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MAGAZINE

THE BLONDE DIED FIRST

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rich, and most wayward girl in America

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CHAMBERS**

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THE BLONDE DIED FIRST

By Dana Chambers

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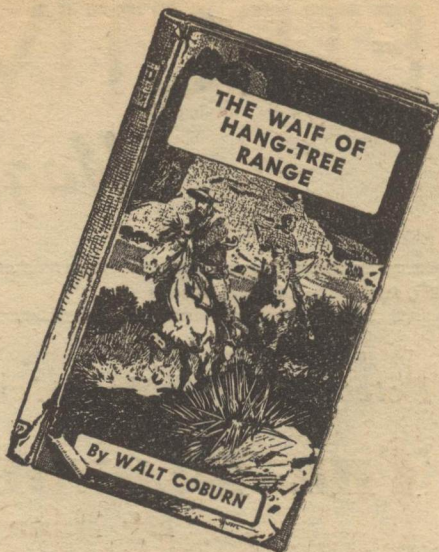
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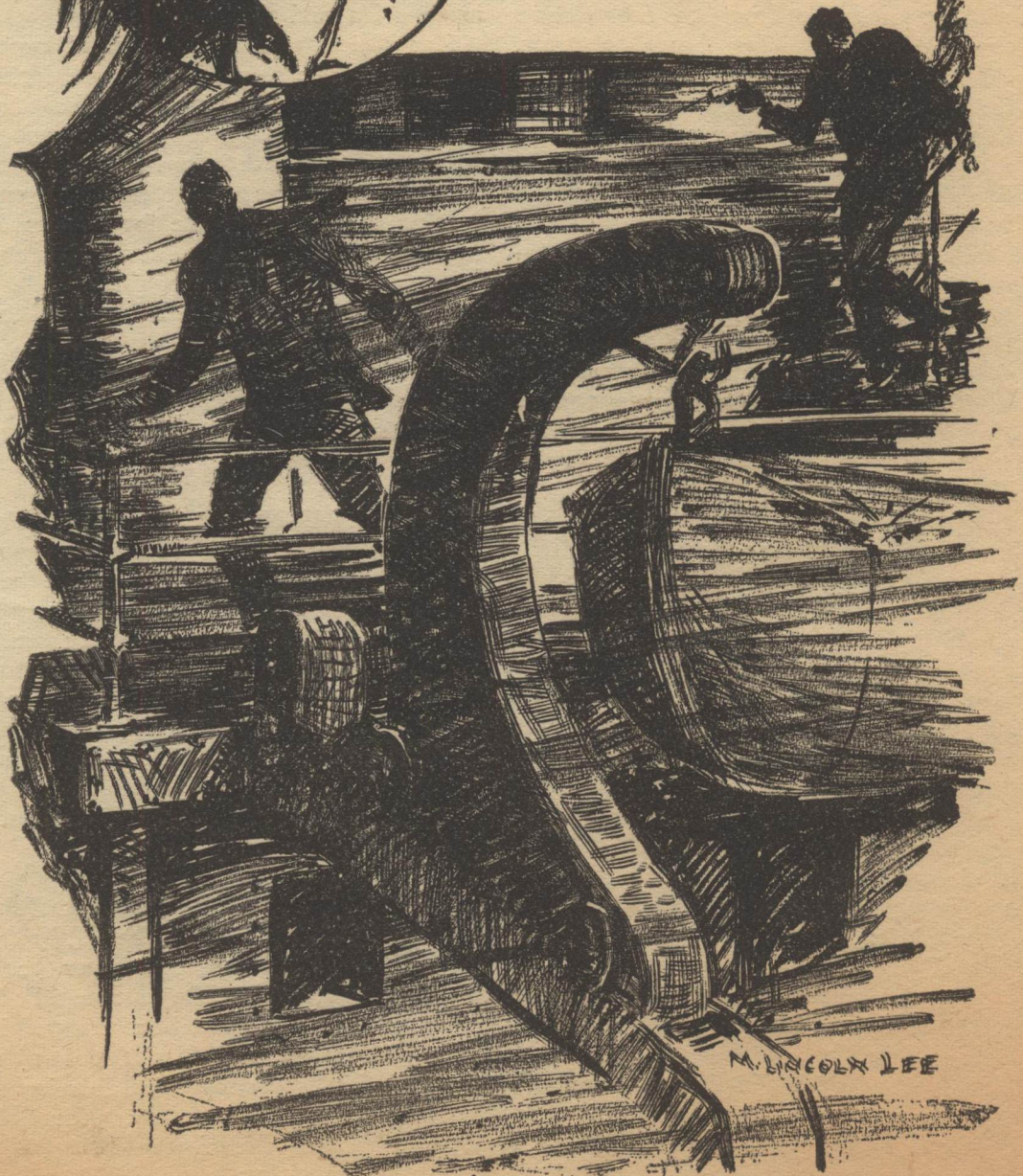
LARIAT

STORY MAGAZINE

ON SALE AT ALL GOOD NEWSSTANDS!

THE BLONDE DIED FIRST

by
Dana Chambers



THE BLONDE DIED FIRST

By DANA CHAMBERS

Murder was loose aboard the Bermuda-bound *Empress*. Already it had claimed two victims . . . and now lovely Brenda Carroll, glamour-darling of the international set, was next on the bland killer's list!

THE Park Lane bar felt hot and close and I went on through to the little garden at the back and ordered a stinger. There was no one else in the garden except a girl who sat under a red-and-blue umbrella on the next bench, sipping through a straw.

I was thinking of another matter entirely, named Lisa, but I couldn't help noticing that my companion raised her head as I sat down, and transmitted, across the three feet of space that separated us, a practically incandescent smile.

She was a graceful wench of twenty-seven or -eight with dark brown hair and a very brown face in which startling electric-blue eyes were set far apart. She represented, obviously, not only money but breeding: long, good-looking legs were sheathed in an ephemeral and costly gauze; white wash-leather gloves crumpled on a Poiret handbag half hid its small gold monogram which seemed to be repeated in a diamond clip at the throat of her black-and-white silk jacket; the line of her small pointed jaw and the articulation of slim wrists and fingers were as clear-cut and graceful as a thoroughbred's—equine, canine or human—always are. It occurred to me that I knew who she was. The waiter came back with the stinger.

Far above the garden wall before me, the Waldorf Towers were tipped with fading gold; inside the bar someone touched the keys of a piano, very softly. A pleasant faintly imperious voice said from the next bench: "Would you do me a great favor?"

The blue eyes were fixed on mine; the scarlet lips were still smiling.

"Certainly."

"It's very silly—I'm leaving for Bermuda in a few minutes. On the *Empress*. I left a package in my apartment—it's quite valuable, or I'd have the doorman

bring it up—and I'm meeting friends here any moment. *Would you . . . ?*"

A slender but quite capable small hand extended toward me a stubby key, fitted inside a flat gold case.

Her inflection combined a casual camaraderie with the assurance of those fortunate few who need fear no vicissitudes save Time, Death and Change; who move with an Olympian detachment in a crystal sphere of their own—and recognize one another at a glance in the far corners of the earth. It would be more accurate, perhaps, to say a sphere of gold.

I asked: "Aren't you afraid I'll steal the silverware?"

"No. You see I know who you are."

"Gary Cooper?" I said hopefully.

"You're Jim Steele—Marcia Rutherford has a picture of you in her scrapbook."

I REMEMBERED that Marcia's hobby was keeping a scrapbook of news-photos of her friends and that she had some of mine pasted in it.

I said: "Which picture did you see?"

"There was one taken in Washington when you were getting the Congressional Medal for something or other—something to do with a spy ring, I think."

"Never heard of it," I said hastily.

"Must have been a couple of other guys."

"You're blushing, Mr. Steele."

"Where's the package?"

"It's on the dresser in my bedroom," she said eagerly. "I'm Brenda Carroll, by the way. It's just round the corner or I wouldn't bother you." She gave me a Park Avenue address. "A flat box, wrapped in white paper and sealed with red seals. About so big." She measured four inches by eight inches with her hands. "You can't miss it. *Terribly* nice of you—"

The matter, to her, was finished.

I said, taking the key and amused in spite of a certain irritation: "If you see a lovely creature with bronze hair and green eyes come in and sit tapping an impatient foot, would you tell her that I'll be along in two shakes? The green-eyed girl will be my wife."

"I'll watch for her."

Lisa would probably be late anyway, I thought, emerging into the gasoline-drenched canyon of the Avenue now filled with strident hootings, while a double stream of motors, like huge glittering fish, swam slowly through the tender violet dusk. The outlines of Brenda Carroll's face hovered before me. That face, that smile, the determination expressed in that small pointed chin had decorated most of the rotogravure pages of two continents and filled a library-full of newspaper columns. Heiress to heaven knew how many millions, with two ex-husbands and an international record for amour, the only real trouble with Brenda Carroll was that she had more vitality than she knew how to handle. I wondered why she was going to Bermuda in mid-September. And on the *Empress*, when she had a yacht of her own. There had been some special sort of notoriety attached to that yacht quite recently, but I couldn't recall the details. Lisa might know. Joe White, a publicity man I once worked with, swung out of Forty-ninth Street and bumped into me. "Time for a quick one?" he asked, recoiling.

I told him where I was bound. He snickered. "Lovely, lovely gal," he said. "Ask her if she wants a public relations counsel. God knows she certainly needs one."

THE doorman at the Park Avenue entrance of Brenda Carroll's apartment house is an old friend of mine. "Hi, Colonel," he said. "Long time no see."

"Where does Mrs. Carroll live in this shack of yours?"

"Mrs. Carroll? House 10. Apartment 8C. You're the third party's been asking for her in the last hour."

"Yes?" Not that I cared.

"Yeah. Blonde that would knock your eye out, came in with a little shriveled duck with a white pointed beard. Guess they're still with her."

"Thanks, Ed." That was mildly interesting, though the visitors might, of course, have left via the Lexington Avenue entrance. This address is one of those vast monoliths encompassing an entire block, built around a shrub-and-flower-filled central court.

I found House 10—it was, as a matter of fact, closer to Lexington than to Park—and told the red-haired Irish lad on duty in the lower foyer that I'd been sent to do an errand for Mrs. Carroll, whom I knew wasn't at home. He hesitated and I showed him the key and stepped into his elevator, so he ran me up.

The door of Apartment 8C admitted me to a square hallway completely paneled in bluish glass whose cerulean hue was heightened by a frosted glass roof through which daylight sifted softly. Evidently this was the top floor. A huge spray of white-and-blue glass flowers bloomed in an Orrefors bowl on a table against the far wall. Doors opened left and right. I tried the left-hand door.

Living-room, evidently, and huge. At least thirty by fifty feet. I crossed its thick taupe carpet quickly, wondering why anyone so vividly alive as its mistress should care for this faintly anaemic color scheme of white and blue. The west wall was almost entirely of glass: an immensely specially built window through which I could see the North River and the sunset. And, by Joe, I thought, there's the *Empress* herself: a tiny buff-and-white toy from whose tan funnels a plume of smoke was blowing. I went on into the bedroom and stopped, quite surprised.

Some things are impossible even though right before your eyes—like finding a horse in your bathtub or one of Mr. Thurber's seals in your bedroom. I swallowed twice and looked again. One, at least, of Mrs. Carroll's visitors was still here.

SHE lay sprawled in the middle of a huge satinwood bed, and its white satin coverlet was a sodden pool of scarlet. Her throat had been cut almost from ear to ear.

I stepped closer.

She was very blond, very well made; her dress was a black silk and her face a dull, terrible drained white. The pale ivory mask was expressive not of anguish, nor of terror, but merely of intense sur-

prise. The dark eyes were open, glazed. She must, I thought, touching her wrist and noting the thickening of the scarlet pool, have been killed almost an hour ago. That would be, if the doorman had been correct, right after she got here. There was no blood on the carpet around the bed.

My first thought was Brenda Carroll.

Killed this girl herself—for what reason or reasons I couldn't, naturally, guess—and sent me down here as the fall guy while she got clean away. Yet, instantly, I realized that that didn't make sense: why send me at all? Why not let the body stay as long as possible without discovery? Unless somehow she'd already notified the Law; unless I was, without knowing it, already trapped—

I stepped round the bed toward the French telephone on its far side and drew my foot back just in time to miss crunching down on the hand on the carpet.

It was a small grey shriveled hand, with whitish hairs showing on the back of the wrist. It belonged to a small grey shriveled man. He lay on his back, one arm thrown back above his head, the other folded across his chest. Blood had stained the pointed grey beard. He wore very good clothes: a pepper-and-salt mixture cut by a good tailor, and expensive shoes. A heavy gold watch-chain which was draped across his lean middle seemed to show that robbery, at least, had not been the motive for killing him. My head swiveled round mechanically toward the dresser.

THERE was no white box, red-sealed, on its lace-spread surface. In fact there was nothing at all, except a shallow round chromium bowl that held a couple of mashed cigarette-ends. Cork-tipped Vice-roys.

I gave the figure huddled on the floor a wide berth and wrapped my handkerchief round my fingers and picked up the receiver. I got Centre Street and asked for Carney. The high clear Celtic voice was a great relief. I said: "Bob. Jim Steele. You ever hear of Brenda Carroll?"

"Also of Greta Garbo and President Roosevelt," he said impatiently.

"I'm standing in her apartment with a couple of corpses lying around. What do I do?"

"What *did* you do? You kill 'em? If

so wait right there and I'll come up and pinch you."

"One's a blonde girl, thirty-ish; one's a little fellow with a grey beard. Throats cut, both of them. Very messy. Been dead about an hour, I guess."

"Where's the Carroll?"

I don't know why I hesitated. It might have been a lot better all around if I hadn't hesitated—and then, again, it might only have postponed the inevitable. I said: "She isn't here. I'm all alone. Shall I wait for you?"

"O.K. Be right there."

I hung up and went and searched the two bodies that decorated the Carroll apartment. Exploratory finger tips proved that whoever had the package Brenda Carroll wanted, these people hadn't. In the man's hip pocket I found a .45 revolver, all of its chambers full: apparently, he hadn't had a chance to defend himself. I started to replace the gun; then, on second thought, I slipped it into my own hip pocket.

And, all of a sudden, a thought hit me, and I cursed myself for my own sublime stupidity. Brenda Carroll would be waiting for me at the Park Lane—but she wouldn't wait forever . . . and if I wanted to help Carney I could do him a lot more good by talking to la Carroll than by staying here till he arrived.

I opened the door quietly and rang for the elevator.

LISA sat in the gilt chair at the end of the Park Lane lobby and waved at me as I came in. My heart did its usual double somersault at sight of her, even if we had been married for a year. It was hard to keep remembering that I was sore. The faintly tilted mermaid's eyes widened under their smoky lashes; the brown heart-shaped face with the powder of tiny freckles across the short, delightful nose lifted to mine; the lips that were always very red and nearly always smiling said tenderly: "Why, you heel. I've been waiting a quarter of an hour."

"Sorry. Want a stinger? I had one."

"I'll have Scotch, I think. No, it's too hot. I'll have a claret lemonade."

"What's the matter—having change of life or something?"

"It'll be change of heart," Lisa said, re-

settling herself in the bar which was cooler now, "if you go sending me any more impudent messages by impudent little tramps."

"That was—"

"I know who it was. I still say 'tramp.'"

"But this is wonderful," I said, ordering the drinks. "I have never been able to get under your skin before, no matter how hard I tried. Can I help it if Brenda and I are that way?"

"She said when she saw me—she was standing talking to a couple who had just come in—'Are you Mrs. Steele, by any chance?' I said, 'Yes'—"

"Smirking prettily at the honor, I trust."

"—and she said, 'Your husband's been good enough to do an errand for me. He asked me to tell you he'd be right back.'"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Just her manner."

"Don't you want to know what the errand was?"

"I want my drink."

THE waiter slid it in front of her and she thrust a straw between her lips and lowered the drink by an inch and looked across at me. She had a new hair-do that September, had Lisa: the bronze curls rolled like a fluted shell in back, and clustered richly atop her head; they escaped now on either side of the ridiculous scrap of white ribbon that made a kind of Marie d'Medici cap; and the rest of her clothes were white, too, except for a scarlet flower on the silk coat lapel. The lovely sea-green eyes narrowed companionably at me now. She said, taking her lips away: "Ah, that's better. I was hot."

"The errand was to get a jewel-case or something for little Brenda. It was gone when I got there. Where is she?"

"She went off with these two people. What really annoyed me was, she said would you mind bringing the package over to the *Empress*? She's going to Ber—"

"I certainly will not mind," I said, leaping up and seizing Lisa's elbow. "Come on."

"I shan't move."

"I'm not kidding. *Hurry . . .*"

She saw my face and slid out of her chair like a bolt of silk uncoiling. The Mercedes was standing with her nose pointing West. Lisa never seems to hurry,

but her long lovely legs got her into the far seat by the time I had dropped behind the wheel. A faint whisper sounded beneath the huge grey-green hood and we shot forward. Carmody at 49th and Park gave me a hand signal and we shot West toward the river while traffic blatted impatiently behind us. At Sixth the lights changed.

Lisa said quietly: "What is it, Jim?"

"It's two dead bodies in the girl's apartment when I got there. I don't know whether she knew about any of it. That's why I want to see her—"

The light went green. Lisa said, not reproachfully but with an ironic resignation: "'Born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.' . . . Can't you stick your nose out the door without getting into a jam?"

"Tell me who she met."

"Tall, horsey-looking elderly man—very British, very cavalry-mustached and watery-blue-eyed. Also a nice-looking woman about forty, a little overdressed but well-dressed. They went off in a taxi—at least I heard them asking for a taxi."

We skimmed crosstown like a drifting grey shadow, wheeled under the West Side Express Highway and came to rest outside the familiar pew. The tan funnels were enormous now, looming above and behind the pier entrance, and from the foremost came a sudden violent screaming as the All-Ashore whistle blew. I snaked the Mercedes into position in a line of parked cars and slammed the door shut as Lisa slid out the far side. The escalator crawled upward.

I FELT somehow a little breathless, though I hadn't exerted myself all day. The white-mustached inspector at the foot of the gangplank had taken tickets from me for the *Empress* before—several times before. The last time was during the year when I thought Lisa was lost to me; it had been an interesting voyage through vinous seas, with champagne baskets and a complicated moon. I said: "Hello, Inspector. Have you ever met my wife?"

Lisa's smile collapsed him.

I said: "You know Mrs. Carroll, of course. Brenda Carroll. Is she sailing?"

He considered me carefully, looked at Lisa again. He said: "She's sailing, yes."

Not by that name, though. Mrs. Sefton. I shouldn't tell you."

"On board now?"

"Twenty minutes ago."

"I haven't a ticket. I want to go too." I heard a snort of delicately registered disgust from Lisa and added: "My wife and I."

"Count me out of—"

"My wife and I." Spoken firmly.

"I haven't even got a toothbrush."

"Don't be effete."

The inspector said: "You can fix it up with the purser, I guess. Steele, isn't it?"

"Right. Thanks a lot."

We went up the gangplank and in spite of her wrath Lisa's face brightened. The usual merriment quickened the deck-rails; the usual facile alcoholic repartee was exchanged between the voyagers and their patently envious friends; streamers fluttered back and forth and clouds of colored confetti, mixed with grains of rice, descended on a pink-faced couple wearing, respectively, orchids and a morning-coat.

Lisa said: "All very silly—isn't it?—yet it's always amusing." Her foot touched the deck and she stopped. "Well. Good-bye. Have a fine time."

"Ah, please. *Please*. Don't start being difficult."

"Some things . . ." she said vaguely. "But *this* . . . too asinine."

"It isn't really, darling. I'll tell you the whole story after we get going."

"You can tell me the whole story after you get home," she said frigidly, and turned to walk down the gangplank and tripped and fell and bumped her lovely nose, which cheered me considerably. I picked her up and flinched visibly from the glare proceeding from the green eyes, at which even she couldn't help smiling. "Oh, hell," she said. "Where's the bar?"

We found it and sat down and I ordered her a claret lemonade, which amused her. I looked out the window and saw rows of heavy piling sliding slowly past. Lisa saw them too. She said, "Ready or not, Bermuda, here we come."

IT was a nice stateroom, very nice, and a good champagne. A *brut* Pommery, if I remember. I filled Lisa's glass again and finished my tale: ". . . so I think the first thing I'd better do is radio Carney. Where

I am, I mean. And then go and find Mrs. Carroll-Sefton. But maybe it ought to be the other way around. What do you think, Mrs. J. Steele?"

"See her first," Lisa said instantly. "Obviously, as you say, *she* didn't kill 'em. Or she'd never have sent you back for the package. But maybe she knows who they are. The thing that really bothers me is, if she didn't kill them, she really wanted you to get that package. But the package wasn't there. It wasn't on either of the bodies. Jim—who else was in that room?"

Through the open cabin window the sea wind was blowing, fresh and salty-sweet; the gilt foil on the neck of the magnum, the glitter of electric light on polished panelings, and Lisa's slim round knees crossed one over the other were all quite normal, usual, reassuring items in the sum total of the moment's consciousness. Yet at her words an icy chill tingled along my spine which was born of no wind that ever blew on earth: the memory of my stupidity was not only maddening, it was terrifying. The simple question evoked an image all the more horrible because it had no face, no form, no substance. . . . *Who else was in that room?*

The moment passed. The question was incorrectly put. Who else *had been* in that room?

Two people might have known. They were both dead. But Brenda? I stood up. "Want to come along? I'm going to find la Carroll."

"I'll stay right here and finish this." Affectionate glance at the magnum of champagne, which was holding up remarkably well.

"All right. I won't be long. But listen. Keep the door on the chain and don't open it to anyone but me. Anyone. Promise?"

"What on earth?"

"Don't be a sap." I gave her a dirty look. Once before—twice before—people had tried to strike at me through Lisa. Very unpleasant people. I didn't want it to happen again, and whoever had slit the long white throat of the woman on the bed, and dabbled the old man's grey beard with his own spouting blood, was a very unpleasant person indeed.

Lisa said: "O.K., Pollyanna. I promise."

I AM not a professional detective. Not even an amateur detective, really. I write radio thrillers rather successfully. It just happens that several times in my life I have been pitchforked, literally, into situations which had got out of all control, and have been lucky enough to get surprisingly good breaks in straightening them around. For the record, if you want it: age 34, weight 185, disposition sardonic, nose too bony, face too thin, hair too black, mouth too hard. These statistics are Lisa's, who nevertheless says she has learned to take it and like it.

I might mention one other item, which probably explains everything. I have, be it stated without either pride or regret, a quite insatiable intellectual curiosity. Monkeys, too, have it. Puzzles bother me. I ought to have learned long ago to skip them when they don't directly concern me, but I don't seem to learn. In this particular instance, of course, I *was* concerned directly. Even so, I couldn't help reflecting as I went along the tessellated rubber corridors, Carney could have handled the whole thing by wireless.

Suite C was on the deck above our cabin, about amidships. I found it without trouble and knocked at the double doors. My wristwatch said seven-thirty and it was quite dark, but the ship herself was just waking to the evening. The emanations of flowers, perfumes and alcohols blew gustily down the corridors with the night wind; against the obligato of the waves creaming sibilantly along our sides far below and the bass accompaniment of the humming ship herself were flung high excited voices, laughter, the sharp popping of corks like pistol-shots, the swooning rhythms of a Mexican love song pouring from the dining-saloon, like warm honey and wine.

A lean youngish man brushed past me as I stood by the double doors waiting for them to open; he murmured an apology as he jogged my elbow and kept on. For an instant our eyes met. He was not tall, but beautifully made, with the flat narrow hips and broad shoulders of the professional athlete. I caught only a glimpse of his face, and it startled me. Not because I had ever seen it before, but because it reminded me of something which I couldn't place. Watching his straight retreating

back I suddenly got it. Its carved too-perfect features, its inhuman calm, repeated almost line for line the marble face of a bust my father brought from Rome when I was a child, a bust of the young Tiberius: beautiful, depraved, and cruel. . . . The doors opened.

IT was a cabin steward who looked out. I said quickly: "Mrs. Sefton, please. Tell her it's Mr. Steele and it's important."

"One moment, sir." He left the door a few inches ajar. Almost instantly he swung it wide and said: "They're on the veranda, sir. Straight ahead."

It was a two-room suite with its own private enclosed deck veranda. Flowers spilled from colored vases in the severely formal gilt-and-brocade parlor where I stood; the door to the left opened into an almost equally large bedroom. Straight ahead, sliding double doors were rolled back to show three people sitting on the veranda. The nearest one, who was Brenda Carroll, stood up at sight of me and came toward me with her hand out, smiling.

"Hello," she said cordially. "This is nice of you, I must say. Did you find it all right?"

She wore the same costume I had seen her in last, though an enormous trunk stood in the far corner of the room, and a trio of rawhide suitcases, jumbled on the bedroom floor, indicated the pampered traveler's usual plethora of luggage. I said, disregarding the outstretched hand: "It wasn't there. But there was something else there. I have to talk to you alone."

The startlingly blue eyes did not waver from mine. "I—why, but of course," she said. "We're going to have dinner in a few moments. Is—is your wife aboard? Why don't you both join us? Major Carteret and Mrs. Riordan—"

Over her shoulder I could see the reddish face of a sandy-haired fifty-ish military-looking man watching me. The face was bisected by an old-fashioned cavalry mustache, more a faded yellow than sand-colored, the ends of which concealed successfully the shape and expression of his mouth. One thin veined hand was clasped round a balloon glass full of something amber and sparkling. The woman I couldn't see: only the toe of her slipper.

I said: "Thanks a lot. But this is more important than dining. I think you'll have to step in the bedroom with me. You're going to be haled up before the captain any minute, you know—"

The blue eyes were suddenly incandescent. "What are you talking about? I—"

"There wasn't any case, any package, on your dresser. Maybe you lied to me, maybe you didn't. I don't know. But there was a dead man lying beside your bed. And a blonde woman *in* your bed. She had her throat cut; she was dead, too. Did you kill them?"

As treatment, it was a bit rough, but it worked beautifully. I was quite close: I had to take only one step forward to catch her as her knees went rubbery and she sagged in my arms like a silk-wrapped sandbag filled with a hundred and twenty pounds of crumbling earth.

MAJOR CARTERET was extremely efficient.

He kicked the three suitcases out of the way with a practiced toe and lifted Brenda Carroll's trailing legs as I straightened her out, and we laid her carefully on the right-hand bed. I said: "Ring for the ship's surgeon, will you? His name's Phillips. Mine's Steele, by the way. I think she's just fainted."

He nodded curtly, lifted the little telephone by the bed, and got Phillips without delay. I said: "You got any brandy?"

The large round frightened face of a lady of forty-two or -three hovered in the doorway like an anxious moon. She had rather untidy windblown hair and a large string of pearls above a more than ample bosom. "I'll get some," she said hastily, and reappeared with a bottle of Courvoisier and one of the balloon glasses. Before I had poured any out, there came a sharp double rap at the outer door and Stanley Phillips came in.

He was a very nice fellow. I had got to know him quite well on the last trip of which I spoke, and I was glad now to see once more the essential sanity of his square hard saddle-colored face with its wind- and wine-reddened cheeks and its firm button of a nose. (He looked a little like Churchill, only much younger and a good deal less pudgy.) Nothing ever disturbed or surprised him.

He said, glancing at me, "Hello, Steele," and proceeded to the bed without either haste or delay.

"She fainted, I think," I said, and left him to it, closing the door behind me.

IN the parlor the major had picked up his glass again. He said, nodding at a point in thin air midway between the moonfaced lady and me: "Have some brandy?"

"Thanks."

"What happened?"

"I probably surprised her," I said. "I—er—I had some bad news about some friends of hers, and it was a bit too much for her. At least, I think they were friends."

Suddenly the small square room was full of tension. I didn't know why, though I thought I could imagine why. Neither of these people had ever seen or heard of *me* before—and the horde of parasites who clung leech-like to the skirts of a girl like Brenda Carroll must be legion. For all these two knew, I might be a blackmailer, a discarded and threatening lover, a—

I could feel the ice harden in the major's watery blue eyes.

He stopped pouring the brandy for a moment, then continued.

Mrs. Riordan sank into the nearest chair. The bulbous orbs of her bosom strained at the black lace of her décolletage and she fixed melting brown eyes on mine and said in a curiously girlish voice: "Bad news? Would you mind telling us, Mr. Steele? You know, we're very old friends of Brenda's."

"I—well. . . . Better wait till we see how she's coming." I certainly wasn't going to spill the girl's troubles to even her oldest friends, unless it were necessary. What I couldn't understand, at this moment, was why on earth the New York police hadn't radioed the *Empress* long before this. Carney had certainly arrived at the Carroll apartment a good two hours or so ago; the apartment-house management, which presumably had arranged for transporting la Carroll's mountain of luggage to the pier, must have known that she was Bermuda-bound, under whatever pseudonym; as a matter of fact, I was surprised that we had even cleared the Narrors without interception.

The bedroom door opened and Doctor Phillips came out.

"She's all right," he said evenly. "Just shock. I—er—I gather she had some news which—"

"I was the one," I said. "My fault. Sorry. But this is very important. You think I could talk with her now?"

I saw Major Carteret open his mouth to speak and I added quickly: "Doctor Phillips here can vouch for me, I think, Major."

"Certainly, certainly, certainly," said Stanley Phillips without hesitation. He evidently meant the triple assurance to answer both points.

I said: "Thanks very much, Stanley. Have a coffee with us after dinner? You haven't had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Steele."

"Like to, very much. Lounge?" His dark eyes crossed mine and I thought I detected the flicker of some obscure emotion in the glance. Irony? I couldn't tell. He bowed to Mrs. Riordan, and the major preceded him to the door as I went into the bedroom and shut its door behind me.

BREND CARROLL lay on the right-hand bed with a light rose-colored coverlet thrown over her legs and feet. Her head was flat, without a pillow; her eyes were wide open. She was quite lovely. I hadn't fully realized before how lovely she was. She was also, plainly, in mortal fear.

The brown face tilted up toward me as I came in, and the blue eyes focused with a momentary difficulty on me.

"Come in, do," she said quietly, the timber of her voice, faintly tremulous like a softly stroked gong, betraying the tension of her whole organism. I sat down on the little folding chair beside the bed. The Courvoisier bottle nudged my toe and I said, lifting it, "May I? Very exhausting day."

She nodded and I slopped some into the glass which I had intended for her and drank it and felt better.

I said: "Sorry I startled you so. But there isn't any time to lose. What was in that package you asked me to get?"

"In the—why, some jewelry of mine. That's all."

"Valuable jewelry?"

"Yes. Very." Her voice still quivered; the assumption of placidity was so transparent as to be absurd.

I said, a little impatiently: "Let's not spar with each other, Brenda. Who were the dead people in your apartment?"

She drew a long sibilant breath, raised her hands with a sudden gesture and locked them behind her head. She said in a low tone that seemed meant for herself more than for me: "I was afraid—that Serge would—but I never dreamed of anything like *this*. . . . The dead man—did he have a beard? A white beard?"

"He had," I said grimly, remembering its bright scarlet fringe.

"He was my lawyer," Brenda Carroll said faintly. "The girl—the woman—was his secretary, Madeline Marsh. Tell me. I'm sorry I was such a fool."

I told her.

It didn't take long. I watched her face carefully while I was talking. It was an interesting, in its way a fascinating face: the over-red mouth with its beautifully carved upper lip and its ever-so-slightly too-full lower lip; the breadth between the temples and the widely spaced eyes such as you see in Greek statues, only the eyes of Greek statues are never an electric blue; the thick dark brown hair curled now a little damply in crisp ringlets against the smooth brown neck; the muscular mobility based on a highly sensitized nervous system which kept all its planes fluid, inter-dissolving, though the faintly imperious Olympian air which I have mentioned tended to crystallize each nascent new expression into a detached disdain.

HARD to describe. But not hard to look at—not at all. And I found myself wondering what this girl's life could have been like: perhaps from earliest adolescence tintured with that terrifying dizziness which beset the Roman emperors of old, when they found each slightest whim gratified at the moment of its conception, so that at last the whole world seemed to rock and roar beneath them, subject to the divine omnipotence of their august will. It was probably the champagne.

"So what do you say to all that?"

"Quite a lot," Brenda Carroll told me,

propping her body up on one elbow and twitching a pillow into place behind her left shoulder blade. "It's Serge. Im sure of that. You see. . . ."

"Yes?"

"*I know a sportsman when I see one,*" the girl said, placing her free hand for a moment on mine. "I—I know this will never go further."

"Of course not."

"I had a child by Serge."

"Serge being—?"

"My second husband. Serge Fabry. An utter louse and heel, to be candid. I didn't want anyone to know I had a baby by him. He—Jock—was born in Scotland. He's in Bermuda now. Two years old. That's why I'm heading there."

"Go on."

"I made Serge a cash settlement when we were divorced, in return for the custody of the child *and* for keeping his mouth shut. He knew about the child."

"Does he know the baby's in Bermuda?"

"No. At least, I hope not. He ran through the money, of course, like—well, you can imagine. Half a million dollars. Now he wants more. I'd give him more except I know he'd be back again. He wants more—or *else*, he says."

"Or else what?"

"I don't know. That's what makes it so bad. I haven't seen him for two years. I haven't even heard from him directly—just a voice on the telephone, a nasty voice, some one of his nasty friends. Another half million, it asked for at first. Then, two weeks later, it went up to seven-fifty. Then it said if I didn't pay within a month, it would be a million. That's the current figure. All the time the tone of the whole thing kept getting worse. Yesterday the man called again. He said I would either have the money ready today or it would be the end. I asked what he meant by that. He just grinned—if you can imagine hearing a grin over the telephone. I got really upset."

"I don't blame you."

"I telephoned Mr. Graham, my lawyer. I inherited him, you might say, from Dad. He was horrified. He said, let him be there to talk with Serge. Or whoever Serge sent. He'd bring his secretary with him. This was yesterday afternoon."

"Late last night, Mrs. Riordan called.

She'd just got in from the West, and she was having tea with Major Carteret. They're both old friends of mine. She has a house in Bermuda and she said she was taking the *Empress* this afternoon, to go down and get something or other done to the house before the season opened. The major was going along, and she said, wouldn't I like to come, too? It was a fine coincidence: I'd been wanting to see Jock for months but I simply hadn't had the time. He's being taken care of by a Scottish nurse, the woman I had when he was born. I said, yes, I'd love to come. I started to pack—this was late last night, as I say—and Mr. Graham called again and said, couldn't I get out of town somewhere quietly till he'd settled with Serge? I told him where I was going and he thought it was fine, but he said not to tell anyone. *Anyone*. So I didn't. But I told him he'd better carry a gun for safety's sake. I didn't even bring any baggage, so that no one at the apartment house would know. I just walked out—about an hour before I saw you. Mr. Graham had a duplicate key to the apartment."

THAT, of course, explained why the Metropolitan police hadn't caught up with her yet. But—I slanted an inquiring eye at the rawhide suitcases, thought of the huge wardrobe trunk outside, pasted with labels from half the luxury hotels of the world.

Brenda Carroll followed my eye. She said indifferently: "That stuff's Mrs. Riordan's. Emily's sharing this suite with me."

"I see. So Serge apparently got there and found you gone. But Graham and his secretary were there—right?"

She shivered. "You found them."

"Graham would have let Serge in, of course."

"Of course."

"And perhaps the reason the doorman on Park didn't mention him was that he turned in from Lexington. . . . But why would he kill your lawyer *and* your lawyer's secretary? I don't get that, do you? Also, Brenda, *who took your jewels?* They weren't on either of the two bodies. I looked carefully."

The red lips, a too-vivid splash now in a face suddenly colorless again, murmured

the name "Serge." . . . Brenda Carroll sat suddenly bolt upright and put both hands on one of mine as I sat beside her bed. She said: "Listen. *Please* help me. You'd think one would have friends. . . . I know a lot of people, but they're not. . . . I—would you give me a hand?"

"At what?"

My still-smoldering annoyance at her habitual manner, her sublimely impertinent self-assurance, was mitigated by two things. The extremity of her distress, and the compliment implied in her perfect confidence that my report to her was accurate. After all, I *might* have been lying myself. I might have stolen and secreted the jewels, and have followed her to the ship to try and put myself in the clear with her.

Brenda Carroll said: "At straightening this whole mess out. I—"

I don't know why I did it— I certainly heard nothing, nothing except the 'cello-like hum of the *Empress* herself—but I swiveled suddenly on my chair and wrenched open the cabin door and Major Carteret would have fallen into the room if one hand hadn't been braced against the door jamb.

He straightened with a dignity which didn't impress me at all. I knew damned well he had had his ear to the keyhole, though I didn't especially blame him. He brought the other hand forward; it held a flimsy white envelope. He said, extending the envelope toward Brenda Carroll on the bed: "This just came, Brenda. You feel up to reading it?"

She put out her own hand without a word, and the hand was shaking. The gum on the flap wasn't even dry; she got the flap open and pulled out a sheet of flimsy with the international wireless symbols at the top. There were three lines of typewriting on the paper, and a signature. I watched her eyes flick from left to right three times and I had no idea what was coming. Brenda Carroll uttered, quite low, a moan of pure anguish, and, bending forward, buried her face in her hands. The sheet of flimsy fluttered to join the crumpled envelope on the floor. The major and I reached for it simultaneously. I won. The paper said:

MRS. SEFTON SS EMPRESS JOCK HAS DIS-
APPEARED.

That was the first line. I got only that far when Major Carteret's thin-veined hand closed firmly over the rest of the paper. "I'll take it," he said, and there was a new authoritative ring in his voice.

However, I was in no mood to be chivvied about by anyone. I kept my own hand on my part of the paper and stood up and said with what I hoped was a soft silken courtesy "Certainly. And I'll read it over your shoulder—"

A sound from Brenda Carroll on the bed was followed by words which, if disappointed, were clearly intelligible: "Major . . . want . . . Steele . . . see."

AT half past nine I took Lisa down to dinner. She made a toilette which consisted chiefly in running a comb through the volute waves of her brown hair, and a little fiddling with some tiny implements extracted from a small black silk envelope inside her handbag. To my mind she looked wonderful, but then to my mind she always looked wonderful. She herself didn't seem at all pleased with the result, but every male eye in the dining saloon very obviously agreed with me.

"There is," I said, halfway through the soup, "something a little waspish about you at times, my girl. A side of your nature which I had never suspected until we were married."

"Waspish?" The cloying sweetness of her inflection should have warned me.

"Just a small and very decorative lady-hornet, who lives in your hair and sharpens her sting at rare intervals. The girl is *not* a tramp. Definitely not."

"So sorry." It was hardly more than a murmur. I didn't at all like the look in her eye. Stanley Phillips rested a large hand on my shoulder. "See you after a bit," he promised. I stood up and presented him to Lisa, who smiled one of her Grade-A smiles at him. I could see him crumple internally. We said we would meet around ten in the lounge, and Stanley tore his eyes away and went on toward the main staircase.

LISA said: "Nice man. Officer?"
"Ship's surgeon. You keep away from him. That taurine type is up to no good when it comes to girls with bronze hair and sea-green eyes."

Lisa's teeth crunched on a celery stalk. She said: "I don't know what's happened to you lately. You grow more tiresome every day."

"... so I wish, I *very* much wish, that you'd accept her invitation and drop by for a moment or two after we've had a coffee with Stanley."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want your opinion. Of everything and everybody. I want to know what you think of the Major, see how you like Mrs. Riordan. And especially—tell me about Brenda. You are highly intuitive, a really remarkable girl. I think I will have some more of that Rudesheimer if you will kindly push the bottle this way."

"Later, perhaps," Lisa said quickly, pushing it the other way. "There is a slight sibilance in your syllables, my lad, which I have learned to recognize and distrust."

"Absurd."

"You see?"

The steward brought some mushrooms on oyster shells and we finished the Rudesheimer eventually and went up on deck, being almost the last diners to leave the room. It was fine on deck. The Gulf Stream was still ahead of us, but the wind blew steadily from it into our faces, and on our left a crescent moon was rising. Its lower horn, bright silver, just touched the wave crests. We went forward to where the wind screens ended and stood by the rail. The wind blew the strands of Lisa's hair, like molten copper in the moonlight, against my cheeks; they held a faint perfume. Time wheeled backward suddenly for me, a year, two years. This wasn't the *Empress*; this was the Morleys' yacht rocking in the slow Bahama swells. This was the Caribbean moonlight which had set both our hearts aching because life couldn't possibly measure up to the moment's perfection. These were stars which, in reality, had set long ago . . . long before I had ever so much as doubted Lisa's love for me.

I said: "Darling, you don't really care for him . . . much?"

The carved profile etched against the night in pale luminance didn't move.

I said: "Reassure me; there's a good girl. Tell me he's just the comic relief."

More silence. The moon lifted clear of the waves.

I said: "Well, let's go see your friend Stanley, anyhow," hoping my voice was steady and impersonal.

WE found Stanley sitting alone behind a palm tree in a corner of the lounge. Lisa sat beside him against the wall and I pulled up a chair. We had coffee with a spot of brandy. Looking at Stanley, and liking what I saw, I wondered again why a man like him should have been content to spend three years—or was it four?—on this Bermuda run, where professional skill was limited to the prescription of sedatives, occasional tooth-extractions, and the extrication of himself with honor from cabins occupied by exhibitionists, nymphomaniacs and virgin schoolteachers.

I said: "Stanley, damn funny thing happened before we left New York. Matter of fact, we had no intention of leaving New York ten minutes before this ship of yours sailed."

"Really? Glad you did." He smiled at Lisa, who smiled back.

"All comes back to your patient, Mrs. Carroll."

"Ah."

The square, firm, sun-tanned face showed no obvious change, yet its expression was subtly different. There was, definitely, strain. I wondered why. "I promised her I'd look in again later," he murmured.

"So did I. You want to drop by and see her now?"

Stanley Phillips consulted his watch. "Twenty to eleven. Suppose we might as well."

Lisa said with some asperity: "I'll have another brandy while I'm waiting."

As though in answer to her, a small brass-buttoned youngster of fourteen or fifteen popped up at her elbow. "Are you Mrs. Steele, Madam?" he inquired. He bore, on a silver salver, a square envelope addressed to Lisa.

Brenda Carroll's handwriting was direct, straightforward and unaffected. It said: "Do forgive the informality of this invitation. If both of you don't drop by on your way to bed I shall be frightfully disappointed."

"Ah, well," said Lisa, standing up. "Lead on."

STANLEY PHILLIPS' firm double rap on the doors of Suite C led to practically instantaneous revelation of Major Carteret, blinking eyes even more watery than before, as he stood in the doorway.

"Come in, come in," he said cordially. "Brenda's been expecting you."

I made him known to Lisa and we went in. The veranda wind screens had been closed and the room felt close, overscented, after the free sweep of the night wind on deck and the fresh, cool spaciousness of the lounge. Brenda Carroll in a quite startling silver lamé wrap-around, which presumably belonged to Mrs. Riordan, smiled at Lisa with her red lips; her eyes, I thought, remained notably unaffected. The Major finished making a fresh rajah's peg (champagne atop a double slug of brandy in a balloon glass) for Mrs. Riordan, whose round face had assumed a faint purple tinge; then he turned politely to my wife. Lisa said she would have just half a glass of champagne and sat down. For once in my life I declined everything.

Stanley Phillips, standing beside the chair in which Brenda Carroll was draped, said: "All right now?"

They were only three words, yet they threw an instant light on an angle of the situation which had, naturally, not occurred to me. His inflection, his attitude as he poised his thick hard body beside her, the very bend of his head, were all suddenly indicative of just one thing. They had been lovers once!

Perhaps only once, perhaps only for a few hours, months or years ago, when the same moonlight which Lisa and I had watched dripping over the waves had swirled into a silver pool of transient tenderness in Brenda Carroll's breast. It didn't matter—not to me—though I felt suddenly and sincerely sorry for Stanley Phillips.

"Yes, I'm fine, Stanley," Brenda Carroll said, and this time her eyes were smiling, too.

Major Carteret handed Lisa her champagne glass and raised inquiring eyebrows at Doctor Phillips, who shook his head. "Nothing for me, thanks," he said shortly, and sat down.

Brenda Carroll said, to my intense surprise: "Now that the Steeles are here, and

Stanley, I think we ought to have a council of war."

"Brenda," said the Major quickly, "are you sure you—"

She paid no attention. "Mr. Steele, I've told Mrs. Riordan and the Major just the bare outlines of—of what happened this afternoon. I don't suppose Stanley knows anything about it. Will you tell the whole story over again?"

"If you like."

"Stanley may have some good ideas. He generally has." Her smile was genuine, I thought: she really liked him still, which was either a break for him or damned bad luck, depending on what you thought of Brenda Carroll and how well Stanley Phillips could take it. "Start with when you came into the Park Lane, will you?"

I did. That was at eleven o'clock Wednesday night.

AT three o'clock Thursday morning I found myself close-wrapped in Brenda Carroll's arms, with her imperious mouth a matter of inches from my own; but the red lips were not imperious now. The reasons why this came about are interesting but a trifle complicated.

I had told my story, all right—to a flatteringly attentive audience, and "attentive" is a masterpiece of understatement. I noted with some amusement the effect of the tale on Major Carteret and Mrs. Riordan: they were sitting side by side, so it was easy to watch both faces. The dawn of horror in Mrs. Riordan's eyes was plain for anyone to see. The Major controlled his emotions better, but it seemed clear that he found the whole matter intensely distasteful; that he connected it, in some vague manner he didn't trouble to define exactly, with me; and that the sooner these strange people named Steele took themselves out of the room and out of Brenda Carroll's life, the better he would be pleased.

After which, I presumed, he himself would take charge of the affair.

I omitted only one detail: the wireless I had sent to Joe White before taking Lisa down to dinner. It had said:

LET'S HAVE ALL POSSIBLE DOPE ON WHAT HAPPENED BRENDA CARROLL'S APARTMENT RIGHT AFTER I MET YOU ESPECIALLY CUR-

RENT POLICE THEORY OF SITUATION. CONTACT CARNEY CENTRE STREET IF NECESSARY BUT KEEP ME OUT OF IT. BIG DOINGS SPEED ESSENTIAL WILL KEEP YOU POSTED

STEELE

White was a very smart man. Whether or not the evening papers were carrying the news of the corpses in Brenda Carroll's apartment, White would get the whole story, I knew: but there seemed no point in mentioning that fact to the little group of earnest listeners I was addressing. Nor any point in emphasizing, in front of her friends who obviously distrusted me, that I myself was extremely dissatisfied with la Carroll's story.

I finished my narrative and for a moment or two, no one said anything. Stanley Phillips, who had not moved a muscle of his face in his complete absorption, broke the silence. "What's your idea, Jim?" he asked, bending his hard, square face and body toward me.

I was through talking; I nodded toward Brenda.

"I'm absolutely certain," she stated, "that the whole thing—the killings, stealing my jewel case, Jock, everything—is Serge. Mr. Steele says he can't understand why Serge, or anyone Serge sent, should want to kill Mr. Graham. Or Miss Marsh. Neither can I. But he *did* kill them, I'm sure of that."

THERE was a curious defiance in her tone, as though she expected everyone to disagree with her. No one said anything.

She went on: "Jock—he's the main thing now. What are we going to do about him?"

I said: "I meant to ask you this before. You said no one knew you were coming to Bermuda. No one but the Major, Mrs. Riordan and Mr. Graham's office. But your nurse knew you were on the *Empress*: she sent you the radio. How come?"

"Oh. Of course. I forgot her. I sent her a message last night—after Emily telephoned."

"It's nice timing," I said thoughtfully, "all the way around. Do you suppose the nurse could have been reached? With money, I mean? Serge's money—or someone else's, in case there's a villain in the piece besides Serge?"

Brenda Carroll said: "I don't think so. She's always been completely trustworthy. And I pay her well."

Stanley Phillips said: "You think, then, Brenda, that Fabry planned all this, and had people ready to kidnap Jock in case you failed to come through. You think he had some kind of argument with Graham—and killed him. Then, of course, he'd have to kill Graham's secretary, too. Then he got in touch with his Bermuda agents and they made off with Jock. Is that correct?"

"That's exactly what I think, Stanley."

"Couldn't you get an official check made of all messages from New York to Bermuda sent after five o'clock this afternoon?" said Lisa in her lovely deep-velvet voice.

I nodded. "A very sound idea. Though, if Serge is smart, he'd have the message sent in such a roundabout way, and so innocently phrased—man from Philadelphia wires his partner that shipment is incomplete, for instance—that it wouldn't help us much. But that brings up something I want to add. It's extremely important."

Major Carteret looked at me sourly. I didn't care for him either. I said, addressing myself to Brenda, "You can't have a general check-up made—you can't ask to have a general alarm sent out for Serge—you can't even tell the British authorities at Bermuda to get busy and find Jock—because you're all out of line with the Law. So am I. And it can't go on."

"What d'you mean, Steele?" Major Carteret barked.

"After all," I said to Brenda Carroll, "the Law found two bodies in your apartment—and no Steele. I'm in worse than you are, but you're in bad enough. I've got to report myself to Carney, and you have either got to report *yourself* or I'll do it for you."

THE words, which seemed to me simple, obvious and necessary, had a surprising effect on Major Carteret. He leaped from his chair as though it suddenly burned him; he took three steps toward me and shook a long nicotine-yellowed forefinger in my face. "That'll do, Steele," he said, and his voice was shaking too. "I don't know what your connection with this business is; I never saw you

before. And from what Mrs. Carroll tells me, she never did either. If there's any wirelessness to be done, I'll do it—not you."

The implications of this speech were quite clear. And very insulting. I felt the back of my neck grow hot but I kept my temper.

I said, still addressing Brenda Carroll, "You see, it's all very well for us to sit here and try to figure the thing out. Perhaps you're right in your theory, perhaps you're not. It doesn't matter. The point is that we in this room have a number of clues which the police don't—can't—know about. We're in the position, actually, at this moment, whether we like it or not, of being accessories after the fact. Of aiding and abetting the murderer to escape justice. You and I, I mean. I admit I was wrong. I should have told the whole thing to Carney—your asking me to get the package, all the rest of it. I should have waited till he got there, especially. We've got to get a wireless off at once—"

Something long, yellow and bony appeared in front of my nose and it was Major Carteret's forefinger again and I didn't like its looks. I put out my right arm in a shove that had more behind it than I realized, and the Major tottered backward in a wild effort to keep balanced, and failed, and crashed into the gilt chair he had been occupying, which in turn tipped back and sideways and spilled him to the floor.

He was at least fifty-five but he was extraordinarily light on his feet. He hadn't more than touched the floor before he was up, and the watery blue eyes were burning with a flame I wouldn't have believed they could hold. He opened his mouth to speak but before any words came out Brenda Carroll and Stanley Phillips had both stood up, and Brenda Carroll said sharply: "*Major!*"

The advancing warrior stopped in his tracks. The light behind his eyes vanished as though a curtain had been snapped down suddenly.

Brenda Carroll said: "I think you owe Mr. Steele an apology."

"Brenda, I—" he began.

"I asked Mr. Steele's help myself," the girl said coldly. "I'm perfectly competent to decide my own affairs."

YOU could almost hear the Major clashing fiercely with himself in the silence that followed. At length he said "Sorry." The word cost him something.

I said: "Sorry myself. Shouldn't have done that."

Stanley Phillips said calmly: "In my opinion, Brenda, there's nothing more to discuss. Steele's quite right. Only thing to do is wireless the New York police the whole story, and let them carry on from there. They'll have a man to meet us at the dock in Bermuda, no doubt of that. That part won't be too pleasant, and I'm sorry. But it's the only way. And meantime we can go ahead with starting the authorities after Jock."

