaking as if in the air above him. "You can't do that! You can't do *that* to me!"

"Be very sure that we can. And look here—there's no need to drag it out. Take a rush at me, man. I can promise you that your death will be instantaneous."

The room had begun to sway before

Routh. Egg-Head's words had been altogether impassively spoken. It was impossible to tell whether compassion, or mockery, or the depraved wish for a moment's mortal excitement had prompted them. It was only clear that the game was indeed wholly up. He was to be murdered.

"You poor devil." This time the accent came through. It really was compassion—compassion tinged with embarrassment at the mere sight of anything so miserable and so shabby and so helpless as Routh. And in Routh it lit a last desperate flare of rage. He felt, without any volition of his own, his whole body tauten to spring. If even with a burst of bullets in him he could get his dying fingers round that throat . . .

The baize door opened. A split second longer and he would have sprung. As it was, he stared over Egg-Head's shoulder, fascinated. For the door had opened only a little, and what had entered the room was a cat. It leapt noiselessly to the back of a chair close to the man's back. He was totally unaware of it. If only . . . And then the thing happened. The cat took a further leap to Egg-Head's shoulder. It was evidently a familiar domestic trick—but for the moment it caught the man unaware and helpless. Routh sprang. The two men went down together with a crash, struggling for the weapon. Routh had it—and in the same instant became aware of Egg-Head's mouth before him, wide open and screaming. Routh thrust the muzzle in it and pulled the trigger. And the great domed head exploded under his eyes like a bomb.

Routh tried to rise. One of his knees, slipping from the body, grated painfully on a hard object on the floor. It was a bunch of keys, similar to that which Squire had used in coming through the park and gardens. Routh grabbed it and hauled himself to his feet. He must get out. The man who was to have killed him instantaneously he had himself instantaneously killed. The automatic as it emptied itself into the gray pulp of Egg-Head's brain must have alarmed the whole place. Within seconds not only Squire and the Director but everybody in the building—even the people whom he had watched playing croquet—would be about his ears. He had seconds to get out of this house; minutes to escape from this whole

infernal region and reach the salvation of the hidden Douglas.

Routh turned to the door by which he had entered. As he did so he saw the cat once more. It was crouched on the dead man's desk with humped back and waving tail. He thought it was going to spring at him. But the cat remained immobile—a great honey-colored creature with long curling white whiskers. Its two forepaws lay on a folded sheet of quarto paper.

As if from very far back in time, the memory of what he had learnt about Formula Ten swam into Routh's mind. What lay there on the desk was something that Egg-Head ought not to have had access to except amid the most elaborate precautions for its security, something worth millions. Realization of his opportunity came to Routh like a great flood of white light. To snatch this paper from out of the paws of the cat might be to wrest unspeakable triumph from what had seconds before appeared defeat and death.

He took a step towards the desk. The cat hissed at him and bared its claws. Beside himself, Routh turned, caught a poker from the fireplace, and hit wildly at the brute, as if intent to mingle its despatched brains with its master's. But the cat sprang aside and the poker crashed down on the desk. Routh grabbed the paper and ran from the room.

II

THE corridor was deserted, and Routh ran for the door that gave on the open air. But even as he did so there was a shout from the room behind him. At the far end of the corridor first one door was flung open and then another; there was a chatter of excited voices; and several white-coated figures appeared simultaneously. Routh bolted through the nearest door on his right. He was back in number eight.

The room was empty. He realized that many of the adjoining rooms were now tenanted, and that his only exit was back through a corridor into which these people were peering or tumbling. But if his plight was desperate his mind was working clearly and swiftly. There was a white coat hanging behind the door; he snatched it from the peg

and scrambled into it. From a corner of the bench he grabbed a pair of horn-rimmed glasses—these he had noticed during his brief imprisonment—thrust them on his nose, and ran from the room.

The corridor held at least half-a-dozen white-coated figures, shouting and gesturing. Routh shouted and gestured too. At the same time he pushed his way towards the door he wanted. Squire had secured it behind them on their entry, but there was a chance that it was kept unlocked during the hours that all these people were at work. In a matter of seconds he had reached it and found that this calculation was justified. He flung himself through and banged it to behind him.

He knew that the respite thus gained could only be momentary. Fortunately the row of windows down the long corridor held nothing but frosted glass, and he could not be observed simply by a glance through them. In front of him was the high beech hedge that ran the full length of the long building, and Routh saw instantly that a gap to scramble through would not easily be found. His eye turned apprehensively to the door. It must surely be flung open now at any moment. Suddenly he saw that some half-hearted attempt had been made to embellish the bleak utilitarian structure with climbing plants, and that up the wall on one side of the door ran a scrap of denuded wooden trellis. Routh grabbed at it and climbed.

Within five seconds he was lying prone on the flat roof.

The surface was warm in the afternoon sunshine. Long and narrow, with its row of skylights down the centre, the roof was curiously like the deck of a liner. He was exhausted—so exhausted that he was suddenly afraid that he might go to sleep. But through the roof he could hear a mutter of voices, and presently the door by which he had bolted was flung open from within. He heard louder voices and his body tautened in acute anxiety. It sounded as if two of the searchers were running down the path in opposite directions. Would another of them think of the roof, or spot the fragment of trellis?

The door was shut again, and in the immediate vicinity he could hear no sound. But

now in more than one direction dogs were barking, and somewhere on the other side of the house a stable bell was being rung with a will. He knew intuitively that the strange establishment upon which he had stumbled had a well drilled response to such a crisis as had come upon it. In other words, against him, Routh, a whole powerful machine was being brought smoothly to bear.

He raised himself cautiously. The first essential was to discover the extent to which his position was overlooked. Ahead of him lay the covered bridge and the island. These were alike invisible, and he was presumably immune from observation in that direction. On either hand was a scattering of tree-tops which represented very substantial protection; here and there were gaps through which, even when he was flat on the roof, he might possibly be spotted from the middle distance; nevertheless the hazard seemed small compared with some through which he had recently passed. He looked behind him—and found a very different state of affairs. As he ought to have remembered, this whole structure projected directly from a wing of the main building. And from the main building it was commanded by more than a dozen windows.

The bell had ceased ringing and the dogs had fallen silent. He guessed obscurely at forces now strategically posted and waiting; at the beginning of some systematic combing of the whole property that would be quietly efficient and final. . . . Then he came to the edge, peered, listened, lowered himself over and dropped.

He landed among grass and pine needles, and picked himself up unhurt. It was as he had thought. The building was nothing but a blank concrete surface running off in either direction. In front of him was an indefinite extent of young fir trees. Among these he made his way at once, for they gave at least the sensation of shelter. In a moment he came diagonally upon a faint path. He wished desperately that he was armed. He wished that he had better understood the operation of the automatic. One bullet would have been enough for Egg-Head, and would have made a mess less likely to remain sickeningly on the memory. With the ability to kill and kill again he might be able to fight his way out. As it was, as soon as he

was spotted he was helpless. He stopped, recalling that he still wore the white coat. He got rid of it, but without managing to feel any the more secure. The little plantation of pines was thinning out and merging with a ragged shrubbery. He left the path and ran crouching forward from bush to bush.

The shrubbery ended abruptly. It was bounded by a path which he had approached at right-angles, and along the farther side of the path ran a six-foot wooden fence. He paused, hesitating whether to try scaling this, or to make what speed he could along the path in one direction or the other. And at this moment he heard voices behind him. He broke cover, ran to the fence, searched it for some foothold. There was none. He turned to his left and bolted along the path.

His heart was pounding yet more heavily. He realized that this was partly because he was running up-hill. If he had turned right he would have been making in the general direction of the little lake, and presumably of a stretch of park beyond it. As it was, he must be moving back towards the house. But to turn and retrace his steps required an effort of will that was now beyond him. He pounded on.

There was another shout on his left. He glanced in its direction as he ran and saw several figures break from the trees simultaneously. Then, as if he had been a train entering a tunnel, they vanished. A fence like the one on his right had abruptly risen up on his left. He was laboring along what was in effect a long corridor. If they caught him here he hadn't a chance.

Routh pulled up. There was some crisis and his brain had cleared to meet it. He was at a cross-roads—that was it. In front of him the fenced path ran straight on towards a huddle of buildings. To his left a transverse path led directly to the main bulk of the house. And to the right this same path, unfenced and bordered only by low box hedges, ran through an indeterminate stretch of garden to the park. That was the way he must go. He turned to run. As he did so a man with a gun appeared as if from nowhere some twenty yards ahead, leapt the hedge without looking towards Routh, and then moved slowly down the path and away

from him, scanning the gardens on either side.

At any moment this new enemy might turn. There was nothing to do but go straight on, and make what he could of the shelter of the buildings before him. They were, he guessed, stables and places of that sort. The distance was scarcely greater than the length of a cricket pitch. Routh covered it without glancing behind him and found himself in a courtyard that was almost entirely enclosed. To his left was a wing of the house itself—the servants' wing, probably, and distinguished by a multiplicity of small, sparsely draped windows. To face them was like a nightmare—the familiar nightmare of being on the stage of a crowded theatre. On its three other sides the yard was a jumble of coach-houses, storerooms, lofts and the like. The only entrance to it, apart from the narrow one by which he had come, was through a broad archway straight in front. Through this one would come, no doubt, to the main facade of the house. Should he dash straight through, and so make for that part of the park which was vaguely familiar to him? This question was answered even as Routh, with the slender mental concentration he had summoned back, addressed himself to it. Suddenly from beyond the archway came a sound that thickened and slowed his racing blood. He remembered Deilos and for a moment supposed that leopards or hyenas were at large in the gardens. Then he realized that he was listening to blood-hounds; that this appalling sound was the deep bell-note of which he had read in fiction. No living creature holds a more alarming place in the popular mind than does the blood-hound; and Routh was now reduced to sobbing with fear. At the same moment he heard voices and steps behind him. There was no more than the angle of a building between some group of his enemies and himself. He was within seconds of being captured.

The yard before him was an unbroken stretch of concrete, and it was quite empty. It looked like an arena cleared for some cruel sport. Routh had a fleeting fantastic vision of himself being driven hither and thither about it in abominable torment. His knees shook. He leant against the wall by which he was crouching, and his hands groped

over its surface for something to which to cling. They found a small object, round and hard. It was like a cricket ball. Routh's mind was now scarcely more than a pin-point of consciousness, and he groped to understand the thing's function, to give it a name. But even as he did so it turned under his hand, and a door swung inwards behind him. He staggered back a couple of steps and fell. The door, just clearing his numbed body, swung to and closed. A great sheltering darkness had received him.

ANOTHER door was slammed close by, and he heard footsteps more loudly than before. They were coming. Within the next few seconds he must hide himself. He took a further step forward, and stopped with a low cry. Directly before him, dim but distinguishable, hung a pale human face, its eyes on a dead level with his own. He drew back and the face drew back too. It was his own face reflected in a panel of glass. His hands went out and once more found itself on a handle—but this time it must be the handle of a car door. Even as he made the discovery there was a creak behind him and a finger of light shot through the darkness. He had only one possible resource left. He tugged open the door, flung himself through it, and drew it to behind him.

The finger of light was now a broad beam. He tumbled over the seat on which he was crouched and sought to flatten himself out to gain concealment. The thing was roomy. There was some sort of tarpaulin sheet, carelessly thrown down; and under this he burrowed. Once there was an ominous clink of metal, for on the floor beneath the tarpaulin was what must be a heap of metal tools, loosely disposed. He lowered himself cautiously upon these and lay quite still.

There were now at least two men quite close to him.

"Surely he can't get far?"

"Probably not. But the devil of it is, he got hold of some keys. So if by any chance he reached the ring fence before the current went on—"

"The current! You don't mean to say they've turned on that? They told me that was only for the greatest crisis of all."

"Get in and don't waste time." The floor

beneath Routh lurched suddenly and there was the sound of a door closing. More faintly, the same voice continued. "It is the greatest crisis of all—only not just as we've expected it. This fellow is the crack agent of something pretty big. And there's the point. He mustn't be killed. He may have hidden this thing already. Or he may simply have thrown it away. That's why we must have him back alive. Ready?"

"Ready."

"Go out fairly rapidly and then come more slowly in again."

Exultant and trembling, Routh hardly dared to breathe. There could be no doubt about the incredible truth. He was going to be driven straight out of this abominable place—yard, gardens, sinister ring-fence, park, boundary wall and all—he was going to be driven straight out of it in search of himself! The fools—the bloody fools! He lay absolutely rigid. Close to his fingers, he knew, was the heavy wrench or spanner that he would eventually raise to bring crashing down on his unconscious chauffeur's skull. And then, having pitched him into a ditch, he would drive the car himself hell for leather to London. Oh, triumphant and all-powerful Routh!

The car was moving. It appeared to be coasting out of the garage. Lying on this hard floor, Routh thought, made the suspension feel funny. He had to brace his body more firmly still so as not to give himself away. But what did it matter if he was in for an uncomfortable ten minutes? Only provided—

The engine burst into life. For a full minute it appeared to race unbearably. Routh waited for the gears to engage, the clutch to be let in, the first swift acceleration that might send him lurching or rolling dangerously backwards. But nothing happened. The sense of something quite unapprehended in his situation possessed him. The whole movement was queer. And under his nose—

He stared again, and there was no doubt of it. Part of the flooring on which he lay was for some reason of a transparent substance—glass or perspex. He could see the road beneath him, studded with cats' eyes. Only the road was green—was as green as the rubber in that endless corridor . . . His eyes adjusted their focus and he saw what

was really there. The two sides of the road were two broad green paddocks. The cats' eyes were the tops of white fencing posts dividing them. Routh, in fact, was suspended in air.

The discovery was a terrific shock. Nausea gripped him and for a horrible moment he thought that he must vomit. The line of posts slipped sideways across his field of vision. He stared below him in fascination. The earth had swung round like a compass-card and was now almost motionless. His tired mind, making a conscious effort of analysis, grasped the implication that he himself must be motionless too. In fact the craft in which he had hidden himself was a helicopter.

For a moment Routh closed his eyes. He was awed at the extent of his enemies' resources. But he himself had held out against them now—as it seemed—for hours. And he still had his astounding chance of triumph. He had nothing to do but rise from his lurking place, hit his unsuspecting pilot hard on the head, take charge of the machine—

But at this his nerve failed him. The thought of hanging high in air alone, with a set of unfamiliar and inexplicable controls between himself and disaster—this was something he found he couldn't take. In any case he had better wait. The fellow had been told to "go out fairly rapidly." That meant, presumably, outside the boundaries of the estate below him. He must bide his time until they were outside that formidable stone wall. The moment of act would be then.

The helicopter was moving again. It was passing directly over the house, and not thirty feet above the chimneys. The size and nondescript character of the place were now fully apparent. Routh was aware of a sprawling system of stone and tile ridges, irregularly disposed and alternating with broad, flat expanses of lead. His eye caught the long, low bitumen-covered roof of the building whence his flight had begun; and beyond he had a glimpse of the lake. Then the helicopter passed over the front of the house. Above the apex of the gleaming white pediment that had been his first impression of the place rose a flagstaff. Against this a white-coated man was steadying himself as

he swept the nearer grounds with a pair of binoculars. The man looked up and waved as the machine passed over him. Routh drew back nervously, fearful that his lurking face might be discerned peering through the perspex. But already the roof had vanished.

And here *was* the wall. They were actually over and beyond it. Routh trembled at the full realization of how far he had got—of how tantalizingly near to safety he had come. The fellow was going to circle the park—perhaps to range swiftly over the scanty system of roads and lanes bounding it and running away from it. Nobody could stir on these without detection. While the helicopter was in the air only thick woodland would give secure cover to a moving figure. And of that there seemed to be comparatively little in these parts. Below, everything was bare, still, empty.

Routh's field of vision was restricted, but as the hunt progressed he realized that one suspicious object after another was being spotted, pursued, and then inspected at close quarters. It seemed impossible that so systematic a process would not ultimately succeed, and Routh presently recognized in himself a fresh anxiety so irrational that it appalled him. He was in a fever lest at any moment Routh should be spotted and caught.

And then the astounding thing happened. Once more the ground had risen up to meet him—and this time it was coming nearer than ever before. There was a lane, a hedge—and protruding from the hedge a dark patch oddly like a human leg. It was this that was to be spied at—this and . . . The wild doubt lasted only a fraction of a second. What lay below was the Douglas. And the dark splash was one of the leggings he had kicked off when his first fatal madness of that morning had come upon him.

He was delivered from all madness now. He threw off the tarpaulin and rose. The pilot swung round and his eyes dilated. He threw up an arm and at the same time spoke rapidly into the wireless transmitter slung on his chest. Routh hit him and he crumpled in his seat. The helicopter was about twenty feet up. It suddenly looked a very long way.

Routh scrambled over the unconscious man. A wrong touch on the controls and he might soar again. He peered under the instrument panel and saw a tangle of thin

cables and insulated wires. He thrust the spanner among them and twisted it—twisted it with all his might again and again. The engine raced, choked, faded out. The earth rose and dealt the helicopter a single shattering blow.

The machine had landed squarely on its belly in the lane. Routh flung himself on a door and tumbled into open air. He saw the Douglas not ten yards away and he gave a weak, exultant cry.

THE engine started at a kick. Its familiar rhythm steadied him and he found himself once more thinking clearly. There was acute danger still—and the more acute because he had made a bad slip. If only he had managed to rise behind the pilot quietly and get him unawares—or if, for that matter, the fellow had lacked the guts and presence of mind to make that quick revealing mutter into his radio—the position would be a good deal more comfortable. As it was, the enemy already had a fair idea of what had happened.

There was nobody in sight. But at any moment the situation might transform itself; he was, after all, no more than ten minutes' walk from that horrible wall. His first job was to get on an arterial road and merge himself in some southward-bound stream of traffic. Nobody, he recalled, was going to put a bullet in him from a distance. The swine were determined to have him alive . . . He shivered, and shoved the two-stroke across the grass verge to the road. His quickest route lay straight ahead. But that way lay the entrance to the fatal lane down which the girl had turned that morning, the lane to the abominable Milton—Milton Porcorum. He could see the mouth of it now. And up there, at any moment, might come some swift-moving reinforcement of his pursuers.

He turned the head of the Douglas and faced the helicopter once more. It lay like an enormous crippled insect, slightly canted over and with its rotor-blades quite still. As he opened the throttle and ducked he glanced sideways into the cabin. With a shock he realized that the pilot had come to. He was in the act of hauling himself up in his seat. For the second time his eyes—now glazed and painfully apprehending—crossed Routh's. Then he was gone.

Routh rode on, getting everything out of the old two-stroke that he safely could. It was still early afternoon. Yet the day had already stretched through aeons. His head swam and the wheel wobbled. He had to steady himself on the unfolding ribbon of time, steady himself on the unfolding ribbon of road. His breakfast had been a cup of tea and a scrap of toast. If he didn't get something soon he would faint. He had gone for several miles without seeing anybody—not even a distant laborer in the fields. But now a figure was approaching on a bicycle. Again Routh's front wheel wobbled. The figure approached and raised an arm. Routh ducked and shied. It was a clergyman, gesturing Christian brotherhood. *Major Road Ahead*. Thank goodness for that.

There was an A.A. telephone-kiosk on the corner, and beyond it a big sign advertising a roadhouse farther north. Close by this an old man was leaning on a gate, idly watching whatever traffic went by. Routh, remembering his senseless fear of the clergyman, glanced at him boldly. A shepherd or something of that sort, Routh thought—and rejoiced in the further proof that harmless folk existed. And here, going south at thirty yard intervals, were four lorries with enormous loads of bricks. He would let two pass and then cut in. The shepherd was looking at him with a mild, patriarchal benevolence. Routh gave him a condescending wave and swing in behind the second lorry. The shepherd had put a hand behind his head and was doing something to his stick, cocking it in air. The lorries were traveling fast. Routh opened the throttle. He had gone a mile or more before it came to him that if the old man were indeed a shepherd then he, Routh, was the sheep. The affair on the old man's back was a walkie-talkie. He was reporting on Routh's movements now.

III

MR. BULTITUDE stepped out of the main gateway of Bede's and looked about him in mild surprise. It was true that nothing had much changed since his performing the same operation on the previous day. Directly in front of him the Ionic pillars of the Ashmolean Museum supported a pediment above which Phoebus Apollo continued

to elevate the dubious symbolism of a vestigial and extinguished torch. On his right, the martyrs Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, perched on their Gothic memorial, presided over a confused area of cab ranks, bicycle parks and subterranean public lavatories. To the left, and closing the vista of Beaumont Street, Worcester College with its staring clock kept a sort of Cyclopean guard upon the learned of the University, as if set there to prevent their escaping to the railway station.

All this was familiar to Mr. Bultitude. But it is proper in a scholar, thus emerging from his cloister, to survey the chaotic life of everyday in momentary benign astonishment.

Mr. Bultitude, pausing only to pat on the head the youngest son of the Professor of Egyptology (a serious child who had been spending the afternoon in numismatic studies in the University galleries), moved steadily up (or, as it may have been, down) Beaumont Street, and presently arrived at the theatre without mishap. Having secured some tickets he emerged through the swing doors and stood, puffing gently as from healthful exercise, and contemplating with evident misgiving the toilsome hundred yards of his return journey. In this posture he was discovered and greeted by an acquaintance.

"Good afternoon, Bultitude. Like myself, you are taking a turn in this mild autumn sunshine."

Mr. Bultitude, who disliked having positive statements made about himself in this way, nodded curtly. "Good afternoon, Ourglass. What some take, others give."

"I beg your pardon?" Dr. Ourglass was an obscure man from an obscure college, and understood to be wholly occupied with obscure speculations on Phoenician trade-routes. "I don't follow you."

"Then let us proceed side by side. I was suggesting that, in the vulgar phrase, you gave me quite a turn. You look wretched, Ourglass."

"Wretched?" Dr. Ourglass was dismayed.

"No doubt it is no more than a bilious attack—a passing error of the table. But to a stranger, Ourglass, your appearance would suggest dissipation."

"Dissipation!" For a moment Dr. Ourglass was indignant. "I am worried. The

fact is, Bultitude, that my nephew has disappeared."

Mr. Bultitude, although a man of various information and extensive views, possessed a discriminating mind. That Dr. Ourglass had a nephew was information that he was disinclined to treat as momentous, and from this it necessarily followed that the nephew's vagaries could be of no interest to him. Nevertheless he looked at his companion as if in sudden naked horror. "My dear Ourglass," he said, "were you present when this surprising phenomenon took place? And was any lingering appearance left behind? A smile, for example, as in the case of the Cheshire cat?"

Dr. Ourglass took no offence at this. Possibly he supposed that Bultitude had entirely misheard his remark. Patiently he began again. "I am speaking of a nephew of mine, Geoffrey Ourglass, who came up to Bede's last year to read Physiology. This term he has simply not appeared."

"Have you yourself heard nothing from this young man?"

"Nothing whatever. A friend, however, claims to have seen him some weeks ago in a place called Milton Porcorum."

"It sounds, my dear Ourglass, as if your nephew, with all the generosity of youth, may be casting his pearls before swine. But let me set your anxieties at rest." Bultitude, as he spoke, laid an arm on his companion's shoulder and exerted an encouraging pressure—with the consequence that Ourglass almost buckled at the knees. "A young man who withdraws into the heart of the English countryside is most infallibly engaged upon one of two ventures. He is writing a play, or he is pursuing a woman. It is true that both activities are singularly futile, and that a young physiologist, oddly enough, stands no special chance of success at either. But at least the first pursuit is never, and the second is very seldom, dangerous. Whether it is a tragedy or a trollop, Ourglass, you may depend upon your nephew's turning up again as soon as he has completed the last act to his satisfaction . . ."

THEY walked for a minute in silence. "This nephew of yours," Bultitude asked abruptly, "is he a schoolboy; or out of the services?"

"Certainly not a schoolboy." Ourglass beamed at this show of spontaneous interest. "And Goeffrey was certainly in the army for a time. After that, he was engaged on some other government work, and his decision to come up to Oxford was quite sudden. He might do very well. He might even prove quite a scholarly person."

"Ugh."

"Or if not *that*," Ourglass pursued with innocence, "Goeffrey might at least enter politics with some chance of becoming a minister. There is our family connection, you know, with the Marquis of Horologe."

"Your connection with Lord Horologe?" Bultitude looked at his companion with quickened interest.

"Quite so. Goeffrey's aunt, Clepsydra . . . But, really, I must not bore you with genealogies."

"Not at all—not at all." Bultitude appeared to make one of those rapid social reassessments which even the most finely intuitive Oxford men are sometimes obliged to in deceptive cases. "I am most interested in your nephew. From all you tell me, I have no doubt that he has the seeds of scientific distinction in him. We must find him. We must bring him back. Milton Porcorum, after all, is not an *ultima Thule*. It would by no means surprise me to learn that there is a bus waiting to go there now. Come, my dear fellow—come along." With altogether surprising vigor Mark Bultitude waddled quite rapidly forward.

Ourglass followed, apparently bewildered but much pleased.

There is nothing exclusive about Gloucester Green. It bears no resemblance to Oxford railway station at, say 9 a.m., when an endless line of first-class carriages rolls in, to bear whole cohorts of the eminent to their learned occasions in the metropolis.

Engines raced and roared; horns blew; across impenetrable masses of compressed humanity mothers separated from children, and children separated from lollipops, cried out in a dismal and surprising manner. It was a peak hour. The whole place throbbed like a mighty heart, governing with its deep pulsations the converging and diverging streams of red.

"Bultitude," called out Ourglass, "might it not be simpler to enquire at the office?

I believe there is always someone—"

"No, no—nothing more fatal." Bultitude was already forcing his way into the thickest of the crowd. "Now, here's Burford. I shouldn't be at all surprised—" With the head of his cane Bultitude tapped authoritatively on the windscreen of the bus before which he had paused. "Can you tell me," he called up to the driver, "if you connect with the bus for Milton Porcorum . . . yes, *Porcorum*?"

The reply was lost on Ourglass, but was presumably in the negative, since Bultitude again plunged forward.

A bus had just moved in beside them, and Bultitude side-stepped to peer at it. "Abingdon," he said. "No good at all. Chipping Norton would appear to me to be much the most likely thing . . . Hullo! There's Kolmak—I wonder what he has been doing? You know Kolmak, our Research Lecturer?"

Ourglass looked obediently at the crowd pouring off the Abingdon bus. First came a small mob of young airmen; then a nondescript man, weedy and pale, and with a scratch across one cheek; then, following close behind, the person called Kolmak, whom Ourglass just knew by sight. But already Bultitude had lumbered off and was conversing with another driver; in a few seconds he was back, nodding his head in placid satisfaction. "As I thought," he said. "The Chipping Norton driver knows the place quite well. And there is a connection, should we care to go by bus."

"Should we care . . . ?"

"Certainly. We will go out there, Ourglass, and investigate quite quietly. We may avoid scandal. Of course it may mean squaring the girl."

"Squaring the girl?" Ourglass, who now felt himself being propelled gently out of the crush, looked helplessly at his companion. "I am willing to believe that Goeffrey may be engaged in dramatic composition—although I have never suspected him of cherishing any literary ambitions of the sort. But your hypothesis—apparently your preferred hypothesis—of a *girl*—"

"Quite so. We must discuss it." And Bultitude gave Ourglass a soothing—and again alarmingly flattening—pat on the back.

WHERE Friars Entry narrows to burrow beneath the shops of Magdalen Street two women were edging past each other with prams. The wheels locked. *Zusammenstoss*, Kolmak thought—and then realized that the delay might be fatal to him. "Bitte!" he called out in his agitation. One of the women stared. He still hated that stare—the insular stare of the uneducated at any evidence of foreignness. But he smiled politely and swept off his hat. "Excuse me . . . but my bus . . . if I might possibly—" The woman squeezed against the side of the passage—but without any answering smile.

As he had feared, it made him just too late. He jumped for the moving bus and missed. The indignant yelp of the conductress chimed with his own exclamation of pain as he fell heavily on one knee. An undergraduate stepped forward and helped him to his feet, slapped at him in a friendly ritual of getting the dust off, was gone before he could be thanked.

Kolmak stood on the curb, breathing fast. He looked up the broad vista of St. Giles' and saw the bus disappearing. It was a Number 2. There wouldn't be another for ten minutes. His quarry had escaped him. He might as well go home.

These days home was a tall, narrow house exposing the absurdity of its Venetian Gothic to a bleak evening sky. Kolmak thought it horrible. The dwellings suggested to him the remnant of some enslaved population, degraded in an alien place. Still, once more he had been lucky. There was, of course, the climb. But had he not a bath, even, at the end of it? And there was an empty room! If only Anna . . .

Kolmak opened the door and went quietly through the hall. The house belonged to the Misses Tinker, ancient women who had owned some august connection with the University very long ago. Kolmak believed that their brother had been *Rektor Magnificus*—Vice-Chancellor—something like that. It distressed the Misses Tinker to have tenants in their attics. When they encountered Kolmak coming or going they were disconcerted; and because of this they would hold him in embarrassed conversation when it would have been mutually more agreeable to pass by with a smile.

It was the elder Miss Tinker who ap-

peared on this occasion. She was carrying a bowl of chrysanthemums as withered as herself, and her form brushed against him like a ghost's as she came to a stop.

"Good evening, Dr. Kolmak. Has it not been a delightful day?"

"It has, indeed, Miss Tinker. Have you cared to go out, at all?" Kolmak spread out the fingers of his free hand very wide, so that he would remember not to click them.

"My sister and I went out—on foot." It was always an implication of the Misses Tinker's conversation that their pedestrianism was a healthful alternative to calling out their carriage. "We walked round to Norham Road—the sunshine was really delightful—and called on Lady Bronson. You will be glad to know that we found her well."

Kolmak bowed, and there was a faint click—but this time from his heels. "I am most happy to hear it."

"And now I must rearrange these flowers. You will find your aunt at home, Dr. Kolmak. Until a few minutes ago I believe she was at her piano. And how delightfully she plays! My dear brother used to remark that only Ger—that only the countrymen of Beethoven really know how to play the pianoforte."

Kolmak backed upstairs, bowing.

For a moment he thought that he heard his aunt playing very softly. Then he knew that it was only the little Aeolian harp that she had insisted on hanging up on their "landing"—the fragile contrivance of pine and catgut that he seemed to remember, all through his childhood, discoursing its alternate discords and harmonies at an upper window from which one could see, piercing the sky beyond the Hofburg, the great south tower of the *Stephans-Dom*. He opened the door separating his own domain from the Misses Tinker's and stood for a moment by the little instrument. A light breeze was blowing in through an open window and brushing the strings to a faint murmuring. He glanced out and saw—what never failed to give him pleasure—the fine lines of the Radcliffe Observatory, tranquil upon the evening.

"Kurt—you have news, *bein'?*"

Tante Lise had appeared in the doorway. He went to her quickly, took her hands, and

led her back to her chair. The room that she called her *salotto*, and that was all sloping ceilings and joists awkwardly placed for the head, was crammed with the massive birch-wood furniture they had been allowed to bring away with them. Most of the pieces were so high that they had to stand out from the wall, so that the room would have been a paradise for children to play hide-and-seek in. But, Kolmak thought, there were no children. The attics were as childless as was the faded elegance of the Misses Tinker's apartments below.

"I have little news, *Tantchen*. I had thought to gain a great deal. But I have been clumsy and it has come to nothing. See, though! I have been able to buy some *salami*—and a *bel-paese* too."

She took the food in silence and set it out on the Castel Durante dishes that were a relic of her childhood in Rome. Tante Lise's father had been the most distinguished *Kunstkenner* of his generation—that and an eminent mediaevalist, the friend of Winkelmann. These plates were her only material link with that spacious past. "The police have been," she said.

"The police?" Kolmak's hand trembled as he brought finally from his brief-case a bottle of cheap wine. "For me?"

"*Aber nein!*" And Tante Lise laughed softly—as she used to do when, as a small boy, he had said some inept but charming thing.

"Then about . . ."

"No, no—not that either. Only about myself."

"But it is intolerable!" Kolmak had flushed darkly. "Do the ladies below, the Misses . . ."

"They know nothing of it. A most polite man came—an official of the police, but in ordinary clothing. I gave him *Fünf-Uhr-Tee*."

"You gave him tea!" Kolmak stared at his aunt in mingled reproach and admiration.

"But certainly. Do not forget that I am required to report myself. This official's visit was to spare me that on this occasion. It was a courtesy, an act of consideration due, doubtless, to your *Stellung*—your new position." And Tante Lise regarded her nephew with affectionate admiration.

But he saw that her eyes were anxious

and questioning, and he sat down heavily. "I do not know that I shall keep the *Stellung*. It may be that I shall seek employment elsewhere."

"Elsewhere?"

"With *them*."

She sprang up. "Kurt! What can you mean?"

"It may be the only way."

"But you know nothing of them."

He laughed wearily. "That is the point, is it not?"

Tante Lise was silent for some moments. Taking the *salami* to the large cupboard in the eaves that served as her kitchen, she began to cut it into slices, paper thin. Kolmak rose, cleared a table of its litter of music, laid out mats and dishes. His aunt reappeared. "But are you not dining with the *Professoren*?"

He put a hand to his forehead. "I forgot."

"You must go. It is advantageous to become more familiarly acquainted with the other *Professoren*. Moreover it is an intellectual stimulus such as I cannot afford you. Do not hurry home."

Kolmak nodded obediently and went out to wash. It was something to have a bathroom. When he came back Tante Lise was standing before the empty fireplace—and so placidly posed that he suspected she had been weeping.

"Kurt, there are always the police."

"No! Certainly not!" And he made a violent gesture. "A hundred times, no!"

"Whatever your ill-success today, you have striven hard, I know; and have deserved it. Shall you be speaking to Mr. Bultitude?"

Kolmak looked at his aunt in surprise. "To Bultitude? I suppose I may—though he is not always very approachable."

"Then tell him about Uncle Nikolaus."

"About Uncle Nikolaus! But why . . ."

"It is something that I observed about Mr. Bultitude when we spoke together at your Provost's party. Remember I am a judge of men."

Kolmak was uncomprehending. But again he nodded obediently. Then he turned to go.

ROUTH did not know where his new pursuer had picked him up. He had thought of Oxford as a collection of colleges and a row or two of shops, and as a

place where everybody went about in a sort of uniform, so that one might be awkwardly conspicuous in ordinary clothes.

But the bus station reassured and comforted him. There was the sort of crowd in which no one could look at him twice. All the same, London would be better. He might get a long-distance bus from this very spot. He could get off as soon as it reached the network of the Metropolitan Railway—at Edgware, say, or Hendon. After that, and barring extreme ill luck, his safety would be absolute. There were half-a-dozen places where he could confidently go to earth.

He went over to an enquiry office and learnt that there was a coach to London in an hour. At a corner of the bus station he found a pub that was just right for him—unpretentious but putting on a square meal. He forced himself to eat this slowly, and he drank no more than half a pint of bitter. Nothing had ever tasted so good, and as its warmth coursed through him his mind found release from its late tensions in pleasing fantasies. One of these was particularly satisfying; it presented a vision of Routh rubbing Squire's face savagely and repeatedly in gravel. But presently Squire's head turned into a lion's, and Routh was constrained to believe that he had been dreaming. For a moment of panic he thought he might even have missed his bus. His watch, however, reassured him that it could have been no more than a five minutes' nap. He paid his bill and went out. In a way he regretted having gotten rid of the two-stroke but it was safer going by bus.

He was still sleepy. The evening air had turned chill, so that he shivered. But it quite failed to wake him up. He looked around him, heavy-eyed. The broad expanse of Gloucester Green was now much less crowded, and his glance fell on a man standing near the middle of it and looking towards him. Routh had seen the man before; had seen him just as he got off the bus from Abingdon. There could be no mistake. The man was foreign-looking and noticeable. But of course it might be pure chance that he was still hanging about. Perhaps he, too, happened to be waiting for the London coach.

At least he could put the thing to the

test at once. He walked off and turned a corner. The facade of a cinema, islanded between two streets, was now before him. He rounded this, as if to stare idly at the posters with which the farther side of the building was plastered. And out of the corner of his eye he saw the foreign-looking man, now affecting to peer into the window of a confectioner's shop across the street.

Routh turned, and this time walked away as rapidly as he could. When he had gone fifty yards he looked over his shoulder. The man was just behind him.

Routh knew very well what he ought to do. He was still on the fringe of the bus station, which showed on sign of becoming denuded of drivers, conductors, policemen and substantial numbers of the public. He ought to stand his ground, get on his bus when it came, and travel on it, as he had planned, to London. There, still moving with a crowd, he would get himself a taxi and vanish. But Routh, as all this revolved itself in his head, walked on. He knew he was being a fool. He knew that he was allowing himself to be driven off his own best line of retreat. But he was powerless to stop and stand. And suddenly the truth of his own position came to him. He was on the run.

They had got him on the run. The battle, essentially, was a battle of nerves—and he was losing.

And once more the symptoms of fear began to operate upon Routh's body. The last enemy, he knew, would be sheer fatalism; would be a disposition to turn flat round and walk limply into his enemies' hands. Gloucester Green was now a nightmare to him, and he turned sharp out of it through the first means offering—a lane that narrowed before him and turned into a mere footpath between commercial buildings. From in front came a hum of traffic on what he guessed must be a principal street of the city. If he could dash out there and swing himself upon a moving bus . . .

He broke into a run, swerved between two women who were approaching each other with perambulators, and was on the street. There was only one bus. It was stationary. But the last of what had been a line of waiting passengers were boarding it, and in a moment it would be moving.

Routh glanced behind him. His pursuer was hard upon him, but seemed to be momentarily entangled with the prams. Routh ran for the bus and jumped on. And it moved off the foreign-looking man emerged and jumped for it too, but missed and fell. For a moment Routh had the happiness of looking down at him malignantly in the dust. Then the conductress pushed him off the platform and he tumbled into a seat just inside. For the second time within a couple of hours he was trundled off for an unknown destination.

Routh closed his eyes, the better to take stock of his situation. That he had once more shaken off his relentless pursuers seemed too good to be true. Nevertheless it was a fact. The foreign-looking man could hardly have had a car in waiting, otherwise he would surely have taken up the chase in it instead of jumping for the bus. So at the worst Routh had five or ten minutes start. It was not much, but if he used it cleverly it would yet save him. And suddenly he knew what he would do. He would make no attempt to get back into the centre of Oxford. Rather he would keep a look out for a suburban garage—the kind that is almost certain to have a car or two for hire. He would go in, take care to keep out of observation from the road, and ask for a car to take him straight out of Oxford. Hiring a car would be expensive, but he had the money and a bit over in his pocket, and it would be worth it. With his eyes still closed, Routh put his hand to his breast-pocket to feel the wallet in which he kept all his cash.

He seemed to go dead cold all over. The wallet was gone. He must have left it behind him when he emerged so sleepily from the pub where he had fed. There was nothing left in the pocket except the thin fold of paper that was Formula Ten. He had not even the twopence that would buy him a ticket on this bus.

Routh opened his eyes again. Planted opposite to him was Squire.

THE double shock was too great. Routh gave a strangled cry. The effect of this was unexpected. Somebody sitting next to him took his hand and shook it warmly. And from out of a great darkness he heard

himself addressed in a high and quavering voice. "My dear Carrington-Crawley, how delightful of you to recognize me!"

The momentary black-out cleared, and Routh saw Squire leaning forward to listen, and at the same time gazing at him stonily. His hand was still being shaken—with surprising vigor in view of the fact that the person concerned had all the appearance of a centenarian. A second before, Routh had felt that he would never be capable of intelligent utterance again. But now words came to him from nowhere. "But of course I recognized you, sir; in fact I was keeping a look-out for you."

The centenarian gave a crow of delight. He had a spreading white beard, and his only other distinguishable feature was a pair of bright eyes twinkling behind steel-rimmed glasses. "Splendid—splendid, my dear Carrington-Crawley! Perhaps you even might have time to pay a call?"

Routh took a deep breath. "Thank you," he said. "That is just what I was on my way to do."

At this the centenarian crowed again, dived into a pocket, and produced a shilling which he flourished in the air before him. "My man," he cried to the conductress, "two fares, if you please, to Rawlinson Road."

Routh took a sidelong glance at the centenarian, who was now counting his change. Presumably he was a professor, and in that case Carrington-Crawley had perhaps been one of his students. Anyway, that would be the best guess upon which to proceed. But Routh had the wit to realize that it was little use his calculating and planning the right things to say. He knew far too little about the ways of this place for that. He must simply proceed on impulse, and trust to the result's being as happy as his first two utterances had been. And impulse now prompted him to take the lead. "By jove, sir," he said, "it's a great many years since we met."

The centenarian nodded vigorously. "My dear boy," he chirruped, "I think I am enjoying my years of retirement. I think I know how to use them—to use them, I say, my dear boy—to use them!"

"I'm quite certain that you do."

"But I look back on my final few years of teaching with particular pleasure, parti-

cular pleasure, particular pleasure. I look back on them with particular pleasure, I say."

Routh wondered how much the old man was really off his rocker. His voice was shrill and commanding, so that several people turned around to glance at him. But none of them appeared to think him anything out of the way. Even the conductress, on being addressed as "my man," had not shown any surprise. Perhaps he was a well-known character about the place. Or perhaps it was just that his sort were the regular thing here.

"And your own year, now—your own year, your own year. Some remarkable men—remarkable men, I say. Todhunter, for example. A most distinguished career—yes, a most distinguished career."

"Ah," said Routh, "Todhunter—we all expected it of him."

"Expected it, you say—expected it, expected it?" And the repetitive old person turned sideways upon Routh and stared so hard into his face that it appeared inevitable that all must be lost. "Expected it?" The old person's voice expressed extreme indignation. "Expected it of that shocking little drunk?"

Routh nerved himself to look again at Squire. The bus was crowded, but he judged it not impossible that his enemy might simply hold it up at the revolver's point and then hustle him into some high-powered car hovering behind. In that case . . .

Routh jumped. "Carrington-Crawley?" he repeated blankly.

The centenarian nodded impatiently. "Carrington-Crawley, I said, Carrington-Crawley. When, my dear Todhunter, did you last see Carrington-Crawley?"

Routh's head swam. "I can't remember," he said. "But it was a good long time ago."

"Precisely!" the centenarian was triumphant. "But here we are, we are, we are. Come along, along, along, I say, along!"

At this moment, and while Routh's ancient friend was preparing to hoist himself to his feet, Squire acted. The seats facing each other at the rear of the bus each had room for three people, and beside Routh a place was now empty. Squire rose, slipped into it, leant across Routh, and addressed the centenarian—and at the same moment

Routh felt something hard thrust into his ribs. "Excuse me, sir, but you are mistaken in supposing this to be a former pupil of yours. He is, in fact, a friend of mine who has recently suffered a nervous breakdown, and we are getting off together at the stop after your own."

"Rubbish, sir!" The centenarian had risen to his feet and was regarding Squire with the utmost sternness. "Stuff and nonsense! Do you think I don't know my own old pupils? Do you think I don't know Rutherford here, of all men—a student who was genuinely interested in the *Risorgimento*—in the *Risorgimento*, I say, the *Risorgimento*?"

"You are quite wrong. My friend is nervously disturbed and extremely suggestible. And his name is certainly not Rutherford."

The bus was slowing to a stop. Routh felt what must be Squire's revolver digging yet harder into his ribs, and he was frozen beyond the power of act or utterance. The centenarian, however, proved to have decided views on how this sort of thing should be met. He raised a gloved hand in front of Squire's face. "Rascal!" he said. "Are my grey hairs—my grey hairs, I say—to be no protection against public impertinence? I pull your nose." And suiting the action to his words, he pulled Squire's nose—so hard that the latter sat back with a yelp of pain, to the considerable surprise of people farther up the bus. "And now, my dear Rutherford, off we get!"

The centenarian had set off at a brisk pace down a long suburban road. Routh scanned it anxiously. It was quiet, but not too quiet. Three or four young men in skimpy white shorts and voluminous sweaters and scarves were congregated round a small sports car by the curb. An elderly man was clipping a hedge. Further along, a couple of men were high on a telephone pole, leaning back on leather slings as they worked at it with spanners. And scattered here and there were about half a dozen small boys in dark blue blazers bouncing balls or circling idly round on bicycles. Routh glanced over his shoulder. There was as yet no sign of Squire or any other pursuer. If only he could gain the centenarian's house before—

The old man had stopped before a small villa lying behind a low brick wall

from which the iron railings had been cut during some war-time drive for metal. As they walked up a short garden path Routh decided that the house was on the way to decay somewhat ahead of its owner. But what much more engaged his attention was the fact that he had gained its shelter without the observation of his enemies. For he was off the road and still there was no Squire.

"Come, my dear boy, come straight into my library—into my library, I say, my library." Routh was aware of a small gloomy hall, of a passage where his feet stumbled on an untidy rug, and of his protector throwing open a door at the end of it and beckoning him to follow. He was well into the room before he saw that it was entirely unfurnished. The centenarian stood by the single window, which was barred. He had thrown down his hat—and with his hat he had thrown down his beard as well. Routh heard a step behind him and spun round. Squire stood in the doorway.

"PUT up your hands." Squire had him covered with a revolver—the same, no doubt, which he had covertly employed in what Routh knew now to have been a grisly comedy on the bus.

Routh put his hands above his head. He was caught. For a moment it seemed utterly incredible. For a moment the ramshackle structure of his self-confidence stood, even with its foundations vanished. And then it crashed. They had got him, after all. For behind him was a barred window, and in front Squire's square shoulders were like another and symbolical bar across the door.

But—oddly—he no longer felt fear. Somewhere in him was a flicker of anger—anger at the cleverness of the thing because it had been cleverer than the cleverness of Routh. Apart from this faintly stirring emotion the moment held a dream-like calm. He saw that his centenarian stood revealed as an elderly man with the air of a broken actor. He saw that the house was untenanted and indeed derelict. Paper hung in strips from the walls; there were places where the skirting-board had fallen away in tinder; the floor, which lay thick in dust, was loose and rickety from some sort of dry rot—it would be a good

spot, he suddenly thought, under which to dispose of a body. But still he felt no terror. Far away he heard a bicycle bell and children's voices, and these mingled with the limp arabesques of the peeling paper and the sour smell of decaying timber.

"Get the van round to the lane at the back—at once." Squire, without taking his eyes off Routh, snapped out the command to his accomplice. And the man went—keeping well clear of Squire's possible line of fire.

As soon as he was alone with Squire, Routh experienced in every limb and organ the flood of fear that had in the past few moments eluded him. For he recognized in Squire's gaze a lust deeper than the promptings of the predatory social animal.

It was something in the way that Squire's glance moved over him. He was studying the several parts of Routh's body in anticipation of the exercise of a sheer and disinterested cruelty. Routh felt giddy. He shifted the weight on his feet to prevent himself from falling. For a moment he thought that he was really going down—that the power of self-balance had left him. Then he realized it was his footing that was unstable. A floorboard had given and sunk beneath his heel. And his senses, again preternaturally sharp, glimpsed a faint stirring in the dust immediately in front of his enemy. Routh was at the one end of a loose board. Squire was at the other. And the board would pivot half-way between them.

But the revolver was pointing straight at his heart. Surprise must be absolute. And time was short. Routh wept. Without any effort, tears of rage and weakness and terror flowed from his eyes. "You can't do this to me!" he cried—and his arms, still above his head, shook in helpless agitation. "You can't—you can't!"

Squire smiled. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"I tell you, you *can't* do it—you can't!" Routh was now no more than a terrified and bewildered child. He stamped with one foot—weakly. Then with all his might he stamped with the other. The board leapt up. Squire's evil face vanished within a cloud of dust. His revolver exploded in air. Routh sprang forward and with clenched fist and the weight of his whole body hit

Squire behind the ear. And then he ran from the room.

He was out of the house and had bolted into the road. Directly in front of him, one small boy was tinkering with a bicycle at the curb. Otherwise, there wasn't a living soul in sight. It was disconcerting. Squire would be staggering to his feet at this moment, and groping in that blessed dust for his gun. Routh had seconds, not minutes, in which to vanish from the landscape.

Routh glanced nervously behind him. A small closed van had rounded a far corner.

At the same moment a group of people emerged from a sideroad just in front of him and paused by a garden gate. At the same moment he heard the van accelerate behind him. He found himself without the resolution to look round again and learn the worst. The group of elderly persons were moving up the path towards a large, ugly house standing in a substantial garden. Routh followed them.

He heard the van stop and its door being flung open. Simultaneously the party to which he had attached himself turned away from the house and passed through a further gate leading to a garden on a lower level. At the end of this stood a large wooden hut. It was being used, Routh guessed, for some sort of entertainment. For on either side of a wooden porch attached to it stood a small girl in fancy dress handing out what were evidently programmes. At the sight of this Routh's group blessedly mended its pace, as being fearful of keeping the show waiting. In another moment he was inside the hut.

The interior formed a single large room, long and low and bare. Islanded in the middle, something like a score of people had disposed themselves on chairs. The farther end was shut off by an untidy but effective system of curtains. Routh slipped into a seat and glanced at the piece of paper which had been handed him. It read:

DICK WHITTINGTON

PLAY

IN AID OF

DUMB FRIENDS

Routh turned from this to his neighbors,

and his heart sank. It was true that nobody seemed disposed to question his presence. The gathering was one of parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts; and in various groups and couples they were animatedly discussing the schooling, athletic ability, artistic talent, physical health, nervous stability, feeding, clothing and disciplining of their own or each other's charges. They all spoke very loud—this being necessary in order to make themselves heard above a hubbub rising from the other side of the curtains. But although an individual voice could be lost, an individual face could not. Anybody stepping into the hut in search of him would be bound to succeed in a matter of seconds.

"You *are* Martin's father, are you not?" A woman beside Routh had turned to him and was looking at him in friendly interrogation.

For a moment Routh stared at her in stupid panic. Then he nodded spasmodically, "Yes," he said, "that's right. I'm Martin's father." He might as well say one thing as another. It must be a matter of seconds now.

"In that case I have a message for you. Martin wants his part."

"I beg your pardon?" Routh was momentarily uncomprehending.

"It seems you have Martin's part. And he wants it to glance at between the scenes."

"By jove, stupid of me—what?" Routh rather overdid it this time. But what did that matter? He was on his feet and dashing for the curtains. "Give it to him now," he called back. He was just vanishing through them when he sensed, rather than saw the form of the man with the red beard darkening the farther doorway.

He had tumbled into a midget world of confused and furious activity. A horde of children, none of whom could have been older than thirteen, were making final preparations for their play. Close by Routh, a small boy in a boiler-suit was cautiously testing the cords that were to draw aside the curtains. At his feet a small girl, also in a boiler-suit, was banging at some invisible object with a hammer. In one corner several coal-black savages—presumably of the country which was going to be overrun by rats—were practicing what appeared to

be a spirited cannibal feast. A flaxen-haired girl in a ballet-dress waved a wand in the manner approved for the Good Fairy; another girl, dressed as a cook, was warming up at the business of banging a ladle loudly inside a metal pot; a boy with a sheaf of papers was rushing up and down shouting "Where's Miles? Miles ought to be here. Has anybody seen that twerp Miles?" And in the middle of the floor Dick Whittington—who was a boy, not a girl—sat in austere distinction on a mile-stone, surveying the scene with the resigned condescension of a superior mind.

Routh took all this in very vaguely indeed. He had no doubt that the bearded man, as soon as he had satisfied himself that the fugitive was not in the audience, would come straight behind the scenes. One or two of the children were staring at him, but the majority were too much occupied to notice. He began to circle the stage, tripped over a welter of dangerous-looking electric wiring, and almost crushed a member of the boiler-suited squad. He spied a door behind the backcloth and made a dash for it; as he reached it and slipped through he heard an adult voice behind him.

"May I just take a look round, boys? I am the inspector, you know, from the Fire Brigade. I go round all the theatres."

There was a respectful hush on the stage. Routh ground his teeth and looked desparately about him. He was at an *impasse*. This room at the end of the hut was no more than a storage space; it had no other exit and was lit only by two small windows impossible to scramble through. The floor was littered with costumes and effects, and there was a square wicker basket in which some of these appeared to have been stored. Routh opened it with the desperate notion of jumping in. But he realized that even an incompetent searcher—and the bearded man would be far from that—would throw open the lid as he passed and glance into it. He was about to shut it again when he realized the nature of the single article left inside. If only he had time—

From the stage behind him rose a clear, level voice. He guessed at once that it was Dick Whittington's. "I think if you were from the Fire Brigade you would be in uniform." The bearded man's answer was

lost in a buzz of speculation. And then Dick Whittington was heard again, speaking very politely. "If you don't mind, I think I would rather you saw my father."

Already Routh had profited by the delay. His jacket and shoes were off. There was a minute of breathless struggle—the thing was, of course, far too small for him—and then he had bounded back on the stage on all fours, metamorphosed into Dick Whittington's cat. He miaowed loudly; a small girl screamed delightedly: "Miles! Here's Miles!"; he went forward in a series of quick jumps, making his tail wave behind him. Through his mask he had a glimpse of the bearded man, confronting Whittington in momentary irresolution. Routh jumped at him, and rubbed himself vigorously against his legs. The bearded man cursed softly, looked quickly round him, strode into the inner room. Routh could hear him lifting the lid of basket. Then he was out again and had vanished through the curtains. There was an indignant shout or two, and then everybody appeared to forget about him. The gramophone was giving out the sound of Bow bells very loudly.