I wondered how she really felt about her little son's disappearance. It was hard to tell because her self-control was so perfect—barring her first collapse when the news came, and that was perhaps as much shock as grief. She certainly wasn't a maternal type; she certainly had spent very little time with her offspring since she bore him; she certainly had staged a very rapid comeback during the dinner hour. On the other hand, I thought, she probably does feel as much affection for the youngster as she's capable of feeling for anyone.

Emily Riordan said: "Does it *have* to come out, Mr. Steele?—about Brenda's meeting you and sending you for the package, and so on? What I mean is, it would be so much easier for her if her connection with the—the murders in her apartment could be—could be—"

"Could be skipped?"

"She's got enough trouble," Emily Riordan said boldly, "with Jock gone. Do the deaths of Mr. Graham and Miss Marsh in her apartment have to be featured too? I don't mean that their deaths could be kept quiet, of course, but the fact that they died in Brenda's home? If it's a question of money, I'm sure—"

Not for the first time, I marveled at the sublime ignorance of her ilk. And at their incredible impertinence. I said, as kindly as I could, that it wasn't a question of money. And that the very fact which she wanted suppressed—that is, the locale of the murders—was in itself news of the first water, which would be seized on with glad cries by every copy desk in the metropolitan area. I said further that while pub-

licity might be unpleasant, a jail term would be still more unpleasant. Which, I said, was what we all faced unless I got my wireless off. And finally, because I wanted to hear from Joe White before I actually sent word to Carney, I pretended to capitulate suddenly and agreed to wait till morning. This silly temporizing appeared to please everyone but Lisa, who looked disgusted.

WELL, that had been that. Lisa and I got ourselves out of the room and down the corridor and the companionway and into our own cabin. My good wife did not turn her lovely head as she marched a little ahead of me, and I had an idea that there was trouble coming. There was.

I closed the cabin door behind me and Lisa went on to the little dressing-table and sat down before the mirror and ran the comb again through the volute bronze waves of her hair. The atmosphere in the room was much too electric to be called chilly. I said, looking for the second magnum and finding it and pouring out the two glasses which were its only contents and also a little flat, "Well, what do you make of all that, my pet?"

The pet took no notice of my remark nor of the champagne. She rose with dignity and disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door. I drank both glasses and lit a cigarette. Presently the door opened and a voice said bitterly: "Not even a nightgown. What the hell do I sleep in?"

"My arms, darling," I said in a deep manly tone.

The voice said something about "In a snake's eye," and the door closed again. I sat thinking. Presently the knob rattled and Lisa came out, wearing a large maroon-striped Turkish towel. The lower edges of yellow panties were visible below the rim of the towel. I couldn't help laughing. That made no hit, either. The adorable line of her back as she turned down the coverlet on the left-hand berth stilled my laughter, and I leaned forward and dropped a kiss on her upper arm. She drew it away as though a bee had stung her. I said: "Ah, let's not go to bed that way. What's wrong?"

Lisa slid into the berth with the grace that marked every move of hers and turned her brown face toward the wall. She said

in a small cold voice: "Turn the light out as soon as possible, will you? I'm very tired. We can talk in the morning, if you want."

"Why, of course, my queen," I said, feeling the champagne a little. "I will not only turn out the light but I will take myself away, too. For a brief, brisk walk on deck."

"That," Lisa said, "will be just ducky. Walk as long as you can. The air in here needs freshening. Walk right off the stern if you feel like it."

"Will you answer me one question? What, exactly, have I done to bring all this on me?"

"It isn't what you've done, it's what you haven't done," said Lisa with maddening obscurity, and would say no more. I switched out the light, locked the door on the outside so that she wouldn't have to bother about the chain, and went up on deck.

IN spite of the relatively early hour, the decks of the *Empress* were almost deserted. I went once around the promenade, then climbed to the boat deck, white and vast and windswept under the high white moon. Here and there, dim blurs against the sparkling sea showed where lovers pressed together by the rail, or more complex silhouettes indicated couples huddled in deckchairs in the lee of the ventilators. I went forward against the wind and a tall, slim figure swung suddenly round a ventilator and ran directly into my arms. It was a girl in a long polo coat, and as she raised her face to mine and stepped back, recovering her balance, I saw that it was Brenda Carroll.

I said: "You ought to be in bed, you know. Couldn't sleep?"

She stared at me a moment as though she'd never seen me; then her face in the moonlight softened and she came closer and put her hand on my arm as she had put it once before. She said: "I'm almost crazy. Come down and talk to me, will you? You—you're the only person I seem to have any confidence in."

"What's wrong now?"

She slipped her arm inside mine and took a step forward. Before I knew it I was pacing beside her. The coat, Emily Riordan's, presumably, was tight-wrapped

around her; she walked pressed against me and I could feel the curve of her hip against mine, lightly, at every step. But she was not only unconscious of the contact, she was quite obviously unconscious of all her surroundings; she was walking in a haze, so abstracted that I shouldn't have been at all surprised if she'd walked right down a companionway and broken her beautiful neck.

I said: "I'd better see you to your cabin, at that. The bar can't be closed yet. Would you like a drink?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. . . . You think a drink might be indicated?"

"Do you a world of good. Unless Stanley Phillips has you all full of barbitol or something. In which case it might just make you sick. Did he give you a sedative?"

"We needn't go to the bar," Brenda Carroll murmured. "All sorts of stuff in the cabin."

"Been up here long?"

"Not long. I felt choked. Emily's snoring like a freight train. I shut the bedroom door and tried the couch in that frightful gilt parlor, but it didn't do any good. I put her coat on and came up here. . . . What luck to find you!"

There seemed nothing except the lesser of two inanities to answer to that, so I said nothing. We went down the forward companionway, Brenda Carroll first. Her suite was amidships, as I have said, one deck below the promenade deck. She preceded me, moving with a dancer's grace along the scrubbed white planking under the wan electric bulbs, but it was a dancer who was nearly dropping with fatigue.

We got to Suite C and she opened the door.

THE wall-sconces gleaming softly under rose-silk shades showed me the gilt-and-brocade parlor looking much as it had an hour before. But the same attentive steward, presumably, who had cleared away the litter of glass and crystal from the dining table had rearranged the gold chairs into stiff, formal patterning, and placed one of the bowls of flowers in the table's center.

They were peonies, I remember. Red as blood. They were a little faded now.

The silver-lamé wrap-around in which I

had I seen Brenda Carroll last was flung carelessly over the wardrobe trunk in the corner.

I closed the door and my hostess slipped off the polo coat and I saw, to my considerable surprise, that she wore nothing underneath but a nightgown of the most intangible chiffon, which frothed around feet thrust into small gold wedge-shaped mules. I looked tactfully away and reached for my cigarettes.

Brenda Carroll said, collapsing in chiffon foam on the Empire couch and looking a little like Canova's statue of Josephine: "Light me one, will you?"

She made no move to reach for the case, so I lit one and inserted it carefully between the scarlet lips. I had to bend close to her to do it and her perfume was a faint mocking summons from some dryad far down a forest glade that never was. She touched brown finger tips to the couch beside her and I sat down. I felt a little dizzy. She said, inhaling smoke, "Listen. I haven't told you everything."

"I didn't think you had."

"It's a little complicated."

"It would be, if you had a hand in it."

"Don't take that tone—please. I—"

"Do you know," I said, staring suddenly into the electric blue eyes, "what I think should be done with you?"

"What?" Her voice was different, the voice of an exhausted child. But she was no child: she was a grown woman who had played with fire so often and so successfully that she had forgotten it can sear and scar. If, indeed, she had ever known that.

I said: "You ought to be—"

A small warm hand was placed firmly over my mouth and held there. "I know what you're going to say," Brenda Carroll stated. "So don't say it." She took the hand away. "Let *me* talk. Will you?"

I said nothing. "The point is," Brenda Carroll said, "Serge wasn't my husband."

"What?"

I remembered, clearly, the roto pages showing the happy pair at the church portals; the close-ups of them at Waikiki; the panoramic shots of their cliff house above a blue lagoon. . . .

"He was married already when I mar-

ried him. But I didn't know it. And he didn't tell me till we were on the so-called honeymoon."

"He must be quite a lad. Never a dull moment, eh?"

"You can see," the girl said, leaning a little toward me, "what a spot it put me in. I *couldn't* let it get out. I'd have been laughed at all around the world."

I DID see. What perhaps she didn't realize, even now, was that the laughter would have had a jeering note of cruel satisfaction. Henry Carroll, utilities magnate of the days just before the first World War, had blundered badly on the public-relations angle: his name was synonymous with high-handed robbery of the public purse. He hadn't cared. But even two decades later, the world hadn't quite forgotten. If Brenda Carroll had been content to live quietly, her father's conduct wouldn't have been held against her, but she had the old man's vital drive, and her own performances were, as I have noted, the scandal of even a liberal day.

I said: "Naturally. But if you were paying him chiefly to keep that fact quiet—as I realize you were—why were you so anxious to keep the baby's existence quiet too? I mean, since everyone thought you were legally married to Serge, what was wrong with having a child by him?"

She didn't answer and I turned to face her fully. The change in her face surprised me. It had been an ivory-white under the smooth tan when I'd first noted it as she slipped off her coat: the pallor of extreme fatigue. Now it was colorful, defiant; her eyes were glittering. "The child," she said in a low, firm voice, "wasn't by him. And he knew it. Now you have the whole story."

I couldn't speak for a moment. Then I said: "You certainly got yourself messed up from every angle, didn't you? How did Serge know the child wasn't his?"

"From me," the girl said proudly. "I told him. Like an utter ass, I loved him. I thought he loved me."

"When did you tell him? Before or after you were married?"

"Before, of course."

"What did he say?"

"He said it didn't matter. He said I was all that mattered. And I believed him.

He said—ah, let's skip it. I was a fool."

"I don't seem to remember about this Fabry's background. He's South Russian, isn't he? Some petty title or other in his family?"

"Half Russian. He had an Italian mother. I met him in Majorca, in '35. Or was it '36? You know the type. Bursting with insincerity—yet charming. So charming that when he admitted the insincerity, told me that for the first time in his life he'd met someone with whom he could really be himself, I was flattered. Actually."

"No money of his own?"

"A little. Not much. Enough to buy him thousand-franc tennis racquets and gasoline for his Bugati; not enough to let him live as he wanted to live. I don't say—" the pink in her face deepening—"that I was *only* a checkbook to him, but that was the main idea. No question about that."

I CONSIDERED the matter a moment. "You know, you've been a most terrific ass. You could have given him the works for deliberate bigamy."

"He had me tied hand and foot. You can see that."

I did see it. "How did Graham suppose he was going to get you out of this last demand? Graham knew the whole story, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then he knew the whole business was illegal. Everything. Serge's marriage to you was illegal to begin with; Serge's blackmailing of you—that's what it amounts to—certainly was illegal; and your own baby was illegal. Must have given the precise legal mind quite a bad time. How'd Graham expect to talk Serge out of this new million?"

"I don't know."

"Was he going to threaten him? Perhaps," I said, struck with what for a moment seemed quite a brilliant idea, "Mr. Graham decided that Serge ought to be put out of the way. For keeps—only the scheme misfired and Graham got done in instead. . . . No, of course not. Graham couldn't conceivably have been the type who would resort to murder. . . . Wait a minute. Wait a minute. The great brain sees a great light."

The lovely flushed face turned to mine; the wide-spaced brilliant eyes fixed on me, expectant.

"Will you tell me something first?" I said.

"Of course."

"Who is Jock's father?"

For an instant, a long instant, the eyes didn't waver; then they seemed to flame. "What the hell," demanded Brenda Carroll, "is that to you?"

I felt quite unabashed. "To me personally, nothing. Nothing at all. Obviously. To me as your Gordian knot-cutter, perhaps quite a lot."

"Why?"

"Never mind why. You going to tell me, or not?"

"I certainly am not."

"Then I certainly shan't try to help." I stood up. When I was two steps from the door a voice behind me said: "I might . . . I might tell you if you tell me why you want to know."

I TURNED around, I remember, and it was on the tip of my tongue to explain why I wanted to know, and if I had only done so, things would have been very different. What I had in mind was, after all, a very obvious thought: it was that if, by any chance, the baby's real father were as big a heel as Serge, then it might be the fond parent himself who was making the trouble—and masquerading as Serge. Far-fetched? Surely. But a blonde on a white satin coverlet with her throat cut open is pretty far-fetched too—at least on lower Park Avenue. It seemed to me almost impossible to imagine a motive for Serge's murder of Graham and the secretary, whereas it would be easy to find a motive for their murder by a blackmailing chiseler whose attempt to muscle in on Serge's racket had been uncovered by astute Lawyer Graham. I could visualize quite clearly a sheaf of confidential reports to Graham which might show (a) that Fabry's financial affairs were in excellent shape, (b) that he was hot on the trail of some other heiress and consequently extremely anxious to keep his nose clean, while (c) Joe Dokes, on the other hand, known to Graham as the true father of the child, was in bad financial shape and in bad company.

Accordingly, fond parent is met at Brenda's apartment, not by Brenda herself, but by gimlet-eyed Graham who says: "It won't work, whatever-your-name-is. You're working for yourself, not for Serge Fabry, and I'll have you behind bars before this day is over." At which point, fond parent loses temper and wits and kills Graham and Miss Marsh. . . . I felt quite pleased with myself.

But I saw no reason for imparting my hypothesis to Brenda Carroll. Not at this point, since she wouldn't be coöperative enough to give me all the facts unquestioningly. She'd made me, God knew, enough trouble to last for some time. Carney's face when he got to her apartment and found me gone was a nightmare image which I'd tried to shut out of my mind's eye all evening. So I merely stopped and said: "All right. Never mind *who* he was. What sort of person was he? Jock's father, I mean?"

"A swell guy. A very swell guy."

"If he was such a swell guy, why didn't you marry him instead of Serge?"

"I told you," she said, very low, "I was a fool."

"O.K. You were a fool. That's no reason for being one all your life. And you're certainly being one if you think that *this* jam can be squared with money, influence, anything at all—and just hushed quietly up, as Mrs. Riordan seems to think. Another thing. And very important. This isn't play-acting: get it through your head that you're in real, honest-to-God danger yourself. At least it would seem so to me. Someone is playing the game of a lifetime for the stakes of a lifetime. One million dollars. I don't see how this Someone can be your friend Serge because I'm damned if I can see why Serge should want to kill your lawyer. I should think Serge would cherish him tenderly. Yet Mr. Graham—and his secretary—are very, very dead. Well, here's another thought. Do you suppose they could have been killed as a warning to you? A warning of what would happen to *you* if you stalled along any further?"

It *could* have been for a warning. . . . But then why kidnap Jock, too?

There was no answer, either in my own mind or from Brenda Carroll's lips. But

a visible shudder shook her slim bare shoulders and I felt a sudden rush of unaccustomed pity (at least it masqueraded as pity at the moment) and I sat down beside her and put an arm around the shoulders and held her close and still for a moment. She didn't mind; quite the contrary: she relaxed, pressing softly against me as if in instinctive search of haven, and I heard her breath exhaled in a long-drawn sigh.

"Tell me this, then," I said briskly. "Is there anyone in the world who knows all the circumstances about Serge and you and Jock? *All* the circumstances?"

"The only person—the only person who knew them *all*—unless Serge has told people, of course—was Mr. Graham," Brenda Carroll said without hesitating.

Someone tapped at the door.

I took my arm away. "Shall I go?" I said.

The tap was repeated—a double knock, not peremptory but not furtive: decisive, firm.

"I'll go," the girl said. I watched her long, beautiful legs under the foaming chiffon carry her across the maroon carpet. The door swung back. I had a glimpse of brass buttons gleaming on a white uniform. "Urgent message for Mr. Steele, Madam," said a calm British voice. "Mrs. Steele suggested he might be reached here."

Psychic, by God, I thought. That's what she is. . . . The predicament of Brenda Carroll shrank suddenly into relative insignificance: what mattered was the flame now shooting, beyond a doubt, from Lisa's lovely eyes.

BREND CARROLL said: "I'll see that Mr. Steele gets it," and took a white envelope from a large brown hand and shut the door. As it clicked shut there was another click, and the bedroom door opened and Emily Riordan came out.

She wore a trailing black negligée and a worried look which changed to astonishment at sight of me. Brenda Carroll returning across the room said: "Hello, Emily. I met Mr. Steele on deck a while ago and we've been talking. Sit down. Why don't we all have a drink?"

She extended the envelope to me. I took it and stuffed it in my right-hand jacket

pocket while she turned toward a mahogany cellarette in a corner and said carelessly: "Brandy? Scotch? There's some champagne here but I imagine it's flat."

"Perhaps," Emily Riordan's pleasant girlish voice said doubtfully, "a small brandy would help me sleep."

"Why, you've been snoring your head off," Brenda Carroll told her, smiling affectionately.

"You're very rude," Mrs. Riordan stated without embarrassment, "as well as inaccurate. I may have sighed once or twice."

"You, Mr. Steele?"

"I think a slug of Scotch wouldn't go amiss. Let me help you."

I poured a brandy and two double Scotches and passed them out and sat down beside Mrs. Riordan, who smiled at me. Twenty years and forty pounds ago, she must have been quite lovely. Her features, encased now in fat like a medallion in jelly, were classically regular: the straight short nose, the full curved lips, the round chin, were Roman and beautiful. The only thing I didn't care for was the color of her eyes: a faded and watery blue, like Major Carteret's. She seemed about to speak, thought better of it, and raised her glass.

"I worry too much," she confided, setting the glass down empty. "I always have. My brother's always at me about it."

"The Major?" I said, putting two and two together suddenly on the score of watery blue eyes.

She looked faintly startled. "Yes. What made—"

"Emily," said Brenda Carroll, interrupting, "you *do* worry too much. Go on back to bed. I want to talk to Mr. Steele some more and you're in the way."

She could say things like that without their sounding particularly offensive. Merely plain statements of fact. Emily Riordan purpled a little at her words, or perhaps it was the brandy; anyway she stood up.

"Good night, Mr. Steele," she said, as if placatingly. Then to Brenda Carroll she added: "Come and tell me good night again, then, will you, dear?"

It sounded perfectly ridiculous. Brenda Carroll didn't seem to think so, though.

She patted the big woman on her arm and said: "Of course. Come along, now," and they went together into the bedroom and the door closed. I seized the moment to pull out the radiogram. It said:

OH BOY YOU BETTER KEEP RIGHT ON GOING.
HELL TO PAY OVER GRAHAM. WHY DO YOU
PLAY SO ROUGH? FOR YOUR OWN SAKE
CONTACT CARNEY AT ONCE. MORE NEWS
LATER WHEN I GET IT

WHITE

I PUT the sheet of flimsy back in my pocket and lit a cigarette and did some concentrated thinking. Or tried to. Before the cigarette was half gone the bedroom door opened and Brenda Carroll came out.

"She's a dear—Emily," she said, with the smile which transformed her imperious lovely face, "but an awful fool. Emotionally adolescent."

She sat down.

"Why," I said, "you are not only a beautiful girl, you are a smart girl as well."

"Smart girl will have another small Scotch, please. *Small*, Mr. Steele."

I handed it to her and she settled back amidst the pale-green foam. "You've got to do something for me," she asserted.

"Indeed."

She sipped twice, set down the glass, bent forward and toward me and locked her bare arms about her knees. Her shoulder brushed mine. My central nervous system tingled as though it had suddenly entered a powerful magnetic field created without warning. No doubt it had. "Yes," Brenda Carroll said. "I told you before—there's no one else I can trust. No one."

"What makes you so sure of me? Marcia Rutherford's remarks?"

Women are the devil. She said no word; she made no visible movement; yet in a subtly altered curve of her lips and a sudden softening of her eyes she put over, very eloquently, quite a long speech which included such points as: "Don't be absurd, it isn't anything as inconsequential as that. . . . I can see for myself what kind of a man you are. . . . And I like very, very much what I see. . . . You will do right by me, won't you? . . . I could tell, the moment I met you, that . . ."

And so on.

I said, feeling a little like the rakish octogenarian on the cover of *Esquire* yet not disliking it, "Oh, tush, tush."

"Why don't you kiss me," Brenda Carroll asked, "and get it over with?"

"What makes you think I want to kiss you?" I hoped my tone held the proper amount of amused tolerance.

"Your left eye, I think. There is a distinct leer in it."

"There is no leer," I said indignantly, and found my arm about her shoulders again. A small mole, very decorative, perched on her left clavicle. "At least, it is an unconscious leer." The arm, quite without volition of mine, tightened. "Anyone would leer at you in that green cloud you're wearing," I said.

She relaxed ever so slightly against me. "Make up your mind, my lad," she said mockingly. "Is it a leer or is it a leer—"

Well, obviously . . .

I took my lips away at last and detached her left arm from around my neck. It is probably fatigue and the Scotch and the ship's motion, I thought, which make my head go round in these great sweeping circles. It is certainly not the mere kissing of a brown-haired girl in a green nightgown, Steele. Don't be absurd. Or could it be? I kissed her again. . . .

THE workings of the human mind are very strange. At the most inopportune moments it will detach itself, so to speak, from the body and stand over and above you and make slurring (or enlightening) comments. At least mine does; I have wished it didn't. At this instant, in this small rose-lighted room with Brenda Carroll's firm, resilient body in my arms and her warm parted lips against mine, this cerebral second self of which I speak detached itself from me and seemed to whisper into my ear. *Do you understand a little better now, Steele?* [it said]. *Do you understand why, two weeks ago, under a red harvest moon, Lisa for a moment on the Club veranda didn't push Tony Pitt away? Take this current moment, Steele* [it said]. *Does it touch even the extreme periphery of your love for Lisa? Of course not. It is something entirely apart—isn't it?—an experience complete in itself, a closed circle, a purely instinctual*

urgency devoid of tenderness and involving nothing except the soothing of a sudden clamorous tension—

That is correct [I answered myself]. She means nothing to me, not really—

"Darling," I heard my own voice saying, "darling . . ."

I was so surprised that I stood up.

Directly before my eyes an oblong window looked out across the sea. It faced eastward, where already the stars were paling and the first indeterminate streaks of light would brighten, soon, to fuming gold. I hadn't realized it was so late . . . so early, rather.

"I think," Brenda Carroll's voice said softly, "you are very rude."

But I hardly heard her. Something very curious was happening over her shoulder. She couldn't see it but I couldn't help seeing it. The knob on one of the double doors to the passage outside was turning very, very slowly.

THERE was something extremely unpleasant about that stealthy turning. It was very different from the business-like unconcerned, double rap of a little while before. The girl must have seen the sudden stiffening of my whole body, like that of a dog coming to point. She started to say something but my fingers bit into her shoulder and her eyes, startled now, met mine and I shook my head for silence and reached back to my hip pocket where the gun I had taken from the late Mr. Graham at the Carroll apartment made a heavy bulge.

I took the gun out and sat down beside Brenda Carroll again and kept quite still. The glitter of the smooth steel snout pointing steadily at the closed door was comforting. The knob stopped turning. The door swung inward a fraction of an inch.

I said, winking at Brenda Carroll and hoping she would understand the play, "Oh, I doubt that. I think they're going to spend the winter in Mexico."

She was smart, that girl. "Mexico City?" she said, in a clear, unshaken voice.

"Probably. Though with Tim's heart, that might not be so good. They may go up to Davenport's ranch near Taos."

The door stood motionless.

"You want another cigarette?" I said. "I've got to be going."

"Please."

I motioned for her to take one, and I kept the muzzle of the gun pointing where it would do the most good, while I put my lips against her ear and whispered: "Go on talking."

She nodded and I stood up quietly. The rustle of my clothes was of course inaudible against the humming undertone of the racing ship. Brenda Carroll was saying "Thanks" to herself as she struck a match, and I took four long noiseless steps to the door and planted myself a little to one side of it and brought my right hand with what it held a little forward; then I took sudden grip of the knob with my left hand and flung the door back.

The square sandstone-colored block of Stanley Phillips' wace was two feet from mine.

I felt nineteen different kinds of a fool.

HE said nothing. He stood in the brilliantly lit corridor in his glistening white uniform as firmly as an image of stone. Only his dark eyes flicked downward at an angle, toward the muzzle of the black gun.

"Sorry," he said then, quietly.

I stepped back, swinging the door open farther so that my hostess could see who it was. "I saw the knob turn, Stanley. It startled me a bit. Sorry myself."

Brenda Carroll said: "Why, Stanley. Come in."

"Just passing," he said, stepping half inside and keeping half outside the door. His brown face crinkled at her in a wry sort of smile. "Too late to go ringing you up. Thought I'd just look in and see if you were all right."

"Nice of you. Have a nightcap?"

He hesitated. I felt like a fool, for what was it to me if Stanley wanted to make a tryst with his old love at dawn?—and I hated to have him think it *was* anything to me.

I said: "I wish very much you *would* come in, Stanley. For a moment, anyway. I've got to be going. Our friend here and I have been discussing the situation all over again. And she has something on her mind that she wants to ask me." I turned to Brenda Carroll. "Go ahead. As soon as Stanley comes in and shuts the door, I mean."

The big man came on into the room at that, and closed the door quietly behind him. He didn't offer to sit down, he merely stood, immense and stolid yet alert, just inside. He didn't look at Brenda again, either: his eyes were on me. There was strong emotion behind them but it was successfully masked. Could it, I wondered, be jealousy?

Brenda seemed annoyed, though not too much so. Certainly she didn't hesitate. "I just told Mr. Steele, Stanley, that there's something I want him to do for me as soon as we dock. A big favor. Something I don't like to ask him—but it's the only way out of this mess."

"Yes?" said Stanley Phillips with his usual calm.

"Yes. The Clipper leaves for New York an hour after we get in. I want Mr. Steele to fly back in her."

I was extremely surprised. I said: "That's no favor, Brenda. I wasn't planning any Bermuda trip—nor my good wife either. That's exactly what I'd decided to do."

"And when you get to New York," the girl went on, "I want you to look up Serge. Find him for me. I don't think, with what I know about his usual haunts, it'll be too hard to locate him."

"The police will be delighted," I said.

"I don't want the police to know," said Brenda Carroll quickly. "That's the whole point—" She stopped.

"Just what is Steele to do, then?" said Phillips.

This time she did hesitate. Then she drew the long breath of one who has finally made up her mind and is about to plunge. "I'm going to pay him off," she said.

FOR an appreciable time the room was silent. Then Stanley Phillips and I both spoke together. "But—" we both began in outraged tones and Brenda Carroll's upraised hand stopped us before we could say a second word.

"I've thought and thought about it," she said. "It's the only thing to do."

"It won't get you anywhere," Stanley Phillips said quietly. "He'll be back again. Sooner or later. You ought to know that."

Subtly yet definitely her face changed. In a rather ghastly way. It became, not

merely feline but feral: the slightly narrowed eyes, the faintest possible backward curl of the lips, the flaring of the beautifully chiseled nostrils, reminded me suddenly of a black leopard I saw once, lovely and deadly, about to spring.

"I've been learning things, Stanley," she said. "Did you know that you get a man killed for five hundred dollars?"

"It depends on the man, of course," I remarked hastily.

Stanley Phillips said, "Are you seriously considering murder at this point, Brenda?"

"I am. But more important I want," Brenda Carroll stated, "to get Jock back. That's the most important thing. It's all very well for the Major to blather about the British Consul-General and searching the island, as he's been doing: the Major doesn't know Serge as I do. He's a heel but he has hell's own cleverness. If he's got Jock, he's got him—and he's got him in a way that can never be traced back to Serge Fabry, and he's got him for good unless I do what Serge Fabry wants. I'll pay him money. I'll pay it gladly—if I can be sure of getting Jock again. That's what I want Mr. Steele to try to arrange. At once. And after that . . . after that I'm not sure. . . ." Even her voice was feline, dangerous now. "After I get him back," she said, "we can decide. . . . what's best to do."

She couldn't have charted the course of her thoughts more clearly. It was her father over again: the ruthlessness, the determination. She would do anything, pay anything, to get the baby back, not only because she loved him, doubtless, but because she would not be—she could not bear to be—thwarted. After that . . . well, after that Serge Fabry had better be careful.

Stanley Phillips decided to sit down.

I MUST say I didn't think, at that moment, that Serge Fabry would ever stand in any real bodily danger from Brenda Carroll or through her. Naturally it relieved her now to toy with the idea of removing, at one gesture, the threats which had overshadowed her life for months and years.

I said: "Stanley, you can see how Mrs. Carroll's mind is working. I can't say I blame her for wanting to do anything—

anything—to get the baby back. Whether she could protect herself against any further demands from this lug is of course problematical, but that just doesn't interest her at the moment. What do *you* say?"

He didn't, at first, appear to hear me. He was staring fixedly through the window, where the eastern sky was colored now with the flamingo tints of dawn. At last he muttered: "I wish I knew. . . ." The indecision was very unlike him.

I knew, of course, all the things I should have said. To put no faith in kidnapers' promises; to lay the whole tale, every last fraction and portion of it, before the Law; to do, thereafter, exactly what the Law advised. . . . But I said none of these things, because I knew it wouldn't do any good. Stanley Phillips swung his big head away from the window, stared solemnly and long at the pale-green-shrouded loveliness that was Brenda Carroll. At last he spoke, not to her, but to me.

"Of course—I think this pay-off business is absurd, Steele. But you can't argue with this young woman. If she wants to pay, she'll pay."

"So I gather," I said, and then turned to Brenda Carroll. "I don't say I will and I don't say I won't. Let me sleep on it, will you? We have all day tomorrow to talk it over—and tomorrow night."

The girl stood up in a quick, graceful movement, moved toward me, stood close before me. She should have been an actress, I thought: the pleading eyes, the eloquence of the faintly quivering lips, the slim hands pressed tightly together between her breasts. "Don't—*don't* let me down. . . . I—it means so terribly much to me."

"Oh, you'll probably win," I said.

The whole lovely face suffused itself in joy. She stood suddenly on tiptoe and brushed lips like moth-wings against my cheek. Over her shoulder I noted Phillips' gaze reverting to the far horizon, over whose rim crimson clouds would be hurrying soon above the morning sea.

I said: "I'll bet Doctor Phillips agrees with me that what you need now is sleep. And not to worry. What about a cocktail at noon for the three of us—afterdeck lounge?"

"Of course. I shan't try to thank you now."

I GOT the door shut behind me and went down the still brilliantly lit corridor and down a flight of stairs and turned toward our cabin. I had no thought of anything but sleep myself; I would give Brenda Carroll's puzzles some cerebration after I'd rested, not now.

The thing that happened then was very cleverly done.

Our cabin, Lisa's and mine, was just beyond an intersection of the port corridor by another corridor, which crossed it at right angles. At each such intersection polished metal strips, sunk flush with the tessellated flooring, crossed each corridor like thresholds. That, I suppose, is why I didn't see the rope: it must have been lying along side one of these strips, and parallel to it, so that it was practically invisible. Or perhaps it wasn't a rope: perhaps it was a wire. I never did see it, as a matter of fact, but I know that it was there.

I know it was there because it worked so beautifully. I came swinging down the corridor toward the intersection and at precisely the right moment the rope (or wire) must have been jerked tight suddenly to a point some four or five inches above the floor.

It was such nice timing that I didn't even stagger: my own momentum carried me on and down, and my hundred and eighty-five pounds hit the floor with a bone-jarring crash.

Before I could think, before I could analyze or realize what had happened, lights like a blaze of rockets roared before my eyes. Then darkness. . . .

A FAINTLY shocked voice said in my ear: ". . . let me 'elp you, sir."

I didn't move. The voice said with a touch of asperity: "Now, sir, you cawn't go a-clutterin' up the passagewye like this, sir. Let me give you a arm."

That made no sense whatsoever, and my head ached. Badly. I opened, with great caution, one eye. It glared feebly at a pattern of black-and-white squares which apparently spread from under my nose on into infinity. They seemed vaguely familiar.

"Chess," I muttered.

"What's that, sir?" The voice was tenderly solicitous now.

"Chess," I said irritably.

"That'll be all right, sir. You hit yer breast bone, no doubt, when you fell. I'll get some liniment for the chest, sir—"

This was so extremely annoying that I swiveled the other eye around and upward. An enormous walrus mustache and an equally outsize putty-colored nose with red veins were bending over me. These, too, were familiar. They belonged to the cabin steward, and I realized suddenly that the black-and-white squares were the patterning on the corridor floor. Floor? I must be lying on the floor.

I clenched my teeth and lifted my head a bit. The blinding pain that swept through it like a curling wave was too much and I let my neck carefully down again. But the motion itself had helped me.

I said: "You're . . . Postlethwaite, aren't you?"

"Postlethwaite, yes, sir," said the voice, gratified.

"Where the hell am I?"

"Practically outside yer stateroom, sir. You must 'ave been a bit under the weather, sir. Let me give you a arm."

"Thanks."

With his hand hooked under my elbow, I managed to sit up. The head was terrible. I said: "Let's get on with it," and pulled on his arm some more and got to my feet and leaned against the wall. I thought I was going to be very sick, but that passed.

I straightened again and asked: "What happened? How long have I been here?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. I just came on duty."

A half-turn of my own arm showed my wrist watch pointing to a quarter of five. I could hardly believe it: out cold for a couple of hours? Yet it must be . . . Postlethwaite's hand on my forearm urged me insidiously down the corridor—one step, two, three—and before me the numerals 29 were bold black splashes on the white paint of my own cabin door.

I said: "Thanks a lot, Friend Postlethwaite. I'll manage all right now."

He released my elbow doubtfully. I fumbled in my pocket and found the door-key and fitted it, with some difficulty, to the proper aperture. Postlethwaite's white-starched jacket vanished tactfully round

the corner. He had witnessed far too many domestic reunions at dawn, I imagined, to want to make three at this one. I turned the key softly and the door went back six inches and stopped. On the chain.

I PUT my lips to the doorjamb and spoke softly and sweetly into the silent room. "The errant spouse, darling," I said. "Name of Steele. Remember?"

There was the sound of muffled movement within, and Lisa's bare foot flashed across my field of vision as she got out of the berth. The chain dropped, rattling; the door swung open in my hand.

She had the maroon-striped towel around her shoulders still; she sat on the edge of her berth and regarded me with a distinctly frosty eye. I closed the door and sat down on my own berth, heavily, and it wasn't a bid for sympathy that brought out a stifled groan.

A wave of faintness sent the room spinning. I leaned far forward and got my head between my knees and started to lock my fingers behind my neck, which is a good way to force the blood back into the brain. At the first touch of my finger tips to the base of the skull I said "Gawd!" and took them away. There was a lump there as big as an egg, and the finger tips came away smeared with still-oozing blood.

"Jim—!" said Lisa, and I heard movement and water running; then an icy towel came to rest with infinite gentleness against the lump, but not before I heard her gasp. "Ohhhhhhh," she said. "Darling, what happened?"

The cold was like tiny frozen fingers weaving through my brain. It felt fine. I said: "Hand me that bottle of brandy we tried and didn't like." It had come with the champagne. "Did I ever tell you what beautiful legs you have?" I asked, as Lisa bent over for the bottle, retrieved it from under the berth, and passed it to me.

"Never mind my legs," she said with dignity. "Take a shot of that and bring me up to date. What time is it?"

I drank freely. It wasn't good brandy but it certainly had power. "Five o'clock," I said, setting the bottle down. "Ahhh. The Old Maestro is making one of his usual snappy comebacks. Did you get any sleep? It was very stupid of me to lock you in; I only did it to be sure you'd be

safe. I knew you wouldn't get up again to put the door on the chain. But suppose we'd hit an iceberg!"

"Aren't any icebergs near Bermuda. And I *did* get up and put the door on the chain. Even though I heard you lock it. Listen. What happened? You want your wife to go quite insane?"

"I don't know what happened. I got this radiogram—the one you so kindly re-dispatched to Brenda's cabin—"

"I knew you'd be there," Lisa said calmly. "I just yelled through the door at the boy."

"Ah. Well, it's from Joe White . . . what the blazing hell!"

My jacket pocket was empty.

I SWUNG the exploring hand farther back, to my hip. The gun was gone too. I said bitterly: "You certainly married a boob, dear love. Let me see. She must have got the radiogram when we were sitting on the couch—"

"Oh, you were on the couch."

"It would seem so."

"I suppose in the heat of passion you never even felt her little hand in your pocket."

"Her little hand couldn't have got away with a .45 gun out of my pocket. I'll tell you that. Wait a minute."

It was coming back. Swinging down the corridor and a sudden tangling of my feet and a forward dive . . . then nothing. Nothing till the walrus mustache bent over me, much, much later. Of course.

"Must have been a rope," I said. "After which one of the boys holding it must have reached forward and laid a blackjack right where it would do the most good. Then he takes the radiogram. And the gun. Heat of passion my eye, dearie. You ought to have more faith in the man you married."

"Yes? I can see how extremely relieved you are to have another explanation," Lisa said. "Not that I care a damn, really, but did you succumb to the cosmic urge, my king? Or didn't you?"

"Quiet, please. Wait till I get my thoughts rearranged and I'll tell you all about it. What it means, obviously, is that Brenda Carroll and Brenda Carroll's party and everyone who impinges, however remotely, on Brenda Carroll's party

—such as the Steeles—are under constant observation on this boat. You see that?"

My voice was very low. Lisa shivered, and it wasn't the dawn wind blowing fresh and sweet through the porthole which was responsible.

At that moment the little telephone by the head of Lisa's berth made a long tinkling. The *Empress* was an old world-cruise liner, diverted to the Bermuda run some five years before. She had a lot of gadgets which the ordinary Bermuda boat of her age wouldn't have had: inter-cabin telephones, an electric elevator, a fine swimming-pool. If it hadn't been for those telephones, as I have frequently reflected since, my memories of S.S. *Empress* would be very different. As the bell stopped ringing, Lisa looked inquiringly at me.

"Go ahead," I said, and she picked up the hand-set.

"Yes? . . . Yes, right here."

She passed the instrument to me. "Doctor Phillips," she said.

"Hello, Stanley."

"Steele. Sorry to disturb you. Were you asleep?"

"Not at all. Never go to sleep before breakfast. Don't believe in it." The brandy was making me a trifle light-headed.

"Could you drop by my cabin before you do go to bed? Matter of fact, could you come now?"

His voice was vibrating with some strong emotion. It was quite uncharacteristic of Stanley Phillips; it actually seemed hoarse with excitement.

"Surely, Stanley. Where is your cabin?"

"85, A deck. Away forward, almost under the bridge."

"I'll be right over."

"Er—splendid. In ten minutes?"

"In five minutes."

I hung up.

"Something," I told Lisa, "has bitten the good doctor right where he lives. Now I wonder. Could it be something he learned from Cousin Brenda after I left?"

"Oh, he was there too?"

"But of course. You don't think I'd go visiting ladies in the middle of the night without a chaperon? Incidentally, did you notice the way he spoke to Brenda?"

His inflection? I'm sure they've been lovers."

"Oh, not a doubt of it. He *and* the Captain *and* the mate *and* the chief stoker in the engine-room, probably. Come one, come all, is your little friend's motto, unquestionably."

"Where's your Christian charity?"

I stood up and cast the towel aside. I took another small shot of the brandy.

"Darling," I said, "I shan't be long. And for the love of God keep the door on the chain."

Lisa's sea-green eyes softened. "Be careful, my hero," she said, smiling, and I knew I was forgiven for whatever imaginary sins had been mine in the night. At least temporarily forgiven. I dropped a kiss on the bright bronze hair and shut the door behind me. Emerging into the corridor gave me, despite the morning brilliance that flooded the whole humming ship, a curiously empty feeling. For no reason at all I kept seeing the gaping slit in the blonde's throat at Brenda Carroll's Park Avenue apartment, and the old man with his white beard all mottled red.

I wished, very much indeed, that I had a gun.

A GREAT gold heliograph on the horizon shot a beam that caught me in the eyes and blinded me as I stepped out on deck. The sun's upper curve was just clearing the sea. Deepening blue waves showed foam-crests as white as milk. We were entering the Gulf Stream.

Groups of men in dungarees were sluicing down the *Empress'* long white decks as I climbed to the boat deck once more for the trip forward. We must have been doing an easy eighteen knots over the sapphire sea, and three dolphins curved into and out of sight off the port bow. My spirits lifted considerably. I would see what Stanley had on his mind, I thought; then I would radio Carney at once, telling him everything he had a right to know; then I would get some sleep; and when I met Brenda Carroll at noon or thereabouts, the report to the Law could be a *fait accompli*.

I walk fairly fast. It wasn't, all told, more than five minutes after Stanley's phone-call when I knocked at his cabin door.

There was no answer. I turned the knob tentatively and the door swung in as the ship rolled a little—and what I saw was pretty bad.

Stanley Phillips lay face down on the floor, grinding his fists against his eyes and uttering low animal sounds of pain. The room stank so of ammonia that my own eyes began to water and I could barely see the narrow scarlet stream that curled from beneath the big man's body. I stood stupidly in the doorway for an instant; then I gulped a lungful of fresh air from outside and plunged in and knelt beside the man. "Stanley!" I remember I said sharply in his ear. "Can you hear me? What hap—?"

He jerked at the sound of my voice. He said: "Steele? I can't see. Am I bleeding badly?"

I give you my word he sounded every bit as calm as usual: much calmer, in fact, than he had been a while back on the telephone.

"Roll to your right a little. Let's see—ah . . ."

He had taken off his coat when he first entered the cabin, for it lay on the berth above him; his white linen shirt was soaked with wet blood. "Open . . . take a look," he directed. "Damn eyes . . . can't see. Thought it was vitriol; thank God, it's only ammonia."

I UNFASTENED the center shirt buttons, pulled the shirt up and aside. A deep gash ran diagonally from the top of his shoulder down across his armpit and into his left breast. It looked very nasty, but the blood was welling, not spouting, and I told him so.

He grunted in a relieved way.

He said: "Clouted me on the head, too; that's what got me down. Look in the glass case over the washstand, will you? Bandages and things there. I'll tell you what to do."

I started to step over him and he said: "No. I can get up all right now. Bathe these eyes is the first thing."

I put out my arm as Postlethwaite had put out his arm to me, and he got to his feet and made the washstand without trouble, except that the blood was certainly ruining the *Empress'* carpet. I waited while he splashed water noisily over his

burning face, then handed him a towel. He took it and sat down on his bunk and held it to his eyes. I opened the glass door and got out the bandages, and between us we didn't do a bad job of swabbing and bandaging the wound.

This took perhaps ten minutes and I thought, if he wants to get this fixed before he talks, I don't blame him.

The cabin, I noted as we worked, was meticulously neat. And bare. A fine chronometer balanced on a hollowed block of mahogany stood on a shelf above the bunk; alongside it were half a dozen books and a leather-framed photograph which was tilted against the wall, its back outward. Apart from the usual toilet articles on a glass ledge under the medicine-case, a chair, and a clothes-press whose door was closed, that was literally all. There was no bathroom; no door except the one by which I had entered.

Stanley Phillips, opening one red and swollen eye to view the complete dressing, said: "That's fine. Thanks. Glad you came along when you did—though that slash wouldn't have cost me anything but a little more blood. Chap must have thought he had me, but it isn't deep."

"No. What happened?"

"Damned if I know, exactly. Heard a knock, thought it was you, though I didn't see how you could have got here quite so soon. Opened the door and *swoosh!* Load of ammonia right in the face. Ever get one?"

"No."

"Devilish unpleasant. . . . Then I felt a crack on the head and my legs began to go rubbery on me and the bright lad, whoever he was, made a pass at me with his toad-sticker and I went on down."

"It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes before I got here," I said thoughtfully. "You phoned from here, of course."

"Yes. Yes, just about two minutes. I took off my coat after I phoned and brushed my hair. Then came the knock."

"What was it you wanted to see me about, Stanley? Could that have any bearing on it?"

FOR the second time in a few hours, innocuous words of mine produced an extraordinary effect. The big hands scrab-

bling at the closed eyelids stopped moving; the restless shifting of the heavy body stopped, too; Stanley Phillips sat, literally, as though turned suddenly to stone. Then the still-sightless swollen eyes moved to glare at me. "Of course," Phillips muttered. "I. . . Steele, you've got it. Got it in one."

His mind was working furiously, it seemed, behind his battered façade. I waited.

"Lock that door," he said.

"And what that means," Stanley Phillips added, "is—my God, man, do you see what that means?"

"I see one thing it means. I wonder if you see it too."

"Why it means that Brenda's being watched like a chicken being watched by a hawk. It means that everyone who has any contact with her is being watched."

"Exactly. But who's watching her?"

"When I telephoned you," Stanley Phillips informed me, "my door was on the chain—open about six inches. It gets stuffy in here. Anyone standing just outside could have heard every word I said—that I wanted to see you right away."

"That," I said, "ties in with what happened to me just now." I told him, as briefly as possible, what that had been.

Professional interest must have conquered his own discomfort. He stood up and ran practiced, curiously delicate finger tips over the lump at the base of my skull and sat down again. "Damned lucky, my lad," he said solemnly. "A little more power behind it, and that smack would have done for you. As it is—I'd say you were suffering from a slight concussion right now. Feel funny at all—dizzy or anything?"

"Hell, yes," I said impatiently. "No sleep, and brandy with champagne, and a row with my wife, and this slug to top off with. Naturally I feel funny. Let's skip all that—you're kind of *hors de combat* too—and get down to cases. Let's hear your conclusions later. Tell me first why you phoned me."

"Because I thought you ought to know," he said. "Serge Fabry is on this ship."

It was one of the biggest surprises in a trip which had been, from its inception, surprising.

I said, rather stupidly: "Are you sure?"

Do you mean you know him personally?"

"I haven't that pleasure." His voice was grim, menacing. "But I'm sure nevertheless. Look here."

His thick arm, the good arm, reached up toward the leather photograph case which stood on the shelf. He brought it down and I saw that it wasn't merely leaning with its face to the wall, as I had thought: it was one of those double cases, hinged in the middle, which open out to hold two large pictures under glass or cellophane inside. Also it had what I had never seen on such a case before: a tiny gilt lock which held the two flaps together.

Stanley Phillips dug out a set of half-a-dozen keys from his trousers pocket. He found the smallest key, inserted it in the gilt lock, opened the case, and held the case out to me.

"You'll have to do it," he said. "Get the left-hand picture out. Need two hands. It's in there pretty tight."

Evidently he didn't mind my seeing the two photographs inside, which was a compliment. Because they certainly gave him dead away.

THEY were quite startling, both of them. The left-hand photo was a close-up of Brenda Carroll taken on a beach in sunlight so brilliant that the shadows were velvet-black. Only there weren't many shadows, so that you were left in no doubt whatever as to the reality of the lady's charms. She was lying on her stomach and facing partly away from the camera, so that her bare and beautiful back constituted most of the picture, with a scrap of colored silk sun-suiting just visible at the extreme lower left, and her head, turned so as to smile brilliantly at the photographer, at the extreme upper right. The edge of a beach umbrella occupied one of the other two corners of the print. Her hair was wind-blown.

"I took that of Brenda in Bermuda, some time ago," Stanley Phillips informed me without visible emotion of any sort. "It's the other picture I want you to get out."

The other picture was of Brenda Carroll too. But it was quite different, in content and in feeling. She was wearing one of those deceptively simple little numbers which Captain Molyneux or Lanvin used

to turn out for a mere hundred and sixty dollars or their equivalent in francs. Just a little something to snatch a bite of lunch in. Brenda was snatching her lunch, evidently, somewhere along the Riviera: the tripod-legged iron-topped table, the bottles of Burgundy, the faces and the clothes of the half-dozen couples visible in the background under a grape trellis as carefully and artificially nurtured as the patrons' vices—these all said "Antibes" or "Cannes." And instead of the frankly voluptuous relaxation of the beach scene, open and careless and abandoned as the sun and wind that drenched it, this luncheon snapshot seemed pervaded with a refined and elegant depravity, a cynicism too deep for words and almost too deep for deeds: even lust, here, was a little weary of itself.

At least, that was my first impression. And when I succeeded in loosening the picture from the frame and withdrawing it, the impression was strengthened. For the leather border had hidden the outer rim of the print, hidden the man who sat opposite Brenda Carroll at her table, hidden his hand over hers where hers clasped the stem of her wine glass, and hidden the expression of his eyes and his mouth.

IT was one of the handsomest faces I had ever seen. And one of the worst. Mere brutishness, however low, has a saving earthy quality about it: there was none of that here. This face was effete without being in the least effeminate. The narrow sleepy eyes, heavy-lidded under long straight penciled brows, the sensual flexible smiling lips, the round cleft chin and the close-curling hair that grew low on the brow—all these gave it a startling resemblance to that bust of the debauched young Tiberius: you felt the cold cruelty behind the smile, the essentially ophidian quality of the eyes.

I said lightly: "Your little friend seems to be in thoroughly bad company. Who—"

"That," said Stanley Phillips quietly, "is Serge Fabry."

"Do tell."

"You might wonder," Stanley Phillips went on, and his voice was quite steady and matter-of-fact, "why I didn't cut out that part of the picture and throw it away.

I've kept it because I—er—wanted to keep his memory green. Ha!" The short explosive laugh was like a dagger-stab. "I always knew I'd meet him some day. And I always knew that when that day came, I'd—"

"Hold it, Stanley," I said. "You know better than that."

With an effort, he did hold it. But the veins on his temples were congested and pulsing as he sat there, hands locked between his thick knees. "Anyway he's aboard now," he muttered.

I said: "I know he's aboard. I knew it nearly twelve hours ago. Only I didn't know it was Serge. He bumped into me as I was knocking on Brenda Carroll's door at half past seven last night. . . . Have you got a gun?"

He looked surprised. "Yes—but you're not going hunting now, are you?"

"I think we'd both better go," I said. "You can carry the gun."

WE stood, Stanley Phillips and I, outside a white-painted door and rapped hard. We had had a little trouble in finding that door: the passenger list showed no Fabry, Serge or otherwise, but a sleepy purser on the telephone recalled, with that miraculous memory of good pursers everywhere, that the gentleman I described was in 138. A Mr. Henri Goncourt, which sounded sufficiently phony in itself.

I must say that as we stood there I felt a momentary wave of doubt, though. If Serge Fabry were really on the other side of this door, and if Serge Fabry were also the author of all that had happened in the past fifteen hours, then Serge Fabry had not only the most incredible nerve but the most colossal and transcendent gall in human history. . . . I rapped again.

With no sound of movement inside, the door opened.

It was an absurd comparison, but the man who stood there made me think for a moment of a golden snake. A snake with a razor glittering in its human hand.

He had been shaving. His yellow silk pajama trousers clung about his narrow hips and from the waist up he was naked. His smooth, muscular, hairless left arm had, clasped about it just above the biceps, a broad band of wrought gold. There was a design hammered on the gold but I

didn't stop to examine it: I was looking at his face.

And I had not been deceived, I thought, in my impressions. Except that, as I say, he reminded me now not so much of a marble bust of a degenerate dead Emperor as of a live and dangerous snake: the curling hair that came to a slight widow's peak above the long heavy-lidded, unblinking eyes, the mouth suddenly straight and slit-like, the face which, seen full front, narrowed too sharply from high taut cheek bones to the cleft and pointed chin—all had something viperine about them. A very dangerous man.

HE said in a soft pleasant voice: "Yes?" The hand holding the razor was poised in front of him, a little above the waist. There was a patch of white lather on his left cheek. I wondered whether it was this razor which had slashed across Stanley Phillips' shoulder.

I said: "We'd like to talk with you. Can we come in?"

His long eyes widened in surprise. "Come in? At this hour? But it is not convenient, not convenient at all. No. What is it you wish to talk with me about?" He had only the faintest of accents: it was his arrangement and choice of words rather than his almost faultless English which made him sound so definitely un-English. He spoke fast and his voice was not so pleasant.

"It's about a man named Fabry," I said. "Serge Fabry. We want to talk about him right now, whether it's convenient or not." I kept one eye on the razor and the other on him—or tried to.

His face didn't change, but he lowered the strip of shining steel and stepped back.

"Fabry?" he said tonelessly. "Come in; we cannot shout in the passageway. Come in."