"What are you doing in my cat?"

The mask was twitched indignantly from Routh's head. A red-haired boy stood planted before him in a belligerent attitude, looking him very straight in the eyes. "I'm sorry," said Routh, "I just thought it would be fun to try."

"It's not Miles—it's a man!" The small girl who had been shouting before, now cried out in high indignation. A circle of children gathered around Routh and there was a hubbub of voices.

"I never allow anybody in my cat." Miles, as he realized the enormity of what had happened, was going as red as his own hair. "And you're much too big. You might bust it."

"I'm very sorry." Routh was inclined to think that he had escaped from the frying-pan merely to fall into the fire. He scrambled hastily out of the cat. "I'd better be—"

"And who are you, anyway? And who was that other person?" This was Whittington's voice again, bringing its higher cogency to bear on the situation.

"Yes, who are you . . . Why are you spoiling our play . . . Dick's father should

send for the police . . . He's bust Miles's cat . . ." The tumult of indignant voices grew, so that Routh was convinced that some of the grown-ups from the other side of the curtain were bound to come and investigate.

"Oh, he's all right. He's cracked."

It was a new and tolerant voice. A boy in a dark-blue blazer.

"Stuart knows him . . . Stuart says he's cracked . . . Buck up . . . Tell Miles to get into his cat . . . Stuart's brought a man he knows . . ." And again there was a confused tumult. Some of the children had already lost interest in Routh.

"I think he works on the telephone-wires." Stuart spoke loudly, being anxious to keep his own sensation in the forefront. "I saw him on our street today."

"Telephone-wires?" A new voice spoke from the background. It proceeded, Routh saw, from a worried boy in glasses, who was swathed in various coils. "If you understand electricity, will you please come and look at this?"

"Malcolm's electricity has gone beastly wrong . . . It's a man who's to help Malcolm with the lights . . ."

Routh was hustled across the stage and found himself inspecting a complex piece of amateur wiring. The worried boy was asking him questions. With an immense effort Routh brought his mind to bear on them. "You should do this . . ." he said. "And *that* terminal should take *this* wire . . ." He had an elementary knowledge of what he was talking about, and the boy's fingers worked deftly at his bidding.

A hush had fallen on the stage behind him. Routh drew further back into the skimpy wings. The electrician was muttering in his ear: "I say, you can stay till the end, can't you?"

And Routh nodded. "Yes," he whispered. "I can stay till the end."

The curtains parted, rising as they did so. It was a neat job that had Routh's professional approval. He stayed his hand on the switch beside him just long enough to scan the little audience.

The bearded man, having drawn a blank, was gone.

Apart from Dr. Ourglass, there had been only one guest at High Table at

Bede's. As he had been brought in by the Provost, whose introductions were regularly unintelligible, nobody yet knew who he was.

"Provost, will you sit *here* . . . and place your guest *there*." Elias Birkbeck, who as Steward of common-room had to determine the distribution of the company upon their withdrawing from hall to the privacies of the common-room, peered up from the card upon which he had earlier sketched out the most desirable arrangement. "And, Mark, if you would put Ourglass here on my left, and on your other side . . . now, let me see." At this stage Birkbeck, who was widely known among his fellow-scientists as a man of incisive intellect, fell into a muddle. Nobody was embarrassed except Kolmak, who unfortunately clicked his fingers. This produced a moment's disconcerted silence, in which everybody stared at him, including Birkbeck, who realized that he had forgotten him altogether. However, Birkbeck got the port and madeira into circulation and things settled down.

Ourglass took the opportunity of addressing Birkbeck on the subject of which he was pre-occupied at this time. "Bultitude," he said, "was good enough to suggest a little conference about my nephew, Geoffrey. I am most distressed that he should not have returned to Bede's at the beginning of term. And that he should not have written to your Dean, or to yourself as his tutor, is quite incomprehensible to me."

"A letter may have gone astray in the post," Birkbeck said. "I hope we may hear from him any day with an explanation that the Dean may be able to accept. He's the most promising pupil I've had in years."

Ourglass's dejection was visibly mitigated by this praise. "Bultitude has formed the curious notion that Geoffrey may be writing a play."

Birkbeck considered this carefully. "But," he asked at length, "might not a play be written in Oxford?"

"That is very true." Ourglass was dashed again. "As a matter of fact, Bultitude has an alternative hypothesis. He supposes that Geoffrey may be—um—preoccupied with a woman. Perhaps he will discount that suggestion, however, when he learns that Geoffrey is, in fact, engaged to be married. And

the girl, Geoffrey will have told you, is actually up at Oxford." Ourglass glanced across at the Provost's guest. "And—do you know?—I could almost persuade myself—"

At this moment the Provost, who was generally accounted an amiable man of reserved manners, favored Birkbeck with a ferocious grimace. There was nothing out of the way in this; it was his regular means of intimating that his enjoyment of his colleagues' hospitality had now continued long enough and that he would welcome a removal to the adjoining room for coffee.

"Ah, Ourglass, how are you? I'd hoped Birkbeck would have put us next to each other in there. Now—look—let me introduce my guest. Ourglass, let me introduce Sir John Appleby. John, this is Dr. Ourglass, the young man's uncle."

Sir John Appleby shook hands. "How do you do," he said. "May I say how much I enjoyed your last paper in the *Journal of Ancient Geography*? It appears to put Cambremer's discoveries in quite a new light."

Ourglass bowed, much gratified. "I thought when we sat down in Hall that I recognized a likeness. Am I right in supposing . . . ?"

"Quite right, quite right!" The Provost, who had at all hours of the day a great air of being engaged in the rapid transaction of business, nodded briskly. "Appleby, who is an old pupil of mine, is our young woman's elder brother. And he has come up because she has sent for him. It seems that your nephew's silence is now worrying her very much. And quite properly. It begins to look decidedly queer. But John, of course, will clear the matter up."

Ourglass, while endeavoring to hint civil satisfaction that the brother of his nephew's betrothed was of responsible and presentable appearance, wondered why he should be regarded as having particular qualifications for finding the missing Geoffrey. But this enigma the Provost illuminated at once.

"A policeman, you know. Many of my old pupils have passed into the hands of the police, I believe. But Appleby is the only one who did so in the special sense of *becoming* one. And now he's gone back to the metropolitan people as an Assistant-Commissioner."

"Dear me!" Ourglass, although impressed

by this peculiar career, was somewhat dismayed. "Does that mean what they call Scotland Yard?"

The man called Appleby nodded. He had a pleasant smile, but the nod was unnervingly incisive. It made Ourglass feel as if he were a short and simple communication that had been rapidly run over and snapped into a file for possible future consideration.

"I haven't met your nephew," Appleby said, "and I hope you will tell me something about him. Your view is likely to be a more objective one than my sister's."

"I am as much worried on Jane's behalf as my own. If I may say so, she has stood up to this disconcerting and alarming incident very well. Do I understand, Sir John, that you take a serious view?"

"I have insufficient information upon which to form a view either way. As a mere matter of statistics, there are two chances in five that your nephew has suffered a nervous breakdown with total amnesia, one chance that he is in gaol under an assumed name, one chance that he is concealing a course of conduct that is either illegal or immoral, and one chance that he is dead."

"I had young Ourglass to dinner in his first term," the Provost said. "He didn't seem to me the suicide type—nor any sort of loose fish either."

"Did it strike you that my nephew might want to write a play?"

The Provost ignored this incomprehensible interjection. "Adventurous, I should say—and even perhaps rash. I got the impression that he had done a lot of courting danger in his time, and found difficulty in doing without it. That's a common enough type with us here at present. I had a feeling that he was rather remarkable." The Provost's eyes fell on the elder Ourglass as he spoke, and some fresh aspect of the matter seemed to strike him. "Odd—eh? But that's how he struck me."

Appleby looked from the Provost to Ourglass. "What was that you said about writing a play?"

"It was something put in my head—perhaps without great seriousness of intention—by Bultitude, there. We were taking—um—a stroll together this afternoon. And when I told him that Geoffrey had last been glimpsed in the country—"

"Now that's very important," the Provost briskly remarked. "That's the last thing about this young man of ours that we have to go upon. It appears that a friend of Ourglass's—*this* Ourglass, that is to say" and the Provost thrust a finger without ceremony into Dr. Ourglass's stomach—"saw the young man in a car—"

"In the back of a *large* car," Dr. Ourglass supplemented, "and with several other men—"

"Driving rapidly through some small village called, I think, Milton Porcorum."

"Precisely. If my informant is to be believed, Geoffrey was last seen in Milton Porcorum. And Bultitude suggested—"

"In Milton Porcorum!"

All three men turned round. The interruption came from Kolmak. He had been standing behind them in the somewhat perplexed reception of much affability from Bultitude. But evidently he had been paying more attention to their conversation than was in the circumstances altogether proper, and now he was staring at them in some obscure but violent agitation.

"Someone has disappeared—*nicht wahr?* And in Milton Porcorum?" Kolmak enunciated this last word in a fashion so Teutonic as to add substantially to the bizarre effort of his interposition.

"Well, yes. We were talking—"

But as the Provost, looking mildly surprised, began to frame this civil reply, Kolmak appeared to convince himself that he had behaved with marked impropriety. He flushed and rapidly clicked his fingers. "*Ich bitte mich zu entschuldigen!*" he exclaimed, and bolted from the room.

"Now, that's a most extraordinary thing." The Provost contemplated his vanishing back in some astonishment. "Kolmak is commonly a quiet, retiring sort of creature, very difficult to draw out. I sometimes think that his understanding of English is negligible, and that he puts odd misinterpretations . . ."

"But Kurt is a very good fellow, all the same."

Bultitude advanced, with a tread that made all the coffee cups in the room tinkle.

"Kurt?" The Provost was puzzled. "I

never heard you, my dear Mark, call him that before."

Bultitude looked injured. "Kurt Kolmak and I, Provost, have been on terms of increasing intimacy for some time. A very nice fellow, as I say. I don't know what bit him just now. Of course he had been through a great deal of stress. There was a period when, positively, he had to tighten his belt." Bultitude, as he made this harrowing announcement, accomplished a reassuring exploration of his own waist-line, contriving with an effort that the tips of his fingers should just touch over his watch-chain. "His people were liberals, and at the same time members of the old Hungarian nobility. Indeed Kurt's uncle Nikolaus, as I was about to observe, was the cousin of a very dear friend of mine, the old Gräfin Szegedin. Did you ever know the old lady? I recall her once saying to me . . ."

The Provost of Bede's assumed a resigned expression, and Dr. Ourglass one of polite interest. But Sir John Appleby, less socially complacent, lingered only to give Bultitude a professionally analytical glance. Then, murmuring a word in his host's ear, he slipped from the room.

IV

A COMPLETE alphabetical list of the resident members of the university of Oxford with their addresses is unquestionably the most useful publication of the multifariously active Oxford University Press. This work Sir John Appleby paused to consult in the Bede's porter's lodge; he then emerged into Beaumont Street and proceeded to move northwards at a leisurely pace. It was six minutes after nine o'clock. Abstraction grew upon Appleby as he walked. He was doubtful of the whole enterprise to which he had agreed to lend himself.

He was much attached to his youngest sister—only the more so because of the wide disparity between their ages. And Jane, very understandably, was in great distress over the disappearance of the young man to whom she had recently engaged herself. But Appleby had never met Geoffrey Ourglass, and he had a professional distrust of people who vanish. Follow up the sort of person who disappears and you will seldom come

upon anything either very exciting or very edifying. Frequently you will be performing no kindness to those whom he has disappeared from.

On the other hand—And now Appleby quickened his pace. For it was just possible that he had come upon something of real significance right at the start. It was just possible that this Geoffrey Ourglass was authentically the victim of something other than his own weakness or folly. For Jane's sake Appleby hoped that it might be so. And, after all, he had nowhere come upon any suggestion that the young man was either foolish or weak. These were not characteristics that would attract his sister. Moreover the qualities which the Provost had suspected in the young man had been those of adventuresomeness and rashness. It was perfectly conceivable that these might have led him to press into some situation more hazardous than healthy, and to do this from motives that were wholly reputable. And Appleby thought of a certain graph—one of many graphs in a file that never left his desk in New Scotland Yard. It bore a curve that required explaining. Perhaps he was walking in the direction of an explanation now.

And this must be the place. He had turned down a side-road, passed through a small garden and presented himself before a tall and narrow house of which the arched and carved windows were just visible beneath the night sky. He rang the bell. After rather a long wait a light flicked on above his head, the door opened, and he was confronted by a silver-haired old lady swathed in the faded magnificence of a large Paisley shawl. Appleby took off his hat. "Is Dr. Kolmak at home?" he asked.

The old lady found it necessary to give this question a moment's consideration. "Dr. Kolmak *came in*," she said, "a few minutes ago. But whether he is *at home* it is not, of course, for me to say."

"Ah," said Appleby.

But now the old lady had an inspiration. "The name?" she said interrogatively.

"Sir John Appleby."

"Please come in. These things are a *little* difficult. Lady Bronson finds them *very* difficult. But then *her* tenants are *undergraduates*."

"Ah, yes—a different matter."

"Precisely. Dr. Kolmak—who lives with his aunt—has recently been appointed to a lectureship at Bede's. We hope that he may be elected into a fellowship quite soon. There is *one* step."

Appleby successfully negotiated the step and found a precarious foothold on the excessively slippery tiles of a dim, high hall. It was furnished with a number of impossible chairs designed to turn into suicidal step-ladders, and embellished with large photographic views of the Roman forum.

Appleby was now climbing. "Please don't trouble yourself further," he said. "I'll go straight up." And he mounted, two steps at a time.

On the third landing there was a door apparently enclosing an upper staircase. Appleby knocked, but without result. He opened it and climbed higher. There was another doorway, at which he knocked again and waited. From within he could hear strains of music—a faint and uncanny music. The door opened and he was confronted by a handsome woman, old but very erect, who it was safe to guess must be the aunt of the man he was after.

"Good evening," he said. "Is Dr. Kolmak at home?"

The woman eyed him steadily for a moment without reply. Then she opened the door wider and in a manner that invited him to enter. The music came from an Aeolian harp set in a window.

"My name is Appleby, and I was dining in company with Dr. Kolmak this evening. He left before I had an opportunity to talk with him, which I am very anxious to do."

The woman inclined her head. "My nephew," she said, "is unwell."

"I am very sorry." Appleby's tone was mild and conventional. Then suddenly he rapped out: "You are alone with him here still?"

The unlikely shot went home and the woman's eyes momentarily widened in alarm. But she spoke composedly. "If you will come into my *salotto*," she said, "we will talk together." And she led the way from the tiny landing on which they had been standing into a massively furnished attic room. "Please take place," she said.

Frau Kolmak, like her nephew, appeared

to preserve a good deal of native idiom. Appleby sat down. But his hostess for a moment remained standing. "Are you, too, of the police?" she asked.

"Yes." Appleby was startled, but saw no occasion for prevarication.

"Then, if you will excuse me, I must put on the kettle."

"I beg your pardon?" Appleby supposed either that he had not heard aright or that, this time, Frau Kolmak's English had gone very markedly astray.

"Not on many days has one the pleasure of twice making tea for the English police . . . it is Mr. Appleby?"

"Sir John Appleby."

"Ach! This afternoon it was Detective-Inspector Jones—which sounds much grander, does it not? But you too shall have tea, Sir John."

And Frau Kolmak applied herself to a spirit-lamp. Appleby, unresentful of mockery, watched her composedly. She had considerably more address, he reflected, than her nephew. "You are very kind," he said. "I shall be delighted to have tea."

Frau Kolmak set a kettle on the lamp and turned back to him. "It would be difficult to express to you," she said, "the charm of giving tea to a policeman; the charm—to put it in another way—of being in no expectation of being kicked by him."

"I see." Appleby looked at his hostess soberly.

"The officer who came this *Nachmittag* had a routine task. Unlike my nephew, I am legally of Hungarian nationality. It makes, at present, some difference in the formalities. But you, I judge, have nothing to do with that. You, who are of *die bessern Stände*, have come to control the police from the army, *nicht wahr?*"

"Oh, dear me, no." Appleby was rather indignant. "I joined the police as quite a young man, and right at the bottom."

"That is most interesting." For the first time Frau Kolmak looked faintly puzzled. Her urbanity, however, remained unflawed. It was, Appleby judged, too unflawed altogether. Frau Kolmak was really under considerable strain. Nevertheless her hands, as they busied themselves assembling what was evidently her formal tea-equipage, were perfectly steady. And presently she spoke again.

"Kurt talks very well—when his shyness is overcome, that is to say. So I am not surprised at your seeking his conversation."

"I want your nephew's help in an investigation—a police investigation, in point of fact, although my own interest in it is personal and not official. It is a question of somebody's having disappeared."

"*Guten Abend, mein Herr.*"

Appleby turned around. Kolmak was standing in the doorway—pale, and agitated to the point of being unconscious that he had spoken in German. Appleby put down his tea-cup and rose. "Good evening, sir. I think you will recognize me, although we were not actually introduced."

"Sir John Appleby." Frau Kolmak had folded her hands in her lap and was looking at them. "He has come to speak to you, Kurt, about somebody who has disappeared."

Kolmak bowed stiffly. "I am afraid I can be of no assistance to you, sir, on that score. There must be a mistake."

"That is perfectly possible, and if it is so I shall owe you, and Frau Kolmak, an apology." Appleby judged it tactful to do a little bowing himself. "Nevertheless I hope you will allow me to explain myself."

Frau Kolmak's eyes traveled from her lap to her nephew's face, and thence to a chair. Kolmak sat down. "I cannot well do otherwise," he said coldly, "to a guest of our Provost's. Please to proceed."

"I think you overheard something of this matter in commonroom just before leaving it—and although it concerns somebody at Bede's I believe that it was news to you. Very briefly, a young man called Geoffrey Ourglass, who ought to be up at Oxford now, has vanished. He is, as it happens, engaged to be married to my sister Jane, who is an undergraduate at Somerville. My own concern with the situation is solely on account of this connection."

Kolmak again bowed frigidly. "We express our regrets," he said. "Our sympathy is extended to your sister."

Frau Kolmak slightly flushed. "Kurt," she said drily, "you seem quite to have guessed that Sir John is connected with the police."

"The police!" Kolmak appeared not, in fact, to have guessed the fact, for he now sat up very straight in his chair.

"Please remember that his colleagues have always been friendly to us as well as courteous."

"Tante Lise, you do not understand the danger—"

"I have understood many dangers, Kurt, *liebling*, for now a long time. I shall say nothing more, but my advice to you is as it has been."

During this enigmatical interchange Appleby conveniently occupied himself with his tea. Now he tried again.

"Dr. Kolmak, I must be quite frank, and come to my reason for calling on you. This evening you heard the story. Or rather you heard the fact of somebody's disappearance associated with the name of this village—Milton Porcorum. You at once evinced sharper interest and marked agitation. You were so aware, indeed, of having betrayed a peculiarity of behavior that you abruptly left the commonroom, and hurried home, feeling ill. Please understand that I should be altogether lacking in my duty to my sister and to this young man—who may well be in some situation of great danger—if I failed to make the most earnest attempt to persuade you to an explanation."

There was a long silence. Then Kolmak looked up abruptly. "It is your sister's lover," he said, "—her *Verlobter*—who has disappeared?"

"It is, indeed."

Kolmak passed a hand wearily over his forehead. "If you were but a private gentleman!" he exclaimed.

"If you have something to reveal, you ought to reveal it."

"Come back—come back tomorrow morning." Kolmak appeared to be swaying uncertainly on his feet.

"Tomorrow may b—" Appleby checked himself. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen Frau Kolmak make him an almost imperceptible sign. "Very well. I will call immediately after breakfast—say at nine o'clock. And, meantime, thank you for listening to me." Appleby moved to the door and from there bowed to his hostess. "And thank you, very much, for entertaining your second policeman to tea."

North Oxford was already sinking into slumber. Appleby walked through the quiet streets lost in thought. The disap-

pearance of Geoffrey Ourglass was linked—tenuously, it was true—with in unimportant place owning the picturesque name of Milton Porcorum. What had interested and agitated Kolmak was not the disappearance of Ourglass, but the linking together of the concept of *disappearance* and the name of *Milton Porcorum*. It was not necessary to stare at this fact for very long before forming a hypothesis. Only the most slender observation, it was true, lay behind it. Still, it was worth holding on to and testing out. *When people disappear, one hears talk of Milton Porcorum.*

Beguiled by this odd proposition, Appleby turned a corner. Why Milton Porcorum? It was a place without significance or marked attraction, offering no unusual facilities for either a life of anonymous beneficence or a period of covert vice. From the insignificance of Milton Porcorum could there be inferred—hazardously indeed but perhaps crucially—another conclusion? *Persons whose disappearance is associated with Milton Porcorum have not been attracted into the void. They have been pushed.*

Appleby had arrived so far in this decidedly uncertain ratiocinative process when his attention was abruptly recalled to the outer world. He was making his way back to the centre of Oxford by certain quiet roads which were familiar to him, and for some little way he had passed nobody except a single elderly man belatedly exercising a small dog on a lead. But now another figure was approaching him—or rather had faltered in doing so and was rapidly disappearing up a side-road a little way ahead.

That falter was well known to Appleby. He had encountered it often enough during the couple of years he had spent with a helmet and a bull's-eye lantern long ago. Instinctively he quickened his pace and turned the corner. Only a little *cul-de-sac* presented itself.

And in this, dimly visible beneath a single lamp, a meagre and apprehensive man stood at bay.

Appleby was amused. It had never occurred to him that he might still give to a practiced criminal eye the appearance of a plainclothes officer on duty. At a guess, the man was a known burglar, with tools for breaking and entering now on his person,

and in thinking to give Appleby a wide berth had taken this unlucky cast down a blind alley.

But at the same time Appleby was puzzled. If he carried his tools with him, the fellow ought not yet to be abroad. The night was still too young by far. Appleby took another look at him, and became aware at once that the man was not merely scared or nervous; he was in great and naked terror.

Appleby saw that the man was now endeavoring to scale a wholly impossible brick wall. He watched him for some moments until the man fell back panting and exhausted; then he spoke quietly down the length of the *cul-de-sac*.

"I'm not your enemy. Try to think. You are unarmed and helpless. If I want you, I've got you."

The man had turned and was standing immobile, his arms spread-eagled against the wall. He was one, Appleby fleetingly thought, who had unconsciously a sense of style, an actor's instinct. It would make an effective shot.

"There would be no sense in my standing talking like this until, perhaps, the police came along and I had to clear out. So you can see you're in no danger with me."

The man straightened himself.

"You're one of them." His voice was at once high and hoarse. "You're one of them."

"Nonsense." Appleby got out a pipe and proceeded to fill it.

"Where are you trying to get to?"

The man hesitated. "Into Oxford. But I lost my way. I want to get into a crowd."

"Come along, then—we'll go together."

The man didn't move.

"You're in a trap there, if this *is* a trap; and you can't make matters worse by coming out. Look, I'm crossing over to the other side of the road. You can come up here and see that there's nobody else about. And then we can get you where you think it's healthy."

Appleby suited his action to his words. The road was still quite empty. And presently the meagre man cautiously emerged into it. He looked about him warily but dully, and then crossed over. "I wouldn't have believed that the old professor was one," he said. "But he was."

Appleby realized that the man beside him was played out in both mind and body.

Perhaps he needed food. And certainly he needed sleep. "If we go by Walton Street," he said, "we can get a cup of coffee still at a place quite near this end."

The meagre man was glancing swiftly from side to side as he walked, like a creature moving through the jungle. "Who are you, anyway?" he said. "Nobody asked you to come interfering with me."

"Well, we do sometimes get what we don't ask for."

A car went by, close to the curb, as Appleby spoke. And the meagre man's whole body quivered.

"The law should get them." Suddenly the meagre man's voice sharpened. "What are you, anyway? That's what I ask. Are you the police?"

"Yes—I *am* the police."

What might have been either a curse or a sob broke from the meagre man. He stumbled—lifting a knee queerly, as if he had made a wholly futile attempt to run.

"Here you are. Hot coffee, and a sandwich if you want it." And Appleby steered his captive—if he was that—to a table in the small café he had had in mind. "Your head will feel clearer, you know, when you've had that."

The meagre man took the coffee in two trembling hands, stirred, and drank. A couple of mouthfuls appeared to give him sufficient strength to take matters up where he had left them. "I never had anything to do with the police," he said. "They've no call to come after me."

"They haven't—not so far as I know." Appleby put down his pipe and produced a packet of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

The meagre man reached forward and took a cigarette as an addict might snatch an offered drug. "Thanks," he said. It was a word the enunciation of which appeared to afford him peculiar difficulty.

Appleby faintly smiled. With this customer he was on familiar ground enough. A little twister who could put up a genteel show among the simple, and get away with a pound note on the strength of one plausible tale or another.

"No," said Appleby, "I don't suppose the police have any call to come after you. But perhaps you have a call to go after them."

The meagre man looked up quickly. "I

don't know what you mean," he said.

"I rather think you do. The only way out of some tough spots is through the police station. It's a bit bleak. But it's as safe as Buckingham Palace."

The meagre man's head was nodding. "You're a devil," he whispered, "a clever devil." With an effort he looked straight at Appleby, raised his cup and drained it, let it clatter back into the saucer.

"We'd better go now, Mr.—?"

"Routh."

Appleby looked at his companion curiously. He was certainly pretty well through; he had handed over his name as if drugged. It was the moment for a shot that was wholly in the dark. "Routh," he asked sharply, "when were you last in Milton Porcorum?"

It was a hit. The man calling himself Routh uttered a strangled cry and made a futile effort to get to his feet. "You *do* belong to them," he whispered. "You must. You know."

"I am a policeman. I know a good deal, but I am a policeman, all the same." Appleby's voice, low, slow and clear, was like a hypnotist's addressing a man in trance. "But you are safe with the police. Safe. We'll go to the police station and you can tell me just as much as you want to. Or they'll give you a bed. A bed where the biggest gang of crooks in England couldn't get at you. Come along."

And Appleby got Routh to his feet and out of the café. It was like handling a drunk. The night air was chilly but the man scarcely revived in it; his feet scraped and stumbled on the pavement; his head turned from side to side blindly in an empty convention of vigilance.

It was a considerable distance to police headquarters in St. Aldate's, and Appleby remembered that there would still be cabs in the rank in St. Giles'. He turned left down a side-street. "Come along," he said encouragingly. "We'll cut down here and get a taxi."

Routh hesitated. "It's dark," he whispered. "And lonely. I don't like it. They may be waiting in it."

The little street was certainly deserted and poorly lighted. Appleby took a side glance at the dim silhouette of his companion, wondering what queer adventure had re-

duced him to this state. "I don't think we need worry about that," he said. "We're in Oxford, you know; not Cairo or Casablanca."

He took Routh's arm and gently impelled him forward. The man moved on beside him, unsteadily, but without resistance. Appleby felt satisfied. This was an odd and unexpected evening's work. But he had an instinct that it was getting him somewhere, and that he had at least a fringe of his problem under control.

At this moment Routh gave a weak cry, and for a fraction of a second Appleby was aware of himself as surrounded by figures that had sprung up apparently from nowhere. Then something was thrown over his face, and his head swam. He heard the engine of a car coming up the deserted street behind him. He smelt what he recognized as chloroform. He was fleetingly aware of having made a mistake—some ridiculous mistake. And then consciousness deserted him.

Like Pericles in the play, Appleby came to his senses to the sound of music. For what appeared an infinity of time it was a music of obscurely sinister suggestion. It set a problem with which his mind seemed to wrestle down long corridors. It reminded him of some careless and fatal error.

Memory stirred abruptly in Appleby. He opened his eyes upon a small room into which daylight was filtering through a light-colored blind. He was on a bed, partly undressed, and warm beneath a feather covering. Frau Kolmak was standing beside him with a coffee-pot. And from just outside came the low music of the Aeolian harp.

"Good morning, Sir John. I believe you are none the worse of your adventure—no?" Frau Kolmak set down the coffee, turned to the window, raised the blind, and appeared to take an appraising glance at the roofs of North Oxford. "Kurt will be here *augenblicklich*—in a moment. He is shaving. The possession of a bathroom is a great satisfaction to him."

Appleby sat up. "Does your nephew commonly go about the streets at night, chloroforming people?"

Frau Kolmak laughed. "You are confused. He will explain." Frau Kolmak lowered her voice. "There are matters of which I hope

that he will speak to you." She glided from the room.

Appleby sat up and drank the coffee. It seemed to him extremely good. But it always does, he reflected lucidly, when provided by persons with continental associations. Preponderantly, it must be a matter of suggestion.

He looked up and saw Kolmak standing before him.

"Good morning," Kolmak said. "I hope, Sir John, that you are not too badly shaken—"

"I'm not shaken at all. Where is Routh?"

"Your companion of last night? He is in the little room"—Kolmak made a gesture indicating some far corner of his domain—"and still asleep. I had not realized that he was your colleague."

"My colleague?" Appleby stared, and then—a little painfully—smiled. "Well, we'll talk about that presently. Will you tell me first how we got back here?"

"With the man you call Routh there was no difficulty. He is of slight build. I got him upstairs myself. But you, Sir John, presented a more serious problem." Kolmak paused and clicked his fingers. He appeared confused.

"Quite so. But do I understand that you really managed to haul me up all those stairs while unconscious? It's unbelievable."

"The difficulty was not insuperable. My aunt helped. And the Misses Tinker, too."

"God bless me!" Appleby drained his coffee and swung himself off the bed. "Didn't they think it a little out of the way?"

Kolmak nodded with some solemnity. "I ventured to suggest to them that matters of state security were involved. They will be models of discretion."

"I congratulate you." Appleby looked at his host in some astonishment. "If you feel at all like it, I should welcome an explanation."

"By all means. When you left us last night I was agitated, I was uneasy. The thought of your sister's anxiety was very distressing to me. There are reasons why I should feel for her. After only a little hesitation I followed you downstairs, meaning to invite you back, or perhaps to have some conversation with you on your walk to

Bede's. But one of the Misses Tinker held me in talk and by the time that I got out of the house you were some way ahead. I hesitated, and followed you irresolutely for some way. Then you disappeared down the *Sackgasse*—how do you say it?"

"The cul-de-sac."

"*Aber!* I waited and heard voices. I was nervous—unaccountably nervous—and I concealed myself. When you appeared again it was with this man. For a second I saw him clearly under the street-lamp. It was a shock to me. You must understand—" Kolmak hesitated.

"That you had had certain dealings with Routh already?"

"*Ja—wahrhaftig!* I was startled that you should be associated with him. But when you came out I followed you again. It was thus that I was near by when the attack was launched upon you."

Appleby smiled. "It seems fortunate that they didn't chloroform you, too."

"I was much disposed to sail in." Kolmak paused, apparently pleased with his command of this English idiom. "But there were four or five of them, and it seemed unlikely that I could improve matters. It was very well timed, and they had you both in the van in an instant. No sooner had they done so, however, than there was the sound of a car approaching from the far end of the street. At once they scattered, and the van drove off. What approached was a taxi—and empty. I jumped in and said 'Follow that van.'"

"It was most resourceful of you, Dr. Kolmak."

"The man did so—without hesitation! We drove some way—I think it must have been down Little Clarendon Street—and were presently in St. Giles'. I had a further thought. I said 'Pass it before we reach Carfax.' He was a most understanding man. He ignored the traffic lights at Broad Street and was well ahead as we approached the cross-road. I called to him to stop, thrust a note into his hand, and jumped out. My hope was that the lights at Carfax would be against the van. And they were! I was waiting as it drew up. I stepped into the road. There was nobody but the driver, and the window on his near side was open. I thrust in an arm, switched off the engine,

and withdrew the key. He was immobilized."

Appleby laughed. "I am tempted to say that you have missed your true vocation."

"There was a constable, as there commonly is, on the farther curb. But I was uncertain of the wisdom of inviting official intervention. I therefore said to the driver 'Get out and go away; otherwise I will summon the constable.' He obeyed, for plainly he had no choice in the matter. I at once took his place, put back the key in the ignition, and drove on. The constable may have thought that the engine had failed—what is the word?"

"Stalled."

"Thank you—stalled. But he was aware of nothing further. I took the route by Pembroke Street and St. Ebbe's, and drove home."

"You still have the van?"

"No. When I had broken into it at the back, and the two of you were safely here stowed in the flat, it occurred to me that the van might well betray your whereabouts, supposing that those people were prowling the streets again. So I drove it to the car park near Gloucester Green and left it there."

"You are sure that you are quite all right?"

Frau Kolmak had entered the room in some precipitation. "But he is gone—"

Kurt Kolmak sat down on the bed and threw up his hands in despair. "That I should not have thought to keep watch!"

"You mean that Routh has gone?" Appleby spoke sharply. "They have got him?"

Frau Kolmak shook her head. "He has gone—but freely. Nobody could have come to him. Our door was secured inside, and so was the house-door below. He too, after his adventure, slept through the night. An hour ago I took him coffee. Then, only a little after, I heard sounds of a door closing. *Leider*, I did not think! It must have been this man stealing out."

"Then, for the moment, we have lost him." Appleby smiled. "He must have managed it uncommonly quietly to escape the conversation of the ladies below. Have you a telephone?"

"It is a thing impossible to obtain. But the Misses Tinker—"

"Then I think I will go down and beg the use of it. Routh must be found. So must that van. And one or two other things must be investigated as well. Then, Dr. Kolmak, if I might borrow your bathroom and a razor—"

Kolmak beamed. "But certainly! You will find the bathroom, for a household of this modest character, exceptionally well appointed."

Appleby hurried out. The Aeolian harp was playing softly on the little landing. Through the open window it pointed at the Radcliffe Observatory on the sky-line, as if its operation depended on perpetual cupfuls of air tossed to it by the whirling anemometer.

THE Misses Tinker were below, crowned with mob-caps and equipped with feather-dusters. Appleby much doubted whether their discretion would be long proof against the charm of retailing to Lady Bronson and their other North Oxford acquaintance of the same kidney the sensational events that had lately transacted themselves beneath their roof. By the time that his telephone calls were made and his shaving in the Kolmak bathroom accomplished, Frau Kolmak had provided in her *salotto* a breakfast for one, impeccably presented after the most orthodox English fashion. Appleby sat down to it very willingly.

"Kurt has a communication to make to you." Frau Kolmak spoke with a trace of nervousness, as if she could not be quite sure of her nephew's communicativeness until he was launched upon it. "But I know that at breakfast the English have the custom of reading the *Times*. It is at your elbow, Sir John; and if we might perhaps leave you—"

"Decidedly not." Appleby was emphatic. "Quite soon I must go out and see my sister, and get going on a number of other things as well. It is most desirable that we should have this talk at once."

"Then I will explain to you." Abruptly Kolmak sat down at the opposite side of the table. "My aunt has a daughter. Or rather—" He hesitated. "How the English flies out when a little emotion, a little distress, comes in! This daughter, this Anna,

verstehen Sie, is ein angenommenes Kind—"

"I understand. An adopted child."

"*Also!* Anna is a highly educated woman—an *Arztin*, skilled in the treatment of children."

"A doctor—a children's specialist."

"*Ja doch!* And she has herself a child—a fine boy of five."

"She is a widow?"

Kolmak hesitated. "In fact and law, no. But, morally, yes. Anna's husband has left her. He too is a doctor, and he long practised in Breslau—a city to which some ridiculous new name has lately been given. Now, he is in Leningrad, directing some medical research. Anna, with her child, was stranded. We strove that they might come here. But there were difficulties."

"Anna is legally this Russian doctor's wife?"

"Yes."

"I see." Appleby had a long and saddened familiarity with tangles of this sort—the private aftermath of Europe's public follies. "Then there might certainly be difficulties, as you say."

Kolmak nodded gloomily. "And then the matter was taken out of our hands. You must understand that Anna was very anxious indeed to come to England."

"She had some compelling reason?"

"But naturally." It was Frau Kolmak who answered this, and in some haste. "I had brought her up. She wished that she and the child might be with me here."

Kolmak straightened himself in his chair. "There was a further reason. We are deeply in love."

"It seems a very good reason." Appleby looked gravely at the man sitting stiffly before him. "And then something decisive happened?"

"Anna came."

"She managed to get into England in some irregular way?"

"She did. She was impatient—and she is resolute and able."

"And the child?"

"She brought the child, too."

Appleby smiled. "I think," he said drily, "that Anna must be decidedly able. And then?"

"She was in London. We were much distressed. We hoped that permission might

yet be gained, and that she could come to us here. But there seemed no way to begin. It was a *Stillstand*—an impasse."

"Matters certainly weren't improved."

"It was decided that she must leave the country as she had come, and that we must begin again. But it would be yet some weeks before that could be arranged. Anna, who knows English well, decided to go into the country. There were difficulties, you understand, about remaining in one place. So she bought a bicycle, with a little seat for the child, and with a rucksack she set off. She passed through Oxford, going west, and almost every day we had a letter. But the letters stopped. For a time we were not alarmed. A week passed, and we worried. But I had no means of making enquiries. Then, one day, I received this."

Kolmak produced a pocket-book and from it drew something which he placed before Appleby. It was a plain postcard. On one side, written in a clear, foreign hand, was Kolmak's name and address.

On the other, in the same hand, was the message:

Both unharmed. Do nothing. A.

For a moment Appleby studied this in silence. "When did it come?" he asked at length.

"Three weeks ago to-day. And it was dispatched, you will see from the postmark, in the little place called Milton Porcorum."

"Does Anna usually write in English?"

"No. But on a postcard she must have thought that it would be less noticeable."

"Her English, you say, is good? It is good enough for her not to write 'unharmed' when she meant, simply, 'well'?"

"Assuredly."

"You are quite sure that it is in her hand?"

"Both my aunt and I are certain of it."

"How did you disobey this injunction? You didn't go to the police?"

"Certainly not. I was assuredly not entitled to do anything of the sort. But I went down to Milton Porcorum. It proved to be a small village with nothing remarkable about it. I felt that I must not so far disregard Anna's message as to go about asking questions. So I learnt nothing. In the afternoon I sought for aerodromes near by.

The idea had come to me that Anna might have found at such a place a friend willing to fly her straight out of the country. But I was wasting my time, and I knew it. Anna's message did not—did not cohere with such a thing."

Appleby nodded gravely. "I agree with you."

"So I returned to Oxford. Then evil thoughts came to me. It is painful to speak of them. Tante Lise, you must explain."

Frau Kolmak had been sitting quite still by her piano. But now she turned to the two men. "Kurt thought that Anna might be saying goodbye to us—that she might be shaking us off. He was ill with the strain of this anxiety, Sir John, and these ideas visited him. Some offer of security and affluence made by a powerful man—a protector, you understand?—had tempted her." Frau Kolmak gently smiled. "This was a most foolish notion, for my daughter is a very honest woman. It was a brief sickness of Kurt's, however, which we must mention, since it serves to explain how he came to make his discovery."

"His discovery?" Appleby swung around on Kolmak. "You *know* something?"

"Indeed I do. For a time I was almost mad, and I went back several times with my field-glasses like some unhappy man constrained to spy upon the privacy of others. And one house in particular tormented me, since it lies in the greatest seclusion. I came upon it, in the first instance, early in my search, since it is quite close to the village itself. It is, in fact, the historical manor house of both Milton Porcorum and Milton Canonicorum. There is a park surrounded by a high wall; and plantations and the lie of the ground make the house and all that lies near it virtually invisible from any public road. But my concentration was such that I found one spot—a small hillock to the west—from which I could just bring into focus the corner of a formal garden. I studied it intently for a long time—There were small animals moving in it. They might have been rabbits or hares. And a child was feeding them. It was Anna's child."

Appleby drew a long breath. "You are sure of that?"

"I am certain of it."

"Did you take any action as a result of this discovery?"

"First, I should say that I was for a time a little easier in my mind. Is not this a strange thing, now? The mere sight of the little boy through my field-glasses destroyed at once the bad thoughts which I had been nursing about Anna. And they have not come back to me. But I was, of course, anxious still. It came to me that Anna might have left Rudi in this place—perhaps some sort of children's home—the better to carry out some plan of her own. She is devoted to the child. But at the same time she is a woman of intellectual interests, deeply concerned by the world's political and social problems. When this possibility came to me I made enquiries about Milton Manor. It is not for children but for adults—a large, private sanatorium—"

"There are yet two matters of which Kurt has to tell." Frau Kolmak was sitting at her piano rather as if she proposed to provide a musical *coda* to these final revelations when they came. "First, there is his adventure with the guest who has just left us."

Appleby nodded and turned to Kurt Kolmak. "You are aware of some connection of Routh's with this place near Milton Porcorum?"

"*Wahrscheinlich!* But it is only from yesterday that this small piece of knowledge dates. Early yesterday morning I set out again on a further spying. I walked all around the park. The circuit was almost completed when I saw the *so genannte* Routh approaching down a lane. He was staggering slightly, as if drunk or ill. There appeared to be blood on his face. I was very wary. It was not my wish to be seen by anybody at all at this prowling and spying. There was still Anna's injunction. Therefore I slipped behind a hedge and through my glasses studied this man. He turned along the road bounding this mysterious estate with which we are concerned. And then, as my glasses followed him, another figure came into view—one who had just appeared, it seemed, through a small door in the high wall of which I have spoken. I was excited. It was the first time that I had seen anybody appear from the place. And this figure—a man with high shoulders and of some presence—had an air of authority."

His clothing was rural but elegant. He might have been the *Landjunker*."

"The Squire?"

"Also! We ourselves employ the word. This man remained standing by his small door until Routh went by. No gesture, I believe, passed between them. But then he called Routh back. Routh appeared to hesitate, and then retraced his steps. The two engaged in conversation. It was my impression that there was some sort of dispute. And then I was interrupted. I had climbed a gate, you understand, and was in a field, crouched behind the hedge through which I was peering with my binoculars. Suddenly there was a farm-laborer in the field behind me, calling out to demand what I was doing."

Kolmak paused, slightly flushed, and clicked his fingers. "I see now my situation as comical. But at the moment I was humiliated and confused. I got up and ran away."

"*Eine dumme Geschichte!*" Frau Kolmak laughed softly. "But there is more of it to tell."

"I spent the rest of the day tramping that countryside and endeavoring to wrestle with the problem. It thus came about that I returned to Oxford by a circuitous route, changing buses eventually at Abingdon. Imagine my surprise when I saw, getting off the same but at Gloucester Green, the man whom I had last seen in conversation with the owner, as it might be, of Milton. There was, of course, no mistaking him. This was the man whose face had been bleeding, the scratches were still visible on his face. I determined to track him to his destination. If I knew where he lived, then I might be able to take thought and find some means of gaining valuable information from him."

"I see." Appleby, who had finished his breakfast, was listening intently to this recital. "You started to trail Routh. Did he seem scared?"

Kolmak considered. "But yes! As soon as he got off the bus he made his way to one point and another about Gloucester Green—and always looking uneasily about him. This, I am sure, was before he ever set eyes on me. Presently he went into a small hotel. I waited. He was there long enough, I should say, to get a meal. When he came out, our eyes met. Very foolishly, I had

waited directly in front of the place. I know that instantly he suspected me of spying on him. He proceeded at once to put the matter to the test. My following of him was very clumsy and obvious. And quite soon he got away from me, boarding a bus that I was unable to catch."

"A bus coming out to North Oxford?"

"It was a Number 2. And here was an end of my playing the detective—the secret agent! Only how surprised I was, on going out to call you back last night, to find you conversing with this man."

"I should much like to converse with him again. But there is still something further you have to tell me?"

"Yes." Kolmak's face took on an expression more anxious than any it had yet worn. "There has been another message from Anna. It, too, has arrived by post—this morning, while you were still asleep. You have it, Tante Lise?"

Frau Kolmak nodded, and rose from beside the piano. There was something in her movement that betrayed the fatigue of long anxiety and Appleby saw that she was an older woman than he had supposed.

"Here it is, Kurt. I fear it occupied my thought to the exclusion of other matters. Had it not been so, Herr Routh would not have slipped away from us so easily."

Appleby was looking at a slim piece of cardboard, about four inches by three. Medially on one of the longer sides, and near the edge, there was punched a small circular hole. "It's clearly meant for use in a card-index. Addressed in the same way as the first, and posted in Milton Porcorum in time for the 4:15 p.m. sorting yesterday." He turned the card over and read:

*Do not be hurt that I do not write.
I am not a free agent, and there is
danger in the attempt. Today or
soon there is a crisis. Do nothing.
But be by your telephone every
day from 10 to 11 a.m.*

A.

JANE Appleby left Somerville College at nine-fifty, thus missing her brother by five minutes. It was her intention to proceed to the Examination Schools and there hear a lecture by the Stockton and Darlington

Professor. In spite of her engagement to Geoffrey Ourglass, or perhaps because of it, Jane had now been, for more than a year, in general sequacious only of the more severe intellectual pleasures. This particular weekly occasion she invariably found wholly delectable. For many of her fellows it was an hour of furious activity—and indeed it has been calculated that more young women are constrained to buy fresh notebooks after the discourses of the Stockton and Darlington Professor than after any other learned occasion whatsoever. Jane, however, was accustomed to sit in a still repose throughout. The substance of what the Professor had to say had, in point of fact, been bequeathed to her by an aunt who attended the lectures in 1925; and Jane was thus in the fortunate position of being able to sit as in a theatre and enjoy the finer points of the performance, without anxious thoughts of the likely bearing of such inactivity upon her examination prospects.

But now that Geoffrey's fate—or could it be behavior?—had got her down. Jane found herself, week by week, taking less and less delight in this particular facet of the pursuit of knowledge. It thus came about that Jane decided not to hear the Stockton and Darlington Professor after all. She would make her way to the upper reading room of the Bodleian Library, where there happened to be reserved for her a work of very sufficient intellectual difficulty. She would wrestle with this until noon and then hunt up her brother.

To this resolution Jane had come when she saw that somebody was waving an umbrella at her from the corner of Beaumont Street. It was Geoffrey's uncle, Dr. Ourglass. She signalled her intention of joining him when she could, and presently threaded her way at some hazard across the street.

"My dear, I am very pleased to see you, and I was delighted to meet your brother yesterday evening. I was dining in Bede's as the guest of Mr. Bultitude, whom I am glad to be able to introduce to you."

It had been Jane's hurried impression as she dodged the traffic, that Dr. Ourglass was standing beside a large barrel awaiting delivery to the Bede's buttery. She now realized that she had been in error. The

barrel was bowing to her with gravity. It was, in fact, the celebrated Mark Bultitude. "How do you do," he said. "I am afraid we divert you."

As Jane had been aware of an element of the ludicrous in the appearance of the gentlemen before her, she found this ambiguity disconcerting. "Oh, no," she said hastily, "I wasn't going anywhere important; only to the Bodleian."

Mark Bultitude directed a faint smile upon Dr. Ourglass, as if calling upon him to remark the delightful fatuity of the young. "In that case," he said, "we can make this small claim upon your time with a clear conscience."

Jane, like most people of her age—and even a few quite mature ones—disliked detecting herself saying something silly. "It's not time wasted at all," she said. "One ought to meet the really interesting people." She contrived to let her eyes rest, rounded in admiration, upon Bultitude.

Dr. Ourglass thought it well to change the subject. "It appears," he said carefully, "that Mr. Bultitude is acquainted with a number of Geoffreys—and my—distant relations; and he has become interested in this distressing thing that has happened. He is very anxious to help. He even suggests that he and I make an expedition."

Jane received this communication with mixed feelings. She liked old Dr. Ourglass, although she had no high opinion of his practical acumen. And she was spontaneously and instantly grateful to anybody—even this terrible great fat *poseur*—who expressed concern and a willingness to help in the horrible matter of Geoffrey's inexplicable and now long-continued disappearance. "Thank you," she said. "I am quite desperate, you know. Geoffrey simply *must* be found. He may be terribly ill—so ill that he doesn't even know his own identity."

Bultitude nodded soberly. "An able and well-connected young man," he said. "With everything before him here at Bede's—and a further tie of which I am now very well able to estimate the force."

Jane felt that the conversation in which she had become involved was somewhat lacking in direction. Dr. Ourglass appeared to have the same feeling, and again changed

the subject with unusual abruptness. "Jane," he asked, "has Geoffrey ever shown any disposition to *write*—for example, a play?"

"I never heard him speak of such a thing," Jane was puzzled. "Geoffrey is simply a straight-out, tip-top scientist. And they don't usually write plays. Of course Geoffrey is fond of acting, but that's a different matter. Why do you ask?"

"Mr. Bultitude had a notion that a long-continued retirement and—um—neglect of one's friends is sometimes to be accounted for by absorption in a literary task."

"I see." Jane thought this decidedly a poor idea. Nor did Bultitude seem pleased at its being aired again. Perhaps Dr. Ourglass was innocently laboring something that had really been one of his companion's obscure jokes. Anyway, she was not going to stand any longer at a street-corner gossiping like this. "I think," she said, "I'd better go off and do some work."

By this time Jane had turned her bicycle. A momentary break in the stream of traffic could be made the civil occasion, she felt, of a tolerably brisk farewell to her interlocutors. "Sorry," she said suddenly. "Here's my chance." And at that she darted away.

THE reading room appeared to be less frequented than was common at this hour. Nobody occupied the desk where Jane's book was waiting, and she settled down to it at once.

But, this morning, Jane's mind proved reluctant to plunge at all—reluctant even to wet its toes. Surface awareness turned out to be her sole stock-in-trade. She buried her nose in her book—which was a very big one—and peeped guiltily over its upper margin at the world about her.

Jane felt a sudden chill. It was a feeling none the less horrid for being familiar—for being a sensation that gripped her whenever chance brought any occasion of danger into her head.

Without her being at all aware of what it was, something in the actual and present world around her had plucked at her attention. It was not—deplorably—the printed page before her. It was not the neighbor on her right: a grey-haired woman copying from a book the size of a postage-stamp—baiting Geoffrey, Jane thought, myself forty

years on. Nor was it that picturesque Oxford figure, old Dr. Undertone, on her left. For Dr. Undertone, surrounded by eighteenth-century theology, had sunk, with closed eyes, into that species of profound cerebration, to a vulgar regard deceptively like simple slumber, which is not unfrequently to be observed in the upper reading room. It was neither of these people. It was a man with a scratched face.

He was still only on the threshold of the room. Subconsciously, she must have become aware of him the instant his pale—his curiously haunted or hunted—face appeared at the door. But, if Jane saw him, nobody else appeared to do so.

The man was completely at sea about the sort of place he had landed in. An unsensational explanation of his appearance would be simply that he had taken a wrong turning when searching for the picture-gallery. But he had not the air of a man concerned to read old books, neither did he very convincingly suggest any interest in old portraits. He was looking neither for knowledge nor for aesthetic delectation. He was looking for refuge.

For a minute or so the fugitive stood. In this there was nothing that was likely to call attention to him. The walls between the square Tudor windows are lined with books and bound journals supposed to be in common use, and before these, scholars will stand for hours on end, either running through the pages of one and another volume or simply studying their spines with an air of profound research. The man plainly hesitated to take a book from the shelf, but he contrived to let his eye run over several rows as if in search of some specific work.

Several people wandered in, and Jane believed that she could see the fugitive quiver each time. The emmet-like conveyor belt behind the scenes emitted one of its faint clankings, and the man gave a sort of jump as he stood. Nevertheless, he was demonstrably getting the hang of the place. He had now boldly taken a volume from the shelf, opened it, and turned around so that he could survey the room over the top of it—a technique, in fact, closely approximating to Jane's own.

At this moment somebody else entered.

the room. He was a man with high, square shoulders, and his appearance was eminently orthodox, even donnish. His features held the mingled stamp of intelligence, authority and mild inquiry. His clothing was so quiet as to lend positive assertiveness to an extremely faded Harrovian tie.

The man with the scratched face had been scanning the readers with some particularity. And now the entry of the doonish person, from whom he was momentarily concealed, seemed to touch off in him a spring of activity. His eye had been on Jane. He thrust the book he had been holding back on the shelf and came straight towards her.

Jane experienced a second's ridiculous panic. There came to her an intuitive understanding of what the fugitive was about. He was going to direct at her some urgent appeal. Nothing could be more irrational. But the man had reached a breaking-point at which only instinctive responses were left to him.

And then he faltered. Jane wondered, with a quick compunction, whether she had shown herself overtly hostile to his approach. However this might be, the man halted not beside her desk but besides Dr. Undertone's. He had been feeling in a pocket. Jane saw that he now held a paper in his hand.

The donnish person was scanning the room. If it was the man with the scratched face that he was seeking, he had not yet located him. And now the man was leaning over Dr. Undertone's desk. Dr. Undertone took no notice. Since his eyes were still closed in meditation, and since he was ninety-six, there was nothing surprising in that.

The man with the scratched face thrust the paper he was carrying into one of Dr. Undertone's books and walked straight on across the room.

IT was, as the vulgar say, a new one on Jane Appleby. And before she could decide what action, if any, was required, her attention was riveted upon the next act of the drama being played out covertly before her.

The donnish person had seen the fugitive and was advancing upon him. Between him-

self and this advance the fugitive was concerned to put a barrier. And one obvious barrier was available to him. Beginning at the end of the reading room which is nearest the door, and extending in two parallel lines down a substantial part of its length, run low, double-fronted cases containing the major portion of the great manuscript catalogue of the Bodleian Library. To move around these massive islands is to circumambulate a brief record of the entire intellectual and imaginative achievement of the race. And this is what the two men—pursuer and pursued—were doing now.