We came in and shut the door and sat down on one of the berths, Stanley Phillips with one arm in his coat sleeve holding his gun in the jacket pocket and the rest of the jacket slung around his bandaged left shoulder. I didn't look at his face; I was afraid it would make me nervous. The man in the yellow pajama trousers folded the razor carefully and laid it down on the washstand shelf. He was about my own age, I decided, or a year so or younger:

early thirties. He didn't sit down; he stood there surveying Phillips and me. The cabin was full of gold sunlight.

I said, politely enough, "You are on the passenger list as Monsieur Henri Goncourt. But your real name's Fabry." Not asking a question; just stating a fact.

The man said: "But you are—This is an officer, yes?" nodding toward Stanley Phillips' brass buttons and sleeve stripes. "But who are you? What is it to you if I am Henri Goncourt or what-you-call Fabry or the President of the French Republic?"

"You are Serge Fabry, though," I said, leaning a little forward and forcing my lips into what I hoped was not too ghastly an imitation of a smile.

"And if I am?"

Pure interrogation: admitting, denying nothing.

"Why," I said, reminding myself of some Headquarters dicks I had seen: patently fake heartiness, "that's fine. Glad you admit it. How would you like," I said, "to get your teeth kicked right down your throat, louse?"

There was a gold fire suddenly behind his eyes. "I am afraid," he said, "I do not understand you. At least I hope I do not understand you—"

QUICK movement beside me ended in the production of Stanley Phillips' gun in Stanley Phillips' large right hand.

"You understand, all right," he said in a hard voice, "and, if you don't, perhaps you can understand *this*." The blue-black barrel wasn't three feet from the man's flat belly. "I shouldn't reach behind you for that razor, if I were you." The hand which had stretched out as though involuntarily toward the washstand fell at the man's side.

He stood there watching us and he began to breathe a little hard. Actually, at that moment, I had no special idea of how to proceed. It didn't matter: Phillips took the play out of my hands.

"Fabry," he said, "you'll do no more black-mailing when I'm through with you. Do you know why?"

No answer, no sound except the breath in the man's flared nostrils.

"Because," Stanley Phillips said, "you'll

be six months, at least, getting out of the hospital. And I doubt if you'll ever be good for very much again. Do you know how it feels to have your arms broken, one after the other, and then your legs—after they've been dislocated at the pelvis, of course?"

Something new and horrible was in the room.

I said warningly: "Stanley!" but he paid no attention.

"I've seen it done," he said, "though I've never done it myself. But I have no doubt," he said, his voice deepening suddenly till it rang like a steel bar struck with a hammer of iron, "that I shall learn fast. Of course there may be a little fumbling at first—"

This man, I thought, has gone mad.

Henri Goncourt, or Serge Fabry, did a curious thing. It was large cabin, with an oversize brass-rimmed porthole just above the berth opposite us. Fabry sat down on that berth and yawned in our faces.

He took bored finger tips away from his mouth and said, addressing me, "Surely . . . your friend has been out in the sun too much? *Un peu dérangé*? If you will go now, quietly, both of you, I promise to say nothing about all this. Unless, of course, I am annoyed again."

The beautiful effrontery was too much, it seemed, for Phillips. He sprang to his feet and though I tried to clutch him, he was between me and Fabry before I could stand up myself. There was a blur of movement too swift for eye to follow, and Phillips' powerful right arm swung backward, gun in hand, and struck me in the chest and knocked me off-balance. He let the gun drop to the carpet and clenched a fist like a ham and sprang forward again. I bellowed "Grab his legs!" and lurched up and I saw, to my incredulous amazement, Fabry's body halfway through the porthole, and forward and Phillips made a futile clutch at one vanishing ankle; there was a ripping sound and Fabry was gone.

Phillips stood there stupidly, a torn piece of yellow silk in his hand.

AGAIN, it was one of those things you can't believe, even though they're right before your eyes. Deliberate suicide. . . . I don't know which of us got his head jammed through the porthole first, but

there was room for us both. Below us the black rivet-studded plates of the *Empress'* huge flank glistened in flying spray; we were moving fast and the wind was freshening. Deep blue waves creamed sibilantly under our startled gaze, and I thought I saw a flash of yellow, already far aft; then even that was gone. The sun climbing up the morning sky illumined an empty ocean.

I thought of it before Phillips did: I pulled in my head and jerked up the telephone.

The operator said: "Good morning," briskly.

I said hoarsely: "Man overboard. Just now. Get her stopped, will you?"

I heard a short breath indrawn, then a click and silence.

Stanley Phillips had his head out the porthole again. I went back to the porthole and looked too—and what I saw just didn't make sense.

At first she was just a glinting speck a couple of miles away and very high; the sun shot bright sparks from her metal wings, as though far in midair an invisible hand were tilting a tiny mirror. Then she came sliding down on a long straight slant and I could see what she was: one of those new Lockheed amphibians which have practically everything except an icebox and a bathtub and I'm not sure they don't have an icebox. Her pilot certainly knew his business: he swung her upwind, flattened out, and set her down between two waves like a butterfly lighting on a wind-tossed leaf, not five hundred yards astern.

At exactly that moment, I remember, the *Empress'* engines stopped. The telephone rang shrilly. My head still out the porthole, I groped for the hand-set, found it, and heard a voice say: "This is Wardman, First Officer. You said man overboard?"

"Right. . . . But by God," I said, my eyes straining astern, "he's being picked up right now."

Wardman was evidently on the bridge, inside; what happened astern was of course a closed book to him.

He said irritably: "Are you drunk? Who is this?"

"Steele, Wardman. I'm in Stateroom 138. The man who has it just jumped out the porthole. But if you'll cock an

eye in our wake, you'll see what's happening."

There was a grunt, and a momentary silence. That made three of us, at least, watching. . . . Something white flashed in the water beside the plane; then a tiny toy doll, half-white, half-yellow, pulled itself up and spraddled one of the pontoons. Another moment, and it rose to its feet and walked lightly along the heaving wing. The cabin door opened; the toy doll vanished inside. In the stillness that had followed the stopping of our own engines we heard a new sound across the bright blue waves: the sudden quickening drone of the plane's motors, bursting almost at once into a full-throated roar as her tail lifted and she began to skim the crests. . . . Before I should have thought it possible she was up on the step . . . she was clear! She circled once, rising, then straightened on a steady climb into the northeast. There was nothing, so far as I knew, in the northeast but Africa.

A voice through the telephone said in my ear: "Captain Rindge wants to see you in his cabin right away."

CAPTAIN RINDGE was a large man and a stout man, and if his face got any redder I was afraid he would burst. I sat in his cabin with Wardman's sardonic lean face on my left and Stanley Phillips slumped in a chair on my right, and wondered how much of the story to tell. The *Empress'* engines were throbbing again.

I said: "Captain, we're almost as much in the dark as you are. The man turned, without warning, and plunged out the window. The plane picked him up. He must have known, of course, that it would pick him up at about that time: right after sunrise, when the *Empress* could be spotted easily from any height. But of course he couldn't be sure the plane would be there; and how he kept clear of the propellers is beyond me. Hell's own nerve—"

"Hell's own nerve is right," Wardman murmured.

Captain Rindge snapped: "What were you doing in his cabin? No—" as I started to answer—"you, Phillips. Give me your side of it."

"Ten, fifteen minutes before," Stanley

Phillips said, "someone had knocked on my door. I thought it was Steele, here; I'd ask him to drop by before he went to bed. We'd been up most of the night, talking. It wasn't Steele; it was someone who threw ammonia in my eyes, and slugged me, and as I went down cut at me with a knife. Or," said Stanley Phillips reflectively, "a razor."

"Good God." The old man rubbed the top of his bald red scalp furiously. Then his red-veined eyes focused on Stanley Phillips as he roared: "All right, someone threw ammonia at you. What's that got to do with 138 jumping overboard? I haven't got all morning."

"I think 138 threw it," Stanley Phillips said.

"Why?"

"I don't know why. I'd like to know. That's why Steele and I went to call on him."

The empurpled face did grow even riper and juicier in tone, yet apoplexy still held off.

I said quickly: "Captain, if you'll forgive my interrupting, none of this makes much sense at best—but it won't make any sense to you at all unless we start at the beginning. It begins with Mrs. Sefton's child—she's really Brenda Carroll, as you probably know very well—being kidnaped in Bermuda yesterday."

"What's that? What's that?" roared Captain Rindge, swivelling round on me.

I said calmly: "That's right. Mrs. Carroll. Suite C."

I THOUGHT that would hold him for a minute and it did. After all, people weren't booking private deck-veranda suites every day in the year, not this year they weren't; and if the ramifications of this particular problem touched Mrs. B. Carroll however indirectly, Captain Rindge of *S.S. Empress* had better walk carefully. Or so Captain Rindge of *S.S. Empress* obviously concluded.

He said in his nearest approach to an ordinary conversational tone: "Carry on, then. What are you waiting for? Give me the tale from the start. Only make it fast—"

"Wouldn't it be better," I said, "if we—if you got Mrs. Carroll up here right now?"

Now, I thought, he *will* explode—*bang!* One doesn't tell ships' captains how to proceed. But no: he looked at me earnestly and searchingly for a moment, then he said mildly: "A very good idea. Wardman, go get her up. Somehow or other. Say that the Captain is very sorry indeed and all that, but something very serious has happened and he'd be happy to have her join him . . . why, what the bloody hell. Why don't I just telephone her myself?"

There being no reason why he shouldn't, no one said anything.

"You're sure, now, you two," Captain Rindge said hand-outstretched toward the battery of instruments on the table beside him, "that Mrs. Carroll ought to come into this?"

Stanley Phillips and I both nodded solemnly and said we were sure. The old man was paying us and our judgment a tremendous compliment, really, by rousing his prize passenger at such an hour without knowing all the facts. I have never ceased to wonder at it. I imagine he had a good deal of confidence in Phillips: that and Phillips' bandaged arm, and our joint serious demeanor, and the befuddling appearance of a seaplane out of nowhere to pick up a vanishing Steve Brodie, must have convinced him that something really big was up and he'd better not boggle it. He picked up the nearest hand-set and told the operator to ring Suite C and we all sat there in silence and waited.

Presently a voice I hardly recognized as the Captain's, so compounded it was of butter, molasses, and warm suet, said: "Ah, good morning. This is Captain Rindge. Might I speak with Mrs. Carroll—Mrs. Sefton, I should say?"

Wardman winked at me.

". . . Oh, it is Mrs. Carroll." Evidently Brenda had dismissed the *nom de guerre* impatiently. "I'm sorry—I'm very sorry to have to disturb you at this time in the morning, but something rather serious has happened. Doctor Phillips and Mr.—er—Steele are in my cabin now. Would it be convenient for you to join us?"

I couldn't hear her answer but it must have been a honey, for the big red face swelled suddenly and he caught his lower

lip in his false teeth and chewed on it.

Then he said: "Of course, of course. . . . In your suite, then? At once? . . . Thank you very much, Mrs. Carroll. *Good morning.*" He hung up with a crash and turned to us. "She says she'll be—er—very glad to see us at once. She'd—er—prefer to have us come to her cabin, she says."

Still in silence, and feeling, I am sure, a little sorry for Captain Rindge, we all stood up. Captain Rindge picked up his cap and led the way.

I WAS too relieved to do much consecutive thinking during the little parade. I didn't know how much la Carroll would want to spill about events prior to the *Empress'* sailing, and I certainly didn't want our respective tales to fail to mesh. But I had another reason for being relieved: my so-called wits hadn't been entirely idle since the seaplane vanished, and certain points about the night's activities seemed to me—as the saying goes—extremely significant. Something was very, very rotten in Denmark besides the Nazis, and I was beginning to believe that I knew what it was. It would be helpful to watch Brenda Carroll's face at a conference like this—and not only Brenda Carroll's face. I made up my mind that if the rest of our little group weren't present when we got to Suite C, I'd ask to have them summoned before we began.

Captain Rindge's knock, which I suppose he fondly imagined to be a delicately courteous announcement of our arrival, was still echoing down the corridor when the door swung back.

"Come in, do," said Brenda Carroll out of a poker face, with an inflection which might or might not have been ironic in its hospitality. "I've ordered coffee."

A somewhat uncertain step behind us heralded Major Carteret, for which I was very glad. He looked quite badly. The watery blue eyes were decorated with large lead-colored pouches, the thin veined hands were tremulous and so was the sweeping mustache, which meant that his lips were trembling too. It wasn't surprising: you can't drink Rajah's pegs all evening and not know it at sun-up next morning. He followed us in. Brenda Carroll had evidently telephoned him while we were on

our way down, and his toilet was definitely sketchy. Wrinkled grey slacks below a heavy canary-yellow pullover; no shave (the stubby, sandy bristles on the putty-colored cheeks looked most unpleasant); long, bony feet thrust into rope-soled espadrilles.

Brenda Carroll said: "Emily'll be out in a moment."

The coffee came then. So, almost simultaneously, did Mrs. Riordan, quite rakish in her black negligée with most of her hair in her eye. When the sleepy steward had gone and everyone had a cup in his or her hand except the Major, who had blinked and shaken his head, Captain Rindge's further attention to the amenities became (he evidently felt) unnecessary. He eased his vast bulk back in his chair.

"Well. Let's get this started. There's a passenger," he said, fixing an eye severely on Brenda Carroll, "just gone and jumped overboard. Mr. Steele said it had something to do with you."

IT was a tribute to the lady's immense vitality that, despite the night she had just put through, she looked lovely. The brown skin was fresh and unlined; the electric blue eyes wide and clear. Her lips—I dismissed hastily the memory of how her lips had felt and tried not even to dwell on how they looked, which was red, and soft. . . .

"Something to do with me, Captain?" she repeated. The blue eyes fixed on me. "What—what in the world is he talking about?"

I don't know that I have made myself wholly clear on my feelings—on the gradual evolution of my feelings, I should say—during the past few hours. There were—and I was quite well aware of the fact—three distinct elements comprising my state of mind. One was what you might call the protective instinct: I wanted to spare this girl what I could, to help her as much as I could. I will not go into that angle further since it is doubtless fairly obvious, though I will say that even this desire wasn't pure and unmixed. It was largely tintured with a kind of jealous exhibitionism where Lisa was concerned: I wanted to prove to her, far more than I wanted to help Brenda Carroll, what a smart lad I was.

A second element was obstinacy: the special Steele brand, I suppose. I had got myself into hell's most frightful jam with Carney and the Law. I wanted to pull out of that jam by my own efforts, and the more involved the situation became, the more determined I was to unravel it myself.

The third element, of course, was the growing thrill of the chase—the thing that every hunter knows so well. My quarry wasn't exactly in sight, but I felt pretty sure that I could spot footprints. . . .

I said: "Brenda, a good deal has happened since we said good night. We didn't stop to tell Captain Rindge all about it. We thought, Stanley and I, that you'd better hear the whole story, especially since you're the one who can best tell him how it ties in with Jock's disappearance." I paused and no one said anything and I continued: "Serge Fabry sailed on this ship. He jumped overboard half an hour ago—"

"No!"—from her, in blank amazement.

". . . and was picked up by a seaplane, believe it or not. A plane he must have had scheduled to pick him up. Which reminds me—will you let me telephone my wife? I've been gone over an hour and she might possibly be wondering?"

A SECOND instrument was plugged in at the corner of the couch. I told the operator to ring my cabin. Lisa's lovely deep-violet voice sounded quite calm, which didn't please me.

I said: "Just reporting that I've been pretty busy and I'd like to have breakfast with you. Any chance of that?"

"Darling!" she said, and the way she said it did please me. "I've been frantic."

"You didn't sound so."

"Don't be childish. You're sure you're all right?"

"Splendid. See you in half an hour?"

"Make it twenty minutes and I'll like it better."

"I'll try." For the first time in two weeks the world seemed a place worth inhabiting. I hung up and resumed.

"When I left you," I said to Brenda, "I started for my cabin. . . ."

There is no point in repeating the tale again: I recounted it all, as briefly as I could. The rope, and the clout on my

head, and my dragging myself to my cabin with the steward's help, and Stanley's phone call, and my arrival to find him writhing on the floor, and our visit to 138 because we knew Fabry was there. (I didn't explain that part, how we knew; I thought the photographs were no business of Captain Rindge's or anyone else's except their subject and their owner.) Captain Rindge listened to this episode with steadily mounting color, and I'd have begun to worry about him again if I hadn't learned that he could take it.

When I got to the part about the porthole, and the tiny doll climbing out of the sea to the wing of the waiting plane, he made faint strangling sounds, but that was all.

"Now," I said, "that'll bring you up to date, Brenda. The Captain hasn't heard about what happened in New York, nor your theory of your child's—er—disappearance. Have you got that radiogram from your nurse handy, by the way?"

I thought it would give her a moment or two to readjust herself.

"Yes. It's here," Brenda Carroll said quickly, and brought it out from under a sheaf of magazines on the center table. I re-read it over Captain Rindge's shoulder. It said:

MRS. SEFTON S.S. EMPRESS. JOCK HAS DIS-
APPEARED FROM CRIB IN NURSERY. HAVE
NOTIFIED AUTHORITIES. HOPE GOOD NEWS
IN FEW HOURS

MARGARET

"When did this reach you?" Captain Rindge said quickly.

"Last night. Around eight o'clock," she replied.

"You've had no further word?"

"No."

"Jock is—?"

"Jock," Brenda Carroll said calmly, "is my child by my second husband, Serge Fabry. The man who you say jumped out of the porthole. He's been threatening me with something of the sort for quite a while, unless I paid him a lot more money. I decided last night, after I got this, that I would pay him—pay him anything, to get the baby back. Now you tell me he was aboard here—and that he's gone. I don't know what to think now."

HER voice wasn't quite so calm when she finished. She added, including Wardman in her quick sweeping glance, "There are a lot of complications in this situation which I suppose we needn't go into now. The point is—and I'm sure you gentlemen will keep this in mind—that no one knows I had a baby while I was married to Serge Fabry. Jock's been taken care of in Bermuda by Margaret MacRae, an old nurse of mine, as her sister's child. Jock MacRae, his name's supposed to be. Her sister's supposed to be dead and she's given the child her own name. Are you sure it was Serge in that cabin?"

She tacked on the question suddenly, looking at Stanley Phillips.

"Certain sure," he said, looking steadily back at her. "Hasn't changed a bit since the day that photograph was taken. . . ."

It appeared to convince her.

I said: "Well, those are the salient facts." They weren't all of them by any means, but I didn't see that Captain Rindge could help with two corpses in the New York morgue. "It seems to me that they boil down to this. After repeated threats from Mrs. Carroll's ex-husband, her child disappears. *Question One: did ex-husband engineer that disappearance?*

"After I leave Mrs. Carroll's suite here last night, an attack is made on me, and my gun and a radiogram from a friend in New York are taken from me while I'm unconscious. Shortly after that, Doctor Phillips telephones me to ask me to come to his cabin at once. He's discovered that Serge Fabry is aboard—you haven't explained how you knew that, Stanley," I added.

"Met him, head-on, on my way to my cabin," Stanley Phillips said. "That's why I was in such a hurry to get hold of you."

"Ah." I made a mental note to the effect that if he'd been with Brenda Carroll all the time I was unconscious in the passageway, and had only reached his cabin at the time I reached mine, it had been a pretty prolonged tête-à-tête. "But before I get to Doctor Phillips' cabin," I went on, "he is attacked and left—or so it would seem—for dead. *Question Two: was Serge Fabry the author of those attacks, and if so, why?* Because he knew I'd been closeted with Mrs. Carroll and he wanted to find out what was in my radio-

gram? But how did he know I had a radiogram? Because he knew Doctor Phillips had recognized him as Fabry, and wanted to shut Phillips' mouth? Possibly.

"Question Three is to my mind the hardest one of all to answer."

"You mean, why did Fabry jump overboard?" said Captain Rindge briskly, looking intelligent and deep.

"No," I said. "I didn't. I mean why did Fabry *plan* to jump overboard? Assume that he had agents who kidnaped the child. Assume that he wanted to get to Bermuda to take charge of the affair in person. O.K.—then he wanted to get to Bermuda, he didn't want to leap overboard in mid-ocean, did he? Yet he had a plane ordered to pick him up at a more-or-less exactly specified time and place. Obviously. While I think of it, I'll bet you that flight to the northeast was just to befuddle us. They'll turn back for Nassau or Florida, once out of sight."

"Go over what happened in his cabin again, will you?" said Wardman.

"Why," I said, "nothing happened, not really. We knocked and he opened the door and we went in and said the hell with his Henri Goncourt stuff, we knew he was Serge Fabry. He more or less admitted he was, and what—he said—was that to us? We started to explain what it was to us—that we thought he was responsible for kidnaping young Jock—and without warning he turned and dived out the porthole. That's all."

"Did you actually mention the baby?" Brenda Carroll asked.

"No. Never even got that far. And it can't have been simply that he got panic-stricken at being recognized as Fabry. First place, he wouldn't have ordered the plane on the off-chance of someone's recognizing him. Because if he was that scared of being recognized, he'd have bought a beard and whiskers. Or something. He must have known that at any minute he might be recognized—just as you, Brenda, though you travel as Mrs. Sefton and all that, know that you may bump into someone any minute who knows who you really are."

Captain Rindge rubbed his red scalp again, violently.

"Damnedest thing I ever—excuse me," he said.

We went on like that for another half hour. Getting, definitely, nowhere. Finally I said I had to go, and left. I recalled, later, that neither the Major nor Mrs. Riordan had uttered one single word. Nor had the expression on anyone's face told me anything.

LISA dug the spoon into her grapefruit and said meekly: "Darling. You are so clever. Explain to a girl what goes on here, will you? The only explanation I can think of is that Brenda and Serge are not really Brenda and Serge at all, but two very astute maniacs from Rockland State Hospital. Of course they *think* they're Brenda and Serge—"

The obliging Postlethwaite had smoothed her bed over and fetched fruit, eggs, coffee and toast for two and set up the works on a little folding table. I had downed an egg and some coffee and felt drowsy, which was not surprising.

I said, having brought my good wife up to date while the breakfast was preparing, and pursuing now my own train of thought while the lovely creature babbled on: "The hell with Brenda and Serge for the nonce. There are two other people I'd like to know something about, and they haven't even been mentioned."

"One being the pappy of little Jock MacRae, I suppose."

"Him, too. But the couple I mean are Brenda's first husband and Serge's still legally wedded wife."

"Ahhhh. Even I can see possibilities there—"

"I would also like to know why Brenda's yacht sticks in my mind. I've been meaning to ask you about that. Wasn't there something in the papers about something that happened on that yacht a while ago?"

"I don't know— Yes, I do, too," Lisa said. "Of course. Why, you must recall that yourself: one of her sweeties was drunk and fell off it."

"Seems to be a habit with them. Was he picked up?"

"Yes—but it made the headlines anyway. . . . Now do you see what happens to Brenda's boy friends? First this man, then Fabry. Maybe you're next."

"Listen," I said, "I didn't lay a finger on her. Don't be that way. Well, not

more than a finger, honestly. And a chaste salute as we said good night. And that's all. Fatherly. That's what it was."

"Yeah."

"Yeah." Quite inadequate, of course. Lisa drank coffee.

"If it comes to that," I said, not intending to say it, "don't you think I get perturbed over Tony?"

SHE drank some more coffee. The cup made a faint clattering sound on the saucer as she put it down.

I said: "Just because I'm your husband, I am not your jailer—I admit that freely. If you *have* to kiss him, I suppose it's all right. Only I wish you wouldn't do it on club verandas where people other than myself might see you."

It was out. I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. She had known for two weeks that something was wrong between us, simply because I couldn't help showing it. Before that we had kidded to and fro about Tony Pitt, the young architect who was mad about Lisa and didn't care who knew it. But I hadn't mentioned before what I'd stumbled on the night of the Wentworth's dance: Lisa wrapped in Pitt's arms in the moonlight, his dark head bent close above her upturned face. . . . It was a bad memory. Very bad.

Lisa looked at me gravely. Looked closely and without embarrassment. The red lips opened to say something but she evidently thought better of it and closed them again.

Then she said: "So *that's* why you've been such a sprightly comrade for the last couple of weeks."

"That," I said in all honesty and with sudden insight, "is the only reason I've given more than a passing thought to Cousin Brenda. Self-defense, I suppose. Let's skip the whole thing. Help me compose a good line to Carney before I snatch a nap, will you?"

Lisa looked at her wrist watch. "It's now two minutes of eight, somewhere off Bermuda, September 20th. I'll ask you to note that I shall revert to this moment, later. Noted?"

"Noted."

I didn't at all like the definite way she said it.

I WOKE up about half past eleven feeling fine. To my own surprise. Shaved, showered, and re-clad in the only clothes I had, I went up on deck and found Lisa sitting next to a stout lady who was narrating, with gestures, an amusing experience which had befallen her and a Mrs. Edward M. Brower of Winnetka the last time they had taken this trip. Lisa said: "Oh, here's my husband. So nice to have had this chat," and jumped up and took my arm.

"Cripes!" she said as we turned the corner.

"What say we have a drink?"

"I say lead on."

"You want the bar or the after-café?"

"I don't care. Which is nearer?"

We turned another corner and the after-café was right before us, so we sat down and I ordered two Ballantines with plain water.

"I told Cousin Brenda I'd look her up about this time," I said, glancing around with impressive carelessness. "Glad I can put pleasure before business, ha-ha."

"Very pretty," said Lisa. "Very gallant. Very chivalrous to your wife—"

"Very nauseating, that honeyed tone."

"Did you get the wire to Carney off?"

"Sure. I'll show you. See what you think."

The space where we sat, a kind of open-air terrace built on the after-end of the promenade deck, was nearly empty, it being a bit early for all but the confirmed guzzlers, of whom there were three or four couples scattered about. No one I'd ever seen before. Lisa bent over the scrawl I'd concocted for Carney while I signed for the drinks. The message had said:

LIEUTENANT CARNEY CENTRE STREET NEW YORK. SERGE FABRY LADY'S LAST HUSBAND BELIEVED INVOLVED TAKEN OFF SS EMPRESS FIFTY MINUTES AGO BY PREARRANGED PLANE. SUGGEST YOU CHECK ATLANTIC COAST AIRPORTS FOR DEPARTURE OR ARRIVAL LOCKHEED LOW WING AMPHIBIAN. DETAIN FABRY IF FOUND. BELIEVE AM MORE HELP HERE THAN IF I HAD WAITED. SORRY FOR DELAY IN REPORTING. WHY DON'T YOU GET ME ON SHIP TO SHORE PHONE AS SOON AS CONVENIENT. LADY INCIDENTALLY DOES NOT SMOKE CORK TIPPED VICEROYS

STEELE

Lisa raised her head and asked: "What's this 'Viceroy' stuff?"

"Oh. Thought I'd mentioned it. Couple of mashed cigarette ends in a bowl on Brenda's dresser. Cork-tipped Viceroy's, I noticed. She smokes Chesterfields."

A hand on my shoulder made me whirl round so that my glass tipped and spilled all across the table. Fortunately it missed Lisa's white skirt. The same apple-cheeked youngster who had brought Brenda Carroll's message the night before said: "Mr. Steele, you're being called from New York. Would you prefer to take it at the operator's office?"

"Yes. Fine." I stood up. "You'll wait here for me, won't you, young woman?"

"It depends," Lisa said coldly, "on who clutters up the place while you're gone."

THE central telephone exchange was just abaft the bridge. I didn't lose any time, though I didn't relish what I knew was coming. The operator nodded at me, waved to the little sound-proof booth with glass walls and did some fussing with his controls. He nodded a go-ahead to me, and ostentatiously took off his head-set, which was a relief.

I picked up the receiver and said: "Steele speaking. That you, Carney?"

"It's me," said the high, clear Celtic voice of Bob Carney, "and it would have been me many hours ago if today hadn't been my day off, and I out fishing in Great South Bay. I've just asked the Captain to put you under arrest."

"Thanks, pal."

"You think I won't? By God, of all the fast ones ever pulled, you—"

"Bob, I told you in that wire, I only wanted to help. I think I'm being some help. It's your party, I know, but when you get the whole story—"

I felt infinitely relieved. For a moment I'd thought he *had* asked my arrest.

"Give it to me now, fast and complete. We'll take it down."

I'd expected something like this. I said, without hesitating: "Ready? I met Mrs. Carroll in the Park Lane by accident yesterday afternoon. Around five. She asked me if I'd pick up some stuff she'd left at her apartment—she was sailing for Bermuda in a few minutes. She gave me the key. I went down and found the old man

and the girl and phoned you right away. Then I thought: the Bermuda boat is leaving in a couple of minutes; maybe I can catch her. So I hurried."

"What about the stuff she wanted you to get?"

"It was jewelry. It wasn't there."

"Description?"

"Don't know. . . . I made the boat just as she was pulling out and braced Mrs. C. with the news. She fainted. I'm sure she didn't kill 'em. It was her lawyer and his secretary, as you know by now, I suppose; they were waiting for Serge Fabry, who's been threatening her unless she pays him a lot of jack. I talked to her most of the night trying to get helpful information out of her. She hasn't any, except she's sure Fabry did it. We can't figure why, though. Early this morning Fabry was recognized aboard here, believe it or not. I went to brace him, with another fellow, a friend of mine, along; and, God's my witness, he jumped out the porthole. The plane I wirelessed you about picked him up. Must have been prearranged. Any trace of the plane?"

"No."

"Didn't think there would be. Private air field, probably. . . . There's more to it than that, but that's the main angle from where I'm sitting: where's Fabry, and why did he have a plane waiting? Doesn't make sense, does it?"

A VIOLENT snort carried through several hundred miles of ether.

I went on: "Brenda Carroll is going to visit two old friends of hers in Bermuda: brother and sister, Major Carteret, Englishman or Irishman, and sister, Mrs. Emily Riordan. Very snazzy people, I guess. They're aboard here. You might see if anyone knows anything about them. Must have money—she owns a house in Bermuda so it's a cinch *they* didn't swipe any jewelry. Point is, who did? It wasn't on the bodies, because I looked. I guess that's all."

"Oh, it is?" His voice was silken; I should have been warned.

"You got any dope?"

"What about Mrs. Carroll's baby that was snatched in Bermuda?"

I was so surprised I couldn't find words for an instant. Then I said, as casually

as I could: "Oh, you know about that, do you?"

"For the love of heaven," exploded the Irishman, "do you think the New York police are asleep? Of course we know about it. Di-rect from Bermuda. No thanks to her—nor to you."

"I was—coming to that part." Which was true—though I had intended to come to it after the *Empress* docked and I'd had a moment or two to survey the situation myself before the Clipper left.

"You were, were you? Many thanks. We'll have someone to greet you in Bermuda, my boy."

"Bob, you needn't get—"

Somewhere something clicked faintly. The line was dead. I waited a moment, then hung up and stepped out of the booth.

"O.K.?" said the operator, smiling.

"O.K.," I said, which was highly inaccurate, but there was no point in weeping on his shoulder. As a matter of fact, I didn't feel too badly about Carney's wrath. Part of it, I was sure, was for the benefit of Headquarters; also I knew I could count on a certain amount of latitude with him and his colleagues, ever since a certain job of work I had done, quite unofficially, for Uncle Sam a little while before. It had got me, as I have told elsewhere, a Congressional Medal; it had also got me a good In with New York's Finest. If it hadn't been for that fact, I'd never have left the bodies in Brenda's apartment and ducked out the way I had—never would have dared to. . . . How the hell, I wondered, did he learn of a kidnaped baby in Bermuda? *And* that it was Brenda Carroll's?

I hadn't been away more than ten minutes, all told. Lisa was still sitting where I had left her, and there was no sign of Brenda Carroll. The place had filled up, though: all the tables were occupied. It was too late in the summer for the school-teacher trade, but the *Empress* carried a fine contingent of tired executives (very shopworn from having had no vacations), and tired-executives' secretaries (either very refined or very hoydenish). Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself.

I sat down opposite Lisa and pointed at our glasses for benefit of the hovering steward and said: "Carney is not amused."

"What did he say?"

I told her. "I can see, now I think, how the Bermuda authorities might have notified New York to watch out for a missing child named Jock MacRae; but how did they or New York know it was Jock—Jock—"

"Why don't you ask her about it? Here she comes."

I snapped up my head suddenly and Lisa gave a musical tinkle of what was supposed to be laughter.

"Sorry," she said mockingly. "I just wanted to see your reaction."

"Dear, dear friend."

"I think I will have another drink. In fact, I think I will get tight. Very boring, these Bermuda thrashes."

"No wife of mine," I said warmly, "will ever get tight on a Bermuda boat—alone. Let us retire with dignity while we still have some to our cabin and order a bottle of this delicious and nourishing drink. It is cheaper that way."

I expected some objection merely because Lisa was in an objecting mood, but she said only: "What! And leave lit-tel Brenda to languish here alone?"

"In case you are in no condition to walk," I said tenderly, "I will order Postlethwaite to serve lunch in the cabin, and feed you myself. There! Not many husbands would do that for a disgusting drunken wench they happened to have the bad luck to be married to."

This interchange appearing to leave the score about even, we got up and went away.

AFTER Postlethwaite had brought the fifth of Ballantine and some fresh glasses, I poured two drinks and announced they were libations to connubial peace, and sat down and took out a pencil and an envelope. The envelope had been left in my breast pocket by whoever had swiped the radiogram; it was a two-months-old-bill from the Club and somewhat tattered, but all I wanted was its blank back. I said: "Steele is now about to function with a brilliancy extraordinary even for him."

"Steele could hang this jacket up for me first, if he would," said Lisa, shrugging slim shoulders out of it and tossing it to me. I felt very encouraged: she never asked favors unless she was in a good

mood. "I am beginning to function a little more amiably myself," she added. "I have also had an idea. I bet you that Brenda telephoned Bermuda last night, without saying anything to you about it. To her dear old Scotch nurse, I mean. After she got the news about Jock."

"Why wouldn't she have said so, then—?" I began, and interrupted myself. "Wait. That can be one of the questions."

"What questions?"

"I am now about to make out a list of all the unanswered questions in this cock-eyed affair. All I can think of, I mean. You sit there and down your drinks like a big girl and keep quiet till I get through. Unless you would rather collaborate with me. That would be preferable, of course, from my point of view, but I do not like to impose."

"Not at all."

"Fine. I will just set these down as they come to me."

I scribbled for a minute, then read out: "One: What about the *right-hand* door off Brenda's foyer?"

"Two: Why did the blonde girl who was dead on the bed look surprised?"

"Three: Who smoked the Viceroy's?"

"Four: Who swiped the jewels?"

"There are four to begin with," I said.

Lisa said: "What's this right-hand door business?"

"There were two doors off the entrance hall. I took the left into the living-room. I never looked through the right-hand door—didn't touch it."

"This is very interesting. Go on with the list."

"It's going to be quite a list, I can see." I ripped the envelope open so that I could continue on the inside. "I'm not going to bother with the obvious inquiries as to whether it's Serge or whether it isn't—this list is for reference purposes, things we might overlook. Let's see."

I WROTE some more. I read aloud: "Five: Why clout me down and attack Stanley—and why differently? The two attacks are obviously connected," I interrupted myself, "though they're hours apart. The one on me occurs as soon as I leave Brenda's cabin with my radiogram. If we're right in assuming that a very close watch was being kept on that cabin

by the party or parties whom we will call the Heels, said Heels *could* have been lurking about and overheard the messenger delivering the wireless, *or* they could have been just outside this door, my love, and heard you calling through it to the messenger. Good thing it was locked and on the chain. Anyway, the Heels want to know what messages Steele has been getting, and, b'God, they find out. Disarming him, incidentally, in the process. But not—mark this—otherwise seriously injuring him. Now Stanley is subsequently attacked with equally prompt action, as soon as he's phoned me. His door was open, he says; on the chain. Someone *must* have been hovering outside it—and instantly decided to attack him before I could get there. But the attack on Stanley differs from the attack on me in one important particular. I trust you spot it."

Lisa said without hesitation: "Of course. They let you off easily—I don't mean to sound heartless. But they tried to kill Stanley."

"Exactly," I said, and went on reading aloud.

"Six: Why did Serge Fabry plan to jump overboard?"

"Seven: What was Serge Fabry doing, or what had he been doing, when Phillips met him at half past five in the morning?"

"Eight: Is Brenda Carroll still hiding something?"

"Nine: Who is Jock's pappy?"

"There are another five," I added, "and I will now pour myself a slight refresher. One for you, too?"

"Thanks. . . . Why do you say 'Is Brenda still hiding something?'"

"Your own suggestion, for one thing. Did she phone or wireless Nurse Margaret and not tell me so? More important, perhaps, is—*why did she wait a whole month, getting threatening call after threatening call, before she reported the matter to her lawyer?* I can understand her paying off Serge in the first place, when they were divorced. Lads like that—or girls like that—can make themselves so obnoxious that the money-partner is only too glad to make a big cash settlement in return for a quiet divorce. She also wanted him to keep his mouth shut about the baby, in return for which she'd keep hers shut about his bigamy. But I can't understand her

delay in getting in touch with Graham this last time—assuming her story's accurate, I mean. It looks to me as though she still hasn't spilled all she knows. As though Serge has some sort of hold over her which she hasn't told about. Some hold which made her keep quiet about the new demands until the last moment—at which point she got absolutely terrified and called Graham in, with most unfortunate results for Mr. Graham."

"I've got two questions to add, if you like," Lisa said.

"Wonderful. Shoot."

"One is: you said Mrs. Riordan appeared on the scene a moment after the wireless was delivered—the one from Joe White, I mean. Then she and Brenda went into the bedroom and the door was shut. Then Brenda came out, and after a while you left. Maybe it sounds silly, but—could the Riordan woman be some sort of glorified confidence-woman? She says they're old friends of Brenda's. Are they really? What I'm getting at is, could she have been listening at the door and heard the radiogram delivered, and come out and seen you stuff it into your pocket, and when she was alone in the bedroom again, telephoned her colleague Fabry to lie in wait for you and relieve you of it? If you think it's even possible that something like that happened, couldn't you check on what phone calls were made from where last night—"

I LEANED forward—she was sitting on her berth and I on mine—and patted her knee enthusiastically.

"You are a *very* bright child," I said. And meant it. "I grant you that to the naked eye Mrs. Riordan would seem 100% O.K.—the professionally girlish overblown dowager without a brain in her head. But you can never be sure. I myself have asked that very question, because I have tried to think of every contingency. The trouble is, I haven't even tried to check on phone calls because I know how they're handled on a ship like this. The operator keeps track of all ship-to-shore calls, of course, and of all messages involving any officer. But they do not keep track of passenger-to-passenger calls because they would go nuts if they did. One operator trying to enter eight different

drunken good-night messages from eight different Lotharios to eight different cuties would be something to see. . . . Also it's more tactful not to keep any record of who calls whom in the middle of the night. So they just plug in as fast as they can handle 'em and let it go at that. Which leaves us just where we started with Madame Riordan."

"The operator might happen to remember, though," Lisa said slowly, "whether a call was made from Suite C last night after midnight—and to whom it went."

Which of course was not only true but so obvious that I had no answer except "Darling, I'm a fool."

"Not at all. You've been so harassed with one thing and another—"

"It isn't that. I knew that no record is kept, I dismissed the matter and let it go at that. Let's write it down."

I added to my list: "Ten: Were there any calls out (or in) from or to Suite C last night" I added verbally: "That'll give us the answer on whether she called Bermuda, by the way."

"Yes. My other question," Lisa said, "is—"

Someone knocked on the door.

I got up and put on the chain and opened it. The apple-checked boy was there again. "Another shore-to-ship call, sir," he said, grinning.

"Save the other question," I said to Lisa. "And lock this door tight until I come back. This is getting really good."

Following the boy, I made a mental note of the fact that I had a couple of questions of my own to add.

"GOT a little more news for you," said Joe White's voice from New York.

"Good boy."

"Seems the lady had a child. No one knew it, but she did. Kept it in Bermuda. It's been snatched."

"I know it. How did New York find out?"

"Dunno. Good thing I've got contacts at Centre Street: *you* wouldn't tell a guy anything." He sounded aggrieved.

"Anything else?"

"Screaming headlines, of course. You know the kind of thing. Not that anyone thinks Brenda Carroll did it."

I said: "Joe. Don't they know of *any* other callers at la Carroll's apartment—besides Graham and Madeline Marsh and me, that is?"

"No other callers on record: the killer's invisible, I guess. I'd have phoned you last night instead of wirelessly, only I'd loaned fifty bucks to Ray Hall earlier in the evening. Didn't have enough cash on me to make it."

"I'll pay you back, sweetheart. Listen—we don't dock till tomorrow morning. Call me again if anything startling happens, will you? I took your advice and talked with Carney, by the way. He knows where I am and he knows where the missing heiress is. Here's something: get a line on her first husband, will you? Where he is, what he's up to?"

"Lancaster? Sure. He's O.K., though—much more apt to be the heel she married later. You know about him?"

"I know quite a bit," I said grimly. "He was aboard here, as I told Carney. A plane took him off at sunrise this morning. I don't know why."

"Well, I'll be—"

"Me too. I'll keep you posted on anything new this end."

"O.K. 'Bye."

The operator said: "You're pretty popular this trip, Mr. Steele."

"Very. Wish I weren't. Here's for your trouble."

I put a ten-dollar bill down before him, at which he reddened and said, "No, thanks." But he made no move to push it back.

I turned on my heel and swung back as if on afterthought and said, lowering my voice, "This is confidential. *Very*. I can tell when to trust a man."

HE reddened some more. With pleasure, this time. He was a gangling youngster of twenty-four and I learned later that this was his first run on the *Empress*.

"Maybe you can help me," I continued. "You took that message for Mrs. Sefton last night? From Bermuda?"

He nodded.

I said: "Then you've got some idea of how upset she was. The person referred to was a baby, the child of a friend of hers."

He nodded again, eyes bright and watchful.

I said: "There's some very dirty work going on and she's asked me to find out what it is and who's behind it—you know who she really is, I suppose?"

A third nod.

"Can you tell me this?" I asked, leaning closer. "Were there any phone calls or wireless messages from her to Bermuda after she got that radiogram?"

"From her, you mean?"

"From anyone. From anyone on this ship."

"I—not while I was on. But I went off duty at eight-thirty last night. I can look through the files, though, Mr. Steele. Or you can ask Pete—he's my relief."

"Will you do that? I'll drop back. Oh, and another thing. Do you handle the phone calls made from cabin to cabin?"

He shook his head. "That's next door. We just take wireless and ship-to-shore calls."

"Who was on duty there last night—after midnight?"

"Fellow named Bruce Rogers. He'll be coming on any time now. But they don't keep records of those calls, you know."

"I know they don't. But he might remember a call I have in mind—after midnight. I'll try him when I come back to see you. Thanks a lot."

He was a tactful youth. He said nothing about my wireless to Joe White, or about White's reply, or about my second wireless, the one to Carney, though he had probably heard from his colleague Pete about all three of them. And, for that matter probably knew perfectly well the contents of the carbons in Pete's files of the previous night. He was just leaning over backward in an effort to assure me, indirectly, that wireless operators didn't meddle with—or remember—messages. . . .

It was time for lunch, but I didn't feel hungry. Only thirsty. I wondered whether Lisa had left any of the Scotch, and headed rapidly for our cabin. The door was shut and, I hoped, locked.

I rattled the knob loudly and said: "It's Jim. Can I come in?"

Lisa turned the key and opened the door and I saw Brenda Carroll sitting on my berth.

SHE was wearing the same old black-and-white silk. She didn't look happy. I came on in, saying "Hello" casually, and sat down beside Lisa on Lisa's berth. The knees of the three of us were almost touching, because the berths were in a kind of alcove, and very close together. I was glad—not because of Brenda Carroll's knee caps but because I could watch every flicker of changing expression in her eyes. That, by the way, is one thing that even the most practiced liars can't always control: the tiny involuntary movement of the eyelids when they're evading, or caught out, or afraid they're going to be caught out. And, even more of a giveaway, the sudden dilation of the pupil itself.

I said "Drink?" and Brenda Carroll shook her head, and in the same breath I said: "Where's your yacht?"

She blinked. "My yacht? Why—Miami, I suppose. As usual."

"In commission?"

"Yes, of course. I'd planned to fly from Bermuda to see some friends of mine at Nassau, then go on to Miami and pick up the *Brenda*. . . . Why?"

"Oh, just an idea I had. . . . Here's another question: Why did you admittedly wait week after week with those threatening messages from Serge coming in on the phone, before you breathed a word to your own lawyer about them? You told me yesterday that Graham knew the whole story—everything. I'm just wondering if he did—until the end. I'm just wondering whether Fabry didn't have some hold over you that you haven't come out with yet, something you didn't tell even Graham until the day before he died."

Her eyes were horrified now. She paused for at least thirty seconds before she answered. Her voice was no longer calm.

"I *did* stall on calling in Mr. Graham until the last minute—because I'd never told him the whole story about Serge's marriage . . . and my baby. If I had, Graham might still be alive today. I didn't want to have to tell him. He is—he was the most straitlaced old soul you'd ever meet: I had given him a bad enough time as it was. Yet I knew he'd never understand why I wanted a half-million or more

in cash—all in one chunk and all of a sudden—unless I *did explain*. So in the end, the day before he died, I told him everything. That was when he advised me to get quietly out of town and let him handle it."

"You mean you couldn't dispose of your own money without Graham's consent?"

"Oh, legally—yes. But he'd been a great friend of father's, he'd known me since I wore pinafores, he could be very difficult when he wanted to be. To get that money I'd have *had* to tell him the truth, and I knew it. So I finally did."

"It's a damned good thing for you," I said, "that you were, legally, a free agent when it came to disposing of your surplus cash."

"I don't understand—"

"Because if Graham *had* had legal control instead of just advisory control, some rising young prosecuting attorney would be sharpening up his pencil right now to hang those two murders right around your neck. Don't you see? You'd have had a dandy motive."

This was a new thought to her. She didn't like it. "But I'm telling you—" she burst out.

"I heard you, too," I said soothingly. "I just mention that in passing. But now see here. We've been over this and over it. We have *got* to find an answer to two questions. At least a possible answer, an answer that conceivably makes sense. *Why should Serge Fabry kill your lawyer—or have him killed? And why did Serge Fabry deliberately plan to be taken off this ship by plane? Wait*"—I held up my hand as she started to interrupt—"let me finish. Either we can figure an answer to one or both of those, it seems to me, or we are on a wrong tack. But I think we can figure an answer—if we put all the facts on the table. So I say again, won't you please, for your own sake, come absolutely clean with me?"

"But I have—"

"Like hell. New York," I added, anxious to bear down at this point, "had me on the telephone this morning. They know you're aboard this ship; they also know that the baby who's disappeared in Bermuda is your baby. *Did* you phone Bermuda last night—and hold out that on me, too?"

FOR the first time since I'd known her, a look of self-conscious embarrassment appeared.

"Yes," she said, "I did. After you left. I got more and more upset—I didn't 'hold out' on you long, though. That's what I came down to tell you—that's why I'm here. Your wife is lovely, by the way."

Her quick smile at Lisa was dazzling and sincere.

"Nasty" temper," I said, viewing my helpmeet critically as she sat beside me. "Otherwise a very decorative piece, I grant."

"Skipping the persiflage," Lisa said, "let's really put our minds to this. I can think of a reason why Mr. Fabry might have killed those two people. Maybe it isn't the real reason, but it's a possibility, I should think."

"Let's have it, my dove," I said.

She turned to Brenda Carroll. "That jewelry of yours—roughly how much would you say it was worth?"

"I don't know how much it was worth, but I know how much it was insured for."

"Pretty good guide," I said. "How much?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Good God, girl—"

"But I told you it was valuable. The biggest single item was an old-fashioned necklace—my mother's. Diamonds."

Lisa said: "I don't mean to sound impertinent, Mrs. Carroll, but why on earth were you carting things worth that much off to Bermuda with you? I take it you must have just got them out of your safe-deposit, from the way you told Jim the box was sealed?"

"Yes. Just that morning," Brenda Carroll said, answering the last question first. She drew a long breath. "I got them," she said, "because I wasn't sure that Mr. Graham *would* agree to pay Serge any money. And I thought—well, if worst came to worst I could always shut him up—Serge, I mean—with that jewelry. And as I told you, I was planning to be away from New York for some time, and I thought: If I learn from Mr. Graham that the interview went too badly, I'll have this way to keep Serge quiet, and nobody the wiser."

"I imagined it must be something like that," Lisa said. "An ace up your sleeve, for self-protection—in case Mr. Graham

got stubborn and Serge got really nasty."

"Exactly," Brenda Carroll said.

"My point is," Lisa went on, "possibly Mr. Graham *did* get stubborn and Serge realized he wasn't going to be paid—regardless of what he did or said—and saw that package *and recognized it*. . . . Perhaps he's in a spot where he *had* to have money—and quickly. . . . *Could* he have recognized it and known how valuable it was? Because if so, a quarter of a million dollars is quite a lot of change, you know, and he might have suddenly decided it was worth the risk of a double murder."

MY brilliant bride, I thought. My very brilliant bride. But I said nothing except with my eyes.

Brenda Carroll said in a hushed, breathless voice: "But of course. Of course. He saw that package twice while we were married—I had it out twice, maybe three times. He'd know it at once." She turned to me, her eyes shining: "There!" she said. "There's a motive for you!"

I wanted to say that it was a pretty screwy motive, if he'd already planned to have young Jock kidnaped in case pressure were necessary and also that it didn't explain how Fabry had got in and out unnoted; but I was too proud of Lisa's reasoning, and too pleased with the facts she'd elicited, to slosh any cold water around. At that, it *could* have been true. It did answer, and answer logically, the first of the two questions I'd just posed. And, letting my mind play with the possibility for a moment, I had a sudden clear and rather terrible vision of how an utterly amoral and anti-social brain could calmly and cold-bloodedly decide that it would be better to take the cash in hand and let the credit go—even at the cost of two innocent lives. . . .

"And the plane?" I said.

"That's conceivable, too," said Lisa. "Was it your nurse you talked to—when you finally got Bermuda last night?"

There was the least possible emphasis on the word "finally" which I thought might be a delicately malicious allusion to the hour at which I'd left; but her face was a bland mask of innocent inquiry.

"Yes," said Brenda Carroll.

"What time did she say the baby disappeared?"

"She was too upset to tell me much, but it happened several hours before she sent the wireless. She evidently did a lot of frantic searching on her own; then she notified the authorities that Jock MacRae was missing; then she finally wirelessed me. In spite of what you said"—turning to me—"about our being all out of line with the Law, I had to call her back and tell her to tell the local constabulary the truth about Jock being my child. I felt they might exert themselves a bit more if they knew that. . . ."

"All right," said Lisa confidently, "that would tie in very well. Suppose your friend Fabry has made arrangements with his colleague or colleagues in Bermuda to snatch the baby at a certain time—that time being, say, when Jock's still taking his afternoon nap. Unless, of course, they hear from him to the contrary—in other words, unless you kick through with the money. But now suppose that Fabry arrives and finds not you, but Mr. Graham and his secretary, and that the interview is prolonged later than Fabry has expected it to last. In addition, when the interview is ended, Fabry has two dead bodies on his hands. My point is that by the time Fabry gets safely away, the time-limit has expired and Jock has already been stolen. You see?"

"NOW what is Fabry going to do? Perhaps he's been planning to go to Bermuda, perhaps he hasn't. Anyway, he evidently decides to go now. The purser would know, I suppose, whether he was one of those last-minute passengers . . . like us. But the trip has now become exceedingly dangerous for him, even under an assumed name: perhaps he was seen leaving your apartment, Mrs. Carroll—or fears he may have been seen. Any one of a number of things may go wrong while he's on the ship here. Very far-sightedly, he arranges to have a plane pick up the *Empress* at sunrise in case of need. When Mr. Steele and Doctor Phillips come accusing him jointly—at precisely that hour—he considers that the need has arisen. He thanks his lucky stars that he provided the plane—and jumps out the porthole. . . . How's that?"