Jane watched, fascinated. It must, she realized, be some sort of symbolic comedy, arranged expressly for her benefit, although she had not the key of it. This weird ballet was being danced for a stake somehow commensurate with the tremendous character of its setting.

And nobody else noticed.

Half a dozen people were moving about the catalogue—lugging out a volume here and there, hoisting it by its leathern loop to the desk-like top of the long case, finding some desired entry and copying it upon a slip, replacing the volume and moving on to hunt for something else. Both the man with the scratched face and his pursuer were making some show of doing the same thing. Nevertheless their actual preoccupation was clear. The one was concerned to edge up and the other was concerned to edge away. This went on for some time. It was like some crazy sequence in a dream.

And that was it. There was an element of the hypnotic in the affair. And it was only in a minor degree that the donnish man was concerned physically to corner his victim. That, indeed, he had in a sense done already. What was now in question was an obscure battle of wills. The object of the pursuer was to compel the other man to leave the reading room, to walk quietly out of the library. And his weapon was this: that his person, or personality, was so repulsive to his victim as to make it physically impossible for the latter to bear any approach. As the donnish person advanced, in the same measure was the man with the scratched face irresistibly obliged to withdraw. Watching the two of them at their covert manoeuvring around the catalogue

was like watching some ingenious toy.

A long, low wheeze, as of air let gently out of a bicycle tire, made Jane glance to her left. Dr. Undertone had opened his eyes and was looking at her in great astonishment—rather as if, on returning to his immediate surroundings, he had discovered himself seated next to a studious walrus or erudite dromedary. This was disconcerting to Jane, but, upon reflection, not at all surprising. During a large part of Dr. Undertone's reading life, it had to be remembered, women—and particularly young women—must have been an unusual sight in Bodley. Dr. Undertone's eyes went back to his book—to that one of the small litter of books on his desk that lay open before him. He looked no younger than his years, and he seemed to Jane, tired and ill. But he also seemed very dogged. There was a story that on his ninety-fifth birthday he had been discovered at his tailor's demanding to be shown a good, hard-wearing cloth. And now with a claw-like finger he was tracing out the words on the page in front of him. Jane wondered with what coherence and cogency they reached his brain, and what large labor of research he was embarked upon. . . . She turned her head. Both the man with the scratched face and his pursuer were gone.

Jane thrust aside her book and rose. Dr. Undertone gave her a glance of grim satisfaction. She hurried as briskly as decorum permitted from the reading room.

The staircase upon which she presently found herself was deserted. Provided one has the agility necessary for cornering neatly as one moves, its shallow wooden treads admit of a considerable turn of speed. Jane found herself going down hell for leather.

She reached the open air. It was now possible to take several routes. She might make her way by the entrance to the Divinity School—obscurely known as the "Pig Market"—in the direction of Broad Street. Or she might move in the same general direction by way of the Clarendon Building. Or, again, she might take the little tunnel or passage on her right that gave immediately upon Radcliffe Square. She chose the last of these courses. And in a moment she knew that she had guessed right.

A small crowd had collected.

It was the man with the scratched face.

He lay just off the footpath, supine on the cobbles of the square. As backcloth he had one of the great buildings of Oxford—the rounded magnificence of the Radcliffe Camera. In such a setting it would have been possible to feel the prostrate figure as something too insignificant for pathos—a mere piece of crumpled or deflated, of pashed and pounded, organic matter. But Jane's heart contracted as she glimpsed him. She shoved to the front. It wasn't difficult, for the crowd—was no more than a knot of people—some standing, some doing no more than linger for a moment as they passed. Nothing sensational was happening. It was possible to suppose that the man was dead—dead of heart failure, or something of that sort—if one didn't notice that a cheek—the unscratched cheek—was twitching faintly. And he seemed to be lucky in having gained medical attention quickly.

For close by, at the corner of Catte Street, stood a large black car, with a chauffeur sitting impassively at the wheel. Out of this must have stepped the figure now kneeling, stethoscope in hand, beside the fallen man. He was dressed in a dark coat, and on the ground beside him he had laid a Foreign Office hat and a pair of immaculate yellow kid gloves. It looked as if, by some odd chance, the accident had attracted the notice of some very grand doctor indeed. And then this reassuring figure glanced up. In the same moment, as if his doing so had been a signal to them, all the bells of Oxford fell to chiming the hour. For Jane Appleby it was a moment of chaos, and she could not have told whether the jangling was inside her own head or out of it. For this dignified physician was the identical donnish person of the late drama in the upper reading room. He had in some degree changed his spots, but he was discernibly the same leopard. And he had made his kill.

Almost without knowing what she did, Jane pushed forward once more and dropped on her knees beside the hunted man. He had opened his eyes. Now he moved his head slightly and looked at her. She saw that he recognized her—or perhaps that he took her for somebody else. His lips trembled, but no sound came. Then his glance went to the man kneeling opposite, and Jane saw his eyes dilate. She knew that it

was in terror. Something moved at his side. It was his hand, groping towards Jane. "Miss," he whispered. His voice faded into a faint, thin wail.

Jane turned. She had remembered the policeman. But the policeman was briskly waving people to the footpath. To the accompaniment of an urgent little bell that had been quite lost amid the chiming all around, an ambulance had driven up, halted and backed, and was now standing with its open doors within a yard of the prostrate man's head. Attendants were getting a stretcher out. A sense of desperate urgency seized Jane. She scrambled to her feet and caught the policeman by the arm. "Stop!" she cried. "I want to tell you—"

But the policeman shook himself rather roughly free. "Just a moment, miss," he said brusquely. "Plenty of time when we've got him in."

The stretcher, with the man on it—the hunted man—was being lifted into the ambulance. "You don't understand," Jane cried. "It's a trick! These people—"

From behind her she heard again the hunted man's thin wail. She was irresistibly impelled to turn back to him. He was just disappearing. Their eyes met. His head moved slightly in a sort of agony of impotence, "No!" he whispered. "You can't do it to me . . . not . . . to Milton—"

The door of the ambulance slammed. The policeman was by the bonnet, shouting to people to keep clear. The ambulance moved. The policeman opened the door beside the driver and stepped inside. In a second's swift acceleration the ambulance had swung out of Radcliffe Square and was gone. Jane turned around. The black car, with its spurious doctor, had gone too. The little knot of spectators was dispersing. To rush at one of them with a cock and bull story would be completely futile. It was the first downright adventure of her life. And she had been roundly defeated.

The man had whispered something just as he was whisked away. It was something idiotic, meaningless . . . something about a poet. . . . *Not to Milton* . . . that was it. But why—

And then Jane understood. The sudden, full wash of lucidity was like a plunge into cold and reviving waters. Milton was not a

man but a place. And the poor devil's last gasped word had been an agonized cry against being swept off to it.

And now he had vanished. And it was through a Milton—Milton Porcorum—that somebody had reported seeing another man being driven. Another vanished man. . . .

For a moment her whole body felt very cold; it was as if she had indeed been plunged in icy water for a long time. But she knew she could run—and she ran. She ran through the Bodleian quadrangle, careless of its violated quiet, and through the gap between the Clarendon Building and the Sheldonian Theatre. There was no car for hire—as she had hoped there might be—in the rank between Turl Street and the gates of Trinity. But she had only to go on to the foot of St. Giles' to be sure of finding one.

She tumbled into a waiting and reasonably powerful-looking car. The driver, a young man in an enveloping duffel-coat, received her instructions with unobtrusive respect—with a respect *so* unobtrusive, that Jane took a second look at him. If the morning's events had not made her sensitive to the notion of imposture, she would probably have held her peace. As it was, she spoke out boldly and with frank suspicion. "Didn't I use to see you at lectures?"

The young man's eyebrows raised themselves slightly in mild reproach. "Madam," he said, "must I always be reproached with my past?"

Despite the turmoil of her thoughts, Jane still had some area of her mind available for the sensation of feeling a fool. "I'm sorry," she said. "It just surprised me. Will you please—"

The young man cast a swift backward glance at his passenger. "In a hurry?" he asked.

"Yes."

There was that in Jane's voice that the young man took a moment to digest. "Life or death?"

"Quite honestly—just that."

The young man thrust at his accelerator so that the car seemed to punch Jane in the back. "If I lose my license," he said, "and—mark you—it's all that stands between a poor boy and the gutter, I am wholly yours. They say these things will touch eighty."

Jane set her teeth. "Then," she said, "touch it."

THE play had been timed for the eve of the half-term holiday. This avoided complications over home-work. And the play had been quite a success. But this served only to lend the morrow a tiresome air of anticlimax. Stuart Buffin, having improvidently made no arrangements whatever for its expenditure, felt this with peculiar force.

These and other dark thoughts had disposed Stuart Buffin to make a most belated appearance at breakfast that morning. They disposed him, when he realized that his mother wanted to get the table cleared, to sit owlily over this repast, nibbling his way through toast and marmalade at the steady rate of one slice every twelve minutes. This recalcitrance, however, was visited with its just penalty, and Stuart found himself implacably roped in to help with washing up. By the time that this tiresome operation was accomplished and he had emerged into the hall, the clock was striking ten. He wished that he had fixed something up with Martin or Miles or Dick or Malcolm. It was at this moment that the telephone bell rang.

Stuart's mood being not at present co-operative, he at first felt disposed to ignore the instrument. Stuart, however, was really a child tolerant of—indeed, amiably disposed towards—those with whom fate had directed that he should live. He moved over to the telephone and picked up the receiver. What he heard was a low voice with a foreign accent. What he believed this voice to say was "Stuart, is that you?"

"Yes," Stuart growled this reply with a good deal of moroseness. He had jumped to the conclusion that some silly ass of his acquaintance was having him on.

"This is Anna." The voice was really a woman's—and it was tense and vibrant. "The place is called Milton Manor, near Milton Porcorum. The danger is now too great. And it is to the boy." The voice grew suddenly yet more urgent, so that Stuart felt a queer pricking in his spine. "Come at once, Kurt. Bring—"

And then the voice broke off. It broke off with a sharp, interrupted cry and a

smothered gasp: it was as if powerful hands had closed round the speaker's throat. There was a thump—a very horrid thump—and then the click of a receiver being set down. The line was dead.

Stuart . . . Kurt. It had been a wrong number—they were always happening—and he had got a message not meant for him. Stuart Buffin found that he was trembling and wet all over, as if he had tried to break the record in the school quarter mile. He found that he had sat down—and it was only because of this, he realized, that he was not rushing to his mother for all he was worth. For he was not in the slightest doubt about the kind of thing with which he had been in contact over some unknown distance. It was violence . . . danger . . . evil. And suddenly his eyes rounded. It was more even than that. It was proof of what he had known: that things *happen*. He took a deep breath. He picked up the telephone again and swiftly dialed a number. And when he got an answer his voice was as urgent as the woman's he had just heard.

"This is Stuart Buffin; please may I speak to Miles? . . . Miles, it's Stuart. Ring round and get everybody to your place *now*. I'm coming straight across. . . . *Everybody*. . . . Miles, it's something sticking out . . . it's tremendous. . . . Call all the Tigers."

He banged down the receiver and dashed upstairs, taking the steps three at a time. When he came down again a moment later he was wearing his dark blue blazer with the crouching tiger on its pocket and its peremptory injunction: *Symmetry*. In the pockets were his purse, his torch, his big clasp knife.

Stuart's mother, returning from her hens, was just in time to see the boy disappearing on his bicycle. For a moment she was sharply anxious. But he was safely past the cross-roads—the quiet one, which she was convinced could be so treacherous. Thank goodness, she thought, Stuart seemed to have found something to do.

V

APPLEBY made a final jotting on the pad in front of him. "Thank you, Superintendent. The facts seem to be pretty well as I remembered them. But there's one more

thing—about the place Milton Manor. . . . Yes, I know it's that. What I want is something much fuller. Get on to the General Medical Council. These concerns must be registered, and you can get a bit of a line through that. Who sends people there, and why—you see? And—Superintendent—one more thing. You've spotted this place on the map? Good. Well, if you don't hear from me between two and three o'clock, carry out instruction D. . . . You needn't sound so surprised. . . . Yes, I *did* say D. . . . Thank you—that's all."

The Provost of Bede's knocked out his pipe into the comfortable fire glowing in his study, and waited until Appleby had put the receiver down. "Well, well," he said; "and to think that all those meditative essays you used to read to me were leading to this . . . You are become a very brisk fellow, my dear John."

"They weren't meditative; they were merely thorough." Appleby smiled rather absently, and walked across the long room to stare out of the window. "As for briskness, since you became the Head of a House, you are a model of it yourself."

"There was something I was going to tell you. It's a story about young Ourglass that Birkbeck told me, but that didn't strike me as relevant until this *filius terrae* business sprang up. To begin with, Ourglass, as you probably know, isn't really so very young. He's in the last batch of our actual war-service men, and he must be a good many years older than your sister."

Appleby nodded. "He's twenty-seven."

"Well, the point is this. Young Ourglass appears to be—or to have been—a person very well able to give a good account of himself. He has a flair for acting of sorts. Character-turns and sketches—and an ability to take on the coloring of the people he's living among. Moreover, he's a bit of a linguist. In the last couple of years of the war he was spotted doing that sort of thing—simply to amuse himself and his friends—in Italy. He could do an Italian peasant to the life. So he was parachuted either into Germany or German-occupied territory—I'm not sure which—and managed to get himself rounded up as a D. P. worker and clapped into an armament factory. Before the show ended, it seems, he got one or two pretty

useful bits of information out. A pretty gallant job. And I've an idea that his subsequent delay in getting up here may have been due to some rather similar assignment. It might be part of your picture—eh?"

"It might, indeed. And it's odd that nothing of this came through to me. The young man must be even closer than Jane."

"Presumably he is. I had this from Birkbeck only after you left common-room last night."

"And from whom did Birkbeck have it?"

"From Bultitude."

Appleby frowned. "Bultitude! You mean your fat scientist? How did they use him in the war—as a barrage balloon?"

"Biological warfare."

"Sounds horrid."

"Quite unspectacular, I believe—or at least the parts of it that ever got going. Thinking up insulating materials that wouldn't be devoured by bugs in New Guinea and Malaya. . . . Would you care for the second glass of sherry?"

"No thank you. Nothing more for me until luncheon in Milton Porcorum."

The Provost nodded. "I wondered when you'd be going out there."

"I'm leaving at noon. But first I want to catch Jane, and also get more reports from the local people and the Yard. . . . Ah, there they are."

The telephone had purred again, and Appleby sprang to it. "Hullo, is that— Oh, I see. . . . This is Sir John Appleby speaking. . . . Yes, go ahead. . . . What's that word? . . . s-u-a? . . . I've got it. Go on . . . Thank you, Yes, send the confirmatory copy to me at the Provost's Lodgings." He put down the instrument and turned to the Provost. "Well, I'm dashed."

"Telegram from London?"

"No. It was from Jane, here in Oxford. Listen." Appleby glanced at the note he had made. "Man weedy, scratched face, first observed upper reading room now being taken non sponte sua in ambulance to Milton stop left Radcliffe Square 11 a.m. stop am followed in hired car investigate." He threw the paper on the desk. "And it's signed 'Jane.' What do you think of that?"

"That's your sister has the rudiments of the Latin tongue. Though why she should break into it—"

"She felt that to say in English that a man had just been carried off against his will from Radcliffe Square might provoke questions and hold her up. Well, these people have got Routh again. And they may presently have this impetuous sister of mine as well. I'd be better off."

JUST short of Witney, it occurred to Jane that her peculiar taxi driver might eventually find her behavior odd. She had very little to go upon. Indeed, all she could do was to poke about Milton Porcorum inquiring for an ambulance. And that must be a proceeding that would strike anyone as a little out of the way. She had better, therefore, do some explaining. On the other hand it would not do to explain too much.

Jane determined to reopen communications. "May I explain a little?" she asked.

"By all means."

"What I'm looking for," she said, "is an ambulance."

"Isn't that a trifle pessimistic? I'm quite a careful driver—although you *are* making me go at a fair lick."

"It's impossible to talk to you."

"Not a bit. I'm attending. And I'll find you an ambulance if I possibly can. Any particular sort?"

"I want to *trace* an ambulance. It left Oxford—Radcliffe Square to be exact—at eleven o'clock, and I think it's going to this Milton Porcorum, or to somewhere near there. There is somebody in it that I want to keep in contact with. Only I wasn't told just where it's bound for."

The young man received this in silence. But he had the air of giving the matter a good deal of thought. When he did speak, it was with some appearance of irrelevance. "My name is Roger Remnant. I *was* up at Balliol. And doubtless you *did* see me at lectures. I didn't think much of them, and eventually the chaps giving them weren't able to see much in me. But I thought I'd like to stop about Oxford for a bit, so here I am. Who are you?"

"My name is Jane Appleby. I'm up at Somerville."

Roger Remnant bowed gravely towards the wind-screen; he was driving much too fast to take his eye even for a moment

from the road. "How do you do."

"How do you do." Jane judged it discreet to comply with this fantastic observance of forms.

"We had better get back to this ambulance. You say it left Oxford at precisely eleven o'clock. We left at eleven-ten. There would be a point at which it was no more than two miles ahead. But it would increase that lead when it got into more or less open country and we were still nosing out of Oxford. An ambulance can get away with a lot. I'm afraid we're not likely to catch up with it. And, of course, it may have gone out of Oxford by the Woodstock Road. I reckon Witney and Burford to be best, but I can see that there's a case for Chipping Norton and Stow-on-the-Wold."

"I see." Jane was impressed by this professional clarity.

"So it looks as if our best course will be simply to enquire for it when we get into the neighborhood you think it's making for."

"That's what I think." Jane was relieved. Roger Remnant appeared disposed to take it as all in the day's work.

"Is it really an ambulance, or is there something queer about it?"

Jane jumped on her swaying seat. She hadn't expected this swift perspicacity. "It—it's something queer."

"I expect we'll find it. Do you know the country?"

"Not very well."

"There are some ordnance survey maps in the pocket on the door on your left. You'd better sit back and do a bit of work on them."

She spread the map out on her knees. "What a difference this makes. One feels one could really find one's way about with it."

"If we knew where to go, Miss Appleby, it would take us there in no time. As it is, we'll try Canonorum, as you say. They may have quite a line in ambulances, after all."

"It's about three miles ahead, and this lane curves right round to it, skirting a big green patch."

"That's a wood."

"Only mixed up with the green there's a lot that's uncolored, and dotted with little circles."

"Park and ornamental ground. There ought to be a seat in the middle."

"A seat? Oh—I see. And so there is. It's called Milton Manor."

"Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour. But, actually, it will be quite dead—or dead so far as the old squirarchal spirit is concerned. Here's the wall bounding it. Pretty formidable, isn't it? But there'll be nothing inside except a district headquarters of the Coal Board, or perhaps a high-class private loony-bin. . . . That wall would keep anybody in." The car was now racing past a seemingly interminable curve in masonry. "Look at that sinister little door."

"Stop!" Sudden and unaccountable certainty had flashed upon Jane. "It's the place."

Remnant threw out his clutch and applied his brakes. "The place where the ambulance has gone?"

"It must be." Jane was peering at the map. "But go on. I've seen where there must be gates and a drive. In about a quarter of a mile. A black spot and then a double line of fine dots through the park."

"That will be a lodge and a drive, all right." The car moved on again. "Are we going to pay a call?"

"Yes."

Remnant said nothing. But he was frowning slightly.

"You don't mind, do you? I don't expect I shall be long."

"I don't mind a bit. But, you know, you've managed to impart an atmosphere of melodrama into this. Yet you don't look a romancing type. It seems to me you may be running into something uncomfortable. . . . Here we are." The car had stopped again at a point where the high wall was pierced by double iron gates. "I wish you'd tell me what this is about, and how it began."

Jane hesitated. The gates were flanked by massive stone pillars supporting eroded and obscure heraldic animals; there was a lodge immediately inside; and from it a well-kept drive curved away through a gloomy belt of woodland. She had never supposed herself to be very sensitive to impalpable things. But even the outer defenses of Milton Manor had an atmosphere she greatly disliked. "Well, as a matter of fact, it

began—or more immediately began—in the Bodleian this morning."

"The Bodleian!" Remnant's tone might have been elicited by a mention of something as remote as the Taj-Mahal. "You mean the place where they keep all the books?"

"Precisely, Mr. Remnant." Jane looked at the man suspiciously. But his innocence appeared entire and unflawed. "I don't suppose that your occasions ever drew you there."

"Not at all." Remnant was indignant. "I once took an aunt of mine there. She wanted to see something called King Alfred's Jewel."

"Don't you think that was the Ashmolean?"

"Aren't they the same thing?"

It was borne in upon Jane that the young man, although doubtless not of a studious temperament, was decidedly not a fool, and that this idiocy was his way of expressing a profound scepticism as to her proceedings. That this wild goose chase was authentically the consequence of anything that could have happened in Bodley was really too much for him. And small wonder, Jane thought. But she could hardly sit back and try to tell him the whole story now. "Look here," she said, "do you mind if we just get out and nose around? Perhaps I'll try explaining presently."

He jumped out, came round the bonnet of the car, and opened the door for her. "Very well," he said impassively. "Provided we nose together."

They crossed the road and peered through the high iron gates. The lodge showed signs of being tenanted, but there was nobody stirring. Jane shook the gates cautiously, and tried turning a large wrought-iron handle. They were certainly secured. She spoke almost at random. "It can't be empty," she said. "Everything's very tidy."

"Except for a bit of litter outside." Remnant had stooped and automatically picked up a scrap of crumpled paper from just beside the gates. He seemed to be summoning resolution to spread his mind. "Now, look here . . . well, I'm damned!"

Unthinkingly he had smoothed out the piece of buff paper in his hand. It was a blank book slip from the Bodleian.

"HE SAW people filling in slips from the catalogue. And he pretended to be doing the same thing—so as not to attract attention." Jane spoke absently. She was still staring, wide-eyed, at the small oblong of paper.

"For goodness' sake, woman, explain yourself. Who did?"

Jane paid no attention. "And he must have had this one, crumpled in his hand—when it happened. And then—well, when the ambulance stopped for those gates to be opened, and he knew he was on the threshold of the place, he managed, somehow, to thrust it outside. In the desperate hope that it would act as some sort of sign. . . . And it has."

"I can see that it's a sign, all right. Do you mean that somebody has been taken in here against his will?"

"More than one person. I'm sure of it now! This wretched little man that I saw for the first time this morning, and—and somebody that I know much better . . . who is very important to me."

"Nothing to do with—with being quite lawfully taken charge of by doctors who believe—rightly or wrongly—that they are insane?"

"Nothing to do with that."

"Good!" Roger Remnant spoke with decision. "Then the whole thing is simplified. Here they are. We're morally certain of it. And now we just have to get them out again. We go straight in, Miss Appleby."

She turned to him gravely. "You mean that? You're helping?"

He answered her gravity with sudden extreme merriment. "My dear young woman, *you* are helping. Bulldog Drummond is on the job. Incidentally, unlike the bone-headed Bulldog, we don't go *quite* straight in. That might be unhealthy. We send some word of our intentions into the outside world first. *Then* we go right in."

This judicious admixture of prudence and personal honor was something that Jane found she highly approved of. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I've done that already. I sent a telegram to my brother before I picked you up."

Remnant grinned. "Do you always telegraph your brother before you—"

Jane was mildly confused. "Don't be an

ass. And he'll have got it by now. He's in Oxford."

"An undergraduate?"

"No, he's much older than I am. He's a policeman."

"Excellent. We now approach something like social equality."

"He's an Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard."

"Snubbed again." Remnant's cheerfulness, however, suffered no appreciable diminution. "And that suggests something. How do we stand to one another when we do barge in? Great lady and her chauffeur?"

"You don't look a bit like a great lady's chauffeur, Mr. Remnant."

"I'm not very sure, for that matter, that you look like a chauffeur's great lady. What about brother and sister?"

"Very well."

"And what's our business?"

Jane hesitated. She hadn't considered this. "We should really know," she said, "what the place *is*. I mean, what it *pretends* to be. They must know in Canonicozum. Shall we drive on there first, and ask?"

"Certainly not. I wouldn't call that going right in. Come on—into the car, face the gates, and sound the horn like mad. Childe Remnant—and faithful page—to the dark tower came."

Jane said nothing, but climbed into the car.

Remnant backed, swung round to face the gates, and gave a blast on his horn. It was a very loud horn—or here in the silence of the country it appeared so—and he made prodigal use of it.

"I say," said Jane, "perhaps you'd better not be so—"

She stopped as she saw a door in the lodge open and a man come out. He walked briskly but without hurry to the gates, and immediately unlocked them and drew them open.

Remnant drove in and stopped. "Sorry to make such a row," he called cheerfully, "but we've got an appointment, and we're a bit late."

The man had every appearance of respectability, and might have been a retired N. C. O. in the employment of his former colonel. "Yes, sir. With the Medical Superintendent or the Assistant Director?"

"The Medical Superintendent." Remnant's voice held not a hint of hesitation.

"Very good, sir. Will you drive straight up to the house?"

"Right—thank you." Remnant prepared to let in the clutch.

"One moment, sir. Have you been here before?"

"No. This is our first visit."

"Then I'd better mention, sir, that there's an inner fence right around the park. It's because of the animals, sir; and as some of them are very valuable, the gate across the drive is kept locked. I ring through to the house, and a man comes down at once to open it. You won't be delayed more than a couple of minutes, sir." The man stepped back smartly—the air of the old regular soldier was now unmistakable in him—and turned to close the gates.

They drove on. "We're in," Jane said.

"We're in—and that reliable retainer is now locking the gates behind us. Presently the same thing is going to happen at an inner barrier. It's not hopelessly out of the way—but it's not quite what I'd call natural. . . . Well, we now know that the establishment is a medical one."

"That it *pretends* to be that."

"Nothing on this scale could be a hundred per cent bogus. You just couldn't get away with it. We'll find this is a perfectly pukka sanatorium, or something of the sort, with the dirty work neatly confined to the back stairs."

"Perhaps so. And I don't in the least know what the dirty work is. I only know that they kidnapped a helpless looking little man from the heart of Oxford this morning, and that weeks and weeks ago they kidnapped somebody I'm going to marry. And he's not at all helpless."

"Then they're crazy." Remnant still spoke with the same composed decision.

"Here's the fence—and the valuable animals."

The fence, constructed of a stout wire diamond mesh, ran off on a convex line on either side of them, and in that arc of it which was visible, the gate now immediately before them appeared to be the only aperture. Just beyond it, a herd of deer, unfamiliar in appearance, was peacefully grazing. The park behind them was dotted

and streaked with clumps and groves of trees, amid which there was still no sign of a house.

They were silent for some minutes. The man at the lodge seemed to have underestimated the time they would have to wait here.

"Have you got a plan?" Jane found that she had uttered the words spontaneously and without premeditation.

"Certainly not. Nothing could be more hampering."

Jane found the *mystique* of this difficult. "You mean you just charge head down?"

"Nothing of the sort. I mean that it's only useful to think of the current move. Try thinking ahead, and you only clog your mind with preparations for situations that are not, in fact, going to turn out at all as you imagine them . . . Here the fellow comes."

"Sorry to keep you waiting." The man now throwing open the wire gates was as respectable as his fellow. "It's this particular herd, sir. We have orders to lock up when it's grazing this section of the park. Very rare, I understand these deer to be. Will you drive straight on? You can't miss the house. And the entrance to the clinic is by the main door, under the portico."

They drove on. Remnant gave Jane a triumphant nod. "There," he said, "you see? We pick up the facts as we go. Our visit is to the Medical Superintendent of a clinic."

A large house appeared before them. Its form was irregular and rambling, so that it might have been very large indeed; but the aspect which they were approaching was dominated by a graceful white portico, now glittering in the sun. They looked at this curiously. "It must take an awful lot of paint," Jane said.

"About as much as the Queen Elizabeth. I suppose it gives the right effect: cheerfulness and antiseptic hand in hand. There's a garden over there with quite a lot of people."

"They must be ambulatory patients."

Remnant slowed down. "You do have a fine stock of words." His glance was moving swiftly over the whole scene. "What sort of patients are they?"

"The sort, oddly enough, that don't need an ambulance."

"Well, they certainly don't look as if they had been kidnapped in one. Do you think we drive under this portico affair? I think we do. Nothing like a confident approach to the dark tower."

They got out in front of a short flight of steps and mounted to a door painted in brilliant vermilion. There was a large brass bell-pull, brightly polished, and a small brass plate, equally brightly polished, on which both their glances fell at once. It read:

MILTON MANOR CLINIC
REGISTRY OFFICE

AS JANE read this she was aware of a twinge of mere misgiving as momentarily replacing her alarm. The little notice was somehow both unobtrusively and monumentally respectable. She had a vision of imminent fiasco—of a reception at first puzzled, and then successively amused, annoyed, frigid. . . . But Remnant appeared to have no doubts. His hand had gone out unhesitatingly and given a brisk tug at the bell-pull. This proved to be attached to one of those genteel contrivances which simulate a miniature carillon. They stood for a moment listening to the brief cascade of musical notes releasing itself somewhere inside. Before it had died away the door was opened.

They were aware of an interior that was all cool, clear colors and polished floors. Standing before them was an immaculate nursing sister. "Good morning," she said.

"Good morning." Roger Remnant in his old duffel coat, Jane noted, had somehow taken on the appearance of springing from the most privileged and opulent class of society. "I am Lord Remnant." He paused as if this must be a very sufficient announcement in itself. The nurse seemed suitably impressed, but her features contrived, at the same time, to suggest the need of further information. Remnant's eyebrows elevated themselves slightly. "My sister and I have an appointment with the Medical Superintendent."

"With Dr. Cline?"

"I'm afraid I have no idea. His name hasn't been given to me. The appointment was made by my aunt—or at least she intended to make one."

"I quite understand." The nurse's voice might have been described as oozing comprehension. "Will you please come in? I am afraid that if there has *not* been an appointment you may have to wait a little."

They sat down to wait. By way of intellectual beguilement there was a choice between *Country Life* and *The Field*. It was all too depressing for words.

The wait, however, was brief, for the nurse returned almost at once. "Will you come this way?" she said. "The superintendent can see you now."

They were led for some way through the house and shown into a room of moderate size, furnished with consistent sobriety as a study. Dr. Cline was a rubicund man of buoyant manner who came forward with a frank smile. "Lord Remnant?"

Roger Remnant bowed. "My sister, Lady Jane," he said gravely.

"How do you do. I understand that your aunt—But I am afraid it is a little chilly here—and really a little gloomy as well. I suggest that we go out to the sunshine of the terrace." And Dr. Cline led the way towards a pair of french windows. "After all, there is much to be said for a cheerful atmosphere when discussing these things. Whether the Clinic is efficient is a matter of statistics. But that it is a reasonably gay sort of place you will presently see for yourselves."

The Medical Superintendent, it was evident, had no hesitation in getting briskly down to sales-talk. And he had all his wits about him. Jane had a sudden and horrid conviction that, before admitting them, he must surely have made a grab at Who's Who or Debrett. But of course, for all she knew, Roger Remnant might really be a lord. He might even have a sister called Lady Jane. . . . They had emerged on a flagged terrace. It was liberally provided with garden furniture, but untenanted. Perhaps it was reserved for the Superintendent's private use. For on a second terrace, immediately below, was a scattered group of some half-dozen people. They were for the most part elderly, and engaged in reading, conversing, or simply gazing into the gardens. The only pronounced activity visible was on the part of a small boy of about five years of age, who was wandering rest-

lessly from individual to individual. . . . At this small boy Jane, as she sat down, took a second look. And it flashed upon her that he represented what, so far, was the only discordant note about the place. For he did not look at all a gay or cheerful child. On the contrary, there was something strained and tense about his whole bearing. And when he glanced towards the upper terrace for a moment it was with eyes that it was not at all comfortable to become aware of.

But Roger Remnant was talking—and with the most complete assurance still. "You will understand, Dr. Cline, that this is an entirely tentative enquiry. And my aunt—who is naturally very distressed—has felt quite unequal to coming down herself. She is afraid that—"

"Quite so, Lord Remnant, quite so." The Superintendent was eminently willing to meet this half way. "There is always the dislike of talk—of gossip. But I assure you that it is a matter which we handle with a good deal of acquired skill—of *finesse*."

"That," said Remnant, "is very important." He smiled amiably at Dr. Cline. "It makes one begin to see one's way more clearly." And his eyes, although quite expressionlessly, moved fleetingly to Jane's.

"Precisely." Dr. Cline looked understandingly at his visitors. Then—and rather as if it were something that had just come into his head—he suddenly assumed an appearance of mild professional reserve. "But I must point out," he said, "that, in the first instance, it would have to be your—um—uncle's personal medical advisor—"

"We perfectly understand that. But I must repeat how tentative this is. Nothing has been suggested to my uncle, and his doctor is not yet really aware of—er—how bad the position has become. What has happened is simply this. My aunt confided her anxieties to Lord Polder, who is a very old friend."

Dr. Cline, at the mention of this most august of medical names, bowed gravely.

"And Lord Polder mentioned the possibilities of the Milton Clinic. He, rather than the family doctor, you know, would be the best person to take on the difficult job of broaching the matter to my uncle."

Jane speculated on what atrociously disreputable disease the noble peer under

discussion—whether real or imagined—was about to be plagued with by his ruthless nephew. . . . But now Remnant had gone off on another tack.

"There is one thing that makes my aunt rather uneasy. She has been told about the research. Of course, my sister and I understand very well that research is always carried on in a leading institution of this character. But my aunt would want to be assured that there was no risk—"

With a gesture perhaps a shade more theatrical than professional, the Medical Superintendent of the Milton Clinic raised two protesting hands. "But quite so! And I can assure you that nothing of the sort would at all impinge upon your uncle during his residence here. The research is, of course, of the utmost importance. We are making constant gains from it on the therapeutic side—constant gains. But, of course, nothing is embodied in our regular treatments that has not abundantly proved itself when employed in the case of—um—patients otherwise circumstanced. The research establishment, indeed, is entirely separate."

Remnant had turned to Jane with an air of brisk decision. "Well," he said, "I think that about settles it—don't you, Jane?"

Jane nodded, and spoke for the first time. "It all sounds very satisfactory—and hopeful for poor uncle."

"Quite. Well, we must book the poor old boy in, and then get Polder to apply the heat." From this slangy excursion, proper in addressing a sister, Remnant turned with renewed gravity to Dr. Cline. "You could manage it at any time?"

"Well, hardly that—hardly that, I fear. But the wait would not be long. And it will, of course, be perfectly correct that Lord Polder rather than a family physician should refer your uncle to us."

"I think we'd better have a firm date, if we can. Nothing like going straight ahead once these things are fixed upon." And Remnant looked firmly at Dr. Cline. It was evident that, for his distinguished family, waiting-lists simply did not exist. "In fact, I think it had better be Monday."

"It is just possible that it could be arranged." For Dr. Cline, seemingly, this was a game that had to be played out according to the rules. "But I shall have to take a look

at the book. And as my secretary is away for the day, it will be necessary to go across and consult it in the other wing. Will you excuse me?"

And Dr. Cline bowed himself off the terrace. Roger Remnant took a long breath. "And now," he said, "now, my dear sister Jane—where do we go from here?"

Jane was watching the small boy. He had been becoming increasingly restless and irritable. In fact he might have been described as trailing his coat, for it was his evident desire to make himself sufficiently tiresome to the elderly people around him to stir them into drastic action. It must, Jane thought, be a poor sort of life for a child amid these comfortable invalids.

The boy's desire to plague his companions had increased yet further. He had gone up to an elderly lady apparently engaged upon a cross-word puzzle and insufferably snatched her paper from her. The lady had merely smiled and made a small, resigned gesture. And at this the boy had lost control of himself. Darting forward again, he had dealt her a stinging blow across the face.—And—once more—the lady simply smiled.

This startling incident had also attracted Remnant's attention. But it was not concluded. The boy had drawn back. He was very frightened. He looked from face to face of the people scattered around him. Some of them had seen his act; others were preoccupied. But nobody made any move. He gave a choking cry and rushed at a tall man with a pipe in his mouth who was sitting in idle contemplation of the garden. The boy knocked the pipe to the ground and clawed, battered at the tall man's face. The man smiled, slightly shook his head, got up and moved to another seat. Most of the people were now watching. They watched as if nothing abnormal was occurring. But this was itself the only abnormal thing about them. They conversed, smoked, looked up from or returned to their books with every sign of reasonable mental alertness. The boy threw himself down on the terrace and sobbed. At this the lady whom he had first struck rose and bent over him solicitously. Others showed a similar kindly concern. And then from a door farther along the terrace, a nurse hurried out, picked up the weeping child, and carried him away.

The whole incident vanished. Everybody was completely composed. It was like seeing a wet sponge being passed over a slate.

Remnant had got to his feet. He and Jane looked at each other wide-eyed. Without a word passed between them, they knew that they were agreed. They had witnessed something unutterably shocking. A child's temper-tantrum had betrayed the presence of abomination—there, in the clear sunlight, only a few yards away. It was something obscure, and at the same time instantly clamant. They had witnessed the fruit of some horrible violation of human personality.

Jane was aware of something wrong with herself. She realized it was a sense of brute, physical nausea. But she could just trust herself to speak, and she opened her mouth to do so. Then she became aware that Dr. Cline had come back. He was carrying a large diary.

"I see that we can just manage it."

Remnant nodded—and Jane noted with admiration that he did so very pleasantly. "Yes, Dr. Cline."

"And now I will just mention some details about the fees, and so on. But perhaps we might go into that more conveniently indoors. And no doubt you will wish to go over the Clinic, so as to be able to give your aunt a full description of it."

Remnant nodded. "We should certainly like to see," he said "whatever can be seen."

"Which is everything!" and Dr. Cline smiled quite brilliantly as he led the way back into his study.

THE Medical Superintendent had sat down comfortably at his desk, opened his large diary, and produced a beautiful gold fountain pen. "I am bound to say that you are very wise," he murmured. "In these cases quite a short space of time may be important. Monday, I think you said, Lord Remnant? Excellent! What can be more satisfactory than decisive action?"

"What, indeed?" And Remnant, leaning across the desk, slapped Dr. Cline hard across the right cheek.

The man scrambled to his feet and staggered backwards, his mouth feebly working. It did not appear that he was either a very courageous or a very quick-witted person.

He stood staring at them helplessly with watering eyes. Then he made a dive for a drawer in his desk, emitting at the same time the enraged snarl of a cornered animal.

But Remnant was before him, and slung him across the room. "Reactions very poor," he said. "Definite signs of resentment. Needs a spot of the cure himself."

Cline regained his balance and dashed for the fireplace, his hand stretched out in front to press a bell. Remnant stepped forward and hit him on the jaw. Cline made a half turn on his heels and dropped to the floor.

These were proceedings that Jane Appleby had never before witnessed except in the cinema. She stared at the inert body of the Medical Superintendent and felt her head swim. Remnant had stepped to the closed door and was listening. "No sound of alarm," he said.

"Is he dead?"

"Good lord, no." Remnant looked down impassively at the figure supine on the carpet. "But it's not a bad knock out. Do you know, for a moment I thought I had mistimed it? Getting a bit rusty, I'm afraid, at this sort of thing."

Jane's head began to clear. "I suppose you *haven't* mistimed it? I mean, it was the best thing to do?" She was far from clear what their next step could be.

"I told you, didn't I? When you meet a thing like this, you put your fist straight through it."

"I see. Well, whom do you hit next?"

"I'd say that this just about concludes our concern with the clinical side. It's not of much interest, and I expect that this precious swine hasn't all that importance in the set-up of the place. What we're looking for is the research. . . . Will you do something?"

"Whatever you say."

Remnant cheerfully grinned. He was reflecting, perhaps, that these were not words which this young woman frequently addressed to her male contemporaries. "Then cut out to the car. Don't be in a hurry to offer explanations to anybody you see about. Remember you belong to a class of society accustomed to going its own way unquestioned."

"Thank you very much."

"Yank up the front seat. There's a leather

bag, and there's a bottle. Empty the bag, put in the bottle, and bring it back here. I'll give you four minutes. Then, if you're not back, I'll change plans and come and find you. Understand?"

"I think I do." Jane took a deep breath, opened the door, and walked out of the room.

The broad corridor was deserted. So was the hall with its foolish little fountain and its massed chrysanthemums. But in the vestibule was one of the manservants she had seen earlier. She fancied he looked at her curiously. Jane walked to the front door and halted—with the air of one who very seldom has occasion to open doors for herself. The man jumped to the door-handle and let her out. "I'm returning," she said briefly, and walked across to the car. She managed to do as Remnant had instructed her—and probably, she judged, without the precise nature of the operation being observed. She turned and mounted the steps, the bag in her hand. The man was waiting, with the door held open. He bowed impeccably and closed it behind her. She thanked him and walked on.

Remnant was sitting on the Medical Superintendent's desk, examining a revolver. He looked quickly up as she entered. "Good girl," he said. "Now we get cracking again."

Jane looked about the study. "Where's Cline?"

"I've lugged the guts into the neighbor room." As he delivered himself of this stray fruit of his former frequentation of the lecture-halls of Oxford, Remnant slipped the revolver into his pocket. "This is what he was making a grab for in the drawer. I don't like the things. Noisy. But you never know what will come in handy."

"Mayn't he recover quite quickly?"

"I've tied him up, gagged him, and put him in a cupboard. Useful that they taught us all those dirty tricks. Got the bottle?"

"Here it is." Jane set the bag down on the desk. "What are you going to do now?"

"About Milton Manor?"

"Yes—of course."

"Burn it to the ground."

"Burn it! You can't—"

"Never believe it." Remnant had brought out the bottle. "Capital stuff, petrol. And this room is pretty well ideal. Panelled

walls, bookshelves, massive desk, all those curtains—give us a splendid start, believe me." He uncorked the bottle.

"Just pass me that big waste-paper basket, will you?"

Jane gasped, but did as she was told. "But what about Cline?" she said. "Didn't you say he's in a cupboard?"

"Cline? Oh—I see what you mean. Well, they say it's not really bad. The suffocation knocks you out before the actual roasting. Quite humane, really." Remnant was going composedly about his fire-raising operation.

"But—but it would be murder."

"Just stand back a bit, will you?"

Jane's head was decidedly swimming again. "You don't know what you're doing! You can't murder—"

"Just one lighted match, please. Into the waste-paper basket. And then we go out by the french window."

Jane glanced unbelievably at Remnant. He was looking her straight in the eyes. He might be crazy, but he was certainly not mad. She took the box, got out a match, and struck it. It was like being a hangman and giving a tap or a pull to whatever worked the drop. She threw it into the waste-paper basket and there was a great leap of flame. Remnant grabbed her and they bolted through the window.

Remnant chuckled. "I never had a girl commit murder for me before."

Jane's head was still misbehaving, and she felt that at any moment her knees might misbehave too. "Look here," she said, "couldn't we just—just get him out of that cupboard and drop him into a flower-bed?"

"How pity runs amok in gentle heart." Remnant was looking rapidly about him. "Or have I got that one wrong?" Abruptly his manner changed. "I say," he said, "I'm sorry. As a matter of fact the whole place isn't going to burn down—worse luck. Your match hasn't started much more than a pretty good diversion. And that's what we want."

Jane gave a long gasp. "Then let's make the best of our chance."

"Capital. Excellent girl. You know, until we winkle out this young man of yours, and until I get back to my wife and twelve kids, you and I make not a bad team."

Jane became aware that they were hurrying with considerable purposefulness

along the terrace. "Where are we going now?"

"It's like this. I reckon that in the excitement of our little fire, you and I will be forgotten for a bit back there. And that gives us our chance of finding the other side of the place."

"The research side?"

"Exactly. The real devilry is there. What we want is the boys in the back room. I expect there will be quite a number of them. And—for that matter—I expect they're really at the back. Did you notice the structure of the place as we drove up? There seems to be a lot of new building—much less dressy than all this—stretching out behind . . . Round this way."

They turned a corner of the main facade of the house, and as they did so heard shouts behind them. Jane quickened her pace yet further. "Are they after us?"

"Not a bit of it. They're after the fire. No doubt in a remote place like this, with a big staff, everybody has a job when it comes to fighting a blaze. That means that we turn their own efficiency against them."

"I see. And I'm not really surprised you didn't care for those lectures. You must have found the dons' wits a bit on the slow side."

They were still skirting the main building on their right. But it had now changed its character, and presented a long line of mullioned windows separated by heavy buttresses which had nothing much to support. There was something decidedly uncomfortable upon passing each of these in turn, for they seemed almost constructed for the sake of affording lurking-places.

"But here we are." The mullioned windows had given place, for a score of paces, to blank walls. And now, between two of the buttresses, they came upon a wide archway, so high that one could have driven a double-decker bus beneath it, and closed by vermilion-painted double doors. Inset in one of these was a wicket. Remnant gave this a thrust and it opened; they went forward as if through a short tunnel, and presently emerged in a broad courtyard. On their right was some sideways aspect of the main building. The three other sides of the court were formed by a miscellaneous but continuous jumble of stables and offices.

"Quick!" Remnant took Jane's arm and

drew her like a flash behind the shelter of half-a-dozen piled bales of hay close by where they had emerged. There were three or four men on the farther side of the courtyard, hard at work trundling a small fire-fighting wagon from a shed. They brought it across the yard at the double; the doors beneath the archway were flung open; they disappeared towards the front of the house.

"Another riddance of bad rubbish." Remnant drew Jane from their hiding-place and glanced around. "Nobody else in sight—and no animals. We'll go through there."

They had continued at a run along a narrow lane between high wooden fences. On their left this fence continued to shut out any view, but on their right it now turned off at a right angle, and their path was bounded instead by a plantation of fir trees. Among these a number of small pig-like creatures were routing. She brought her mind back to what Remnant had been saying. "What time *do* we need?" she asked.

"Not much. If we manage anything at all, it must be soon. Within an hour or so the whole place will be packing up."

She looked at him incredulously. "Packing up?"

"Certainly. Keep a clear head. There seems to be a building through the trees. We'll make for it."

They plunged into the little wood. The small pig-like creatures scurried out of their way. Jane thought of the forbidding outer wall, the high wire fence, the men who seemed to prowl the place with guns, the sinister suggestion of inner recesses of the building given over to the perpetration of unspeakable things. She remembered the terror of the little man in the upper reading room . . . But Remnant treated the whole impressive structure as so much papier mâché. She hoped he was right. "Well, I'm blessed!" Remnant had come to a halt. Before them was a sheet of water, and into this the end of the building dropped sheer. "Take a look at that."

Jane looked. Before them was a small lake, its banks thickly wooded. Near the center was an island, almost entirely occupied by a large circular temple of somewhat bleak design. The walls of this were entirely blank, and recessed behind Doric pillars supporting the curved architrave;

above this was a somewhat inelegant and incongruous dome. But the odd feature of this not very successful ornamental venture was its being joined to the building they had been skirting—and joined by a drab and utilitarian enclosed wooden bridge. It was like a Bridge of Sighs run up in a drearily functional age.

"Quite a strong-point, in a quiet way." Remnant was looking at the temple with a sort of reluctant admiration. "Ten to one, it's the nerve-center of the whole bit of voodoo we're enquiring into." He glanced at Jane, and she saw that his face was set in new and grim lines. "All hope abandon, ye who enter here."

She felt herself turn pale. "You think it looks horrible?"

"Well—my guess is that it could do with a little airing. And now we go up this apple tree."

Jane stared. Here at the edge of the little lake there was the ghost of an orchard, and one gnarled and sloping old tree grew close to, and overhung, the building beside them. "You mean we get on the roof?"

"Just that. Then we can either drop down on the other side, where there may be doors and windows, or take a bird's eye view of things through the skylights. I'd like to know just how the ground lies in this long building before we tackle the island and that temple. We'll do our final clean-up there, I don't doubt; but we'll just have a look at this first." Remnant was already on the flat roof, and in a moment he had hauled Jane up beside him. "It's rather raked by the windows of the house. But that can't be helped." He walked to the nearest skylight, knelt down, shaded his eyes and peered in. "I can't see the whole room. But it looks like a small bedroom—and not exactly luxurious. We'll move on to the next."

They were unpleasantly exposed, Jane thought, to anybody who was prepared to take an interest in them. But excitement sustained her; she felt a mounting certainty that they were really coming nearer to Geoffrey; and if he, and others, could be rescued at all, Roger Remnant seemed very much the man to do it. He had dropped down beside another skylight. "Different cup of tea," he said. "Rather like Cline's study over again. Leather chairs, handsome books, bath-

ing belles by some lascivious old Italian over the mantelpiece. What about its belonging to Cline's opposite number on the research side? . . . Move on to the next . . . Looks like a lab. It *is* a lab . . . And so is this one. As far as I can see all these rooms intercommunicate—and they open on a passage on the far side as well. The set-up is pretty clear, wouldn't you say?"

They retraced their steps. Jane stopped by the first skylight at which Remnant had paused, and herself peered down. She drew back her head hastily. "There's somebody there," she whispered. "A woman. She's lying on a little bed."

"She must have been in another corner when I looked." Remnant in his turn peered down. "Seems the moment to take a chance." He put his foot through the skylight.

The crash of splintered and falling glass seemed terrific. But Remnant thrust at the thing with his foot again and again. Within seconds the skylight was a wreck. The woman below had sprung up and was staring at them. "Friends," Remnant said. "We're breaking up this whole racket. Sorry to startle you."

"*Aber!*" It was less a word than a hoarse cry. "You are truly friends? *Gott sei Dank!* You may be just in time. They have taken my boy. They have taken my boy to the island. Never have they done that before."

"We'll have him back to you in no time."

"But you cannot get in! Look—between us still there are these bars and that strong mesh."

Remnant knelt down. The skylight had been as flimsy as such things commonly are. But there remained, at the level of the ceiling of the cell-like apartment below, a barrier of the sort the woman had described. Remnant nodded. "I see. But don't worry. You couldn't do much with it from below. But from up above it may be a different matter. Please stand right back." Remnant rose, retreated a dozen paces, and ran. A yard before the shattered skylight he leapt high in air, and then went down with his feet rigid under him. There was a resounding crash. Jane ran forward and looked down. Remnant was on the floor below, scrambling to his feet from amid a debris of twisted bars and tangled wire netting. He looked up. "Did I say you put a fist

through it?" he called. "A foot's even better. Now then, down you come. Imagine you're making one of those thrilling midnight climbs into college."

With what she felt was a dangerous approach to hysteria, Jane laughed aloud. Then she scrambled over the edge and dropped. Remnant caught her. "Good girl." He turned to the woman. "We know a good deal. Explain about yourself. As quick as you can."

"I AM Anna Tatistchev, a doctor." The woman's eyes were wild with anxiety, but her speech was collected. "I was persuaded—it is now a month almost—to come here with Rudi, my small boy. I was to be shown work of medical interest in which I might assist—living quietly for a time, as it was necessary for me to do."

Remnant nodded. "You mean you were hiding from someone?"

"From the English police. Rudi and I ought not to be in England. So I came. For a time the work seemed indeed interesting and honorable. Then I suspected. There were patients—experiments too—that I did not understand. Or not at first. Then my position was difficult. They had chosen well. An outlaw is helpless."

"I understand." Remnant was dragging a small table to the middle of the room and perching a chair on it. He was clearly determined that action should begin again without delay. "But what *are* these experiments? What does the whole thing aim at?"

"It is a scientific conspiracy. They call it Operation Pax."

"Operation Pax?"

"The aim is to find a means of neutralizing the combative—the aggressive—component in the human personality, and perhaps of spreading this, like a disease, through whole populations. They call that the General Pacification."

Remnant received this in silence. But Jane spoke up at once. "*Would* that be a bad thing?"

"It is the question I asked. At first it seemed to me that here was something perhaps of great benefit to mankind. I soon saw that it was the intention of these men to use their achievement in evil ways. They planned the means of making whole peoples

—whole nations—helpless, impossible to arouse. These would be mere cattle—mere sheep—while others would remain wolves, lions, beasts of prey. And they would sell this instrument of power. More—they would *be* this power. For somewhere in this organization, in some inner circle to which I have not penetrated, there is a lust for power, an unlimited ambition, that is very terrible."

Remnant was testing his means of climbing again to the shattered skylight. "Certainly a very considerable project," he said. "Do you think they have other places besides this?"

"I think they have."

"Well, now—they must be packing up, you know. They simply must. That escape, things we've done this morning; these things are their marching orders. But you think the active villainy is going on still?"

"I am sure it is. There are two reasons. One is the using to the best advantage of what little remains of the substance of which I have spoken. And that is why I fear for Rudi. It was only early yesterday that I came to suspect this of a child's being required. And they have taken my boy to the island! I beg that you and your friends should act quickly."

Remnant nodded in brisk reassurance. "As it happens, we haven't any friends here yet. But we, ourselves, are going to act now."

"*Gott sei Dank!* Then you will be in time. It was only within this half an hour that they took him. And they will have put him to sleep. There is a certain harmless drug which must act—I think for perhaps an hour—before the thing is done . . . But you must hasten very much, because of the other."

Jane caught her breath. "The other?"

"A young man. For him, too, I think they intend the injections."

"Have you seen this young man? Do you know his name?"

"His name—no. He has not told it to me. But I have seen him and two or three times spoken. He is tall and fair, and his complexion—I do not know the word—"

Jane was trembling all over. "You mean —"

"It is *sommersprossig*."

"Freckly . . . it's Geoffrey!"

The little prison-like room swam round Jane, and she sank down on the bed. Remnant strode across to it and gave her an uncompromising shake. "Steady on. This is the best news we've had yet. The chap's alive. And we'll have him joining in the kicking in no time."

Anna Tatistchev too, had come over to Jane and taken her by the hand. "He is your husband?"

"He is going to be."

Remnant jumped on the table. "Well, we're going there now." He picked up Jane as if she had been a child, mounted the chair, and gave her a vigorous hoist that sent her scrambling out on the roof. He turned to Anna Tatistchev. "I think three may be too many at the moment. Is anybody likely to come in on you here?"

"I think not."

"Then, just for a time, you'd better stop."

"You are brave people. Have you arms? . . . Yes? Then go. I will wait, since you ask me. But there is one other thing of which I was to speak. It is the second reason why they will press on with what they have wished to do, even if they feel that soon they must abandon this place. It is the active evil spirit . . . I do not know the words for it."

"I think I see."

"Since yesterday I believe it has become a madness, a fury. And if things go badly, and their ambitious plans are checked, then they will destroy blindly, rather than not destroy at all."

Remnant nodded. He put his hands up to the shattered skylight and heaved himself to the roof.

Jane Appleby was already at the extreme end of the long roof. Remnant hurried after her. Fortune, he thought, had thrown him up against two very good sort of women for an affair of the sort on hand.

JANE was staring at the temple. It had a sufficiently forbidding look. "Ought she not to have come with us? She's the child's mother, after all."

Remnant shook his head. "For the moment, only business considerations count."

"How do we go?"

"Straight across the bridge, Miss Appleby. Take your shoes off."

Jane obeyed without asking questions.

"Good woman. We go across the lid, so to speak. And it's tin. Don't want to make a row. So follow me, and don't speak until you're spoken to."

Jane compressed her lips. There were moments when she found Roger Remnant very hard to take. His own shoes were off and strung round his neck. From the roof on which they stood to the upper surface of the tunnel-like bridge was an easy drop, and he made it in absolute silence. Jane dropped down beside him. They went forward on tip-toe. The surface was of corrugated iron. Walking delicately, it was not easy to keep a sure balance. But in less than a minute they had reached the other end.

Remnant came to a halt and stood quite still, frowning. Jane saw that the next problem was a hard one. On either side of them the sheer wall of the temple went off in a blank, smooth curve, and below them it dropped clean into the water.

"We're perfectly hidden here. Lie still. I'm going around and up." Remnant breathed the words in Jane's ear and set off at a crawl. He had become, she realized, suddenly very cautious. He disappeared around the curve of the dome, keeping wholly prone in the gutter. His progress in this fashion could not be rapid; to Jane it appeared an age before his head and shoulders emerged from behind the answering curve of the dome on her other hand. She thought inconsequently of Sir Francis Drake, home after circumnavigating the world.

"What have you got on under that skirt and jersey?"

By this time Jane was schooled into finding nothing that Roger Remnant said at all odd. "Nylon."

"A lot of it?"

"Well, quite a lot." Jane was apologetic.

"It's getting on in October."

"Stockings?"

"Nylon too." This time Jane was yet more apologetic. "Economical, really."

"I want the whole lot."

"The whole lot?"

"Listen—it's as I thought. The lantern up there screens a circular opening at the top of the dome."

"An eye."

"Very well—an eye. And it looks straight

down on a sort of small circular hall—"

"A cortile."

"—with rooms opening off all round. I think we can make something that will take me down."

"If you mean out of my nylon, then I'm going down too."

"We'll see about that. Look—I'll nip round here a bit and see what I can contribute." Remnant grinned. "Not that I can really compete. But a pair of braces will give us a final useful three or four feet."

He was gone. It was not a commodious spot in which to undress, but Jane made no bones about it. The garments when lying in a heap at her feet seemed absurdly tenuous. She picked them up and crawled with them farther round the drum. The sensation of a skirt and a woolen jersey next to her skin was mildly disconcerting. Remnant was waiting for her. He took the things, one by one. "Absolutely splendid. Marvelous stuff. Take an elephant. Unfortunately, it needs a bit of time."

The marble floor was very cold on her bare feet. Remnant's hand came out and touched hers. It was a gesture commanding absolute silence. The little cortile, with its cupola and lantern above, could be a dire acoustic trap. A mere whisper, incautiously pitched, would echo and re-echo round it, until the reiterated and amplified sound was like surf breaking on a beach. Jane strained her ears. She could hear only a low, intermittent sighing, now rising towards a whistle and now sinking to a moan. It was the wind, she thought, playing through the lantern and washing round the chill concavity of the dome.

Remnant moved his other hand slightly. It was the one holding the revolver. She understood, and drew out the weapon in her own pocket. Where Remnant had picked it up she did not know. She gripped it firmly, imagining the clatter it would make if it fell. She looked downwards. The marble was white and faintly veined, like her own feet that rested on it. She looked around. There were five closed doors. Two of them were symmetrically placed on either side of a vaulted passage leading, she guessed, to the main doorway and the bridge, and the fifth was directly opposite this.

She heard her own heart. Remnant's left

hand let go of hers and described a small circle in air. She understood him instantly. It was like having a twin brother with whom no speech was necessary. He disliked the way the closed doors surrounded them. Let the wrong one open, and for a fatal second they could not help being taken unawares.

Remnant was stopping at each door, intently listening. He paused longest at the door directly opposite. He crouched down by it, and she saw that he was licking his left hand. For a moment the effect was weirdly feline. Then she saw that he was passing the moist hand close to the floor, and then at a right-angle up the edge of the door. . . . Presently he moved on and completed the circuit. She glanced swiftly at his face as he came up to her. His eyes seemed to have gone darker. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. He pointed back at the door straight ahead of her. She knew that they were to go through it.

They moved straight across the floor, brushing as they went past it the tatter of nylon that had brought them here. Remnant paused, pointed to himself, raised one finger; he pointed to Jane and raised two; he stepped for a moment in front of her and made a gesture from his back to the space on his left. She understood that he was to go in first, and that as she followed she was to place herself on his left hand.

He was reaching for the handle. He must be proposing to take a chance that the door wasn't locked. The faint sob and whistle she had already heard was louder. Perhaps the wind was rising.

Remnant flung back the door. It was of abnormal thickness, and bedded in rubber. What Jane had heard through this insulating medium was a human voice, screaming in agony.

SOMETHING whined past her ear and smacked against a wall far behind her. She knew that it was a bullet; that with formidable swiftness of response the enemy had met the assault in its first moments. Then she realized that she was again on the wrong side of the door. At that first shot Remnant had thrust her back and half closed it on her.

The screams of agony had mercifully

ceased. Or perhaps they had only disappeared behind a curtain of more deafening sound. So confounding was the uproar that for a second she lost all clear understanding of its occasion. She recovered herself and knew that it was a gun-battle.

When she turned again Remnant's shoulders had gone. She had a horrible fear that he had been hit; that he would be lying crumpled on the floor. She pushed at the door. It swung back freely and she entered the room.

The place reeked of powder, and of queer smells she could not identify. There was one further shot. She saw a white-coated figure in the middle of the room dive head foremost to the floor like an acrobat and lie still; and in the same instant she was aware of two similar figures dashing through a door straight in front of her and slamming it behind them. Remnant was on his feet still; he leapt at the door through which the figures had retreated, and locked it. Then he turned round and saw her. "Go out," he said.

She found herself trembling with anger as she looked at him. "I'll never forgive you—never!"

"Go outside." His voice was low—but it fell on her like a strong hand. She turned and walked unsteadily into the circular hall, her temples hammering. Things that she had momentarily glimpsed and instinctively refused to acknowledge the meaning of, swayed before her inward vision, and she felt, like an actual physical thing, an icy and invisible hand on her heart.

"Jane—please come back now."

She turned again and re-entered the room. "I'm sorry," she said.

Remnant raised the ghost of a smile. "We're getting on pretty well. I think the child is all right." And he pointed to a corner of the room. Jane took one look and ran to it. Rudi Tatistchev, the small boy whom they had already glimpsed once that morning, was lying there, curled up, his face stained with tears, and apparently in a deep sleep. She knelt beside him and took him in her arms—with a surge of deep feeling such as she had never known.

"He really is all right. They hadn't got going on all that." Remnant had come up beside her. "They were busy instead with your poor devil from the Bodleian."

"They wanted to experiment—"

"No—not that." Remnant's voice was very quiet. "They were trying to get something out of him. He's been pretty filthily handled. That was why I pushed you out the second time. I wanted to tidy him up a bit. He'll be quite all right—in time. I've put him over on that bench."

Jane set the sleeping child down gently and turned round. The battlefield—for it was like that—was a large, wedge-shaped room that had been turned elaborately into an operating theatre. It was lit by sundry impressive electrical contrivances, and the only daylight—as presumably with all the rooms in the temple—was from shallow windows high up under the architrave. There was blood now all over the place. In the middle of the floor, huddled on his side, the man she had seen fall there lay in a pool of it. He was alive; his body was spasmodically twitching; when it did this it emitted noises that were not human but merely mechanical or hydraulic; and his face was hideously grey behind a neatly trimmed red beard.

Her eyes passed swiftly on, very fearful of what it might next see. But there was now only one other figure in the room; the little man she had seen driven from the library. Fate had decreed that he should be one of Nature's meaner and more insignificant creations; man had lately seen to it that he should be much less even than this. He half lay, half sat on a bench by the wall where Remnant had shoved him, wrapped in a sheet patched with blood. His eyes were open, but it was impossible to tell if they saw.

"Stay here and keep an eye on things—and particularly for anybody coming to monkey with the door." Remnant was moving across the room again. "I'm going to make sure there's nobody lurking—of his own will or otherwise—elsewhere in the building."

She watched him go out, understanding very well the meaning of his move. They had rescued the little man she had seen

kidnapped in Radcliffe Square—or at least they had rescued what was left of him. And—what would have been worth crossing the world for—they had rescued the little boy. But of her lover whom she had set out to seek, there was still no sign . . . She looked at the shambles about her—the product of the heat of battle and partly of madness and cold cruelty—and her whole body shivered as if in ague.

Remnant was back. The chill of the ghastly place seemed mitigated as he entered. "Nobody and nothing," he said.

"I see." Jane's voice trembled. Her eye fell on the bearded man on the floor. "Can we do anything for him?"

"Unfortunately, he's past getting anything from." Remnant's tone held a momentary savagery that startled her. "He's going to die."

"Do you think that Geoffrey—"

"Your young man? Don't worry. I'm afraid they're holding him still. But he's in no danger. Or in no danger of—this." He glanced around. Jane saw that, beneath his reassuring manner, he was fighting mad. "Only we've got to think. . . . I wonder if the poor chap over there can tell us anything."

They both crossed the room. Jane's bare feet were like metal dragged at by some powerful magnet under the floor. With an immense effort she looked straight at the man and walked on. His eyes were still open. And as they reached him, his lips moved.

"Others . . . there was a kid."

Remnant spoke clearly. "The kid's all right. He's over there. Was there anyone else?"

"The little place beyond this . . . I didn't see it the first time." The man's face contorted itself with the effort of speaking. "They put me in there first . . . a young chap . . . prisoner—"

"Yes?"

"Asked—" The man gave a deep groan. "But I didn't—" His eyes turned to Jane with a queer lift of recognition.

Jane looked at Remnant. "He means the little square temple?"

"Clearly. A couple got away there when they'd had enough of the shooting game here. And there might be one or two more.

You say you sent a telegram to this top-ranking policeman brother of yours?"

"Yes." Jane looked at her watch. "And he must have got it well over an hour ago."

A high, hoarse scream from behind them froze the words on Remnant's lips. They whirled around. The savagely man-handled figure, who, a minute before possessed scarcely the strength to whisper, had flung off the sheet enveloping him. Bloody and almost naked, he was staggering across the room. In an instant they saw why. The bearded man had got on his knees and was crawling along the floor, clutching in one hand a short, gleaming knife. He glanced sidelong as he moved—and Jane, catching his eye, saw that in his last moments humanity had left him and he was become a beast.

"Not the kid!" The little man, as he screamed the words, flung himself upon the insane creature on the floor. Rudi Tatistchev, in his deep drugged sleep, lay no more than a yard away, and the bright surgical knife had been poised in air. There was a second's violent struggle as Remnant rushed forward. The two figures on the floor were a tangle of flailing and twitching limbs. Then there was a single deep groan. Remnant took the bearded form by the shoulders and flung it aside. It lay quite still. The little man turned over on his back with a low wail. The knife was buried in his breast.

Jane dropped down at his side. He opened his eyes on her and his lips moved. "Your kid," he whispered. "Your kid's safe . . . across the . . . weir. . . . They can't . . . can't pull the plug on him. . . ." His lips became motionless, and his eyes closed.

Remnant moved from one inert form to the other. "Both dead." He looked down at the torn body of the little man whose name was unknown to them. "I don't suppose he ever got high marks as a citizen," he said soberly. "But he wasn't a bad chap."

It was an unexpected epitaph on Albert Routh.

A mile short of Milton Manor, Appleby overtook and cautiously passed a small horde of children on bicycles. Al-

most immediately afterwards, and as he turned into the sideroad on which the entrance to the estate must lie, he just saved himself from head-on collision with a powerful car swinging out at a dangerous pace. The two vehicles came to a stop, bonnet to bonnet, with a scream of brakes. Appleby was preparing to speak in his frostiest official manner when he became aware that the driver of the other car was known to him. It was the fat Bede's don, Mark Bultitude.

Without attempting to back, Appleby climbed out. "Good afternoon," he said. "We nearly did each other a good deal of damage."

For a second Bultitude, who had not stirred from his wheel, stared at him blankly. Then his face broke into a smile. "Dear me," he said. "Sir John Appleby, is it not? We are undoubtedly here on the same errand."

"Except that I am coming and you are going."

"Precisely. You are looking for news of the young man Ourglass?"

"At the moment, I am looking for my sister. It is she who is looking for him—with some rashness, possibly."

Bultitude raised his eyebrows. "It was meeting her that put this expedition into my head. . . . Good gracious—what a mob of brats!"

The children on the bicycles had swept past. They were shouting and arguing hotly as they disappeared in a cloud of dust. Appleby watched them absently. "It was through meeting my sister that you came out here?"

Bultitude considered. "I had a further reason—an acquaintanceship in these parts."

"At Milton Manor?"

"My dear Appleby—if I may so address you—how thoroughly on the spot you are. At Milton Manor, as you say. A certain Dr. Cline, who runs the place. Or who runs one side of it."

"That is most interesting to me, Bultitude. A close acquaintance?"

"Dear me, no. A former professional contact—no more. But it struck me that it might be worth consulting him."

"How very odd."

Bultitude pondered, as if resolved to accord this response fair consideration. "Yes," he said. "I agree. It *was* odd. It was a queer idea. Less an idea, indeed, than an intuition."

"A successful intuition?"

"Unfortunately not. At first Cline was engaged, and then they couldn't find him. Moreover there was a fire. By now the whole place may be burnt down."

"Burnt down!"

Bultitude's engine started into life, and his car shot alarmingly backwards. It then advanced, clear of Appleby's mudguards, and stopped again, with the engine ticking over. The bulk of Bultitude deflected itself by some inches from the perpendicular. In a common man the attitude would have been that of leaning affably out to bid a friend farewell. "This has been a most enlightening conversation, Appleby. I have missed a luncheon party, but I am really very glad that I came out, all the same. There are times when one must cut one's losses—in the interest, of course, of greater ultimate gains."

THE cyclists had not got far. Appleby passed them again round the next bend, scattered over a grassy knoll in a sort of irregular bivouac. Some were eating sandwiches or apples; some were disputing hotly; some were listening to an impassioned harangue by a small, red-haired boy.

At the lodge of Milton Manor, Appleby was nearly involved in a second collision. The gates were open, and a couple of heavy covered lorries were just swinging out. Drawn into the side of the road with his engine running, Appleby eyed them grimly. Then before the gates could be shut again he drove through them and stopped.

A respectable-looking man at once hurried up. "I'm very sorry, sir. But no visitors today."

Appleby shook his head. "I'm not a visitor. I'm a fireman."

The man looked startled. "Sorry, sir. My orders are—"

"Don't be a fool, my man." Appleby was suddenly brusque. "I always come out ahead of my brigade, as you very well know. The engines will be here within a

minute. Leave these gates open, and see that nothing gets in the way."

"But you won't get through the fence." The man was puzzled and worried. "And I've orders—"

So there was another barrier. It was something, Appleby thought, that one might have guessed. "But surely," he said, "you keep a key here?"

"No, sir. I telephone up to the house." The man was apologetic. "It's the animals, you see. Very valuable, they are."

"No doubt. And I suppose the house itself is of some value too. And it's burning. See that you telephone at once." Appleby let in his clutch again and shot forward. As he did so he fancied he heard, far off and faintly from behind him, the chiming of a great many bicycle bells.

Driving fast, he rounded a bend and saw a tall wire fence in front of him, running away on either side of equally tall gates of the same material. If he waited, perhaps somebody would come and unlock them. Or perhaps somebody would not. As the roar of the engine died, he thought for a moment that he heard the crackle of flames. Then he realized that the sound was of rifle or revolver fire. He pressed down on the accelerator hard. The car had still been travelling at a good pace. He felt in his back the sudden thrust of its eight roaring cylinders.

The gates went down with a crash—and with a flash of brilliant blue flame. Appleby's body tingled all over; there was a queer sensation in his scalp; for a moment an unaccountable smell of singeing filled the car. By the time he had taken a guess at what had happened he had rounded another bend and glimpsed Milton Manor straight before him.

There was a crowd of people out on a lawn—patients, he supposed, because several nurses appeared to be attending on them. At a little distance from these a man in a white coat was lying back in a deck chair, with the appearance of being assisted or revived by two more nurses. Farther on, he could see a red fire-tender and a tangle of hoses. He cut off his engine and heard another shot. It came from somewhere beyond the house. The drive forked and he

swung left. It curved towards the house again, and in front of him he now found a tall archway that appeared to lead into a courtyard. He drove straight through.

"AND now for our experiment." Remnant was coolly ripping a strip of cloth from the white linen coat of the corpse with the red beard. Some yards back from the door pointed towards the tip of the island he had already built a formidable double breast-work out of the stainless-steel equipment with which the place was lavishly provided. Now he advanced to the door with his improvised rope—the second he had constructed that day—in his hand. He tied it to the handle, unlocked the door, and retreated, gun in hand.

"You'd better be inside this too. And bring the boy. It will be the safest place if there really is shooting and things begin to ricochet."

Jane Appleby did as she was told. "You think they're still there?"

He grinned. "I'll be pretty surprised if they are. But we'll take no chances. . . . Ready?"

Jane nodded.

Remnant pulled firmly at his rope and the door swung open. In an instant a bullet rang past above their heads.

Jane's heart leapt. They were still there—which meant that Geoffrey was still there too. "Roger Remnant," she murmured in her companion's ear. "His first bad guess."

Remnant's reply was lost in a second rattle of fire. The bullets ripped harmlessly overhead. She heard a click of metal besides her. Remnant was fiddling with a long forceps and a couple of mirror-like stainless-steel plates. "First-rate periscope," he said. "Keep down, whatever you do. I'll give you a full report in a tick." He shoved up the forceps with one plate gripped in it, and maneuvered it to an angle. "A couple of fellows are lurking there to keep us back. I'll just touch them up a bit. Show them we're quite lively." He suddenly thrust out an arm and fired.

"I wish John would come."

"So do I. We could do with every Appleby—male and female—your family

can raise." Remnant's voice was not, Jane considered, altogether convincing. He's a vain creature, she thought ungratefully. He'd like to beat them off his own bat. And I wouldn't put it beyond him. . . .

Her thought was scattered by the sudden roar of an engine starting into life somewhere beyond the square temple in front of them. Remnant scowled. "There they go," he said. "But keep down still. I'm going to have a proper squint . . . Hullo—what's that?"

From somewhere out in the park a new sound came to them: that of racing cars, a low, almost continuous penetrating horn, and behind that a single urgently-chiming bell.

Jane gasped. "It's John . . . it's the police—and an ambulance. . . ."

Remnant had got on his knees. He fired a couple of shots at the farther temple, waited a second, and stood up. "Gone," he said.

The engine beyond the temple was still roaring. Suddenly above it they heard a single shrill call—a call for help. The sound brought Jane to her feet in an instant. "Geoffrey!"

For a second she saw nothing except a row of Doric pillars and a dark doorway beyond. Then a single figure emerged flying—the figure of a young man in ragged trousers and a torn shirt. His hair was matted and his face was a dead white streaked with grey. Two men—one in a white coat—pounded after him.

"Jane—Jane!" It was a cry like a child's—and as he uttered it the young man thrust out blindly, gropingly, an appealing arm that seemed bruised and blackened in its torn sleeve. "Help!"

She took the breast-work at a bound and ran. She heard Remnant curse and leap after her. There was a hail of bullets, and she heard Remnant give a cry, spin around and fall. But she herself was untouched. Geoffrey was no more than five yards away. She was nearly there. She was nearly touching him— Suddenly from the lake on her left a dark, dripping figure rose up, took her in a flying Rugby tackle and then, with almost no loss of impetus, went rolling with her across the narrow tongue of land and into the lake on the other side.

The water closed over her head just as she heard another fusillade of shots.

For a moment she thought that she would never come up again—that she was down at some great depth in the grasp of a drowning man. Then—ludicrously, tragically—she found that she was struggling upright in some four feet of muddy water. Her head was out; she shook it; her eyes cleared—but in her ears there was still a great roaring. The square temple was straight in front of her. And above it hung something monstrous, out of nature: a vast and hovering insect. She shook her head once more, and knew that the roaring noise was not inside her own brain. The noise came from the insect. The insect was a helicopter. . . . Even as the realization came to her the machine climbed, hovered again, and moved off on a lateral course.

"They certainly seem to keep a trick or two up their sleeve."

She swung around. The man who had carried her headlong into the lake was standing breast-high in the water beside her. It was her brother John.

SHE was sitting on the bank. The skirt and jersey that had been her only garments lay heavily on her in sopping folds. Her hair was soaking. The shoes still slung absurdly round her neck were two small buckets of water. Only her eyes were dry—dry and bitterly angry.

"John, why did you do it—*why*? It was Geoffrey—he's still alive!"

"Which is more than you would have been in another five seconds." Her brother, who was binding up Remnant's right arm, spoke grimly and without turning round. It dawned on her that he was quite as angry as she was. "Do you think, sir"—he was addressing Remnant—"that this was a proper affair in which to involve my sister?"

"Yes, I do—or I wouldn't have done it." Remnant in his turn was angry and uncompromising. "She has what it takes—and I don't know that there's any other test." He smiled wanly. "Besides—if I may say so—she rather involved me. I apologize, all the same."

"How dare you apologize!" Jane had jumped to her feet, at once, dripping and

blazing. "I think—"

"Easy, easy." Her brother was now smiling at the two of them. "I apologize too. We needn't quarrel. After all, we're doing pretty well."

Jane felt the blood going to her head. "Doing pretty well! With Geoffrey—"

"Easy, Jane." Appleby had stepped to the edge of the island and was scanning the park. "Now, where have all those police come from?"

"Those police?" Jane opened her eyes wide. "Aren't they yours?"

"Quite impossible. I did arrange for something of the sort in certain circumstances. But a good deal later in the afternoon. . . . And what the dickens is all that yelling?"

"I shouldn't be surprised at a bit of yelling." Remnant spoke drily.

Appleby was still scanning the grounds. "It isn't . . . it isn't by way of being a children's home? I could swear those were children's voices."

"Dear me, no—nothing of the sort." Remnant had got to his feet. "I see you haven't got your bearings at all. But if I may lend a hand—"

"Thank you—I think I can manage." Appleby was still inclined to treat with some asperity the confident young man whom he had found involved with his sister in a shooting match. "You came here by car?"

"By taxi. I am a taxi-driver."

"Then I hope you drive, sir, with rather less impetuosity than you fight." Appleby frowned, seemingly feeling that this had come out with rather more of complimentary implication than he had intended. He turned to his sister. "I don't think that that wound's serious. But it had better have medical attention at once—and not precisely of the sort they seem to keep about here. Put this young man in his cab and drive him to Oxford at once."

"But, John, couldn't we—"

"*At once*. Now, get moving, or you'll catch a chill. I'm off to get a line on all this uproar."

HARD after riding through the shattered wire gates the expedition had split up, obedient to tactical dispositions laid

down by Stuart Buffin. Piling their bicycles, they had made a wide detour to the left of the drive. Now they had climbed to the brow of a low hill, and the chimneys of the house could be seen below them.

"It *is* on fire!" A boy ahead of the others pointed dramatically to the dark column of smoke rising from the house.

There was an immediate babel of voices, not very conformable with the idea of a military force moving up to a surprise attack. "The place is on fire . . . It's burning down . . . Rot—that's a potty little fire . . . Anyway, there's a fire-engine."

"Listen!" Stuart's voice asserted itself above the hubbub. "I hear something else. Be quiet."

The chatter dutifully stilled. Round the part of the building that was on fire orders were being shouted, and on a lawn at the side of the house a collection of elderly and harmless-looking people were huddled in a group talking. But over and above this there was certainly another sound. It was like the sound that an axe will make across a valley in frosty weather. Only this sound came in short bursts, with nothing of the regularity of axes being set to a tree.

"It's shooting," Stuart spoke with sudden conviction—and also considerable relief. "I was right. They *are* crooks."

"Look!" Miles's arm had shot out. "Those buildings in the middle of the lake. You can see the flashes. It's a battle. Come *on*, you asses!"

"Here's the fire brigade!" The cry was raised by a shrill voice on a flank. "Golly, they're coming at a lick."

"That's not a fire-brigade. All fire-engines and things are red."

Stuart was frowning. "The cars have something on their roof."

"It's the police!" Miles gave a shout of excitement that was quickly echoed by everybody. "Stuart telegraphed them from that place on the road. They're Stuart's police."

The whole party tumbled down hill.

"There's a helicopter going up!" It was the young scientist, Malcolm, who eagerly called attention to this new sensation. "Look—from behind that square temple, where they were shooting."

Everybody stopped and stared.

"Look out!" Miles' voice was urgent,

quelling the chatter. "There's a man coming up that path."

The man's clothes were dripping wet. But he held them with a single gesture of authority. "All right," he said.

"Can we help, sir?" It was a subdued voice speaking from the middle of the group.

The man in the soaking clothes shook his head. "No," he said gently. "Anybody in command of your lot?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then some shoving and pushing. A boy rather taller than the rest stepped forward. "Would you please," he asked politely, "say who you are?"

"I am Sir John Appleby." The man looked gravely at the children as a group, but addressed the tall boy. "I belong to the Metropolitan Police. I come, that is to say, from Scotland Yard."

There was a moment's silence that spoke of absolute awe. Even the tall boy appeared to have to think twice. But when he spoke it was with composure. "My name is Stuart Buffin," he said. "How do you do?"

"How do you do." Sir John Appleby was looking at their blazers. "You all come from Oxford?"

"Yes, sir."

Sir John Appleby turned for a moment and looked at the house, now cordoned by police. "And is one of you responsible for this remarkable turn-out of the County Constabulary?"

Stuart Buffin answered without hesitation. "Yes, sir. I sent a telegram."

"I see."

"I hope, sir, it was all right."

"It saved the situation." Appleby's eye had again strayed in a certain wonder to the mass of blue uniforms in the middle distance. "It's an effect that I doubt if I could have achieved myself. You must be a natural master of the telegraph."

This time Stuart violently blushed. But his voice maintained its composure. "I gave the wording some thought," he said.

"Always a good thing to do." Sir John Appleby smiled, and glanced over the whole group. "Thank you," he said. "The police are much obliged to you all. And now you had better cut off home. Can you get a train part of the way?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You might meet a head-wind." Appleby nodded briskly. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, sir."

Appleby turned away, and the Tigers moved off obediently in search of their bicycles. But a moment later a voice spoke at Appleby's shoulder. "Sir, may we ask a question?"

Two of the boys had remained behind.

"Go ahead."

"May we talk about this?"

Appleby appeared to consider this question with a good deal of grave deliberation. "Even if you don't," he said, "I suppose the younger ones would be bound to?"

"I don't think so, sir. We have them pretty well in hand."

"That's an excellent thing." Appleby smiled. "But I think you can talk. Everyone has his own story at tea. It's a good part of the fun, after all."

"Yes, sir!"

Wreathed in smiles, Stuart Buffin and his companion hurried off after the other Tigers.

VI

ROGER REMNANT'S headlong drive to the demesnes of Milton Porcorum et Canonicorum, involving as it had done much fast cornering, resulted in trouble during Jane Appleby's much more cautiously conducted return journey. A tire blew out just before Eynsham. And as Jane took some pleasure in debarring her companion from attempting to assist her in any way, and laboriously but effectively contrived to substitute the spare wheel herself, it was nearly five o'clock when she reached the Radcliffe Infirmary. There she handed over her charge, answered such questions as the mildly sensational nature of his wound made necessary, and then drove back the few yards to Somerville. Such clothes as she had hastily commandeered from Dr. Cline's deplorable clinic by no means became her, and the frailty of her sex obliged her to get out of them at the earliest possible moment. She changed quickly, resisted the conversational attempts of several interested friends, and returned to the car. It was her intention to return it to the rank where she had so fatefully picked it up, and then to retreat hastily

into college without answering any questions. There she would await news from John with whatever patience she could muster.

The first part of this project went smoothly. She drove down to the end of St. Giles' and saw that there were no other taxis waiting in the rank. This was decidedly to the good. Remnant, presumably, had colleagues, and if one of these was about he might prove tiresomely inquisitive. She had just swung the car around to bring it out of the line of the traffic when she heard a vigorous hail from the pavement opposite. "Taxi!" Since it did not occur to her that she might herself be the object of this shout she paid no attention. "Taxi!" This time the shout was a bellow. She looked up and saw, first the silver knob of an elegant cane being brandished peremptorily in air, and then—beneath it and spread out far on either side the massive figure of Mark Bultitude.

Jane had very little use at the moment for any further encounter with Bultitude. So now she let her gaze pass him stonily by, and prepared to step quickly from the car and march off without explanation.

This, however, proved to be impossible. Bultitude had recognized her; for a moment his features expressed extreme but seemingly genuine astonishment; then he launched himself into St. Giles' with all the resistless momentum of a hippopotamus taking to the water.

"Excellent!" he said. "Excellent! In the morning the keen young student off to Bodley, and in the afternoon the resolute and emancipated bread-winner. But—my dear Miss Appleby—have you had the Proctors' permission to follow this laudable avocation?"

"I am putting it away for a friend," she said. Her tone was icy. "I expect there will be other taxis turning up here presently."

"No doubt. But not other young ladies with whom I have a strong impulse to converse."

Jane, who could think of no polite reply to this—and who was determined to be polite, since she suspected that earlier in the day she had been rather rude—said nothing.

"I have had some conversation with your brother, Sir John—on my way back from Milton."

"From Milton! You mean that you made your—your expedition, as you called it?"

"I went to Milton Manor, decided that it was a very shady place indeed, and came back to think about it. I had—indeed, still have—some notion that I might clear the business up myself. Would you advise me to try?"

"No—certainly not." Jane still spoke coldly. But Bultitude's more direct manner of speech was making her look at him with new interest. "We have discovered that it was full of criminals, practicing abominable scientific experiments upon people kept there by force."

"I must confess, Miss Appleby, to being not altogether surprised by what you tell me."

"I don't see how you can know anything about it. And, if you did, it was your duty —"

Bultitude tapped his cane on the ground. "When did you last have a meal?"

Jane stared. "Why—well, it was at breakfast."

"Then come and have some tea."

Jane decided to go. Bultitude puzzled her. He seemed to have his own slant on the affair. And the invitation was certainly an entirely harmless one. It was also subtly flattering. For Mark Bultitude was commonly reputed not to care for young women at all. "It's very kind of you," she said. "I'd like a cup of tea."

The apartment into which Jane was presently ushered by her host would have been described by an unfriendly critic as overwhelming. It was large, and everything in it had the appearance of being very valuable. Bultitude, dispensing his Orange Pekoe from an equipage that had appeared with miraculous speed, gave his young guest a charming smile. "I see," he said, "that you are looking at my *Battle of the Centaurs*."

"Oh—yes." Jane was not aware that she had been looking at anything in particular.

"It is, in fact, a *Caravaggio*. I bought it of the *Gräfin Szegedin*—you know the dear old *Gräfin*? I was speaking of her to somebody only last night—a good many years ago. It gave the poor dear a helping hand."

"That was very nice of you." Jane took her tea and spoke without much enthusiasm.

She suspected that the fat don was going

to be evasive. His attitude was coming to puzzle her very much. There was something baffled in it—as if he was helpless in knowing where to begin with her . . . But now he was trying again.

"This place in Milton is in the hands of the police?"

"Yes."

"So far, so good. I suppose you already know the things your brother told me."

"John said very little. Our talk was hurried—no more than a scrap. I think he was anxious to get me out of the place and begin clearing it up in a professional way. I'd meddled, I'm afraid."

"If you did, the circumstances make it very natural."

"I thought perhaps that you had something to tell me?"

"There are one or two things that I can mention." Bultitude had stooped down to the lowest of an elaborate system of trays by which he was flanked and grabbed a plate of excessively creamy cakes. But the action had not absolutely excluded from her view a look of swift calculation such as she imagined herself to have seen on his face before.

"I can mention—well, that during the war I had a good deal to do with one or two rather special lines of enquiry. The physiology—and also the psychology—and the liability to crack up, aggressive and passive responses to things of that sort. I knew a man called Cline. Later I heard that he had taken a place in the country and was developing new ways of treating drunks. It was a laudable but not very exciting activity. And it didn't quite fit in with what I remembered of Cline. Naturally, I didn't think much more about it. Then I gathered that he had associated with him—ostensibly in this blameless species of social medicine—several people whom I also knew. The question of why they came together again as crusaders of scientific temperance was a real one, which I found myself turning over from time to time. And I didn't like it. For some of them had quite patently been persons of altogether impaired moral perceptions."

Bultitude as he produced this orotund phrase again mopped his brow—but this time openly. There was a moment's silence.

"And . . . about Geoffrey?" Jane asked.

"Can't you say anything about him?"

"I can say this—that as soon as his uncle said something connecting his disappearance with Milton Porcorum I recalled an element in the conversation of one of these people I have been talking about."

"Cline's friends?"

"Yes. He was not a scientist but an administrator; an able—and yet again in some ways rather stupid—person, called Squire. This fellow used to praise"—Bultitude hesitated—"used to praise those civilizations, if they are to be called that, which delivered over felons, captives, slaves and the like, alive, to the uses of science. He used to say that it was the way to get results. And there were others who used to back him up. I thought of it as idle talk without substance. But now we must—"

"Mr. Bultitude—tell me." Jane had sprung to her feet. "Were they—when you knew them—mad as well as bad? If things go wrong with them, and their plans crash, and there are—are people who are no more use to them, will they . . . would they—" Jane found herself unable to finish her sentence.

"No." Bultitude had also risen. "In my opinion—not."

"They won't . . . kill Geoffrey?"

He looked at her strangely, and for a moment was silent. She suddenly saw that he, too, was indeed a scientist. The fat *poseur*, the University Worthy, the celebrated snob had all faded out of him. Instead of these—little estimable but yet human and intimate—there was only something aloof and very cold. He made as if to speak, and then hesitated again. She believed that—out of the sheer instinct of the scientist—he was seeking for words which he could believe an exact representation of the truth as he saw it. "Miss Appleby, Geoffrey Ourglass is in grave danger. It would be foolish to pretend otherwise. Yet I think I see something which would mean that he is safe from them."

THERE was no message from John. Jane took from the shelf that notebook in which her aunt had bequeathed to her the lectures of the Stockton and Darlington Professor, efficiently abridged. But this afternoon the volume had no charm. Recogniz-

ing that she was unable to work, she fell to pacing her room. Presently she discovered that her restlessness had a more specific cause than the general anxiety under which she lay. In her encounter with Mark Bultitude there had been something missing. He had failed to say something that he ought to have said. Or *she* had failed—

As she moved to the door she remembered—remembered something which, either by inadvertence or some wholly obscure design, she had not told Bultitude. She had missed something out—and until a moment before she had missed it out of her own thoughts too. The little man who now lay dead at Milton Manor had *bidden* something in the upper reading room. He had thrust something into a book on old Dr. Undertone's desk. And what he had there hidden must surely be what his captors had sought. Moreover, there was something further that could safely be said. The hidden paper—for it had been that—if it at all came into the picture in this way, was important. The unrelenting manner in which the pursuit of the hunted man had been carried out was surely proof of that. Only the fantastically rapid series of events in which she had been involved could have made so significant a point slip her mind. . . . Emerging into the Woodstock Road, Jane turned right and set off hurriedly for the Bodleian Library.

IN the upper reading room the long day's task was almost done, and learning had turned to packing up for the night. The unashamed were yawning, the reflective were finally sorting out their musings, the industrious were gathering up sheaves of notes. In its hutch in one corner the emmet-like conveyor-belt moaned with a suggestion of weariness stoically borne; in another corner Bodley's Librarian was amiably assisting an Ethiopian to decipher a manuscript, and for this purpose had superimposed three pairs of spectacles each upon the last. A broken light still struggled through the broad tutor windows, and sent long, soft shadows exploring across the littered, or ordered, desks.

Miss Butterton was gone; her tiny duodecimo and decimo sexto volumes were marshaled in disciplined ranks, as if waiting to stand guard through the night. And

Dr. Undertone was gone too. But his desk was empty.

Jane paused for a moment, disconcerted. Then she turned away and retraced her steps down the reading room. There was an assistant sitting at the table near the great catalogue. She went over and spoke to him. "Has Dr. Undertone finished with all his books, do you know?"

The man nodded. "Yes. As he went out at lunch-time he said that he would need none of them again. So they were cleared."

"Simply all put back on the shelves?"

"Yes. Dr. Undertone spoke quite decidedly—in fact curiously so. I'm afraid it will be too late to get anything back for you now."

"Thank you." If Jane had been disconcerted before, she was now nonplussed. But she asked one more question, although she already knew the answer to it. "There wouldn't be any record of the books he's been using?"

"Oh, no." The man was surprised. "The books go back on the shelves and the slips are destroyed."

"Yes—I see." Jane moved away. An understanding of the extreme queeriness of what had occurred came to her fully as she walked towards the door. If in all the wide world the little man has sought an inviolate hiding-place for his scrap of paper he could scarcely have found a better than he had done. For the paper now lay between the leaves of one among several million books. If old Dr. Undertone's present studies were markedly off a beaten track—and with so immensely learned a person they almost certainly were—it might be a generation, or even a hundred years, before—quite fortuitously—the thing was again held in human hands. It was Dr. Undertone alone who could now abbreviate this process.

JANE came downstairs again—slowly, this time—and in the Bodleian quadrangle stopped to think. One or two readers came out and passed her; a nondescript man was examining the Pembroke statue; another nondescript man was staring at the effigies on the ornate East Tower. Jane turned to her right and emerged into Radcliffe Square.

Old Dr. Undertone was her quarry. She knew that he was a Fellow of St. Gregory's.

And, almost certainly, he was a bachelor and lived in college. Even at ninety-six, only a bachelor could have looked at her quite as he had done that morning—as if she had been a camel or a crocodile. And, remembering that look, Jane hesitated.

But Jane Appleby was a girl of impetuous and even headstrong disposition, lightly disguised by an air of learning. She ought to have been in Somerville; she had been told to remain there by an admired brother greatly senior to herself; nevertheless her legs were now taking her rapidly in the direction of St. Gregory's College. There are no long distances at Oxford, and in five minutes she had passed through the gates. "Can you tell me," she asked the porter, "which are Dr. Undertone's rooms?"

"Number five staircase in the next quadrangle, madam." The man had hesitated before replying.

Jane found number five staircase. The stone treads were worn and hollowed; the walls were grimy and flaking; there was an indescribable smell—the smell of centuries of food and wine and sweat and polished leather. Dr. Undertone had rooms on the first floor. Jane climbed. The whole quadrangle was very silent.

She stopped on the landing and listened. There was no sound. She knocked at the door. There was no reply. She knocked again, without result. Perhaps he was a bit deaf. Indeed, he well might be. And he would have several rooms, and perhaps be in a farther one. . . . Jane knocked a third time and waited. Perhaps she should go down again and find the scout who worked on the staircase. Probably Dr. Undertone kept a personal servant who might be discovered in some dungeon decanting port or counting claret. . . . Jane gave a fourth and perfunctory knock, opened the door, and peeped in.

The room was large, lofty, and completely surrounded with books. The only light was from a single candle, set in a candlestick with a reflector to it. This had probably been a bold innovation of Dr. Undertone's in the Eighteen-eighties. He must have turned conservative before the spread of gas or the invention of electricity. There was a dull glow from an open fire which had been allowed to go almost out. It played upon

the surface of a large, shabby desk, piled with disordered books and papers. Over the mantelpiece was a portrait of Archbishop Tait, and directly under it a small shield displaying the arms of Rugby School. On the desk, in a silver frame, was the photograph of an early Victorian lady. All Dr. Undertone's life was concentrated in this room. But Dr. Undertone himself was absent.

To go farther would not be decent. She must try to find a servant and enquire when Dr. Undertone might be able to receive a visitor. But as she was about to close the door softly, and explore the situation downstairs, another door opened at the far side of the room. It was a manservant. Perhaps he had heard her.

Jane took a step forward. "Is Dr. Undertone at home?"

"Yes, miss." The man closed the door behind him. "Never more so, if you ask me?"

Jane hesitated. "Do you think he can see me?"

"Yes, miss."

"Then will you tell him—"

"I can't tell him anything, miss. He's dead."

SHE hurried from St. Gregory's. Nothing, she was sure, would ever bring her back there.

At her room a telephone message was waiting for her. It said simply "Ten o'clock—John." Which was something—but she disliked its brevity. She looked at her watch. In a few minutes she would have to go into hall and dine with some two hundred of her kind. The prospect rose before her as unusually depressing. Her mind had ceased to work, either anxiously or eagerly, on the problem of Geoffrey's peril, the chances of saving him, what John would prove to have done. She felt simply that she had come to a dead stop, that all the wishes and fears left in her were very small and very futile, that life was bad and Oxford worse. The only sound resource was to find the next thing to do, and do it. But there wasn't anything. . . . And then she remembered that there was. She had a duty to walk round to the Radcliffe Infirmary and enquire about Remnant.

She ran into him under the archway by the lodge. After the manner of Oxford males preparing for a foray into unknown regions, he was making a cautious survey of Somerville in the gathering darkness. His arm was in a black silk sling. But he had managed to change, and was now dressed in an immaculate dark suit, like a fashionable undergraduate prepared to go up to town. The effect needed only a hard hat and an umbrella to be complete—and it was disconcerting. Jane felt that he was a stranger, after all. But Remnant smiled, and she realized that she had guessed wrong. "Come along," he said, "We need dinner badly."

"Are you all right?"

"Perfectly all right, thank you. But hungry—as I say."

"And do you often dress like that?"

Remnant nodded his head seriously. "Only change I have. That and a pair of pajama-trousers. Everything else gone up the spout to support the wife and little nippers. . . . Any news?"

"Yes and no. No news from John—nothing about Geoffrey. But I have found out something queer myself."

Remnant looked at her, she thought, with momentary apprehensiveness. "Something to tell?"

"Oh, yes. And John's coming in to see me at ten."

"We can eat quite a lot by then. Where would like to go? Mitre? George?"

"If the family is right down on the bread-line like that, Mr. Remnant, you oughtn't to be thinking of going anywhere at all."

Remnant made no reply to this. Argument indeed was unnecessary, for they were already walking down the Woodstock Road. "The Radcliffe's not a bad place," he said. "I got a cup of tea and bun."

"And I got Orange Pekoe and some outside cream-cakes from Mark Bultitude."

He gave her a quick sidelong glance.

"He's the enormous great fat man at Bede's?"

"Yes."

"Well, listen." Remnant hesitated. "He was the fat man that I caught a glimpse of on that terrace when we were waiting for Cline."

Jane nodded. "That doesn't surprise me a bit. He told me that he'd been out there

this morning, doing a little quiet investigating."

"I see." They walked for some way in silence, and when Remnant spoke it was abruptly. "Here we are. In we go."

Their dinner at first showed some signs of being rather a labored affair. But Roger Remnant made no attempt to be more entertaining than the continued crisis in Jane's personal affairs warranted. He was as hungry as he had said, and he managed to make Jane feel hungry too. As she ate and drank she ceased to find a good deal of silence burdensome. And thus they arrived in decent comfort at coffee and cigarettes. He eyed her gravely. "What is the queer thing you have found out for yourself?"

"It's not so much something I've found out as something I've remembered. And you'll think me an utter ass for not remembering it before. When the little man was in the upper reading room this morning he *bid* something—a paper."

"And has anybody found it?"

"Almost certainly not. And now it seems possible that all chance of finding it is gone. It's like this." And Jane told the story of the late Dr. Undertone and his books.

"It's better vanished. Some secret trick of their dirty game—that's what it must be."

"Yes—I think it must be that too. But it hasn't disappeared in any absolute sense."

"Whatever it is, your new reader isn't likely to make head or tail of it. He'll chuck it in the waste paper basket—I suppose there are such things in Bodley?—and that will be that."

"I think it's important."

He looked at her curiously. "It's hardly the center of your problem, Jane."

"It might be. It might be the key to it." Jane, who less than an hour before had been feeling that she had no more fight in her, was again quick and eager. "To begin with, it must be important to *them*. They did so much to get it back that—"

"I agree. But still I don't see how, directly, it's going to help."

"If *we* had it, it might be a card in our hands."

"You mean a bribe, a bargaining point, a hostage—something like that?"

"That against Geoffrey."

He looked at her with yet fuller gravity.

"Very well. The thing, whatever it is, would certainly be better in our hands than simply lost. But how do we get it?" Jane could see that Remnant's mind was beginning to work swiftly and in a way she knew. "You are sure nobody could have spotted the actual book the little man thrust it into? What about the person on Undertone's other side?"

"There wasn't anybody."

"Then on *your* other side? Somebody might just have got a squint from there."

"That was Miss Butterton. She might conceivably have seen that little man was fiddling with Undertone's books. But she couldn't have seen that it was this particular book or that."

"Then we came back to the start. There's only Undertone himself. Short of a *séance*, we can't ask him. . . . What was his line of country?"

Jane considered. "He was an ecclesiastical historian . . . no, that's wrong. I remember! He retired ages ago from the chair of Pastoral and Homiletic Theology. And he's been compiling an enormous history of that ever since."

Remnant grinned. "Remember," he said, "that I stopped off from all that lecture-stuff. Do you mind telling me just what that *rigmarole* means?"

"It means something more impossible than I can say. His work in Bodley consisted in reading all the sermons that were ever published."

"And have a lot been published?"

Jane laughed a little desperately. "Far more of them than of anything else in the whole world."

Remnant had paid their bill. "Up you get," he said. "We'll take a walk on this. It needs thinking out."

There was a thick mist shrouding Oxford—the Thames' valley mist which is not quite a fog, but which gets in your throat and eyes all the same. Jane thought walking through this a poor idea and not likely to clear the brain. But she had got in the habit of obeying Remnant. They set off. Tom, the great Christ Church bell, had not begun the tolling that would announce five past nine. She still had plenty of time in hand if she was to be back in college with half an hour to spare before her brother's arrival.

"I suppose we couldn't get in?" Remnant's voice spoke from the uncertain darkness beside her. "I mean into this old man's rooms in Gregory's?"

She was rather shocked. "The body's there. They'll have sported the oak by now to leave it in decent security. And we couldn't possibly ask."

"You can't think of a story that would get us in? Nephew and niece? Illegitimate but sorrowing children hurrying to Oxford at the news?"

"Of course not! I think you are the most unscrupulous person I've ever known. And—anyway—it wouldn't be the least good."

Remnant said nothing. They continued to walk in silence. Either their footfalls were producing a queer echo in the mist or somebody else was walking this inclement evening behind them. Jane lost her bearings. Presently Remnant spoke with an air of casual surprise. "This *is* Gregory's," he said. "Never been in it. Have you—before today? Low College."

"We can't all go to Balliol."

"True—true." Remnant's voice was extremely absent. "Where about are that poor old chap's rooms?"

"Number five staircase in the second quad."

"Well, I believe this is the second quad we're skirting now. . . . On this side?"

"Yes—on the first floor, at the corner. You can't see in this stuff—or I can't. But they must be those rooms just above our head now."

"Interesting." Remnant did not sound as if he was at all interested. "Mind if I just step behind this archway to light a pipe?"

"Not a bit." It was a chilly night, Jane felt, to hang about. But she owed Remnant a good deal more than permission to smoke. She waited. Suddenly—and utterly without rational occasion—she felt panic grip her. It was as if danger had suddenly reached out hands at her in the dark. . . . "Roger!" Her call was low but urgent. There was no reply. "*Roger!*"

"Yes, Jane?" The mist was playing odd tricks with sound. His voice seemed to come from straight overhead. "Don't worry. Keep quiet. Even with only one arm it's pie. I'll be back in two ticks."

She understood—she understood and trembled. But she did not call out again. Aeons passed. Once she was certain that she heard whispering in the darkness—an angry and dissuasive whispering. She knew that—for the first occasion in her life—she had lost her nerve and her wits.

Suddenly her right hand was taken in a strong clasp. "Good girl." He took her arm and moved her forward through the mist. "A bit more walking. Say as far as Magdalen bridge. This still needs thinking out." They went on in silence. It seemed incredible that only a minute or two before she had been scared out of her wits. . . . "I say"—Remnant's voice was unwontedly diffident—"what would *perlegi* mean?"

For a moment she was puzzled. Then she understood. "*Perlegi*? It's Latin for 'I have read through.'"

"I guessed as much." The voice was now triumphant. "Then we've got it."

"You actually got into Undertone's rooms?"

"Quite easily. I went up the rustication and in at the bedroom window. Roof-climbing used to be one of my things, rather."

"I see. . . . You said the *bedroom* window?"

There was a quick chuckle in the dark—and then Remnant's voice, swiftly repentant. "I'm sorry if it shocks you. . . . And he's dead, all right."

"You—"

"I made sure. This is so queer a business that you can take hardly anything in trust. . . . And then I got it—this *perlegi* business. A fairly fresh piece of paper on his desk, with a lot of book-titles in Latin and French—and then after all but the last two this word *perlegi* and a date. The last date was today's. Oh—and there were a lot of letters and numbers against each book. I copied them down too."

"The case-marks."

"What are they?"

"Where the books live on the shelves—all over Bodley. They're very complicated, and only the Bodley people understand them. You copy the case-mark from the catalogue, and that tells them where to find the book for you."

"Well, now—don't they arrange the

books in a sensible order—alphabetically, or something like that?”

“My dear boy, you just haven’t got the scale of the thing. There are *millions* of books.”

“I think it’s quite absurd.” Remnant was honestly exasperated. “You mean to say that you and I couldn’t find these things? That if we broke into this Bodleian place—”

“Broke into Bodley!” Even although she knew she was being absurd, Jane’s voice was stiff with horror.

“Why ever not?”

“You just don’t understand. Besides, you’re talking nonsense. We’ve found what we want. The thing is certain to be in one of those books. And it’s certainly safe there till tomorrow. John must see about it.”

“I hate to say it—but I think John might be a bit behind the times.”

“John is never behind the times.”

“Well, we don’t need to argue about that. I’m sure he’s a good sort of stick.” It was evident that Sir John Appleby’s manner at Milton that afternoon still rankled. “The point is that I’m not at all sure about the thing’s being safe there till tomorrow. . . . Did you think I took rather a long time over my burglary?”

“Well”—Jane was cautious—“yes, I did.”

“It was because I had to join in the queue.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“There was somebody before me, jotting down those books. I had to lurk in the bedroom quite a bit.”

“It’s impossible! I’m sure nobody in the reading room understood what was happening, beside me. . . . Did you see who this person was?”

In the darkness Remnant seemed just to hesitate. “Yes.”

“Somebody we know?”

“Yes. At least you know him. And I know him by sight.”

Jane gave a gasp. “Was it Mark Bultitude?”

“No. It was your young man’s uncle, Dr. Ourglass.”

“Dr. Ourglass! He’s the most harmless—”

They had been walking seemingly at random, and now Remnant was peering about him in the dark. “How very odd. Do

you know, it looks like Radcliffe Square?” Suddenly he turned his head, as if listening.

Jane’s heart sank. She had experienced just this technique a little too recently to have forgotten it. “Now, look here, Roger Remnant, I simply will not—”

Reaching out in the darkness, Remnant suddenly put his fingers on her lips. She fell silent—and found that, like her companion, she had frozen into immobility. The mist was now very thick, and the few lights in the Square made little impression on it. One could see no more than the vaguest outlines even a couple of yards ahead. His voice was in her ear. “Sorry. But I’ve had a feeling that there’s somebody interested in us.”

“So have I. I had it when you were doing your climb into Gregory’s.”

“Well, we’re old hands at all that. And it’s probably imagination anyhow . . . We’ll scout around here.”