She stopped, flushed and excited. Brenda Carroll clapped her hands together, then

leaned forward and kissed Lisa's cheek impulsively.

"But you're wonderful!" she cried. "You're wonderful!"

"What do you say, Maestro?" asked my wife.

I know that I heard her voice then, because I remember hearing it; but the question she asked didn't register at all. I was much too busy thinking. Four words: you wouldn't suppose they could make such a difference. Just four words which she had used as she outlined her theory—four words which had told me nothing I didn't already know—yet on Lisa's lips they had suddenly become as portentous and as sinister as if I had seen them traced in blood. For as she spoke them, they somehow climaxed and coalesced all the vague half-formless and apparently unrelated conclusions among which I had been groping—and fused them into an answer so wild, so hair-raising and so horrible that I was left, literally, speechless. Because it was an answer which I felt, deep in my bones, must be true.

Something jogged my arm and it was Lisa's elbow. "What do *you* say?" she repeated.

"Right on the nose," I said mechanically. "Right on the nose. Whatever became of that bottle of Ballantine? I could use a modicum right now."

"You'd better have some lunch first," said Lisa, having evidently forgotten her earlier-expressed intention in the thrill of creative achievement. "I'm a little hungry myself—*What's that?*"

Crash! went something in the bathroom, and a hissing rush of rain drove hard against the porthole as our stateroom tilted slowly far to one side. I put my head through the half-open door and saw a water glass which I'd left standing on the washstand now in splinters on the marble floor. The heavy roll to starboard had slid the glass off. Through the streaming pane I could see an angry black sky. We had run into a sudden squall.

ALL afternoon the *Empress* plowed through a heavy, oily quartering sea pockmarked with fiercely driven rain. Whether it was the lobster I had at lunch or the clout I'd had the night before, my head began to hum and throb nastily. I

thought fresh air would be the best thing, and got a rug and a chair and draped myself in the shelter of one of the vast white ventilators on the boat deck. I sat slumped on my shoulder blades, chain-smoking cigarettes and thinking, while moisture gathered on my hat brim and glossed the heavy rug with a pearly film.

There were a number of points, of course, on which I wasn't clear, but I was surer than ever of my main thesis. What bothered me most was what might be called a purely mechanical problem: how the killer had got into (and out of) Brenda Carroll's apartment without being noted. All those big granite catacombs along Park Avenue, housing all kinds of people from exhausted and irascible millionaires whose doctors prescribe privacy to haughty and unapproachable mink coats whose *metier* demands it, are guarded by myrmidons specially trained to keep the world away. Brenda's house, for example, extending as it did from Park to Lexington, had two outer guards: one at each Avenue entrance. If there was anything in the least suspicious or hesitant or unduly truculent in your appearance, you were stopped right there, and courteously questioned before you went any farther. If you ever did. Then, at the foot of the elevator shaft in each "house" entrance off the central court, another glittering guardian was on duty constantly; and in case the demands of Nature should occasionally prove too much for even his impassivity, the elevator boy himself was instructed how to use the house phone to the designated apartment before running the waiting guest up.

This system did, of course, break down occasionally. I'd broken it down myself when I'd told the redhaired young Irishman who was running the elevator when I went up that I knew Mrs. Carroll wasn't home, but wanted 8C none the less. His colleague had been off at that moment, evidently, and he'd felt a little uncertain as to how to proceed; also I'd waved the key, the indubitable key, under his nose.

He'd *seen* me, though; he'd know me again; he'd remember that such a person had called. *Why hadn't the killer been thus seen and noted—and how did he happen to have a key?* Neither Carney nor Joe White had mentioned any other figure arriving or departing from 8C.

A FAST, springy footstep went along the deck behind me; I turned my head and it was Wardman.

"Find anything?" I asked.

He'd been following a somewhat mysteriously phrased suggestion of mine: a second search of Stateroom 138. If it had been Serge Fabry who had drawn the knife across two pulsing, living throats and vanished with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of jewels, I simply couldn't visualize his fleeing the country and leaving the jewels behind. So, of course, he must have taken them aboard with him. Yet he certainly—*most* certainly—hadn't taken them off with him when he dived out the porthole. He'd taken nothing except one leg of a pair of yellow pajamas. Therefore, I thought the cabin he'd occupied ought to receive more careful attention than the usual thorough but cursory check-up of personal belongings, and I'd told Wardman so without telling him why.

"Not a thing," he answered now, cheerfully. "Not a blasted thing. Looked under carpets, probed pillows—everything. No go."

"Oh, well," I said, sounding indifferent, "it was just a thought. . . . Any trace of the plane reported yet?" Captain Rindge had broadcast news of the Lockheed's antics to all and sundry, asking to be notified if it were sighted. It seemed to me a bit unnecessary, since the little amphibian would certainly fly so high as to be unrecognizable.

Wardman said: "Nothing there, either."

I said: "Look here, Wardman," and stood up. The ventilator cut us off from the sweep of the deck: we were quite alone. "You know what Fabry's suspected of having done?"

"No. Like to know. Confidential, of course."

"He's believed to have stolen a young fortune in jewels from Mrs. Carroll—killing two people in the process."

A LONG almost soundless whistle was Wardman's only comment.

I said: "I can't believe he didn't bring that stuff aboard with him. I know he didn't take it away when he—er—left. You say there's nothing in his cabin. What's the answer? Easy: hes' got at least

one confederate aboard, and he left the stuff with him. Or her. It may be a her."

Wardman's lean face wrinkled appreciatively; his white teeth bit into his pipe stem as he reflected.

"Sounds correct to me," he said. "Any ideas as to who—?"

"Yes," I said, "I have. And you'd be surprised if I told you who. The trouble is, any search of the spots I have in mind would have to be made unofficially."

"Unofficially? Why?"

"Secretly, I should have said. Very secretly. Which of course is something neither you nor any of the ship's officers can get mixed up in. But I'm pretty good at that sort of thing—I mean, I know where to look and how to do it quickly. I think I'll have a go at it."

He looked a little apprehensive. "You'll catch merry hell from the Old Man if you're caught."

"I won't be caught. It's—why, good Lord, it's after four now. Not long to wait. I think the time would be during the dinner hour. I'm telling you about it because—"

"I can't help you if you're caught," he said, grinning pleasantly. "I shall have to say you never mentioned such a thing to me."

"Of course. I never did. But suppose this stateroom door is locked. Isn't there a nail somewhere—you'd know where, I don't—with a pass key or master key hanging from it which would open that door? It would be a terrible thing, of course, if some slob happened by and borrowed that key for a bit—"

The idea amused him; his left eyelid quivered in a fractional droop.

"Terrible," he agreed. "So there's going to be no such key hanging from any such nail . . . unless J. Wardman knows what door it's supposed to open. Did you know I'm the original Edgar Wallace fan?"

"All right," I said, "then the whole thing's off. It's one thing for me to take upon myself a highly illegal bit of snooping: I'm the only one that suffers, and this conversation never happened. It's quite another thing for me to go throwing suspicion on possibly quite innocent people to the First Officer of the *Empress*. You can see that. If I start to mention names,

the thing becomes official and you know it."

I hoped this wholly specious argument would satisfy him. It didn't, entirely: I could tell from his face. But he said: "I eat at seven. I never bother to lock my door. Bad habit. Anyone could go right in and pull the nails right out of my wood-work and I wouldn't know who it was—"

I burst out laughing. He grinned too, and turned away.

AT five o'clock, Lisa had a cocktail with me in the main lounge. It being so raw outside, practically the whole ship's company was gathered there, and people were sitting, so to speak, in each other's laps.

Lisa said: "See anyone who looks conspiratorial?"

A small mouse-colored man at the next table blushed an anguished red.

I glanced at the henna-haired Mama with him and kicked my good wife in the ankle, saying, "Conscience doth make cowards . . .,"

She said: "Yes. Let's get out of here," so we did.

At the door to the writing-room Lisa stopped. "This is a good time for me to write a letter—two letters," she decided. "I haven't written a letter since the Fourth of July."

"Who you going to practice on?"

"I think I'll send just a line to Tony Pitt," she said.

"Splendid. Splendid. Couldn't do better."

"Where will you be around dinner-time?"

"I'll explain that later. See you in the cabin in about forty-five minutes? Right now I'm going to interview the wireless man, the one who was on last night."

THE boat deck was even wetter and colder than when I'd left it. Pete Webster in the radio shack was as lanky and as youthful as his relief-colleague, but temperamentally he was less obliging. In fact, at first he was bluntly negative.

"Files are files," he said, his thin jaw thrust out at me. "Strictly against regulations, Mr. Steele, to give out any information at all on them. Eddie knows that as well as I do."

"Good work," I said heartily, clapping

him lightly on the shoulder. "That's right."

He looked bewildered.

"Right for the general public, I mean," I said. "I'm a little different."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes." I murmured a sentence in which the name "Washington" was taken, as it were, in vain; but it was not in vain where Mr. Webster was concerned: he gaped. I turned back my left lapel. A tiny pale-blue white-starred rosette was pinned underneath, of which I was (and am) very proud. "Know what that is?" I asked. Not many people know what it means, but this lad knew. His eyes popped.

"Sure," he said, in quite a different voice. "I know. I had three months at Pensacola—"

"What happened?"

"Eyes. Couldn't make the grade. . . . Is that recent, sir?"

"Year or so ago. Not that I go round flashing it, you understand. I only wanted you to know that my interest isn't just personal."

It was a little disingenuous: the Congressional Medal had nothing in the world to do with Brenda Carroll's jam. But it worked.

"Just what can I tell you, Mr. Steele?" the boy said.

"Messages to Bermuda last night, after you came on duty. Any sent—phone or wireless?"

He turned back the thick canvas cover of the file-book, leafed over the pages of carbon flimsy. "Especially any to or from Major Carteret, Mrs. Emily Riordan or Mrs. Sefton," I added. "Or this fellow that jumped overboard—138, he was. But I'd like to know about any others."

"Mrs. Sefton talked with Bermuda, I can tell you that," he said promptly. "Early this morning. Something about a baby. She wanted a Margaret MacRae, and what a time I had getting her"

"Yes. She told me about that. Anything else?"

"Don't think so." He turned the last page, closed the book. "No sir, not a thing. Nothing today, either."

"Well, that's that. Thanks a lot. I want to send a radiogram myself, now that I'm here."

"Yes, sir."

"And—" I laid a finger across my lips;

he nodded. I took a form and wrote:

HENRY HALL POLICE HQ MIAMI LET ME
KNOW STATUS AND WHEREABOUTS OF
YACHT BRENDA OWNER B CARROLL. VERY
RUSH AND HUSH HUSH. THANKS

STEELE

I have a wide and catholic acquaintance-ship. Lieutenant Hall and I were old friends. Pete said he'd get the message right off and I thanked and paid him and went on to see Mr. Bruce Rogers, next door.

THIS was a horse of a very different shade, indeed. Forty-five, with iron-grey hair brushed straight back from a square, tanned face, he looked a little like a Joseph Conrad villain: competent, intelligent and quite conscienceless. He didn't even glance at me till he had made three connections; then he swiveled part way round in his chair and pushed his head-set back from one ear and said brusquely "Yes?" I decided a different approach was indicated here.

I said: "This may be damned irregular—my name's Steele, by the way," and put out a hand. He took it, let it go. His eyes were narrow and hard.

I said: "I want some information and I'm prepared to show I appreciate it," and I put a new green twenty-dollar bill down casually beside him and sat down.

He looked at the bill and flipped it back toward me.

"Such as what?" he said.

"Nothing very much," I said, flicking the bill with my finger nail, so that it skidded back against the switchboard, where it remained. "Captain Rindge will authorize me, if you insist. I'm a confidential agent for Brenda Carroll. She's had a little trouble lately; maybe you know." He didn't move a muscle. "She's in Suite C traveling as Mrs. Sefton. A Mrs. Emily Riordan shares it with her; Mrs. Riordan's brother is Major Carteret, two doors away."

"Very interesting," said Bruce Rogers dryly.

"Mrs. Carroll was out of her suite a good deal last night," I lied. "I want to know whether you happen to remember if any calls went in or out of Suite C last

night—and if so, to whom they went."

He considered me carefully, decided I was O.K.

"She called Bermuda," he said, "a little after midnight. But you mean on the ship, I suppose?"

MY heart jumped like a fresh-caught trout inside me but I tried to keep my face immobile.

"Later than that, wasn't it when she called?" I said, reaching for a cigarette and sounding not much interested.

"No. . . . Let's see." He riffled the official record book covering ship-to-shore calls that went through his board. "Twelve-forty."

Why had she lied to me, I wondered? In our cabin at lunchtime she had said "after you left." Well, it *was* after I'd left with Lisa, but the whole implication was clearly that it was when I'd left for the night. I could think of only one reason why she had lied, and it was a reason that added one more bolt in the scaffolding I was erecting. . . .

I said: "You're right. Doesn't matter, anyway. Do you recall about the inter-ship calls—if any?"

"Let me see. They come in so fast here, between midnight and two or three in the morning, it's hard to remember anything. You know, old pals have got to say good night after the bar's closed."

"I can imagine."

His face brightened. "Mrs. Riordan," he said. "Mrs. Riordan—she's sailed with us a lot, I know her voice—called the Major. Around—let's see—around two, I guess. Maybe a little before. I remember because she said: 'Hello, Mr. Rogers. See if my brother's up, will you?'"

I said brazenly: "You wouldn't know what they said?"

He stared woodenly back. "I would not."

"And that's the only one, eh?"

"So far as I can tell you, my friend, that's the only one."

I got up. "Thanks, anyway."

He pushed the bill toward me again.

"No charge," he said, showing very white teeth in a pleasant smile.

I said: "Oh, hell. I made you enough trouble the last time I was on this ship—you've been here quite a while, haven't

you?" He nodded. "Though this is the first time I've actually met you. Have a bottle of Scotch on me and forget it."

I went out before he could answer.

Disappointment dogged me all the way to our cabin. The timing of Emily Rior-dan's call would fit in with Lisa's thesis, all right. It would have been, I felt sure, just about the time the wireless had been delivered to me in Brenda's parlor. But it seemed most illogical that she would go publicizing a phone call to her brother, if any nefarious purpose had been involved. Besides, I couldn't visualize the Major, however ruthless, stooping in public corridors to twitch ropes. If she'd called someone I'd never heard of, I should have felt much better.

THE corridors of the *Empress* were unusually wide and unusually well-lit. I felt as conspicuous as a fly in the middle of a tablecloth when, at seven-thirty, I proceeded along them to the cabin of J. Wardman, First Officer, and pushed open the door.

Roomier and more elaborate than Stanley Phillips' barren little cubicle, it even had an easy chair drawn up under a hanging bookshelf, and I couldn't help noting that its owner hadn't exaggerated one, at least, of his extra-curricular activities: the shelves were crammed with the more lurid type of mystery story. The bookshelf hung from a nail. Something else hung from the nail—or rather on the nail. A large and brightly glittering key.

"Good man," I thought, and I had it off the nail and in my pocket and myself out of the door in something under three seconds. My anxiety was not for myself but for Wardman: in case anything went wrong in the next hour or so, I didn't want any wandering steward connecting me with his cabin and possibly involving him in my illegal enterprise. But the corridor remained empty.

I turned out the first available door and went along the spray-swept deck as far as the familiar stained-glass windows of the bar. Inside, it was quite riotous, and both barmen were perspiring in their efforts to mingle up Martinis, swizzles, sidecars, stingers, highballs, Manhattans, and other doubtful apéritifs for the more than doubtful benefit of the shop-worn executives

and their girl-friends. I finally managed to get Harry's eye and he slid me the Ballantine and I took my drink to a distant corner and sat down.

I saw Stanley Phillips sipping a sherry with a couple of his fellow countrymen in dinner jackets; he waved at me, and presently, as all three stood up, came past my table.

"Any news?" he said, standing serious and solid before me.

The two other men were right behind him.

I said: "Nothing startling. See you after dinner? Lounge. Your friend in C told Lisa this noon she was slowly stifling in her gilded coop, and Lisa asked the three of them to dine with us down below."

"Ah, yes. I'll look you up. Just going to brighten up the inner man myself."

I watched his square, massive back vanish round a corner and wondered, not for the first time that day, about the part he had played in Brenda Carroll's life. He didn't look like a person who could be easily aroused, but by the same token, he was certainly not one who would be lightly dismissed.

I FINISHED my drink and debated whether to have another and decided against it. Lisa would be meeting Brenda and her companions in the lounge just about now, and explaining that they wouldn't wait for me. It was quite dark outside as I left the bar and went forward along the deck with my right hand in my trousers pocket clenched firmly around the slim metal key.

When I turned inside again, I was so preoccupied with trying to keep an eye before and behind me that I was three paces past my destination before I knew it, and had to retrace my steps.

The key was quite wet when I bent to fit it in, and I knew the palms of my hands were sweating.

My flashlight, bought at the ship's notion store after lunch, was of the Woolworth variety but it was enough. I didn't want to switch on the lights inside unless they were on, because lights have a way of leaking under doors and through keyholes when sharp eyes are passing. The room into which I stepped was, fortunately, al-

most pitch-black, and I clicked the door shut softly and pressed the button on the little red tube in my left hand. Then I laid the tiny flash down on the carpet, pointing away from the door, and got to work.

There are various systems of hiding things. And I mean "hiding," not merely "locking-away." One is the "Poe-Purloined-Letter System": the article, possibly thinly disguised, is right in plain sight, so obvious or so obviously a part of something quite different, that you never give it a thought. (Valuable papers stuck amongst the carelessly shuffled sheaves of sheet music on a piano rack, for instance.) Another is the "Secret-Drawer System," which has a lot of ramifications—from a last-will-and-testament rolled in a hollow bedpost to a pearl necklace hung on a thread down the bathroom drain-pipe. Another—and to my mind the best—is the "Just-Plain-Impossible System"; so-called not because the hiding-place is really impossible but because it would be, normally, so impossible that you'd never even think of looking there. Ulysses leaving the Cyclops' cave by clinging to the fleece on the sheep's belly while the blind giant ran his frantic, futile hands over their backs is, I think, the classic example of this method. You don't look for objects in such a location because the law of gravity is against their being in such a location. That is precisely why the under side of a chair is such a fine place to hide suitable objects: the object is right there in front of you—in plain sight, for that matter, from the proper angle—but it's one of those seemingly impossible places because objects are not normally adherent to the under side of chairs.

Now a thick, heavy box, four by eight inches in width and length, isn't exactly a "suitable" object for such a spot, but my own search-procedure follows a system, too; and chairs come first, so I knelt and groped. . . .

And it was there!

IT was there, fastened firmly to the under side with broad bands of adhesive tape. At least, *something* was there, something paper-wrapped and of precisely the right dimensions.

I picked up the flash in my left hand

again and turned the chair sideways with my right. . . . Yes. Red wax seals and all.

The narrow beam of light glancing off the heavy waxen paper showed scribbled pencil markings. I steadied the light, bent closer. Faint but clear, two groups of numerals and letters. I am no mariner, but even to me it was clear that they were latitude and longitude figures. I didn't have a pencil but I do have a photographic memory. I knew I wouldn't forget them.

I set the chair carefully down and footsteps came closer down the corridor and my throat tightened painfully and the footsteps passed the door and died away. I didn't linger. I pocketed the flash and was sauntering down the corridor myself in almost the time it takes to read about it, with the door safely relocked behind me.

Why I did it I don't know, and I don't suppose it would have made any difference what route I took: my heart was pounding so in reaction to those approaching footsteps that I felt choked. I went aft via the boat deck again. The rain had stopped and the sea was moderating. The ship was fairly steady, which, added to my obliging choice of route, made the job seem (I suppose) just too easy. Perhaps that was what saved me—why I am around today. Between one stride and another, I felt a sharp tug at my shoulder and heard something *splat* above the wind's moaning and I turned and the dark figure wasn't forty feet behind me and I ducked instinctively as flame burst with a second *splat* from its outstretched hand.

This time I heard the bullet go *z-z-z-zing* just where my head had been.

YOU don't stop to reason at a time like that: your actions combine age-old human instincts with the distillate of all similar personal experience. I jumped sideways like a startled frog and the dim white wall of a ventilator loomed and I darted around it and ran. And once I was moving, my brain worked with remarkable clarity, telegraphing to my muscles, in a kind of mental shorthand, the fact that my only chance would be to run faster than the black shape behind me could travel—toward the aft. companionway. With no gun, I hadn't a chance otherwise, alone with a killer on that echoing empty

deck. He could track me down almost at leisure as I dodged vainly from one futile cover to another, and finish me as easily as you pot a trapped beast. . . . That was what the brain said, and the muscles certainly obliged.

I was a pretty good broken-field runner in the not too long ago; those were amateurish performances compared to this burst of speed. The bad moment, no matter how fast I traveled, would be the moment when I hove into plain sight from behind the ventilator row and dived for the companionway. . . . That moment was coming, was coming— *Now!* I thought, and plunged.

Seventy, eighty feet behind me I saw the figure try to stop, saw its arm swing up again—and I put both hands on the brass siderails that slanted steeply down and swung myself up and forward in an arc like a ski-jumper's that flashed me down out of sight. Next instant my feet struck the lower deck with a crash that seemed to drive my legs up into my pelvis, and I slammed on forward on to my face.

If the brain behind that gun had had just a little more temerity, been just a little less cautious, I was a dead man at that instant, because I couldn't move. I tried—God knows I tried! It was as though my spine were paralyzed. But that lower deck was the promenade deck, brilliantly illuminated and with couples passing at every moment; my sliding fall had carried me a little to one side of the foot of the companionway, so that to aim at me my antagonist would have had to come part way down the steps. . . . The light from a bulb at their foot would have shone straight in his face.

He didn't dare.

I heard an exclamation of horror in a woman's voice and high heels rapping along the deck. A tall girl in a white evening wrap bent over me as I propped myself up on my arms, and her escort pounded up beside her.

I said, as breath came back to me: "Nothing . . . broken, I . . . don't think. . . . Slipped."

"Want my arm? Or had you better lie still a minute?" the man offered.

"Just my wind . . . and legs wouldn't work."

It was passing, the numbness, but I was glad of his arm and even gladder of his company. I asked him if he'd see me to my cabin and he said he'd be delighted. It wasn't far. And it wasn't till I had got the door closed and locked and let myself slump heavily on my berth that I began to get really sore. I hadn't had time till then.

IT is hard to think clearly when you are shaken with both rage and pain, and I spent a valuable five minutes just sitting there, trying to make up my mind. The thing that finally decided me to drag myself down to the dining-saloon was no higher motive than curiosity. That, and the fact that my assailant, whoever he or she was, and however ruthless, was also cautious. Cautious, because if he or she had dared those extra few steps down the companionway, I wouldn't be breathing now. In the broad bright corridors between our cabin and the main staircase, I didn't think there'd be much risk.

I splashed water over my face and some brandy into my stomach. Both were helpful. It still hurt to move my legs but I could move them, so I opened the door.

The long corridor was empty; but I can't say I enjoyed my passage down it. The orchestra was playing a Conga and playing it very badly. I limped round the turn to the main landing at the staircase head, and there were the musicians in their lofty little pen, sawing away like mad, and below, the curved servility of waiters' backs, the bare shoulders of women, the sparkle of crystal, the fragrance and the color of massed flowers. . . . Dark figures with flaming guns belonged, it seemed, to a totally different realm of space and time.

Yet the fiery anguish in my hip joints as I came slowly down the staircase was real enough. I kept my face straight but I was sure it looked stiff, grim. Lisa sat facing me, not twenty feet away, and I saw the faintly tilted eyes widen and the lovely mouth smile: she's chosen that seat on purpose to watch the stairway, I thought, and it wasn't the brandy that warmed my heart suddenly. Brenda Carroll sat opposite her, back to me; the Major and Emily Riordan were on either side. Far over

Lisa's shoulder, with his back to the wall, Stanley Phillips was pouring red wine from a decanter for one of his brother officers whom I didn't know.

I stopped beside Brenda Carroll's chair and said: "Heartfelt apologies and all that. Couldn't help it. Been doing a little quiet sleuthing for you."

She glanced round and up, startled, and I sat down beside her. They had reached the salad and I told the steward I'd start with that, and poured myself a little Chablis. Captain Rindge, I noticed, was still at his post of honor, but Wardman's chair at the adjoining table was empty.

MAJOR CARTERET looked at me sourly; then, seeing my eyes on his face, distorted his cheek muscles in a very fair imitation of a smile. He should have been gratified at the improvement in his appearance since that morning: his sallow horsey face now had the rich deceptively healthy flush of the confirmed alcoholic, and his hand as he lifted his glass to his lips was steady as a rock.

Brenda Carroll said sweetly: "You don't need to feel too badly. This has been one interruption after another, and I've already apologized to your wife."

It was a speech so unlike her that I must have looked surprised, and she added: "First I forgot my handkerchief and Bob"—nodding at the Major—"had to go back and get it; then Emily felt faint and insisted on going after her smelling salts."

I looked at Mrs. Riordan with interest. The small gold flacon of sal volatile on the white cloth beside her corroborated the testimony of a face curiously ashen, and the lead-colored pouches which her brother had sported that morning had transferred themselves to her now-pendulous and sagging cheeks. She looked like someone on the verge of complete collapse. The words "frightful" and "headache" sounded ridiculously inadequate as they passed her lips when she turned. The steward set a salad plate before me, thanked me, and withdrew.

"What d'you mean, sleuthing?" said the Major in a rich, fruity, port-and-cheddar drawl. He was more at his ease than I had ever seen him.

I said: "Oh, ransacking cabins while the occupants are wining and dining. . . .

You never know what you'll find."

"Ha!" said Major Carteret, appearing to receive this as humor. "What *did* you find?"

HIS air of tolerant amusement was infuriating. Fortunately, I didn't have to formulate a properly modulated answer, for Stanley Phillips' hand fell on my shoulder as it had done the night before and he paused on his way out to smile at us all.

"We'll be in around nine in the morning, I understand," he said. "Half an hour early in spite of the blow this afternoon."

I said: "Damn good thing. We're all invalids. I slipped on the deck and sprained my leg—"

"I thought I saw you limping," Lisa observed calmly.

"—and Mrs. Riordan has a headache. How about you, Major?"

"I. After all, that's my business." Why did he choose, again, to be deliberately insulting, I wondered? Raised eyebrows; the words fairly barked at me; his whole manner an illustration of the attitude "Damned bounder . . ."

I said, as if unconcernedly: "You looked simply frightful this morning. You must have been drunk as a pig last night. I didn't think you could have got over it entirely so soon, that's all."

Startled silence was broken, of course, by Lisa and the other two women all starting to talk at once; but the slow tide of furious red that stained the Major's neck and ears did me a great deal of good. Stanley Phillips removed his hand as though my shoulder burned him, nodded vaguely at a point of space midway between Lisa and Brenda Carroll (it happened to be occupied by Emily Riordan, but I am sure he was unconscious of that) and continued on toward the staircase. I had, naturally, torn it: no one, it appeared, wanted dessert, and though Lisa murmured something about coffee in the lounge as we all rose, I knew that the Carroll party were already framing their good nights. I didn't, after one glance, dare look at Lisa: her face wore a curious slightly swollen aspect which she told me later was compounded of wrath at me for insulting a guest at what was, so to speak,

my own table, and a hysterical desire to shriek with laughter.

The whole situation was both frightful and absurd, I told myself, as we moved toward the staircase. Frightful in the steadily mounting tension which indicated quite accurately both the state of everyone's nerves and the looming approach of climax; absurd in the attempt everyone was making (except myself) to preserve at least some of the civilized amenities. I knew that the next move was up to me, and between the bottom step and the top step of the staircase I decided that it would be a move which no one involved would, however astute, expect.

At least I hoped so.

WE smiled stiffly with unreal smiles at each other as we reached the main landing and Brenda Carroll said, as though reciting a part, "I think we'd better pass up the coffee. Emily still feels badly, I know. I'll help her get to bed."

Lisa made a duly sympathetic murmur and Major Carteret and I exchanged brief glares and dinner was over. . . .

"Let's get a breath of air on deck," Lisa said tonelessly as we turned toward our cabin.

I said in her ear: "We will *not* go on deck; we will go as fast as we decently can to our cabin."

My arm under her elbow urged her forward; she lengthened her stride to mine instantly—" . . . and we will lock the door," I went on, stepping still faster.

The pain of moving my legs made me a little breathless.

"I have a lot to tell you," I added.

A piping voice behind us—"Mister Steele! Mister Steele, sir!"—brought me up short. It was the little messenger again (I wondered if he ever went off duty), complete with envelope on silver salver, and though he was only four feet six and could have made the flyweight division with his clothes on, his presence was as good a protection (I felt) as a platoon of infantry. I waited till he caught up and took the envelope; then I said: "Come down to our cabin a moment. I want to ask you something."

"Yes, sir."

He smirked in anticipation of further lavish tips and followed us. The key I

hailed out of my pocket as we reached our door happened to be Wardman's master key, but I tried it anyway and it worked as well as it had once before that night.

"Come on in," I said, opening the door. I'd left the lights on. Lisa sank down on the pocket-size armchair below the port-hole and brass-buttons stood respectfully at attention while I ripped open the envelope. The message said:

YACHT BRENDA LEFT HERE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AGO. WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN. HIYA

HALL

I HANDED it to Lisa to read and gave the youngster another dollar. Then I pulled out a five-spot and turned it round carelessly in my fingers while I said: "You evidently know your way around this ship, son. What time does the Captain come off the bridge tonight?"

"Midnight," he said promptly. "First officer takes over then."

"I want you to be on hand when the Captain gets to his cabin. Can you be—without fail?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want a message delivered to him and I don't want to telephone it." The iron-hard face of Mr. Bruce Rogers appeared unbidden before me: he was why I didn't want to telephone.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Steele," the boy said. "Will you write the message now, sir? You can rest assured"—he seemed proud of the phrase—"that Captain Rindge will receive it."

"I don't need to write it, I'll tell it to you. It's just this: I want to see him. I want to see him as soon as he can get here. Here in this stateroom. You'll have to dirty that up a bit, son—say 'Mister Steele presents his compliments, Captain, and could you possibly drop by his cabin at once, sir?' or something of the sort. I'll leave that to you. But you must make him understand that it's vitally important. You get that? You'd better remember to tell him those words: 'vitally important.' And don't take no for an answer."

I handed him the five-spot and he turned to go.

"I'll see that he's here, sir," said the

urchin, so confidently that I had to grin at him.

I said: "If you do get stuck—I mean if he won't come—come back here and knock at the door and let me know. What's your name?"

"Perkins, sir."

"Knock and when I answer say 'It's Perkins' and I'll let you in. Oh, if the point comes up, don't let him telephone me. Be sure of that. Say it's highly confidential. Vitally important and highly confidential."

"Vitally important an' highly confidential. Yes, sir. I understand."

"And mind you, keep it confidential," I said sternly, "or you won't get the other five when we dock. Don't speak to the Captain until he's alone."

All mankind, for some reason, loves a mystery: Perkins was no exception. He beamed, saluted, departed.

I locked the door.

FRIDAY'S sunrise was still an hour away.

As we approached the great steel door, Captain Rindge and Lisa and I, the *Empress'* engines slowed their pulsing beat. But they did not stop: it was not meant that they should stop. Naked bulbs above us lit the echoing metal cavern of the after-hold and harsh shadows carved deep lines in the boatswain's face. The Captain glanced mechanically at his watch, rubbed his bald spot, and said: "All right, bos'n. Open her up."

The boatswain sprang to the bolts on one side of the door; I took the other side. A dozen rapid twirls, and we swung the door slowly back. The vast black curtain of the night spread over the vast black sea-floor, which heaved and whispered not a half-dozen feet beneath us. The rectangle of light cast from the open door upon the waters showed little curls of foam swirling out of the night into the orange oblong, then swallowed by the night again. Nothing else.

Captain Rindge muttered: "They were going to give a blinker signal; Wardman *must* have seen it or he wouldn't have slowed—"

A sharp steel prow slid noiselessly out of darkness, kept pace with us for a moment, crept forward. . . . Knife-edged,

it cleft the water with hardly a ripple. Above the throb of our own engines I could hear another sound: the soft incessant tom-tom beat of a powerful Diesel throttled down. The long cigar-shaped speedboat adjusted its speed with beautiful precision to our own, veered closer . . . closer. . . . A man standing on her narrow forward deck drew his arm back and a rope came whistling past my ear. The bos'n caught it expertly, drew it taut.

Captain Rindge said: "Well. Here's luck."

I took his large flabby hand and shook it with heartfelt appreciation.

"No use trying to thank you," I said, "but you know how I feel."

"How we both feel," said Lisa. She smiled.

He beamed. "I'll give you an arm down," he said. "Though we hate to lose you."

The open cockpit was directly below us. The man who had thrown the rope stretched up his arms; Lisa tucked her skirts around her and let Captain Rindge ease her to a seat on the deck-edge with her legs hanging, and the man got her by the waist and she jumped and landed lightly.

I said: "You're a great guy. I'll be seeing you," and jumped myself.

The bos'n tossed back the rope; I sat beside Lisa in the only place one could sit, which was in the rear of the cockpit, just behind an oilskin-shrouded shape at the wheel. The *Empress* was a black mountain looming, inconceivably vast, above us: a mountain on whose far summits here and there tiny points of light appeared. There were not many such: except for the mast-heads, the bridge, the great ship was wrapped in darkness. Which was why we were leaving now.

The man who had thrown the rope sat down in front of us, beside the steersman.

"All right?" he said.

"All right."

The tom-tom beat quickened, the sharp nose swung off in a tangent to the *Empress'* course; suddenly the orange rectangle in her huge side narrowed, vanished. The boatswain had swung shut the heavy door.

"Better pull this around you," said the man in front of us, yanking at a heavy

tarpaulin. "She ships some water when she travels."

The engines in the sleek steel hull seemed to have heard him: they pulled us suddenly round in a sweeping semicircle, then shot us forward in a straight dive into the night.

"How far out are we?" I roared into the ear of the man in front of me.

"Just about forty miles, I imagine. We won't be long."

Spray slapped my face and we were moving so fast already that it stung like hail. I believed him. I pulled the tarpaulin close around Lisa's shoulders with the arm which wasn't around them itself, and sat back. When, after a little, I turned my head, the *Empress* was just two colored lights fading, like twin stars low on the horizon. . . .

IT was a very fine thing, I thought, which Captain Rindge had done. Especially after all the disorder which had upset his routine already. Perkins had convinced him, somehow, that it really was "vitally important" to come to my cabin. When he had arrived I had talked very fast and very earnestly.

At one point of my story, he had gasped, literally, with amazement. I hadn't given him a chance to expostulate: I'd gone on hastily with my tale. I had told him a lot—but not everything: I was still afraid to make out-and-out accusations. "So I think," I said, "that every hour—every minute, you might say—counts. Couldn't you get a speedboat from the island to start right away and pick us up as soon as possible? They could run dark and give you a blinker signal when to slow; They could take my wife and me off without a soul but you and Wardman knowing it, and I don't think anyone ought to know it. When we get to the stateroom I'll tell Stanley Phillips that we're going to leave the ship *after* everyone else has disembarked, and tell him to spread the word round to the Carroll party. That ought to give me still another half-hour or so. . . . What about your man Webster, by the way? He's trustworthy, isn't he? He'd know something was up because he'd have to get the island for you—"

"Webster? Oh, absolutely. But good God, Steele!"

He had fretted and purpled and sputtered. But in the end he had agreed. And it was something I would never forget. . . . So Lisa and I were here, on a streaming steel splinter that was hurtling into the dawn, while the *Empress* churned her stately unhurried way.

Captain Rindge was not a good actor. But I thought he'd be good enough for the part he'd have to play when the *Empress* docked, if anyone asked him about the Steeles. Suddenly I found my arm tightening around Lisa's slim shoulders. Her face was a pale heart-shaped blur in the rearing dark. I bent my head and touched my lips to the wet tendrils of her hair.

A GAIN the giant heliograph shot its first lancing beam across the waters, splintering in dazzling intolerable gold against our eyes. The low pink cloud, above which the sun had climbed, was no cloud, but the Bermuda shore; and as we raced toward it two tiny orange sails appeared, bobbing in the morning wind. The sky had assumed that deep impossible blue ordinarily found only on foreign picture postcards and in dreams of Paradise.

"I could use some coffee," Lisa murmured, opening her eyes as the sunlight struck them, "but this is lovely. Why haven't you ever brought me here before?"

"We Steeles like to plan things a special way. Each new experience, we feel, should be arranged so as to strike with unforgettable dramatic impact. I didn't have the right build-up before."

"You fixed a honey for Bermuda, all right."

"How about kissing me good morning?"

"No. My mouth tastes awful. Besides we are in public."

"Rinse it out." I scooped up a handful of the blue salt water, swirled it round, spat.

Lisa said: "Disgusting. Wipe your chin."

"Another reason why I couldn't bring you to Bermuda before," I said, "is that I have a sweetie here. Had, I mean."

"Cousin Brenda?"

"Regrettably, no. She is a chambermaid at the Castle Harbor Hotel, aged fifty-eight, and has buried three husbands. She is very fond of me. She pulled my shoes off every night the last time I was here."

"Why couldn't you pull them off yourself?"

"I couldn't be bothered with those details. It was when I thought you had left me forever, and if I made the elevator without assistance I thought I was doing swell. . . . Thank you." She had turned her head again to watch me and her eyes had softened and I kissed her before she knew it was coming.

THE pilot spoke, for the first time since we'd boarded. They were silent men, both of them, unless they had something to say. The sea seems to have that effect on people; it is too bad more people don't go down to it.

"That new air field where I told 'em to have the plane waiting," he said, "is right around this point we're coming to. We can dock just below it. Or you want to drop the lady at the hotel landing-stage first?"

A huge pink medieval castle loomed as we cleared the point, the effect of a Saracen's dream being marred only by a small flotilla of motor boats at the landing-stage.

Lisa said: "To the field. I'll get to the hotel later."

"To the hotel," I said.

And to her: "I want to be sure you're safe."

She won. We slid past the hotel and headed up the coast. It was just six o'clock.

We curved in gracefully to a little cove, where a long white jetty extended from the pink sands into the turquoise swells. Yellow-and-white flowers which were new to me rioted over the slope beyond the beach, and beyond them was visible the extreme tip of a lofty pole with the wind-sock standing out taut against the blue. I pointed.

"Field must be right up that slope," I told Lisa.

"Tis," said the pilot, which finished his conversation for the trip.

Fifteen minutes later he and his craft were a tiny speck on the horizon, and Lisa and I were standing beside the plane.

She had been moored at the shoreward end of the jetty, where a sloping concrete apron led up the beach. Balanced on her pontoons and painted bright yellow herself, she looked like some gigantic butter-

fly against the yellow flowers. The deeply tanned youngster who was tinkering with her mysterious vitals put down his implements and stepped to the jetty, smiling.

I said: "Hi. I hope it's me you're waiting for."

"Steele?"

"Yes. This is my wife."

"My name's Bob Taylor." His look at Lisa said quite clearly that he wished he had a three-seater.

"Good of you to help me out."

"That's what I'm here for," he said cheerfully. "All they told me was, you wanted to do a little flying round the island before you took the Clipper back this morning. That right?"

"In a way," I said. "Only it isn't round the island, exactly."

I WOULD have said more but a couple of mechanics from the field over the brow of the slope were sauntering toward us.

"Can we get going?" I said.

"Sure. She's full up with gas."

"What's her range?"

"Oh, three-fifty or so. She'll cruise at around 95 or 100."

"Say three hours' flying with a bit of a margin?"

"Just about."

I turned to Lisa and she walked into my arms and stood close within their circle. She kissed me twice, hard. She stepped back and to my surprise her eyes were a little misty.

"I'll order your breakfast for nine-fifteen, then, Colonel," she said, smiling. "And wait for you."

"Don't forget what I told you. Also don't forget that I—ahem—love you. I will have toasted English muffins with Irish bacon for breakfast: nine-thirty would be better because I could dash off a shave."

The competent-looking young Taylor swung up and into the two-seater cockpit. I followed. The foremost mechanic began to fumble with the mooring rope.

"Thanks, Mike," Taylor said, and to me: "Where you want to head for, Mr. Steele?"

"I'll tell you when we pull away from here," I said, with what I hoped was a reassuring smile on my brine-encrusted

face. The motor burst into song and above its singing I heard a faint shout. We taxied slowly forward and I turned my head and met Lisa's farewell smile. That much was fine. But over her shoulder I saw a tall gentleman in a grey Hom-burg and loose, well-cut tweeds descending the slope toward us rapidly, and waving an irate umbrella; that was anything but fine. He shouted again, more loudly.

Taylor said, eyes fixed ahead: "Who's making all that racket?"

"Damned if I know," I said. "Not for us, anyway."

Intent, immovable, he was hardly listening; my indifferent tone was enough. He gave her the gun and we roared away from the jetty and the last I saw of its occupants was Lisa waving a handkerchief and paying no attention to the umbrella man, who was now running out on the jetty in vain pursuit. I didn't know who he was, but I felt very certain that if he meant any harm to Lisa, Mike and his fellow mechanic would take vigorous and effective steps. . . .

EVEN outside the little cove the sea was like a lake; the sky still cloudless. Taylor lifted the little ship easily into the air and I said: "Bear about southwest for a bit and I'll talk. I didn't want to talk in front of those lads back there." He nodded. "This is private business—very private. I want to find a ship."

He turned his head toward me quickly in surprise. "It isn't just sightseeing, then? I thought that sounded screwy. In such a rush, I mean." We both had to shout to make ourselves heard.

"You're not English."

"Hell, no. Connecticut Yankee. Why?"

"Your accent, for one thing. Just barnstorming around?"

He grinned. "That's about it. Like to fly, had a little money, bought a plane. Had her shipped here. I'm just making coffee-and-cake money but it's fun; and when the fall season really opens up, I think it'll be profitable too. I only came last spring. You flown much?"

"Some," I admitted.

"License?"

"Oh, sure. Last flying I did was in Spain."

"In the war, you mean? The Spanish

war?" His tone was quite different; he was prepared to accept me fully, which was what I'd hoped and why I'd got personal.

"Yes," I said. "I'd much rather be here. . . . Well, here's the idea. There's this yacht, a big steam yacht, and she left Miami probably Tuesday evening and I think she's heading for Bermuda. I don't know her speed and I don't know her course, because she may have put in somewhere off the Virginia coast or even farther north; or she may have made a circle to eastward and be coming up on Bermuda from the east or southeast. In fact, I don't *know* she's coming here at all. But I feel pretty sure she is, and I want to locate her if we can."

"You don't know much, do you?" said the boy, grinning. "Do you know what she looks like?"

"I know her name," I said, grinning back. "Well, a little more than that. She's a big barge—eight thousand tons or so—black with a white superstructure. Two stacks—one of 'em's a dummy, stuck on for looks or something. Of course she may have been repainted this summer a different color scheme. Used to belong to a fellow named Comstock." I didn't add that I happened to have this information because I am a great newspaper reader, and because I could still remember the rotogravure pictures of the *Brenda* and their accompanying captions, which had appeared when la Carroll had bought the yacht from Comstock before her marriage to Serge.

"Comstock? Hell, I know the old bucket, then," said Taylor. "Seen her up around Bar Harbor."

We were still rising.

I said: "Got any glasses?"

"Sure. In that pocket right beside you."

I pulled out a fine pair of binoculars, put them back.

I said: "What would you say, if you took her up to say eight thousand and we kept heading more or less Miami-ward for the next forty minutes? That'll take us around seventy-five miles out and we ought to have picked the ship up by that time. If we don't, we can spend the rest of your gas zig-zagging back and bearing to the west of the island. O.K.?"

"You're the doctor. Sounds O.K. to

me. . . . What you going to do when we find her—if I may ask? Want to go aboard?"

I DIDN'T answer that at once because I still hadn't made up my mind. Finally I said: "It depends. Let's find her first."

"Right you are." He sounded indifferent. Our climbing-angle steepened. I decided that I liked Mr. Taylor very much. I regretted that I couldn't be franker with him—franker, in particular, about my own current indecision.

At eight thousand he straightened her out and the sea was an immense blue bowl beneath us, in whose exact center we seemed to hang stationary. The bowl was empty.

I expected it to be empty for a little while. But not for long. For I had been on the *Empress'* bridge the night before and I had studied very carefully one of the great charts all criss-crossed with tiny pencil figures and intersecting lines. . . . Beyond any question, the latitude and longitude figures I'd seen scrawled on the bottom of the jewel box indicated a point just about seventy miles southeast of Bermuda. I didn't, as I'd told Taylor, know from which direction the black yacht would be coming. But unless my theorizings were all wrong, I felt sure that she'd be waiting there.

Twenty minutes later a speck far ahead broke the clean sharp horizon-line. Taylor slid down easily and I got out the binoculars and it was a wallowing tramp headed due East. We swung around and climbed again.

It wasn't more than ten minutes later that we sighted another speck. We dipped again, whistling down and toward it and I put the glasses to my eyes and my heart bounced against my ribs as I saw the black hull and the white superstructure leap clearly into view.

And in the last ten minutes I had made up my mind.

SHE was barely moving, if she was moving at all: there wasn't even a fleck of white in her wake.

I said quickly: "That's her. Don't go any lower. Keep straight on now—straight on past. As though she didn't interest us.

Then cut your engine and we'll go downstairs."

"O.K."

"Listen. How close can you set us down alongside her?"

He considered. "Not much sea. Run you right up under her counter if you like. Want to get aboard?"

"If we can," I said. "We'll start by asking them for some gas. Have you ask them, rather. You and I are a couple of crazy joy-riders who miscalculated their capacity—alcoholic and otherwise."

"What the hell goes on here?" said Taylor, still cheerfully. But I could see he didn't like it much.

I said: "There's still a war on, you know. I want to look this ship over." I made it sound as portentous and official as I could. It seemed to satisfy. We swung in a great circle and curved down.

We splashed our pontoons in the blue water not a hundred feet astern of the *Brenda* and there was no longer any doubt: she said *Brenda* in gilt letters across that stern. A sailor in a blue uniform drawing water in a bucket stopped and looked at us stupidly. Taylor taxied in a skittering curve toward the man and cut his engine.

"Hey, can you spare us some gas?" he called.

We weren't thirty feet away, bobbing gently in a calm sea. The *Brenda* just had steerage way on her.

The sailor jerked a thumb toward the bridge at the same moment that a tall blond man in smart white duck appeared there. He wore a white gold-braided cap at a rakish angle and his short mustache looked the color of tow against a mahogany skin. He eyed us without speaking.

TAYLOR raised a hand in salutation, called: "Captain, can you spare us some gas? My tank must have a leak; it's almost empty."

"Who do you fellows think you are—Acosta and Byrd?" said the blond man, big hands gripping the rail. "We got no gas to spare."

"Quit kidding," said Taylor nonchalantly. "Just a few gallons. Where you bound—Bermuda?"

"What's it to you?"

"Oh, if you want to be *that* way . . .

I meant I'd pay you for it when you pulled in."

"That where you're from?"

"Yeah."

"What you doing out here?"

"Just riding around," Taylor said innocently. He turned to me. "Guy must be nuts. You can't refuse like that. Make a fine story when we *do* make Bermuda. My old man owns the newspaper there, did I tell you?"

"Pipe down, pipe down, kid," said the blond man hastily. "Who's refusing? I said we hadn't any gas to spare. We haven't—because we haven't got any gas at all. We're Diesel-motored."

"None?" Taylor's distress was touching. "You mean you haven't got even a five-gallon can of gas on your whole blasted ship?"

The blond man was evidently enjoying himself. "That's the status, squirt."

"What the hell do you expect us to do? Walk home?" This with a grin. The blond man pretended to think.

He said: "You got any rockets? We could loan you a couple rockets. All you'd have to do then is wait till it gets dark. They look awful pretty."

Taylor hesitated. "This is about as far as I go," his quick side-glance told me. "You'd better take over."

I said: "I'll tell you what you *can* do—you can take us aboard."

This sobered him. He stood silent for a moment and we were so close that I could see the knuckles on his big hands whiten as he gripped the rail. If he takes us up on that, I thought, it'll be a miracle. The chances of getting aboard and looking the yacht—and her occupants—over had been slim enough at best: I'd thought that during the process of refueling it might be managed, though I doubted if we'd learn much. But if he really had no fuel for us, we had no excuse whatever to touch foot on that deck. It was a calm day; he could say he'd radio Bermuda for help for us, and leave us sitting there.

What he did say was: "I don't know about that. I'll have to ask the owner."

"We'll wait," said Taylor, grinning. But the blond man was not amused any longer; he swung back into the wheelhouse and disappeared.

What wind there was blew from the

southeast, so that we danced along the water at a rate which almost matched the yacht's laggard pace. She had gained only forty or fifty feet on us and we were floating about amidships of her and so close I could almost have jumped aboard, when a curtain behind a porthole was pushed back and a face looked out.

It was looking directly at me, and at just about my own eye-level. It hung there, motionless behind the thick glass pane, for several seconds; time seemed to stop for me at that instant and I don't know how long it was there. Then the curtain fell in place again.

That was all. But that was plenty. For though the eyes were blank and staring, with no faintest sign of recognition, it was the face—beyond any doubt or question—of Brenda Carroll.

I MUST have exclaimed under my breath, been jolted into some sort of speech, for Taylor—who hadn't seen the curtain move—said: "What?"

"Wait. I'm trying to think."

I glanced at my wrist watch. Seven o'clock. I tried to do some fast computing but it was no go: my brain just balked, as it would have balked if the yacht *Brenda* had suddenly sprouted wings and soared away. The blond man reappeared, not on the bridge but on the deck directly opposite us.

He said: "I've just talked with the owner. Come on aboard—I'll throw you a line." He bellowed suddenly at the stupid-looking sailor, who hadn't moved: "You, Larsen. Heave a line, there."

Larsen pulled up his bucket hastily (it had relaxed into the sea) and lumbered aft. He came back with a coil of light rope. His right arm swung effortlessly and the rope fell neatly over Taylor's shoulders. Taylor made the end fast to a strut and two more sailors joined Larsen and we began to narrow the strip of water between the two craft. The blond man stood watching sardonically. But then, I thought, that may be his natural expression. I didn't like his face, anyway.

Our pontoon tip grazed the *Brenda's* black plates and we bumped awkwardly. The blond man had his hand in his pocket. His right hand. The pocket bulged curiously and I had barely noted the fact

before he seemed satisfied that I *had* noted it and he said, looking me hard in the face with hard steel-colored eyes: "Come and get it, Mister Steele—you and your friend, too."

I sat quite still and looked at him. It was a high cockpit and he couldn't see my right hand move a little, toward the pocket where my fingers had touched a gun nestling alongside the binoculars. Of course, I didn't know whether it was loaded.

I said, full of a sudden nasty conviction that I'd overplayed my hand again: "Where do you get this 'Steele' stuff?"

Not that I didn't know.

"We don't want any trouble," he said in a low voice which barely reached me. "But we're on the high seas and I'm Master. It's a dumb crew," he added, with apparent irrelevance, "and jobs are hard to get these days. If you think I won't make trouble if I have to—"

The gun was in my hand. I didn't dare glance down at it; it was small, light, snub-barreled like an old-fashioned Derringer. German make, probably. I hoped it was loaded and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

The blond man said in a loud tone which everyone on deck could hear: "Sure, come right aboard. I'm just having breakfast. Have some coffee while you're waiting. . . . *Larsen!*"

"Sir—"

"Make that line fast and keep an eye on that plane. Mister Steele and his pilot are coming aboard." He was enjoying himself again.

The gun was safe in my sock.