They were somewhere out in the Square, for she could feel cobbles under her feet—the identical cobbles on which the little man had been lying before they bundled him into the ambulance. Then she lost her bearings. Far away she heard a train hoot, and nearer at hand there were some young men calling to each other in the mist. But the voices might have come either from Brasenose or from Hertford, and her sense of disorientation was complete. The street lighting was going dimmer and more yellow. Straight ahead of them, nearer the ground, they saw a dull red glow. Remnant moved towards it. The red glow came from a charcoal brazier. Some building was going on, and in a little shelter before the fire a night-watchman was settling in to his job. They went on, and were presently in complete darkness. Again Remnant spoke softly in her ear. “About roof-climbing—”

“I’m not going roof-climbing, and neither are you. You can’t possibly—not with that arm.”

“Listen—and don’t be so quick to make irrelevant remarks.” Remnant’s tone held its old assurance. “It’s a principle of Oxford roof-climbing that there is no natural feature known to climbers of which there is not a pretty fair artificial equivalent in the buildings of this city. And the principle has been worked out very fully.”

“I haven’t the slightest doubt it has.”

"Do you know about the Mendip caves?"

A dim and horrid light began to dawn on Jane. "No—I don't. And, what's more—"

"They form a very extensive system of underground caverns which it is possible to get into here and there—with a very tight squeeze. *Really* very tight. Not a game, for instance, for your friend Bultitude. Well, like everything else in the world, the fissures that take you down there have their equivalent here in Oxford. Or rather have *one* equivalent. You're standing beside it now."

"You mean—?"

Roger Remnant laughed, very softly. "I mean that you and I, Jane, are about to enter the world's greatest library."

SOMEWHERE at her feet Jane heard a muted clang, as of a metal plate or grid forcibly displaced. For a fraction of a second a torch flashed on in Remnant's hand, and she had a glimpse of what appeared a very small circular aperture flush with the ground. Then the darkness was again entire and Remnant was once more whispering.

"Listen carefully. This is important. As it happens, I've never made this expedition. But I have the facts. First, there's your clothes. People commonly strip."

"Thank you—no. I've lost quite enough perfectly good clothes today already."

"Good enough. But they absolutely mustn't bunch up. Can you grip your skirt between your knees?"

"Yes."

"That should do. Your measurements are pretty fair."

"Thank you very much."

"You go down feet first—legs together, hands palm downwards on your thighs, wrists in the pit of your tummy, all quite rigid. Can you feel your heart beating?"

"Yes." Jane was tart. "I can."

"Let it count five for you as you go down. Then begin to pull up. That means you jack-knife ever so slightly. Behind down and knees up. You may lose a bit of skin. But it's perfectly all right, unless you start slowing down too suddenly and too soon."

"What happens then?"

"The confidential character of our mission fades out. I fetch the police, the Fire Brigade and the University architect. Sappers are sent for from the nearest garrison town."

"I see."

"Then down we go—me first. Don't worry. It's not half as bad as that crazy nylon rope."

Remnant had vanished. For a moment Jane thought that he had stepped behind her. "Roger," she said softly.

There was no reply. Her sense that there was any longer somebody near her must have been illusory. He had really gone—had vanished down that small hole that now lay invisibly at her feet. He probably has the disadvantage, she suddenly thought, of not having the sort of heart that makes itself heard . . . For a second she hesitated. Jane found that she had sat down on very chill stone—and that, as once before that day, her legs were dangling in nothingness. The shaft, or whatever it was, felt quite desperately narrow, and she had a sudden vivid sense of what it must be like to be the lead in a pencil. But Remnant had gone. And his shoulders must be far broader than her hips. Jane went too.

She certainly lost some skin, but there was more of indignity in the thought than painfulness in the sensation. Her brain worked with extraordinary speed. As she fell she guessed what the particular hazard of this journey must be. The chute must have a kink in it, or must somewhere flatten out like a section of a big dipper. If you gained too much momentum there would be a nasty crash at the end. If you checked it too soon you simply came to a stop in a spot too tight for wriggling. She felt that she had never had a nastier thought . . . She was suddenly in empty space, and Remnant had caught her and set her on her feet.

Her knees were unsteady, and she felt the need of something to say. "It was absolutely horrible. Miles worse than the nylon rope. But just your cup of tea."

Her eye was following the sweep of Remnant's torch. It was a powerful torch, and its beam had now moved laterally far into darkness. But it was still playing upon books. It swept back, and then off in the other direction. The books ran off, apparently to infinity, in that direction too.

"It's very depressing." Remnant's reaction was decided. "I've never before been made so powerfully aware of life's utter futility. All those chaps scribbling away, persuaded

that fame and immortality were just around the corner. And now nobody so much as remembers their existence, except this old fellow—what do you call him?—Bodley's Librarian. It's the sort of thing that makes one look around for a drink. Sorry to be such a barbarian."

"You're not terribly singular. A great library made Dr. Johnson feel much the same . . . But now you see that it *will* be rather difficult finding what we're after."

"It's just a matter of time. And we've got all night for it." Remnant was dogged. "Good Lord—look at that!"

He had turned the torch upward, seeking the roof. But as its beam climbed and climbed it still met books—although books now in part obscured by open-work catwalks of cast iron, by vertical ladders and spiral staircases, and by a criss-cross of supporting girders. Jane felt slightly giddy. But she managed to speak firmly. "Try downwards."

The beam swept down. They were standing on just such a catwalk as they had been observing high above their heads. Below them was another infinity of books.

It was like something, Jane thought, by Piranesi—a dream-architecture cunningly devised to suggest at once the reach and the impotence of the human mind. But Remnant's response was now severely practical. "First we want lights."

"Isn't that risky?"

"I don't see how it can be. We might be at the bottom of a mine, for all anybody in Oxford can know about it . . . And—by jove!—here we are." Remnant's hand had gone out to a cluster of switches; he flicked at them rapidly one by one. Clear light sprang up everywhere. What they had hitherto only glimpsed piecemeal they now saw in its entirety. Thus displayed, the vast storehouse was not less impressive than when Remnant's torch had been exploring it. It was this, partly, as being another world from the Bodley that Jane knew. There, the building and its furnishings were heavy with immemorial associations and rich in intrinsic charm, so that the books were no more than an element in the total effect. But here, everything was modern and bleak and functional; the single use of the place was to range in an accessible manner as many books

as could be crowded in.

Remnant was busy with a pencil and paper against the side of the nearest stack. "There you are," he said. "One copy for you and one for me, since we may find it quicker to split up. Title and case-mark of the four likely books. They're as complicated as you said. But I've noticed something about them. They're in pairs. These two differ only in the last couple of figures on the line. And it's the same with those. So we have just two rows of books to find, all told."

"I wish I had a notion where to begin."

"Haven't you? Look down at your feet."

Jane looked and was abashed. She had noticed that the ends of each stack bore case-marks. She now saw that at every main inter-section the floor was painted with a system of arrows and symbols designed to show what further case-marks must be sought in one direction or another. She studied first this and then the paper in her hand. "I don't think we're burning hot," she said, "but it does seem to me that we may have had the enormous luck to begin not altogether cold . . . I believe all four really will be in this place, after all. Look—you hunt the two '*perlegi*' ones and I'll hunt the two others."

IT WAS perhaps twenty minutes later that Jane knew she had progressed from warm to hot. Not only the case-marks but the titles glinting on the old leather spines told her as much. She had come to that wide field of learning upon which the late Dr. Undertone had turned himself out to grass in his ripest years. *Sure Sanctuary of a Troubled Soul . . . Preces Private . . . An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness . . .*

She was on the ground floor of the vast chamber. Remnant's quest had taken him higher, and into a remote corner. They were like Adam and Eve in the Garden, when they had separated the more efficiently to cultivate its fruits. Jane's mind, drawn to this analogy by the biblical cast of the acres of old print around her, for a moment elaborated the fancy. It was by taking advantage of that rash isolation of our first parents that the serpent—

Suddenly she knew that she was uneasy. But that was foolish. There could be no

serpent in Bodley. She brought her mind back to her task. *An Apologetical Narration . . . The Sinner's Mourning Habit . . . A Buckler Against Death*. She halted, and gave a low cry. The first of the books she sought was there in front of her. *God's Terrible Voice in the City*. She stretched out her hand to take it from the shelf. The hand trembled, so that she could hardly hold the volume securely. It was the excitement of the discovery, she told herself, that made her tremble. The book was quite small. She opened it, shook it, ran through the pages. There was no lurking paper.

And now for the second book, which she knew could not be far away. Peering at the shelves, she moved along the stack in front of her. *A Large Theatre of Divine Judgment . . . Enthusiasmus Triumphatus . . . The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation . . . Her excitement must be mounting, for now she was trembling all over. A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality . . . It was not excitement that had taken command of her. It was fear.*

It was the same fear that had reached out and seized her in the dark when she had been left alone outside St. Gregory's. And it was fear of something very evil and very close to her. Her senses, she knew, had brought her no report of this presence. But her certainty was entire. She fought against it. She forced her eye to travel over two more books. *Joy in Tribulation . . . An Examination and Censure of False Devotion . . .*

She could hardly breathe. She looked at the next book, and put out her hand to it with a gasp. Then her senses did speak. One of the iron platforms above her head creaked, vibrated. She turned her head, and something moved on the very fringe of her field of vision. She looked up. Danger threatened her—not, as she had irresistibly felt, from close at hand, but from high on a remote gallery. There, framed at the end of a vista of stacks, a man had appeared. He was looking at her directly and fixedly, and she saw that it was not Remnant. The platform creaked again beneath the weight of the man standing on it. He was Mark Bultitude.

At least she must have the book. She grasped it and pulled it from the shelf. Bultitude was raising an arm as if to point at her. She remembered that she could shout. "Roger!"

As if she had spoken a magic word, the books immediately in front of her moved. Thrust at by an unseen hand on its farther side, the stack glided away on its rails. And in the gap stood a man—a man with a pale, freckled face.

"Geoffrey!"

As once before that day, she stretched out a hand to her lover. And Geoffrey Ourglass too stretched out a hand. But it was not to her. It was to the book.

The movement was a blinding revelation—instantaneous and final. The foundations of Jane's world had crumbled as in some fantastic spectacle on a stage. She gave one protesting cry, and then acknowledged the truth. Geoffrey took a step forward and with horrible dexterity, like a low thief on a race-course, drew the book from under her arm. He stepped back and the stack moved again. In a fraction of time she was once more confronting only a wall of books. She heard a woman's voice calling for help in a strong, clear voice. It was her own.

The place was suddenly full of voices: her brother's, Remnant's, Bultitude's—and another, elderly and authoritative, that she knew to be that of Bodley's Librarian. At the end of the long lane of books in which she was standing she glimpsed one and then another hurrying figure in uniform. The police had come. Over the dark surface of the great horror that Jane confronted, a tiny and momentary horror rippled. It was very shocking that the Bodleian should be turned over to this sort of thing.

There were now other sounds as well as the shouting: a low rumbling, at first intermittent and then rapidly becoming almost continuous; a succession of dull thuds, with now and then a clash of metal, as one massive and buffered rampart of books came hard up against another. It was Roger Remnant's grotesque game come true. The place had become a vast maze, through which Geoffrey fled and the mustered forces of society pursued. It was like a chase through a surrealist nightmare—a chase down endless corridors in which every yard of wall could

become at any moment an opening valve, a sliding door . . .

They were closing in. They were driving him towards the center of the great dimly vaulted chamber. Jane moved towards the center too. She had no awareness of what she was doing. Her lover had been a criminal. And now he was become a hunted man.

In the middle there was a small clear space—a sort of well up one side of which a spiral staircase climbed through tier upon tier of books. Geoffrey had leapt out of hiding and was at the foot of it. He started to climb. The book was still in his hand. He went up with incredible speed, so that as her eye followed him the surrounding books seemed to take on a spiral motion of their own. There were two figures pounding after him. He was high—very high. Not far above his head must be the cobbles of Radcliffe Squire, where that other hunted man had lain . . . From somewhere on a lower level she heard a shouted summons, and in an instant two further figures had appeared at the head of the stair. Geoffrey saw them, ducked under the rail, and leapt perilously to the top of a stack. He swayed, steadied himself, prepared for another leap. In the split second before his taking-off the book dropped from his hand. His foot caught on it and he fell.

He fell sheer—and into a great darkness that now flooded up over Jane. But for a second yet her inward eye could see him—plunging down through a million books, rank upon rank of books, armies of unalterable law.

“THANK YOU,” Bodley’s Librarian took the book from Appleby, laid it on his desk, and examined it carefully. “The joints are cracked, I fear. But, on the whole, we must congratulate ourselves on getting off fairly lightly.” He turned to Remnant. “I suppose,” he asked mildly, “that you came in by the Mendip cleft?”

For the first and only time, Roger Remnant was staggered. “Yes, sir—we did. But surely *you* don’t—”

“My dear boy, I first entered Bodley that way myself. It was what first drew my interest to the Library. So it is very possible, you see, that one day this room will be your own. I had supposed, I confess, that the

Mendip cleft had long since passed out of mind. Otherwise, no doubt, I should have felt constrained to have something done about it. As one grows old, you know, one becomes very cautious and curmudgeonly.” Bodley’s Librarian picked up the book again, adjusted his system of spectacles, and again examined it. “This is now something of a bibliographical curiosity, Sir John. It cannot be often that a book has proved lethal—in a direct physical sense, that is to say. Curious, too, that it should be *this* book. You have looked at the title?”

Appleby shook his head.

“A Thunderbolt of Wrath against Stiff-Necked and Impenitent Sinners. Whether the young man was indeed impenitent at the last it is not for us to say. But his persistence in crime certainly suggests that he was stiff-necked.”

Bultitude was turning over the leaves of the book. “Not a neck stiff enough to stand that drop. It was broken and he died instantly . . . And here is what it was all about.” He drew from the book a folded sheet of quarto paper, smoothed it out, and laid it on the desk. For a few seconds he studied it silently. “Interesting,” he murmured. “And extremely complicated—in fact, quite beyond me.”

“There is much that is beyond *me*,” Bodley’s Librarian was courteous but firmly curious. “You say that this young man had actually succeeded in becoming the directing mind behind a formidable scientific conspiracy?”

Appleby nodded. “He was known to have been a first-rate scientist—as brilliant as we now realize him to have been unscrupulous. His adventures during the war had brought him into the way of conspiratorial activity. We don’t know how he uncovered this organization, or how he managed, within no more than a couple of months or so, to force himself to the top of it. But I suspect the key to his sinister success lay simply in his being very clever. A man may be both able and brilliant without being that. Young Ourglass held all three of these cards.”

Bodley’s Librarian elevated one pair of spectacles to his ample brow. “In what,” he asked, “was this cleverness instanced?”

“Notably in the measures he took to re-

trieve the mistakes of less intelligent colleagues. There was a fellow called Squire who inclined to take the bit between his teeth in the dangerous business of kidnapping people or luring them into Milton. Ourglass, who kept himself quite aloof and concealed, had a wary eye on that. Three times he met, or tried to meet, critical situations of the sort by exploiting the flair he had for character acting. Squire brought in the foreign physician, Dr. Tatistchev, thinking that she might eventually be corrupted into a valuable member of the gang. When Ourglass gathered that she might be unreliable, he put himself in her way as a victim of the place and endeavored to find out where she stood. Again, Squire brought in the little man Routh, and then let him escape again, with this paper in his possession, and with a corpse, it seems, to his credit. That was the grand disaster. Before Routh was recaptured, he had hidden the paper—as we now know, in *A Thunderbolt of Wrath*. Before licensing more brutal methods, Ourglass seems to have tried the same bogus-prisoner trick. But his most brilliant—and blackguardly—application of it was on the island, after the fight. There was a matter of minutes left to him if he was to get away. And he thought it likely that Routh would have parted with his secret to his rescuers. So he put up a show of making a desperate bid to escape. He knew, you see”—Appleby's tone was grim—"the sort of person my sister is. And he'd have had her—and any secret she possessed—if I hadn't nipped it just in time."

"He almost gave the show away to me." It was Remnant who spoke. "You see, I'd rigged up a bit of a periscope and caught a glimpse of the fellows who had been shooting from behind the pillars of the little temple. And I had the impression—no more than that—that the fellow who rushed out as a fugitive had been one of them. It put me in pretty wretched doubt. But I don't see how *you* could have known."

"It was no great feat of detection," Appleby smiled. "He came running from the place, you remember, in a ragged shirt, and holding out his arms. His right arm was blackened right up to the elbow. In other words, this supposed helpless fugitive had been firing with a revolver in a confined

space. There was smoke on his face too."

Bultitude began flapping about his person, produced a cigarette-case, caught the eye of Bodleian's Librarian, and hastily stuffed it away again. "So you, my dear Appleby, had certainty. I had only suspicion. It was born the moment I heard of this able young scientist's being seen in the neighborhood where Cline and his queer lot were working. But it was not a nice thing to speak up about until one was sure. I was feeling very cagey—I believe that is the word—when we met this morning. Later, when your sister came to tea and I heard about the incident in the upper reading room here, I saw that I must get all the information about it that I could. I got hold of Miss Butterton on the telephone. She had noticed the little man, and seen him doing something at old Undertone's desk. It was not difficult to guess what he had been up to. Not being of a very active disposition—a fact, Appleby, which your sister has very frankly pointed out to me—I enlisted the help of young Ourglass's uncle. If my suspicions were correct, he was going to suffer a great family humiliation, and I judged that it would be easier for him in the end if he could look back upon having a little helped in the cleaning up. Eventually, and in our own way—much less spectacular than Mr. Remnant's here—we got a list of the books in which the secret, whatever it was, was likely to be hidden. I then sent old Ourglass home to bed—things might well begin to happen which would not be fit for him to witness—and contacted Bodley's Librarian and yourself."

REMNANT was frowning. "I don't understand how young Ourglass got after us."

"No difficulty about that," Appleby shook his head. "He still felt that you might have got the whereabouts of the paper from Routh. And he was, of course, desperate about it. Without it, apparently, nothing could be retrieved from the ruins of his organization at all. Well, he got out of his helicopter—I don't yet know where—in time to have Jane trailed in Oxford. Later he joined in on that himself, and went down your so-called Mendip cleft after you. . . ."

"Only, of course, I was having Jane trailed too."

"You were!"

"Certainly. I know my sister pretty well. And I didn't quite trust her to stop in Somerville."

Remnant rose. His face had gone very still and grave. "You say know Jane well. Will she . . . get over it?"

"In time she will." Appleby looked at the young man swiftly. "But I think I understand what you mean. I don't know. Perhaps."

"Ought I to go away?"

Bodley's Librarian too had risen. "I take it, Mr. Remnant, that you are not a married man?"

"No, sir. I put up a bit of a yarn to Jane about the missis and the twelve kids. But I'm not."

"The other side of the world. For a year."

"Write?"

"Picture post-cards every three weeks. A letter from time to time."

"Then I'll be off." Roger Remnant moved to the door. He had the habit of not wasting time. "I suppose, sir, they'll let me out?"

"I'm sure they will." Bodley's Librarian dropped a pair of glasses on his nose and smiled. "But I doubt whether they will let you back again." He advanced and shook hands. "If, when you do return to this country, you are minded to pursue your studies here at irregular hours, will you please ring me up? I have a telephone beside my bed. Good-bye."

The door closed. Mark Bultitude looked at his two companions with a light of sudden speculation on his face. "A very good boy," he said. "I wonder, by the way, if he's a *Remnant*? It hadn't occurred to me."

Bodley's Librarian had moved over to a

window and opened it. "I don't know how you people feel. But to my mind there's been a good deal in this that needs blowing away with a breath of fresh air."

They crossed the room and stood beside him. A wind had risen and dispersed the vapors shrouding Oxford. Before them were the spires and towers of the city. They looked up, and could distinguish a few stars. Directly below the window there was a dull red glow. It was the night-watchman's brazier, and the night-watchman was sitting beside it, stuffing a pipe. He glanced up at the sky—an old man, unambitious and serene.

The wind was blowing hard, and licked the charcoal to a fuller glow. A puff of it blew through the room; there was a flutter of papers behind them; something white floated past their heads into the open air and drifted towards the ground. Before they realized the significance of what had happened it had come to rest, close by the old man's feet. He stooped to it. Appleby leaned out, prepared to shout—and stopped as Bultitude murmured something in his ear. The old man picked up the scrap of paper—it was simply the first thing to his hand—folded it, thrust an end into the brazier, and lit his pipe. Then he tossed the remaining fragment into the flame. He drew at the pipe and again looked at the stars. His face appeared yet more serene than before.

Bodley's Librarian closed the window. "We can go to bed," he said. They left the room in silence, and in silence walked through the immemorial place, empty and yet so tremendously thronged. "I'm fond of Bodley," Bodley's Librarian said casually. "And particularly of Bodley by night."

★

First Lieutenant
Henry A. Commiskey, USMC
Medal of Honor



ONE SEPTEMBER DAY, near Yongdungp'o, Korea, Lieutenant Commiskey's platoon was assaulting a vital position called Hill 85. Suddenly it hit a field of fire from a Red machine gun. The important attack stopped cold. Alone, and armed with only a .45 calibre pistol, Lieutenant Commiskey jumped to his feet, rushed the gun. He dispatched its five-man crew, then reloaded, and cleaned out another foxhole. Inspired by his daring, his platoon cleared and captured the hill. Lieutenant Commiskey says:

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The Bride Wore Black

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

Not a flicker of remorse ever appeared in her eyes; nor a shadow of fear in her heart. Jealously she hugged vengeance to herself and nursed her bitterness. Four times she played the role of Grim Reaper, setting up an amazingly mysterious pattern that offered no clues, no motives . . . and no warning for that fifth and last victim of the sinister bride who proudly wore black.

"JULIE. MY JULIE." It followed the woman down the four flights of the stair well. It was the softest whisper, the strongest claim, that human lips can utter. It did not make her falter, lose a step. Her face was white when she came out into the daylight, that was all.

The girl waiting by the valise at the street entrance turned and looked at her almost incredulously as she joined her, as though wondering where she had found the fortitude to go through with it. The woman seemed to read her thoughts; she answered the unspoken question. "It was just as hard for me to say good-bye as for them, only I was used to it, they weren't. I had so many long nights in which to steel myself. They only went through it once; I've had to go through it a thousand times." And without any change of tone, she went on: "I'd better take a taxi. There's one down there." The girl looked at her questioningly as it drew up.

"Yes, you can see me off if you want. To the Grand Central station, driver."

At the ticket window she opened her handbag, separated the small roll of currency it contained into two unequal parts, retained the smaller in her hand. She moved up before the window, thrust it in. "How far will this take me, at day-coach rates?"

"Chicago—with ninety cents change."

"Then give me a one-way ticket." She turned to the girl beside her. "Now you can go back and tell them that much, at least."

"I won't if you don't want me to, Julie."

"It doesn't matter. What difference does the name of a place make, when you're

gone beyond recall?" They went below to the lower track level.

"We'll kiss, as former childhood friends should." Their lips met briefly. "There."

"Julie, I only hope I see you some day soon."

"You never will again."

The station platform fell behind. The train swept through the long tunnel. Then it emerged into daylight again, to ride an elevated trestle flush with the upper stories of tenements. It started to slow again, almost before it had got fully under way. "Twanny-fifth Street," droned a conductor into the car. The woman who had gone away forever seized her valise, and got off. She bought a paper at the waiting-room newsstand, opened it to the classified ads: FURNISHED ROOMS. She dug her nail into the spongy paper, marking it. She walked outside to a taxi. "Take me to this address, here," she said, and showed him the paper.

THE landlady at the furnished rooming house stood back, waiting for her verdict, by the open room door. The woman turned around. "Yes, this will do very nicely. I'll give you the amount for the first two weeks now."

The landlady counted it, began to scribble a receipt. "What name, please?" she asked, looking up.

The woman's eyes flicked past her own valise with the "J.B." once initialed in gilt still dimly visible midway between the two latches. "Josephine Bailey."

"Here's your receipt, Miss Bailey. Now I hope you're comfortable. The bathroom's just two doors down the hall on your—"



"Thank you, thank you, I'll find out." She closed the door, locked it on the inside. She took off her hat and coat, opened her valise—so recently packed for a trip of fifty blocks—or a lifetime.

There was a small rust-flaked tin medicine cabinet tacked up above the washbowl. She went over to it and opened it. On the topmost shelf, as she had half hoped, there was a rusted razor blade.

She went back to the valise with it, cut a little oblong around the initials on the lid, peeled off the top layer of the paper-mâché, thus removing them bodily. Then she prodded through the contents of the receptacle, gashing at the stitching of an undergarment, a nightrobe, a blouse; removing those same two letters, that had once stood for her, wherever they were to be found.

Her predecessor obliterated, she threw the razor blade into the wastebasket, fastidiously wiped the tips of her fingers. She found the picture of a man, in the flap under the lid of the valise. She took it out and held it before her eyes, gazing at it for a long time. Just a young man, nothing wonderful about him. Not so strikingly handsome; just eyes and mouth and nose as anyone has. She looked at it a long time. Then she found a folder of matches in her handbag, and took the picture over to the washbasin. She touched a lighted match to one corner of it, and held it until there was nothing to hold any more. "Good-bye," she breathed low.

She ran a spurt of water down through the basin and went back to the valise. All that was left now, in the flap under the lid, was a scrap of paper with a penciled name on it. It had taken a long time to get it. The woman looked further, took out four similar scraps. She brought them all out, burned all five of them over the washbowl.

II

THE cab drew up short at the entrance to Bliss' apartment house and threw him forward a little on the seat. The liquor in his stomach sloshed around with a jolt. He wasn't helplessly drunk, he never got that way. He knew everything that was said to him and everything he was saying, and he felt just right. Not too little, not too much.

And then there was always the thought of Marge—it looked like he was getting some place there. You didn't want to drown out a thought like that in liquor.

Charlie, on night door duty, came out behind him while he was paying the driver.

Charlie answered, "Morning, Mr. Bliss." He held the entrance door open for him, and Bliss went inside.

There was a mirror panel on one side of the lobby, and Bliss stepped up, took one of his usual looks at himself.

Bliss saw a man of twenty-seven, with close-cropped sandy hair, looking back at him. So close-cropped it looked silvery at the sides. Brown eyes, spare figure, good height without being too tall about it. A man who knew all about him—Bliss. Not handsome, but then who wanted to be handsome? Even Marge Elliott didn't care if he was handsome or not. "As long," as she had put it, "as you're just Ken."

Bliss took out a crumpled package of cigarettes, helped himself to one.

Charlie was big and roundish at the middle. He'd been night doorman in the building ever since Bliss had first moved into it. Bliss liked him. Charlie liked Bliss, too.

Bliss lit the two of them up. Then he turned and started up the two shallow steps to the self-service elevator. Charlie said, "Oh, I nearly forgot, Mr. Bliss. There was a young lady around to see you tonight."

"Yeah? What name'd she leave?" Bliss answered indifferently. It hadn't been Marge, so it really didn't matter much—any more.

"None," said Charlie. "I couldn't get her to leave any. I asked her two or three times, but—" He shrugged. "She didn't seem to want to."

"All right," said Bliss. And it *was* all right.

"She seemed to want to go upstairs and wait for you in the apartment," Charlie added.

"Oh, no, don't ever do that," Bliss said briskly. "Those days are over."

"I know; no. I wouldn't, Mr. Bliss, don't ever worry—" Charlie said with impressive sincerity. Then he added, with a somewhat reticent shake of his head, "She sure wanted to bad, though."

Something about the way he said it

aroused Bliss' curiosity. "Whaddye mean?"

"Well, she was standing here with me, a little to one side, over there by the mirror, after I'd already rung your announcer without getting any answer, and she said: 'Well, could I go up and wait?'"

"I said, 'Well, I dunno, Miss, I'm not supposed to—' You know, trying to let her down easy. And then she opened this bag, this evening pockybook she was holding into, and sort of hunted around down in it like she was looking for a lipstick. And right there on top of all her things there was this hundred-dollar bill staring me in the face. Now y'may not want to believe me, Mr. Bliss, but I saw it with my own eyes—"

Bliss chuckled with good-natured derision. "And you think she was trying to offer you that to let her up, is that it? Gawan, Charlie—" He kicked up one elbow scoffingly.

Nothing could lessen Charlie's pained, round-eyed earnestness. "I *know* she was for a fact, Mr. Bliss; y'couldn't miss it, the way she done it. She left the top of the bag wide open, and went around under it with her fingers, so's to be sure not to disturb it. It was spread out flat, see, on top of everything else. Then she looked from it to me, looked me square in the eye—even holding the bag a little ways out from her. Not *right* at me, y'understand, but just a little ways out, so I'd catch on what she meant. Listen, I been in this business long enough, I know all the signs, I could *tell*."

Bliss worried his lip between the edge of his teeth, pinching it in. "Well, I'll be damned! Well, what'd she look like? Was she anyone you ever saw before? You know most of the crowd I used to have around to see me pretty well."

"Yes, I do," Charlie admitted. "And I can't place her. I'm sure I never seen her before. Mr. Bliss, all I can tell you is she was some looker. Was she some looker!"

"All right, she was some looker," agreed Bliss, "but like what?"

"Well, she was blonde." Charlie brought his hands into play, as the artist in him came to the fore. He outlined—presumably—masses of luxuriant hair. "But this *real* blonde, y'know this *real* yella-blonde? Not this phony, washed-out, silvery kind they

make it. This real blonde."

"This real blonde," Bliss confirmed patiently.

"And—and blue eyes; y'know, the kind that are always laughing, even when they're not? And about this high—her chin come up to this second chevron here, on me sleeve. See. And—ur—not too fat, but y'wouldn't call her skinny either; just a right armful—"

Bliss was eyeing the far side of the foyer ceiling as the description unfolded. "No," he kept saying, "no," as if going over the records to himself. "The closest I can come to it is Helen Raymond, but—"

"No, I 'member Miss Raymond," Charlie said firmly, "it wasn't her; I got a cab for her many a time." Then he said, "Anyway, y'know how I'm pretty sure y'don't know her? Because she didn't know you, herself."

"*What?*" said Bliss. "Then what the hell did she want coming around asking for me, trying to get into my place?"

CHARLIE was still a lap behind him in the circles they seemed to be making. "She didn't know you worth a damn," he repeated with heavy emphasis. "I tried her out, on the way up—"

"Oh, so then you *were* going to let her up. That must have been a hundred, after all."

Charlie cleared his throat deprecatingly, realizing he had made a *faux pas*. "No, Mr. Bliss, no," he protested soulfully. "Now you know me better than that; I wasn't. But I *did* start up on the car with her, acting like I was going to. I thought maybe that'd be the quickest way of getting rid of her, *pretend* like I was going to, and then at the last minute—"

"Yeah, I know," said Bliss dryly.

"Well, we started up in the car together, to the fourth. And on the way, I remembered that robbery we had here in the building last year, y'know, and I figured I better not take any chances. So I started to reel her out a fake description of you, just the opposite to your real one, to try her out. I said, 'He's red-headed, ain't he, and pretty tall, just a little bit under six feet? I'm kind of new on the job here. I wanna make sure I got him placed right, there are so many tenants in the building.' She fell for it like a

ton of bricks. 'Yes, of course,' she said, 'that's him.' Kind of quickly, to keep me from catching on that was the first time she heard what you looked like herself."

"Well, I'll be a—" Bliss said. He went ahead and said what it was he would be.

"So, of course, that was enough for me," Charlie assured him virtuously. "That finished it. When I heard that I said to myself, 'Nothing doing. Not on my shift, y'don't!' but I didn't say anything to her, because—well, she was dressed pretty swell and all that, not the kind it pays to get tough with. So I let her down easy, tried the wrong key to your door, and when it wouldn't work, pretended I didn't have no other and couldn't let her in. We went downstairs again, and she just kind of shrugged it off, like if she hadn't gotten in that time, it didn't matter because she was going to sooner or later. She smiled and said, 'Some other time, then,' and started off down the street, just the way she came, walking. It was funny, too, dressed up the way she was. I watched her as far as the corner, and I didn't see her call no cab or nothing, just walked along like it was ten in the morning. Then she turned the corner and disappeared. O'Connor the cop, he passed her coming up this way, and I even seen him turn and look after her. She sure was a looker."

"Just a ship that passes in the night," remarked Bliss. "Well, one sure thing, it was some kind of stall. If I didn't know her—and I don't, from your description—and she didn't know me, what was it all about, what the hell was she after? Maybe she had me mixed with somebody else."

"No, she had your name right, even your first name. 'Mr. Ken Bliss,' she asked for, when she first come in."

He turned away, readied the elevator panel. He flashed Charlie a mock apprehensive backward grin just before it closed on him. "It's getting so a young guy ain't safe any more living by himself. I think I'll get myself married off and get hold of some protection!" But the thought that he took up with him was of Marjorie—not of anyone else.

COREY showed up at his door at eighty-three, long before he'd even begun to

get ready, the night of Marjorie's engagement party. "What the hell," Bliss said, with the pretended disgruntlement one only shows a close friend, "I only just got back from eating; I haven't even shaved yet."

"I called y'at the office at four-thirty. Where the hell were you?" Corey barked back at him with equally familiar brusqueness. He came in and appropriated the best chair.

Corey wasn't a bad-looking sort of fellow, without being decorative about it. Taller than Bliss, a little leaner—or maybe just seeming so because he was taller—and with dark-brown hair and heavy brows. He tried to be man-about-townish in an *Esquire* sort of way, but it was just a veneer; you could tell he was a primitive underneath that. Every once in a while a crack would show, and you'd get a startling glimpse of jungle through it. Veneer or not, he worked hard at it. Any party you ever went to, he was there, holding up a door frame, hand-warming a glass. Any girl you ever mentioned him to, she knew him, too—or had a friend who did. His technique was a head-on attack, a *Blitzkrieg*, and it had succeeded in the unlikeliest quarters. Some of the haughtiest, most unbending shoulders in town had been pinned to the mat, if the truth had only been known.

He started rubbing his hands with a fine show of malicious glee. "Well, tonight you get hooked! Tonight you get branded! Feel like runing out yet? You bet you do! You're all white around the gills—"

"Think I'm like you?"

Corey triphammered a thumb against his own chest. "You should be like me. This is one guy they don't pin down to a formal promise!"

"If you'd bathe oftener, maybe you'd get more offers," Bliss grunted disparagingly.

"And make them have a hard time finding me when the lights go out? That wouldn't be fair. So where were you this afternoon? I wanted to eat with you."

"I was out getting the headlight. Where d'you suppose—" He opened a dresser drawer, took out a cubed box, snapped the lid. "What d'you think of it?"

Corey took it out of the plush, breathed on it admiringly. "Say, is that a rock!"

"It ought to be, it threw me pul-lenty."

Bliss pitched it back in the drawer with an air of indifference that was admirably assumed, started unhitching his braces. "I'm going in and take a shower. You know where the Scotch is."

He came in again in something under twenty minutes, complete down to batwing tie. "Who was the dame?" Corey asked idly, looking up from a newspaper.

"What dame?"

"The phone rang just now while you were in there, and some girl asked for you. I could tell it wasn't one of your old pals by the way she spoke. 'Does Mr. Kenneth Bliss live there?' I told her you were busy and asked if there was anything I could do. Not another word, just hung up."

"Strange."

Corey swiveled his drink. "Maybe it was one of these women society reporters, looking for stuff on your engagement."

"No, they usually tackle the girl end of it. Marjorie's people have already given out all the dope there is, anyway. I wonder if it was *her*?" he said after a moment's thought.

"Who's *her*?"

Bliss grinned. "I haven't told you, but I think I've got a secret admirer. Funny thing happened not long ago." Bliss recounted in detail the story of the beautiful girl who tried her level best to get into his apartment.

"I wonder what she was after?" Corey asked when Bliss finished.

"She wasn't out to clean the apartment, that's a cinch, because she was willing to pay a hundred dollars just for the privilege of getting in here, and anyone who can get a hundred dollars' worth out of this place is a magician." Corey nodded judicious agreement on that point.

Bliss stood up. "Let's go," he smiled nervously. "I like everything about marriage except the functions leading up to it—such as tonight's."

"The part I like best," said Corey, "is not having it happen in the first place."

ALONE there with Marge, in a little alcove away from the rest of the party, he scratched the back of his neck in pretended perplexity. "Let's see now, how does this go? I've seen enough movies, I ought to have the hang of it. Well, let's give it the

old shut-eye treatment, that's the safest. Shut your eyes and stick out your finger."

She promptly hooked her thumb toward him. He slapped it out of the way. "Not *that* one. Help a fellow out, I'm so nervous I could—"

"Oh, wrong finger? You should be more specific. How'd I know but what you wanted to bite it or something?"

And then the ring. Their heads drew together, looking down at it; they made a love knot of their four hands. They made nonsensical purrings and cooings and other noises which to them were probably language. Suddenly both became aware of eyes regarding them steadfastly, and they turned their heads in unison toward the doorway. A girl was outlined in it, as motionless as though she had taken root in the floor.

She was in tiered, wide-spreading black, the creamy whiteness of her shoulders rising out of it without any interrupting straps. A gossamer black wimple twinkling with jet was drawn over hair so incredibly yellow it seemed to have been powdered with corn meal. A dimple of sympathy—or possibly derision—at the corner of her mouth had disappeared before they could confirm it. "Pardon me," she said quietly, and moved on.

"What a striking girl!" Marjorie exclaimed involuntarily, continuing to stare at the empty doorway as though hypnotized.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. I think I remember her coming in along with Fred Sterling and his party, but if I was introduced, it didn't take."

They looked down at the ring once more. But the spell had been broken, their mood was gone, they couldn't seem to get it back. The room didn't feel quite as warm as it had. As though that look from the doorway had chilled it. She shivered, said, "Come on, let's get back to the others."

THE party was in the home stretch now, they were dancing, he and she. Those little sketchy turns and fake half steps that are just an excuse to cover up a private conversation. He said: "Well, let's take the apartment on Eighty-fourth Street, then. After all, if he'll give it to us for five dollars less a month like he said—And with the

furniture they're going to give us, we can fix it up to look like something—"

She said: "That girl in black can't take her eyes off you. Every time I look over there she's staring at you for all she's worth. If it was any night but tonight, I might begin to get worried."

He turned his head. "She isn't looking at me."

"She was until I called your attention to it."

"Who is she, anyway?"

She shrugged. "I thought all along she came with Fred Sterling and his bunch. You know how he always shows up anywhere with a whole posse. But he left quite some time ago and now I see she's still here. Maybe she decided to stay on alone. Whoever she is, I like the way she handles herself. None of this cheap dazzle stuff. I've been watching, she's had her troubles all evening long, poor thing. Every time she tries to sneak out on the terrace alone, three or four of the men mistake it for a come-on and make a beeline after her. Then a minute later she'll come in again, usually by the side door, still alone. What she does to get rid of them that fast I don't know, but she must have it down to a science. Then they'll come slinking in again themselves right afterward, one by one, with that foolish look men have when they've been stymied. It's a regular side show."

She touched her hand lightly to his lapel as a signal; they stopped on the half-turn. "Some more people are leaving, I'll have to see them off. Be right back, darling. Miss me while I'm gone."

We watched her go, standing there like a flagpole on which the flag has suddenly been run down. When the light-blue gown had whisked from sight at one end of the room, he turned and went out the other way, onto the terrace for a breath of air. He felt a little sticky under the collar; dancing always made him warm, anyway.

The lights of the city streaked off below him like the luminous spokes of a warped wheel.

The terrace ran along the entire front of the apartment. At one end it made a turn around to the side of the penthouse superstructure, and the moon couldn't follow it. It was dark there. There were no floor-

length windows either, just an infrequently used side door, whose solid composition blacked out light. He drifted down around the turn, because there was another couple up the other way, and he didn't want to crowd them. He stood in the exact right angle formed by the two directions of the ledge, and now he had two views instead of one.

AND then suddenly—she must have slipped unnoticed out through the side door and come along from that direction toward him—that ubiquitous girl in black was standing there a foot or two away from him, looking out into the distance, the same way he was.

"Swell, isn't it?" he suggested. After all, they were at the same party together. She didn't seem to want to talk about that, so maybe it wasn't so swell to her.

At this instant Corey came along conquest-bound. He'd evidently had his eye on her for some time past, but the wheel of opportunity had only now spun his way. Bliss' presence didn't deter him in the least. "You go inside," he ordered arbitrarily. "Don't be a hog, you're engaged."

The girl said, in quick interruption: "Do you want to be a dear?"

"Sure I want to be a dear."

"Then get me a big tinkly highball."

He thumbed Bliss. "He does that better than I do."

"It would taste better coming from you." It was primitive, but it worked.

Corey came back with it. She accepted it from him, held it out above the coping, slowly tilted it until the glass was bottom up and empty. Then she gravely handed it back. "Now go in and get me another."

Corey got the point. It would have been hard to miss it. The suave man-about-town glaze shattered momentarily and one of those aforementioned glimpses of jungle showed through the rent. Not travelogue jungle, either. A flash of white coursed over his face, lingering longest around his mouth in a sort of bloodless pucker. He stepped in and went for her neck, with both hands, in businesslike silence.

"Whoa—easy." Bliss moved quickly, blocked them off before they could get to her, deflected them up into the air. By the

time they came down again, Corey already had them under control. He bunched them in his pockets, perhaps to make sure of keeping them that way. Vocal resentment came belatedly, after the physical had already been reined in.

"Any twist that thinks she can make a monkey outta me—!" He turned around and strode back from where he'd come. Bliss turned to follow. After all, what was she to him?

Her hand flashed out, pinned him at her side. "Don't go, I want to talk to you." It dropped away again, as soon as she saw that she had gained her point. He waited, listening.

"You don't know me, do you?"

"I've been trying to find out who you are all evening." He hadn't; he'd paid her less attention than any man there. It was the gallant thing to say, that was all.

"You saw me once before, but you don't remember. But I do: you were in a car with four others—"

"I've been in a car with four others lots of times, so many times I really can't—"

"Its license number was D3827."

"I've got a rotten head for figures."

"It was kept in a garage up on Exterior Avenue, in the Bronx. And it was never called for afterward. Isn't that strange? It must still be there, rusted away—"

"I don't remember any of that," he said, baffled. "But say, who are you anyway? There's something electrifying about you—"

"Too much can cause a short circuit." She moved a step or two away, as though she had lost interest in him as unaccountably as she had developed it. She lifted the jet-spangled scarf from her head, held it spun out in a straight line before her, hands far apart, let the breeze flutter it forward.

Suddenly she gave a little exclamation. It was gone. Her hands still measured off its length. An aerial wire, invisible against the night, came down diagonally right there where she was, riveted to the facade below the ledge by a little porcelain insulation knob. She flashed him a look of half-comic surprise, then bent over, peering down. "There it is, right there! It's caught on that little round white thing—" She plunged one arm down, probing into space. A mo-

ment later she had straightened again with a frustrated smile. "It's just an inch away from my fingers. Maybe you'd have better luck, you probably have a longer reach."

He got up on the coping, squatting on both heels. He cupped one hand to its inner edge, as a brake to keep from going over too far. His head turned away from her searching for it. She stepped forward behind him, palms outturned as if in sanctimonious negation. Then recoiled again as quickly. The slight impact forced a hissing breath from her, a sound that was explanation, malediction, and expiation all in one.

"Mrs. Nick Killeen!" He must have heard it. It must have been a spark in his darkening mind for a moment that went out as he went out.

The ledge was empty. She and the night had it to themselves. Through the terrace windows, around the turn, the radio was pulsing to a rumba and voices were laughing.

One, louder than the others, exclaimed: "Keep it up, you've got it now!"

Marjorie accosted her on her way in a moment later. "I'm looking for my fiancé—" She used the word with proud possessiveness, touching her ring with unconscious ostentation as she did so. "Is he out there, do you know?"

The girl in black smiled courteously. "He was, the last time I saw him." She moved on down the long room, briskly yet not too hurriedly, drawing more than one pair of admiring masculine eyes after her as she went. The maid and butler were no longer on duty in the cloakroom adjoining the front door, only came back as they were summoned. Just as the front door was closing unobtrusively, without their having been disturbed, the house telephone connected with the downstairs entrance began to ring. It went on unanswered for a few moments.

Marjorie came inside again from the terrace, remarking to those nearest her: "That's strange, he doesn't seem to be out there."

Her mother, who had finally been compelled to attend to the neglected telephone in person, screamed harrowingly from somewhere out near the entrance, just once.

The party had come to an end.

III

LEW WANGER left the cab with its door teetering open and elbowed his way through the small knot of muted on-lookers who had collected about it. "What is it?" he asked the cop, showing him something from a vest pocket.

"Cash in." The patrolman pointed almost vertically. "From up there to down here."

Somebody's midnight edition of tomorrow morning's paper had been requisitioned, expanded with its component leaves spread end to end, and formed into a mound along the ground. One foot, in a patent-leather evening oxford, stuck out at one corner. "I understand they're having a blow-out up there. Probably had a drink too many, leaned too far over, and lost his balance." He tipped a section of the news-sheet back, for Wanger's benefit.

One of the spectators, who hadn't been expecting this and was standing too close, turned his head aside, cupped a precautionary hand to his mouth, and backed out in a hurry. "Well, what'd y'expect, violets?" the cop called after him antagonistically.

Wanger squatted down on his heels and began to knead at a rigidly contracted fist that was showing at the upper right-hand corner of the mound. He finally extracted what looked like a swirl of frozen black smoke.

"Dame's handkerchief," supplied the cop.

"Scarf," corrected Wanger. "Too big for a handkerchief." He looked down again at the shrouded body.

"I know him by sight," the night doorman of the building supplied. "I think they were announcing his engagement to their daughter tonight, up at the Elliotts'. That's the penthouse—"

"Well, I'd better get up there and get it over with," Wanger sighed. "Just routine; probably won't take more than ten or fifteen minutes at the most."

At daybreak he was still hammering at the disheveled, exhausted guests ranged before him: "And do you mean to say there's not one of you here even knew this girl's name, or had ever seen her before tonight?" All heads kept shaking dully.

"Didn't anyone ask her her name? What kind of people are you anyway?"

"We all did at one time or another," a dejected man said. "She wouldn't give it. Passed it off each time with some crack like 'What's in a name?'"

"O.K., then she was a gate crasher. pure and simple. Now what I want to find out is why, what her motive was." Marjorie's mother came back into the room at this point, and he turned to her. "How about it, any valuables missing, anything stolen from the apartment?"

"No," she sobbed, "not a thing's been touched, I just got through checking up."

"Then robbery wasn't the motive for the intrusion. She seems to have avoided and discouraged all the rest of you young fellows all evening long, according to what you say; singled Bliss out as soon as there was a chance of getting him alone. Yet according to what *you* say"—he turned to Corey—"he didn't seem to recognize her from the description passed on to him by the doorman at his own flat. And when he arrived here and finally saw her, he acted as though she was a perfect stranger to him. That is, assuming it was the same girl."

"That's about all there is to be done up here for the present. Has anyone anything to add to this description?"

No one had; she had been seen by so many people, it was exhaustive in itself. As the guests filed mournfully out one by one, giving their names and addresses in case they should be wanted for further questioning, Corey edged up to Wanger. He was full of drink, and cold sober at the same time. "I was his best friend," he said huskily. "How do you see it? What do you figure it for?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Wanger answered as he prepared to leave, "not that you're entitled to be taken into my confidence any more than anyone else; there isn't anything to show that it wasn't an accident—but *one* thing. The fact that she cleared out of here so fast right after it happened, instead of staying to face the music like all the rest of you. Another very incriminating piece of behavior is that when she met Miss Elliott in the doorway and the latter asked her if she'd seen him, she calmly answered that he was out there instead of screaming blue

murder that he'd just gone over, which was the normal thing to do. There's always a possibility, of course, that he *didn't* go over until after she'd already left him and gone inside. But what argues against that is that he took that black scarf of hers down with him. That makes it look very much as though she was still with him at the actual instant it happened. Yet she *could* have dropped it, or even given it to him to hold for her, then gone in.

"You see, the thing is fifty-fifty so far; everything you can bring to bear on one side balances nicely with something you can bring to bear on the other. What'll finally tip the scales one way or the other, as far as I'm concerned, is her ultimate behavior. If she comes forward within a day or two to identify or clear herself, as soon as she hears we're looking for her, the chances are it'll turn out to have been an accident, and she ran out simply to escape the notoriety, knowing she had no right up here. If she remains hidden, and we have to go out hunting for her, I think we can say murder and not be very far from right."

He pocketed the description and other data he'd take it down. "We'll get her, either way, don't worry."

But they didn't.

Evening Accessories Department, Bonwit Teller Department Store, fifteen days later:

"Yes, this is our twelve-dollar evening wimple. The only place it could have been purchased is here, it's a special with us."

"All right, now call your sales staff in here. I want to find out if any one of them remembers selling one to a woman whose description follows—"

And when they'd assembled and he'd repeated it three times over, a mousy little person with glasses stepped forward, "I—I remember selling one of these numbers in black, to a beautiful girl answering that description, a little over two weeks ago."

"Good! Dig up the sales slip. I want the address it was sent to."

Fifteen minutes later: "The customer paid cash and took it with her; no name or address was given."

"Is that the customary way you make these sales?"

"No, they're a luxury item, they're usually delivered. In this case it was at the customer's special request that she took it right along with her, I remember that."

Wanger (under his breath): "To cover up her tracks."

Wanger's report to his superior, three weeks later:

"... And not a trace of her since. Not a sign to show who she was, where she came from, where she went. Nor why she did it—if she did it. I've investigated Bliss' past exhaustively, checked back almost to the first girl he ever kissed, and she doesn't appear anywhere in it. The testimony of the doorman at his flat, and of his friend Corey, seems to show that he did *not* know this girl, whoever she was. Yet she deliberately discouraged and shunned everyone else at this party, until she had maneuvered to get him alone out on that terrace. So mistaken identity won't jibe either.

"In short, only indication it was not an accident is strange behavior of this mystery woman and her subsequent disappearance and refusal to come forward and clear up the matter. On the other hand, other than the above, no positive indication it was murder either."

Wanger's record on Ken Bliss:

Met death in fall from 17th-floor terrace, 4:30 A.M., May 20. Last seen with woman, about twenty-six, fair skin, yellow hair, blue eyes, 5 feet 5 inches. Identity unknown. *Wanted for questioning.*

Motive: uncertain if crime was committed, but, if so, probably passionate or jealous. No record of former relationship.

Witnesses: none.

Evidence: Black evening scarf, purchased Bonwit Teller's, May 19.

Case Unsolved.

IV

MIRIAM—last name long forgotten within the confines of the Helena Hotel—was a short, pugnacious person the color of old leather. She had three things she clung to tenaciously: her British citizenship—which had been passively acquired through the accident of birth on the island

of Jamaica; a pair of gold-coin earrings, and her "system" of doing rooms. No one had ever made the slightest attempt to interfere with the first two, and the few abortive efforts at tampering with the latter had met with resounding failure.

Numerical progression had nothing to do with it. Nor had their location along the dim, creaky, varileveled corridors. In fact, it was a sort of mystic algebra known only to the innermost workings of her own mind. No one could disturb it—not with impunity anyway. Not without bringing on a long, malevolent tirade, down endless reaches of labyrinthine corridor, that went on—or seemed to—for hours afterward, long after the original cause of it had slunk away, frustrated.

"The fo'teen come after the seventeen. It got to wait till I finish the seventeen. I ain't never yet do fo'teen first." Nor did this precedence have anything to do with gratuities, which were in any case an almost nonexistent factor at the Helena. "Habit," perhaps, would be the closest guess to what after all was a purely emotional state of mind on Miriam's part.

The wheel of "the system" having finally, at the appointed hour and fraction thereof of the day, swung around to "the nineteen," Miriam advanced down a particularly moldering length of corridor far toward the back, tin bucket in one hand, long pole in the other, at the working end of which could still be detected stray wisps of fibrous fuzz. She halted before "the nineteen," threw open the door challengingly and advanced into a small and singularly unprepossessing room. The pattern of the carpet had been ground into oblivion. A sort of gray-green fungus was all that now covered the floor boards. A whitewashed brick shaft wall blocked the eye a few feet outside the window. Through this a shaft of sunlight struggled downward at an angle that was enough to break its back. The room would have been better off without it, if only to preserve an illusion of cleanliness, for it was fuming like a Seidlitz powder with masses of dust particles.

On the wall above the bed were ranged an array of girls' photographs, of varying sizes, all mounted, framed and glassed over. Miriam did not even deign to raise

her eyes to these. Most of them had been up years. The one "nineteen" was going with now would never get up there, she opined. Because she couldn't afford to have a picture taken, and he couldn't afford to have it mounted, framed, and glassed over. And there wasn't any more room left on that side, anyway. He was too old now to begin a new side. And if he wasn't, he ought to be. Which disposed of that matter.

The bed made, with frenziedly swirling effects on the dust motes in the sunbeam, Miriam became aware of being observed. She turned her head and there was a lady standing out there in the hallway, looking through the open doorway. Miriam knew at a single glance that she did not live in the hotel, and she rose accordingly in Miriam's esteem.

"Yes, ma'am?" she said with cordial interest. "You lookin' for Mst' Mitchell?"

The lady was so friendly and so soft-spoken. "No," she smiled, "I just happened to drop in to see a friend of mine, and she's not in. I was on my way back to the elevator, and I'm afraid I became a little confused—"

Miriam hoped the lady wouldn't go right away. She didn't. She advanced an unnoticeable step nearer the threshold, but still remained well outside the confines of the room proper. She gave the impression of an overpowering interest in Miriam and her conversation.