I said: "All right, Taylor: let's get aboard," and stood up. The youngster followed my lead unquestioningly. We swung to the deck, Taylor first.

NOW that I stood facing him closely I could see that the blond man was older and more battle-scarred by life and time than he seemed even thirty feet away: the healthy vital rakishness of his stance, his features, was belied when you got a close-up by the subtle stigmata of premature degeneration and decay. He was forty-five, at least, and the pinpoint pupils in the steel-colored eyes gave a clue to the habits which had depleted him. A thoroughly dangerous person. He'd make

a good running-mate, I thought, for—

"Right this way, gentlemen," his voice said. I crossed the deck as indicated and stepped over the high brass shin-duster guarding the door and went in, Taylor after me.

After the glare of sun on sea for more than an hour, the cool dark interior was just a black wall. I stopped.

The blond man's voice behind me said: "Third door on the left. You *will* join us at breakfast, won't you, Mister Steele?"

Repetition of the name gave him, it appeared, great pleasure. My eyes began to focus. It was a long central hall in which we stood: it formed the main lounge, evidently, for settees were grouped about a huge radio at one end, and chromium-and-canvas easy chairs lined a long low mahogany table littered with magazines. The magazines nearest me had been pushed back to make room for a tray which someone had evidently just placed there, since the butter hadn't yet hardened on the remains of a plate of toast.

"Third door," the blond man repeated.

From each end of this hall a corridor opened. I could see the third door on the left in the nearest corridor from where I stood; it was closed. I started to say, "Who's 'us'?" and thought "Ah, hell, let's get on with it," and paced down the corridor and opened the door with a jerk and went in.

IT was a large cabin, sun-drenched now, which the late Comstock had presumably used for a library and study. The walls were lined with books, and a folding typewriter desk stood in a corner. I noted this mechanically and was surprised later to recall that such a thing as a typewriter desk had even registered, for my eyes and all my attention were elsewhere.

Below the nearest window was a large carved refectory table. On the table was another tray, also a breakfast tray. Behind the table, facing us, sat Serge Fabry in a yellow silk gown, peeling an orange with delicate fingers. His face, across whose cheek a bar of sun struck slanting, didn't move. Only his eyes flicked up at me for a moment; then he concentrated on the orange again.

"Come in, Mr. Steele," he said quietly. "Come in."

I was already in; I didn't move. Serge Fabry added, not even looking up this time: "You, Captain—see that Mr. Steele's friend is taken care of, will you? We shan't be long."

"Hey," said Taylor's young voice behind me, "what about it, Passenger? O.K.?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll be right with you."

The door closed. Serge Fabry said, still detaching strips of skin from the orange, "Sit down."

Facing him on my side of the table was a low leather chair. I dropped into it and rested my elbows on my knees again. The top of the table between us hid my dangling hands. The sag of the little gun at my finger tips was very comforting. There was one strip of skin still left on the orange. Serge Fabry said, balancing the fruit in his hand, "There was some talk of pelvis-breaking a while ago, if I remember. Have you ever been in China?"

"No."

"Their methods," he said. "Very interesting. They can peel off the skin as neatly as you peel a fruit." He detached the long strip that still clung to the orange, laid it down. His eyes lifted smoothly to mine and hung there, unwinking. The things they were saying were quite horrible things.

I DON'T think I am unduly impressionable. On the other hand, I do believe in the possibility of extra-sensory perception—extra, that is, beyond the commonly accepted limits. I've had too many of those sudden spinal *frissons* which accompany a premonition that proves true—and I knew at this moment that I was in more immediate and more terrible danger than I had ever been in my life. I kept my shoulders stiff and unmoving, as the finger tips of my right hand hooked under my trouser-cuff and raised it inch by fractional inch.

I said: "Listen, Fabry. Don't try to play bogey-man with me because it'll get you nowhere. I imagine you're in a hurry. I know I am. You want to talk frankly or you want to go on kidding? This diabolic-cold-detachment act will go big in the death-house. You'd better save it."

It was a silly speech. I knew it even as I made it, but I wanted above everything to fix his attention on my lips and

my words till I got the little gun in my palm. It rested there now. And simultaneously with the comfort of the cold metal against my fingers came another impression which so startled me that I almost let the gun slip. The faint, the very faint vibration of the yacht's lazily turning screws strengthened without warning into a faster beat which quickened and quickened. The dishes on the tray clinked suddenly, took up the beat. I wanted to spring to the window and I knew I didn't need to. We were moving now, and moving fast. I forced myself to sit still and it was one of the hardest things I ever did.

I said conversationally: "I hope you're towing the plane."

The man in the yellow silk gown didn't answer. A section of the orange was at his lips and he held it there, his head a little bent. He seemed to be waiting for something.

I said: "What will—" and stopped, for a dull heavy sound like someone slamming shut a giant iron door shook the cabin and the ship and drowned the engines' beat.

"Dear, dear," said Serge Fabry, his eyes on mine again. "I do hope that isn't something exploding in that plane of yours. How on earth would you get back to Bermuda?"

I realized that I'd been half expecting that noise. It was requiem for the plane, all right: I could see, as clearly as if I'd been on deck, the blond man dropping the explosive unobtrusively into the cockpit, paying out the line till the plane was well astern of the yacht, starting up the engines to full speed ahead, and—*boom!* Accident, he could tell the crew—or a deliberate plan of the men who'd flown her, depending on which tale would tie in best with what Serge Fabry intended to do with us.

I SAID, crossing my legs and folding my hands in my lap so that my left hand covered and cloaked the little gun in my right palm, "Just a big playboy at heart, aren't you? Are there any more dramatics on the program, or can we get to business?"

For the first time since I'd entered the room, his eyes began to burn with that feral fire I'd seen glowing in them before. He sat back in his chair and looked at me,

and once more I was reminded of a snake.

Serge Fabry said: "We will get to 'business,' as you call it, very soon now. Your time, Mr. Steele, is almost up."

I don't know whether I can explain or even express the feeling his words gave me. It was a very bad feeling, because for the first time I saw the situation in a light quite different from the light I'd been seeing it in. I saw it now, not as the hasty (and, at points, frantic) operation of one or more undisciplined though ruthless minds, but rather as the smooth, precise, carefully calculated functioning of an extensive machine. A machine which had been built with an eye to every possible contingency—and which was also flexible and adaptable enough to take care of the impossible ones. Such as Brenda Carroll's bracing me in the Park Lane—which no one could have foreseen. And if that point of view were the right point of view, then I had not only been acting like God's prize fool from the moment I hung up on Carney at Brenda's apartment, but I had involved young Taylor in imminent and perhaps total disaster. It was even possible that the man with the umbrella who had shouted from the jetty wasn't Carney's man at all (as I had decided he must be), in which case Lisa herself might be a casualty. . . . The thought was intolerable.

I said, because the worse I feel the more flippant my expression of that feeling tends to become: "What are you running here—a Tom Thumb blitzkrieg?"

He didn't appear to have heard me.

". . . Almost up," he repeated. "So we can afford to be frank with each other. I am curious to know your views on—Mrs. Carroll's affairs. Would you care to tell me?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" I said. "Why should I? I'll tell you this, though: you can't get away with it."

"Why?"

Only one word, but it was unanswerable.

He went on: "I repeat—I should like very much to hear your views. Your interpretation of events. It would interest me very much."

"All right," I said, in rage so sudden and so cold that my whole body felt

sheathed in ice. "I'll give you my interpretation *right now!*"

And I shot him without warning between the eyes.

I REMEMBER very clearly every detail of the next few minutes.

The impact of the bullet just above the bridge of the nose snapped the head back sharply against the tall carved chair-back; under the table I saw the legs jerk twice, like a frog's. The body slumped a little in the chair; that was all. The face remained staring at me, and the mouth open in an O of surprise duplicated the look of amazement on the face of the blond girl in Brenda Carroll's blood-soaked bed.

"Well," I remember saying, very low, "how d'you like *that* interpretation?"

The face in the brilliant sunlight didn't answer. A drop or two of blood appeared at the edges of the small black hole between the eyes.

I glanced at the gun for the first time then, and it was a good little gun. I dropped it in the pocket of my jacket and stepped closer. The body's slump had partly revealed something very curious, something on which Serge Fabry had been sitting, something dark and matted—a cushion? I bent and tugged and it was no ordinary cushion: it was a mass of tangled brown hair. . . .

Red silk fluttering at the window brought my mind back to the current moment. It was the curtain, the same curtain I'd seen pushed back a few minutes before. The sun slanted in from a point apparently off our starboard bow: we were Bermuda-bound, all right. Which was fine . . . *if* I could play the hand right from here in. The sound of the shot, not loud, had been covered by the yacht's racing engines—or so I hoped. But I was, after all, still a prisoner—a prisoner on a ship three hours or so from land, a ship still commanded by an intelligent and undoubtedly ruthless antagonist. If I could get, somehow, to the radio-room, I thought. . . .

Something in a black box on the table in front of the body made a buzzing sound.

I stepped round back of the table again and it was one of those direct-call boxes with a switch such as are used for inter-office talks.

I flipped the switch and a voice from the box said: "She'll be in in half an hour. Just heard."

"Good."

I FLIPPED the switch back to avoid further conversation and hoped the blurring of the call-box would disguise my voice so that it would sound like Serge Fabry's. I thought it had been the blond man speaking but I couldn't be sure. Before I had got my hand at my side again the box made another buzzing: three short, sharp calls. I let it ring. After three more buzzes it stopped.

"Might as well get it over with," I thought, and got out the little gun and stepped to a point on the carpet where I'd be masked, momentarily, by the opening door. Accustomed as I was to distances on the *Empress*, I miscalculated the time it would take the puzzled captain to get here from his bridge: I hadn't drawn more than a couple of long breaths, it seemed, before the door burst open and a kind of human catapult shot into the room, which was very smart indeed of the blond man.

If I'd had any kind of warning, the noise of a footfall, the briefest preliminary rattle of the knob, say, or if he'd entered even a shade more slowly, I could have adjusted myself. But cerebral and motor adjustments are not instantaneous, no matter how fast your reaction time, and mine was slowed badly by fatigue. The blond man was inside and away past the gun-muzzle before I even moved; he caromed off the table and bounced back at me in what seemed part of the same motion; so fast that my retina registered just a long blur of white shooting at me before his fist connected and I went down.

That, as anyone can see, is no way to enter a room where an enemy is waiting unless you are very sure of yourself and as fast as a lightning bolt with pants on. The blond man was both: evidently the three buzzes had been a "must" signal which, when unanswered, meant something was very wrong; and he'd decided to lose no time. Of course, he didn't know that I had a gun; on the other hand, he didn't know I hadn't. But to shift, re-aim, and fire a gun takes time, as I say; and he gave me none. None, except that I saw

his left coming. And rolled just a little to ride the blow.

It wasn't much, not enough to keep me on my feet, but it was enough to keep me conscious. The fist got me just to the right of my chin and I landed flat on my back with a crash. I should have been out. But I wasn't. So that as he came on, in a second headlong rush, a stunned but still-functioning brain marked the pressure of the gun-butt still in my hand. And as he leaped high above me in a vicious feet-first lunge which would have buried his heels in my belly as he came down and left me writhing at his mercy, I had just sense and strength enough to crook my elbow. The trigger seemed to pull itself.

IT was a small gun but they were high-power bullets; this one, striking at practically muzzle-range, literally blew his falling body sideways and only his legs hit me a glancing blow across the chest as he slammed to the floor.

I pushed the legs aside and got slowly and very shakily to my feet. I gulped some more air and bent over the long white-clad frame and it didn't stir; I rolled it over on its back. He wasn't dead, for his lips sucked in and puffed out with labored breath. His eyes were partly closed, and rolled up so that only the whites showed. As I looked, the heavy white drill of his tunic showed a small faint smudge which broadened and deepened into a dark damp stain, and this stain in turn enriched itself with fast-pumped blood into a soaking scarlet smear. On the right side, just below the stomach. I didn't know whether he'd die while unconscious but I did know he'd die soon if he were to keep on bleeding at that rate; and I didn't, for reasons not at all altruistic, want him to die. I unbuttoned the tunic, and pulled his shirt carefully free of his trousers. A nasty-looking hole, the wound: and from the looks of it, the bullet might have nicked his spine. I did the only thing I knew how to do, which was to rip my own shirt in two, and wad half of it into a small hard ball, and tie that ball tightly against the wound with the other half. He didn't move an eyelid during this process; only the lips sucked in, puffed out, mechanically. I straightened his left leg out (it was twisted sidewise) and left

him there at the feet of his late employer. I turned, at the door, and looked back: they made a very striking pair indeed.

The corridor outside was empty; so was the main lounge. I kept my hand on the little gun in my pocket and turned out on deck and went forward toward the bridge. We were doing a good twelve or fifteen knots on the same course as before, which was still fine with me. There was no sign of Taylor, or of anyone; I climbed the brass-edged narrow steps to the bridge and opened the wheelhouse door and went in.

THE man at the wheel had his back to me. He was a long lean man with grizzled hair and a red seamed neck, dressed in not over-clean whites.

I said: "Be in Bermuda about when?"—conversationally, and his head snapped round in surprise. He had a long melancholy face and a long upper lip, very Celtic. "What's your name?" I said, lounging easily against the door jamb.

"McCaffrey." He seemed puzzled.

"Mate?"

"Mate is right. Did you come aboard with the lady? I haven't seen you."

"No. I'm one of the fellows you picked up off the seaplane a while ago."

I watched him sharply and it was as I had thought: Fabry and the blond man had been careful to keep any hint of trouble from the crew. The mate's puzzled look vanished, replaced by a dull disinterested stare ahead. Accidents to seaplanes were nothing to him, and unlike most of his compatriots he was no conversationalist.

I said: "This her maximum speed? What is it—around fifteen knots?"—in the bright annoying manner of the inquisitive ignoramus.

"Fourteen," said Mr. McCaffrey. "You wouldn't have a chew of tobacco about you now, would you?"

"Sorry."

If we were doing fourteen, we'd already covered eight or ten from the point where Taylor and I had boarded, but we wouldn't make Bermuda till long after nine-thirty, nor indeed until after the New York Clipper had left. And I wanted to take no chances of any sudden departures via Clipper on the part of any *Empress* passengers:

it might be too hard to pick them up again. Also Lisa (I hoped) would be frantic, for she would know that our gas supply had been exhausted long ago.

I said: "Mister McCaffrey, where's the radio shack? Straight aft?"

"Ye'll bump yer nose on it when ye go out," said the mate, his tone indicating clearly that he'd be glad if both happened soon. I thanked him and turned to leave; he said suddenly: "If ye want to send any messages, ye'll prob'ly have to wait. Sparks is awful sick."

"Sick? He's not on 'duty?"

"Something he ate since we left Miami, and he's doubled up in his bunk as he has been all night and today, groanin' and cryin' like a man demented."

"Who's been handling the stuff, then?"

"The captain."

MY tired heart gave a great heave in my breast. For if Sparks was sick—with a sickness induced *deliberately* by something slipped into his food, I had no doubt, so that Fabry and the blond man could handle messages which might set an outsider wondering—I could probably get at the instruments myself.

I said: "Where'll I find the captain? What you got—just a skeleton crew?"

Life is a difficult enough process, McCaffrey's furrowed brow and compressed down-drawn lips informed me, without having to answer the inanities of useless and uninvited passengers.

"I don't folly up the captain's footsteps," he stated, and returned moodily to his horizon. I left him to it. The glistering aeries led down to another deck-house so close that one could, indeed, have bumped a nose against it on heading aft. I tried its door and it swung open and the little room was, for the moment, mine.

I blessed the incipient duodenal ulcer which had led me, a couple of years before, to spend a restful month on a Caribbean fruiter whose bored wireless man had explained the basic functionings of his miraculous engines. I thought I could remember what he'd told me, and the sound of a clipped official voice in my ear five minutes later assured me I was right. The voice—it was that of a Bermuda police official—said what did I want, and I told it a number of things I wanted, chief

among which was an inquiry and report on my wife's safety, and the voice said it would be glad to do what it could.

I looked at my wrist watch as I stood up and it was hard to believe that it was still early morning, and the *Empress* still at sea. I thought the next move would be to go back and break the news to McCaffrey. At least that part of the news which concerned him: the fact that his captain was *hors de combat*, the fact that he was, therefore, now in command, and the fact that he would be held responsible for cooperation with me and with the Bermuda police boat which would shortly come shooting over the horizon.

After that, I'd come back and stand by for word of Lisa; after that, I'd go find young Taylor and release him from duress vile, if any; after that, the two of us would search the ship. . . . We would search the ship thoroughly, but even if the blond man had regained consciousness and could help direct us, I didn't think we'd find any further trace of Brenda Carroll. . . .

All of which worked out very well, and according to schedule. Also exactly on schedule was the blond Captain's death, barely ten minutes before the police boat arrived. He went quite suddenly and relatively painlessly, from a secondary hemorrhage; but he talked before he went.

THE sun slanting in from the west splashed Lisa's brown cheek with gold; she leaned across the table toward me and said: "Darling, are you sure it's safe?"

My eyes traveled over her with pleasure unalloyed and over the high fragrant hedge behind her with more doubt than pleasure; my ears heard the hotel orchestra working on "Prairie Mary" with no pleasure at all. It was four o'clock, and the rich green sward of the garden café was sprinkled with colors as variegated and brilliant as an artist's palette—from canary-yellow pull-overs to apple-green slacks—where pleasantly relaxed twosomes and foursomes, masculine and feminine, were celebrating victory or drowning defeat. The air quivered and hummed with a hundred simultaneous conversations like an open beehive.

"No," I said, "it's not safe. It's not

even necessary, probably, to do it this way. Put it down to your consort's mulish obstinacy, if you like. I didn't ask to get dragged into this thing. But I was dragged in—and by Jove I'm going to finish it. . . . She was sitting under an umbrella much like the one you're decorating, when I first met her."

"How every precious moment must come back!" said Lisa sweetly, and turned the stem of her glass round and round between slim brown fingers.

Framed by the high green walls on either side, Emily Riordan made a dramatic, graceful entrance through the hedge gateway just ahead of me. I half-rose and she saw me and smiled and came toward us, the Major in her wake. She wore a rose-colored lace tea-gown which encased her bulbous torso much too tightly; the Major in loud vertically striped Shetland tweeds behind her resembled a toothpick trailing an overstuffed sausage. He smiled with unexpected geniality, though, as he drew near, and the faint air of constraint which stiffened our first greetings seemed to blow rapidly away. The Major brightened still further as the waiter took the champagne from the cooler to fill his glass and he saw the red-and-white label and the year.

Emily Riordan suddenly said in her girlish, pleasant voice: "Oh, here's the Doctor."

I looked up and Stanley Phillips was standing beside our table and I was very glad.

I said: "Sit down, sit down, Stanley."

He smiled at Lisa and did. His square, firm face looked a little worn.

He said: "I hope you're not going to ask me anything. I'm all talked out. These blasted Bermuda officials—three solid hours this afternoon. . . . Thanks." He put his fresh-filled glass to his lips and took it away instantly—empty.

BRENDA CARROLL appeared in the tall green gateway. She came toward us quickly across the bright green grass, a tall, slim girl in a plain white tennis-frock, and she looked very lovely and very fresh and virginal with the sun and a white flower in her hair. Beside her marched a gentleman of fifty or so, clad in very well-cut tweeds and carrying a

grey Homburg in his hand. He said something in her ear as they came up and she gave him a dazzling smile and tossed its twin, with happy impartiality, at all of us.

"Have you heard?" she said excitedly. "Have you heard? Jock's been found!"

Everyone seemed to speak at once; finally Emily Riordan detached her arms from Brenda Carroll's neck and the Major stopped pumping her hand and we all sat down and I ordered more champagne.

"This is Charles Williamson," Brenda Carroll stated, her hand on the tall grey man's arm, and mentioned all our names. "Very old friend," she added, which seemed to amuse them both.

Emily Riordan said: "Brenda, we're dying to know—"

But the tall girl, who was now seated between Lisa and me, cut in. "We'd better let the rescuer tell the story," she said, and the electric blue eyes on mine were more eloquent than I'd ever seen them. "This is Mr. Steele's party, anyway. Jim, take over, will you? I seem to remember asking you something similar once before: now give us Chapter Two."

Mr. Charles Williamson settled himself a little deeper in his chair and I noticed that his right hand had disappeared; otherwise no one moved. Yet the silence that settled about the glittering round table was suddenly so tight and tense that the beehive hum of the garden reached my ears as though from a great distance: we were alone here, we seven.

I said: "There's no point in prolonging this. We've all been asked to be present at the Chief Constable's office in another hour, in an official inquiry into young Jock's disappearance. The fact that he's been found, that he's safe, won't alter that inquiry's getting under way, because the Law is now very anxious to find out who stole him—and why. When I asked you all to meet me here beforehand, and told you I had some fresh light to throw on the subject, you all very obligingly said you'd come." My encircling eye passed from the Major to his sister, to Brenda Carroll, to Stanley Phillips and back to the Major again.

"The point is," I said, and paused to light a cigarette, hoping I sounded much more nonchalant than I felt, "the point is that my news is quite startling news, and

I thought I'd better spring it before the inquiry starts. It won't take long."

The cigarette tasted vile and I put it down. "Jock's found and Jock's safe, as his mother just said. And Serge Fabry—you'll be glad to hear—is dead."

Someone gasped.

"That isn't all my news," I added quickly. "His friend the Captain is dead too."

Emily Riordan looked startled. "Not—not Captain Rindge?"

"No," I said. "This was another captain. A blond captain!" Not a face at the table told me anything. "Also," I said, "the murderer of Graham and his secretary is known. Definitely known. . . ."

I AM not naturally sadistic, yet I was conscious of a twisted pleasure in prolonging the moment. Also I had a serious purpose too: under British law you can hardly even arrest people, much less try and execute them, on mere suspicion or hearsay. And even now I was woefully short of actual proof. My only chance, I felt, was to counter-attack a subtle criminal's colossal nerve and egotism with an assurance equally superb: to get under my antagonist's guard, so to speak, not in an official hearing where everything proceeded slowly, carefully, with few opportunities for surprise—but here in this sunlit garden, where I could handle things my own way, as unorthodox a way as I chose, and where tension could be screwed suddenly to the snapping-point. . . . That, right or wrong, was how I felt; and I'd persuaded the authorities to see things my way—at least to the extent of letting me arrange this brief meeting.

Brenda Carroll said: "Who was the murderer? And how do you know?"

"I know," I said, "chiefly because the blonde died first."

"What?"—as incredulously as if I'd lapsed into Esperanto.

"I mean, it was after I realized that she died first that I got to thinking. And if I hadn't got to thinking, and trying to reason things out from that starting-point, I very much doubt if we'd all be sitting here at this moment."

"You mean the secre'try gal, the lawyer's secre'try?" asked Major Carteret. "How d'you know she died first—and what if she did?"

"I know she died first because she didn't look frightened or anguished. She didn't look anything except surprised. She was lying on, or sitting on, or standing right beside the bed when she was killed—because there were no bloodstains on the carpet *except those right around Graham*. If she'd seen Graham killed, she'd have looked the way he looked: face all contorted in mortal terror. He saw her dead, she never saw him—because, as I say, she died first."

"Wonder why Graham didn't shout when he saw the gal being—" This was the Major's contribution.

"He was lying right outside the bathroom door," I said. "I think he was probably in the bathroom."

"Still," said Emily Riordan, "you'd think she'd look more than just surprised when the murderer approached her."

"Exactly," I said. "*Why didn't she?* It seems to me there's only one answer: *she knew the murderer well*. Probably very well—as a friend, you see, *who might naturally approach her*."

"Well, that tells us one thing about the murderer, doesn't it? Do we know anything else about him? *We know*," I said, "*that he seems to have had no face*."

EMILY RIORDAN put a hand over her eyes and shuddered.

"Wh-what do you mean?" said Brenda Carroll.

"I mean that it's just about as easy to get in and out of your apartment house without being noticed as to get in or out of the Tombs. But apparently no one has reported seeing—apparently no one *did* see—the person who drifted in and out of your eighth-floor apartment like a ghost. . . ."

"Roof?" said the Major matter-of-factly.

"There's a sun-deck on the roof. People there all afternoon. I talked with New York this morning on that very point. No stranger came in or out that way."

The Major said: "What *is* the answer, then? D'you know?"

"Yes," I said, "I know. And it's a very terrible answer. Because it involves one of the most terrible crimes a human being can commit."

"Quite," said the Major with an impatient snort. "Aren't many worse than murder. Granted."

I said: "No, not many. And this is—this was to be—one of them." His long wolf-jaw dropped. "It isn't, of course, that the murderer had no face," I said, leaning toward Brenda Carroll again. "The murderer . . . had *your* face."

No one moved; it seemed that no one even breathed.

"Would *you* be noticed—reported—coming in and out of your own apartment, as you do half a dozen times a day?" I asked her. "Of course not."

Brenda Carroll said in a voice chilled with horror: "Are you accusing me of—"

"Wait. Let's go on. You still haven't heard all my news. Some of you may have wondered at not seeing Mrs. Steele and me this morning when the *Empress* docked. You didn't see us because we left her very early—before dawn, in fact—and reached Bermuda hours before you did. And it wasn't very long after that," I went on, "that I found myself climbing aboard the yacht *Brenda*, seventy-odd miles at sea."

The gasp this time was Brenda Carroll's. "But she's—she's—"

"She's in the harbor at this moment. . . . I was especially interested in getting aboard her, for a number of reasons. I'd learned that she left Miami Tuesday. I'd realized what a dandy hiding-place she'd make for Jock—set on board her at night the same way my wife and I were taken off the *Empress*—and what an easy pick-up she could make of Mr. Serge Fabry. And as the plane I was in landed alongside her—do you know what I saw?" I lit another cigarette and hoped I was getting somewhere. "I saw a face looking out a porthole at me, Brenda—*your* face. . . . Or, to be more accurate, the murderer's face; or, to be specific, Fabry's face."

THE girl's lips were so bloodless that the lipstick looked like a bit of scarlet paper carelessly stuck on.

I said slowly: "I see you understand. I do think you might have told me. I knew you were keeping something back. I suppose Graham knew—and that was one reason why he had to go?"

I was drawing a pretty long bow. Yet I was also sure I was right.

Brenda Carroll said: "I'll tell you—later, not now. Go on—"

"So I found Mr. Fabry eating an orange in the study he'd just been peering out of, dressed in a lady's yellow silk dressing gown and feeling very chipper. He was sitting—actually sitting—on the wig he wore to impersonate you. That meant, of course, that beyond any further doubt you were to die. I didn't want to take any further chances, so I shot him. I understand I'll have to stand trial for it, but I hope that'll be just a formality." (I decided to stick to what I'd just said: "wig" before "shot." It sounded better.)

"Also," I said, "I imagine I'll have to stand trial for killing the Captain of the *Brenda*. Though that was clear-cut self-defense. He talked, too—before he died."

I looked up and a sharp electric wave went tingling down my spine. The last sentence had gone home like a bayonet thrust: no doubt of that. The face at which I looked was still blank, sphinxlike, but its eyes were the eyes of an animal in a trap that is shearing through bone. I felt a little sick. But I couldn't stop because of that.

I said: "I've been called in—or hauled in—on some very nasty jobs in my time. I've never heard of anything—ever—as bad as this; anything as brutal, anything as low. The only appropriate word is fiendish—fiendishly clever and fiendishly vile."

My eyes rested still on that sphinxlike face while I went on: "The scheme was not merely to kidnap Jock, Brenda, but to kidnap you, on your own yacht, with your own child. Wait"—as she started to speak impetuously—"do you see what that would mean? With Graham gone, with the child at their mercy before your eyes, they could, as days passed, wring literally anything out of you. I don't mean anything, I mean *everything*."

Visions too horrible for contemplation flashed before my eyes unbidden and were gone. And not before my eyes only: the long grey man stirred in his chair.

"And when they *had* everything," I said, "when the drafts on New York had been honored and safely cashed at some South American or Caribbean port—

splash overboard with you and the baby. And if any hitch developed later, Serge Fabry's amazing resemblance to you could be capitalized still more boldly, and a 'Brenda Carroll' could appear in Egypt, in China, in South America—long after the real Brenda Carroll had been food for sharks."

THE iron shell of composure I was attacking seemed untouched, yet I felt deep within me that it was split from within, ruined, ready to fall apart at a word, a gesture.

Brenda Carroll on a long rush of exhaled breath said "Ohhhhh," and bent her head and dug her clenched knuckles hard against her eyes. "I can't—I *can't* believe it," I heard her choked murmuring.

This was the moment. . . .

"*Why did you do it, Stanley?*" I said, "I think you ought to tell us why you did it. Tell Brenda, at least. I think you owe her that much, anyhow—to tell her why, before you go."

Slowly, slowly the square hard face lifted in ghastly pallor to mine. White lips as stiff as if cut in metal said, with difficulty. "This is absurd. Are you m-mad, Steele?"

Empty, mechanical—the gesture, the protest. He knew it. His mind, for that black yet blazing instant, had stopped functioning as minds at such intolerable moments of final impasse will often do.

"You and Fabry," I said, "you and Fabry. A fine pair! It was a fine scheme, too, wasn't it, Stanley," I said in merciless mockery, "only I had to ruin it by going back for the jewels! Yet even then I suppose you *might* have brought it off if . . . *You fool—don't you know I found them in your cabin, beneath your chair?*"

That tore it.

Under my eyes the big face changed. A quick red tide washed through the heavy cheeks, the eyes bulged suddenly, the cords in the thick neck swelled with the angry blood. A voice I didn't know said thickly: "All right. All right. You ruined it—and I'm through. All right! But I'm going to take you with me, Steele, as I go."

One big hand brushed across his mouth as he spoke the last word, and the motion of the other toward his breast was light-

ning-fast. The long grey man was on his feet like a tiger leaping, and the gun never emerged from beneath Stanley Phillips' coat: there was a sharp crack of bone breaking and a stifled cry and I slid my hand under Lisa's elbow and pulled her up and back.

But it was a very quick poison, and Doctor Phillips was dead before his big body had touched the soft green grass. I stood looking down at him, and at the faces of the others around the table, and I had a curious feeling of unreality, as though we were all actors in a play which was almost finished, and as though the invisible curtain which had been rung up when Brenda Carroll smiled at me in the Park Lane garden were now beginning, slowly and silently, to fall.

The grey man said in a gentle heart-felt tone: "I'll get hell for this."

Glass made a sharp tinkling sound, and the ring of startled faces which had closed us in surged forward. I turned my head and saw that there were two bodies on the grass. Emily Riordan had fainted.

OVER the sea another moon was rising, and from the high balcony where we sat, the lights and the music in the garden below were colored fireflies and fairy violins. Very soothing. I felt I needed soothing, after the past couple of days.

Lisa said: "I wish I hadn't eaten that lobster. At least, not all that lobster. . . ."

"Quiet, please. You are disgusting. Here I sit drenched with dreamy tropic splendor—"

"I know, I know. You have the poet's soul. Listen, though, will you?"

"Dreaming," I said spitefully, "of my little gypsy sweetheart."

"Ah. Well, listen, my little Percy Bysshe. Answer a couple of questions before your orgiastic soliloquies claim you for the night. Yes?"

"Certainly. James C. Steele is I'm. C is the middle name. C for Courtesy, Consideration, Courtliness."

"C for Courvoisier at the moment, I bet," Lisa said, wrinkling her delightful nose in a suspicious sniff. "You must have a bottle hidden on me. . . . See here—I get most of this, but I still don't see how you put two and two together and

added them up to make an eightball for your dear, dear friend S. Phillips."

"It wasn't just two and two. It was half a dozen different things—and finally it was four words of yours."

"Of mine?"

"At first," I said, "I suspected the Major and his sister—just as naturally and inevitably as they were worried about me. But I had nothing tangible to go on—not till you suggested checking on their phone calls, and even then, Emily's phone to her brother seemed a bit ostentatious if they were really guilty. It was the seaplane, really, that began to crystallize things for me."

"Why?"

"Well, I began to add up certain factors. As I said to you, it was mighty funny about the attack on Phillips. The more I thought, the more unconvincing it seemed. The only purpose it could have had, if they really meant to silence him about Fabry being aboard, was to kill him. Yet they didn't kill him. Didn't even wound him seriously. Seemed very unlike the sure touch of whoever was behind the dirty work. Naturally it occurred to me that he could have chucked some ammonia around and used a scalpel on himself, though I didn't see why.

"Then—I guess I'm naturally a suspicious slob—he'd made such a point of emphasizing his hatred of Fabry—dragging out a picture he said he kept around so as to keep his rage white-hot, and all that rubbish—I kind of asked whether there wasn't a touch of Lady Macbeth: protesting too much. Or was that Hamlet's mother? Anyway, it was certainly true that, outside of Brenda herself, only Stanley knew I had a gun. Because he'd seen it when I opened Brenda's door for him. Maybe that meant nothing—I couldn't be sure then—but it was another factor.

"More important, though—I had the most curious feeling about the fracas in 138. A feeling that he was helping Fabry, not attacking him. Helping him get out the porthole—by blocking me off so I couldn't interfere. It was cleverly done, so cleverly I couldn't even be sure . . . but I marked that down too.

"ANOTHER thing. If he met Fabry at nearly dawn, what the devil had

he been doing, himself, all night? Was he with Brenda all that time? He could have been—and I meant to ask her. But a phrase of yours somehow made me quite, quite sure."

"Highly gratifying, I'm sure," Lisa murmured. "What was it? I drop so many pearls."

"Talking about the plane, you said—referring to the nice timing involved—'then you and Phillips go to see him to accuse him jointly *at precisely that hour.*' Or words to that effect. I realized that the supposed attack on Stanley, coming so that it would leave just time enough to get me over to his cabin, and then into Fabry's cabin, was so remarkable a coincidence in timing that the chances were it was *more* than mere coincidence. It got me to a point where I decided I'd search Phillips' cabin. . . . And, by Jove, there were the jewels, as I told you."

"Why didn't you take 'em then?"

"Possession of stolen objects doesn't mean, legally, *conscious* possession. He could have said someone put 'em there. Had to give him a little more rope. . . . There were the jewels and that latitude-longitude notation scrawled on the paper. I didn't know—I don't know now—when he scrawled that: possibly he didn't write it at all, possibly Fabry wrote it down on the wrapper before handing the jewels to Phillips, so that Phillips (who was to bring the frantic mother out to the yacht, as I explained) couldn't possibly go wrong on the yacht's exact position. And that rendezvous point in the middle of the ocean plus the fact that Hall wirelesslyed that the *Brenda* had left Miami Tuesday, made me pretty sure she'd be hanging around at that spot."

"You're very smart, Steele. What about Serge? When did you first notice that—resemblance?"

"I noticed it first when I saw him first, right outside Brenda's cabin door, shortly after we sailed. I figured he reminded me of that bust of Tiberius I told you about, but after Phillips had showed me those photographs, I realized it was someone else, too, that he reminded me of: Brenda Carroll. Most people, of course, don't spot similarities between a man and a woman even when they're very marked, because most eyes are misled by non-

essentials: haircuts or hair-dos, hats, the shape of the eyebrows (which can be altered by a pencil—all those things.) I don't say I'd have noticed it myself if Stanley Phillips hadn't shown me that Riviera snapshot: the tops of both faces were in shadow, and it brought out the likeness sharply. They looked—like brother and sister."

"How clean did she come on that tonight?" Lisa said curiously (She knew I had spent an hour with Brenda Carroll immediately after Stanley Phillips' suicide.) "Or is that one of the many exciting secrets between you two?"

"I knew there must be *some* relationship," I said slowly, "or I wouldn't have ventured that crack in the garden—about there being some crimes more terrible than mere murder. The bone structure of the two faces was almost exactly the same. . . . She came very clean. He was her half-brother—and *he knew it*. Yet he got her to marry him! Then the baby came. . . . Well, figure it out—"

LISA drew in her breath sharply. "Oh, Lord!" she said. "And I suppose that was the real hold he had over her?"

"Very smart, infant, as usual. Yes. Her tale about his bigamy was hokey, because even then and even to me she didn't want to spill the truth. Too painful. And, she felt, too shameful. Only Graham knew. Her father was all kinds of a hellion, you see—not just a financial pirate. Serge was his son by an Italian mistress: the boy was brought up abroad and the old man got very fond of him and left him a good stake. Which he promptly ran through as soon as the mother died. I'm telling you what Brenda told me, which is what Serge told her—but *only after they were married*. Immediately after. She'd never known he was her half-brother, of course. He had no love for her—never pretended to have, the minute the ceremony was over. But he had a way to make her pay."

"And I suppose with that wig—"

"It was perfect. It was startling. It was incredible. When I saw that face—*her* face, absolutely—staring out the port-hole at me, I—well, of course it cleared up practically everything. It meant that, whatever the details of this plot had been and might be, the real Brenda was slated

to die. That's why I didn't want to take any foolish chances with Cousin Serge: I let him have it, cold, the first instant I got."

"Jim, go back to the very beginning, will you? I don't mean the blonde in the bedroom, I mean the start of the whole thing—as you see it. I'm still gasping over Stanley Phillips having been mixed up in it."

I said, having now got thoroughly awake and interested in my subject, "It would be very easy and quite wrong to put Phillips down as a cold, unprincipled son of a thus-and-such who took what he thought was an easy road to riches, regardless of who he betrayed or who got hurt. He was unprincipled, all right, but I don't think he was cold. I'd call him one of those badly integrated split-personalities who are forever at war with themselves. The world is full of them, God knows. . . . I talked with Joe White again this afternoon and got some dates, and this is the way I see the whole thing, as well as I can piece it together:

"BREND A CARROLL was married at twenty to Paul Lancaster, one of the Boston Lancasters: a nice guy, not much on the ball, maybe, but pleasant, correct, and in general O.K. He simply couldn't stomach our Brenda: they were divorced in '34 and she took her maiden name again.

"She raised considerable hell for the next four years. On February 1, 1938, she was married to Serge Fabry. His phony South-Russian title—'boyar' or something like that—wasn't entirely phony: the old man equipped his son with that, I gather, as well as with money. Jock was born eight months later: September 30, 1938.

"In December, 1938, she was divorced, and again took her maiden name. *Where was she through December of '37 and January of '38?*—that being the period when she got pregnant, obviously. She told me tonight where she was: she was on a cruise aboard the *Brenda*, and Stanley Phillips was a guest. I trust you will require no indelicate details."

"I know about the bees and the flowers, if that's any clue—"

"—and I gather that Stanley not only

made violent love to her, but begged and besought her to marry him."

"Why wouldn't he?" Lisa said scornfully. "Fifteen millions or so."

"Sure. And perhaps it was purely sordid on his part. But, myself, I don't think so. Because . . . you know what she did?"

"What?"

"The girl is a female hit-and-run driver of the most arrant type. Why, even with me—"

"I know," said Lisa, patting the back of my hand. "I'll leave you alone with your memories in just a minute. Stick to Stanley."

"She laughed at him. And that, for a person of Phillips' temperament, is the one thing you must not, under any circumstances, do. Quite intolerable. Worse than dishonorable death. She not only laughed—she told him, then and there, that she was going to marry Serge, whom she'd met a couple of years before; that she found him much more amusing than large, stolid Doctor Phillips."

"At which point Doctor Phillips' 'love' turned to solid, lasting hate."

"Right again, my armchair psychiatrist. It certainly did, judging by what's happened since. I'll give the dead the benefit of the doubt, especially since it makes the whole thing more understandable to me: I can imagine him having been kicked right square between the eyes by this attitude of Brenda's. One of the few—perhaps the only—powerful, sincere amatory drives he's ever known has been turned against him to make him ridiculous. I can understand now why he settled down to this Bermuda run, brooding, coldly detached outwardly, and inwardly seething with rage at the world, Brenda, himself. . . . If he ever got a chance to get even, if he ever got a chance to rook the world as he must have felt the world had rooked him, he would grab it in a moment. You get, in a general way, the picture. . . .

"NOW at what point, exactly, he and Fabry got together I don't know. The discarded lover and the blackmailing ex-husband. 'They got chinning and they hooked up together' was all the blond yacht's Captain could tell me. But you can picture the icy evil in Fabry acting like a soothing poultice to Phillips' still-

smoldering wound. And you can see how, little by little, Fabry could lead him on.

"At this point, Fabry has run through the money he originally got from Brenda. Let's put it that, side by side with the spectre of real want which is now gibbering at him, his inflamed and diseased imagination sets a vision of the incredible riches, the incredible life which could be his if he could only tap that mine of wealth freely—if, in a word, he could somehow get Brenda out of the way, yet make her money *his*. . . .

"And somehow—perhaps nebulously at first, then more clearly, or perhaps in one brilliant flash—he gets his Great Idea.

"It will take, first of all, a trusted confederate. And after hours, or perhaps days; over drinks with Stanley Phillips, Fabry's acute brain must have grasped the rage and rebellion underlying Stanley's attitude toward life, and he decided that Phillips would be his man. You can even imagine just how, bit by bit, he led him on, revealing only bits of the whole scheme, getting him more and more excited and avaricious and curious, till at last he had him safely hooked.

"The scheme, in brief, was just what I said in the garden—to get Brenda and her baby off together on Brenda's yacht, where they'll be entirely in the conspirators' control. Now, this is going to take some doing—because Brenda never takes the baby anywhere, never sees him except on visits to her old nurse Margaret MacRae. O.K., they must have figured: if the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the mountain—we'll put the baby on the yacht ourselves, and then decoy Brenda aboard. A message will be given her by that honest dog Stanley Phillips, telling her to come quietly, at night, to some lonely spot on the island where she'll be met. Stanley will accompany her. They will be rowed by the yacht's crew out to the yacht (Brenda perhaps dressed as a man, for a reason you'll see in a minute)—and hotsy tots, off we go!"

"But won't Serge be suspected?" Lisa asked.

"Ah, no. Serge has already capitalized on his resemblance to his half-sister, when he entered the Carroll Park Avenue apartment as Brenda and killed Graham. Serge will capitalize on it again. First he will

disappear, publicly and dramatically, as he disappeared from the *Empress*—and the plane which picked him up will never be heard of again. Why? Because it will be locked in the hold of the yacht (as I found it): dismantled, and ready to be destroyed at leisure."

"But wouldn't the crew have talked?"

"No. Because when our blond Captain—an ex-World War flier, I am sorry to report—hoisted it out of the hold and took off to pick up the *Empress* and his boss, he carried a set of woman's clothes and a wig, and told the crew he was going to get the owner, the always-slightly-wacky Mrs. Carroll. . . . Mrs. Carroll stepped aboard from the returning plane, exactly as advertised. How could even the most confirmed gossip of a sailor have connected that with a story, heard much later if at all, of a man jumping overboard from a Bermuda boat? The scheme was safe as churches. "Mrs. Carroll" even wore the wig in his study, when a steward brought him breakfast—that's how I saw Brenda Carroll's face, so to speak, looking out the porthole. After they'd got the real Brenda Carroll aboard, perhaps dressed as a man, as I mentioned, and imprisoned in one of the cabins, *then* Serge could appear openly as a man, as the passenger who'd just been brought aboard. You see? He could swagger all over the boat in perfect safety: the crew would never know. At the next good opportunity, they could all have been fired, anyway, and a new crew shipped."

LISA was very thoughtful.

"Yes," she said finally, "it's insane, it's impossible. Yet just because it is 'impossible,' they might have worked it. Of course where it went wrong—"

"Where it went wrong was Brenda's forgetting her jewel case. Up to then it was fine. The rodent Riordans—not bad, eh?—the rodent Riordans had played their part beautifully. I'm sure they'd never been taken into Fabry's or Phillips' confidence completely: that would have been very risky, and was unnecessary. Probably they were fed some tale about taking Brenda for a big financial ride, and were helping out for the sake of some crumbs. It was when she began to suspect that worse and bigger things were afoot that Emily Riordan began to look so badly.

She was worried, all right—worried about her own precious neck. And Phillips knew they were worried. I don't think he wholly trusted them. . . . To go back: the Riordans announce, Tuesday evening, that Brenda has accepted their invitation to Bermuda. Fine. Instantly Fabry or Phillips phones the yacht's captain at Miami, telling him to hitch up his pants and get going. . . . Serge has the date with Brenda all made for Wednesday, at which time (this is guesswork, but it makes sense) he will be present in Brenda's apartment when a call will come on the telephone. The same nasty voice as before—the Major's voice, thinly disguised, for my money—will reiterate the demand for more money or threaten, definitely, kidnapping of the child immediately. Some sort of scene will ensue, during which Serge will loudly and heatedly disclaim any and all connection with the scheme, and try to convince Brenda that he's sincere."

"What's the purpose of all that?" Lisa asked. "I don't see—"

"The Major will tell us, you wait and see. He won't hold back a thing, now he's in the clink. I bet you he'll tell what he really believed—that it was a chiseling scheme to scare money out of Brenda, but not real kidnapping. That radiogram telling that the baby had been snatched must have been nearly as nasty a shock to the Riordans as it was to Brenda: showed they were away over their heads in much deeper waters than they'd realized. The real purpose of this final telephone scene, I think, was to make doubly sure that the always-unpredictable Mrs. Carroll would be on the boat with the Riordans that afternoon. If her baby were definitely threatened, *of course* she'd go to Bermuda, not change her mind (as she was notorious for doing) at the last minute. You see, they've burned their bridges now—the yacht's on the high seas."

"I'm hanging on every word. Go on."

"**W**ELL, it just didn't work that way. Graham tells her to beat it out of town entirely and skip the interview; she arranges with the Riordans to meet them at the Park Lane at a time when she *should* have been listening to Serge's histrionics; something, the heels realize, has slipped.

And nothing must slip. So Serge decks himself out as Brenda, wig and all, and trips into the Carroll apartment house without question or comment, and rings the bell—and is admitted by the unfortunate Miss Madeline Marsh. . . . Old man Graham may or may not have been in the bathroom. Anyway, Miss Marsh, let's say, opens up, and the disguised Serge realizes what's happened and has to decide, all in a flash, what to do. I must say he acted with vigor and initiative: here's his chance to get Obstructionist Graham out of the way for good and all. He goes into the bedroom, asking Miss Marsh to follow; seizes her as she stands beside the bed, and cuts her throat. . . . As Graham emerges, ditto. . . . Yes, I know, darling—it's very nasty. But that's what happened. . . . Thinking very fast, Serge then writes the note."

"What note?"

"Oh, haven't had a chance to tell you. The note the Law found under Graham's body. They kept it dark, naturally—till they learned from me that the baby had been found. Then Carney told me. Around noon today. Note said: 'Mrs. Carroll: This is what will happen to your baby if you don't follow orders.' See? Put all the blame smack on the kidnapers—and *no one could prove that Serge Fabry had a thing to do with them.*"

"Who did the actual kidnapping, by the way?"

"Alas for human frailty," I said. "The incorruptible Margaret was *corrupted*—on assurance that the baby wouldn't be harmed. Margaret simply hides the baby—until some time before dawn on Thursday, when the blond captain (who has flown on ahead) arrives in the amphibian and taxies right up to Margaret's little private beach. He takes the blanket-wrapped baby and flies off for the *Express* to get his second passenger—"

"Jim! You mean that baby was in the plane when—when Fabry jumped overboard?"

"Sure. Didn't hurt him. He was chipper as could be when I found him in a spare cabin aboard the yacht. Feeling fine. Nice youngster. Must have been quite a sight to see him and his 'mother' come aboard, though, at that. . . . Well. Back to the Park Avenue apartment: Serge then

sees the jewel case. What ho, he thinks, let's make sure of that, anyway! He picks it up and exits. . . ."

"To head for his cabin on the Bermuda boat."

"Right. . . . Meanwhile, the Riordans are horrified, though they can't show it, at Brenda's news that she's left her jewels behind and sent a nice man (that's me, in case you don't recognize the reference) back to get 'em. They don't know how nice man will come out with Serge, and it must have been a very nasty shock to have nice man turn up aboard the *Empress*, babbling of a dead man and woman on the carpet and the bed, and how the Law must be invoked at once. I don't blame the Major for losing his temper. To make things worse, our Brenda seems to take quite a shine to nice man—aha-ha-ha-ha—and they aren't sure how much n.m. has figured out. Hence the rope gag—rope being pulled by Serge, I have no doubt—and examination of Joe White's radiogram. Curses! This guy Steele is in close cahoots with the Law! Let's have a conference: and I imagine Serge and Phillips had quite a conference, ending with Phillips' attack on himself and his hasty phone call to me. This fake attack, you see, served—or was supposed to serve—to divert suspicion once and for all away from Doctor Phillips, and concentrate it on the about-to-vanish Serge. . . . A few minutes more—a leap through the porthole—and Serge is in the clear. *Spurlos versenkt*, because his plane will never be heard of again!

"SO now everything is jake. Or so they must have felt. The baby's aboard the yacht; Serge is out of it and a free agent, free to play the part of Brenda as and when he wishes; Graham is out of the way; Brenda in Bermuda will shortly get the message to contact the kidnapers; the New York police are diverted by a note under Graham's body which, to say the least, befuddles and confuses the issue—and there is just one fly in the ointment. Just one. A fly named Steele. And thinking things over that afternoon and early evening, Stanley Phillips must have decided that this guy Steele had better go. Right now, while the going was—from his viewpoint—safe. I don't think he went

down to dinner when he told me, in the bar, he was going to. I think he went down to the ship's dispensary—where, I learned later, he kept a gun—and came back to his cabin, only to see me emerging. Then he followed me up to the boat deck and tried to kill me. He failed, and he knew he'd failed, and he didn't dare risk being seen by anyone on the promenade deck; so he came quietly down to dinner as fast as he could, and was sitting there calmly when I limped down myself. He may have thought I suspected him—for he knew I suspected everyone else who had any connection with Brenda—but I was in his cabin only a few minutes and he wouldn't have any reason to feel I'd located the jewel box he'd so ingeniously hidden."

LISA'S fingers touched my arm. "I'm very glad he's such a lousy shot," she said abstractedly. "What about the blond Captain?"

"Oh, sure. Brenda says she hired him in the Fall of '37; he had a bad record, but Brenda wouldn't think of bothering her pretty head with petty things like that. Fabry got to him—that's all: Fabry was his kind of man, and besides Fabry paid him whenever he wanted a job done. The Captain told me all that before he died.

"I trust," I added, "that this masterly résumé satisfies you, and that I can now—"

"Just a couple of minor points, my hero. Why do you suppose Emily Riordan called her brother—that call you heard about, I mean?"

"Probably to tell him she was getting worried sick—that Steele had just got a radiogram and that he'd better watch his step. She could have done it in a kind of double-talk that no one over-hearing or listening-in on could understand. A kind of private code."

"Of course. . . . Oh, who did smoke the Viceroy's?"

"Just exactly who you'd think: Lawyer Graham. Never smoked anything else."

There was a fairly long silence.

Then Lisa said: "Did dear, dear Brenda get her jewels back?"

"She did, indeed. And you are in no

position to take that tone about dear, dear Brenda," I said.

"Why not, pray tell?"

I relapsed into injured silence. She knows damned well why not, I thought.

Lisa said with delicate malice: "Do you recall two minutes of eight, somewhere off Bermuda, September twentieth? I told you I should revert to it."

"Go ahead and revert."

"I will. Because this has gone far enough. Too far, as a matter of fact. You were yapping about me on a veranda under a moon, me and young Tony Pitt, who quite incidentally bores me to extinction—"

My heart did a nimble double flip-flop.

I said cautiously: "Well?"

"Well, you saw a girl with dark hair and a white dress with big red buttons, and I have dark hair and a dress with big red buttons, so it was me, of course; and you became mysteriously silent and aloof, and I began to wonder if you had a secret sweetie or something—"

I was out of my chair. I was bending

over her. I was saying: "Lisa! Is that—?"

"But of course," she said calmly, pushing me away. "Mary Eddy came that night with an identical dress to mine: we both swore we'd never shop at Fox's again. She's announcing her engagement to Tony next week. Of course you hadn't heard that."