"You know," the lady confided with an enchanting woman-to-woman intimacy of manner, "I always think you can tell so much about a person just by looking at the room they live in."

"Yes indeed, you sho right about that," Miriam agreed heartily.

"Just take this one here—as long as you happen to be in it tidying it up, and I happen to be on my way past the door. Now I don't know a thing about the person living in it—"

"Mist' Mitchell?" prompted Miriam, engrossed by now. Her chin had come to rest on the rounded point of the mop handle.

The lady made a careless gesture of one hand. "Mitchell or whatever the name may be—I don't know him and I've never seen him. But just let me tell you what his room

shows me—and you correct me if I'm wrong."

Miriam squirmed her shoulders with anticipatory delight. "Go 'head," she encouraged breathlessly. This was nearly as exciting as having your palm read by a fortune-teller, free of charge.

"He's not very tidy. That necktie twisted around the light fixture—"

"He's a slob," confirmed Miriam.

"He's not very well off. But of course the hotel itself would tell me that, it's not very expensive—"

"He's been a month and a half behine in his rent fo' eight years straight!" divulged Miriam darkly.

The lady paused—not like one who is trying to put one over on you, but like one who wants to weigh her words carefully before committing herself. "He doesn't work," she said finally. "There's an early edition of today's paper standing on end in the wastebasket. I can see it from here. He evidently gets up around noon, reads for a while, before going out for the rest of the day—"

Miriam nodded enthralled, unable to take her eyes off this apparition of wit, wisdom, and graciousness. The mop handle could have been snatched away from under her and she probably would have retained her half-inclined position unaltered, without noticing it. "He shiftless, all right. He live on some kine of a sojer pension come in each month, I dunno what it is." She shook her head, reverently. "Gee, you sho good."

"He's lonely, hasn't many friends." Her eyes went up to the wall. "All those pictures up there, they're a sign of loneliness, not popularity. If he had many friends, he wouldn't have to bother with pictures."

Miriam had never thought of it in this light before.

The lady went on, "He's never actually found the girl he's looking for; there wouldn't be so many of them up there if he had. There wouldn't be *any* of them up there if he had. But they—" She tapped the rim of one of her lower teeth reflectively. "Blend them all together, into one composite picture, and they try to tell you what he *has* been looking for."

"Blame!" marveled Miriam, who ap-

parently hadn't even known he *had* been looking for anything. Or at least, not something that you discussed in polite company.

"He's been looking for mystery. An illusion. A type of girl who is not to be found anywhere in this world."

"I 'spect he never goin' get one like he really wants her," suggested Miriam.

"You never can tell," the lady in the doorway smiled. "You never can tell."

Then she deferred to Miriam with an enchanting, quizzical little quirk of her head. "Tell the truth now, haven't I been right more than I've been wrong?"

"You been right all the way!" Miriam championed her stoutly.

"You see? That's what I mean. It just goes to show you what an empty room can tell you."

"Don' it though! It sho do."

"Well, I mustn't keep you from your work any longer—" She gave a chummy little flurry of her fingers, an extra-warm smile of parting, and moved on her way.

Miriam sighed regretfully as the doorway showed blank. She let the mop staff stagger against the wall, went over to the entry, and stood in it, watching her down the hall and around the turn. "She sho was nice," she murmured wistfully. "I bet she don' ever come back again, either."

V

MITCHELL came into the shabby lobby of his hotel at his usual time, folded paper under his arm. He stopped at the desk to see if there was any mail. He got three letters.

The first was a note from Maybelle, his blonde friend from the restaurant. The second was a mistake, belonged in the pigeon-hole above. The third one was either a circular or a bill, he could tell right away by looking at it. The address was typed, and the envelope bore no return address. He didn't open it right away, for that reason. He could scent bills and advertisements a mile away.

He went upstairs, closed the door, and looked around the room. He'd been living here twelve years. The room had acquired facets of his personality in that time. There were framed photographs of girls *galore*

all over the walls. A regular gallery. It wasn't that he was a *roué*; he was a romanticist. He'd kept looking for his ideal. He'd wanted her to be glamorous, mysterious. Masks and fans and secret rendezvous and that sort of stuff. And all he'd ever got was waitresses from Childs and salesgirls from Hearn's. Pretty soon it would be too late to find Her any more; pretty soon it wouldn't matter. He hung up his coat, with the third letter making a white scar above its side pocket. He got out a gin bottle from underneath his dirty shirts on the floor at the back of the closet. He only allowed himself two fingers every evening, parceled out each bottle so that it lasted two weeks. He shot the pickup bodily into the back of his mouth, without putting lips to the jigger glass at all.

Here it was night again, and nothing wonderful, nothing glamorous was ever going to happen to him. He supposed he might as well call up Maybelle now as later and get it over with. He knew he was going to in the end anyway. It was a case of Maybelle or nothing. But he knew just what she'd say, just what she'd wear, just what she'd think. Beer and liverwurst.

He picked up the phone and gave the number of her rooming house. Then he always had to wait while her landlady yelled all the way up the stair well to the fourth floor for her to come down. He'd done it so often, he knew just how long to allow for it. He left the phone and went over to his coat to get out a cigarette. He saw that third, unopened envelope in the side pocket. He pulled it out, tore it open. A crimson ticket fell out. There was nothing else in the envelope. "Elgin Theater. Loge A-1. Good only Tuesday Evening, etc." That was tonight. "\$3.30" it said in the corner. It couldn't be *good*; it must be some kind of dummy. He turned it over and over and over, but there was no catch on it anywhere, no additional payment to be made. It was authentic. Who sent him such a thing?

The phone was making rasping metallic noises. He went back to it. "She'll be right down," Maybelle's landlady was saying.

"Sorry," he said firmly, "I got the wrong number," and hung up.

He started to get ready. It rang back when he was at the hair-smoothing stage. It was Maybelle.

"Mitch, was that you just called me here?"

"No," he lied remorselessly.

"Well, am I gonna see you tonight?"

"Gee, no," he whined falsely. "I'm laid up in bed with a touch of grippe."

"Well, should I stop over and keep you company?"

"No, don't do that," he said hastily. "You might catch it from me and lose a week's wages." He hung up before she could bedevil him with any further unwanted kindnesses.

He was almost sure, when he got down to the Elgin and presented it at the door, that the ticket chopper was going to turn him down. Instead, he accepted it, even passed him in with an extra touch of deference because it was a loge seat.

There wasn't anybody in the loge at all, he discovered to his secret disappointment, when the usher had led him to it. Each loge was fitted with four chairs, walled off from its neighbors on either side and from the balcony behind it. There was more privacy to be obtained in them than in any other part of the house, even the boxes.

He felt funny sitting there alone, with the three vacant chairs around him, kept looking around to see if anyone was coming. All the other loges gradually filled up, but no one came near this center one, the choicest of the lot. At overture time, when the house lights went down and plunged the audience into blue twilight, its three remaining chairs were still unspoken for.

The play began, and as its glamour and make-believe unfolded before him, little by little he began to forget the strange circumstances that had brought him here, to lose himself in its spell. Then suddenly, at exactly what point during the first act she'd arrived he did not know, there was someone already sitting there next to him. There hadn't even been a flick of the usher's torch or a rustle of garments to warn him.

No one ever came to claim those two other chairs just in back of them. He never saw any more of the show than just that first half of the first act. He couldn't take his eyes off her from then on. She was beautiful, gee she was beautiful! She was red-haired and had a face like a cameo. She had a dark velvet wrap around her, lighter on the inside, and she seemed to rise out of

its folds like a—like a nymph out of a sea shell. He would never have dared to speak to her, but suddenly she had turned to him, was holding a cigarette to her lips, waiting for a light. "Would you mind?" she said, with just a trace of foreign accent. "One is allowed to smoke in these loges, I believe."

And that was the start of the acquaintanceship.

HE HAD everything in readiness long before she could be expected to come. He still couldn't believe she'd meant it, that she was really coming here to see him. It had been her own suggestion, he would never have dreamed of—He had told her how to reach the room without having to pass through the inquisitive lobby downstairs, by the service stairs at the back of the house.

All those girls' pictures that he'd taken down from the walls had left yellowed stains behind them from being up so long. What did he want those counterfeits for, now that he'd found the real thing at last?

The phone rang, and he almost tripped all over himself trying to get to it fast enough. Wasn't she coming? Had she changed her mind? Then he slumped disappointedly, with a wearied grimace. It was only Maybelle. "How's your grippe? I been worried about you all day, Mitch. Look, I snitched some of the rest'runt's chicken broth that goes with our special dolla dinna, I'm gonna bring it over in a container, it's the best thing for you when you're laid up like that—"

He writhed agonizedly. God, tonight of all nights! "I thought you had the night shift Thursday nights," he snarled ungraciously.

"I changed places with one of the other girls, so I could come over and take care of you."

"No, some other time, I can't see you tonight—"

She was starting to snivel at the other end of the line. "All right for you! You'll be sorry!"

He hung up heartlessly just as the delicate tap he'd been waiting to hear sounded on the room door. He opened the door and Romance came in, just as he'd always day-dreamed it would, some day, somewhere. She was muffled in that same velvet cape

that she had worn at the theater.

He didn't know what to say or how to act; he'd never been with an Ideal before. "Did you find those stairs all right? I—maybe I should have gone down and met you at the corner." He turned on the radio, but it was a sports commentary, so he turned it right off again.

She brought a bottle of something out from under the folds of her cape. Yet she could even make that act, which would have seemed unspeakably shoddy if committed by anyone like Maybelle, appear gracious and intriguing. "This is for us," she said. "Arak. I brought it as my contribution to our evening." It hadn't been opened yet, foil still sealed its neck, and he had to pull up the cork with a screw.

It was heady stuff, but it made you see the world through rose-colored glasses. It took away his tongue-tiedness, made him speak without difficulty and say the things that came to his mind. "You're just like I always dreamed of someone being, almost as though you came out of my own head."

"The really clever woman is all things to all men. Like the chameleon, she takes her coloring from his ideal of her. It is her job to find out what that is. Those pictures on the wall, they told so plainly what you had looked for in women—"

HE NEARLY dropped the glass he was holding, stared at her wide-eyed. "How did you know there were pictures on the wall! Have you ever been in this room before?"

She drank a sip of liquor, coughed very slightly. "No," she said. "But it is easy to see from the stains that there were pictures there. And anyone who does that is a romantic, and romanticizes women."

"Oh," he said. His perceptions were already a little dulled. "It's funny—"

"What is?"

"Just by being here, you change this mangy room into something warm and glamorous. You take away twenty years and make me feel—like I u-eta feel walking down the bullyvards on leave under a tin hat, and around every corner I was sure I'd find—"

"What?"

"I don't know, something wonderful. I

never did, but it didn't matter, because there was always another corner. It was the feeling that mattered. It made your footsteps sing. I've always wanted it back again, but I was never able to get it any more after that. You must be magic."

"Black or white?"

He smiled vacantly. He evidently didn't get the allusion.

"I'll have to go now." She stood up, crossed over to the dresser. "One more drink before I do. I think there's enough in it for one more." She held up the bottle, eyed it against the light. They had been using the bureau top for a serving table. She filled the two glasses, then interrupted herself, let them stand there on it a moment, a considerable distance apart. "I must make myself beautiful—for your last look at me," she smiled across her shoulder.

A little metal powder holder flashed open in her hand. She leaned across the bureau top, toward the mirror. She made little flurried motions that bespoke the will rather than the deed, for the vast majority of them failed to come anywhere near the surface of her nose.

She was really powdering the air between it and the mirror. He sat there, smiling over at her in hazy benevolence. She picked up the glasses and went back to him.

He looked up at her with an almost dog-like devotion. "I can't believe all this is really happening to me. That you're really here. That you're bending over me like this, handing me a glass. That your breath is stirring my hair. That there's just a little sweetness, like one carnation in a whole room, in the air around me—"

He'd put his glass down meanwhile, and she had hers, as if in some kind of obligatory accompaniment.

"When you go outside the door, I'll know it wasn't true. I'll dream about you tonight, and in the morning I won't know which was the dream and which was the real part. I don't already."

"Drink." And then as he reached for the wrong one, "No, that one's yours, over there. Are you forgetting?" she said with unexpected sharpness.

"To what—?"

"To the coming dream, may it be a long and pleasant one."

He hitched his glass. "To the coming dream."

She eyed it as he set it down again half drained. "This isn't our first meeting," she remarked thoughtfully.

"No, last night at the theater—"

"Not there, either. You saw me once before. On the steps of a church. Do you remember?"

"On the steps of a church?" His head lolled idiotically; he straightened it with an effort. "What were you doing there?"

"Getting married. Now do you remember?"

Absently, absorbed in what she was saying, he finished what was in his glass. "Was I at the wedding?"

"Ah yes, you were at the wedding—very much so." She got up abruptly, snapped the switch of the midget radio. "We'll have a little music at this point." A guttural, malevolent trombone seemed to snarl into the air about them. She began to pivot about him, turning faster and faster, skirt expanding about her knees.

Nobody's sweetheart now,

And it all seems wrong somehow—

He backed his hand to his forehead. "I can't see you so clearly—what's happening—are the lights flickering?"

Faster and faster went the solo dance, the dance of triumph and obsequy. "The lights are still, it's you that is flickering."

His glass fell, crashed on the floor. He started to writhe, clutch at himself. "My chest—it's being torn apart. Get help, a doctor—"

"No doctor could reach here in time—" She was like a spinning top now, seeming to recede down the long vista of the walls. His dimming eyes could see her as a blur of brightness, then like white metal cooling, little by little she seemed to go out forever in the dark.

He was on the floor now at her feet, moaning out along the carpet in a foaming expiration: "... only wanted to make you happy ..."

From far away a voice whispered mockingly, "You have ... you have ..." Then trailed off into silence.

She backed the room door after her, about to close it inextricably into the frame, then froze to statuesque stillness, holding it ajar

that fraction of an inch that meant re-entry could be gained at her volition.

They looked at each other, a foot apart. Maybelle was blonde and buxom and blowsy, and holding a cylinder of some sort done up untidily in brown paper. The woman in the velvet cape, flung around her in a sort of jaunty defiance that somehow suggested a toreador, eyed her calculatingly, watchfully. The other spoke first, pouting with overreddened, full-blown lips. "I brought this over to Mitch. If he doesn't want to see me, he doesn't have to; I understand now. But tell him—"

"Yes?"

"Tell him I said he should drink it while it's still hot."

The woman in the cape glanced over her shoulder at the hair's-breadth crack of door, too narrow to permit vision. "They saw you come in just now, downstairs?"

"Yes, sure."

"They saw you carrying that soup?"

"Yes, sure."

How easy to have inveigled her into the room. She had moved the screen out and around his body, concealing it, when the first warning knock at the door had come. How easy, in the moment or two before this stupid heifer discovered him, to have silenced her forever, with the same glass he had just drunk from. Or to have left her there, involved, too stupid ever to clear herself.

She turned back to her. The door clicked definitely shut behind her. "Get down there where you came from, get away from here fast."

It wasn't said in menace, but in whispered warning.

Maybelle just opened china-blue eyes and stared at her stupidly. "Quick! Every minute that you spend up here alone will count against you. Be sure you take that container down with you again, unopened. Let them know you couldn't get in—gather people around you, protect yourself!" She gave the slow-thinking lummo a push that started her involuntarily down the corridor toward the front of the building. From the turn at the end of it the blonde looked back dazedly. "But wha-what's wrong? What happened?"

"Your friend is dead in there and I

killed him. I'm only trying to save you from becoming involved yourself, you fool. I have nothing against—other women." But Maybelle hadn't waited to hear the last. She emitted a series of noises like a nail scratching glass, fled from view with a great surging wallow.

The woman in the velvet cape moved swiftly, but with a neat economy of movement that robbed her going of all semblance of flight, to the hinged service door at the other end of the corridor, giving onto the unguarded back stairs.

VI

WANGER'S superior didn't put him on it until nearly a week after it had happened. A man named Cleary had been working on it in the meantime, and getting exactly nowhere.

"Say listen, Wanger, there's a peculiar case over at the Helena Hotel. I've just been reading the reports sent in on it, and it occurred to me it has certain features in common with that Bliss incident—remember that, six months or so ago? At first glance they're not at all alike. There's no doubt about this one, it's an out-and-out murder. But what gave me the notion was they both feature a woman who seems to have gone up in smoke immediately afterward, for all the trace we've ever been able to find of her. Also a complete lack of discoverable motive. Neither of which is exactly usual in our line. That's why I thought it'd be a good idea to have Cleary run through it for you, give you his findings; you talk to some of the people he's lined up. You see, you're familiar with that Bliss affair, he's not; you're in a better position to judge. If you think you detect any connection, no matter how slight, let me know, I'll assign you to it full time."

Cleary said: "Here's what I've gotten so far, after seven days on it. It all stacks up very nicely, but it has no meaning. It's as irrational as the act of a feminine homicidal maniac, but I have definite proof that she is nothing of the sort, as you'll be able to judge for yourself later, when you hear it. Now, he died from a pinch or two of cyanide potassium introduced into a glass of arak—"

"Yes, I read that in the examiner's report."

"Here are transcriptions of the witnesses' statements. You can read them over later, I'll give you the gist of them now, as I go along. First of all, I found a red theater-ticket stub—you know, the remainder that's returned to the customer to hold after it's chopped at the door—in the lining of one of his pockets. I traced it back and here's the story: two nights before his death a very beautiful red-haired woman stepped up to the box office at the Elgin Theatre and said she wanted to buy an entire loge outright. The ticket seller asked her what night she wanted it for, and she said that didn't matter, any night. What did matter was that she wanted to be sure of getting the entire loge. That was unusual for two reasons: with most customers the date is the important thing; they take the best they can get on the particular date they want. Secondly, the number of seats didn't seem to concern her either; she didn't ask whether she was getting three, four, or five. All she wanted was the entire loge for her own. He gave her the four seats for the first night they were available, which happened to be the very next night. Naturally the incident impressed him.

"Two of them were never used. Mitchell was seen by the theater staff to show up alone, on that particular night, and turn in one ticket. The same woman who had originally bought them also showed up alone, but a considerable time later, long after the curtain had gone up."

"Only one person is in a position to state for a fact that she was the same woman who bought them," Wanger warned him.

"The ticket seller; and that's his affidavit you have under your thumb there. He'd shuttered his box office for the night and happened to be standing watching the show from the mezzanine stairs; she passed him on her way up—alone—and he recognized her beyond any possibility of doubt.

"Now we come to the important part of the whole thing. I've questioned the usher on loge duty. What he tells me convinces me they were *utter strangers to one another*. He paid particular attention to the act of seating her for several reasons. He has fewer people to seat than the orchestra

or balcony ushers. She came in unusually late, and so stood out. She was strikingly beautiful and came alone, which seemed to him to be unusual.

"He watched closely, if not altogether intentionally, for the above reasons, as she settled herself in her seat. Neither one turned to greet the other. Neither one spoke nor even nodded. He remained within ear-shot long enough to be sure of that. He's positive, by everything he's ever learned in all his years of theater ushering, that they were complete strangers.

"And this cinches it, to my mind. If they hadn't been, Mitchell would have waited for her down in the lobby instead of going up ahead, any man would have, even the crudest.

"It was only during the intermission that the usher noticed they'd begun to talk to each other. And then it was in that diffident way of two people who are just becoming acquainted. In other words, it was a pick-up."

"If they were strangers, how'd she get his ticket to him?

"She bought them, he showed up with one of them."

"Anonymously, through the mail. I found the envelope also, in one of his pockets. The ticket was a vivid crimson. There's a faint pinkish discoloration visible on the inside of the envelope; somebody with sweaty hands, either at the post office or downstairs at the hotel desk—or maybe Mitchell himself—handled it, dampened the dye a little. This is it here.

"**S**HE was only seen one more time after that. Then she vanished completely. I haven't been able to get a line on her since then. The night of the murder she wasn't seen entering or leaving the hotel. However, that isn't quite as confounding as it sounds, because there's a service stairs at the back that leads directly out into an alley without passing the lobby. The alley door works on a spring lock, can't be opened from the outside, but it could very easily have been left ajar to admit her. These precautions must have been her own suggestion, since she evidently came prepared to kill Mitchell."

"Then who was it saw her that one more

time you just mentioned, after the theater episode?"

"The girl he was keeping steady company with, a waitress named Maybelle Hodges. She called at the room within a few moments after the time established for his death by the medical examination. When she knocked on the door, this woman came out. She'd been in there."

"What did the woman say to her?"

"She admitted she'd killed him, and advised the girl to go downstairs again, get away before she became involved herself."

Wanger felt his chin dubiously. "Do you think that statement's trustworthy?"

"Yes, because the girl's description of the woman, both as to appearance and the clothes she was wearing, tallies completely with that given me by the theater staff, so you see she couldn't very well have made the story up. And that brings up a point I mentioned before. She's not a homicidal maniac by any means; she had a beautiful opportunity to kill the Hodges girl then and there. All she had to do was admit her to the room—there was a screen around his body. She had plenty of time. Instead she warned the girl off, for the girl's own sake."

"There's the whole thing. More material than we need, in one way. But the keystone that would give it a meaning is missing: no motive."

"No conceivable motive, and they didn't know one another, and she vanishes as completely as a streak of lightning after it's struck once," Wanger summed up baffledly. "Well, he sent me over here to see if I could make anything out of it. I'm only sure of one thing: this case strings along with the Bliss one; it's an accurate copy."

Colored chambermaid, fourth floor, Helena Hotel:

"I've never seen her before, so I knew for a fact she didn't live in the hotel. I thought maybe she was visitin' somebody. She was just pasin' by the hall that day. This was about, um, two weeks before it happened. Maybe mo'. She stopped and looked in the open door while I'm cleanin' his room. I said, yes'm, you lookin' for Mr. Mitchell? She said, no, but I always think

you can learn so much about a pusson's character and habits just by lookin' at their rooms. She talk so polite and refine' it's a pleasure to hear her. She look at the girls' pictures he have all over the wall and she say, 'He likes women to be mysterious, I can tell by them. Not one is an honest everyday pitcher of how those girls really look. They all tryin' to look like somethin' else, for his sake. Bitin' roses and starin' through lace fans. If one of 'em gave him her pitcher like she really was, he most likely wouldn't put it up.' That's all. And then before I knowed it, she gone away again, and I never seen her no mo' after that."

Clerk at Globe Liquor Store:

"Yes, I remember selling this. A thing as unusual as arak, we don't sell more than a bottle a year. No, it was not her suggestion. I happened to come across it on the shelf and I thought it would be a good opportunity to get it off our hands, as long as she'd asked for something unusual and at the same time potent. She said she was making a present of it to a friend, and the more exotic it was the better pleased he would be. I'd already shown her vodka and aquavit. She decided on arak. She admitted she'd never sampled any of it herself. One funny thing: on her way out she gave me a peculiar smile and said, 'I find myself doing so many things these days that I've never done before.'"

WANGER'S superior said, a week later: "So you think the two cases are related in some way, do you?"

"I do."

"Well, in just what way?"

"Only in this way: the same unknown woman is involved in both."

"Oh no, there's where you're wrong, it couldn't possibly be," his chief overrode him, semaphoring with both hands. "I'll admit I had some vague notion along those lines myself, when I spoke to you last week. But that won't stand up, man, it won't wash at all! Since then I've had time to look over the composite description Cleary obtained of her, and sent in. That knocks it completely in the head. Take the Bliss one out of the files a minute, bring it in here . . . Now, just look at the two of them. Put them side by

Bliss file	Mitchell file
yellow-blond hair	red hair
five feet five	five feet seven
fresh complexion	sallow complexion
blue eyes	gray-blue eyes
speech shows education and refinement	about thirty-two
about twenty-six	talks with slight foreign accent

There's not even a similar *modus operandi* involved, or anything like it! One pushed a young broker's clerk off a terrace. The other dropped cyanide into the drink of a seedy ne'er-do-well in a mangy hotel. As far as we know, the two men not only did not know the women who brought about their deaths, but had never heard of one another. No, Wanger, I think it's two entirely different cases—"

"Linked by the same murderess," Wanger insisted, unconvinced. "With these two diametrically opposite descriptions staring me in the face, I'll grant you it's like flying in the face of providence to dispute. Just the same, all those physical difference don't mean much. Just break them down a minute, and look how easy it is to get a least common denominator.

"Blonde and redhead: any little chorus girl will tell you how transitory that distinction can be. Five feet five and five seven: if one wore a pair of extra-high heels and one wore flat heels, that could still be the same girl. Fresh and sallow complexions: a dusting of powder takes care of that. The difference in eye coloring can be an optical illusion created by the application of eye shadow. The seeming difference in age is another variable, likewise dependent on externals, such as costume and manner. And what else is left? An accent? I can talk with an accent myself, if I feel like it.

"A point to remember is, no single person who saw one of these women saw the other. We have a complete set of witnesses on each of them, separately. We have no single witness on the two of them at one time. There's no chance of getting a comparison. You say there's no similarity in *modus operandi*. But there is in every way, it's just the method of commission that was different; you're letting that mislead you. Notice these 'two' unknown women involved. Both have a brilliant, almost uncanny

faculty for disappearing immediately afterward. It amounts almost to genius. Both stalk their victims ahead of time, evidently trying to get a line on their background and habits. One appeared at Bliss' flat while he was out, the other cased Mitchell's room—also while he was out. If that isn't *modus operandi*, what is? I tell you it's the same woman in both cases."

"What's her motive, then?" his superior argued. "Not robbery. Mitchell was a month and a half behind in his room rent. She bought out an entire loge at \$3.30 a seat, and threw two of the seats away, just to be sure of getting to meet him under favorable circumstances. Revenge would be perfect but—he didn't know her and she didn't know him. We not only can't fit a motive to it, but we can't even apply the explanation that usually goes with *lack* of motive. She's not a homicidal maniac either. She had a beautiful opportunity to kill the Hodges girl—and the Hodges girl is the juicy, beefy, lame-brain type that's almost irresistible to a congenital murderer. Instead she passed it up, warned the girl off for the girl's own sake."

"The motive lies back in the past, 'way back in the past," Wanger insisted.

"You sifted through Bliss' past—broke it down almost day by day—and couldn't find one anywhere."

"I must have missed it then. I'm to blame, not it. It was there, I didn't see it."

"We're up against something here. D'you realize that even if these two men were still alive *they themselves* couldn't throw any light on who she is, what she did it for—because they didn't know her themselves, seem never to have seen her before?"

"That's a thought to cheer one up," said Wanger glumly. "I can't promise you to solve this, even though you've turned it over to me. All I can promise is not to quit trying until I do."

Wagner's record on Mitchell (five months later):

Evidence: 1 envelope, typed on sample machine on display at typewriter salesroom, without knowledge of personnel.

1 arak bottle, purchased Globe Liquor Store.

1 ticket stub, Loge A-1, Elgin Theater.

Case Unsolved.

VII

IT WAS his experience that grownups always asked such dumb questions. Like this lady that was holding him up right now. Bending down and being so kind and all that, and keeping him from having any fun.

"My, what a big ball that is for such a little fellow."

Well, anyone could see it was a big ball. Why did she have to tell him that? Why didn't she go home where she lived?

"How old are you?"

What did she have to know how old he was for? "Five anna haff goin' on six."

"Just think. Whose little boy are you?"

"My mother's and father's," he mumbled patronizingly. How could anyone be anyone else's?

"And what's your father's name, dear?" Didn't she know *anything* at all?

"Have you any brothers and sisters?"

"Nope."

"Ah, what a shame! Don't you miss them?"

How could you miss them when you never had them? However, he could vaguely sense some sort of personal reflection involved in not having any, so he immediately tried to make good the lack with substitutes.

"I got a gramma though."

"Isn't that lovely? Does she live right with you?"

One's granma never did, didn't she know that? "She lives in Garrison." Another substitute came to mind with that mental image, so he threw her into a gap, too. "So does my Aunt Ada, too." Wasn't she ever going to let him go ahead bouncing the ball?

"Oh, all the way up there!" she marveled. "Were you ever up there to see her?"

"Shoe I was, when I was little. But Dr. Bixby said I made too much noise, so Mommy hadda bring me back home again."

"Is Dr. Bixby your grandma's doctor, dear?"

"Shoe, he comes there lots."

"Tell me, dear, have you started school yet?"

"Shoe. I go to kindergarten every day," he said self-importantly.

"And what do you *do* there, dear?"

"We draw ducks and rabbits and cows."

Miss Baker gave me a gole star for drawin' a cow." Wasn't she ever going to go away and leave him be?

He tried to go around one side of her, and she finally took the hint. "Well, dear, run along and play, I won't keep you any longer." She patted him twice on the bullet-shaped back of his head and moved off down the sidewalk, throwing him a fetching smile backward over her shoulder.

His mother's voice suddenly sounded through the screen of the open ground-floor window. She must have been sitting there the whole time. You could see out through the screen, but you couldn't see in through it; he'd found that out long ago. "What was the nice lady saying to you, Cookie?" she asked benevolently. A grownup would have detected a note of instinctive pride that her off-spring was so remarkable in every way he even attracted the attention of passing strangers.

"She wanned to know how ole I was," he answered dextrously. He turned his attention to more important business. "Mommy, watch. Look how high I can throw this!"

"Yes, dear, but not too high, it might roll into the gutter." A moment later he'd already forgotten the incident. Two moments later his mother had.

VIII

MORAN'S wife called him at the office. "Frank—" Margaret's voice sounded emotionally charged.

"H'lo, dear, what's up?"

"Oh, Fuh-rank, I'm awfully glad you got back! I'm worried sick, I don't know what to do. I just got a telegram from Ada, half an hour ago—"

Ada was her unmarried sister, upstate. "A telegram?" he said. "Why a telegram?"

"Well, that's just it. Here, I'll read it to you. It says: 'Mother down with bad spell, don't want to frighten you but suggest you come at once, Dr. Bixby agrees. Don't delay. Ada.'"

"I suppose it's her heart again," he said.

She had begun to whimper in a low-keyed restrained way that was not quite outright weeping. "Frank, what'll I do? D'you think I ought to call them up long distance?"

"If she wants you to go up there, you better go up there," he answered shortly.

She'd evidently wanted to hear this advice, it chimed in with her own inclinations. "I guess I'd better," she agreed tearfully. "You know Ada, she's anything but an alarmist, she's always been inclined to minimize these things before now. The last time Mother had on of her spells she didn't even let me know about it until it was all over, to keep from worrying me."

"Don't get so unnerved about it. Do you want me to find out what busses there are for you?"

"I've already done that myself, and there's one at five. If I take a later one I'll have to sit up all night, and you know how miserable that is."

"You better take the early one," he agreed.

The pace of her conversation quickened, became a flurry. "I'm all packed—just an overnight bag. Now, Frank, will you meet me at the terminal?"

"O.K., O.K." He was starting to get a little impatient with this endless rigmarole.

"And, Frank, be sure you're there on time. Remember, you'll have to take Cookie home with you. I'll have him with me; I'm picking him up at the kindergarten on my way downtown."

As punctual as he made it a point to be, Margaret was already there ahead of him when he got down to the terminal, with the little dab of foreshortened humanity that was Cookie by her side.

A torrent of maternal advice began pouring from her. "Now, Frank, you'll find the food for his supper all ready on the kitchen table, all you'll have to do is heat it. And, Frank, if you should want to go out yourself, later on, I wouldn't leave him alone in the house if I were you. Maybe you can get one of the neighbors to come in and give him an eye."

A voice was megaphoning sepulchrally somewhere in the vaulted depths below the waiting room. "—Hobbs Landing, Allenville, Greendale—"

"That's yours, y'better get on."

They moved slowly down the ramp to departure level.

"Ba-awd," the bus starter was keening. She crouched down by Cookie, adjusted

his cap, his jacket collar, the hem of one of his little knee pants, kissed him on three sides of the head. "Now, Cookie, you be a good boy, listen to whatever Daddy tells you."

The last thing she said, from inside the bus steps, was: "Frank, he's forming a habit of telling little fibs lately, I've been trying to break him of it; don't encourage him—"

HE HAD his coat and tie off, shirt sleeves rolled up out of harm's way, and one of Margaret's aprons tucked into his belt. He'd managed to get Cookie's food warmed up—after all, the way Margaret had left it waiting, all you did was strike a match and put it on the gas-stove—and he'd managed to bring Cookie and the food together at the table, after a lot of running around. But accomplishment ended there. What did you do to keep a kid from wallowing it backhand with the flat of his spoon, making mud pies with it so to speak, so that it flew up all over? With Margaret around, Cookie just seemed to eat. With him, he laid down barrages on it, and flecks of it were even hitting the wall opposite.

Moran kept shifting around behind him, from one side to the other, trying to nab the niblick shots that were doing all the damage. Persuasion was worse than useless; Cookie had him out on a limb and knew it.

The doorbell peeped a second time, Moran meanwhile being so busy he had already forgotten about the first ring. He raked despairing fingers through his hair, looked from Cookie out toward the door and from the door back to Cookie. Finally, as though deciding nothing could be any worse than this, he started out to answer it, wiping off a dab of spinach from just above one eyebrow.

It was a woman, and he didn't know her. She was a lady, anyway; she carefully refrained from seeming to see the apron with blue forget-me-nots in one corner, acted as though he looked perfectly normal. She was young and rather pretty, but was dressed in a way that seemed deliberately to seek to ignore the latter attribute; in a neat but plain blue-serge jacket and skirt. Her hair was reddish-gold, and kept in severe confinement by pins or some other means. Her face was innocent of anything but soap

and water. She had a little rosette of freckles on each cheek, high up on it; none anywhere else. She had an almost boyish air of friendliness and naturalness.

"Is this Cookie Moran's house?"

"Yes—but my wife's away right now—"

"I know, Mr. Moran." There was something understanding, almost commiserating, about the way she said it. "She said something about that when she came by for Cookie. That's why I'm here. I'm Cookie's kindergarten teacher, Miss Baker."

"Oh, yes!" he said quickly, recognizing the name. "I've heard my wife speak of you a lot." They shook hands; she had the firm, cordial sort of a grip you would have expected her to have.

"Mrs. Moran didn't exactly ask me to come over, but I could tell by the way she spoke she was worried about how you two would make out, so I took it upon myself to do it anyway."

"Say, that's swell of you!" he said fervently. "Are you a lifesaver, Miss Baker! Come in. How do you get them to eat, anyway? I'm afraid to ram it in his mouth, he might choke—"

"I know just how it is, Mr. Moran, I know just how it is," she said consolingly.

"Cookie, look who's here," Moran said, still overjoyed at this unexpected succor. "Miss Baker, your kindergarten teacher. Aren't you going to say hello to her?"

Cookie studied her for a long moment, with the grave unblinking eyes of childhood. "Is not!" he finally said dispassionately.

"Why, Cookie!" Miss Baker rebuked gently. She crouched down by the high chair, bringing her head to the level of his. She put a finger to his chin and guided it. "Turn around and look at me good." She found time to flash a tolerant smile to Moran over his head. "Don't you know Miss Baker any more?"

MORAN was embarrassed for the child, as though it made him out the parent of a mentally retarded offspring. "Cookie, what's the matter with you, don't you know your own kindergarten teacher?"

"Is not," said Cookie, without taking his eyes off her.

Miss Baker looked at the father, com-

pletely at a loss. "What do you suppose it is?" she asked solicitously. "He's never been that way with me before."

"I dunno, unless—unless—" A remark his wife had made came back to him. "Margaret warned me just now before she left that he's starting to tell little fibs; maybe this is one of them now." He put an edge of authority into his voice, for his auditor's benefit. "Now, see here, young man—!"

She made a charming little secretive gesture with her eyelids, a sort of deprecating flicker. "Let me handle him," she breathed, "I'm used to them." She thrust her face toward him cajolingly. "What's the matter, Cookie, don't you know me any more? I know *you*—"

Cookie wasn't saying.

"Wait, I think I have something here—" She opened her large handbag, brought out a folded sheet of paper. Spread, it revealed an outline drawing, printed, filled in with crayon coloring, by hand. The crayon filling did not match the guide lines very accurately, but the will was there. Cookie eyed it without any visible signs of pride of accomplishment.

"Don't you remember doing this for me this morning—and I told you how good it was? Don't you remember you got a gold star for doing this—"

"Are you Miss Baker?" Cookie conceded warily.

"Ho!" She worried the lobe of his ear. "Of course I am, bless you! *You* know that."

"Then why don't you look like she does?"

She smiled amusedly at Moran. "I suppose he means the glasses. He's used to my wearing horn-rimmed glasses when teaching class; I came out without them tonight. There's a fine point of child psychology involved, too. He's used to seeing me in the kindergarten and not in his home. I don't belong here. So"—she spread her hands—"I'm not the same person."

Moran was secretly admiring her scientific attitude toward the child and the thorough knowledge it was obviously grounded on, so different from Margaret's irrational, emotional approach.

She stood up, evidently not a believer in pressing a contested point too far with a re-

luctant child at any one given time.

"He'll forget all about this refusal to recognize me, himself, in five minutes, watch, you'll see," she promised brightly in an undertone.

"You've got to know just how to go about it, with kids, don't you?" he said, impressed.

She removed her hat and jacket, started toward the ravaged kitchen. "Now let me see what I can do here to help. How about you yourself, Mr. Moran?"

"Oh, never mind about me," he said with insincere self-denial. "I can go out to a cafeteria later—"

"Nonsense, there's no need for that at all, I'll have something ready before you know it. Now, you just read your evening paper and just forget everything, as though your wife were here looking after things."

She was, thought Moran with a grateful sigh, one of the nicest, most competent, most considerate young women to have around that he'd ever yet had the pleasure of encountering. He strolled out into the living room, rolled down his shirt sleeves, and eased back behind his evening box score.

IT SEEMED a longer ride than it had the summer before, when she and Frank had last made the trip to Garrison.

She tried to shorten the trip, take her mind off its purpose, by thinking of other things. It was not easy to do. She had not the pictorial eye; inanimate scenery had never meant much to her.

They arrived strictly on schedule, ten-thirty to the dot. She was the first one down, elbowing her way through the other passengers. She wasn't disappointed that there was no one waiting to meet her, because she realized Ada must have her hands full at the house.

She hurried up the dark tunnel-like length of Burgoyne Street, smothered under trees, turned left, continued on for two house lengths, turned in at the well-remembered flagstone walk, with its tricky unevenness of edges.

As she stepped up on the little white-painted porch platform, dread assailed her. There were too many shadows flitting back and forth behind the lowered linen shades,

you could hear the hum of too many voices coming from inside, as at a time of crisis, when the neighbors are called in. There was something wrong in there, there was some sort of commotion going on. She reached out and poked the bell button with an icicle for a finger. Instantly the commotion became aggravated. A voice screamed "I'll go!" Another shrieked, "No, let me!" She could hear them clearly out where she was. Had one of them been Ada's high-pitched and unrecognizable with uncontrollable grief? It seemed to her it had. She must be hysterical, all of them must be.

Before her heart had time to turn over and drop down through her like a rock, there was a quick shuffle of frenzied footsteps, as though someone were trying to hold someone else back. The door billowed open and a great gush of yellow interior light fanned out all over her. There were two unrecognizable figures silhouetted in it, grotesques with strange shapes on their heads.

"I got to it first!" the smaller one proclaimed jubilantly. "I was opening doors before you were born—" The music and the welter of hilarious voices streamed out around them into the quiet country night.

Her heart didn't drop, her overnight bag did instead—with a slap to the porch floor. "Mother," she gasped soundlessly.

The other figure in the paper party cap was Ada. "Margaret, you *darling*! How did you remember it was my birthday? Oh, what a dandy surprise, I couldn't have asked for anything—"

They were talking at cross-purposes, the three of them. "Oh, but Ada—" Margaret Moran was remonstrating in a shaky, smothered voice, still unmanageable from the unexpected shock, "How could you do it in *that* way! If you knew what I went through on the way up here! No, Mother's health is one thing I don't think you have any right to joke about! Frank won't like it a bit when he hears it—"

A puzzled silence had fallen over the two standing in the doorway. They turned to look after her. She was inside in the crepe-paper-lighted hallway now. The vivacious old lady asked Ada with a birdlike, quizzical cock of her head: "What does she mean?"

Ada asked, at the same time: "What on earth is she talking about?"

"I got a telegram from you at one this afternoon. You told me Mother'd had another of her attacks, and to come at once. You even mentioned Dr. Bixby's name in it—" Margaret Moran had begun to cry a little with indignation, a natural reaction from the long strain she had been under.

The mother said: "Dr. Bixby's in there now; I was just dancing a cakewalk with him, wasn't I, Ada?"

Her sister's face had gone white under the flush of the party excitement. She took a step backward. "I never in the world sent you any telegram!" she gasped.

MORAN surreptitiously stuck a thumb under the waistband of his trousers to gain a little additional slack. "Margaret couldn't have done any better herself," he said wholeheartedly, "and when I say that, I'm giving you all the praise I know how.

"It'll make her your friend for life, when I tell her how you walked in here and saved the day. You must come over and have dinner with the two of us—I mean without working for it—when she gets back."

She eyed the empty plates with a cook's instinctive approval, flattered to see that her efforts have not been slighted. "Thank you," she said, "I'd love to. I don't get as much home cooking as I might myself. I've had a room at the Women's Club since I've had this school job, and there are no facilities. Before then, of course, at home, we all took turns in the kitchen."

She rose slowly, stacked dishes together. "Now you just sit there and take it easy, Mr. Moran, or inside in the next room or wherever you please, I'll get through these in no time."

She came out to the dining-room door one time and spoke to him, drying a large dish between her hands with a cloth. "Nearly through now," she announced cheerfully. "How're you two getting along in here?"

"Fine," said Moran, looking back across his shoulder at her from the semireclining slope the chair gave him. "I'm waiting to hear from my wife, she promised to call as soon as she gets up there and let me know how things are."

"That won't be for some time, will it?"

He glanced at the clock across the room. "Not much before ten-thirty or eleven, I guess."

She said: "I'm going to squeeze out some orange juice for the two of you, for the morning, as soon as I finish putting the last of these away. I'll leave it in a glass inside the frigidaire."

"Aw, you don't have to bother doing that—"

"Doesn't take a minute; Cookie really should have it daily, you know. It's the best thing for them." She returned to the kitchen again. Moran shook his head to himself. What a paragon.

Cookie was in there with him just then, playing around. Then a minute or so later he got up and went to the hall door, stood there looking out, talking to her. She'd evidently wandered out there herself, from the kitchen door at the other end of it, while she finished drying the last of the utensils. Margaret had that habit, too, of perambulating around when she was in the last stages of dish drying. Cookie was standing perfectly still, watching her.

He heard him say: "What're you doing that for?"

"To dry it off, dear," she answered with cheery forthrightness. Moran only heard it subconsciously, so to speak, with the fraction of his faculties not absorbed in his paper.

She came in a moment later, painstakingly wiping the blade of a small sharp-edged fruit knife that she'd evidently just used to cut and prepare the oranges. Cookie's eyes followed the deft motions of her hands with that hypnotic concentration children can bring to bear on the most trivial actions at times. Once he turned his head and glanced back into the hallway, somewhere beyond radius of the door, where she had been just now, with equally rapt absorption. Then came back to her again.

"There, all through," she said to him playfully, flicking the end of the dishcloth toward him. "Now I'll play with you for five or ten minutes, and then we'll see about putting you to bed."

Moran looked up at this point, out of sheer sense of duty. "Sure there's nothing I can do to help?" he asked, hoping against hope the answer would be no.

It was. "You go right back to your

paper," she said with friendly authoritative-ness. "This young man and I are going to have a little game of hide-and-seek."

She was certainly a godsend. Why, when it came to getting your paper read without distraction, she was even better to have around than Margaret.

ADA tried to silence the buzzing party guests. "Shh! Be quiet just a minute, everybody. Margaret's out in the hall, trying to call her husband in the city and tell him about it." She took the added precaution of drawing the two sliding parlor doors together.

"From here?" one of the younger girls piped up incredulously. "For heaven's sake, that costs *money*!"

"I know, but she's all upset about it, and I don't blame her. Who could have done such a thing? Why, that's a horrible trick to play on anyone—!"

One of the matrons said with unshakeable local pride: "I know nobody up here in our community would be capable of it. We all think too much of Della Peabody and her girls." Then immediately spoiled it by adding: "Not even Cora Hopkins—"

"And they signed my *name* to it!" Ada protested dramatically. "It must be somebody that knows the family."

"And mine, too, isn't that what she said?" Dr. Bixby added. "Where'd they hear about me?"

Half-frightened little glances were exchanged here and there about the room, as though somebody had just told a chilling ghost story. One of the girls, perched on the window sill, looked behind her into the dark, then stood up and furtively moved deeper into the room. "It's like a poison-pen tellygram," somebody breathed in a husky stage whisper.

Ada had reopened the sliding doors a foot, overcome by her own curiosity. "Did you get him yet?" she asked through them. "What does he say?"

Margaret Moran appeared in the opening, widened it, and then stayed in it undecidedly. "She said our house doesn't answer. He *could* be out, but—look at the time. And if he is, what's he done with Cookie? He wouldn't have him out with him at this hour. And the last thing he said was he

wouldn't budge out of the house. There ought to be someone there with Cookie to watch him—"

She looked helplessly from Ada to her mother to the doctor, who were the three nearest to her. "I don't like it. Don't you think I ought to start back—?"

A chorus of concerned protest went up.

"Now?"

"Why, you just stepped off one bus, you'll be dead!"

"Ah, Margaret, why don't you wait over until the morning at least?"

"It isn't that—it's that telegram. I don't know, it gives me a creepy feeling, I can't shake it off. A thing like that isn't funny, it's—it's malicious; there's something almost dangerous about it. Anyone that would do that—well, there's no telling *what*—"

"Why don't you try just once more," the old family doctor suggested soothingly. "Maybe he's gotten back in the meantime. Then, if he hasn't, and you still feel like going, I'll drive you over to the bus station; my car's right outside now."

This time they didn't bother closing the doors at all, they didn't have to be told to be quiet. With one accord they all shifted out into the hall after her and fanned out in a wide half circle, ringing her and the telephone about, listening in breathless sympathetic silence. It was as though she were holding a public audition for her innermost wifely distress. Her voice shook a little. "Operator, get me the city again. That same number—Seville 7-6262."

FROM time to time he could hear a splatter of quick running footsteps somewhere near by, and a burst of crowing laughter from Cookie, and an "I see *you*!" from her. Mostly up and down the hall out there.

Hide-and-seek he supposed tolerantly.

One time there was a stealthy, stalking cessation of sound, a little more long drawn out than the others, and he looked up to find her hiding herself just within the room doorway. She was standing with her back to him, peeping out around it into the hall. "Ready?" she called genially.

Cookie's answer came back with unexpected faintness. "Not yet—wait."

She seemed to enjoy it as much as the kid.

She turned her head, found him watching her approvingly. "He's gone into that little storage space built in beneath the staircase," she confided with a twinkle. And then, more seriously, "Is it safe for him to go in there?"

"Safe?" repeated Moran blankly. "Sure—there's nothing in there, couple of old raincoats."

"Ready," a faint voice called.

She turned her head. "Here I come," she warned, and vanished from the doorway.

He could hear her pretendedly questing here and there for a preliminary moment or two, to keep up the relish of the game longer. Then a straining at woodwork, and a muffled burst of gleeful acknowledgment. Suddenly his name sounded, with unexpected tautness. "Mr. Moran!" He jumped up and started out to them. It had been that kind of a tone: hurry. She'd repeated it twice before he could even reach them, short as the distance was.

She was pulling at the old-fashioned iron hand-grip riveted to the door. Her face was whitening down around the chin and mouth. "I can't get it open—see, that's what I meant, a minute ago!"

"Now don't get frightened," he calmed her. "There's nothing to it." He grasped the iron hand-grip, simply pulled it up a half inch parallel to the door, the latch-tongue freed itself, and he drew out the heavy oaken panel. It was set into the back of the staircase structure, half the height of the average door and a little broader. It did not quite meet the floor either, there was a half-foot sill under it.

Cookie clambered out hilariously.

"See what it was? You were trying to pull it out toward you. It works on a spring latch and you have to free that first by hitching the iron bracket up; then you pull it out."

"I see that now. Stupid of me," she said half shamefacedly. She gestured vaguely above her heart, fanned a hand before her face. "I didn't let on to you, but what a fright it gave me! Phew! I was afraid it had jammed and he'd smother in there before we could—"

"Oh, I'm sorry—darn shame—" he said contritely, as if it had been his fault for having such a door in his house at all.

She seemed to want to continue to discuss possibilities, as though there was a hidden

morbid streak in her. "I suppose if worst had come to worst, you could have broken it down, though, at a moment's notice."

"I could have taken something to it, yes," he agreed.

She seemed surprised. He saw her eye glance appraisingly over his husky upper torso. "Couldn't you have broken it down with your bare hands, or by crashing your shoulder against it?"

He fingered the edge of the door, guided it outward so she could scan it. "Oh, no. This is solid oak. Two inches thick. Look at that. Well-built house, you know. And it's in a bad place, there isn't room enough on either side to run against it, to get up impetus. The turn of the wall here only gives you a couple yards of space. And on the inside it slants down with the incline of the stairs; you can't even stand up full length. The closet's triangular, wedge-shaped, see? Swing your arm too far back over your shoulder, on either side of the door, and it would jam against the sloping top. Or against the wall indentation out here."

Suddenly, to his surprise, she had lowered her head, gone through the low doorway into the darkness inside. He could hear her sounding the thick sides of it with her palms. She came out again in a moment. "Isn't it well built!" she marveled. "But it's stuffy in there, even with the door open. How long do you suppose a person could last, if they did actually happen to get themselves locked into such a place?"

His masculine omniscience was caught unprepared for once. He'd evidently never given the matter any thought before. "Oh, I don't know—" he said vaguely. "Hour and a half, two hours, at the most." He looked up and down the thing with abstract interest. "It is pretty airtight, at that," he conceded.

She winced repugnantly at this thought she had herself conjured up, wholesomely changed the subject. Everyone, after all, has odd moments of morbid conjecture. She leaned down, grasped Cookie from below the armpits, and started to march his legs stiffly out before him like a mechanical soldier. "Well, mister." Then she deferred to Moran: "Do you think he should go to bed now?"

Cookie started some more vertical emphasis. He was having too good a time to give it up without a battle. "One more! One more!"

"All right, just one more and then that's all," she conceded indulgently.

Moran went back to his chair in the living room. He'd finished his paper. He blew a lariat of sky blue cigar smoke around his head with ineffable comfort. He sat there with it for a moment in a complete vacuum of contentment.

It was a seldom enjoyed luxury, and he almost didn't know what to do with it. His head started to nod. Cookie came tiptoeing in, carrying Moran's soft-toed carpet slippers, one each in hand. Soft-toed and soft-soled. "Miss Baker says to put these on, you feel better," he whispered sibilantly.

"Say, that's fine," Moran beamed. He bent down and effected the change. "Tell her she's spoiling me."

Cookie tiptoed out with the discarded shoes—heavy-soled, thick-toed—with as much precaution as when he'd come in, even though the object of his care was unmistakably still awake. Moran sprawled back, and when the second and third nods came, let them ride. A girl like that oughta—oughta be in a jewelry-store window—mmmmmm—

"I KNOW," Dr. Bixby purred. He reached out and grasped her outside shoulder and juggled it hearteningly. "I know. You're all worried and upset, and wish you were down there already. Now, honey, don't take on like that. It'll be all right, it's *bound* to be, how could it help being otherwise? Just 'cause he doesn't answer the telephone? Shucks, he's probably over at one of the neighbor's houses guzzling beer—"

"I know, Dr. Bixby, but I can't help it. It's that telegram. It gives me the most uncanny feeling, and I can't throw it off. *Somebody* sent that telegram—"

"Nat-chelly, nat-chelly," he chuckled benevolently, "telegrams don't just send themselves. Maybe some blame-fool in his office thought he'd like to get back at him—" But he let the thought die out, it wasn't very convincing.

She was staring ahead, down the State

Highway that skirted the opposite side of the bus station to where the doctor had his Ford parked. "It's late, isn't it? Maybe there aren't going to be any more tonight—" She kept continually putting a finger to her teeth, replacing it a moment later with another one.

Dr. Bixby good-naturedly drew her hand down, held it pressed to her lap. "I broke you out of that habit when you were seven; you're not going to make me do it all over again, are you?" He looked ahead through his none-too-spotless windshield. "Here she comes now. See those two lights way off down there? Yep, that must be her all right."

SOMETHING soft brushing against his legs down by the floor roused him. He looked down blurredly. Cookie was scampering around down there on all fours, like a little animal, head almost lower than his feet. "Still trying to find some place to hide?" Moran asked fondly.

His young son looked up, sharply corrected his failure to keep abreast of current events. "We not playing *now* any more. Miss Baker loss her ring, I'm helping her to find it."

Her voice sounded somewhere outside at that moment. "See it yet, dear?"

Moran roused himself, got up, and went out. He remembered seeing it on her when she first came in. The stair closet door was wide open, as though she'd already been in there. She was exploring the baseboard across the way, on the opposite side of the hall, slightly bent forward, hands cupped to knees.