I sat down again. "It is no use my pretending I'm crushed," I said. "I am much, much too happy. I will say, though, and mean it, that—I'm very sorry."

Some more silence interwove itself with the distant violins; then Lisa said: "You never did get around to asking me the eleventh question. I told you I had one more—away back on Thursday morning, if you care to recollect."

"Do you care to tell me?"

"I wasn't too perturbed about our Brenda," Lisa said, "but I thought I'd better ask you, anyway. . . . It was—whether you still loved me?"

As best I possibly could, I tried to answer her.

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Elissa was the lovely bait that lured Chick Garvin into the murder trap. The hot seat was the not-so-lovely pay-off, unless he could crack that neat killer frame.



THE KILLER FRAME

By PAUL SELONKE

THE door of the rooming house opened, and Chick Garvin stared curiously into the landlady's sparse, white face. Not because Mrs. Pollak was

particularly ugly, but because her smile was missing. Her smile was usually as much a part of her as was her dyed hair and rather ill-fitting false teeth.

"Elissa isn't here, Chick," she blurted.

"I can wait," he said briefly.

"She doesn't want you to wait. She—"

"Don't give me that," grinned Garvin. "I'm the last guy Elissa would stand up on a movie date."

"She's over at the Morris Hotel, Chick. She wants you to come over."

"Morris Hotel?" His lips tightened. "What—?"

"Something's terribly wrong, Chick." Mrs. Pollak's bony fingers grabbed his arm. "She came home from work a while ago, but got all excited when she heard that Clyde, her brother, had been gone all day. She went out five minutes later—with a gun in her purse!"

"A gun?" Garvin's mouth twisted. "You sure?"

She nodded despairingly. "I was outside Clyde's room and saw her take the gun out of his bureau. She hid it in her purse and hurried out. Chick, I'm scared."

"And this about the hotel?" he gritted.

"She phoned here a couple of minutes ago. You're supposed to come right away and meet her at the Morris Hotel. Room 703. She sounded awfully excited and—"

Chick Garvin turned from the door and plowed down to his car at the curb. Early this afternoon, the police had told him unbelievable things about Elissa and her brother. Now, coming face to face with this—

He drove away desperately—glanced back and cursed when he saw the headlights of a police coupe following him. Thin lips tight, he went to work on this tail Detective-Lieutenant Clemens had pinned on him. He turned sudden corners, reversed directions like a motorist gone mad, and when he finally saw no sign of the coupe behind him, he set out for the Morris Hotel.

His brain was numb as he drove along. The police just had to be wrong! A girl with clear, smiling blue eyes like Elissa had, couldn't possibly be mixed with one of the most ruthless men that stalked the underworld!

That was what Clemens had claimed, this afternoon, when he called Garvin into his office at headquarters. He was a hard, thin, leather-faced man who had come up to his position at the Detective Bureau the hard way. And the minute Garvin came

in, he spoke in a voice that was as threatening as a poised lash:

"Your record as a private dick has been fairly clean, but right now we're not so sure. We happen to know Joe Barty's back in town, and we're asking you to open up with any dope you've got on him. Clam up on us and, by hell, we'll nail your hide to the wall!"

"Wait a second!" Garvin blurted. "What—?"

"It's come to us, Garvin, that that dirty hood is trying to get his elbows into some of the local unions, working from under-cover so we can't break him up. We've tried twice to grab him on a vagrancy charge, but he was tipped off both times. It's obvious somebody's keeping him informed about our operations. We're sure there are no leaks in the department, so I've been checking up personally."

His eyes narrowed. "You pal around with a lot of our boys, and you look like a guy an innocent-eyed babe could wrap around her fingers."

Garvin reddened. "If you're talking of Elissa—"

"I'm talking of both Elissa and her brother. Clyde may be a union under-cover man, but we know he's the type Barty could buy over to his side. I've got the dope that both he and Elissa's been bought. A reliable stoolie has tipped me that Elissa is Joe Barty's new moll."

"You dirty heel!" roared Garvin. He dived at the desk.

HE never reached Clemens. Sergeant Mullins, who was standing inside the door, clamped fingers to the back of Garvin's neck and slammed him hard against the wall.

Garvin crawled to his feet. His face purple with restrained fury, he snarled at Clemens:

"Yeah, I get it. You're one of those cry-babies, the low kind of louse who'd frame any guy to hell who beats your time. I beat you plenty with Elissa, didn't I? You didn't get anywhere, trying to make her these past three weeks, and now you want to ease your hurt feelings by taking it out on me. Can you deny it?"

"Nuts," snapped Clemens. "I don't give a damn for her. I'll play up to any frill, if she's connected with a wanted

crook. And I found out a lot of things."

He lashed: "Maybe you're in up to your neck with Barty, Garvin; maybe you aren't. I'm warning you to stay clear of that girl, or I'll throw you in the can as an accessory. Take your choice, Mister."

"So I'm to take my choice," sneered Garvin. "Elissa's in the clear. So am I. No matter how much a cop's feelings have been hurt, he can't interfere with private citizens. Try remembering that, Clemens."

"We can go to hell, eh?"

"Damned right you can," Garvin snarled at him. "Clemens, if you want war between us, by God I'll give it to you. Keep blackening Elissa just because you're a sore-head, and I won't answer for the consequences. Understand?"

Clemens rose up, his jaw outthrust. "What I said about staying away from her goes. Now—get out!"

Mullins grabbed Garvin's arm. He shoved him roughly out into the hall and slammed the door.

Garvin twisted around, glowering, mad enough to have gone back in and had it out with Clemens. But when he finally made his way down the hall, he was fighting the sweaty feeling that prickled his spine, trying to convince himself this was nothing but jealousy and nothing to worry over.

Sure, some of the headquarters boys had confided in him about Joe Barty and the raids they were planning. Sure, he had talked to Elissa about it. But, good Lord, it couldn't be true that she had tipped Barty. And this about her being Barty's woman—

Now, tonight, Elissa had taken a gun with her and was waiting for him in one of the most expensive hotels in town. There was something queer about that, and it brought that sweaty feeling back to his spine. He remembered what Clemens had said that afternoon.

Yet when he parked at an obscure side entrance to the hotel and strode inside, he was still sure that what Clemens had said was sheer jealousy. He swiftly crossed the big soft-rugged lobby and took an elevator to the seventh floor. A moment later, he was knocking at the heavy soundproof door of 703.

While waiting, an elevator stopped at the floor and a heavy-set man got out and disappeared down the hall in the opposite direction.

Garvin stared uncomfortably. He hadn't gotten a good look at the man, and somehow the man had looked a little like that detective who had been driving the police coupe he thought he had shaken.

Garvin got no response from his knock.

A nervous feeling gripped him, for if Elissa was waiting here in 703, she would have opened up at once. He instinctively palmed his gun, his free hand stabbing to the door knob. The door was unlocked, and he pushed into a tiny inner vestibule.

And then he heard the chilling sound—a groaning, a painful gasping coming from the trimly furnished room that lay beyond the vestibule. Garvin sucked in a puzzled breath, took two steps into the bedroom—stopped dead.

Elissa wasn't in there. Only a thin-figured man, hunching awkwardly against the wall—Lieutenant Clemens!

CLEMENS' leathery face was sweat-pimpled, twisted in pain. He was holding himself erect by gripping one hand on an electric wall-fixture. His other hand was a tight claw, bunching his coat lapels across his chest. His dulled eyes hardly recognized Garvin. And then his voice came out, labored, in a struggling stage whisper:

"Get Barty! St. Paul—Fourth Presbyterian—"

His body shuddered violently, and his grip slipped from the wall-fixture. He thumped down heavily to the floor, rolled over on his back and lay motionless.

And now the shirt above his vest was finally exposed, red and sodden with blood!

Garvin swore in horror and knelt beside him.

Clemens was dead; shot through the chest. It was the kind of wound that should have killed him instantly.

Garvin got up and spun desperate eyes about the room. His face was gray; sweat was trickling down his back. He had been lured here to be a fall-guy for murder, and there was little doubt that headquarters had been already notified. Perhaps, at this very moment—

He sleeved the sweat from his forehead, sprang to the door, opened it quietly and slipped outside. He breathed relief as he saw the hall was deserted.

He walked quietly to the stair well, every nerve in his body quivering. Then he began running down, the over-powering urge to get out of the hotel goading him to frantic speed.

One horrible truth was hammering in his brain—that when the police discovered the body, they would check his movements. They would be curious why he had taken pains to shake the cop that had been tailing him. They would get hold of the information that Elissa had called him here to room 703.

With an effort he walked casually across the lobby. A few seconds later, he was out the side entrance, striding to his parked car, and the cool night air felt good to his constricted lungs.

Footsteps thumped out of the hotel entrance behind him. His face went a little slack with horror and fear. He turned, his right hand close to his chest.

The man behind him was gray-haired, wearing a battered old hat carelessly on the back of his squarish head—friendly old Pop Handel of the Detective Bureau.

"What's the all-fired rush, son?" grinned Handel as he pulled up beside him. "Got yourself a blonde you want to see, or something?"

Garvin's face crinkled in a tight smile. "Yeah, Pop, there's a client across town who—"

"The client can wait, son. Clemens called me here, saying he wanted me to help in a conference with you and some gal. Now, you wouldn't be running out on that meeting by any chance, would you?"

Garvin shook his head. "Clemens told me I could go, as he didn't need me any more. He told me that if I saw you, I should tell you—"

"None of that, Garvin." Pop took him gently by the arm. "I reckon you and me go up to 703 first and find out. It'll only take a minute. So, what say?"

Garvin fought against the cold sweat that popped out all over his body. He couldn't go back up there with a detective, even though it was only Pop Handel.

"Okay, Pop," he said agreeably. "Okay if you want to be stubborn about it."

He had as soft a spot for Pop as did the members of the Bureau, and it was almost against his will that his fist looped up, smashing to Handel's square jaw.

Pop Handel stumbled helplessly. He bumped against the side of Garvin's car and rolled to the sidewalk.

Garvin leaped into his car, started the engine. A curse gritted from his lips when a beat cop sauntered suddenly around the rear corner. He roared his car away.

The curse was more directed at himself for having to resort to means such as this. Striking Pop Handel meant the whole Bureau would be angrily at his tail. Moreover, the police would consider this desperate escape as unequivocal proof that he *had* murdered Lieutenant Clemens!

LATER, he was slipping surreptitiously from the side door of an obscure public garage in the east end of town. Twice since leaving the hotel, cops had spotted his all too familiar car and had given chase. Now the car was hidden in this garage, and he felt safe. He rammed fists deep into his pockets and set off grimly along the dark street to do battle for his very life.

Images of the recent past were torturing flames in his brain: Clemens be-friending Elissa in an effort to find if she actually was Joe Barty's moll; that episode in Clemens' office; the police coupe the suspicious Clemens had put on his tail; Elissa going out to the Morris Hotel, a gun weighting her purse!

Garvin groaned. No! Elissa hadn't lured him there as a fall-guy for a murder Barty was pulling.

That had been Clemens' work!

According to Pop Handel, Clemens had been holding Elissa in that hotel room, and it seemed to Garvin that Clemens was the one who had forced Elissa to call him over. Probably Clemens had been intending a showdown with Pop Handel, who had a clever, fatherly way in handling women, to get the truth out of Elissa.

But what if Joe Barty—

Garvin felt sick as he strove to reject the horrible possibility that Barty had come there and committed murder to save Elissa from a police inquisition.

And Garvin knew that his own salvation lay in keeping out of range of the police

until he could somehow manage to clear himself.

Clear himself how? He didn't know where to begin searching for Joe Barty. It was a task doomed to failure even before he began.

He tried reading between the lines of all that had happened. There was nothing that could help him, except that before he died, Detective-Lieutenant Clemens had gasped, "Get Barty! St. Paul—Fourth Presbyterian—"

Clemens must have had reason for making the church reference, though there was as much a chance it had merely been the mumbling of a dying man. A gutter-rat killer like Joe Barty couldn't possibly have any connection with the Fourth Presbyterian Church on Park Boulevard—the most exclusive church in the city.

Garvin slipped into a cigar store, into a phone booth and put a call through to the big church.

At first he was afraid no one was there. Then, finally, the janitor answered sleepily, irritably.

"This is a matter of great importance," Garvin said. "I was asked to meet a man at St. Paul in your church. The directions confuse me, and I wonder if—"

"Your friend likely means the St. Paul Bibliotheca, a religious book store behind this church."

"A book store?" Garvin blurted.

"Yeah, Mister, it's on the street behind this church," said the janitor. "It's probably closed now."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Chick Garvin was walking down the shadowy, deserted street on the south side of the hulking gray-stoned Fourth Presbyterian Church. And upon reaching the crooked, narrow little avenue that ran behind the church, he found a tight-bolted bookstore that had *St. Paul Bibliotheca* in modest gold letters on its window.

The darkened shop was deserted.

He fought the near-panic that shook him, and his eyes thinned when he made a more careful examination of the ancient two-storied stone building. Though the front second-floor windows were sealed with old-fashioned slat shutters, there was an almost imperceptible glow of light behind them.

It meant someone was upstairs! Sudden fury rose up in his heart, but common sense warned him to move carefully. Joe Barty would not be alone. So he quietly circled the building, searching for some possible entrance.

There was one, in a between-building passageway, and the door was locked. And as he silently tried the knob, he heard feet gritting toward him.

He flung himself out of the light that shafted into the passageway from the street lamp. His tense back hunched against the cold wall, he waited, gun in hand.

A heavy-set man entered the passage from the street—one who looked not unlike the detective who had been in the coupe that had trailed him earlier. Then he saw that it wasn't; that it was the same man he had seen come out of the elevator at the Morris Hotel!

Chick Garvin watched him go to the door, take out a key and fit it to the lock. Garvin sprang then and smashed his gun hard to the man's skull. He caught him as he fell, and eased him to the ground.

He took the man's key and gun, entered, locking the door behind him so this first enemy was safely on the outside. And feeling his way about the lightless hall he had entered, he bumped against a stairway that led upward.

Gun tight-gripped, he tiptoed up the stairs.

It led him to a long, dim corridor on the second floor, and he moved grimly to the lighted open doorway he saw to the front of the corridor. The soft drone of a radio came to him as he approached the door, and he cautiously peered around the jamb.

An abnormally thin man, with cruel, bony features and coldly watchful dark eyes, was sitting at a table, thumbing through a sheaf of papers as he half-listened to the little radio at his elbow. Racketeer, murderer, one of the most dangerous and enterprising men in the Middle West—Joe Barty!

Garvin licked his lips. His grip tightened on his gun as he bunched his muscles to spring into the room.

Then the round nozzle of a gun prodded his spine.

"Drop the rod—Chick Garvin!" a wo-

man's voice gritted tensely behind him.

Joe Barty swore and leaped to his feet. He ripped an expensive-looking gold-chased revolver out of his pocket and roughly relieved the frozen figure of Garvin of both guns. Stepping back, he flashed a pleased smile past Garvin's shoulder.

"You're sure dependable, Elissa," he chuckled.

It was Elissa, the very girl Garvin had been intending to marry, who had thrust a gun into his back!

"I'm pretty glad you came here, Garvin," Barty said. "A man I had watching at the Morris, saw you go to 703, and I imagined you've been working with Clemens in his lone-wolfing. That you've broken in here proves that."

His voice hardened. "I want nothing to happen to the good thing I'm cooking up here, so I'm asking you how much Clemens found out and who else knows about it!"

Chick Garvin merely stared blankly.

Barty answered with a leer. "Being shut-mouth will get you nowhere, Garvin. I've got ways of making—"

Four men, guns in fists, crowded excitedly into the room. They stopped dead, seeing Garvin at bay.

One of them was the man Garvin had slugged out in the passageway. He smashed his fist to Garvin's face.

Barty shoved him back. "Take it easy, Lou!"

"Oh, yeah?" Lou snarled. "This mug slugged me outside the door. If the boys hadn't been downstairs and heard me pounding on the door—"

"I give the orders here," snapped Barty.

Lou swore. "So I've got to take orders like the rest of your small fry! Who tipped you to this choice union setup to chisel into? Who's protecting you?"

"Better not get ideas, Lou," said Barty. "You ain't the type to big-shot around, you know."

"Yeah?" Lou was worked up, threatening.

Barty shrugged. "Okay, work him over then. He refuses to open up with the dope Clemens got on us."

"I'll work him over all right, but only because I'm deep in this too." Lou eyed Barty a second, then turned to the others.

"Downstairs with him, mugs!" he said.

GARVIN had a glimpse of Elissa's taut white face as he was dragged out, and it made the setup clear in his mind. When Barty bought her brother Clyde to his side, Elissa had become Barty's woman. The lone-wolfing Clemens had trapped her in a meeting room Barty had in the Morris Hotel, then called in Garvin, suspecting he too was up to his neck in it. Lou, guarding the room, had seen Clemens with Elissa there, and he called Barty over to rescue his woman.

Coincidence had thrown the blame for the murder on Garvin's shoulders.

He was jabbed into a basement room and lashed into a heavy armchair. Lou alone remained with him.

Lou went to work brutally, efficiently. . . .

Later, both he and Garvin were soaked with sweat. Garvin's face was bloody and swollen and set in a frozen grin as Lou cursed and pounded him.

When Lou panted, "Damn you, when are you gonna give in?" Garvin's burning gaze still stared blankly.

Joe Barty padded into the room then.

"So he's an iron baby, huh?" he said. "Scram back upstairs, Lou. I'll take over from here."

"Giving orders again," sneered Lou. "Barty, I still think—"

"I said I'll take over now. Understand?"

Lou gave him a vicious look and slouched out.

Then Barty turned to Garvin and said coldly:

"You know my rep. If punks act wrong to me, it's just too bad for them. I dropped one weighted body off River Bridge at dawn today. Our friend Lou may get the same if he turns nastier, even though this is his building I'm holing up in. So you see that being stubborn isn't going to get you any place."

A confidential tone crept into his voice. "I'm really a right guy, Garvin. I'm willing to make you a worthwhile proposition."

"You go to hell," gritted Garvin.

"Damn you, Garvin!" Blind fury twisted Barty's face. He swung a hairy fist hard to Garvin's jaw.

Garvin jerked and then sagged in his ropes.

A WAKENING, a long while later, Garvin saw that he was alone; the room was dark. Powerless to prevent his doom, he numbly wondered how soon it would come. And even if he managed to get out of this alive, he had no way of proving Barty had killed Clemens. All because Elissa—

Thought of her enraged him. He threw out his muscles to fight against his bonds, then jerked in surprise. There were no ropes about his battered body! During his period of unconsciousness, someone had untied him!

And when he leaped up, he noticed something else: the weight of a revolver in his shoulder rig. He yanked the gun out. It was his own, fully loaded!

This seemed utterly unreal, as if he were having some impossible dream before the men would come down here and drag him out to his death. And yet—

Yes, that was it! This was Lou's work. Lou wanted control of this union-chiseling racket, feeling he no longer needed Barty's domineering help. He knew he couldn't blast Barty down and hold the men. He had to let somebody like Garvin do it, and then to win Barty's men over by vengefully blasting Garvin to death!

Here, then, was a twofold danger. But it was far better than helplessly waiting for death, like a trapped rat. There was a chance now—a slim chance.

Yet Garvin wasn't thinking of escape as he crept to the basement stairs. The only way he saw to clear himself was by capturing Barty and his gold-chased revolver—the gun that very probably had blasted down Clemens.

He paused at the top of the basement stairs and looked into the now lighted side-door hall. He saw Lou sitting disconsolately alone on the bottom step of the stairway that went to the second floor.

He saw his play then, a wild, desperate measure. He stepped silently into the hall.

"Lou—listen!" he whispered. "We can—"

Lou looked up. His eyes went wild when he saw Garvin. His skinny fingers stabbed for his armpit.

Garvin shot Lou between the eyes.

THE noise of his gun shook the walls. And as Lou rolled down beside the heavy stair railing, the startled gunmen on the second floor crowded excitedly to the head of the stairs.

At first they didn't see the bloody, flaming-eyed figure crouching over Lou's body, temporarily screened by the stair rail. Garvin was breathing fast, his gun gripped in a quivering, white-knuckled fist.

The gunmen started down the stairs, and Garvin fired the instant they spotted him.

Bullets poured down, spraying the floor about Garvin. Garvin triggered furiously, like a man gone mad.

One gunman fell. He collapsed against his partner, spilling him, and they went crashing down to the hall. And when the unwounded man tried to stagger up, Garvin slammed his gun butt to the fellow's head.

Garvin pounded upstairs, and jerked rigid when he saw Barty and Elissa coming down the corridor from the front. Joe Barty had his gold-chased gun gripped in his hand.

Garvin flattened himself against the wall; waited. Barty was lightning with a gun, a man who would never surrender, and Garvin saw only one way to stop him. He had to shoot him down like the dirty killer he was, and then depend on the gold-chased gun alone to clear him.

He heard their feet pounding toward him. He could hear angry curses gritting from Barty's lips.

That instant, he flung himself into their path. He roared, "This is for Clemens, Barty!" and squeezed trigger.

Nothing came from Garvin's gun. Nothing but a sharp click. The hot gun was empty!

Cold despair clutched Garvin's heart. He stiffened and waited for slugs to tear through his body.

Joe Barty withheld his fire. An evil expression twisted his face. He laughed harshly, coldly.

"You're a smart baby, Garvin, getting past the boys. But it isn't doing you any good. I warned you of that down there in the basement room."

Chick Garvin said nothing. His eyes were full upon Elissa. Her eyes were wide in utter horror; her face, chalk-white. He

wondered why she wasn't smiling, because her kind should enjoy things like brutal murder.

Finally Garvin couldn't stand it any longer.

"Damn it, Barty—shoot!" he blurted.

"Sure," smiled Barty, and Garvin saw the finger on the gold-chased gun tighten slowly.

Elissa suddenly screamed: "Jump him, Chick! I took the bullets out of his gun when I cleaned it!"

Joe Barty swore, fell back as Garvin charged. He fought to bring the gun down on Garvin's head, missed, and Garvin crashed him brutally against the wall.

Dazed, Barty was an easy mark for Garvin. Garvin lashed out unfeelingly with his empty revolver. And Barty collapsed, his head bleeding.

Elissa stood rooted, trembling. She half-sobbed: "Chick, I know what you've been thinking. Oh, Chick—"

Garvin looked at her questioning. "It's plain now that it was you who loosened me and planted my revolver. I don't get it. Why did you do it?"

She said: "Clyde was never actually a part of Barty's gang. When the union heard Barty was trying to get my brother on his side, they told Clyde to accept and join up with him—so Barty could be trapped. The union even tricked the police into believing Clyde had sold out, just in case Barty had a friend at headquarters."

Garvin stared. This could be the truth.

ELISSA continued: "Barty fell for me when we accidentally met. I agreed when Clyde begged me to play the game, knowing trapping Barty would mean so much to his future. Clyde was sure the police wouldn't be able to hold Barty on vagrancy, and made me tip Barty off on those police raids. He wanted Barty to take me into his confidence. And that Morris Hotel room was a secret meeting place for Clyde and union officials. Barty found out about it yesterday. Clyde had a good explanation ready, but he was afraid, seeing Barty was getting a bit suspicious lately."

Elissa shuddered. "He didn't come home last night. When I found he hadn't come

home today either, I went to the hotel to see if he were there, taking a gun along for protection. Not finding him, I got frantic, realizing Barty had trapped him. I tried to reach you; couldn't. I knew the union wasn't in position to give me much help, so I called Clemens. I told him everything when he came."

"Oh," broke in Chick Garvin, "so that's how Clemens learned about Barty's hide-out here. But, tell me, why did Clemens call me over to the hotel?"

"He wasn't convinced Clyde and I were in the clear. He suspected you were in with us," the girl told him.

Horror crossed her face. "Barty must have had the room watched. He suddenly sneaked in with Lou. Clemens tried to draw his gun, and Barty shot him with his gold revolver. Barty imagined I'd been trapped by Clemens and took me here to hide out. I could see, though, he was wondering if I were a doublecrosser like Clyde."

"I was secretly searching for Clyde when you came here. I braced you because I knew the others were downstairs and you wouldn't have a fighting chance. Stopping you would squelch any suspicions Barty might have about me, and I'd be in better position to help you. But when I managed to get downstairs to you, you were unconscious. I untied you and left your gun I'd sneaked from Barty's desk. Things turned out well at that. Only if I knew if Clyde—"

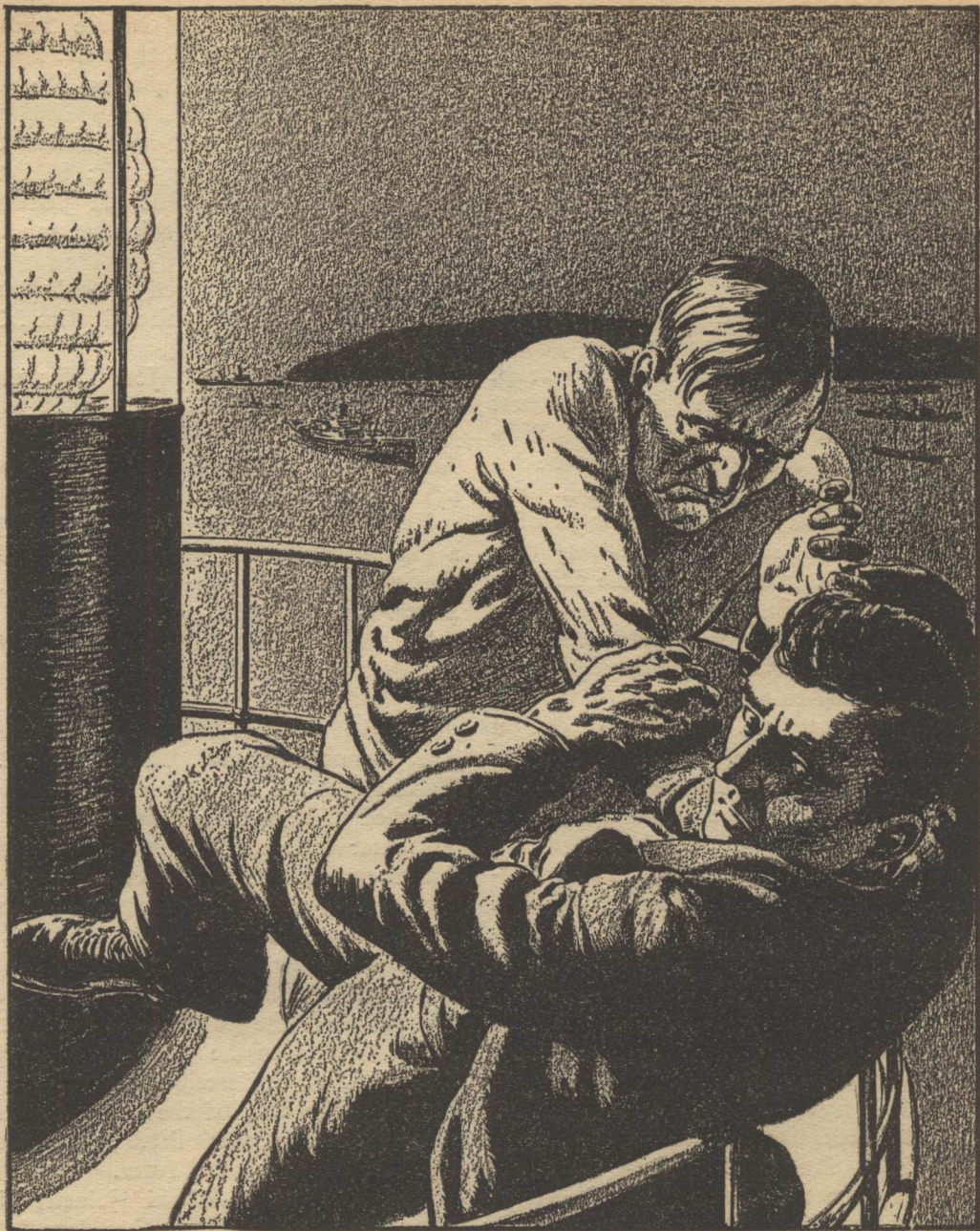
Garvin scowled when her voice broke off, remembering what Barty had said about dropping a corpse into the river. But he had proof now that Barty had murdered Clemens—Elissa's evidence, and the gold-chased gun that lay on the floor. He picked up the gun; examined it.

"Good Lord, Elissa!" he burst out in amazement. "This gun is loaded!"

She nodded numbly. "After I trapped you, he asked me to clean and reload his revolver. When he was going to shoot you a minute ago, I was wishing I'd unloaded it. It gave me the inspiration."

Garvin stared. Then he grinned and took the girl into his arms.

And as she clung to him, still shivering with horror, everything suddenly seemed right in his world.



HELL FOG

A STEVE KOSKI STORY

By STEWART STERLING

The killer struck once, then vanished into the fog. Now, high above Manhattan's midnight harbor, Koski fought to cheat Death of a double harvest.

RAIN slashed at the *Vigilant's* windshield as if a fire-hose had been turned on the police boat; water cascaded from the forward deck, spurted

from the scuppers. Sergeant Mulcahey, at the wheel, had to stick his beefy red face out of the pilot-house window and squint under the brim of his sou-wester

to make out the channel buoys in the darkness. To the roaring accompaniment of wind and water, he bellowed a slightly off-key bass:

"Man-y brave souls
Are a-sleep
In the deep,
So be-ware
Be-wa . . . a . . . are—"

The tall, raw-boned man, beside him, wiped flying moisture from his shaggy eyebrows. "Speaking of sleepers, Irish, there's one ahead you're going to bust our keel on, if you're not careful." With the stem of a battle-scarred briar, he indicated a dark gray wedge, awash in mid-channel. It was so much the shape of a wave-bobble; so similar to the slaty harbor-surface in color, that in the faint illumination afforded by the reflection of lights from shore, even a water-wise sergeant of the Marine Precinct might well have neglected to notice it.

Mulcahey grunted. "I had my eye on it, all the time, Steve. I was conjecturin' it might be one of them banana crates, off a Fruit Liner." He gave the clutch a touch of reverse, to brake the *Vigilant's* way.

Koski pulled up the collar of his trench-coat, turned down the brim of his felt. "Since when have they been growing bananas up north on the Grand Banks, Joe?" He went aft; lifted the boat hook from its chocks, leaned overside.

The police boat slid alongside the drifting object, now sinking beneath the surface, then rising sluggishly to spill water from its back, like a blowing whale.

"'Tis a Banks dory, true for you, Steve." The Sergeant put the clutch in neutral, hurried to the cockpit. "Rolled overboard from a Fulton fishboat, wouldn't you say?"

Steve Koski, ranking plainclothesman assigned to the Harbor Squad, pulled the nose of the drifting dory out of water with his hook. "I wouldn't say that, Irish. Let's have her up for a look-see. I never heard of a codder painting up a trawl boat as pretty as this. Or wasting varnish on thwarts."

They hauled the narrow-floored, sharp-snouted craft up on the *Vigilant's* stern rail.

"God help the sailors on a night like

this," Mulcahey switched on the trouble-lamp. "By the look of that smashed gun-wale an' them stove-in planks, she was run down in th' dark."

Koski ran his thumb-nail across the jagged fracture of one plank; held the thumb up so tiny flakes of red glistened, wetly. "A damn queer ship that ran her down."

"The tramp that checked through Quarantine, few hours ago, had red paint half-way up her Plimsoll."

"This isn't red lead, Joe. Not even paint. It's enamel."

The sergeant looked closer. "So it is. An' to what conclusion will you be jumpin', on account of such?"

Koski leaned out over the stern, to get a glimpse of the dory's transom. "That she was sunk by the good ship *Axe*, Sarge."

"In the name of the devil, what lunatic would chop in the ribs of a good boat like this?"

"Maybe we can find out, in Bayonne. There's a name on her. 'R. R. Bayonne.'" Koski rolled the cod-boat over on its side, crouched to inspect the inside.

"Water is comin' in my collar faster than it can run out my shoes, Steve. 'Tis enough indignity for underpaid servants of the peace to bear, without havin' to investigate New Jersey's shortcomin's, on behalf of th' Port Authority." He went forward, sent the power of two hundred horses surging to the propeller. The police boat's wake described a neat arc in the narrow waters of the Kill van Kull; the black forefront lifted; the stern squatted into froth and foam.

In a moment, Koski joined him. "There's more red, inside that dory."

The sergeant snorted. "You'll be surmisin' it got run down by a fire-engine, next."

"The stuff inside isn't enamel, Irish. There's a big smear of it, along the gar-board. It'll have to be analyzed, of course."

THE *Vigilant's* speed checked. She turned a point, entered a little cove. Ahead, a trio of blue bulbs shone coldly from a high mast, on shore. Light from the windows of a long, low building made shimmering reflections in the sheltered

water. The police boat nosed up to a tire-protected float.

A shape in oilskins and rubber boots clumped into the greenish glare of the starboard running light.

"Looking for the Cobweb Yacht Club, officer?" He stared up at the soggy green flag on the patrol-boat's signal staff.

Koski dropped to the float. "Looking for the owner of this dory."

The newcomer stared. "Hell, Cap. That's Andy Garris' pet rowing dory. What happened—"

"Who's Garris?"

"Keeper at Robbin's Reef light. Lives just up the hill, here. Ties his boat here, when he comes ashore."

"Happen to know if he's ashore, now?"

"Has been, all week. Where'd you find the dory?"

Koski waved, vaguely. "Out there. How do I get to Garris' place, did you say?"

The yachtsman gave directions. "Pete's sake, Cap. I hope nothing's wrong."

The detective of the Harbor Squad was noncommittal. "Hope so, too, son." He turned to Mulcahey. "I'll run up to the house, Sarge. Why don't you call up the Coast Guard, see if they've had any report of trouble at the lighthouse?"

It was nearly midnight, but there was still a light in the Garris home. A light, and the sound of quarreling voices.

Steve Koski couldn't make out what was being said, but when he had climbed to the porch and jabbed at the bell, there was a hush, within.

The woman who opened the door was flushed with anger, the color high in her thin, angular face, and the glint of dispute sharp in her dark, suspicious eyes.

"What you want?"

Koski said: "Andrew Garris. He here?"

"No. He isn't. He's gone back to the light." She started to slam the door, but a man in the living-room inquired gruffly:

"Who wants to know?"

The man from Pier A, The Battery, tipped up one V of his vest to show the gold badge. "Harbor Police."

The woman screamed. The man within shouted: "Shut up, Barbara." He came to the door; he was short and thickset; a two-day beard covered his heavy jowls with a sooty stubble. He eyed Koski

with suspicion and unconcealed hostility.

"What you want my father for?"

"Just want to make sure he's okay. We just picked up his dory, out in the Kill. Been sunk." The detective watched the woman. She was doing her best to signal the man—but he paid no attention. His lips tightened grimly; his voice was bitter:

"He's done it, then."

"Done what?"

"Killed himself. He was sayin' tonight, right here, only a couple of hours ago, that he might just as well. The way things were going, around this house." He scowled at the woman. "Now he's done it."

The woman bit her lips, eyes wide with fright.

Koski pushed through the door. "Lot of things might have happened to your father, Garris. Only thing I'm sure of—he didn't commit suicide."

They waited, tensely.

"Climb into your coats."

The woman spoke first, sneering. "Where you taking us?"

Koski said calmly: "To the Light. You want to find out if your father's all right, don't you?"

Garris doubled his fists. "Don't get tough about it. My sister and I'll go with you quick enough." He kept his eyes on Koski, but turned his head so he could speak over his shoulder. "Toss me my windbreaker, Barbara, and let's not have any lip about this."

Koski looked around the room. The floor was unswept; dust thick under the furniture; the windows were crusted with grime; the curtains bedraggled. Soiled clothes were piled on the sofa; the place smelled of rancid grease.

The woman stalked stiffly toward the rear of the house. "If we're going out, I've got to fix the stove." She banged the door behind her.

Garris banged his head; his jaw muscles worked convulsively. He glanced at Koski, then at the floor. The Harbor man growled:

"See what she's doing."

GARRIS shrugged, swung on his heel, got to the door, flung it open. Barbara was on her knees, in the middle of

the kitchen floor. There was an open suitcase in front of her; another, a cheap black metal valise, stood beside her; there were a couple of hotel stickers pasted on it, and a letter Z scrawled in chalk down in one corner. The woman craned her neck around, snarled:

"Lord's sake! Can't you give me a minute!"

Koski's eyes narrowed. "I told you to get a coat, not to pack for a week-end."

"I ain't packing; I'm unpacking. I just got back from Florida. I got to get a coat out, haven't I?"

The marine detective shook his head. "Kind of garment that'd be any good in Florida wouldn't help you out in the bay, tonight."

Garris muttered, impatiently: "Damn it, Barbara. You oughta know better than to fool around with the cop. Get your old coat."

Her upper lip curled back, animal-like. She lunged toward the sink on all fours; one hand snatched at a fat, flask-shaped bottle full of a milky fluid. She squirmed back on her haunches; swung the bottle with all her might, at Koski.

He ducked, swiftly. The bottle shattered against the door-jamb above his head; splinters of glass bit into his cheeks; searing fumes stung his eyes. He dived for her. She kicked the open suitcase in front of him; he went down, over it, tears from the ammonia streaming from his eyes.

Garris yelled: "Barbara, you crazy—"

Then there was a gust of rain and welcome fresh air in Koski's face. He got to his feet, stumbled to the back door, let the rain drench his face. There was nothing to be seen on the vacant lot behind the house; no sound except the shrilling of the storm. He closed the door, looked at Garris.

The man held out open palms, helplessly; let his hands fall at his sides. "I know it looks bad, but it don't mean a damn thing, except Barbara's kinda nuts, anyway. And getting upset about the old man, didn't help any."

Koski turned over the contents of the suitcase, with his toe. "Thought you said your father was the one who was upset about conditions, here?"

"He was. Used to be a Gloucesterman,

before he went into the lighthouse service. Always wanted things shipshape; couldn't stand this sloppy sort of stuff." He waved disgustedly at the heap of unwashed dishes in the sink. "Bad enough for Barbara not to stay home when he was on leave, but when she left things mucked up like this, for him to find when he came ashore—" He swallowed hard. "Don't know's I blame him. Man has a right to expect some comforts when he gets on toward seventy."

Koski went through the house, out to the porch. "Takes more'n dirty dishes to make a hard-shell like that do away with himself, Garris."

The man swung into step beside him. "She was always fighting with him, and with me. About money, mostly. Old man didn't have any to spare, and I don't make more'n enough to cover the insurance on my tow-boat. But Barbara, and that husband of hers, always act like she's keeping house here as a favor, though the old man pays all the bills." They turned down the by-road toward the yacht club.

"Where's this husband of hers, Garris?"

"Bill Escot? Out on the Reef. He's assistant keeper. That don't help none, either," he added, grimly. "Old man can't stand slipshod work, around the Light, and Bill is always snoozing on watch or forgetting to wind the rotator or pulling some lousy trick like that."

Koski followed him down the gang-plank, to the float.

"Hi, Sarge. Get hold of the Cee-Gee?"

"Sure, and I did, Steve, but little I learned. The district depot at St. George says both tenders are chasin' a buoy down at the Ambrose, and could we carry on an investigation for ourselves, for the time bein'."

"We could," Koski said.

"Twill be short and not so sweet, I'm thinkin', Steve." Mulcahey turned around, with his back to the detective; bent over. "Now's the time to speak your piece, mister."

Koski stepped to the gunwale, saw a taffy-haired youth in a blue Melton jacket, sitting dejectedly by the engine box, face buried in his hands. The sergeant tugged at the youth's wrists.

"Come out of it, Yobe. We've no time for heebie-jeebies."

The younger man put his hands down beside him on the cockpit floor, turned his face up to the ghastly blue illumination of the yacht club's beacon:

"What's the use? He won't believe me, either. I told you what I saw; you thought I was stewed or something."

Koski reached over the coaming; grabbed the blond boy's shoulder. "Skip the double-talk. What'd you see?"

The boy shuddered. "A dead man. A floater. With a leg wedged in one of them freight dolphins, near the ferry-slip."

"That wasn't all you told me," Mulcahey rumbled. "Tell him, Yobe."

The youth drew a deep breath. "I saw the strangler eel. Around his throat, it was. I watched it throttle that dead body until—"

He began to giggle, shrilly.

MULCAHEY gripped Yobe by the hair, jerked his head back so his face was tilted up to the driving rain. "Black shame on you! Acting like some gidgety girl."

The boy's teeth chattered. "It got me . . . for a minute. I'm okay, now."

Koski vaulted up and over the rail, into the cockpit. "Who is he, Irish? Where'd you pick him up?"

Mulcahey pointed to the round-bottomed dinghy that was cleated close to the *Vigilant's* port quarter. "He come rowin' in here like a bat outa hell, whimperin' and carryin' on, like a man demented." He let go the blond hair.

Yobe stood up, six feet of compact muscle. He had a seaman's face, Koski thought, and a sailor's long, ape-like arms, with big, competent hands. His voice was still a little unsteady: "Herman Yobe, sir. Second class machinist's mate, U. S. Coast Guard. Assigned to lighthouse service, Robbins Reef."

The cold steel of Koski's eyes fixed the pale blue of the newcomer. "How's it happen you were rowing around the ferry-slip, night like this?"

"We get six days off a month; my leave began tonight. I figured on heading into St. George, but when I saw that floater, I changed my mind."

"Why didn't you row into the ferry-slip and get some of the boys there to help you recover the body?"

The machinist's mate looked away, evasively. "Bad luck to fool around with the strangler eel."

Garris piled in over the side, seized Yobe's arm roughly. "Whyn't you drive it away with an oar, or kill it, you greasy-gutted lump of—"

Koski grabbed Garris by the scuff of the neck, flung him down onto the starboard locker. "Sit down! Shut up!"

Garris squatted there, gripping the locker-edge, fiercely. "How did he know the man was dead, cop? If it's my father who's been drowned, and this damn panty-waist didn't try to save him, I'll kick his face in!"

Koski went over, put his fist under the man's chin, forced Garris to look up at him. "I don't want to have to slap you around just because you're worried about your father, but I will if I have to. You keep your yap shut and sit right here, or I'll part your hair right down to the bone." He loosened the stern-line. "Kick her away, Sarge."

He ran forward, felt the deck tremble as the *Vigilant's* motor thundered into action. "All clear, forward."

The police-boat did a half-pivot, backed into the cove, rounded the little point. The detective joined his partner in the pilot-house. The rain lightened a little; in its place, a smoky steam veiled the dark silhouette of the Staten Island shore.

"I do not like any part of this business, Steve. Eels are all very well in their place, fried up nice with cracker crumbs and maybe a seidel on the side, but the idea of being throttled to death by a sea-going snake—"

"Ah, now, Joe, do you have to go ga-ga, just because this Yobe dreams up a dizzy one like that?"

Mulcahey swung inshore, to avoid an oil barge. "'Tis not the first time I've heard of this homicidal sea-serpent. Sailors off them squarehead ships claim they're worse'n sharks."

Koski made a disparaging noise with his lips. "The only thing that lives in five fathoms which could choke a man, is a devil fish. I understand very few of them have been harpooned in the harbor this season."

"The lad from the lighthouse claims

he saw this one, clear. The squareheads say there's one to a harbor,—a six foot creature as big around as your wrist. He is supposed to swim on the surface, and once he sights a swimmer trying to keep his head above the water, the strangler eel makes for him, loops around his neck and pulls until the victim has no breath in his body."

"Now I'll tell the one about the swordfish that cuts off rivet-heads from ship plates."

Koski drifted back to the cockpit. "Which dolphin was it where you thought you saw this thing, Yobe?"

The youth pointed through the murk, toward a pyramidal clump of pilings bound together with a heavy iron strap. "The one nearest the channel, on the north side."

The *Vigilant* slowed, coasted in toward the mooring piles. Mulcahey switched on the searchlight, angled it down toward the surface of the water. There was a dark and wavering shadow there, close to the surface. They came close to it. It was a man, face-down in the water. There was nothing around his neck.

Koski leaned overboard, caught one of the floater's hands, pulled the body free from the crevice in the pilings. At his side, Garris husked:

"It's the old man, all right."

They dragged him aboard, stretched him out in the cockpit. The body was ice-cold, the limbs stiff with *rigor mortis*. Andrew Garris must have been a fine dignified figure of a man, Koski decided as he knelt by the corpse. But now, with his false teeth gone, his gums sunken, the eyes receding in their sockets, he was horrible to look at.

The thing that puzzled the marine plainclothesman was the inch-wide circle of lacrated skin around the man's neck!

YOBE didn't look at the body at all, as Koski and the sergeant laid all that was left of Andy Garris in the cockpit. The machinist's mate huddled up against the bulkhead of the pilot-house, kept his eyes fixed on the steaming surface of the sea.

"The eel will not be far from here," he muttered. "They never leave a body as long as it's on the surface."

Koski bent over the livid mark on the

dead man's neck. "That eel swam all the way from Manila, Yobe."

The blond youth mumbled, stupidly: "From Manila?"

"There was no eel." Koski clipped off his words. "This man was strangled by a rope. Inch manila."

The tow-boat man chafed the leaden skin of his father's hand. "That would be the way he'd have done it—hung himself."

Koski put a finger to the purplish lips of the corpse. "Ever see a man who'd hung himself? His throat muscles are stretched; his tongue is sticking out between his teeth; usually his face is all twisted up. There's none of that, here. Your father was choked, but not by his own hand."

Garris gritted: "By God, you show me the man and I'll—"

"You'll do nothing." Koski cut him off. "This is a cop job; if I need any help, I'll ask you for it." He turned to Mulcahey. "Let's get over to the Reef, Sarge." They went into the pilot-house.

The *Vigilant* began to move again. The fog was denser, now, and through the wreathing coils of vapor, came the dismal hoot of deep-throated fog horns, the mournful wail of sirens from the outer bay. Mulcahey cursed, quietly:

"The poor old man was murdered, eh, Steve, and dumped into the bay to conceal the crime?"

"He was killed, all right, Irish; I don't know about the other part of it. It wouldn't account for that blood we found in the dory."

The sergeant scratched his chin, thoughtfully. "Now that you mention it, Steve, I do not see how a man being strangled could smear blood on the bottom of a dory, so the killer we are looking for will be handy with both the rope and an ax?"

"That's right, Irish." Koski leaned out the starboard window, cupped his hand at his ear. "When we find him, I'll guarantee to teach him a trick with a chair, too. A chair and fifteen thousand volts."

The mist ahead became pink, then crimson. Off to starboard, the loom of the Robbins Reef light illuminated the fog with a pale and ghostly blur. The blood-red radiance to port came from the red

sector of the lighthouse beam, the danger sector. Across the bow of the police-boat flashed a light-blinded gull, its wings reddened by the unearthly glow.

The groan of the fog horns grew louder, yet Koski thought he could detect another, and more ominous, sound. Still, he could see nothing.

His mind was befogged, too, about this dead man, back there in the cockpit. If the old man had been murdered and tossed into the tideway for concealment, why had it been necessary to wreck the the lighthouse keeper's dory? If Yobe had actually seen a rope about Andy Garris' neck, what had become of the length of manila? What had the domestic troubles of the Garris household to do with this homicide? The crack investigator of the Harbor Squad could scent something more important than family disagreements behind the curious chain of events that had taken the keeper's dory to the Kill van Kull, his body to the slip at St. George's, and was now urging the patrol-boat at top speed toward the wave-swept shelf of rock a mile north of Staten Island.

He drew his head back inside the pilot-house. "I hear a diesel, somewhere. Seems to be up ahead."

"I couldn't make out the *Normandie* through this murk, Steve, but I hear the motor. 'Tis a heavy duty, by the thumping of her. I will give them a signal." He reached for the fog horn switch; sent a warning bellow through the eddying vapor. "That'll give her pause, Steve. Holy mother!" He wrenched the wheel hard over. The *Vigilant* swung sharply to port, heeled over heavily.

Fifty feet away, headed for them at such an angle that a collision seemed inevitable, was a black, low-decked tow-boat. There were no running lights visible on her, and as the heavily-timbered craft thundered toward them, Koski snapped on the police-boat's searchlight, threw its beam toward the deck shelter. There was no one at the wheel.

"She's goin' to hit us!" Mulcahey revved up his gasoline motor, but there was no escaping the plunging hulk that emerged so swiftly out of the fog.

Koski had just time to turn, yell: "Hang on!" to Garris and Yobe when the skip-

perless craft, after smashing a gaping hole in the patrol-boat's side, slid off into the luminous haze, vanished.

The *Vigilant* shivered; wallowed, for a moment, in the trough of the work-boat's wake; then rolled sluggishly back to even keel. Water poured in through the raw wound in her planking.

"She's sunk us, Steve!" The sergeant swore, luridly. "Get ready to swim!"

KOSKI dived aft. "Get your pump going, Irish." He grabbed Yobe's arm. "Yank out the floor boards; shift the ballast over to port." The marine detective caught hold of the dory's bow. "Grab hold, here, Garris."

"What you want to do, cop?"

"Lash her outboard, port side. Use her weight as a lever, to heel us over. That hole's only a foot or so below the water line; if we can get a forty-five degree slant on her, it'll be above the surface."

They worked fast. It was touch and go. They were working in water over their ankles when Mulcahey called back to them:

"We're holding it, now."

Koski snapped at the machinist's mate. "Toss a few more of those hunks of pig-iron into that dory. Further over we lay, safer we are."

The motor pump began to drop the level of the bilge. Mulcahey folded up a square of heavy tarpaulin; stuffed the tarred canvas into the gash in the *Vigilant's* side; wedged it in place with a locker cover.

"We might be able to stay afloat, now, Steve, if that runaway tow-boat don't smack us again."

Koski nodded. "Get on with it, Irish. We can't be more'n half a mile from the Light." He swung around to Garris. "Notice the name on that tow-boat?"

Garris said, "Yeah, the *Andy G.*"

The plainclothesman might have been talking to himself. "Yeah."

The tow-boat man admitted: "That was my boat, all right. What the hell she's doing, tearing around the bay with nobody on board and the diesel going top-speed, damned if I know."

"We'll check up on her," Koski promised, "after we're through at the Light."

The patrol boat nudged up against an iron ladder. The heavy door to the light-

house was a dozen feet above them.

"You first, Yobe," Koski ordered. "Irish, you stay here with Garris. If you see that *Andy G.* again, don't wait for her to clip you; put a few .45 slugs where her fuel tank ought to be."

Above them, the hoarse groaning of the fog-horn made it necessary for Mulcahey to yell: "Don't be too long, Steve. That repair job is not good for a stop-over, you know that."

Koski didn't answer; he was reaching up for the first rungs of the vertical steel ladder, leading to the lighthouse door. The rung he had hold of was slippery. It wasn't sea slime, either. He held his hand up so the light shone on it. There was an ugly, reddish-brown smear across his fingers. Koski knew what it was; he'd seen blood and water mixed before.

He climbed hastily to the lighthouse door. A stockily-built man lounged negligently against the jamb of the door. His hair was black and stringy, plastered down over his bullet-shaped skull; his face was flabby and there were pouches under his small, shoe-button eyes. He was talking to Yobe when Koski came up.

Yobe said: "This is Bill Escot. I guess he's first keeper, now Mister Garris has gone."

Escot frowned. "Gone? Gone where? I been expecting him back from Bayonne, all afternoon. His leave's up today; he should've been here—"

Koski cut him short. "He's here, now, down in the patrol boat."

The assistant keeper limped to the railing, looked down. "What's the matter. Pop been hurt?"

"Hurt bad. And permanent."

"Drowned?"

"We took him out of the water."