"I don't know how it happened to slip off without my feeling it," she said. "Oh, it's probably around somewhere. The only reason I'd feel bad about losing it is my mother gave it to me on my graduation—"

"How about in here?" he said. "Have you looked in here? You stepped in here once, remember, and thumped the sides—"

She glanced casually over her shoulder, while she continued her own search. "I looked in there already, but I didn't have any matches, so it was hard to make sure—"

"Wait a minute, I've got some right here, I'll look again for you—" He stepped across the sill, struck a tarnished gold glow,

crouched down with his back to the entrance.

The sound the door made was like a pistol shot in the hallway.

IX

Superior to Wanger:

"WELL, what'dje find out over there? You seem to be becoming our expert in murders-that-don't-look-murders-but-are."

"Sure it was! Certainly it was! How can there be any doubt about it?"

"All right, don't blow all these papers off my desk. Well Kling tells me the men he put on it don't seem to feel as sure about that as you do yourself. That's why I got his O.K. on your horning in. He was very nice about it—"

"*What?*" Wanger became almost inarticulate. "What're they trying to do, build it up that he locked himself in acci—"

His superior sliced his hand at him calmly. "Now, wait a minute, don't get so touchy. Here's what he means by that, and I can see his point, too. It's true that Mrs. Moran got, or claims she got, an anonymous telegram with her sister's name signed to it. Unfortunately, there hasn't been any trace of it found around the house, it's disappeared, so there's no way of tracing where it was filed from. It may have been filed right here in the city, and in her perturbation she didn't notice the date line. It's true that the kid keeps prattling about a 'lady' playing games with him. The only two facts that point definitely to an adult agency being involved are the cut telephone wire and the note on the kid's quilt—"

Wanger forced up his underlip scornfully. "And what about the putty?"

"Meaning the kid couldn't have reached the top of the door with it, that it? No, Kling tells me they tried him out on that. Didn't interfere, just handed him the putty set, said, 'Let's see you cover up the door like the other night,' stood back and watched. When he'd gotten as high up as he could go he dragged over the three-legged telephone stool, climbed up on that, and his hands spanned the top crack beautifully. Now if he did that, of his own accord and without being coached, the second time,

why, they wanna know, couldn't he have done it the first?"

"Hoch!" Wanger cleared his throat disgustedly.

"They put him to another test. They said to him, 'Sonny, if your daddy went in there, what would you do—let him out or make him stay in?' He said, 'Make him stay in there and play a game with me.'"

"Are those guys crazy—where're their heads? I suppose the kid cut the phone wire, too. I suppose he wrote out that note in printed capitals—"

"Let me finish, will you? They're not trying to say that the kid did all those things himself. But they *are* inclined to think along the lines of it being an accident, with a clumsy frightened attempt on someone's part, afterward, to escape being involved.

"Now here's the theory of Kling's men—and remember, it hasn't jelled, they're just playing around with it until something better shows up; Moran had some lady friend on the side. A fake telegram was sent to the wife to clear the coast. Before the woman got there, Moran, alone in the house with his kid, started playing games with him. He accidentally locked himself in the closet and the damn-fool kid putted up the door. The woman shows up and Moran is smothered to death in there. She loses her head, deathly afraid of being dragged into it because of her reputation. She puts the kid to bed and leaves an unsigned note pinned to the quilt for the wife. Maybe the phone starts ringing while she's there and, afraid to answer it, she loses her head even further and cuts the wire. They think she even went so completely haywire that, after having already opened the closet door once and seen that Moran was dead, she made a panicky attempt to leave things looking just like she found them by closing the door on him a second time and leaving him in there, even replugging the putty, so it would look like the kid's work and nobody else's. In other words, an accident followed by a clumsy attempt at concealment on the part of somebody with a guilty conscience."

"Pew!" said Wanger succinctly, pinching the end of his nose. "Well, here's the theory of your man Wanger: bull fertilizer. Do

I stay on or do I come off?"

"Stay on, stay on," consented his overlord distraitly. "I'll get in touch with Kling about it. After all, you can only be wrong once."

THEY seemed to be playing craps there in the room, the way they were all down on their haunches hovering over something in the middle of the floor.

A matron stood watchfully looking on, over by the doorway, without taking part in the proceedings herself.

Wanger, over in the opposite doorway, where he'd just come in unnoticed, stood taking in what was going on as long as he could stand it. Finally he strode forward, the apelike conclave disintegrated, to reveal a pygmy in the middle of the giants. Cookie looked even smaller than he was, against their anthropoidal bulk. "Not that way, not that way," Wanger protested. "Whatdaya trying to do anyway—sweat a kid that age?"

"Who's sweating him?" Wanger knew they hadn't been. One of them put away a gleaming pocket watch he'd evidently been dangling enticingly at the end of its chain with complete lack of result. The matron threw back her head and laughed with a neigh like a horse.

Cookie, with that devilish quickness of children to scent sympathy and play up to it, took one look at Wanger, wrinkled up his muzzle into a monkey grimace, and began to emit the moderato opening stanzas of a good hearty bawl.

Wanger drew up a chair, sat down on it, spread his legs at a ninety-degree angle, and perched Cookie on one.

He had shooed the others from the room; all but the matron.

"We're going to play Charlie McCarthy again," the matron chuckled pessimistically, "I don't think he was even awake through the whole thing that night—"

"He was awake all right. Who's doing this?"

Cookie was beginning to know Wanger from previous knee "interviews." He smiled favoringly, perhaps even a trifle venally, up at him. "You got' ny more jelly beans?"

"No, the doctor says I gave y' too many already." Wanger got down to work. "Who made your daddy go in the closet, Cookie?"

"Nomboidy made him, he wanneda go. He was playin' a game."

"That's the same place where y'got stumped before," the matron pointed out gratuitously.

Wanger snapped his head around with a flash of unfeigned ill-temper, rare with him. "Listen, will you do me a favor!" He drew a long, preparatory belly breath, to see him through what he knew he was in for. "Who was he playing the game with, Cookie?"

"Us."

"Yes, but who's us? You and who else?"

"Me and him and the lady."

"What lady?"

"The lady."

"What lady?"

"The lady that was here."

"Yes, but what lady was here?"

"The lady that, the lady that—" It wasn't that Cookie wasn't willing; the dialectics of the thing were throwing him. "The lady that was playing the game with us," he concluded with a burst of inspiration.

Wanger was nearly run through the breath supply he'd laid in by now; he let the dregs of it out with a dejected hiss.

"Y' see how he gets away from y' each time? That kid isn't going to need a mouth when he grows up."

Wanger was not in an equable mood. "Listen, McGovern, I'm not kidding, if you make one more side remark while I'm doing this—"

"Doing what?" the matron wanted to know, but with prudent inaudibility.

Wanger took out a small black pocket notebook. He turned back to his knee-riding witness, who was swinging his legs blithely. "Well, look, what was the name of the game?"

"Hide-'n-seek!" crowed Cookie positively. He was on familiar ground now.

"Whose turn was it first?"

"Mine!"

"And then whose turn was it?"

"'Nen the lady's!"

"And after that?"

"'Nen it was my daddy's turn."

"Build-up," murmured Wanger softly. He scribbled almost undecipherably, on his free knee, using the curve of one arm to support his other burden: "Inveglied—" He

crossed it, substituted: "Invagled—" He crossed that, too, scrawled: "Lured in during game of hide-and-seek."

He looked up bitterly. "What the hell! It don't make sense! How's a strange woman that the guy never saw before going to walk into a house and get a full-grown man to play games with her—just like that!"

The sardonic matron said very softly, "You'd be surprised. But not the kind of games you mean."

The book hit the opposite wall and dropped with a little flurry. "What's a matter?" asked Cookie, looking after it interestedly. "What'd the book do, ha?"

"Wait a minute, you're taking it for granted he never saw her before, aren't you?" the matron tried to remind him, at the risk of her neck.

"You heard what he says each time!" Wanger hollered over at her wrathfully. "I've got it jotted down in that thing six times over! She never came to their house before."

Cookie started to pucker up into his weazened monkey expression again.

"I'm not sore at you, sonny," Wanger hastily amended, patting the slope of Cookie's head mollifying a couple of times.

Then it suddenly came. Cookie looked up at him with the uncertainty of one whose confidence in a relationship has just been shaken. "Whoua you mad at then? Are you mad at Miss Baker?"

"Who's Miss Baker?"

"The lady that was playin' games with—"

Wanger nearly dropped him to the floor on the back of his head. "My God, I actually got her name out of him! Did you hear that? Here I didn't even think that he—"

His enthusiasm was short-lived. His face dimmed again. "Aw, it was probably just a spiked handle she gave herself. She started being Miss Baker when she came in the door, she stopped being Miss Baker the minute she got outside it again."

Wanger glanced around in the direction of the stairs. "I wonder if she'd be any help— Ask the doctor if she's in condition to come down for just a minute. Tell him I don't want to question her, y'understand,

I just want to see if she can throw some light on a point the kid brought up. I won't keep her a minute."

"Don't take any lead pipe to the kid while I'm out of the room now," the matron warned. "I'm supposed to be in attendance the whole time he's with you."

She returned in a couple of minutes. "They didn't want her to, but she did want to. She'll be right down."

The doctor and a nurse both came in with her. She walked very slowly. The murder hadn't been in the closet out there; it was in here on her face.

Wanger almost didn't have the heart to go ahead. But, after all, it had to be done sooner or later. "Mrs. Moran, I don't suppose there's a Miss Baker that you happen to know of— I'm trying to find out if there really is such a person or if it was just a — He just mentioned a Miss Baker—"

He saw the change come over her face before the doctor and nurse did, because she was turned toward him. It had seemed impossible a moment ago that anything could have been added to the emotion she had undergone already, and yet now something was. A climactic excess of horror, to top all the other horror she had experienced, seemed to spread slowly over her face like a cold, vicious film. She pressed two fingers to the outer edge of each eyebrow, as if to keep her skull from flying apart. "Not *here!*" she whispered.

"That's what he says," Wanger breathed back unwillingly.

"Oh, no—*no!*"

He correctly translated the meaning she gave the harried negative; not a denial of the person's existence, a denial of the accusation—simply because it was so unthinkable.

"Then there is—" he persisted gently.

"The child's—" She pointed, hardly able to articulate. Tears, no longer of grief but of mortal terror, welled unchecked from her eyes. "Cookie's—kindergarten teacher —"

She crumpled; not in a faint, but her legs gave under her. The nurse and doctor caught her, supported her between them. They pivoted her slowly around to face the door, started her over toward it, taking

small steps. She was incapable of saying anything further, but nothing further needed to be said. It was all in Wanger's hands now.

SHE was in the middle of a flock of kids in a subdivided section of the schoolyard, separated from the rougher activities of the older children. They were playing games.

She saw him watching, and left them a minute and came over to him. She was a short, slender little body with coppery-gold hair; young, not more than twenty-four or five; pretty behind her shell-rimmed glasses. In fact, even pretty before them, if a trifle more austere. Sparingly gilded with freckles on her cheekbones. They were becoming. "Were you waiting for one of them?" she asked pleasantly. "The session won't be over for another—"

"It's you, yourself I'd like to speak to," Wanger said. He tried to do his job without frightening her unduly. After all, she was just a stray name on a child's lips, so far. "I'm Wanger, of the Police Department—"

"Oh." She wasn't particularly frightened, just taken aback.

"I'd like you to come over and see Cookie Moran—you know, Mrs. Frank Moran's youngster—with me as soon as you're through here, if you don't mind."

"Ah yes—poor little soul," she commiserated.

In the classroom later, the children all safely packed into the bus and sent off, he watched her clear the desk at which she held sway over them, putting things neatly away into the drawer. "Those little crayon drawings they do for you—like those you've got there—don't they take them home every day?" It was the idle question of a man standing by watching something he is not familiar with. It had that sound, at least.

"No, Fridays are our days for that. We let them accumulate during the week, and then on Fridays we clear out their little desks and send everything home with them to show their mothers how they're progressing." She laughed indulgently.

He picked up one of the color plates at random. It was an oversized robin perched on a limb. He chuckled with hypocritical

admiration. "Is this pattern from last week or from this week?"

"This week's," she said, glancing around to identify it. "That was their Monday-afternoon assignment."

Monday night was the night—

They took a taxi to the Moran house. Wanger was the more diffident of the two, kept looking out the window on his side. "Is this a police matter you're taking me over on, or—er—an errand of mercy?" she finally asked a little embarrassedly. It wasn't the embarrassment of guilt, it was the uncertainty of a totally new, uncharted experience.

"It's just a bit of routine, don't pay any attention to it." He looked out the cab window again, as though his thoughts were a thousand miles away. "By the way, were you over there the night it happened?" He couldn't have made it sound more inconsequential if he tried.

"Over there at the *Morans*'?" She arched her brows in complete astonishment. "Why, good heavens, no!"

He didn't repeat the question and she didn't repeat the denial. Once each was enough. She was on record.

Wanger had looked on at many confrontations, but he thought he had never been present at a more dramatic one than this. She was so defenseless against the child, in one way. And the child was so defenseless against the whole grownup world, in another way.

He was overjoyed to see her when the matron brought him in. "H'lo, Miss Baker!" He ran across the room to her, clasped her below the hips, looked up into her face. "I couldn't come to school today because my daddy went away. I couldn't come yesterday either."

"I know, Cookie, we all missed you."

She turned to Wanger, as if to ask: Now what do I have to do?

Wanger got down on his haunches, tried to keep his voice low and confidence inspiring. "Cookie, do you remember the night your daddy went into the closet?"

Cookie nodded dutifully.

"Is this the lady that was here with you in the house?"

They waited.

She had to prompt him herself finally.

"Was I, Cookie?"

It seemed as though he were never going to answer. The tension became almost unendurable, as far as the grownups in the room were concerned. She took a deep breath, reached down, sandwiched one of his little hands between her two. "Was Miss Baker here with you the night Daddy went into the closet, Cookie?" she asked.

This time the answer came so suddenly it almost jolted out of him. "Yes, Miss Baker wuss here. Miss Baker had supper with my daddy and me—'member?" But he was talking directly to her, not to them.

She straightened slowly, shaking her head blankly. "Oh, no—I can't understand it—" Their faces had sort of closed up around her. Nothing was said.

"But, Cookie, look at me—"

"No, please don't influence him," Wanger cut in, civilly but decisively.

"I'm not trying to—" she said helplessly.

"Will you wait for me outside, Miss Baker? I'll be with you in just a moment."

When he came out presently, she was sitting by herself in a chair against the wall. She looked up at him with directness. "I can't understand that—"

He didn't say anything more about it one way or the other. The child was on record now, too, that was all.

He'd brought a crayon-colored outline pattern out to show her. An oversized robin on a bough. "You've already told me that this is the pattern you gave them to fill in Monday afternoon. And that they only bring their work home once a week, on Fridays." Her eyes clung to it much longer than was necessary for mere identification. He waited a moment; then folded it and put it away.

"But it was found right here in the house, Miss Baker, in the early hours of Tuesday morning. How do you suppose it got here?" She just looked at the place where it had last gone into his clothing.

"It's possible, of course, that the youngster brought it home with him himself without permission that day, before it had even been marked." The suggestion came from him, questioningly.

She looked up quickly. "No, I—I don't think he did. I excused him ahead of the rest that day, because his mother was wait-

ing outside to take him with her. You can ask Mrs. Moran, But—"

"I have already."

"Oh, well, then—" She stood up. A little added color peered slowly into her face. "Then what was that supposed to be, a verbal trap for me?"

He quirked his head noncommittally.

"This seems to have put me in a somewhat awkward position."

"Not at all," he said insincerely. "Why say that?"

She looked down at her handbag, unfastened and refastened its catch once more time, then suddenly looked up, flung at him with a spirited little flare-up of impatience that matched her hair: "Although I don't know why it should! That was hardly a fair test in there just now."

He was urbane to the point of silkiness. "Why wasn't it? Doesn't the child know you well enough? Doesn't he see you five days a week? It's not conclusive as far as we're concerned, that you're entitled to say, but fair it was."

"But don't you see; a child's mind, a child that age, is as sensitive as an exposed camera plate; it'll take the first impression that comes its way. You asked me not to influence him just now, but you men have undoubtedly already influenced him, maybe without meaning to, during the past few days. He's heard you talking about my being here, and now he believes I was. In children the border line between reality and imagination is very—"

He spoke in a patiently reasoning voice. "As far as our influencing him goes, you're entirely mistaken. We'd never heard the name, any of us, until he first mentioned it, so how could he have heard it from us first? As a matter of fact, we had to send for Mrs. Moran and have her explain who you were, when he first brought it out."

She didn't actually stamp her feet, but she gave a lunge of her body that expressed that state of mind. "But what am I supposed to have done—would you mind *telling* me? Walked out of here, when such a thing took place, without notifying anybody?"

"**N**OW, please—" He spread the flats of his hands disarmingly. "You've already told me once you weren't here; and

I haven't asked you a second time, have I?"

"And I repeat I wasn't. Most decidedly! I've never been *in* this house before today."

"Then that's all there is to it." He made a calming motion, as of pressing something gently downward with his hands. Peace at any price. "Nothing more to be done or said about it. Just give me a rough outline of your movements that night, and we're through. You don't object, do you?"

She quieted down. "No, of course not."

"No offense, it's just routine. We've asked Mrs. Moran that herself."

"The children were sent home at their usual hour. Four, that is, you know. Until I cleared my desk and so on, it must have been four-thirty by the time I left. I went back to my room at the Residence Club, stayed in it until about six, resting and doing a little personal laundering. Then I went out and had my dinner, at a little place down the block where I usually go. You want the name, I suppose?"

He looked ruefully apologetic.

"Karen Marie's; it's a little private dining room run by a Swedish woman. Then I took a walk, and at, oh, some time around eight, I dropped into a moving picture—"

"Don't recall just which one it was, I suppose?" he suggested leniently, as though it were the most unimportant thing in the world.

"Oh, oh, yes. The Standard. *Mr. Smith*, you know. I don't go to them very often, but when I do, the Standard's the only one I go to. Well, that's about all, I guess. I came out when the show did, and got back to the Residence Club just a little before twelve."

"All right, well, that'll do very nicely. Thanks a lot, that takes care of everything. Now, I won't keep you any longer—"

She stood up almost unwillingly. "You know, I almost would rather not go under—under these circumstances. I'd feel better if this whole thing were cleared up one way or the other right while I'm still here."

He gave one hand a paddle twist. "There's nothing to clear up. You seem to be reading more into it than we're willing to put into it ourselves. Now don't worry about it, just run along and forget the whole business"

"Well—" She went reluctantly, looking

back until the very last, but she went.

The minute the front door had closed on her he seemed to get an electric shock from some unseen source. "Myers!" A man who had been in the room farther down the hall popped out. Wanger prodded his index finger twice at the door. "Day and night. Don't let her out of your sight a minute." Myers went hustling by to seek the back way out.

"Brad!" Wanger called. And before the staircase had stopped swaying with tumultuous descent: "Beat it out of here fast; check with the Standard Theater and find out the name of the other picture they were showing there Monday night with. *Mr. Smith*. That's one good thing about double features; they come in handy in our business. Then check with this Karen Marie's place; find out if she ate there. I'm going to go over this alibi of hers every inch of the way and God help her if it doesn't hold up under hundred-pound weights dropped from a height!"

First phone call to Wanger, at the Moran house, twenty minutes later :

"Hey, Lew; this is Bradford! Listen, I didn't have to check with the Standard movie house. The name of the second feature that night was *Five Little Peppers*, if you still want it. But somebody else stopped by just ahead of me and asked them the same question, I was told. The girl in the box office wondered why all the sudden interest in a Grade-B filler."

"Who?" Wanger jumped through the phone at him.

"*Her*. The Baker girl. I got her description. Must have headed straight over there as soon as she left. How d'ya like that?"

"I like it pretty well," answered Wanger with grim literalness. "Polish the rest of it off. The kid just came through with the color she was wearing that night. Another of those freak spills, like his popping the name. Dark blue, got it? Go over to the Residence Club, see if you can get a line on what color she had on when she left her room Monday evening; somebody might have noticed. And do it cagey; no badge. I don't want her to tumble we're taking stitches, until the sewing up's all done. You're just a guy trying to follow up a

crush on someone whose name you don't know; you can get to her by elimination."

Second phone call to Wanger, same place, half an hour later:

"Brad again. Holy smoke, is her alibi cheesecloth! I think we've got something now all right. She *didn't* eat in Karen Marie's that night! First the Swensky woman that runs it backed her up solid. Oh ya, ya. Sure she vos dare. Well, after what happened at that movie box office, I dunno why, but something gimme kind of a hunch, so I took a chance and played it. And it paid off! I threw a big bluff and got tough about it and told her, 'Whattaya trying to do, kid me? Don'tcha suppose I know she was just in here herself and told you to say that, if anyone asked you? Now, d'ya wanta get in trouble or d'ya wanta stay out of it?'"

"She caved right in like wet cement. Ya, she admitted kind of scared, she vos here yust now. I like to help her if I could, but as long as you know dot already, I don't want to get in no trouble myself."

"And wait, there's more yet. I spaded around over at the Residence Club lobby. The elevator girl and the desk clerk both remembered seeing her pass through that night, and she was wearing—*dark blue*."

"Come to Papa," intoned Wanger fervently.

Third phone call to Wanger, next day:

"Hello, Lew? This is Myers. I'm outside the school, I've got her safely nailed down until four this afternoon. I've been practically sitting on her shoulders ever since yesterday. But here's a little something just turned up; I wanted you to get it right away. It might mean something and then again it might not. I picked her up when she came out of the Residence Club doorway just now, and on her way to the bus I noticed a fruit-stall keeper give her the old good morning and she smiled back. So I dropped behind and cased him quick, so I'd still be able to make the same bus she did. He told me she bought half a dozen Florida oranges from him at six o'clock Monday evening. I'm remembering that two glasses of orange juice turned up in the Moran refrigerator the morning after that Mrs. Moran couldn't

account for, that she was certain she didn't prepare herself before she went up to her mother's."

"I'm remembering that, too. At six she was on her way out, not in, even according to her own story. She took them somewhere with her. I'm going over there right now and have a chat with the cleaning maid that does her room. One good thing about oranges, from our point of view, is you can't eat the peel, too."

Wanger to superior:

"This is Wanger, chief."

"I've been waiting to hear from you. I think you better bring the Baker girl in with you now."

"I am, chief. I'm calling you from the lobby of the Residence Club right now. I wanted your O.K. before I go up to her room and get her."

"All right, you've got it. I just got a report that gives the kid's story grown-up confirmation for the first time, even if it's only partial. A man named Schroeder, who lives on the other side of the street a few doors down, happened to go to his bedroom window to pull down the shade and definitely saw the figure of a woman leaving the Moran house shortly before midnight. He couldn't identify her at that distance and in the dark of course, but I don't see much sense to holding off any longer."

"No, there isn't. Not with her past record of disappearances. I'll be in in about fifteen or twenty minutes."

HE CAME into the dim room, looked at her, lit a cigarette. "Crying won't do any good," he said. "You're not being mistreated in any way. And you have only yourself to blame for being here."

"You don't know what it means—" she said in the direction his voice had come from. "You deal in arrests, to you it's nothing. You can't possibly know what goes through you, when you're in your room, secure and contented and at peace with the world one minute, and the next someone suddenly comes for you to take you away."

Another voice spoke up from the perimeter of gloom: "D'you think Moran had an easy time of it, that last half-hour or so in

the closet? You didn't see him when he was taken out; we did." She pressed her hair flat to her head, soundlessly.

"Don't," Wanger said in an aside. "She's the sensitive type."

THE unseen matron made a plucking sound at her lips with her tongue, to express her own opinion on that subject.

"I didn't know it was a murder. I didn't know it was done to him purposely!" the girl on the wooden chair said. "When you had me out there at their house the other day, I simply thought it had been an accident, that he'd locked himself in some way, and the child hadn't realized the seriousness of the danger, and then afterwards perhaps, to escape the blame, as children will, had made up the story that I was there."

Wanger said: "That doesn't alter the case any. That's not what we're talking to you about now. You didn't eat at the Swedish woman's. You didn't go to the Standard picture house. But you went to both of those places *afterwards* and told them to say you did! Then you wonder why you're here."

She held one wrist with the other hand, twisting at it circularly. Finally she said, "I know—I didn't realize I was being watched so soon—you seemed so friendly that afternoon."

"We don't give warnings."

"I didn't know it was a murder; I thought it was just the child's little fib I had to contend with." She took a deep breath. "I was—with my husband. His name is Larry Stark, he—he lives at 420 Marcy Avenue. I made dinner for him at his apartment, and was there all evening."

It made no impression. "Why didn't you tell us that the first time you were asked?"

"I couldn't, don't you see? I'm a teacher, I'm not supposed to be married, it'll cost me my job."

"We've shot your first story to pieces, there's nothing left of it; naturally you've got to replace it, you can't just stand on thin air. Why should we believe this one any more than the first?"

"Ask Larry—he'll tell you! He'll tell you I was there with him the whole time."

"We'll ask him all right. And he probably will tell us you were there with him.

But the Moran child tells us you were there with *him*. And the crayon drawing tells us you were there with *him*. And the two glasses of orange juice in the icebox tell us you were there with *him*. And your dark blue suit tells us you were there with *him*. And your own actions for the past few days tell us you were there with *him*. That's quite a line-up to buck, little girl." She gave a wordless intake of breath and let her head tilt back across the chair back.

A shaft of yellow corridor light slashed through the four-square darkness around her and a voice said: "He's ready for her now."

Wanger's chair scraped back. "It's a little late for that now. It won't do you as much good as if you'd come out with it in the beginning. This thing's well under way, Miss Baker, and it seldom pays to change trains in the middle of a trip—you're liable to fall down between the two of them." His hand became visible up past the wrist, reaching out into the downpouring cone light for her.

She was crying again, soundlessly as ever, when the matron and Wanger brought her up before his superior's desk.

"So this is the young lady?" Under other circumstances it might have been misconstrued as a half-friendly opening remark. It wasn't meant that way.

A phone beside him stuttered: D-d-d-d-d-ding, br-r-r-r-ring."

He said, "Just a minute." Then he said, "Who? Yes, there's a Wanger here, but you can't use this extension. Well, what is it you—"

He lowered it, looked across the desk at him. "There's somebody has something to tell you about this girl you just brought in. Go ahead, see what it is."

He motioned, and the matron stepped outside with Miss Baker again.

"The husband, I guess," Wanger murmured, moving around beside him and picking up the instrument.

A woman's voice said, "Hello, is this Wanger?"

"Yes. Who is it wants to—" he started to say warily.

The other voice cut through his like a knife through butter, "I'm doing the talking. You've just brought a girl in with you

from the Women's Residence Club. A Miss Baker, a kindergarten teacher. That's right? Well, this is just to tell you she had nothing to do with what happened to Moran in that closet; I don't care how it looks, or what you think you know, or what you think you've found out."

Wanger started to have ants in his pants, to squirm around trying to keep the mouth-piece silenced and at the same time signal, "Trace this! Trace this!" to his superior.

The voice was almost telepathic. "Yeah, trace this, I know," it observed dryly. "I'm getting right off, so don't waste your time. Now, just in case there are any doubts in your minds, and you want to pass me off as a crank, the note pinned to the Moran kid's quilt read: 'You have a very sweet child, Mrs. Moran. I am leaving him where he will be safe until you return, as I would not want any harm to come to him for the world.' Miss Baker couldn't possibly know that because you haven't given it out yourselves. Their radio's a Philco, he reads the *Sun*, I gave him scrambled eggs for his last meal, there were two moldy raincoats in the closet, and his whole cigar burned down without losing its shape, next to the chair he was last sitting in. You'd better let her go. Good-bye and good luck." *Click.*

The other phone on his chief's desk was ringing at that very moment.

"A pay telephone in the Neumann Drug-store, corner of Dale and Twenty-third!"

Wanger nearly pulled the door off its hinges, left it open behind him. Six minutes, eighteen seconds later he was panting his insides out into the face of a startled proprietor hauled out from behind the prescription counter. "Who just put in a call from that middle booth there, where the bulb is still warm?"

The proprietor shrugged with expansive helplessness. "A woman. Do I know who she was?"

Wanger's record on Frank Moran:

Evidence: 1 note in hand-printed capitals pinned to quilt on child's bed.
1 crayon-colored outline drawing, probably an adult imitation of a child's handiwork.

Case Unsolved.

X

FERGUSON had just finished arranging his easel and canvas when the knock on the door came. "Be right with you," he said, and started laying out his oil tubes.

He didn't look like a painter. Maybe because they don't any more. He didn't have a beard, or a beret, or a smock, or velvet pants. He knocked down a thousand a magazine cover. But in between he liked to do serious stuff, "for himself" as he put it. One whole side of the studio was glass—the essential northern light. But that side didn't rise up straight like the other three walls, it slanted in at an angle, so that it was a cross between an upright wall and a skylight.

He went over to the door and opened it. "You the new model?" he said. "Come over here by the light and let me look at you. I don't know whether I can use you or not. I told the agency I wanted a—"

He stopped faultfinding and held his breath. He had her over in the full glare of the skylight wall by now. "Sa-ay," he exhaled finally, between a long-drawn whistle and a reverent hiss. "Where have you been keeping yourself? Turn around a little, that's it. Maybe you don't fit the specifications for the ginger ale spread, but, baby, I'm using you all right! You're just what I had in mind for that Diana the Huntress thing, for myself. I think I'll begin that, now that you're here, and the commercial can wait."

She was raven-haired, creamy-skinned, and her eyes seemed violet behind the imperceptible shadow line she had drawn around them.

"Who'd you work for last?"

"Terry Kaufmann."

"What's he trying to do, hog you all to himself?"

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"Sure, I know the bum," he said jocularly.

She dropped her eyes momentarily, caught her lip between her teeth. Then she looked up at him with renewed confidence. He was rubbing his hands exuberantly, overjoyed at this unexpected find. "Now there could be only one possible catch. How's the figure?"

"O.K. I guess," she said demurely.

"Y'better let me see for myself. You can

go in the dressing room there and hang up your things. You'll find the stuff I want you to put on all laid out in there. The gold bangle goes on the left arm, and hook the leopard-skin kilt so that the opening's at the side; your thigh shows through."

She moistened her lips. One hand went helplessly up toward her shoulder. "Is that all?"

"That's all; it's a seminude. Why? You've posed before, haven't you?"

"Yes," she said, face impassive, and went unhesitatingly into the dressing room. She came out again, as unhesitatingly, but with her face held rigidly semiaverted, in about five minutes time. Her bare feet made no sound on the floor.

"Beautiful!" he said fervently. "Too bad those things don't last. In two years it'll be gone, as soon as they start dragging you around to cocktail parties. What's your name?"

"Christine Bell," she said.

"All right, now get up there and I'll show you how I want you. It's going to be a very tough pose to hold, but we'll take it in easy shifts. Crouch forward now, dead center toward the canvas, one leg out behind you. I want her to seem to be coming right out of the frame at them when they look at the picture. Right arm bent out in front of you, grasping something, like this. Left arm drawn back, past your own shoulder. That's it. *Freeze*. Steady, now, steady. You're supposed to be stalking something, about to let fly an arrow at it. I'll put the bow in later; you obviously couldn't pose for any length of time holding it stretched taut, the strain would be unendurable."

He didn't speak any more, once he had begun to work. At the end of thirty minutes she moaned slightly. "All right, let's knock off for five minutes," he said casually. He picked up a crumpled package of cigarettes, took one out, tossed the package lightly over to her on the stand.

She let it fall to the floor. Her face was white with anguish when he turned to look at her. His eyes narrowed speculatively. "Are you as experienced as you say?"

"Oh, yes, I—"

Before she could go ahead there was a sudden knock at the door. "Busy working, come back later," he called. The knock re-

peated itself. He swore under his breath, took a step toward the door. The girl on the stand made a supplicating gesture, said hurriedly: "Mr. Ferguson, I need the money so bad; give me a chance, won't you? That's probably the model from the agency—"

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I was hanging around there trying to get taken on, but they won't take you on, they've got a waiting list this long, and I heard them telephoning to her to report over here to you, so I went downstairs and called her back from a public booth and let her think it was still the agency. I told her it was an error, she wasn't wanted after all, and I came over in her place; but I guess she's found out since. Won't you try me at least, won't I do?" The pleading look on her face would have melted a heart of stone, much less an artist's susceptible one, always touched by beauty.

"Tell you better in a minute." He seemed to be having a hard time keeping a straight face. "Get back out of sight," he whispered conspiratorially. "We'll give it the old Judgment of Paris workout."

He went to the door, held it open narrowly, staring intently outside with critical appraisal. Once he turned his head and glanced over at the first candidate, cowering against the wall, arms crossed over her bosom with unconscious—or was it unconscious?—artistry. Then he reached into his pocket, took out a crumpled bill, handed it through the door. "Here's your carfare, kid; I won't need you," he said gruffly.

He went back to the easel with a suppressed grin struggling to free itself at the corners of his mouth. "There's even muscling-in in *this* racket," he chuckled. The grin overspread his features unhampered. "O.K., Diana, up and at 'em!"

He poised his brush again.

COREY, highball glass in hand, paused before the easel in the course of his aimless wandering about the studio, fingered the burlap carelessly flung over it. "What's this, the latest masterpiece? Mind if I take a look?"

The sacking had gone up and he was standing there rooted to the spot.

Ferguson turned his head at the continu-

ing silence. "Well, if it takes your breath away like that before it's finished," he said hopefully, "imagine what it'll do after the fixative's gone on."

Corey shook his head vaguely. "No, I'm trying to think. There's something vaguely familiar about that girl's face."

"Oh, sure, I expected that," Ferguson said dryly. "Well, you don't get her phone number out of me, not till after this picture's finished, if that's what you're—"

"No, I mean it. It hit me like a flash when I first lifted the sacking. Now I've lost it again. Like when you have a word on the tip of your tongue and can't bring it out. *Where* the devil have I seen those ice-cold eyes before, and that warm, kissable mouth? What's her name?"

"Christine Bell."

"I don't know her by name, at any rate. Have you ever used her before? Maybe I've seen her on some of your covers."

"No, she's brand new. I'm just breaking her in, so you haven't."

"I won't get any sleep now until I get straightened out on that." He went out, casting troubled backward glances at the covered canvas to the very last, until the door had closed after him.

SHE winced delicately as Ferguson notched the arrow into the bowstring, fitted the integrated weapon into the formalized pose of her hands. "Wasn't that *horrible*, the way that snapped through my fingers yesterday? I almost hate to touch it, after that!"

He laughed good-naturedly. "It wasn't horrible, but it sure could have been—if my neck had been two inches farther back, where it belonged and where it had been a minute before! What saved me was I happened to bend my head toward the canvas just then, to concentrate on a detail I was working on. I felt this streak of air shoot past the nape of my neck and the next thing I knew the arrow was wobbling in the wooden frame between two of the skylight panes over there."

"But it could have killed you, couldn't it?" she lamented, wide-eyed.

"If it had happened to hit me in the right place—the jugular vein or dead center to the heart—I suppose so. But it didn't, so

why go on worrying about it?"

"But wouldn't it be better if I used one with a guard, a protective knob on the end of it?"

"No, no, I'm nothing if not realistic; I go flat when I fake things, even such a simple thing as an arrowhead. Don't be nervous now. It was just one of those hundred-to-one shots. Most likely you were unconsciously pulling it tighter and tighter as the tension of posing grew on you, and then without realizing it you let your muscles relax to try to ease them, and the damn thing sprang! Just remember not to pull it all the way back. Pull it only enough so that the bowstring isn't relaxed, forms a straight line to the arrow cleft; that's all you've got to do."

When they had taken time out, and the cigarette package had passed between them on the fly, as a handcloth does between gymnasts, she remarked: "Strange that you should become a painter."

"Why?"

"You always think of them as sort of gentle people. At least, I always did until now."

"I am gentle. What makes you think I'm not?"

She murmured, so low he could barely hear her, "Maybe you are now. You weren't always so gentle."

Then afterward, when she was back on the stand, bow stretched toward him in shooting position, she said: "Ferguson, you bring happiness to many people. Did you ever—bring death to anyone?"

His brush halted in mid-air, but he didn't turn to look at her. He stared before him as though seeing something in the past. "Yes, I have," he said in a subdued voice. His head inclined a little. Then he straightened it, went ahead retouching. "Don't talk to me while I'm working," he reminded her evenly.

She didn't, any more after that. There wasn't a sound in the studio, and scarcely a motion. Only two things moved: the long slender stem of the paint brush between his deft fingers, the retreating steel-tipped head of the arrow as it slipped slowly back upon the shaft to the position of uttermost tension. The cord was capable of. A third thing there was that moved: a shadow played back and

forth across the hollow of her left arm, as the white flesh contracted, as the tendons below it strained. Only those three things were not still, in the vibrant, supercharged silence.

Then suddenly there was a rain of jovial blows against the studio door, and a bevy of voices called: "Come on, Ferg, let us in. Union hours, you know!"

The arrowhead edged unnoticeably forward again, past the staff, as the strain was let out of the cord, degree by degree. She exhaled in such a peculiar, exhausted way that he turned to ask: "Matter, can't you take it?"

She shrugged, threw him a glazed smile, "Sure, but—too bad we couldn't have finished it, while we were at it."

She had never dressed under such difficulties before. The dressing-room door had no lock, and after the first inadvertent discovery that she was in there, they kept purposely trying to break in on her every few minutes, to tease her.

Judging from the sounds going on in the studio proper, the party was no temporary intrusion. It was going to be an all-night affair, one of those snowball things that kept rolling up more people as it went along. Twice already the outer door had stormed open and new voices had come screaming in.

Dressed, she watched her chance, and when the line of escape from dressing room to studio door was least populous, she slipped out, threaded her way diagonally across that corner of the vast room, and tried to make her exit unobserved. Somebody shouted, "Look! Diana!" There was a concerted rush over toward her, and she was swept into their midst as if by a maelstrom. They were unhampered by conventional formality.

"How beautiful! Oh, just look, how beautiful!"

"And trembling like a frightened gazelle. Ah, Sonya, why don't you tremble for me like that any more?"

"I do, darling, I still do; but with laughter now, every time I look at you."

When the first effusion of appraisal and praise was over, she managed to draw Ferguson aside. "I have to go—"

"But why?"

"I don't want all these people to—to

see me—I'm not used to it—"

He misunderstood. "On account of the picture, you mean? Because it's a semi-nude?" He found this so charming he promptly repeated it to the whole assemblage at the top of his voice.

They found it charming, too; it was that thing they were always looking for, the unusual. This brought on another group formation around her.

She finally acquiesced to the extent of sitting on the floor against the far wall, a cup of untasted red wine on one side of her, an intense young man reciting some of his own blank verse on the other. She sat there passively, but her eyes kept calculatingly measuring the distance between herself and the studio door. Her hands suddenly clenched spasmodically on the floor, slowly opened out again.

Corey had just turned up across the room from her, was standing by the entrance.

SECONDS hung like moments in the air, moments hung like quarter hours. Her eyes, which had sought refuge on the floor, slowly, unwillingly traveled the ascending arc of the figure that had come to a halt directly before her.

Corey wouldn't take his eyes off her. She couldn't take hers off him, as though afraid to trust him out of their sight a single instant. He said, "All kidding aside, haven't I met you before?"

Even if she'd given an answer, even if she'd wanted to, it would have been drowned in the howl of friendly derision that went up. "Look, there are moths flying around from that one!"

"You should oil up that technique."

"Is that the best the Great Lover can get off?"

Sonya squalled informatively to someone, with that deadearest mannerism of hers, "Yes, didn't you know? That's how they make girls in the upper-middle classes. A friend of mine who went uptown once told me. She had it said to her three times in one night."

Corey was laughing with them at his own expense, shoulders shaking, facial muscles working, everything humorously attuned except those coldly speculative eyes that wouldn't leave hers.

The girl they held pressed to the wall with their stabbing stare shook her head slightly, smiled a little in regretful negation. She stood there a moment, then maneuvered her way out of the corner pocket he had her backed into, sauntered across the room, conscious his head had turned to look after her, conscious his eyes were following her every aimless step of the way. She found refuge on the other side of the studio for a while, took shelter with almost the entire personnel of the party between them for a buffer. In fifteen minutes he had marked her down again, came bringing a cup of red wine over, for an excuse. She seemed to grow rigid when she saw what he was bringing her, swallowed hard, as though there lay some danger in the imminent courtesy itself, apart from the fact of his approach.

He reached her finally, held it out to her, and the pupils of her eyes dilated. She seemed afraid to accept it and equally afraid to refuse it, afraid to drink it and equally afraid to set it aside untasted—as though anything she did with it bore a penalty of flashing recollection. She took it finally, touched it toward her lips, then held it behind her with one hand, safely out of sight.

He said, blinking troubledly: "I nearly had it for a minute when I handed you that just then, and then I lost it again."

"You're torturing hell out of me, quit it!" she flared with unexpected savagery. She turned away from him and went into the dressing room. He followed her even in there after a decent interval of ten minutes or so. There was no impropriety in it, the room was open to the party now.

She began busily tapping at her nose with a puff before the mirror the instant that she saw him nearing the outside of the doorway. Until then—

He came up behind her. She saw him in the glass but didn't seem to. Standing at her shoulder he placed his hands one at each side of her face, as if trying to obliterate the dark luxuriant masses of hair that framed it. She stood motionless under the ministration, without breathing. "What're you doing that for?" She didn't pretend to misunderstand it as a caress.

He sighed and his hands fell away. He hadn't been able to cover her entire head with them after all.

She turned partly aside from him, folded her arms, chafed their upper parts uncomfortably, bent her head downward. It was a pose strangely suggestive of penitence. She wasn't thinking in terms of penitence. She was seeing in her mind's eye a sharp little paint-scraping knife of Ferguson's that was somewhere about the place. She was seeing in her mind's eye the masses of people there were in the adjoining room. Perhaps, too, the diagonal line of escape that led from this dressing room to the outside studio door.

He'd finished lighting a cigarette. He spoke through smoke. "It wouldn't bother me like this if it weren't so."

"It isn't so," she said dully. With dangerous dullness, still looking down.

"I'll get it eventually. It'll suddenly come to me when I least expect it. Maybe five minutes from now. Maybe later on tonight, before the party's over. Maybe not for days. What's the matter? You're looking a little pale."

"It's so stuffy in here. And that red wine, I'm not used to it—especially on an empty stomach, you know."

"You haven't eaten?" he said with extravagant concern.

"No, I was posing, you know, when they broke in on us, and I haven't been able to get away since. *He* doesn't seem to feel it, but I haven't had anything since ten this morning."

"Well, er, how about coming out and having something with me now? Even though I don't exactly seem to have made a hit—"

"Why shouldn't I go with you? I have nothing against you. All contributions gratefully accepted."

"Don't say anything to the rest of them or they'll gang up on us."

Their crafty preparations for impending departure did not go as unnoticed as they had hoped.

They'd got as far as the foot of the outside stairs when there was a thundering stampede behind them that sounded like six people in pursuit. It was only Ferguson. "Say, will you do your foraging some place

else? I need her for a picture."

"Do you own her soul?"

"Yes!"

"Fine. Well then, it's just the body I'm taking with me. You'll find her soul up there on the canvas."

Ferguson straightened his tie determinedly. "Well then, we're both going with the body."

They weren't openly truculent about it, but both were in that mercurial state of mind where there is no longer much of a border line between horseplay and hostility.

The girl surreptitiously sliced her hand against the side of Corey's arm, as if asking him to leave this to her, drew Ferguson a few steps away, out of earshot. "I'm going with him—to get rid of him. This is the simplest way there is. See if you can clear the rest of them out up there; I'll come back later and we'll finish the picture. Or have you had too much to drink?"

"This red ink? This isn't drink."

"Well, don't drink any more then. I'll be back in an hour—in an hour and a half at the latest. Be sure you have them out by then. Wait up there for me."

"Is that a promise?"

"That's more than a promise, it's a dedication."

He turned and, without another word, tramped stolidly up the stairs.

COREY prodded a wall switch, and a small apartment living room lit up. "After you," he said with mock gallantry.

She took two bored steps forward into the place and let her eyes stray halfheartedly around, without any real interest. "Well, now what do we do here?" she asked abruptly.

He shied his hat off some place where there was nothing to catch it. "You don't seem to get the hang of things very easily, do you?" he said, thin-lipped with annoyance. "Do you have to have outline drawings?"

She turned her face aside to her shoulder an instant. "Don't. I hate that word."

She moved ahead toward a dark opening. "What's in there?"

"The other room," he said disgruntledly. "Go ahead in and see it by yourself if you want to. I'm warning you, you're rushing

things. That doesn't come for about another ten minutes yet."

It lighted up and she passed from sight. It darkened and she came in again to where he was. He was swirling a coil of rye around in the bottom of a glass. "Aren't you terrified?" he sneered. "It was a bedroom!"

A scornful catch sounded in her throat. "You're the one seems to be terrified. What do you have to do, build up your courage with that stuff?"

"We'll take that up in a few minutes— if you've got breath enough left to ask it."

She went over to a knee-hole desk, shot open a drawer or two. "Desk," he said scathingly. "You know, four legs, something you write on."

He put his glass down. "Lemme get something straight, just for the record. What was *your* idea was going to happen when you O.K.'ed coming up here with me? You were willing enough when I first put it up to you."

"Because you were too willing to see me back to my place otherwise. My willingness beat yours to the punch, that was all."

"And what's over at your place that you're leery of?"

She shot open a third drawer, shot it closed again. "You name it. My dear old mother. A six-months-old kid that I support by my modeling. Or maybe it's just that the washbasin is cracked."

He loosed his collar so abruptly the button flew off. "Well, the hell with your background, I'm going to give you a future. This is the works—now."

She shot open a fourth drawer, looked down, smiled a little. "I knew there was one some place around here. I saw a box of the cartridges in the bureau drawer inside." She came up with an automatic.

He kept coming on over, necktie cock-eyed. "Put that down! D'ya want to have an accident?"

"I don't have accidents," she murmured placidly. She measured the weapon lengthwise in the flat of one hand, thumbing the trigger.

"It's loaded, you damn nitwit!"

"Then don't try jerking it away from me, that's what always sets them off. The safety's down now, too." She laid it down

on the desk before her, but without taking her finger out of the trigger scabbard. He was in a state of mind where an anti-aircraft gun wouldn't have been able to do much with him. He caught her from behind in a double-furled embrace and hid her face under his own. Her hand stayed motionless on the desk, hooked in the gun, the whole time. His face got out of the way finally—he had to breathe himself—and hers came into view again.

She drew her free hand across it with a grimace that wasn't calculated to do his ego any good. "Don't kiss me, you fool. I'm not out for love."

"What are you out for then?"

"Nothing—as far as you're concerned. You have nothing that I want, you have nothing that—is coming to me."

Her attitude shriveled him like a June bug in a match flame. He rammed his hands into his pockets with force enough to drive them in almost up to his elbows. The gun slid off the desk top, and she sauntered casually over toward the outside door, with it dangling from her one hooked finger.

"Come back here with that. Where do you think you're going with it?"

"Only as far as the front door. I don't know anything about you. I want to be sure that I get out of here. I'll leave it just inside the door sill."

His voice shook with masculine outrage. "Go ahead if you want to go that badly. I'm not that hard up." He heard the door open, and when he took a quick step out into the little entryway, the gun was lying there mockingly on the threshold. He could hear her going down the stairs—but with deliberation, not with haste. Even that concession to his injured self-esteem was lacking.

"I'll get who you are yet!" he called down after her wrathfully.

Her answer came back from a floor below. "Better be thankful that you haven't."

LESS than an hour later the light flashed on in the pitch-black bedroom with explosive suddenness, like a flashlight photograph, revealing Corey in blazer-

striped pajamas, lying in a trough of tortured bed coverings, hand outstretched to the switch of the bedside lamp. He squinted protectively, unable to bear the brightness after the long hours of lying there in the dark. His hair was a briery mass that bespoke repeated digital massaging. A pyramid of cigarette butts topped the tray next to him, and he added one last one to the accumulation with a triumphant downward stab that showed it had finally brought results. "Damn it, I knew I'd seen her some place be—" he muttered disjunctively.

The clock said 3:20.

Then, as the implications of the discovery hit him fully, his eyes opened to their full extent and he swung his legs to the floor. "The girl that was with Bliss that night! She's already killed a man! I'm going to warn him right now to look out!"

He pounded outside in bare feet, came back again bringing the telephone directory from the hall, sat down on the bed with it, ran his finger down the column of F's, stopped at Ferguson.

Then he looked at the clock again. 3:23. "He'll think I'm nuts," he murmured undecidedly. "The first thing in the morning'll be time enough. I wonder if it really is the same girl; the other one was yellow as a buttercup, this one's dark as a raven."

Then, with a renewed stiffening of resolution, "I was never yet wrong in my life about a thing like this. He's got to be told, I don't care what time of night it is!" He flung the directory aside, bare-footed it back to the hall, and began dialing the number of Ferguson's studio. The call signal at the other end went on interminably; no one came to the phone in answer. He hung up finally, massaged his hair a couple more times. The party must be over by this time. Maybe Ferguson didn't sleep there in the studio at nights. Sure he did, he must; Corey remembered seeing a bed in one of the rooms.

He dressed, went downstairs, drummed up a cab, gave Ferguson's address.

A knock at the studio door, when he stood before it presently, brought no more results than the phone call had. He noticed something that confirmed his hunch: Fer-

guson not only worked here but lived here as well. A small thing, a slight thing—an empty milk bottle standing to one side of the door. That finished it. Milk bottles are not put out before you go, but after you come back. He was in there; he was almost certainly in there. Corey had a premonition of doom now that wouldn't be dispelled.

He went downstairs and roused the building superintendent.

"You open that door for me," Corey panted in a voice that brooked no argument. "I'll take the responsibility if I'm wrong. But I'm not getting out of here until you come up and open that door for me, understand?"

The super grumblingly preceded him up the stairs, jangled keys, knocked uselessly before fitting one to the door. Corey knew where the switch was, reached around him backhand and plugged it on. The two of them stood there looking down the long vista of light to the far end where the black skylight panes slanted down and the outside night began.

All Corey said, in a strangely anticlimactic, almost subdued voice, was: "I knew it."

Ferguson was lying there face down before the easel. The wicked steel sliver of the arrowhead protruded from his back, over the heart, forced through by the fall itself to that additional penetration. In front, when they turned him over, the feathered end of it had been splintered by the fall, was at right angles to the rest of the shaft. He must have turned full face toward the stand at the instant it winged at him to receive it dead center to the heart like that.

Above him brooded Diana the huntress, Diana the killer—faceless now. The features that had tormented Corey were gone. An oval hole in the canvas, cut by a paint-scraping knife, occupied their place. The bow, cord slack now, balanced mockingly across one corner of the modeling stand.

Corey brooded: "I didn't tumble in time, she beat me to it. He must have posed her late at night, to finish it up."

"What d'ye suppose it was?" the super breathed awe-stricken, after they'd put in the call and stood there in the open doorway, waiting for the police. "Her grip on the bowstring accidentally slipped and the

arrow flew out?"

"No," Corey murmured. "No. Diana the Huntress came to life."

XI

"AND then she moved over here like this." Corey was warming up to his re-enactment as he went along, as any good actor does when he has a sympathetic audience and is enjoying his role.

"Go on," Wanger nodded.

"Then she starts casing the drawers one by one like this, slap—slap—slap. Hell, I didn't get it. I figured she was just stalling, giving herself something to do with her hands, you know; killing time like they do until the clinch caught up with her. So then she hits the one it's in and comes up with it—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute—" Wanger started from his chair, made a hasty gesture of dissuasion. "Don't touch it. We may still be able to get her prints off it. Have you handled it much yourself since she picked it up?"

Corey's arrested hand hung like a claw over it. "No, only to put it back in. But I haven't finished telling you what she did with it afterward—"

"All right, but first let me wrap it up, I want to have it checked—with your permission."

"Help yourself." He stood aside while Wanger took out a handkerchief, dipped into the drawer with it, and transferred it to his pocket.

"I'll see that you get it back," Wanger promised.

"No hurry. Only too glad to be of some help." The performance resumed. "So then, she doddles around with it. I go over and give her the old branding iron and"—he looked genuinely outraged all over again, even though this was only a recapitulation—"it didn't take."

Wanger nodded with masculine understanding. "She wasn't having any."

"She wasn't having any. She says, 'I don't want love. I don't want kisses,' and she goes over to the door, gun and all. I follow her, and she's left it lying there inside the sill, and she's already halfway down the stairs. So I called down after her

I'd figure out who she was if it took me all the rest of the night, and she calls up to me, 'Better be thankful you haven't.'"

He got white around the mouth with virtuous indignation. "The little so-and-so, I'd like to give her a biff across the snout!"

Wanger drummed nails on the chair arm. "As I see it, there are three possible explanations for her coming up here with you like she did, before going back and killing the guy she had in mind to all along. One, she intended getting rid of you first, before you had a chance to warn Ferguson and throw a monkey wrench into the main business at hand. After she got here with you, you still hadn't remembered who she was, so she changed her mind. She'd got you away from the party, and that was the most important thing. She figured she'd have time enough to get back there and finish up before it finally dawned on you where you'd seen her before. Two, she came up only to get the weapon and use it on him. No, that won't hold up. My brain's hitting on two cylinders. She left it behind her, inside the door. Well, three is you were pestering her at the party and she was afraid you would stay on after the others and gum the works up, so she took the easiest way of eliminating you. Gave you a tease treatment and then left you flat."

Corey looked as though this last suggestion didn't do his self-esteem any too much good, but he swallowed it.

"I think a combination of one and three is as close as we can get to it at the first sitting," Wanger went on, getting ready to leave. "She came up here with you because you were getting in her hair. She intended giving you the gun if you came through with who she was, but if you didn't she was going to let you go. You didn't, and she let you go. Come in tomorrow, will you? I want to go over the whole thing with you again. Just ask for me, Wanger's the name."

Day was breaking when he got back to Headquarters, and daybreak wasn't lovely around Headquarters, inside or out. He was tired, and it was the hour when human vitality is at its lowest. He went into his superior's untenanted office, slumped into a chair at the desk, and let his head plop

into his pronged fingers. "Why the hell did that woman have to be born?" he groaned softly.

After a while he raised his head, took out the gun she'd handled at Corey's place, put it in a manila folder, sealed the flap, scrawled across it almost illegibly: "See if you can get anything on this for me. Wanger,—th Precinct Div."

He picked up the phone. "Send me in a messenger."

The rookie that showed up about ten minutes later was green enough to have fooled a grazing cow.

Wanger remarked, "What took you so long?"

"I got in a couple of the wrong rooms. This building's kind of tricky."

Wanger looked at him through blurred eyes. "Take this over and give it in for me. It's a gun. They'll know what to do."

"**Y**OU'RE still sure of what you told me the other night?" Wanger began, on his second and more detailed questioning of Corey, at Headquarters forty-eight hours later.

"Positive. She had the same eyes, mouth, everything, in fact, but the hair, of that girl in black who was at Marjorie Elliott's engagement party the night Bliss met his death two years ago. I could swear it was the same one!"

"Your testimony's doubly welcome to me; it's not only important in itself, but it bears out what my own private theory has been in these cases all along: that the woman is one and the same. A theory which, I might add, isn't shared by anyone else."

Corey clenched his fist, bounced it on the table top. "If I'd only gotten it sooner, figured out who it was the portrait reminded me of! But I didn't get it in time."

"Undoubtedly you could have saved his life, if you'd only made the discovery even an hour earlier that same night. But the breaks fell her way. As it was, you only succeeded in hurrying the thing up, bringing it on all the faster, by insisting you'd seen her somewhere before. She identified you and recognized the danger, realized she had a dead-line to work against. And made it—maybe only minutes ahead of

your first warning phone call! He died at twenty-one past three in the morning; his wrist watch stopped with the fall."

"And I phoned him at 3:22 or 3:23; I saw the time there in my room!" Corey grimaced anguishedly. "The arrow must have been still vibrating through his heart, he hadn't even toppled to the floor yet!"

"Don't let it get you," the detective tried to brace him up. "It's over now and it's too late. What interests me is that you can be invaluable to me; you're what I've been crying for all along in this, and now I've got it. At last there's a link between two of these four men. You didn't know Mitchell, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Moran?"

"Him either."

"But at least you did know two of them, if not the others. You're the first witness of any sort we've turned up who is in that position, who overlaps two of these episodes, bridges them. Don't y'see what you can mean to us?"

Corey looked doubtful. "But I didn't know the two of them concurrently. I only met Ferguson about eight months ago, at a cocktail party. Bliss was already dead by that time."

Wanger's face dropped. "So that, even through you, any connection between the two of them will have to come by hearsay, at second hand."

"I'm afraid so. Even Bliss I only knew the last year or two of his life. He and Ferguson had sort of drifted apart, got out of one another's orbit, by then."

"Any trouble between them?" Wanger asked alertly.

"No. Different worlds, that was all. Divergent occupations, and hence divergent interests; brokerage and art. No points of contact left after they once started to harden into their molds."

"Did either one of them ever mention Mitchell?"

"No, never that I can recall."

"Moran?"

"No."

"Well, Mitchell and Moran are in it somewhere," Wanger said doggedly. "But we'll let them ride for the present, take the two we've got. Now here's what I want

you to do for me: I want you to burrow back in your memory, rake up every particular mention each of those two made of the other—Bliss of Ferguson and Ferguson of Bliss—and try to recall in just what connection the reference was made, just what subject or topic it had to do with. Women, horses, money, whatever it was. Is that clear? My theory is, there is some point at which these four lives cross—maybe other lives as well. But since I don't know who the others are, I'll have to confine myself to the four I do know of so far. If I once find that point, I may be able to trace the woman *forward*, from there on, since I haven't been able to trace her or her motive *backward*, from the crimes themselves."

Wanger to superior:

"As a matter of fact, to clear the decks I'm going to do what will probably seem to you suicidal, fatal. I'm going to eliminate the woman from my calculations entirely, leave her out of it as completely as though she didn't exist. She only clouds the thing up, anyway. I'm going to concentrate on the four men. Once I can put my finger on the connecting link there is between them, she'll re-enter the thing automatically, probably dragging her motive into view."

His superior shook his head dubiously. "It's sort of an inverted technique, to say the least. She commits the murders, so instead of concentrating on her, you concentrate on the victims."

"In self-defense. She'll hold us up forever, like she's already held us up for nearly two solid years. When you can't get in one door, get in another. Even if they don't lead to the same rooms, at least you're in."

"Well, try to get in, even if it's by a chimney," his superior urged plaintively. "The only thing that keeps this from being a big stink is that no one inside or out of the Department seems to share your conviction that the four cases have any relation to one another. Presumably to be outwitted by four separate criminals on four different occasions is less of a reflection on us than to be outwitted by the same criminal four times running."

Wanger was coming down the steps at Headquarters when he bumped into Corey

on his way up them. Corey grabbed him by the arm. "Hold on, you're just the man I want to see."

"What brings you around here at this unearthly hour? I was just on my way home."

"I was playing cards until now, and listen, remember those 'mentions' you asked me to recall if I could—Bliss of Ferguson and vice versa? Well, one of them popped into my head, so I left the game flat then and there."

"Swell. Come on in and let's hear it."

"Now, I don't know if this is what you want or not, but at least I got something. I wanted to get it to you right away, before I lose it again. Association of ideas brought something back to me. We were playing stud tonight and somebody shoved a stack of chips across the table, said, 'Can't take 'em with you.' That brought Ferguson back to me. We were playing poker down at his studio one night, and I remember him shoving a stack across the table with the same remark. Then *that* in turn brought back a reference he made, at the time, to Ken Bliss—and that was what you told me the other day you wanted."

"See how it works? Association of ideas, once removed. He said, 'I haven't had a hand like this since I used to belong to the Friday-Night Fiends.' I said, 'What were the Friday-Night Fiends?' He said, 'Ken Bliss and I and a couple of others were banded together in a sort of informal cardplaying club. No dues or charter or anything like that; we'd just meet every other Friday—payday for most of us—for a stud session, each time at a different guy's room. Then we'd all pile into a car we owned shares in, half soused, and go joy-riding through the town, raising Cain.'"

"That was all he said, just in the space of time it took the dealer to fill up discards around the board. Now is that worth anything to you?"

Wanger whacked him behind the shoulder, so hard that Corey had to grab the table to keep an even balance. "It's the first break I've had!"

Wanger to superior:

"They belonged to a card club together, Bliss and Ferguson. That doesn't sound

like much, does it? But it's what I've said I wanted, so I'm not kicking: the point at which their two lives crossed."

"What does that give you?"

"One thread by itself is not much good. Two crossed threads are that much stronger. Cross a few more together at the same place, and you're beginning to get something that'll hold weight. It's the way nets are made."

"Now I've got to do a lot of plodding. I've got to find out the date, that is the year, on which this little amateur social club was banded together. I've got to find out others who were in it, along with Bliss and Ferguson. I've got to find out the dates of the month of the particular Fridays on which they got together. When I have, I've got to check those dates carefully to see if I can find just what they were up to when, as Ferguson expressed it, they went tearing around town half stewed. It may show up in the blotter of some out-of-the-way police station. Then when I've got all that built up, I can start looking for this woman from that point on. I'll have a fulcrum, I won't be suspended in mid-air the way I am now."

"Outside of all that," commiserated his superior, but strictly off the record, "you've got practically nothing to do. How you going to spend your spare time?"

Ten days later:

"Get anywhere yet?"

"Yeah, like a snail. I've got the year date and I've got the names of the other two members of the Friday-Night Fiends. But there's a blind spot has developed in it that I don't like the looks of. It may make the whole line of investigation worthless, if I can't clear it up pretty soon."

"What is it?"

"No Mitchell. He wasn't a member of the card club; his name wasn't among them. I went checking back through dusty police blotters, and I finally hit something, like I figured I might. Four men in a car were pinched on a Friday for drunken and disorderly conduct, reckless driving, smashing a plate-glass window by throwing an empty liquor bottle at it as they went by, and finally knocking over a fire hydrant. They spent sixty days apiece in the work-

house, had to pay the damages, and of course their license was taken away from them. Now three of the names down on the blotter were Bliss, Moran, and Ferguson. They gave their right ones, too, thank God. The fourth is a new one, Honeyweather. Also, I got their addresses—at that time—off the blotter. I'll have an easier time now tracing this Honeyweather, the other member, from there on. But if Mitchell had been a member of the card club, he'd have been in the jam along with them, and he's one of the four she's killed. So I'm scared stiff that the card club has nothing to do with the killings and I'm barking up the wrong tree."

"Mitchell may have been ill that particular night, or he'd passed out and been dropped off at his home before they got into all that trouble, or he may have been out of town. I wouldn't give up yet; I'd keep on with it like you are. At least it's a positive line of approach; it's better than nothing at all."

A week later:

"How are you coming now, Wanger?"

"Do you see this look on my face? It's that of a man about to jump off a bridge."

"Fair enough! Only first clean up these Unknown-Woman Murders. Then I'll drive you as far as the bridge approach myself and even pay the toll for you."

"All kidding aside, chief, it's ghastly. I've finished building the thing up since my last report. I've got it all complete now, not a thing left out. I even filled in the Mitchell blind spot. And now that I'm through—it has no meaning, it doesn't help us at all! It has the same drawback to it that each of these murders in itself has had: there isn't any motive there, from beginning to end, to incite to murder. Nothing they did was criminal enough, injurious enough to anyone, to precipitate a deferred-payment blood feud."

"It may be present but you haven't identified it yet. Let me hear your report anyway."

"I tried to trace this Honeyweather, the fourth member, from the address he gave that night of their quadruple arraignment. And I've lost him entirely. Gone from the face of the earth. I was able to keep up

with his movements for about a year afterward—and God knows he moved around plenty! Then he seems to have dropped from sight, vanished as completely as this woman herself has—only without the subsequent reappearances she makes!"

"What line was he in?"

"Seems to have been chronically unemployed. He sat in his room all day pecking away at a typewriter, from what his last landlady tells me. Then he left there, and never showed up anywhere else."

"Wait a minute, maybe I can give you a lift on that," his superior said. "Unemployed—pecking away at a typewriter; maybe he was trying to be a writer. They sometimes change their names, don't they? Have you got a pretty recognizable description?"

"Yes, fairly accurate."

"Take it around to the various publishing houses, see if it fits anyone they know. Now, what about Mitchell? You said you cleared that up."

"Yes. He was the bartender of a place they frequented at that time. They took him with them in the car more than once. Chiefly, I gather, because he chiseled liquor from his employer's shelves and brought it along with him each time. So that, although he was not a member of the card club itself, he was very much present when they went skylarking around afterward. Which at least keeps my whole line of investigation from collapsing, the way I was afraid it was going to; those Friday-night tears in the car are still the point at which all their lives intercross. But the main difficulty still remains; they don't seem to have been guilty of anything which would warrant bringing *this* on, what we're up against now."

"Are you sure of that?"

"As far as all police records go, anywhere within city limits during that period; and I've even covered the nearby outlying communities."

"But don't you realize that it was bound to be something that escaped police attention at the time, otherwise they wouldn't still be at large today? It must have been a crime that was never attributed to them on the official records."

"More than that," said Wanger thought-

fully. "It just occurs to me—it may have been a crime that they didn't even realize they committed themselves. Well, I've got a way of finding *that* out, too! I'm going to sift through the back files of every newspaper that came out, on the particular dates of their get-togethers. It must be in one of them somewhere, hidden, tucked away, not seeming to have anything to do with them. That's what libraries are for. That's where I'll be from now on. The tougher it gets, the harder to lick I get!"

Wanger to Fingerprint Department, by telephone:

"Well, what the hell happened to that gun? D'je lose it? I'm still waiting for a report."

"What gun? You never sent us any gun, whadaya talking about?"

Incoherent squeak, as when a tenor voice goes suddenly falsetto. Then: "I never *what*? I sent you a gun to be checked over God knows how many weeks ago and not a peep out of you since! I'm still waiting! It wasn't supposed to be a Christmas present, y'know! What kind of a place are you running there anyway? It's up to you guys to get it back to me, or didn't you know that? You're a fine bunch of crumbs!"

"Listen, thunder voice, we don't needa be told our job by anyone. Who the hell do you think you are, the Police Commissioner? If y'da sent us a gun to be tested, we'da sent it back to ya! How we gonna get something back to you we never got from you in the first place?"

"Listen, don't get tough with me, whoever you are. I got a gun coming to me and I want it!"

"Aw, look up your assignment and see if that's where you left it!"

Clopp!

City home of a popular and successful writer, three weeks later:

"Mr. Holmes, there's a gentleman in the outside room who insists on seeing you, he won't be put off."

"You know better than to do this! How long have you been working for me?"

"I *told* him you were dictating into the machine, but he says it simply cannot wait. He threatened, if I didn't come in and

inform you, to come in himself."

"Where's Sam? Call Sam and have him thrown out! If he gives you any trouble, call the police!"

"But, Mr. Holmes, he *is* the police. That's why I thought I'd better come in and let you—"

"Police be damned! I suppose I parked too long by a fireplug or something! Right while I'm in the middle of the biggest scene in the whole book, too! D'you realize this whole interruption has gone into the machine, that I'll have to start over again from the end of the last record? I'm sorry to do this, Miss Truslow, but you've broken one of my first and most inflexible rules that was impressed on you over and over when you were first taken on to help me with my work. No intrusion while I'm creating, not even if the building is burning down around me! I'm afraid I won't need you any more after today. You finish up the typing that you have on hand, and Sam will give you your check when you're ready to go home."

"Is this the man? Just what do you mean by forcing yourself in here and creating a disturbance like this? What is it you want to speak to me about?"

Wanger (softly): "Your life."

XII

HOLMES' roadster was crawling along at his usual snail's pace, hugging the extreme outside of the road, German shepherd stiffly erect in the seat beside him, when the taxi flashed by, going the same way he was.

He habitually drove in low like that, to help his thinking.

By the time he neared the cutoff that led in to his own place, the cab should have been long out of sight, at the clip it had been going, but to his surprise it was still in view ahead as he crested the last rise.

Just as it came opposite the cutoff, with its warning, T. HOLMES, PRIVATE ROAD, NO THOROUGHFARE, stretched across it, three acoustically perfect screams winged up from it. The next moment the door flung outward and the figure of a girl either jumped or was flung bodily onto the soft turf edging the road. She rolled

over once in a complete somersault, then came to a stop right side up. The taxi put on speed and spurted down the road.

Holmes glided to a stop opposite her a moment later and got out. She was in a sidewise sitting position now, clutching her instep with both hands. The German shepherd undutifully remained in the car, as though that was his first love, rather than his master.

"Hurt yourself?" Holmes bent over her, took her below the arms, and helped her to her feet. She immediately teetered against him.

"I can't stand up on one of them. What'll I do?"

"Better come into my place a minute. It's right down the way there.

He helped her into the car, drove the short distance down the private road, helped her out again in front of a typical remodeled-for-city-occupancy farmhouse.

A colored man opened the door. He greeted Holmes with the familiarity bred of long years of association. "Well, did you get a bang-up finish for that chapter was troubling your mind?"

"I did have one," said Holmes somewhat moodily, "but it was knocked right out of my head again. This young lady's had a mishap, help me get her to a chair. Then go out and put the car in."

The two of them helped her down a long pine-paneled living room that ran the entire depth of the house, with a gigantic conical fireplace of cobbled stones set into one side, from floor to ceiling. That is, the trim was ceiling high, the aperture was about shoulder height or a little less. She attempted to stop and sink down when she had reached a large overstuffed chair standing out before it, with its back to the salmon-pink glow. The colored man quickly gave her a little hitch onward, toward another, a few paces away. "Not that one, that's his inspiration chair."

Seated, Holmes studied her by the firelight.

She was young, and the mere fact that everything about her tried to convey the exact opposite impression showed how young she really was. Eighteen; nineteen at the very outside. Her hair had probably been golden when she was a child, it was

darkening to chestnut now. Her eyes were blue.

"What happened?" he said.

"The usual thing. Whenever you see a girl come out of a car without waiting for it to stop, you can draw your own conclusions."

"But it was a city cab, wasn't it?" It occurred to him it was a little far out for that sort of thing.

"And the ideas in it were city ideas." She didn't seem to want to talk about it any further.

"I guess we'd better have a doctor in to look at that foot of yours."

She didn't show any particular eagerness at the suggestion. "Maybe it'll go down, if I just stay off it."

Sam had come back.

"Doc Johnson will be here in half an hour."

After a while, while they were waiting, she said: "I've always wondered what you were like."

"Oh, then you know who I am?"

"Who doesn't? I've read you from A to Z."

She sighed soulfully. "Imagine sitting here in the same room with you!"

He turned away. "Cut that stuff out."

"And at least you're like you should be," she went on, undeterred. "I mean so many of these people that write red-blooded outdoor stuff are skinny anemic little runts wrapped in blankets. You at least cut a figure that a girl can get her teeth into."

"You oughta be poured over waffles," he let her know disgustedly.

Her eyes roamed the raftered ceiling, flickering with flame reflections like sea waves. "You live in this big place all alone?"

"I come out here to work." If there was a gentle hint in that, it glanced off her.

"What a fireplace; I bet you could stand up on the inside of it."

"They used to smoke whole hams and turkeys inside it in the old days; the hooks are still set into the inside of the chimney. It's almost too big, takes it too long to draw and get het up. I tried to cut it down by relining it, putting in a dummy top and sides of zinc."

"Oh yes, I see that chink that seems to

border it all around; I thought it was a fault in the stones."

SAM was thrusting at the fire with a heavy iron poker when the doctor's knock sounded at the door. He stood it up against the stone facing, went out to admit him. Holmes followed him into the hall, to greet the doctor. He thought he heard her give a sobbing little moan of ex-cruciation behind him, but the doctor's noisy ingress drowned it out.

When they came in a moment later, her face was contorted and all the color seemed to have left it. The iron poker lay horizontal on the floor, as though it had toppled down of its own weight.

"Let's have a look," the doctor said. He felt gently with his fingers. "You've got a bad contusion there. But it's not a sprain, more like one of the little cartilages is smashed. Wrap it up in cotton wool. You'll have to spare that foot for a day or two, give it a chance to mend."

Even while the overflow wrung from her by pain slowly trickled out of the corner of each eye, the look she gave Holmes seemed to hold something of triumph in it.

Afterward, when the doctor had gone, he said: "I don't know how we're going to do it. The station's a forty-minute pull from here, and I don't even know if there are any more trains in tonight. I could drive you all the way in to the city myself, but we'd get there about daylight."

"Can't I stay?" she said wistfully. "I won't bother you."

"It isn't that. I'm single and I'm alone in the house. Even Sam sleeps out over the garage."

"Och." She tossed that off like a puff-ball. "That dog'll be chaperon enough."

"Well—er—won't your people worry about you if you stay away overnight?"

Something like a choked laugh sounded in her throat. "Oh sure, three days from now. They're in New Mexico. By the time they hear I wasn't home, I'll be home all over again."

He gave Sam a look and Sam gave him one. "Fix up that ground-floor room that has the cot in it for the lady, Sam," he said finally.

"Freddie Cameron's the name," the child-ish-looking figure ensconced in the chair supplied. "Short for Frederica, you know."

They sat there in silence, waiting for Sam to get the room ready.

"Why do you keep all those rifles and shotguns stacked up in the corner?"

"Because I do a lot of hunting when I'm not working."

"Are they loaded?"

"Sure, they're loaded." He waited a moment and then he added: "They give a terrible kickback when they're fired."

"G'night, Mr. Holmes and lady," Sam called on his way out. Holmes followed him upstairs.

Sam came in and found them sitting at the breakfast table together. "What's this?" he cried with mock outrage that had an undercurrent of pique to it.

"The Number Two Boy rustled it up for him this morning. But she has no luck, he won't eat."

"He's thinking of a plot," Sam suggested. Holmes gave him a startled look, as though the remark was disconcertingly shrewd. He filled a saucer from his cup, put it on the floor. The German shepherd came over and noisily siphoned it up.

"Well, is the plot finished yet?" she wanted to know presently.

"Incomplete," Holmes said. He had been watching the dog. "But I'll get it later." He took up his cup, drained it, held it out to her for more.

He got up, threw her a brief, "See you tonight," and went into the living room.

"What does he mean, see you tonight?" she asked Sam blankly. "What am I supposed to be, invisible until then?"

"He's going to produce now." Sam went in after him, as though his presence was required to set things in order. She watched from the doorway. Sam shifted the "inspiration chair," cocked his head at it, readjusted the chair with hairline precision.

"Does that have to be in the exact same place each time?" she asked incredulously. "I suppose if it was two inches out of line he couldn't think straight."

"Sh!" Sam silenced her imperiously. "If it ain't even with that diagonal pattern on the carpet, it distracts him."

Holmes was standing looking out the

window, already lost to the world. He made an abrupt backhand gesture of dismissal. "Get out! Here it comes now."

Sam tiptoed out with almost ludicrous haste, frenziedly motioning her before him. She stood there a moment outside the closed door, unabashedly eavesdropping. Holmes' voice filtered through in a droning singsong, talking into the dictating machine:

"Chinook rushed on through the snow wastes, face a mask of vengeance under his fur parka—"

Sam wouldn't leave her in peace even there. "Don't stand this close, you're liable to make the floor creak."

She turned away reluctantly, limping on her one slipped foot. "So that's how it's done. And there must never be the slightest variation in detail, not even in the way his chair stands."

Sam poised himself, watch in hand, outside the door, one fist upraised in striking position. He waited until the sixtieth second had ticked off, then brought his fist down. "Five o'clock!" he called warningly.

Holmes came out haggard, hair awry, shirt open down to his abdomen, cuffs open, shoelaces untied, even his belt buckle unfastened. A prim, mousy little figure of a middle-aged woman, sitting under the antlered hatrack near the door, stood up. She wore an ill-fitted tweed suit, steel-rimmed spectacles, and had her graying hair drawn tightly back into an unsightly little knot at the nape of her neck.

"I'm the new typist, Mr. Holmes. Mr. Trent says he hopes I'll be more satisfactory than the last one he sent you."

The Cameron girl had come to the doorway of her room, opposite them, drawn by the sound of his emergence.

"I'm afraid the damage has been done already," he said, with a glance at her. "Did you come prepared to stay?"

"Yes." She indicated a venerable Gladstone bag on the floor beside her. "Mr. Trent explained the work would have to be done on the premises."

"Well, I'm glad you got here. I've already done six chapters into the machine. I don't know how fast you are, but it'll take you at least three or four days to catch up. Sam, carry Miss— I didn't get your name."

"Miss Kitchener."

"Carry Miss Kitchener's bag up to the front second-floor room."

The Cameron girl came toward him, a look of sulky disapproval on her face, as soon as he was alone. "So we're going to have Lydia Pinkham with us for a while."

"You seem put out."

"I am." She wasn't being playful about it either, she was seething. "A woman likes the run of the place. This was ideal."

He gave her a long, level look. "I'll bet it was," he said dryly, turning away at last.

Sam said later, "We're sure getting a run of women out here! Maybe you better do your work in town, where it's nice and lonely, after this, Mr. Holmes."

"I have an idea they'll be thinning out soon," Holmes answered, brushing his hair at the mirror.

THE three of them sat back after Sam had taken out the dessert plates. Freddie Cameron still had the sulky look on her face. Throughout the meal she had tried, much to his amusement, to give the other woman the impression she was a legitimate member of the household.

"Sam," he called. And when the colored man had returned to the doorway, "How long since you've had a night off?"

"Pretty long. But ain't no use in having one out here, there's no place to go."

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll treat you to one in the city. I'll drive you over to the station when I go out for my usual evening spin. There are some things I want you to stop in and get at the flat in town, while you're there, anyway."

"I'd sure like that! But will you be able to get along without me, Mr. Holmes?"

"Why not? You'll be back by midmorning. Miss Cameron can rustle up breakfast for me, like she did today."

Her face brightened for almost the first time since the typist's arrival. "Can I!"

"And I can build my own fire when I'm ready to start work in the morning. Just see that there's enough wood on hand."

It was nearly eleven when he drove slowly back to the house. The Cameron girl was standing out at the foot of the stairs,

listening. A sound like frightened, low-pitched sobbing reached him from above.

She smiled inscrutably, thumbed the staircase. "The old maid's walking out on you. She's got the heebie-jeebies. Somebody threw a rock through her window warning her to clear out."

"Why didn't you go up and calm her at least?"

"I didn't have to. She came tearing down here to me in an 1892 flannel nightie and practically jumped into my lap for protection. That's only the trailer you're listening to now. I looked up the trains for her, as long as she wanted to leave that bad."

"It wouldn't have surprised me very much if you hadn't."

She ignored that. "Some mischievous kids must have done it, don't you think?"

"Undoubtedly," he said as he started up. "Only there don't happen to be any for miles around here."

Miss Kitchener was packing things into the Gladstone bag, between whiffs at a bottle of smelling salts. There was a fist-sized rock on the table, and a crudely penciled scrap of paper that read:

*Get out of that house before morning
or you won't live to regret it.*

"You're not going to let a little thing like that get you, are you?" he suggested.

"Oh, I couldn't sleep a wink tonight after this!" she snuffled. "I'm nervous enough other nights as it is, even in the city."

"It's just a practical joke."

She paused uncertainly in her packing. "Wh—who do you suppose—?"

"I couldn't say," he said decisively, as though to discourage further questioning on that score. "Did you look out, try to see who was down there at the time?"

"Dear me, no! I ran for my life down the stairs, as soon as I'd finished reading it. I—I feel so much better now that you're back, Mr. Holmes. There's something about having a man in the house—"

"Well," he said, "I don't want to oblige you to stay here if you're going to be frightened and uncomfortable. I'm willing to drive you in to the station and you still have plenty of time to make the quarter-of-twelve train. You can do the typing next

week in the city, when I come back. It's entirely up to you."

The avenue of escape he was offering obviously appealed to her. He saw her look almost longingly toward her open bag. Then she took a deep breath, gripped the foot rail of the bed with both hands as if to steel herself. "No," she said. "I was sent out here to do this work for you, and I've never yet failed to carry out anything that was expected of me. I shall stay until the work is complete!" But she spoiled the fine courage of the sentiments she was expressing by stealing a surreptitious afterglance at the shattered window.

"I think you'll be all right," he said quietly, with a half-formed little smile at the corner of his mouth. "The dog's an effective guarantee that no one will get in the house from outside. And my own room's right down at the other end of the hall."

XIII

THE Cameron girl was unusually vivacious at breakfast, perhaps because she had had the making of it. She was whistling blithely when Holmes came down, a derelict with a shadowy jawline and soot under his eye. Miss Kitchener was there ahead of him, shining with soap and water, her nocturnal timidity a thing of the past—at least until the coming night.

"You ladies'll have to excuse me," he said, "I want to start work immediately."

He closed the living-room door after him, thrust cords of wood into the fireplace, kindled a wedge of newspaper under them. The "inspiration chair," he noticed, was slightly out of true with the diagonal pattern of the carpet. He shifted it slightly. Then he picked up the speaking tube appended to the machine, sat back, everything in readiness for a long day's creative work. Everything but one thing—

The Cameron girl snapped her head around, found his eyes boring into her from the doorway, some five minutes later. "Wh-what happened?" she faltered uneasily. "No quarantine this morning?"

"Come in, will you, I want to talk to you. Maybe that'll help to get me started."

She made her way in ahead of him, looking back across her shoulder at him the

whole way. He closed the door on the two of them. "Sit down."

"*That chair?* I thought no one else was allowed—"

"That's Sam's line of talk." His eyes fixed themselves on her piercingly.

She sank into it without further protest. He squatted down, adding an extra cord or two to the fire.

"What'll I talk about?" she suggested presently.

He didn't answer, just kept watching her. A minute or two ticked by; the only sound in the room with them was the steadily increasing hum from the fireplace.

"Deep thought," she said mockingly.

"Let me feel your hand a minute," he said unexpectedly. She extended it to him indolently. The palm was perfectly dry. The wrist was steady.

He flung it back at her with such unexpected force that it struck her across the chest. He was on his feet. "Come on, get out of that chair fast," he said hoarsely. "You sure had me fooled. What's your racket, kid?"

But before she had a chance to answer, he was already over at the door, had thrown it open, was thumbing her out past him with an urgency that had something tingling about it.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" she drawled reproachfully as she regained her own doorway opposite.

"Keep out of the way for a while; don't come in here, no matter what you hear. Get that straight?" Some of the rough edge left his voice, he called up the stairs with suddenly regained urbanity: "Miss Kitchener, could I speak to you down here a minute?"

The diligent pitter-patter of her typing, which had been like soft rain on a roof, broke off short and she came down unhesitatingly, at her usual precise, fussy little gait. He motioned her in. "How far have you gotten?" he asked, closing the door.

"I'm midway through the opening chapter."

"Sit down. The reason I called you is I'm changing this lead character's name to— No, sit down there, right where you are."

"That's your chair, isn't it?"

"Oh, any chair. Sit down while I discuss this with you." He forced her to take it by pre-empting the other one. She lowered a spine stiff as a ramrod to the outermost edge of it, contacting it by no more than half an inch.

"Will changing his name give you any extra work? Has he appeared by name yet in the part you've already transcribed?"

She was up again, with alacrity. "Just a moment, I'll go up and make sure—"

He motioned her down again. "No, don't bother." And then with mild wonderment, "You were just going over that part, how is it you can't recall offhand? Well, anyway, it occurred to me that in Northern stories readers are used to identifying French-Canadian characters with the villain, and therefore it might be advisable to— Miss Kitchener, are you listening to me? What's the matter, are you ill?"

"It's too warm in this chair, the heat of the fire. I can't stand it."

Without warning he reached forward, seized one of her hands before she could draw it back. "You must be mistaken. How can you say the chair's too warm for you? Your hand's ice-cold—trembling with cold!" He frowned. "At least let me finish what I have to say to you."

Her breathing had become harshly audible, as though she had asthma. "No, no!"

They both gained their feet simultaneously. He pressed her down by the shoulder, firmly but not roughly, so that she sank into the chair again. She attempted to writhe out of it sideways this time. Again he gripped her, pinned her down. Her spectacles fell off.

"Why is your face so white? Why are you so deathly afraid?"

SHE seemed to be in the throes of hysteria, beyond reasoning. A knife unexpectedly flashed out from somewhere about her—her sleeve, perhaps—and was upraised against him across the back of the chair. Her hand was quick, his hand was quicker. He throttled it by the wrist, pinning it down over the chair top; it turned a little, and the knife fell out, glanced off the low fire screen behind her and into the flames.

"That's a funny implement for a typist to be carrying around with her; do you use that in your work?" She was struggling almost maniacally against him now, something seemed to be driving her to a frenzy. He was exerting his strength passively, holding her a prisoner in the chair with one hand riveted at the base of her throat. He was standing offside to her, however, not directly before her. She alone was in a straight line with the fireplace.

"Let me up—let me up!"

"Not until you speak," he grunted.

She crumpled suddenly, seemed to collapse inwardly, was suddenly a limp bundle there in the chair. "There's a gun in there, above the zinc partition—trained on this chair! Any minute the heat will—! A sawed-off shotgun filled with—!"

"Who put it there?" he probed relentlessly.

"I did! Quick, let me up!"

"Why? Answer me, why?"

"Because I'm Nick Killeen's widow—and I came here to kill you, Holmes!"

"That's all," he said briefly, and stepped back.

HE TOOK his hand away too late. As it broke contact, there was a blinding flash behind her that lit up his face, a roar, and a dense puff of smoke swirled out around her, as though blown out of the fireplace by a bellows worked in reverse. She heaved convulsively one more time, as though still attempting to escape by reflex alone, then deflated again, staring at him through the smoke haze that veiled her.

"You're all right," he assured her quietly. "I emptied it out before I started the fire up a second time, only left the powder charge in it. The dictation machine saved me; you must have accidentally brushed against the lever, turned it on, when you came in here last night. It recorded the whole proceeding, from the first warning creak of the floor to the replacing of the zinc sheet that roofs the fireplace. Only I couldn't tell which one of you it was, that's why I had to give you the chair test."

The door flashed open and the Cameron girl's frightened white face peered in at them. "What was that?"

He was, strangely enough, twice as rough-

spoken and curt to her as he had been to the woman in the chair, the way one is to a puppy or a child that can't be held responsible for its actions. "Stay out of here," he bellowed, "you damned nuisance of an autograph-hunting, hero-worshipping school brat, or I'll come out there, turn you over my knee, and give you a spanking that'll make you need cotton wool some place else besides your ankle!" The door closed again twice as quickly as it had opened, with a gasp of shocked incredulity.

He turned back to the limp, deflated figure still cowering there in the chair. "What were you going to do to *her*—in case it had worked?" he asked curiously.

She was still suffering from shock, but she managed a weak smile. "Exactly nothing at all. She wasn't on my list. She couldn't have endangered me. I might have tied her up, in order to get away, that was all."

"At least you're fair-minded in your death dealing," he conceded grudgingly. He watched her for a moment, then went over and poured her a drink, without turning his back on her. "Here. You seem to be all in shreds. Knit yourself up again."

She tottered waveringly erect at last, one hand out to the chair back. Then little by little a change came over her. Though her hair was still artfully streaked with gray and drawn tightly back, the last vestiges of the prissy Miss Kitchener seemed to roll off her like a transparent cellophane wrapping. She was somehow a younger, more vibrant woman.

"Well, I got them all but you, Holmes. Nick will overlook that, I'm only a woman after all. Go ahead, call the police, I'm ready."

"I am the police. Holmes was hijacked into safety weeks ago, he's lying low in Bermuda. I've been living his life for him ever since, tearing the covers off his old books and reading them over again into the machine, waiting for you to show up. I was afraid the dog would give me away; it showed so plainly I wasn't its master."

"I should have noticed that," she admitted. "Overconfidence must have made me careless. Everything went like clock-work with all the others—Bliss and Mitchell and Moran and Ferguson."

"Look out," he warned her dryly, "I'm

getting it all on there." He thumbed the dictation machine, making its faint whirring sound again.

"Do you take me for the usual petty-larceny criminal for gain, trying to cover up what he's done, trying to welsh out of it?" There was unutterable contempt in the look she gave him. "You have a lot to learn about me! I glory in it! I want to shout it from the housetops, I want the world to know!" She took a quick step over beside the recording apparatus, her voice rose triumphantly into the speaking tube. "I pushed Bliss to his death! I gave cyanide to Mitchell! I smothered Moran alive in a closet! I shot Ferguson through the heart with an arrow! This is Julie Killeen speaking. Do you hear me, Nick, do you hear me? Your debt is paid—all but one."

Sparks seemed to dart from her eyes.

"It's a long time ago now, as times goes, and yet all I have to do is shut my eyes and he's beside me again, Nick, my husband. And the pain wells up around me again, the hate, the rage, the sick, cold loss. AN I have to do is shut my eyes and it's yesterday again, that lost-past, unforgotten yesterday."

XIV

"—FOR better or for worse, in sickness or in health, until death do ye part?"

"I do."

"I now pronounce you man and wife. Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. You may kiss the bride." They turned toward one another shyly. She drew the filmy veil clear of her face. Her eyes drooped closed as his lips met hers in the sacramental kiss. She was Mrs. Nick Killeen now, not Julie Bennett any more.

The apsed doorway receded overhead, gave way to a night sky soft as velvet, pricked with a single star, the evening star. Promising things, long life and happiness and laughter; promising things—but with a wink.

Their attendants hung back, as if bonded in some mischievous conspiracy, as the two principals unsuspectingly started down the short, spreading flight of church steps. The foremost of a short line of cars that had been

held in readiness a few doors up the street meshed gears and started slowly forward to receive them. Hands sought paper bags, and the first few swirls of rice began to mist the steps. The bride threw up her arm to ward off the bombardment, huddled closer to the groom.

There was a sudden caterwauling of hysterical brakes, a large black shape, blurred for a moment by its very unexpectedness, careened around the corner of the church. It skimmed over the curb, threatened to mount the steps. By some miracle of maniac steering it veered off, straightened out, revealed itself for a split second as a black sedan, then shot forward into blurred velocity again. A series of ear-splitting detonations had punctured the whole incredible apparition, and reflected flashes traced it from windowpane to windowpane along the lower floors of the row of houses opposite.

The laughter and playful shouts had changed to strangled coughs and sputterings. Then there was a sudden silence, as of premonition. In it, a voice spoke a name. The bride spoke her husband's name. "Nick!" Just once, in a hushed, terrified voice. An instant longer they stood down there motionless at the bottom of the steps, side by side, just as they had left the church. Then all at once she stood alone, and he lay at her feet.

Minutes went by that had no meaning any more. She was a statue in white. The one motionless, the one fixed thing, in all the eddying and swirling about. Voices shouting suggestions reached her as from another world, holding no meaning. "Open his shirt! Get these girls out of here, put them in the cars and send them home!"

Hands were extended toward her, trying to lead her away. "My place is here," she murmured tonelessly.

"Stunned," someone said. "Don't let her stand there like that, see if you can get her to go with you." She motioned briefly, mechanically, and they let her be.

In the welter of sounds a dismal, clanging bell approached in the distance, rushing through the streets. Then it stopped short. A black bag stood open at her feet. "Gone," a low voice said. A girl screamed somewhere close at hand. It wasn't she.

The black bag was held partly toward

her. "Here, let me give you—"

She motioned them aside with one hand. "Just let me hold my husband in my arms a moment. Just let me say good-by." The two heads joined, as they had been meant to join, but only one gave the caress. Those hovering closest heard a soft whisper. "I won't forget."

Then she was erect again, the straightest one among all of them; like ice, like white fire. A whimpering bridesmaid plucked helplessly at her sleeve. "Please come away now, *please*, Julie."

She didn't seem to hear. "How many were in that car, Andrea?"

"I saw five, I think."

"That is what I saw, too, and I have such very good eyes."

"What was the license number of that car, Andrea?"

"I don't know, I didn't have time—"

"I did. D3827. And I have such a very good memory."

"Julie, don't, you're frightening me. Why aren't you crying?"

"I am, where you can't see it. Come with me, Andrea, I'm going back inside the church."

"To pray?"

"No, to make a vow. Another vow to Nick."

SV

"SO THAT was it, and you've repaid your debt," Wanger said musingly, "and nothing we can do to you now can take away the satisfaction of your accomplishment, is that it? No punishment that you receive from us can touch you—inside, where it really matters, is that right?" She didn't answer.

"Yes, I had you figured that way all along, and now I see that I had you figured right. Sure; imprisonment won't be any punishment to you, no, nor not even the chair itself, if they should happen to give you that. There isn't a flicker of remorse in your eyes, there isn't a shadow of fear in your heart."

"There isn't. You read me right."

"The state can't punish you, can it? But I can. Listen, Julie Killeen."

"You haven't avenged Nick Killeen. You

only think you have, but you haven't. On the night that Bliss, Mitchell, Ferguson, Holmes, and Moran tore past those church steps, howling drunk in their car, a man crouched at the first-floor window of a rooming house opposite, watching for the two of you, a gun in his hand. Waiting for you to come out. He'd missed Killeen going in for some reason; he wasn't going to miss him coming out.

"He didn't."

"He raised his gun as you and your husband came down the steps. He sighted at Nick, and he pulled the trigger. The car streaked by in between at that instant, with its exhaust tube exploding a mile a minute. But his bullet found its mark, over the car's low top. It was a freak of timing that wouldn't have happened again in a hundred years, that couldn't have happened if he had tried to arrange it that way. The very reflection of the backfiring along that row of unlighted windowpanes helped to cover up his flash.

"There's your punishment, Julie Killeen. You've sent four innocent men to their deaths, who had nothing to do with killing your husband."

He hadn't reached her with that, he could tell; there was still the same glaze of icy imperviousness all over her. There was disbelief in her eyes. "Yes, I remember," she said contemptuously, "the papers tried to hint at some flimsy possibility like that at the time, no doubt deliberately encouraged by you people to cover up your own incompetency. There have been cases before that were never solved—Elwell, Dorothy King, Rothstein—and there's always the same reason: rottenness in the wrong places, bribery in the right places, pull. But there never was a case in the whole history of the police force that was allowed to pass so unnoticed as this. Not even a suspect questioned in it from first to last. As though a dog had been shot down in the streets!"

"As far as our encouraging the papers at the times goes, it was the other way around. We did everything we could to keep them from mentioning the man-across-the-way angle, deliberately misled them with stories of a stray shot from some rooftop, hoping if we kept quiet about it, if

this unknown gunman thought he wasn't suspected, it would be easier to get our hands on him."

"I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now! I saw with my own eyes—"

"What you saw was an optical illusion, then. If you had come to us at the time, asked us how were we progressing, we could have proved it to your satisfaction once and for all. But no, you hugged your vengeance to yourself, nursed your bitterness, wouldn't interview the police. You deliberately withheld the information that was in your own possession—inaccurate though it was—and used it for murder."

She flashed him a look that was a complacent admission.

"There were powder burns found on the window curtains in that room opposite the church. There were people in it, on the floor above, who distinctly heard a shot beneath their feet, over and above all the backfiring outside. They were in a better position to judge, after all, than you. We even found a discharged shell, of the same caliber as that taken out of your husband's body, wedged between a crack in the floor boards. We knew from that start where the death shot had been fired from; that was why we didn't have to go tracing wild cars all over the city. We knew everything but who the killer was. We only found that out now, recently. Don't you want to know who he is? Don't you at least want to hear his name?"

"Why should I be interested in what rabbits you pull from a trick hat to try to mislead me?"

"The proof is in our files right now. It came in too late to save Bliss, Mitchell, Moran, or Ferguson. But it's there today. Scientific proof; proof that cannot be gotten around. Documentary proof; a signed confession—I have a copy with me in my own pocket at this very minute. He's been in custody down in the city for the past three weeks." For the first time, she had no challenging answer to make.

"You'll meet him face to face when you go back there with me shortly. I think that you'll remember meeting him before."

The first superficial crack had appeared on the glaze that protected her. A flicker of doubt, of dread, peered from her eyes. A

question forced its way out. "Who?"

"Corey. Does the name mean anything to you?"

She said with painful slowness, "Yes, I remember this Corey. Twice he crossed my path, for a moment only. Once, on a terrace at a party, he brought me a drink. It would have been so easy to— But I sent him away, to clear the decks for—"

"The murder of Bliss, isn't that right?"

"According to you, someone who had never harmed me, never even seen me before that night." She held her forehead briefly, resumed: "And the second and last time, I was up in his very room with him, for a few minutes. I went back to his apartment with him as the simplest way of getting rid of him. I remember I even held him at the point of a gun, to make sure of getting out again unhindered. His gun."

"THE gun that killed your husband. The gun that fired the bullet into Nick Killeen. Through a slip-up on the part of a rookie it was checked by Ballistics instead of by the Fingerprint Department for *your* prints, which was what he had brazenly turned it over to us for.

"I remember I was sitting there raising Cain with the Fingerprint Bureau for not sending me a report on a weapon that had never reached them, when someone at Ballistics telephoned me and said, 'That gun you sent us to be tested matches the markings on the slug taken out of Nick Killeen; we suppose that's what you wanted, you weren't very definite about it.' I had to see it with my own eyes before I'd believe them. Then just to make the irony all of a piece, Corey comes walking in to find out if we were through with the gun and he could have it back again. He never got out again!

"He'd come forward to help us of his own accord. He had a license for the gun; he was only too willing to let us have it, to see if we could get your prints off it. I suppose by then so many years had passed since the Killeen killings, his sense of immunity had become almost a fetish, he thought nothing could.

"It took a little while, but we finally broke him down. In the meantime I had been working independently on what we

all thought was an entirely different matter, and came across an obscure item in old newspapers at the library, date-lined on one of those Fridays that the Friday-Night Fiends had been on the loose. Just a little human-interest thing, tragic to those immediately involved, but not particularly important. A bridegroom had been struck dead by a stray shot, presumably fired from some roof near by, as he was leaving the very church he'd just been married in.

"To me that story offered the only possible reason for the murders of the Friday-Night Fiends, who had already lost three charter members and the bartender they carried around with them on those tears of theirs. I put two and two together. No mention was made of who the bereaved bride was, but after all there must have been one, a man doesn't marry himself.

"So we soft-pedaled Corey's arrest, held him practically incommunicado, to be sure you wouldn't get wind of it and pull your next and last punch. It was easy to figure out where it would land, so I simply got into position under it.

"But what I can't figure out is what you did with yourself between visitations, so to speak. How you were able to vanish so completely each time, effect all these quick changes of coiffure and personality. I knew you were coming, but to the last minute didn't know from where, or how. It was like trying to come to grips with a wraith."

The woman answered abstractedly, "There was nothing very supernatural about it. I suppose you looked for me in out-of-the-way hiding places, rooming houses, cheap hotels. I came into contact with dozens of people daily who never gave me a second look. I lived in a hospital. I'll give you the name if you want, one of the biggest in the city. I worked there and lived right there, didn't have to go out. My hair was kept covered, so no one knew—or cared—what color it was, from first to last. When I was off duty I stayed in my room, didn't encourage friendship from the staff. When it came time to—strike again, I would get a short leave of absence, go away, return again a few days later.

"All for what? All for nothing."

She was breathing again with difficulty, as she had in the chair before. As though

something inside her were breaking up, clogging her windpipe.

"So I held the very gun he killed Nick with, in my own hands! Had him helpless at the point of it; lowered it and walked out, to go and kill an innocent man." She began to shiver uncontrollably, as though she had a chill. "Now I can hear that awful cry of Bliss as he went over the terrace. I didn't hear it then. Now I can hear Mitchell's groan. I can hear them all!" She bowed her head as abruptly as though her neck had snapped. Her sobbing was low-pitched, but intense, even-paced as the pulsing of a dynamo.

A long time after, when it had ended, she looked up again. "What did he do it for—Corey, I mean?" she asked. "I must know that."

Paper rattled under his coat. He took out a copy of the confession, unfolded it, offered it to her. She glanced only at the beginning, and at the signature at the end of the last page. Then she returned it. "You tell me," she said. "I believe you now. You are an honest man."

"They were working a racket together, your husband and Corey. A nice, profitable, juicy little racket. The details are here in his confession." He broke off short. "Did Killeen ever tell you that?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, he told me. I knew. He told me—all but the names. He told me what would happen to him if he quit. I didn't believe him. I wasn't as familiar with violence then. I told him it was either that or me. I didn't think it was as serious as all that, I didn't believe it could be. You see, I loved him. He took a week or two to make up his mind, and then he made his choice. Me."

For the first time Julie Killeen looked directly at Wanger. She spoke quietly, as though telling him some other woman's story. "He changed his quarters, our meetings became furtive. I suggested that we go to the police for protection, but he told me he was in it as deep as whoever it was he feared. He said we'd go away. We'd go away *fast*, right from the church door straight to the ship. That was another thing I insisted on, a church wedding." She smiled grimly. "You see, I killed him, in a way. That made my obligation even greater

afterward." She hesitated a moment, weary, then went on.

"He said we wouldn't come back right away. Maybe we wouldn't come back for a long time after. He was right. We went away all right—but not together. And we neither of us ever came back again.

"I KNEW I had to take him on those terms or not at all. There was never much question of a choice in it for me. I wanted him. Lord, how I wanted him. I used to lie awake at nights breaking down the time there still was to go without him into minutes and seconds. It made it seem shorter that way. His business"—she shrugged—"he promised he'd give it up, that was all my conscience was strong enough to demand."

"The mistake you both made," Wanger mused almost to himself, "was in thinking that there's ever any quitting the game he was in. They'd chalked up several killings behind them in the course of 'business.' And then there was the question of the final division of the profits, which is always the main rub. Corey couldn't let him go, they had each other deadlocked."

The woman interrupted. There was fury in her quiet voice. "He quit. He not only quit, but he made himself over. Mr. Corey, the dashing man about town. That's what he's become! Why couldn't he have let Nick go, why did he have to kill him?"

For the first time in his career Wanger was answering questions instead of asking them.

"Yes, Corey quit. But by the time he tried it there was no one left to reckon with but himself, don't forget. When Killeen tried it, there was still Corey. And the way he did it wasn't any too reassuring. Just broke the connection off short, put himself out of reach—probably listening to your well-meant advice—but *with* enough on Corey to send him to the chair in three or four round trips. Not to mention several thousand dollars that Corey thought was coming to him. Corey had his reasons, all right. He wouldn't have known a moment's peace from then on. There would have been an ax hanging over him every minute of his life. He went out to get Nick while the

getting was good, before Killeen got him first. The church was the only place Corey would be sure to find him. Before that, Nick evidently didn't show himself."

"He laid low, very low," she said, quietly, almost indifferently.

"Nick had moved. Corey didn't know who the girl was, where she lived."

"We met in the dark in the movies, always two seats in the last row."

"But he finally thought of a way. He went around to all the churches asking questions. Somebody slipped up, and he found out where and when the wedding was going to take place. Then he hired a room that commanded the side entrance. He knew Killeen would use the side entrance. He took a gun in there with him, and a package of food, and he didn't go away from that window for forty-eight hours straight. He figured the time of the ceremony might be moved up at the last minute, as a precaution."

There was silence in the room. Wanger thought of the bullet that had killed Nick Killeen, the bullet that had gone over the heads of five over men, and yet had inevitably caused the death of four of them. He sighed and looked at Julie Killeen.

"You—he never knew who you were from first to last. You were just that unimportant little white doll-like figure next to his target. And he—you never knew who he was either, did you—the man who took you to his room one night, the man who had killed your husband?"

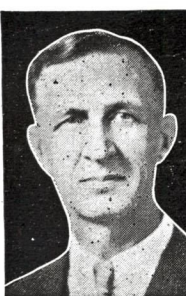
The woman didn't answer, didn't seem to hear.

"Afterwards, he sent a wreath to the funeral, in care of the warden of the church." The woman shivered, put up a hand as though Wanger had struck her.

He saw that he had convinced her at last. He got up, put the manacle around her wrist, closing it almost gently, as if trying not to disturb her bitter reverie. She seemed not to notice it.

"Let's go," he said gruffly.

She stood up, suddenly became conscious of the steel that linked their wrists. She looked at Wanger and nodded gravely. "Yes," said Julie Killeen, "it's time for me to go."



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Approved under G. I. Bill



NOW! GET AMAZING NEW COMFORT and RELIEF with

RUPTURE-EASER

Reg. in U.S. Pat. Off. (A Piper Brace Product)



- for MEN
- for WOMEN
- for CHILDREN
- Over 400,000 Grateful Users!

RIGHT or LEFT SIDE
\$3.95

Double **\$4.95**

NO FITTING REQUIRED!

A strong form-fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Snaps up in front. Adjustable back lacing and adjustable leg straps. Soft flat groin pad—no steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort, invisible under light clothing. Also used as after-operation support. Just measure around the lowest part of your abdomen and state right side, left side or double. Your Rupture Easer is ready to wear—just adjust back lacing and leg straps—and you face the world again with confidence and comfort. The immediate relief is almost unbelievable.

MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT DEvised

Soft gentle support aids Nature relieve this serious affliction in the most effective way. Brings wonderful new freedom from fear and worry. No binding, torturing steel or leather bands. Rupture-Easer has helped thousands of users—restored them to useful comfortable living—the same is YOURS FOR THE ORDERING!

INVISIBLE UNDER CLOTHING — Washable, Sanitary

Wear Rupture-Easer with new confidence under your lightest clothing. No more visible than any usual undergarment—no revealing bulk to hide. Fits under girdles and corsets. Washable—easy to keep fresh and sanitary.

BLESSED RELIEF DAY AND NIGHT

You can sleep in it—work in it—bathe in it!
10 DAY TRIAL OFFER

Money-back guarantee if you don't get relief

Piper Brace Co., Dept. FHW-2
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.
Note: Be sure to give size and side

DELAY MAY
BE SERIOUS
ORDER TODAY

What Folks Just Like You Write About RUPTURE-EASER

R. C. of Corvallis, Oregon, Air Mails: "Send me another Rupture-Easer so I will have one to change off with. It is enabling me to work at top speed at my press machine 8 hrs. a day."

M. S. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: "It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."

PIPER BRACE COMPANY

811 Wyandotte, Dept FHW-2 Kansas City 6, Mo.

Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side ☐ \$3.95 Measure around lowest part
Left Side ☐ \$3.95 of my abdomen is
Double ☐ \$4.95 _____ INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s

Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for \$_____
☐ Send C. O. D.

Name _____

Address _____

City and State _____