Yobe said, "I . . . I found him, Bill. Jeeze, it was terrible. There was an eel—" The machinist mounted the steep stairs leading to the upper rooms. Escot ran after him, crying:

"Pop's dead, and you found him? And only last week, he warned you he'd have to report you, for appropriatin' government property. Those oarlocks you took ashore, for a friend, you white-haired son of a—"

Yobe, on the floor above, protested: "I didn't touch him, Bill. I swear I didn't.

I didn't have a thing to do with it."

Koski glanced hastily around the storeroom which constituted the first floor of the lighthouse. Drums of kerosene, tins of alcohol, a few cases of canned goods, a stack of wood beside a chopping block, but no ax, no hatchet. And piled in a corner, a string of tennis balls—about thirty of them—strung together on a steel wire. They were soaking wet and had been partly covered by an old piece of canvas. Koski examined them, briefly; hurried up the steep stairs, after the others. He could hear Yobe's voice; on the third floor:

"I tell you, I didn't even see Mister Garris until I found him in the water, there."

"You're a liar! You knew Pop was due back tonight; you knew the direction he'd come from; you waited for him!"

On the second floor, Koski made a swift inspection of the circular-walled room. It evidently served as combination kitchen and living-room. There was nothing in it to suggest there had been any violence here on the Reef, except a pair of bathing trunks drying on a rod behind the wood stove. Lighthouse men don't do much swimming; when they get through work, they like to forget about things.

Up above, Yobe screamed: "No! You're wrong, Bill. You're making a mistake!"

Koski went up the stairs, four at a time. Bill Escot was standing with his back to Koski; the assistant keeper had Yobe backed up against the wall, was holding the point of a saw-backed fish-scaling knife against the machinist's midriff.

"Confess, you slimy drip," Escot hissed. "*You killed Pop to prevent his reporting those thefts!*"

"You can't make me say it. It isn't so . . . you!" Yobe squirmed and twisted as the tip of the knife dug into his flesh. The assistant keeper grunted viciously, leaned his weight on the sliver of steel!

Koski, coming on the run, was too late to prevent it.

Yobe screamed once. He put up his hands to the weapon imbedded in his body; looked at it foolishly.

He coughed. A pink-flecked foam drooled from his lips. He opened his mouth to cry out again, but no sound came.

Then he collapsed without a sound on Escot's shoulder.

THE pudgy man turned to Koski. "He made me do it. It was his own fault." His fat cheeks quivered; his lips trembled. "Anyway, he killed Pop. I'm not sorry." He backed away; let Yobe topple to the floor.

The Harbor Squad man held his gun hip-high. "You will be, Escot. Stand over there, against the wall. Fold your hands back of your neck." Koski watched the steadily widening pool of red, beneath Yobe's still figure.

Escot said, angrily: "You don't have to bulldoze me. I had to pull the knife on him, in self-defense. I'm not going to give you any trouble."

"Damn right, you're not." The marine detective eyed him, coldly. "You're going to come along, now. Nice and quiet. Or get hurt."

The plump keeper snarled: "Somebody's got to stay at the Light."

"Somebody else. Not you."

"Okay. Get snotty, if you want to." Escot's chin sagged, dejectedly. "I got to wind the rotator before I go, though. Or the light won't turn proper."

Koski made up his mind, quickly. He had all the evidence he needed against this man. The fellow couldn't get away; not with Mulcahey, down below, in the *Vigilant*. And if the light *should* go out of kilter, on a mist-blanketed night like this, there might be a wreck or another collision. Keeping trouble away from the harbor was Koski's job.

"Go ahead. Fix the clock. I'll go with you."

"Suit yourself." Escot went out, began to climb the steep stairs to the next floor of the lighthouse. His limp was more pronounced, now.

"How'd you hurt your leg, Escot?"

"Fell." The keeper was surly.

"Must've have fallen on the ax, then." Koski kept close enough behind him to make sure the man made no false moves. "Or did it slip when you were chopping up the dory, and give you a gash?"

"What the hell are you yapping about?" They left the third floor, a circular bedroom, and mounted still higher.

"The dory you cut up with the ax that

used to be kept down there on the store-room floor. After you gave your father-in-law the kayo and tied that rope around his neck and heaved him off the Light. Remember?"

Escot swung around, savagely. "Yobe filled you up with that bushwah!"

"No. But that was the way it happened, wasn't it?" Koski prodded him in the small of the back, with the gun muzzle. "When the old man found out what you were up to, he put up a squawk."

"I ain't seen Pop, not for six days."

"Sure. Sure you've seen him. When he came to the Light tonight, rowing over from Bayonne. Probably you didn't expect him so soon. I suppose, when he figured out what you were putting over, he let out a yelp. And to shut him up, you socked him; tied a length of line around his neck. Maybe you didn't mean to kill him, then. All you wanted, was a chance to get away. But when you found he was dead, you tossed him over-side. Without making sure the knot was right. It wasn't; and the rope came off, after he'd drifted a while."

THEY reached a trapdoor, over Escot's head. He raised it. They emerged on an iron gallery, some sixty feet above the surface of the water. Escot opened the door to the lamp room. "Rave on, wise guy. You believe this guff, yourself?"

Koski went into the beacon room, after him. The air here was hot; the smell of kerosene strong. A curious humming came from the big rotator. "What did you do, Escot? Try to weight the old boy's body down with the ax?"

The light-keeper spat out an obscenity; he took a pair of dark glasses from a shelf, put them on. "Why would I hurt my wife's pop! Tell me that!"

"Can't, yet. Be able to—" Koski kept his gun leveled at the man's back. "—Soon's I know why you used those swimming trunks."

Escot fiddled with one of the sliding shields over the light prisms. "Those were Yobe's."

"Too big for the boy. They were yours, guy. And you're not the sort of scum to go swimming for fun. Not at night, in a tide-race, in New York harbor."

Koski became aware of a sudden stiffening of Escot's muscles. "That string of tennis balls, down there in the storeroom, they might have something to do with it. You don't get much chance to play out here on the reef, do you?"

Escot flung back one of the great metal shields. Instantly the lamp-room was filled with a dazzling incandescence; a light so strong that it had, for Koski, the impact of a blow. It blinded him, momentarily. Not until a teeth-loosening blow on the jaw snapped his head back, and a hand wrenched at his pistol, did the Harbor Squad man realize why Escot had put on the dark glasses. He lashed out at the light-keeper; but he couldn't see his target. Escot could. In five seconds, the gun was in the plump man's hands and its muzzle was jabbing Koski's belt buckle.

"Give you your choice, wise guy. Turn around; take a crack in the skull, to keep you quiet until I get away. Or a bullet in the belly, now."

Koski talked, for time. He was being pushed back, outside the lamp-room, but there was no chance he could be seen from the police boat. The gallery was shrouded in mist; the foghorn would conceal the sound of a shot. Yet he knew, if he turned, the man would kill him with the butt of his own revolver.

"You won't get away, anyhow, Escot. My partner on the patrol boat will stop you."

Escot laughed, harshly. "You think I'm as dumb as you are, don't you! Horse-radish! I figure things out!"

"Yeah." Koski retracted another step. "You must've planned it pretty carefully, at that." His voice bore grudging admiration.

"You wouldn't know, lunkhead. Finding out just when the steamer would come past the Reef; how the tide would be running. Getting that dumb-skull, Yobe, out of the way, just in time. Watching for the signal, diving off the ladder, swimming out and picking up the stuff." The keeper's boasting demanded an audience, if only temporarily. "And a fat lot of good it will do you to know it. About as much as it did Pop Garris. Turn around and take your knock-out pill, Mister."

Here it was, Koski thought. He had

to make his choice. Not much of a choice, either. Get his brains bashed out, from behind, without a fight. Or get shot in the guts, if he resisted.

"You want the slug, Mister?" Escot's teeth showed, in a snarl. "I'll give it to you." His finger tightened on the trigger of Koski's gun . . . and out of the luminous haze around the light gallery, came a hurtling shape of grayish white! It struck the iron railing around the gallery, bounded off and smashed Escot smack in the face; a light-dazed gull seeking refuge from the storm!

Koski was in motion before Escot had recovered from his shock. The Harbor Squad man got the gun-barrel in his hand, but he had to fight for the weapon.

He drove a fierce left to Escot's jaw.

The light-keeper rocked back on his heels, stumbled, and fell down through the open stairway hatch as if he'd been dropped from a gallows!

KOSKI was after him, like a flash. His eyes had recovered from the shock of the exposure to the light. He half-slid, half-fell down the stairs. Escot was huddled in a heap at the foot of the first flight.

His head was twisted grotesquely to one side; he didn't move when the detective hit him on the knee-cap with the pistol barrel.

The marine division man left him lying there; hurried down to the boat platform. The police boat was there, and tied up beside it was the black-hulled runaway boat that so nearly sent the *Vigilant* to the bottom. There was no one on the deck of either craft.

"Hi, Sarge!"

A woman answered. "Your pal is sitting on the pilot-house floor, here. Right in front of me. About six inches in front of my automatic, if you got to have the details. And there's where he stays, until my husband comes down that ladder!"

"He won't be coming down, Mrs. Escot." Koski could make her out, now. She was crouching on the starboard waterway, beside the pilot-house. She could keep a gun on Mulcahey, through the window. There was no sign of the younger Garris.

"Bill better come down, copper. And

he better have that string of tennis balls with him, if you want your pal to be in one piece when you see him."

Koski moved to the top of the ladder, got set.

"Suppose he can't come, Mrs. Escot?"

"Then your pal doesn't climb up the ladder; he goes down in five fathoms, right here."

The detective leaped. Not for the woman. But for the outboard end of the dory. He landed on it. His weight, under the momentum of his jump, wrenched the *Vigilant* over until her port side was under water.

Koski went down, with the dory, which broke free with the force of his fall. He swam back to the police boat.

Mulcahey hauled him aboard.

"Where is she, Irish?"

The sergeant pointed down into the black water. "She went down like a rock, when your jump jolted her loose from her perch, Steve."

From the cockpit, Garris groaned, painfully: "She couldn't swim a stroke."

Koski stared overside. No use going in after her, not with that racing tide. Somewhere, in the bay, her body would come to the surface, tomorrow or next day.

"How'd she hijack you, Sarge?"

"The *Andy G.* came up alongside. The woman was yelling for help. I started to go aboard, and got a clout over the head for my pains. Her brother, there, tried to warn me, and she nearly killed *him*, for that." He looked up at the Light. "What the hell is it all about, Steve?"

Koski went up the ladder; retrieved the string of tennis balls, came down again. "These, Joe. Full of dope, some of 'em, I'd say."

"Narcotics, is it?"

"Opium, probably. From Havana, likely. Tossed overboard from a porthole of that tramp steamer that cleared through Quarantine, a few hours ago. Escot swam out and got the string, brought it back here. The old man must have showed up about that time, suspected what was going on, when he saw his son-in-law in a bathing suit, and Escot killed him."

"But, Steve, who done the tossing of this lousy stuff?" Mulcahey handled the tennis balls with disgust.

"Mrs. Escot. She'd been away on a visit. Said she'd been in Florida, but I knew that was a lie. She'd been out of the country somewhere. Her luggage had come through customs. There was a Z scrawled on one of her suitcases, Z for Exzaminated, you know how the boys scribble it on, in chalk."

The sergeant shook his head, bewildered. "She went down to Cuba, did she? To buy those drugs, or whatever it is? And rigged it up with her husband to toss this bunch of contraband over so he could swim out and recover it? Then they'd go a-peddling of it, around the city?"

"That was about the way it went, Irish. From all I can find out, she and her husband were never satisfied with the money he made, working for the government. They always tried to squeeze some out of the old man, who had a tough enough time as it was keeping his own head above water."

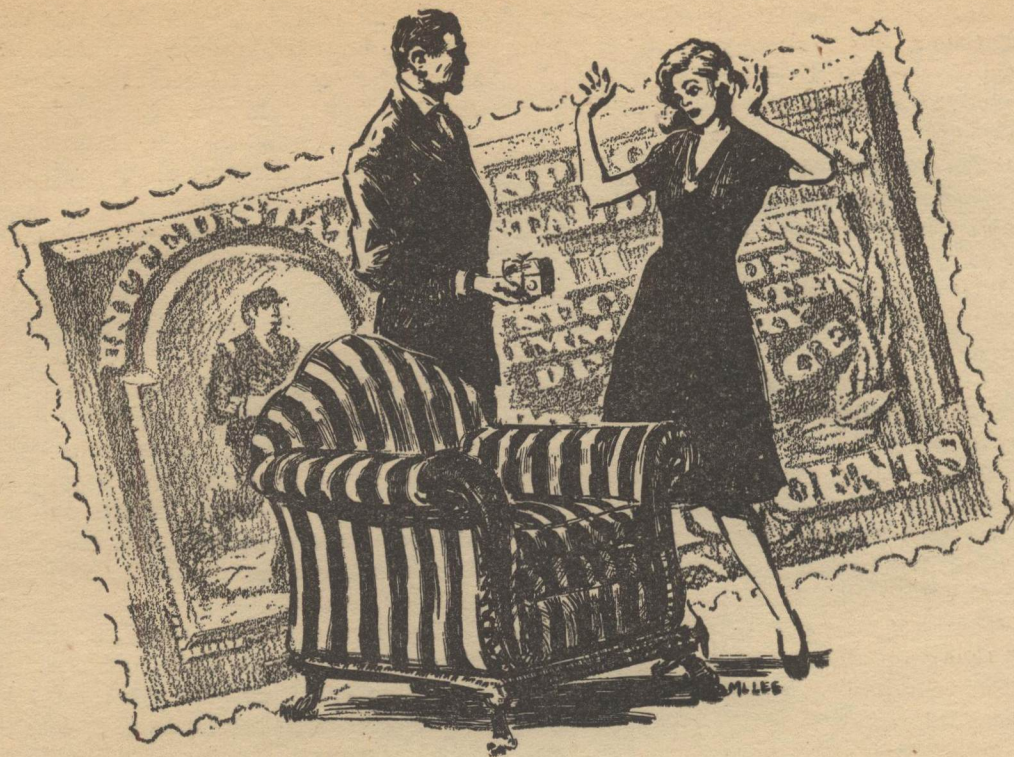
Garris croaked: "They squeezed the life out of him, between them. Damn them to hell!"

"Yeah." A long and sinuous shape drifted past the side of the police boat. Koski knew it was probably sea-weed. But somehow, he thought of Yobe's strangler eel. "Yeah, I guess that's where they'll be, about now, both of 'em."



A Fiction House Magazine





MURDER—C.O.D.

By NELSON S. BOND

It looked like a run-of-the-mill snatch, until the kidnapped man came home—*piece by piece!*

"THIS here," grumbled Mooney, "is the kind of case I get stuck with every time. If I catch the guy which done it, I got a fine chance of gettin' myself carved into alphabet soup. If I don't, I lose my job."

"What's it all about?" I asked him.

"Don't you never read the papers? It's this Garwood affair down in Florida. Garwood disappears, and Mrs. G. gets a ransom note. Then about two weeks later her old man starts comin' home in little pieces."

"I remember the case now," I told him. "But where does *your* department come into it, Mooney? I thought the G-men were in charge?"

Mooney made a rude sound.

"*Them* guys! No, this snatch was pulled in the center of the state. As long as they can't prove no state lines was crossed, the local cops got to get along without the help of Mr. Hoover's Boy Scouts."

"I still don't see," I persisted, "where the Post Office Department comes into it?"

"I already told you Garwood's been comin' home one piece at a time. Well, he's been comin' by special delivery—see? We're just wastin' time talkin'. There's a plane leaves for Jax in half an hour. Want to come along?"

I said, "Sure!"

"All right then. But make it snappy."

On the way down, I tried to make Mooney discuss the case. But he said,

"Listen, I don't know nothin' now, an' the chances are I never will. The whole thing's screwy. If it's murder, why did somebody send a ransom note? An' if it's kidnagin', why are they makin' a jig-saw puzzle out of Garwood?"

I said sagely, "It sounds like a maniac's work," and Mooney nodded gloomily.

"That makes two of us, then," he said. "Him an' me." And he went to sleep. He slept the rest of the way. We got to Jacksonville about two-thirty, hired a car, and started inland toward Orange City where the Garwood ranch was.

We reached Orange City about four. Mooney stopped the car in front of the local police station. He told me.

"These hick cops won't know nothin'. But we might as well talk to them now an' get it over with."

He was right. The Orange City Chief of Police was a sad specimen. A political appointee, he was scared spitless by the case that had cracked his burg into headlines.

"Why do you think these guys cut Garwood up?" my friend asked him. "Because his frau wouldn't pay the ransom?"

"She never got a chance to pay it. There was just one note. Then the very next day she started getting—"

The Chief shuddered and shut up. He looked a bit green around the gills. Mooney said,

"I'd like to see them things. You got 'em here?"

"They're in the morgue. They don't keep very well in this kind of weather."

We went over to the morgue. The attendant dragged a little box out of the cooler and showed us what was in it. The local copper turned his head away and took a long time lighting a cigar. I didn't much blame him. One gander at the contents and I wasn't very hungry myself.

Mooney didn't seem to mind. He took the pieces of sliced Garwood out of the box one at a time, studying each one carefully. Once he grunted and borrowed a magnifying glass from the morgue attendant. But he made no comments.

"The left ear," the police chief remarked over his shoulder, "came first. The right ear came the next day. Then the toes, one at a time. Today it was the left thumb."

Mooney said, "Uh-huh!" absently. He returned the grisly trophies to their container and washed his hands in alcohol. On the way back to Headquarters he asked,

"You got the wrappers them things come in?"

"Yes. Would you like to see them?"

"In the morning. How about this guy Garwood? He have lots of dough?"

"No. That's the funny part. The ransom note was for twenty grand, and Garwood wasn't worth more than half that amount, insurance and all."

"I thought they said he owned an orange ranch?"

"Just a cracker ranch. It's barely large enough to earn him a living."

Mooney said, "You got some ideas about who done it, I suppose? He got any enemies?"

The police chief looked more worried than ever.

"We don't have any ideas at all. You see, Garwood didn't belong in these parts. He and his wife just came to Florida about three months ago. From somewhere up north—Pennsylvania, I think. They kept pretty much to themselves; didn't have any enemies or friends, from what I gather."

Mooney said, "Yeah? What did he come down here for?"

"His health."

Mooney chuckled.

"He picked the wrong place, didn't he?"

IT was too late to do anything else that night. We found a hotel and turned in. Mooney was already up, dressed and out by the time I woke up the next morning. I took my time dressing, had breakfast, then walked down Main Street to get some post cards. The morning papers said it was below freezing in New York, so I picked shots of bathing girls and wrote on them, "Whew! It's hot!"

When I got back to the hotel, Mooney was waiting for me. He looked hot and disgusted. He said, "This case has got more angles than Saturday night in the Old Maids' Home. I might as well go back to D. C."

I said, "What's wrong? Did you see the wrappers?"

"I seen 'em. They're all postmarked

'Tampa.' So now that's somewhere else we got to go."

"Right away?"

"No. First we'll go call on Mrs. Garwood."

We drove out to the Garwood's orange ranch. There was quite a crowd about the place; some State police, some newspaper men, and mostly morbid curiosity seekers.

The house itself wasn't much. A ramshackle frame building, faded and sun-blistered; badly in need of a coat of paint. The orange grove was a small one. About a hundred or a hundred and fifty trees.

I said to Mooney, "One look at this dump ought to set you straight on the motive. It was murder—not kidnaping. Maybe revenge, or something like that. You better start looking for some guy from up North who hated Garwood."

Mooney said admiringly, "You got brains. I guess you're right at that."

A State trooper let us into the house when Mooney flashed his P. O. identification card. Mrs. Garwood was upstairs in bed. A trained nurse told us she couldn't see anybody, but Mooney convinced her it was important, so we went up.

We found Mrs. Garwood propped up in bed. She was a faded blonde in her middle thirties; a little on the busty side. Her nose was red, and her eyes puffy. She looked as though she'd been crying steadily for the past three weeks.

Mooney asked her a few questions; mostly routine stuff, and she answered him. It didn't sound to me as if he was getting anywhere. I guess she thought so, too, for after a while she said.

"Mr. Mooney, I've been all over this with the local police. I've told them all I know. My husband started down to town after supper that—that night, and he never came back. The next morning that ransom note came. The morning after that, the—the first package."

She was all choked up, and she began to cry again. She'd been under a lot of strain, and I felt sorry for her. I gave Mooney the office and he nodded. We started to go, but at the door he turned and said,

"Mrs. Garwood, you always lived up north before you come down here, didn't you?"

She said yes, and he said, "Did your husband go to see any doctors since you lived down here?"

"No."

"Not any kind of doctor? Maybe an optician?"

She said, "No. My husband didn't wear glasses. He never had anything wrong with him. He never had a sick day in his life. He—"

She started sobbing again. This time the nurse came in and gave us a dirty look, so we left. On the way back to town I asked Mooney,

"What was all that stuff about doctors?" Then I got smart, and before he answered I said, "Oh—I get it! It was the way Garwood's ears and toes were amputated. Looked like a professional job, eh?"

Mooney said, "You catch on quick, don't you? Let's go see the postmaster."

IT turned out that he meant the postmaster in Tampa, so we had an hour and a half's drive to the larger city. We got there about twelve, and of course the postmaster was out to lunch. It was almost two by the time we got to see him.

He seemed glad to see a Post Office Department dick on the case. He said to Mooney, "Maybe we'll get somewhere now. Those Orange City flatfeet have been driving me nuts."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"They've been trying to get me to assign a man to each collection box, so's we can pick the Garwood hacker up when he slips another package in the mails. What they don't seem to realize is that I've got anywhere from fifty to seventy boxes for every carrier on the street."

Mooney said, "I guess you already got your men on the lookout for stuff addressed to Mrs. Garwood?"

"Of course. As if that meant anything. We picked up yesterday's in a downtown bank, and the day before that the package was found in a deposit box in Lemon Grove."

"On the other side of town, eh?" said Mooney. "The kidnaper's scatterin' his shots, ain't he?"

"Kidnaper!" sniffed the postmaster, "This isn't kidnaping. This is murder, pure and simple!"

Mooney jerked a thumb at me.

"That's what *he* says, too," he said.

There was a touch of asperity in the postmaster's voice. "Don't you think so?"

Mooney shrugged. "Me? How should I know? I just get paid to ask questions. Not to think."

There didn't seem to be much more we could get from the Tampa postmaster, so we went down the street to get some lunch. We found a nice looking place, but we'd no sooner settled into our seats than Mooney rose again.

"Wait here," he said, "there's something I got to do."

He wasn't gone more than five minutes or so. When he came back he looked like a cat who has just finished off the top of the bottle. I said,

"You've got something up your sleeve?"

"Skip it," he told me. "It's just a brainstorm, I guess. It won't amount to nothin'."

Since he didn't want to open up, I minded my own business. After we finished lunch he said,

"You good at holdin' your cookies?"

I said, "Reasonably. Why?"

"Because we got to go to the Tampa morgue now, an' I'd hate like anything to see you up-yip a good sixty cent lunch."

"Another morgue?"

"That's right. I want an index finger."

It didn't make sense to me, but Mooney seemed to know what he was doing. We went to the Tampa morgue, and Mooney told the man in charge what he wanted. The man said that he was nuts, and he couldn't have it, and then he and Mooney went round and round for a while, but in the end Mooney got what he wanted. An index finger off a stiff that nobody had been able to claim or identify.

Then he went back to the post-office, and Mooney got some paper and twine and wrapped the thing up. He addressed it to Mrs. Garwood at Orange City.

I said, "Hey, what's this all about, anyway?"

"Didn't I tell you? It's a brainstorm. But I got to do something, haven't I?"

He took a small cellophane envelope out of his wallet, and took a special delivery stamp out of the envelope. He licked it carefully and put it on the package. He shoved it over the counter to

the attendant and told him to put a six cent stamp on it.

The clerk saw the address, and started to get panicky, but we called the postmaster, and fixed everything up. Mooney still wasn't giving out. The postmaster was curious and started asking questions, but it didn't do him any good. Mooney said,

"What time should this thing reach Orange City?"

"About nine o'clock tonight."

Mooney turned to me. "Come on, then. We got to get to Orange City before it gets there."

It was after six when we reached Orange City, but the Chief of Police was still in his office. He jumped up when we came in. He looked pretty excited, and proud of himself, too. He shouted,

"Well, we've cracked the case!"

Mooney looked startled. He said, "You have? You mean you found Garwood?"

"No, but we know who murdered him. A tenant farmer by the name of Praikes. Lives in a little shack about a half mile from the Garwood ranch. The neighbors discovered today that he wasn't home; hadn't been home for a couple of weeks. They broke into his shack. Praikes wasn't there, but there was blood on the floor, and from the look of the room, there had been a fight. All we've got to do now is locate Praikes."

Mooney said, "This Praikes guy? He wasn't from the north, was he?"

The police chief smirked.

"No. That idea was all wet. He was a native. You see, you Federal cops aren't so smart after all."

"I guess you're right," said Mooney. Then to me he said, "Come on. You an' I got to go see Mrs. Garwood."

MRS. GARWOOD was up out of bed when we got there. She was all dressed in black, and looked a lot more like a human being than the first time we'd seen her. She was still sniffing, but it looked as though she'd reconciled herself to the idea, now, that her old man was dead.

She said, resignedly, "I kept up hope as long as I could—even when those horrible messages came to me through the mail. But I know, now, that dear John is gone.

As soon as they told me about Praikes—"

"You knew this Praikes?" Mooney asked her.

"Yes. He was a horrible man. He and John never did get along together. Not from the first day we moved to this ranch. They had trouble about the property boundaries; then about the ownership of some smudge pots that belonged to us. He hated John and me, because he thought we were 'Northern capitalists'."

"You think that's why he sent the ransom note?"

"I suppose so. Then, afterward, he must have decided to drop that idea. He—he was a little crazy, I think."

Mooney said, "You give the cops his description, I guess?"

"Yes. I'll never rest until they find him."

Mooney opened his mouth to say something, but just then the doorbell rang. It was the special delivery messenger. The State cop on duty let him in, and he delivered the package. I recognized it as the one Mooney had mailed from Tampa.

Mrs. Garwood turned pale and shrunk back. She said,

"N-not another! Oh, my God! Not another!"

Mooney said, "This is tough on you, ain't it, Mrs. Garwood. Havin' to identify all these things?"

I said to Mooney quietly, "Listen—does she have to do this? Her nerves, Mooney?"

She pulled herself together. She looked pale, but firm. I had to admire her strength of will. She said, weakly, "I—it's the least I can do. I—I have to cooperate—"

Mooney unwrapped the package and held it before her mutely. She nodded.

"Y-yes!" she choked.

Mooney said, "Are you sure, Mrs. Garwood? Absolutely sure?"

She said, "I'm positive!"

Mooney sighed. He said to the cop.

"Take her in!"

The cop and I looked at him in astonishment. The cop said, "Wha-a-at?" Mooney shook his head.

"You stuck your neck out that time, Mrs. Garwood," he said. "That's not your husband's finger, and you know it."

She looked at him dumbly for a minute. Then she began to turn brick red.

She started to bluster. She squealed.

"But—but it is! I know! I can tell! Who are you to tell me—"

Mooney said quietly,

"You see that stamp?"

We all looked at once. It was a special delivery stamp; dark blue and the usual shape. Unless someone *told* you to look at it especially, nine times out of ten it would pass unnoticed as a regular special. Only it wasn't. The picture of the messenger on it wasn't standing by a doorway, with his motorcycle. He was running. The inscription read, "*Secures immediate delivery at a Special Delivery Office.*"

Mooney said, "That stamp was issued in 1885, Mrs. Garwood, an' went off sale in 1888. Your husband ain't been savin' it *that* long to use on one of his phoney bundles."

Mrs. Garwood stared at him for a minute. Then all of a sudden her ladylike pose came apart. She made a dive for the package on the table, and when Mooney snatched it up first, she kicked at him and started clawing at his eyes.

The State copper came out of his trance and stepped forward. He grabbed her and held her. She began to scream and swear in a shrill, high monotone. I suddenly realized that Mrs. Garwood wasn't exactly what you might call a lady. She shouted,

"It was a trick! A sneaky, lousy copper's trick! Well, you're not going to make me take the rap for it, see? It was his idea in the first place. It was him that killed Praikes—"

Mooney held a clean handkerchief to the fingernail scratch over his left eye. He nodded to the State cop.

"Take her in," he repeated. "She'll talk. She'll tell us where to find her old man now."

WHEN we were alone I said to Mooney, "Then Garwood isn't dead, after all, eh?"

"That's right."

I said, "But the corpse? I mean the finger and all that. Where did they come from?"

"Maybe you ain't as smart as I thought?" said Mooney. "Them things was part of the missin' Praikes guy."

"Praikes?"

"Sure. As soon as I heard there was a cracker tenant farmer missin' in the neighborhood, that made everything click. I had it half figured before then, but I was shootin' in the dark.

"The way I see it, this Garwood an' his wife moved down here to Florida for just one reason—to pull a fast one on the insurance company. You heard what the Chief told us? Garwood didn't have no cash; all he had was insurance."

"So?"

"So they came down here where nobody knew them, an' they took care not to make no friends. Maybe this Praikes started gettin' in their hair. He had trouble with Garwood a couple of times, which means he knew what kind of chiseler Garwood was. Or maybe he didn't even enter into it; I don't know. Maybe him and Garwood had a fight and Garwood knocked him off, an' that's what made 'em decide to pull the stunt right away.

"Anyhow, Garwood knocked off Praikes an' skipped to Tampa. If he just disappeared, Mrs. Garwood wasn't goin' to get no money from the insurance people till after he was officially declared dead—which would be seven years, in this state. So Garwood started mailin' home these hunks of hisself—an' Mrs. Garwood identified them."

I asked, "But how did you get wise to the scheme?"

"I didn't. I was just battin' around, lookin' for a lead, an' I seen a couple of

things that looked screwy. Garwood's wife said he didn't wear glasses, but there was marks on them ears which showed the dead guy did. Besides, Garwood was a Northerner, an' them toes was the toes of a guy which had lived in the South an' was a poor white."

"How did you know that?"

Mooney grunted, "Hookworm. Praikes was used to goin' barefoot. That's why I asked Mrs. G. about the doctor. It was a sure thing that whoever used to walk on them feet had had to go to a doctor.

"Well, when I seen it wasn't parts of Garwood that was comin' home, an' yet Mrs. Garwood was identifiyin' them as her old man, I began to wonder."

I said, "Just the same, you got a break. If she'd been smart, she wouldn't have cracked when you framed her on that Special Delivery trick. You never could have proved anything."

"That's right. But crooks ain't smart. If they was, they wouldn't be crooks. Well, I better not talk. I ain't so smart, either."

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Well, I didn't find Garwood, did I? Now the local cops will find him an' they'll get all the credit. I bet I won't even get my expense money back."

"Expense money?" I said.

"That there special delivery stamp," said Mooney gloomily. "I had to buy it at a stamp-dealer's store. Two bucks it cost me. This is a hell of a racket!"

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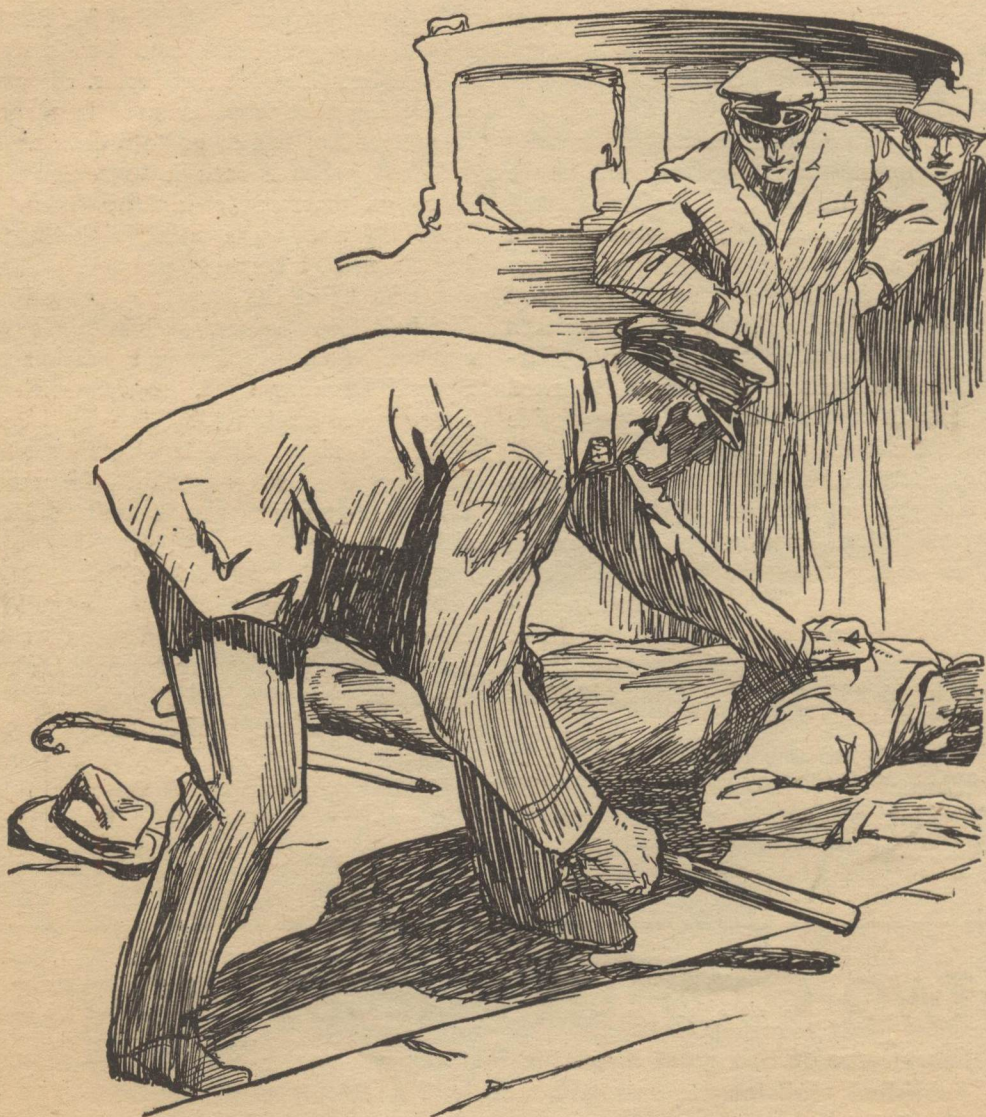
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THE gambler's eyes were still, dead, unreadable, as he glanced around Brett's office. He said: "And so, Mr. Brett, I'd like to buy a partnership in your detective agency for ten grand."

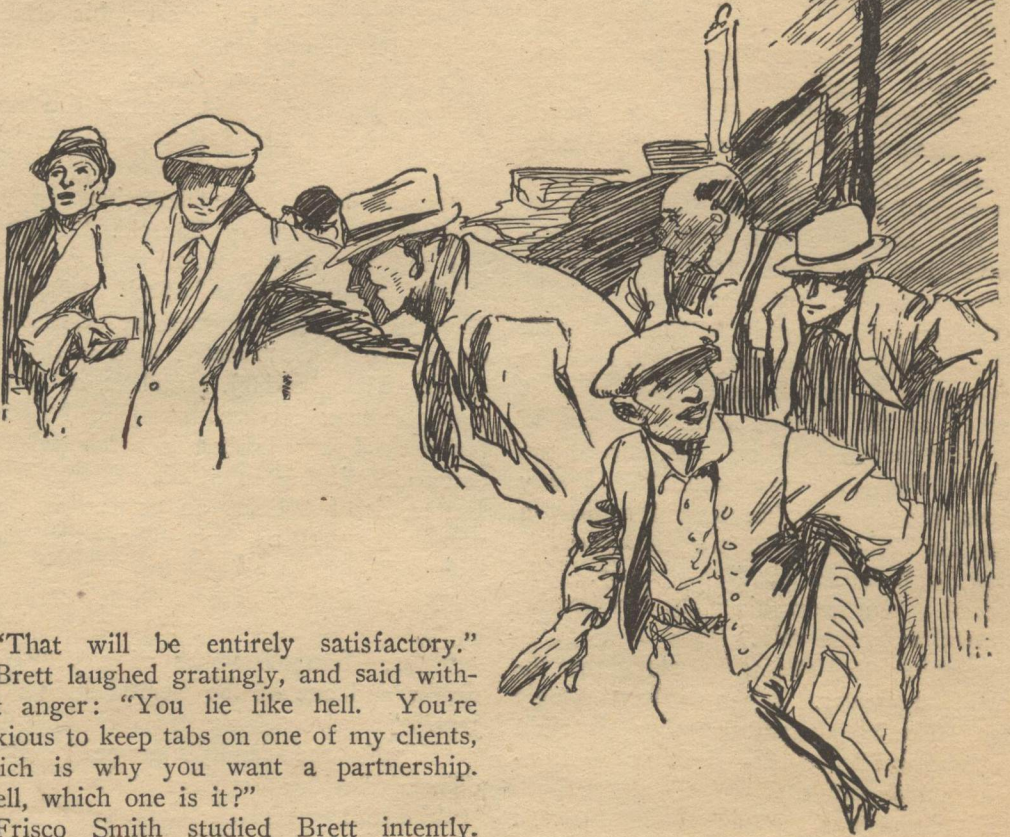
Tay Brett seemed bored. He said something that sounded like "Oh yeah" as he lighted a cigaret. They stared at each other across Brett's desk. The gambler's smile was neat and chiseled under his

small, glossy mustache, black like his thinning hair. Nothing lived in his eyes.

Brett smiled politely. "That's a lot of money." He leaned back, propped his feet against a drawer. Without interest, he suggested, "Here's a proposition: Fifteen grand for a partnership—*after* all present cases have been settled."

No expression disturbed Frisco Smith's unwavering smile.

Sonia Patten was lovely, talented—and clever. But she wasn't smart enough to lure private sleuth Tay Brett into playing catspaw for a killer clique.



"That will be entirely satisfactory."

Brett laughed gratingly, and said without anger: "You lie like hell. You're anxious to keep tabs on one of my clients, which is why you want a partnership. Well, which one is it?"

Frisco Smith studied Brett intently. Then he scribbled his phone number on a card, picked up one of Brett's business cards. He rose to the full six feet-three of his aristocratic slimness.

"I'll call you up tomorrow," he promised. "You might change your mind for—twenty-five thousand."

Brett waited until the lock of the door clicked. Then he replaced his memorandum pad on the desk and studied the few notations curiously. But from the first, "Cartman—tomorrow, eleven," to the last, "West—Warwick," there was no clue.

LIGHT in the long, apartment house corridor was uncertain, depending upon alternate ceiling bulbs. It was after three-thirty a.m. A very tall man knocked softly at a door, rang twice, knocked

again. After a moment, a voice inside demanded: "Who is it?" The voice was guttural. The tall man outside whispered something in reply. A chain scraped and rattled, a lock turned, the door swung inward.

From inside the apartment, three shots ripped out, fused into a single dry, brittle rasp, muffled by a silencer. The tall man said in a surprised voice, "Well, I'll be a son—" He pitched forward.

A figure flitted along the corridor, disappeared down the stairs.

After a minute, the man on the floor coughed deep in his stomach. He put out his hand—pushed—pushed himself up slowly until his shoulders were clear of the floor. Like a punch-drunk fighter,

he pulled himself to his knees, to his feet, scratching at the door jamb, the knob.

His left hand pressed his open coat against his side. He moved to the automatic elevator unsteadily, his shoulder rubbing the wall for support. He stabbed a button weakly—the “Up” button. The car arrived. He tugged open the door, stumbled in, fell full length. The door closed.

Again the tall man fought to his feet, laboriously. Pushed blindly at the floor button with his right hand. His left never relaxed its pressure against his side. Where his lower left vest pocket had been, were now ragged rips. The cloth of his jacket, his vest, his shirt was jammed into the wound, into his flesh. The blood oozed slowly through the wadded cloth.

The elevator stopped. The tall man jabbed feebly at another button and the car continued downward. This time it stopped at the ground floor. He peered out cautiously—saw no one, heard no voice. The tall man stumbled weakly across the foyer. He leaned against a table for breath. On the table was a Ming vase made in New Jersey. He worked a gun from his right hip pocket, dropped it in the vase.

Reaching the street, he staggered toward the corner. He was bent double now. The bloody smear under his right eye was hidden. His right hand fumbled in his pocket.

His heart was pumping blood between the fingers of his left hand. It was wet and shiny where it splashed on his shoes, wet and shiny where it splattered the sidewalk.

The taxi driver on the corner saw him, but couldn't see his torn face.

“Bellyache?” he asked solicitously.

“Take me—take me—”

Suddenly the man thrust out a stiff right arm, a closed fist. He slumped forward, struck the side of the cab, fell to the fender, rolled face down onto the sidewalk. . . .

The patrolman reporting to the desk sergeant said:

“—and tell the Louie he was a private dick by the name of—,” he consulted the crumpled, blood spotted card he'd taken from the man's right fist, “name of Brett, Taylor Brett. They give him the business

all right. . . . Yeah, dead as hell.”

II

HOWARD CARTMAN, the lawyer, inspired one with confidence. Prospective clients observed his respectable clothes, his respectable offices, his respectable eyes and were filled with immediate trust in his honesty, his ethics. Tay Brett thought he was a heel.

“I hope you can handle this—er—business personally, Mr. Brett,” Cartman said suavely. “It is very—well—ticklish.”

“Sure,” agreed the detective readily, keeping his ideas to himself. “Suppose you tell me what you want done.”

“Of course. How stupid of me!” Howard Cartman laughed in respectable embarrassment. “Briefly, here is the situation: Mrs. Lewis J. Humbolt, of Montclair, seeks a divorce from her husband because of her husband's affair with a certain Sonia Patten of New York. Miss Patten, is, I believe, an actress and reputed to be a very—er—charming woman.”

“They usually are,” Brett observed dryly.

“Mrs. Humbolt comes of a very fine family and one of the wealthiest in New Jersey.”

“What's the family's name?” Brett demanded with an eye for business.

“Sherrell,” replied Cartman. “Mrs. Humbolt was Miss Virginia Sherrell before her marriage to Lewis J. Humbolt about a year and a half ago. It's a shame, Mr. Brett—” the lawyer's voice held a nice balance between shock and sorrow—“really a shame. Mrs. Humbolt is a charming woman, simply a charming woman.”

“I'm sure of it,” Brett agreed.

“However—” The lawyer sighed, then went on: “We know that the Patten woman has letters written to her by Mr. Humbolt which, if we could—er—lay hands on them, would provide Mrs. Humbolt with the evidence necessary for a divorce.”

“And that's where I come in, huh?” Brett asked.

Cartman bowed. “Precisely. It shouldn't be difficult. We'll pay well for those let-

ters—if necessary, ten thousand dollars.”

“Ten grand?” Brett demanded. The lawyer shuddered genteelly.

“Yes; yes, ten—er—grand.”

“What am I supposed to do?” the detective asked.

“Well — ah — convince the Patten woman to sell to us and handle the whole transaction.”

Brett asked: “What’s the husband like?”

“Lewis J. Humbolt,” began the lawyer, oratorically, frowning at an inkstand, “is a very fascinating man. To women, I mean,” he added hastily. “His family is—was one of the most famous in this state and dates back to the Revolution.”

Brett stirred restlessly.

“Humbolt served with the Royal Air Force and then transferred to the American air service when we entered the last War. Unfortunately the Humbolt family isn’t what it used to be; in fact they’ve lost all their money.”

“Tch, tch!” Brett tched.

“Such a shame,” Cartman agreed. He leaned forward confidentially, “That’s why he married Virginia Sherrell.”

“Yeah, but why did she marry him?” Brett asked.

“She’s very young—twenty-four or thereabouts. She was carried away by Humbolt’s war record, his fascination, his—”

“I get it,” Brett cut in. “I’m to get in touch with Sonia Patten and get those letters.”

“Quite—er—quite.”

“How many letters are there?”

“Eleven,” Cartman replied.

Brett took a fifty dollar retainer from the lawyer, promised him a fat expense account, and left. Outside in the street, newsboys were crying extras on the Frisco Smith murder, which was not yet eleven hours old.

“**H**OW’S the sleuth racket?” Pat Hirsch asked from his regular post beside Swedie’s desk as Brett entered his office. Hirsch was grinning.

“Fifty bucks better than lousy,” Brett snapped.

“What do you think of the Frisco Smith kill?”

“Not interested.”

“Then get interested,” Hirsch advised. “Centre Street’s been calling you.”

“Yeah?” Brett replied. Then he stared, sighed, and pointed to Pat’s collar. “I’m sorry, Pat, I can’t get her to use indelible lip stick.”

As Brett went into his office, there was a snort from Swedie and Hirsch was treading on his heels. The reporter glared.

“Just a pal,” he jeered. “Why don’t you give yourself up? Listen, Sherlock Holmes, if you were smart, you’d see that smear on my collar’s too dark to be a blonde’s lip—”

The door burst open and Swedie appeared, her eyes blazing. “So, you cut yourself shaving,” she cried at Hirsch. “If you—”

Brett pushed her out and shut the door. He watched the reporter silkily dispose his long body in a tilted chair and laugh. “I know you. It’s Don Juan Hirsch himself.”

Pat Hirsch grunted. “What the hell,” he grumbled philosophically. “What happened in Newark?”

“A guy wants me to make a fix for him with a certain labor mob,” Brett replied easily as he rinsed two glasses in a wash basin behind a screen.

“Horsefeathers,” Hirsch said. “Swedie told me you went to see Howard Cartman, the lawyer.”

“I wish somebody’d marry that loud speaker and take her off my hands,” Brett observed. He handed out glasses and a bottle. “Make yourself useful.”

As Brett thumbed a New Jersey phone book, Hirsch poured two extra-generous slugs of rye. He asked casually:

“Looking for anything particular?”

“Yes. A chance to make some money.”

Brett put down his empty glass as the phone rang. He said: “Hello Captain Moeller,” into the mouthpiece, listened, then promised irritably, “O.K. I’ll be down around eight, but I’m telling you my nose is clean.”

Brett put down the phone, growled, “Centre Street,” to Hirsch and went out. “Listen, baby,” he told Swedie, “I pay your salary, You’re working for *me*, not that lanky news-hound.”

Swedie’s sniff of contempt followed him to the stairs. Tay Brett grinned.

BRETT'S taxi stopped before a new and magnificent apartment house on Central Park West. He entered and went to an attendant who stood before a switch board.

"Miss Patten in?"

"Yes, sir."

Brett handed him a sealed envelope with his business card inside.

"Send this up to her."

A moment later he was ushered deferentially to an elevator and let off at the twenty-third floor. An attractive mulatto maid opened the door, showed him into a well furnished living-room.

"Miz Patten'll be heah in a minute," the girl informed him with a flashing tip-hunting smile.

Brett nodded and seated himself comfortably. The girl walked from the room with a swaying, sensuous rhythm to her well proportioned body. Brett grunted: "One of those things, huh."

When Sonia Patten entered, Brett found her a strikingly attractive woman of about twenty-eight. The Sonia part of her name was reflected in wide, high cheek bones which told of her Slavic origin. Her eyes were a smoky blue, set wide apart, nose slightly broad at the nostrils. There was a mole just under the left side of her chin. Medium blonde hair, height about five feet eight, weight around one hundred and twenty-two.

She stood just inside the doorway looking from Brett to his card in her hand. Across the center of the card, in Tay's muscle-bound scrawl, was written: "Must see you at once. Important." Sonia Patten studied the words but Brett stood silently, doing nothing which might give her a hint as to his errand.

"Mr. Taylor Brett?" she asked consulting the card. Brett bowed. "I don't quite understand your message."

Her voice was throaty. Brett smiled.

"What—what do you wish to see me about?"

"Let's not try to kid each other, Miss Patten," Brett said smoothly. "I'm here to make you a very generous offer—ten thousand dollars."

Her smoky blue eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. But she was a smart girl, she made no reply.

After a moment's silence, Brett rose and wandered round the room. He looked casually through the French doors which opened upon a small stone balcony that ran the length of the apartment. He strolled to the foyer, glanced through a door on the right into a small kitchen where the languorous maid sat looking at pictures in *La Vie Parisienne*. Brett returned to the living-room and looked around. Behind Sonia were wide, curtained French doors. Brett drifted toward the woman, detoured so he passed her, and, without warning, threw open the doors.

With a bound, Sonia Patten reached him. She seized his arm. Brett allowed himself to be shoved violently aside, but not before he had spotted the brown Homburg hat, Harris tweed coat, and Malacca stick which lay on the chaise longue by the windows.

"How dare you, how dare you!" she demanded, her voice trembling. Brett shrugged.

"Ten grand," he said indifferently. "Take it or leave it."

"I should have you arrested or—have the hall boys throw you out," she raged.

"Ten grand."

"For what? What do you want?" the woman demanded angrily.

"Some hot love letters," Brett replied. The Patten woman's mouth hardened. Brett sauntered toward the foyer. Sonia followed warily. He looked left along the short hall, past the door to the kitchen, to a door on the left, evidently the one to the bedroom. She watched him closely, breathing hard.

"Ten grand," said Brett softly and stepped off toward the bedroom door. Sonia clutched his arm. He shook her off easily, went on.

"Wait!" she cried. "What letters do you want?"

"Oh, more than one set, huh?"

Sonia bit her lip, but plunged on desperately: "What letters do you mean? Did you come here just to bully me or—"

Brett turned to her sharply. "Listen," he cut in, "I came here to do business, but you want to play the smart girl. I don't like this job or anything connected

with it—and that goes for you too. I never did like lady blackmailers!"

She stepped back, one hand up as though to ward him off. Brett kept the bedroom door in sight and repeated:

"I don't like blackmailers!"

Nothing happened. Brett raised his voice angrily.

"I'm here to offer you ten thousand dollars for letters written to you by Lewis Humbolt. Know him?"

The Patten woman nodded dully. Brett took her arm and led her back to the living-room. She asked:

"Who hired you?"

Slowly, distinctly, Brett countered, "Suppose I said Mr. Humbolt?"

The smoky blue eyes flickered, stared back at him expressionlessly.

"So Mr. Humbolt sent you?"

Brett laughed easily. "You're too smart for me, Miss Patten. As a matter of fact, I'm acting for Mrs. Humbolt."

"I don't believe you," she replied. "I know Mr. Humbolt wants his letters. Why should Mrs. Humbolt want them?"

"To get a divorce," Brett explained. "She needs evidence. Will you sell?"

"For ten thousand dollars?" the woman scoffed. "I should say not!"

"Ten grand will buy you many a square meal," observed the detective mildly.

"Those letters are worth one hundred thousand dollars! If Mrs. Humbolt wants a divorce so badly, let her pay for it. She's rich."

"Let's be reasonable, Miss—"

"One hundred thousand dollars!" she interrupted. "That's my price to Mrs. Humbolt or Mr. Humbolt or anyone else."

"Say, with a hundred grand you could settle down in France and live like a queen for the rest of your life."

"Possibly that's my intention," she replied.

"You could even afford a husband," Brett said. Sonia didn't answer; he went on: "I'll tell them that's your price, but I don't think they'll meet it."

"She can afford it," the woman said. "If she can't, her father can."

Brett rose. "I'm glad to have met you," he smiled. "If you ever need a detective, let me know." His eyes admired her. "I'd like to work for you."

III

BRETT went back to West 45th and climbed the three flights to his office. Swedie was making up her face in preparation for the Subway rush. She caught Brett's amused glance at her lip stick and turned her back on him.

"Where's the boy friend?"

Swedie turned and asked primly, "To whom exactly do you have reference, Mr. Brett?"

"Go home, Mrs. Vanderlip, you're wearing me out."

Going down the short corridor past the empty office, Brett went into his own bailiwick and poured out a stiff rye. Next he copied the names and addresses of five of Newark's best lawyers from the phone book. He poured out another rye. Then he called:

"Hey, Swedie!" She came to his door. "Want a drink?"

"I've asked you upon numerous occasions," she replied haughtily, "not to offer me liquor in any form." Suddenly she blazed, "and stop calling me 'Swedie'!"

The banging door drowned Brett's chuckle.

JACK AND JILL'S on West 47th was beginning to fill as Tay entered. He ordered supper and prepared to wait. When Jake Goldhess, the lawyer, entered, Brett called him over.

"Sit down, Jake," he invited, "I owe you a meal."

Goldhess considered, scowled, and sat down.

"More than that you owe me," he grunted as he tucked a corner of the napkin into his collar and opened the two bottom buttons of his vest. He appraised Brett's well cut, quiet suit.

"A new suit," he remarked. "Where'd you get it?"

"Tripler's" Brett recited, "46th and Madison. Don't remember the salesman's name, and I don't know where I was September 21st, 1927."

"Now if you want class, y'understand," Goldhess said, his highly polished nails gleaming against the flaring lapel of his ultra smart coat, "I'll give you my tailor's address."

"I don't want to look like a crap shooter."

"Listen, Brett, one hun'ed and seventy-fi' bucks I paid for this suit. It's got lines—it's got class. Pull any more fast ones like that Spencer jewelry deal and you can afford to go—"

"All right, Jake, all right," Brett cut in. "I want to ask you a question."

"Please, Brett, don't ask me questions. I don't like it when you ask me questions, y'understand?"

Brett grinned and tossed the list of lawyers he'd copied in front of Goldhess.

"This won't hurt your appetite," he promised. "Know anything about the practitioners of jurisprudence in Newark?"

"Certainly," Goldhess responded. "Haven't I got a cousin practicing there?"

"On whom?" Brett grinned, then grew serious. "Listen, Jake, a client of mine wants to hire one of those five guys. Which is best?"

With a heavy sigh, Goldhess scanned the list. After deliberation, he said: "They're all good, y'understand? You got some of the best legal minds in New Jersey on—"

"Hell!" Brett snatched the list from between fat, ring-infested fingers. "Making a noise again, huh?"

The lawyer smiled grimly. "Do I owe you money?" he demanded. "You want the dope on one of those guys, and I should give it to you free?"

"One of them did a kill," Brett said evenly. Goldhess' eyes popped, a heavy, red stain suffused his pink jowls.

"One of those guys a killer?" he breathed. Brett seemed serious. A cunning light came into the lawyer's eyes, and he leaned forward confidentially. "Which one, huh?"

Brett was silent. Goldhess asked, "Hart?" He waited for Brett's reaction. There was none. "Schneider?" Another pause. "Cartman? Bell? Mulcahy?"

Brett's face was impassive, cold.

"Mulcahy?" Goldhess mused. Then, "He's got dough. Hart's in the sugar too. So's Cartman." He stopped, remembered something. "That's right."

Brett stared at him.

"Yeah? What is?" Brett prodded.

"I just remembered," said Goldhess

blandly, "Schneider and Bell got dough also."

"They've all got dough, huh?"

"Sure," replied Goldhess suavely, "they all got dough. Rich guys don't have to be killers."

"Money the only thing a man kills for?"

"What else?"

Brett rose. Goldhess pushed the check toward him. He said:

"Any time you want professional advice, come to my office and pay my fee. And don't forget the check."

"Uh-huh," Brett grinned, "you said you'd kill for money."

IV

AT eleven-thirty next morning, Tay Brett was shown into Howard Cartman's office. On Cartman's desk was a paper screaming with headlines on the Frisco Smith murder. Brett jerked a thumb toward it.

"Guess I'm not the only baffled sleuth in the world," he remarked.

"Does that mean . . . Were you—er—unsuccessful?"

Brett laughed shortly. "She won't sell."

"Won't sell!" echoed Cartman.

"Hell no," said Brett quietly. Cartman studied Brett's easy smile with bewilderment.

"It seems to me, Mr. Brett," he announced coldly, "that you find this affair amusing rather than serious."

Brett shrugged.

"You offered her ten thousand dollars for the letters?"

"Sure."

"But—but—" The lawyer stopped, seemed at a loss how to cope with Brett's indifference.

"If you really want those letters," Brett said, "she'll sell—for one hundred grand!"

"One hundred—why that's absurd! One hundred thousand dollars is a small fortune!"

"Not so small," Brett put in. "If you really want to secure Mrs. Humbolt's divorce, the thing to do is shake her father down for the hundred grand. Old Man Sherrell can afford it." The lawyer stared dazedly. Brett said, "I'll see Sherrell for you to explain—"

"No, no. That won't do at all," Cartman broke in.

"Why not?"

"Mrs. Humbolt's family were—er—bitterly opposed to her marriage from the start," Cartman explained hurriedly. "Mrs. Humbolt doesn't wish her family to learn of the divorce until it has been granted."

"With the woods lousy with newshounds?" Brett jeered. "She's an optimist!"

"Mrs. Humbolt doesn't wish to approach her father in this matter. That's enough for me; it will have to be enough for you," Cartman stated with heavy finality.

Brett shrugged. "Then we'll have to dope out some other way of handling Sonia."

"How about—" Cartman hesitated—"how about securing the letters by stealth? Could it be done?"

"Sure," agreed Brett. "But not by me."

"Scruples?" the lawyer asked with an unpleasant smile.

"Accidents," replied Brett laconically. "Suppose I mooched into Sonia's place, located the letters, and started to lam and the cops came in, *accidentally*? Wouldn't that be cute?"

"But how could the police know?" Cartman objected.

"That's just it," Brett pointed out. "Of course it would be sheer coincidence. No, that's out."

After a moment's thoughtful silence, Brett suggested, "I'll tell you how it could be done. We'll make Sonia believe Humbolt is crossing her, running around with another woman. Then we'll offer her ten grand for the letters and the revenge of seeing Humbolt kicked out of his nice meal ticket by Mrs. Humbolt's divorce."

"I'm afraid that won't do," complained Cartman.

"What do you mean 'won't do'? It's fool-proof!"

"Granted. But Mrs. Humbolt is—er—a woman of high principles," confessed Cartman. "She would never countenance such a—ah—deception."

Tay Brett grinned. "What a woman," he breathed in devout admiration. "I'd like to meet *our* client."

A shadow flashed across Cartman's face.

"Does she know I'm on the case?" Brett asked.

"Naturally," Cartman replied coldly. "I should hardly retain you without advising her first."

The telephone buzzed discreetly, and Cartman picked it up. Brett lighted another cigarette.

Of the ensuing conversation, Brett was only able to catch one word when Cartman hissed "murder!" in a horrified voice and turned deadly white. Brett grinned, took out an expense account form, began tabulating his expenditures on the Humbolt-Patten job. The lawyer's face was still pale as he replaced the receiver and reached for his cheque-book.

"Let me have a statement of your expenses, Brett," he said, his voice indignant. "Our association is—ah—terminated."

Brett handed it to him and remarked easily, "Jake Goldhess is a real pal."

Above the scratching of his pen, Cartman said: "I feel I owe him a great debt." He rose and handed Brett a cheque.

"Telling Mr. Goldhess what you did may be your idea of humor, Brett, but it's not mine," Cartman snapped. "And since you have attempted to discredit me, have told a brother lawyer that I was—er—a murderer," his voice shook with righteous indignation, "you are no longer wanted on this case."

"That's all right, Cartman," Brett replied amicably as he folded the cheque. "Don't apologize. This isn't a case yet anyway—it's a run-around."

Brett hunted up a phone booth in the lobby of Cartman's building and looked up Mrs. Lewis J. Humbolt's address. He looked at his watch—a quarter past twelve. He went to a little Greek chop house around the corner from the Robert Treat Hotel and had a swell steak.

Then he grabbed a taxi.

THE Humbolts' house was not as large as Brett had expected. It was of Colonial architecture and modest in every way, compared to other houses on the street. It stood well back from the road, its spacious lawns shielded from view by a high boxwood hedge.

Brett presented his card and was shown into a pleasant room panelled in pine from floor to ceiling. A moment later, Mrs. Humbolt entered.

Virginia Sherrell Humbolt was about twenty-four. She was blonde like Sonia Patten, but smaller, about five feet eight, weighed around a hundred and ten. Her eyes were a clear blue, nose faintly aquiline, features regular, and no distinguishing marks. There was a slightly obstinate angle to her chin which suggested that Cartman had been telling the truth when he said she had married despite parental objections. Mrs. Humbolt smiled.

"Mr. Brett?" she asked. Her voice was warm, colorful. Brett rose, smiled in return. "I am Mrs. Humbolt."

Brett smiled again.

She seated herself, looked puzzled, and asked, "What have I done to deserve the attention of a New York detective? She glanced again at his card. "You are a detective, aren't you?"

"It's been questioned," Brett admitted.

Mrs. Humbolt looked him over carefully, curiously; noticed his dark cordovan shoes, black socks, the well tailored, unobtrusive suit, bottle-green tie, plain white shirt, and brown snap-brim hat.

"I must say I'm disappointed," she confessed. "I thought detectives wore thick-soled shoes, black derbies, and smoked cigars."

Brett laughed easily. "I've got a derby at home. I'll get it if it will convince you I'm the genuine article."

"What do you wish to see me about, Mr. Brett?"

Brett drew a note book from his pocket and consulted a page on which he had tried to dope the probable winners at Pimlico two weeks previously.

"This will sound silly," he warned. "Did you ever employ a maid named Agnes McGillicudahy?"

"Why no. What does she look like?"

"About six feet tall and weighs two hundred and—"

"Good heavens," Mrs. Humbolt interrupted, "I'd be scared to death of a woman that big."

Brett rose and picked up his hat. "I thought it was a stall," he said.

"Did she say she's worked for me?"

"Yet," Tay replied, "and she's hooked

my client for eighty thousand dollars worth of jewelry."

"That's awfully exciting!" Mrs. Humbolt exclaimed, her eyes shining. "But how did she ever come to pick me?"

"Probably took your name out of the phone book," Brett answered. "By the way, you might hang onto my card. You can never tell when you'll need a detective."

Mrs. Humbolt looked down at his card. Brett couldn't see her eyes.

"I don't believe I shall ever need a detective," was her low retort.

Brett said evenly, "There are always jewel thieves."

She looked up and smiled at that. "Hardly for my jewelry. I haven't enough."

"I can give you plenty of good references," Brett said. "Let's see, whom do I know around here." He meditated, then laughed. "I know a lawyer in Newark, but I played a joke on him—he'd say I was a crook. No, you'd better not ask Howard Cartman about—"

"Do you know Howard Cartman?"

"Yes; do you?"

"He's my husband's lawyer."

"Well, well; isn't that interesting." Brett grinned. "Thanks very much for your help. And if you ever need me—"

He pointed to the card in her hand and gave her his best business-getting bow.

V

"**W**HERE'VE you been all day?" demanded Swedie petulantly as Brett entered the office. There was a smudge of ink on Swedie's forehead, and her blonde hair was not tidy.

Brett dropped his hat on her desk.

"What's the matter? The President been trying to reach me?"

"Worse," she replied. "Anthony Warwick the actor phoned and had hysterics by courtesy of the Bell Telephone Company."

"That's a good gag," Brett admitted. "Where'd you steal it? What's on Warwick's mind?"

"My dear!" exclaimed Swedie in exaggerated imitation of the temperamental Thespian, "it's too terrible! I've simply

suffered beyond endurance. I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown, it's—"

"Which in plain English means what?" Brett demanded.

"Bill West has been tailing the wrong man for two weeks."

"What?"

"Bill has been shadowing the wrong man!"

Collapsing into the nearest chair, Brett threw back his head and gave vent to whole hearted laughter. Swedie looked somewhat startled at the boss' unusual display. At last, Brett pulled himself weakly from his chair and wiped his eyes.

"It's too good to be true," he said. "I'll bet the dope was half crazy."

"He was."

Brett's mouth hardened. "Damn Bill West!"

He turned to go, but Swedie put out her hand falteringly.

"Mr. Brett," she stumbled, stopped.

"Now what?" Brett asked.

Again Swedie started to speak, stopped. Then she held out a newspaper, pointed to a marked paragraph in the middle of a gossip column. Brett read aloud:

"A certain well known keptive is having boy friend trouble again. One of our better gum-shoes visited her yesterday and said nasty things in behalf of his New Jersey client. And they thumb noses!"

"See, he's double crossed you now," Swedie said. Brett looked up, a tight smile on his mouth. There were tears in the girl's eyes; she kept her face averted and dug at the top of her desk with an envelope opener.

"Go easy on the family antiques," Brett warned softly. He took the opener from her hand, slipped a pencil in its place.

"Pat's double crossed us both," Swedie whispered.

Brett's eyes were thoughtful as he slipped his arm around the girl's shoulders.

"Don't take it so hard, kid," he urged. "It's Pat's job to get news. He knew I was working on something and got sore when I wouldn't let him in."

"All right," Swedie retorted, her voice flying storm signals of an approaching

deluge, "but he d-didn't have to put that in the p-paper and then send us a m-m-marked copy."

"That won't hurt us any; it'll help."

"You wouldn't s-say that if he'd played the d-dirty trick he p-played on me," she wailed, becoming incoherent with increasing rapidity. "He p-p-played me a—"

"The lip rouge gag?" Brett demanded.

"—a d-d-dirty trick and I g-g-guess h-he knows—"

"Hey! Hold it!"

Brett picked up her open compact and held the mirror so Swedie could see her tear stained face.

"Does that look like America's Sweet-heart?" he asked. "Let me tell you a funny story. I ran into Dan English just before I came back here tonight and—"

"W-who's D-D-Dan English?"

"A feature writer on Pat's rag. Dan told me they found Pat sleeping off a jag under the Sunday editor's desk yesterday morning and what do you think?"

Swedie refused the bait and Brett hurried on:

"So they borrowed a lip stick from one of the gals and smeared it on his collar."

"You're just making that up."

"Making it—listen, Swenson, have I ever lied to you?"

"I don't think so," Swedie said hesitatingly. "How did you happen to see D-Dan English?"

"In a bar on 40th Street, Suspicious," Brett answered without hesitation. "He dropped in for a beer."

"Well—" she temporized. "Then Pat wasn't out with another girl?"

Brett cheered.

"But he told that columnist fellow about the case you're working on."

"Oh that!" said Brett lightly. "If Pat knew what we do about that case, he'd go crazy. I'll tell you, but don't you tell him."

Swedie shook her head.

"It's an agency secret," Brett warned. "I've got a line on a potential murderer."

"What do you mean?"

Brett swallowed a sigh and explained patiently: "I found out that a certain man may kill a certain person if it comes to a showdown."

Swedie's "Oh!" of horror cleared her eyes of its few remaining tears. Brett went on:

"But that isn't important. I found out that another gent is trying to work himself into a blackmail angle that will cost a husband his happy home. That part ties up with Sonia Patten, but don't tell Pat. Don't even give him a hint."

"Oh, I won't, I wouldn't for the world." Suddenly she turned on him. "Why are you telling me this?" she demanded suspiciously. "You've never told me important business secrets before."

Brett looked hurt; he sighed bitterly. "That's what you get for showing a gal you trust her."

"I'll bet you just told me hoping Pat Hirsch would worm it out of me," Swedie cried with a flash of inspiration. "Well, he won't!"

Brett glowered at her. "You let Pat find out and I'll wring your neck!" He made a gesture with his hands. "Like that. Now beat it. I've got to go down and explain to the D. A. all over again what I explained to the whole damn Homicide Squad."

"**A**BOUT this Frisco Smith murder, Mr. Brett—" the District Attorney began as Brett seated himself in a straight, uncomfortable chair near the glass-topped desk.

"What about it?" Brett shot back. "Are you involved?"

"Wha-a-at? The District Attorney stopped, glowered, ran a hand through his heavy hair.

Powers was a big man with a heavy frame. His long hair rose and swept back majestically in a straight, thick pompadour. His features were coarse, large, his voice booming and oratorical. Powers smiled bleakly, his yellowish eyes dull.

"No, I'm not involved. How about you?"

"Have you checked into my alibi?"

"Oh yes, and it's air tight. But alibis—" Powers smiled deprecatingly, spread his hands.

"My God! Is this going to start all over again?" Brett jerked out irritably. "Moeller worked on me for hours. 'Did I know Smith? What size shoes did I

wear? Was my father an Elk?' I haven't time to play Information Please!"

"Just a minute, Brett—"

Brett didn't pause. "If you want to solve the Smith kill, forget my card was found in his hand. And here's a deal: Get me some dope and I'll give you two good tips."

"And if I don't deal?"

"Then go ahead and indict me for the kill. And try and make it stick."

"What information do you want?" Powers asked.

"I want to know all about Sonia Patten and all about Smith."

Powers thought it over. At last he said, "Very well. But naturally I am not responsible for the actions of the police."

Brett brushed that aside. An hour later, he rose, shook hands with Powers and left. As the door closed behind him, a large man slipped into Powers' office through another door. He smiled wolfishly.

"Did you get it all, Moeller?" Powers asked.

"Sure," Moeller replied. "And how do we know that he didn't gun Smith to protect the client who had Smith so worried he was trying to buy into Brett's agency?"

"Exactly!" Powers said softly.

VI

AFTER dinner, Brett drifted over to the East 51st Street station and got into a bull session with Big Mac and several other detectives which wound up at his apartment around three-thirty a. m. At two minutes past nine next morning, his phone rang. It was Swedie.

"There's a Mr. Humbolt down here to see you," she said. "I found him waiting when I arrived."

"Does he look sore?" Brett asked.

Her voice was very positive, "Yes!"

"Tell him I'll be there in—" Brett pushed back his pajama sleeve, consulted his watch—"in four minutes."

Despite his promise, Brett shaved leisurely, dressed without hurry, and cleaned up dead soldiers from the night before. As he was about to go out, the phone rang again. He picked up the receiver, but didn't answer.

A woman's voice said, "Hello, hello?" It was Swedie. Brett grinned and put down the hook softly.

He went to a restaurant on the corner and ordered breakfast, then went to a phone booth and called the office. Swedie answered.

"This is the New York Telephone Company," Brett said. "Is Mr. Brett in?"

He heard Swedie say to someone beside her: "No, it's not Mr. Brett!" She said to Tay: "Mr. Brett isn't in yet, but we expect him any moment."

"Thanks, I'll call later."

At exactly twenty minutes to ten, Brett entered the office. A tall, lean man leaped at him.

"Are you Brett?" he demanded.

"Yeah," said Brett insolently, noticing the brown Homburg, Harris tweed coat, and Malacca stick. "Who are you?"

"I've been waiting here for over half an hour," the tall man raged. "You told your secretary—"

Brett said: "Hello" to Swedie and walked into his office. The tall man followed belligerently.

"Who are you anyway?" Brett demanded brusquely.

"Lewis Humbolt," the tall man snapped. "Ever hear of me?"

"Sure," Brett replied disinterestedly. "Your partner threw me off the case."

"The hell with Cartman!" Humbolt exploded. "What do you mean by bothering my wife?"

"I bothered Sonia Patten, too," Brett pointed out.

Humbolt calmed down. "We're talking about my wife," he said.

"And my client," agreed Brett. Humbolt said nothing. Brett went on: "Your boy friend Cartman told me I was working for Mrs. Humbolt. When he fired me, I went up to see her—naturally."

"Naturally nothing!" Humbolt thundered. "You were dealing with Cartman. he was paying you. He—"

"Imagine my embarrassment," Brett broke in, "when I discovered Mrs. Humbolt had never heard of me, didn't want a sleuth."

"That has nothing to do—"

"It has plenty to do with it!" Brett barked. "I got the run-around from

Cartman. He chased me over here to offer Sonia Patten ten grand for your letters. He knew she wouldn't sell. But he figured my mouth would start watering for that ten grand and I'd swipe the letters."

Humbolt was silent. Brett went on: "Hell, he hired a New York dick because he thought I wouldn't know the New Jersey laws. Mrs. Humbolt doesn't need those letters to get a divorce—not in Jersey. You're the guy that needed the letters. You wanted them in case Sonia got tough and decided to show you up to your rich wife, get you kicked out on your ear from a nice allowance."

Humbolt towered above the detective. "Damn you, Brett, I ought to throw you out the window for that."

"Well, open it first," said Brett evenly. "Then there's another angle: Maybe Cartman wanted the letters so he could blackmail you himself."

Humbolt sat down suddenly, his eyes narrowed. "My—I" he said in a surprised voice.

Brett sank into his swivel chair and began to study his fingertips.

"Who was paying my fee?" Brett asked.

"Cartman. At least," Humbolt explained, "he was advancing the money. I was to pay him back later."

"That's a cute angle," Brett laughed. "Cartman loans you the money to get the letters. He keeps them. You pay him back. Then Cartman puts on the blackmail squeeze and you start paying all over again. Smart boy, this Cartman."

"What made you suspicious of him?"

"All his excitement about the letters," said Brett. "It didn't make sense. If you fought the divorce, Mrs. Humbolt could try Reno. Those letters weren't to help her get a divorce, but to make sure she didn't get one."

"And where do you come in?" Humbolt asked.

"I don't. I got fired off the job."

"You mean to say you've lost all interest in the case merely because Cartman fired you?" Humbolt demanded in astonishment.

"What did you think I'd do?" Brett countered.

"But I thought detectives—"

"Worked for fun?" Brett finished. "Maybe they do, but not me. I get paid or I don't work."

The two men studied each other in silence.

Humbolt looked like an athlete. Scaling a shade over six feet, he seemed in perfect condition; his rather handsome face was bronzed and he wore a neat, dark mustache over a firm, full mouth. His eyes were dark brown and his hair, a few shades lighter with gray splashes at the temples and over his ears. He appeared to be around forty-two.

"Cartman tells me you were in aviation during the War," Brett observed.

"I was. Royal Air Force before we got into it."

"Flying is a tough racket. Must take lots of guts."

"The 'guts' part is over-rated," Humbolt said. "The War was the most glorious part of my life, I—" He stopped selfconsciously.

"You did combat flying?" Brett asked interestedly. Humbolt nodded. "Get any Heinies?"

"The War Department credited me with four planes," was the laconic reply. "Now about those letters. Do you think we can do business if I can raise the money?"

"You can always do business with me if you can pay for it," Brett assured him.

Humbolt thought that over. "I'd like to get those letters and I'd hate to have someone else get them."

"Being a rich gal's husband isn't such a bad job, huh?"

"It isn't," Humbolt admitted frankly. "And it's the only one I know."

With that he left. Brett followed him as far as the outer office. He asked Swedie:

"Seen anything of Pat Hirsch?"

"No," she replied, but didn't look up.

"You're a liar," Brett said conversationally. "He works until twelve or one—when did you see him?"

"After he got through last night," she confessed under her breath.

"Did you tell him what I told you?"

"No! I didn't, Mr. Brett, honestly," she protested.

Brett smiled. "I didn't think you would." He moved toward the door.

"Where'll you be?" Swedie asked.

Brett turned. "I'm up against a very difficult psychological problem so I'm going to pull a Vilo Pants. I'm going down to the Grand Central and read time tables."

Swedie stared after him speculatively.

VII

AS Brett drank orange juice and coffee at breakfast next morning he studied the gossip column of a pale pink tabloid propped against the cafeteria sugar bowl. He read:

"Who is the husband who will lose his rich wife if a certain Newark lawyer's blackmailing plans go through and the husband doesn't pay pa-lenty?"

After tearing out the page and stowing it in his pocket, Brett discarded the tabloid and picked up the other morning papers. He walked slowly to his office.

As Brett opened the door Swedie moved quickly. Brett saw her stuff the same tabloid into her waste basket.

"Anything good in it?" Brett asked, pointing to the crumpled paper. He dropped the others on her desk.

"N-no, not a thing," she informed him.

"I forgot to get it," he said. "Run through these and see if they're any leads. Anything beside the Frisco Smith kill."

At ten o'clock, Brett slipped an unopened pint of rye into his pocket and went out. He walked to a drab house on West 52nd Street with dirty lace curtains almost hiding the fly-specked sign "Rooms," and asked for Mr. P. Leonidas Hirsch. Mr. Hirsch was still sleeping, but the landlady, after mature deliberation, led Brett upstairs.

"You're a sucker, Pat," said Brett from the doorway.

Pat Hirsch fixed his sleep-heavy eyes on the slight dent in Brett's nose and asked: "Come to beat me up?"

"Maybe I should at that," Brett said. He tossed the gossip column beside the reporter. "Why give that guy dope? You don't work for his paper."

"You know the answer to that one yourself," Hirsch grumbled. "Go away, I want to sleep."

"So you fixed it up with Swedie, huh?"

"Did I fix it up!" Pat chortled. "Till three o'clock two mornings."

The reporter rolled up in the bed-clothes and relaxed, his eyes closed. Brett studied his bony, good humored face, then hunted up a couple of glasses. At the sound of pouring, Hirsch jerked up and sniffed.

"I fear the Greeks bearing rye," he grinned. "But not enough to say 'no'."

"Pat," Brett began, "you've helped me out on this case. I'm going to give you a chance to earn a couple of quarts."

"What do you mean I've helped you out?" Hirsch asked suspiciously.

Brett flicked ashes partially on the bed clothes, partially on the newspaper clipping. Hirsch swore fervently. "Do you want to play along or must I go down and sell Art Stultz the idea of assigning you to the job?"

"Art would be the greatest managing editor in the newspaper business," Hirsch groused, "if he didn't listen to you."

"That means you'll play?"

"What else can I do?" The reporter poked the bunched pillows behind him lovingly. "Wait a minute," he stalled. "How about giving me some dope before you shag me out of bed."

"I'll tell you enough for your own good," Brett agreed, "but keep your typewriter under control. Lewis J. Humbolt, whose wife is the daughter of Sherrell, the paint king, has been playing around with Sonia Patten before and after his marriage. Sonia has some hot letters from Humbolt, but she refused ten grand for them, even when I told her they would help Mrs. Humbolt get a divorce."

"Sonia's a wise baby," Pat observed. "If she isn't jealous of the wife, why should she kill her boy friend's income for a lousy ten grand?"

"You been eating fish?" Brett asked.

"What's Humbolt like?"

"Seems to be quite a gent," responded Brett. "That's what I want you to do—check up on Humbolt, especially his service record."

"War baby, huh?"

"Yeah, shot down four Jerry planes." Brett continued, "And I'm putting Halloway on Howard Cartman, I don't think the morgue will have him."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I want to know about the Sherrells," said Tay. "One of that gang is going to pay me for protecting Mrs. Humbolt."

"And pay plenty," observed Hirsch dryly. He scooped a phone from under his bed and called a number. After a few questions, Hirsch held the mouth-piece against his cheek and recited: "Two daughters, Virginia and Carmen. Carmen's married, lives in K. C. Old Lady Sherrell's society crazy. You know Virginia."

"Enough," admitted Brett.

"The old man's lousy with coin. One son, Douglas, a wild sort of bimbo."

"That takes dough," the detective commented. "Where can I reach Douglas?"

Pat spoke into the phone, then informed Brett: "He doesn't work. Has an apartment in town, hangs out at the Princeton Club."

"Swell," Brett said and Pat hung up.

"Want me to scout Sonia?"

"I'm getting a line on her," grumbled Brett, frowning.

As Hirsch dressed unhurriedly, he asked: "What was that 'potential murderer' stuff you gave Swedie?"

"Just a gag," chuckled Brett easily.

They left the house and walked down Broadway toward the Subway station. Hirsch looked at a morning paper, asked:

"What's your idea on this Frisco Smith rub-out?"

Brett's eyes narrowed, then he smiled: "I wouldn't know. No one's offered a reward, so why should I get excited?"

"He was no BB," Hirsch mused. "He was a real big shot."

They parted at 50th Street.

TWENTY minutes later, the phone in Brett's office rang. Answering it, Brett could hear the tremble of excitement in Pat Hirsch's voice.

"Just a gag, huh!" Pat jeered. "Did you hear about the accident?"

"Go on," Brett ordered.

"Just got the flash. At nine-thirty this morning, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis J. Humbolt are driving along when the left front tire blows and the car swerves sharp left across the road in front of a kid who's been hitting it up."

"Go on!"

"The right-hand door of Humbolt's car wrenches free and Mrs. Humbolt is slammed out in the middle of the road."

Brett swore softly. "Killed?" he asked.

"This kid who's tearing toward them is just seventeen, but like lots of kids that age he's got no nerves," Hirsch continued. "He climbs a bank, grazes a tree, and never even breathes down Mrs. Humbolt's neck. All she got out of it was a shock and a flock of bruises."

Brett straightened in his chair. "And Humbolt?"

"Busted left arm; cut over the right eye."

"What kind of car were they driving? Where is it now?"

There was a rattle of paper, then Hirsch said: "1938 La Salle convertible red and black, red wheels, top down, license number 16-46-2."

"Perfect."

"It was smashed up so badly they left it to be towed to the nearest garage."

"Where were they?" Brett asked.

"They were going to the Essex Fells Country Club, car's about a quarter of a mile from there. Coming from Bloomfield Avenue."

"Call me back in half an hour," Brett ordered and snapped down the receiver. He yelled, "Swedie! Call that mechanic! Get him down here with a car and some tools." His fingers drummed on the desk. "Then call Talky Baldwin. Tell him to come in if he wants to make a fin."

Brett yanked newspapers from his desk, threw them around until he found the right one. He jerked the phone off its stand and asked for Information.

"Information?— Give me the phone number of Richard Holland, one—six—four West—"

Twenty-five minutes later, the husky New York City patrolman, in plain clothes, strolled in nonchalantly. Swedie hustled him into Brett's office.

Brett said: "Hello, Dick." Holland nodded and surveyed the other two men. Longvelt, the mechanic, was a square-faced, blond man of about thirty with a dark coat over his oil-stained overalls. Baldwin was a foppishly dressed little gent of fifty who sported a cane and a ten-cent gardenia on his lapel.

"Go to Jersey," Brett directed without

ceremony. "You'll find a red and black La Salle. Here are full directions." He handed Holland a piece of paper. "It may be at the Essex Fells Country Club, maybe back in Montclair. Find it! Talky, here, wants to buy a car just like it. Talky gabs to the garage men while Holland and Longvelt look it over."

"What do you want to know?" Holland asked.

"Why it cracked up. Why the right front door wrenched open," Brett barked. "Then go back to the scene of the accident and use your eyes. Holland, you're boss."

As the three went out, Holloway entered. Brett handed the fat detective a sheet of directions.

"Go out and check over the accident, Tub," Brett instructed him. "Get everything, eye witness accounts, local gossip on the Humbolts, everything."

"Big case, Brett?" Holloway asked, stuffing the directions in a bulbous bill-case.

"Hell, no case at all yet."

Holloway smiled discreetly and walked out with a jerky gait.

VIII

A SMALL piece of metal and a crudely drawn map lay in the pool of golden light cast upon the desk by the desk lamp. Brett and Dick Holland were humped forward over the map as Pat Hirsch entered. Brett waved him to a seat, spoke to Holland:

"Then you think it was on the level?"

Holland hesitated. "Sure," he said doubtfully.

"The accident?" Pat asked excitedly. "Rated off his form it was."

"Yeah?" said Brett softly and looked up.

"Absolutely! That Humbolt guy seems jinxed. He had five crack-ups in the War and he's been in—this is his sixth bad automobile smash."

"You see?" Brett said to Holland.

The big man nodded. "Uh-huh, and that makes it different. This Humbolt wouldn't be afraid of another smash; he knows how they work." He picked up the metal object. Hirsch craned forward.

"The latch of a car door!" he breathed.

He snatched it from Holland and examined it. Suddenly he yelled, "It's been *sawed off!*"

Brett said: "Yes."

"Where'd you get it? Humbolt's car?" Hirsch demanded excitedly.

"No," Brett explained, "Longvelt sawed it off a La Salle in a Jersey City junk yard."

"But—"

"Longvelt and Holland couldn't decide whether the latch on Humbolt's car had been snapped off or sawed off."

"Brett thinks he can make that latch work better than a sock on the jaw." The cop's grin was faintly malicious.

Pat looked at Holland and nodded. "Now I remember you. You're the fella that was going to beat Tay up during the Spencer job."

Holland squirmed under Hirsch's derisive grin, cleared his throat. Someone rapped on the hall door and Pat went to answer it as Brett cleared the desk of map and car latch.

The reporter ushered in a good looking, blond man of about twenty-three. He was only slightly shorter than the angular Hirsch, but better built. His eyes were very blue in a tanned face.

He looked around.

"Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Brett?" he asked.

"I am," Brett said. He pointed to the chair Pat Hirsch had vacated. "Won't you sit down."

"Thanks." The young man seated himself on the edge of the chair. His hands played with a pair of gloves. He glanced at Pat Hirsch leaning against the wall behind Brett's desk, then at Holland industriously splitting paper matches. He cleared his throat. He said:

"I am Douglas Sherrell."

Brett smiled encouragingly, waved toward Pat and Holland, explained, "My men. You can speak freely."

"Mr. Brett, do you handle divorce cases?"

"I don't like them." Then, "Sure—sometimes."

"I—will you handle one for me?"

"What's it all about?" Brett asked. He offered Sherrell a cigarette. Holland supplied a light.

"This is rather new to me," young

Sherrell explained self-consciously. His pale brown skin showed twin dark splotches over the angle of his jaw.

"Sure," Brett said easily. "Take your time."

Hesitatingly, Sherrell said, "I want you to get evidence for a divorce. It—it's for my sister, Virginia Humbolt."

Brett was business-like; he wrote the name down and looked up expectantly. Reassured, Sherrell went on:

"She doesn't know that Mike—that Lewis Humbolt, her husband has been —" he stumbled over the word—"unfaithful to her."

"I see." Brett's tone was matter-of-fact.

"You'll have to get all the evidence," said Sherrell. "I'll give you the other woman's name and some data, but—you'll have to get all the evidence. The dark splotches flowed back to his jaw. "You'll have to convince my sister. You see—well, she doesn't know."

"I see. Will you give me that data now?"

Young Sherrell drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it to the detective. He tried to smile, said: "Humbolt has been very discreet, it may be difficult—" Then, "You'll need plenty of proof to convince Sis."

"I'll try to get it," Brett promised.

"How much shall I make the cheque for?"

As Sherrell spread a pocket cheque book on the table, Brett said: "Better make it five hundred dollars."

Taking one of Brett's business cards from his pocket, Sherrell consulted it as he made out the cheque. Brett glanced over, saw: "Must see you at once, Important. T.B." scribbled across it.

TAY BRETT'S eyes narrowed as he recognized the card he had sent in to Sonia Patten. He asked Sherrell to make the cheque out to "Cash," and his fingers drummed the table. As Sherrell handed Brett the cheque, he said:

"I hope you can get at this right away."

"I shall," Brett promised. He flipped the pages of an afternoon paper. "Didn't your sister and her husband have an accident?"

"Yes," replied Sherrell, "their car

smashed up. All he got was a broken arm."

"Too bad," observed Brett. "If he'd been smashed up right, it would have saved you money."

Sherrell gave an involuntary shiver. Brett went on:

"I knew you looked familiar; you're a lot like your sister."

Sherrell's eyes widened. "You know my sister?"

"Yeah. I met her a couple of days ago."

"Is she suspicious of Mike? Did she hire you?"

"I went to see her on another case," Brett explained. "A crooked servant gave her as a reference."

"Oh, I see." Sherrell picked up his hat. He hesitated, seemed uncomfortable; his hand fumbled in his top-coat pocket. He cleared his throat nervously and said: "Mr. Brett—I wonder if—if you could come up to my apartment, now. My car's outside—"

He didn't finish. Brett watched him levelly.

"What for?"

"Well—you see—I've—I've something to show you."

Brett rose, said: "Wait here," to Hirsch and Holland. He led the way to the outer office, held open the door. He stepped aside to let young Sherrell through.

His next move was sudden.

As Sherrell moved through the door, Brett closed in on him fast, gripped his wrists from behind. Sherrell twisted, flung himself round, but couldn't free himself from the paralyzing hold on his wrists. Brett brought up his knee sharply, then again. Sherrell gasped.

"Want some more?" Brett muttered grimly. Sherrell relaxed.

Holding Sherrell's right wrist, Brett's left hand shot up, snapped Sherrell's hat forward, gripped his hair. He pulled the man's head back. Sherrell's breathing was labored.

"Now get tough," whispered Brett. "Get tough."

His hand forced Sherrell's hand from the pocket, shook it, shook the small .32 Mauser automatic from his numbed fingers. Brett swung him around sud-

denly, dealt him a heavy blow across the face with his open palm, and scooped up the gun.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" Brett smiled unpleasantly, juggled the Mauser in his palm.

Sherrell didn't reply, didn't look at the detective. There was an ugly red welt across his right cheek, his left was pale.

"You didn't want to see me," Brett stated, "but Sonia Patten did. Tell her I'll call her if I want to see her." Deliberately, he tossed the Mauser to Sherrell. Said tersely: "Scram!"

As Brett re-entered the inner office, Dick Holland scrubbed the thick hair back of his ears with the heavy knuckles of his big right fist.

"So this is the private dick racket?" he said softly.

"If that guy didn't know his sister had met you," Hirsch pondered, "how come he wandered in here? You should have asked him that, Tay."

"Yeah, I should have," Brett agreed. He put Sherrell's letter in his pocket.

"Maybe it's in the letter," Hirsch suggested interestedly.

"Maybe it is," Brett replied.

Holland rose. "Hell, I go on soon—I got to beat it."

"Thanks for coming over, Dick," Brett said as the big man went to the door.

"I like it—and the ten-spot too," Holland tossed over his shoulder.

BRETT piled two glasses, a pint bottle, and the map on the desk. He poured two drinks, picked up one, and studied the map, his heavy eyebrows almost touching above the slight dent at the bridge of his nose. Pat Hirsch made no move toward his glass; he remained tilted back in his chair, his long legs propped against an open drawer.

When at last Hirsch spoke, his voice was hard and there was an unpleasant arrangement to his good humored features.

"So the 'potential murderer' thing was just a gag."

Brett paid no attention.

"Just a gag," Pat sneered. "I think you're a heel, Brett." He spoke slowly, distinctly, "I think you're a heel. And a very dumb heel at that."

"Uh-huh," Brett said without interest.

"This whole case is a push-over!" The reporter made a contemptuous brushing gesture with his hand. "You knew Humbolt was still crazy about the Patten squaw. You knew that's why she didn't want Mrs. Humbolt to get a divorce. . . . He barked nastily, "And you knew Humbolt was sole beneficiary of his wife's will."

Brett's eyes flashed up at Hirsch, then down quickly. He didn't reply.

"You knew that put Mrs. Humbolt on the spot, yet what did you do?" Pat raged. "You suck around trying to get them all paying you fees, bleed them all white. And," he emphasized each word, "you are the guy who started things rolling. You're the guy who put Mrs. Humbolt on the spot."

"How?" Brett asked quietly.

"By not telling Cartman he was a dirty blackmailer the moment he approached you to get those letters," Hirsch said savagely. "You saw what his angle was!"

"As simple as all that." Brett's voice seemed regretful. "Hell! I wish these things were as easy to handle as they are in detective stories."

"What's so tough about it?" Hirsch wanted to know.

"You can't pinch a gent for trying to kill his wife—not without proof," Brett said. "Besides, Mrs. Humbolt'd laugh at you. You heard what Sherrell said."

Brett's shoulders shrugged helplessly.

Hirsch cursed bitterly and the anger drained from his face leaving it tired and pale. Even his gray eyes seemed pale.

"I didn't figure Humbolt would get tough so soon," Brett offered. "I thought I had at least three days."

"Well, what are you going to do?" the reporter demanded hoarsely. Brett got up and eased around the office. "What are you going to do?" Hirsch repeated.

"Nothing," Brett said. "Not one damn thing."

"Nothing, huh?" Pat Hirsch pushed himself from his chair, his long bony hands doubled into fists. He said in a flat tone: "Not going to do anything, huh?"

Unexpectedly, Brett wrenched open the door, took the short corridor in two bounds, ripped open the door to the hall. He came back grinning sheepishly.

"I read that one in a book," he confessed.

Hirsch watched him warily, his fists still clenched. Brett picked up the phone and called a Montclair number. Pat looked perplexed; his hands opened slowly.

"Mr. Humbolt, please," Brett said into the phone. He nodded toward the empty glasses, told Pat, "Barkeep for me."

As Hirsch poured red brown liquid into the glasses, Brett explained into the phone:

"Tell him it's the man he saw in New York yesterday morning."

Leaning back, Brett accepted a glass from Pat, raised it in short salute and drank. He bent forward quickly, put down the glass.

"Hello, Mr. Humbolt . . . Brett." His eyes found the reporter's gray ones, remained on them steadfastly. . . . "Sorry to hear about the accident—Have you heard from that person on Central Park West?—Something very funny's happened. When can I see you?—I'd rather not be seen around your house—Good, about nine?—Great. And say, you'd better bring a coupla of hundred dollars, *in cash*."

Brett hung up, chuckled. "He didn't go for that last crack."

"So you're just bleeding them after all," Hirsch sneered.

"Aw, grow up!" Brett barked irritably. He called Susquehanna—7—6160 and asked for Miss Patten; said: "Thanks," and hung up. "Out," he said.

He leaned back again.

Pat Hirsch's tone was exasperated: "Do you know what you're doing or are you plugging along waiting and hoping for breaks?"

Brett swallowed the rest of his drink and said:

"Both."

"Then what in hell are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to get Humbolt's letters."

Hirsch jerked to his feet, cursed—a single, biting word. He went to the door, put his back to it, tried to read Brett's expressionless face. He cursed again and went out.

Brett opened a new pint of rye, poured himself a short slug. He took out Sherrell's letter, and read:

DEAR MR. BRETT:

I was referred to you by Miss Sonia Patten who has great confidence in your ability as a result of—

With a humorless smile, Brett skipped until he came to:

Failing to win Miss Patten's love so broke Lewis Humbolt's spirit that he began, and is still carrying on, an affair with her maid, Effie Short.

Brett swore and reread: "Failing to win Miss Patten's love so broke Lewis Humbolt's spirit—"

He swore again, contemptuously, and stared at the passage. Then, without reading any further, he stuffed the letter in his pocket. He opened the window, put the door latch on the sill outside. Closed the window, killed his drink, and left the office. Reaching the street, he hailed a cab, ordered:

"East 51st Street Police Station."

At three-twenty-six that night, Brett was sitting on a low, sand-colored, over-stuffed chair. He glanced at the alarm clock at his elbow, reset the dial for four o'clock, reached for the phone. It rang as his fingers touched it. Brett said:

"Yes? . . . Oh, hello, I've been calling you all evening. . . . Yeah, they told me you and young Sherrell left around six. . . . I've got to see you, soon. . . . Fine. Thanks for the client."

IX

HUMBOLT'S light coat was draped on his shoulders in a military cape effect. He shrugged out of it; dropped it and his stick on Brett's desk. He said: "I hope to—this is important."

Brett looked at the splintered left arm resting in a sling.

"Maybe you're lucky."

Humbolt looked down, smiled sardonically. "I wouldn't say so," he observed. Then: "Why did you want to see me?"

"You certainly work fast," said Brett quietly.

"Do I?" Humbolt's face and eyes were naked of expression.

"Yeah," Brett grunted. "Listen, Mr. Humbolt, I'm no hog, but our understanding was that I was to get a crack at those letters."

"Was it?" Humbolt was playing cagey, but his eyes were uncertain, watchful.

Brett studied him a moment, shrugged.

"Playing tough, huh? Okay, just as long as I know." He laughed without amusement. "And I thought there was only one Cartman in this deal."

Humbolt rose. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" Brett barked angrily. "I'm going to do myself some good. I got the run around from Cartman, now you're giving it to me. And I hate to be double crossed."

"I double crossed you?" Humbolt asked.

"You crossed me," Brett said flatly. "Well, I've got to make a living and your family has plenty of skeletons knocking around."

"How did I cross you?"

"Oh, be normal!" Brett burst out. "Stop the innocence stuff—I'm not that dumb." He considered, "Or maybe I am. Anyway, let's call it quits."

But Humbolt was easing himself into his chair. His eyes showed perplexity.

"What's this all about?"

"By — —" Brett stopped, sighed. He asked patiently: "Didn't it occur to you that I might see Sonia, or hear about that letter?"

"What letter?"

"Is this a game?"

"Not unless you make it one!" Humbolt barked. "What in hell are you talking about? *What letter?*"

"The letter you wrote Sonia Patten," Brett whipped out. The muscles in his jaw knotted. "The letter in which you told her to put your letters in a safe deposit box. The letter in which you tipped her off that someone was trying to get them, you double-crossing louse!" He imitated Humbolt with heavy sarcasm. "What letter?"

Humbolt's face was pale, but he managed to control his voice. "You're a liar, Brett! I didn't write to Sonia Patten. I haven't seen or spoken to her for three days."

"Didn't see that letter—is that it?"

Humbolt stared at him, didn't reply; his face was yellowish. Brett pushed a pad and pencil at him savagely.

"Write what I dictate, if you've got the guts. We'll see who's the liar."

Humbolt took the pencil angrily. Brett fished an envelope from his pocket, dic-

tated emotionlessly as Humbolt wrote:

SONIA:

Get my letters to a safe deposit box immediately. Your flat is to be searched. Let you know more when I can.

MIKE.

Humbolt looked up with a start. "There you are, Mister Detective," he jeered. "My friends call me 'Mike,' but Sonia calls me 'Jim,' my second name. That's how I sign my letters to her."

"Jim?" Brett repeated. "But it was signed Mike."

FOR a moment they looked at each other in silence. Brett picked up the pad, studied what Humbolt had written. Then he ripped it to pieces, dropped them in a waste basket. His smile was chagrined.

"I owe you an apology," he confessed. He shook his head doubtfully. "It was a damn good forgery."

"Who sent it?" Humbolt asked.

Brett snorted, "Let's ask Sonia."

"And how did you happen to see it?" Humbolt asked, his narrowed eyes watching the detective. Brett seemed embarrassed.

"Well," he admitted slowly, "Sonia was out last night. I happened to see her go and it seemed like a good time to look around her place, so—" He spread his hands. "That letter was in a waste basket. I didn't want to take it just in case she should look for it again." He hesitated, added modestly, "I did a rather neat job, I didn't want to spoil it."

"You searched Sonia Patten's apartment?" Amazement streamed across Humbolt's face.

"I knew I could sell the letters to Cartman if you and I couldn't do business," Brett said with unassailable logic.

"Did you get them?"

"Hell, no!" Bitterness flooded Brett's voice. "Maybe she knew that letter was a fake, but she didn't take any chances. Either that or she doesn't keep them in the apartment."

"But she does!" Humbolt protested. "I know she does. Who could have sent her that letter?"

"Got two hundred dollars with you?" Brett asked.

"Yes."

Brett held out his hand. "Then suppose I find out."

"What is this—a dodge to make two hundred dollars?"

"If it is, it cost me Cartman's ten grand," Brett replied evenly. Humbolt looked at him in silence, then handed over two one-hundred-dollar bills.

"If you're selling out to the highest bidder," he advised, "don't count too heavily on Cartman; he took an awful beating in the Market."

"So that's what drove him into the blackmailing game," Brett remarked.

"What can I tell Sonia if she asks me why I wrote that letter?" grumbled Humbolt.

"Don't tell her anything, yet," Brett suggested. "Keep away from her."

"That won't be hard to do," was the enigmatic reply.

With impatient eyes, Tay Brett watched Humbolt through the door, down the short corridor, through Swedie's sanctum. The closing of the outer door sent him rummaging through the waste basket. He was fitting together torn pieces of Humbolt's letter when Big Mac, the detective, entered, pushing before him a stoop-shouldered, pale man whose owlish eyes were magnified by glasses.

"Here's Mr. Montgomery," said Big Mac with an elaborate wink. He pushed Montgomery into a chair. Without looking up, Brett replied:

"Good. Almost ready."

A moment later, Brett signaled Montgomery to take his place.

"How long will it take you?" Brett demanded as Montgomery sat down and examined Humbolt's note.

"I'm good," Montgomery wheezed. "Twenty minutes."

"Hop to it," Brett ordered. "Sign it 'Jim.'"

Big Mac winked at Tay again, leaned his great bulk against the closed door as Brett phoned for a Postal Telegraph messenger.

X

A FEW minutes after ten, and Brett sat in a taxi at the upper end of the block south of Sonia Patten's apartment house. A Postal Telegraph boy entered

the apartment. Brett's eyes glinted; he lighted another cigaret.

Not ten minutes later, Sonia Patten came out hurriedly. Brett barked, "Step on it!" His taxi rolled up just as Sonia stepped into a cab the doorman called. Brett swung out, wrenched open the door to her cab.

"Running out on our date?" he demanded cheerfully.

The smoky blue of Sonia Patten's eyes was almost hidden by the contraction of her eyelids. She was silent. Brett climbed in beside her.

"You act scared," he declared. "What's wrong?"

"I have an errand to do," she said.

"Must be damned important," Brett observed. Every line of his face showed suspicion and disbelief. Sonia smiled.

"I have to buy some socks," she explained easily, putting out two perfect legs, devoid of hosiery. Brett admired them.

"Not on my account," he protested. "You can afford to keep them bare. No kidding—where're you going?"

"Down to the bank for money, to Sak's for some socks, then home again." Sonia read the doubt in his eyes, laughed throatily. "You detectives are impossible! You'd accuse me of some dark plot if I were merely going to the A & P for a can of beans."

"Uh-huh," agreed Brett non-committally. "Which bank?"

"The Fifth Avenue Bank," she said.

Brett leaned forward, rapped on the glass. The driver turned.

"Go down Sixth," Brett directed. The driver put down his flag and meshed gears. Brett leaned back comfortably and announced to Sonia: "I think your story is screwy. You wanted to see someone before I came. Who was it?"

"I wouldn't have a mind like yours for a million dollars!" Sonia scoffed.

"Who was it?" Brett insisted. "Your lawyer? Humbolt?"

Sonia Patten merely smiled; she said: "I told you the truth."

"Then it's the first time," Brett sneered. "I'll just come along and check up."

A wary look dawned in her eyes. Brett said: "Why are you so anxious to get to the bank?"

As she hesitated, Brett's eyes became

opaque. He glanced from her face to the front of her dress, on to the bag she clutched firmly, back to her eyes. He grinned unpleasantly.

"The truth, huh? Why are you so anxious to get to the bank?"

"You're very melodramatic this morning, Mr. Brett," she laughed. "Suppose we have our talk. Then, if you wish, you can go shopping with me."

"Who were you going to see?" Brett repeated doggedly.

Sonia sighed impatiently. "Don't be a fool!" she snapped. "I've offered to talk to you before I do anything else."

"You're a tough gal," Brett grumbled. He gave the driver the address of his office. They rode in silence. Brett apparently still puzzled, Sonia trying to stifle a triumphant gleam in her wide eyes.

As they entered the office, Swedie jumped from her desk.

"I've got to go to the bank," she announced and started tucking white-gold hair under a brown hat.

"Go ahead. Everybody's doing it," Brett said and guided Sonia Patten into his private office.

SONIA PATTEN seated herself gracefully and crossed one bare leg over the other. In her right hand she still clutched the brown-gold-and-blue, needle-point bag. But she was very generous; her chair scraped forward as Brett seated himself so he could enjoy an unhampered view of the contrast between her dark brown, high-heeled sandals and the golden-brown of her stockingless legs. She slipped her mink coat backward, cape fashion, and leaned toward him. The lacy edge of a chemise showed in the deep V of her plain, sand-colored dress. Nothing bulged at the front of her dress—nothing angular such as letters. Brett examined her minutely, frankly. His narrowed eyes flattered.

"I said I'd like to work for you," he reminded her. She showed even, white, teeth, asked:

"You want to see me about Doug Sherrell's letter?"

Brett looked at the watch on the inside of his wrist. "Yes." He frowned, said: "This Effie Short thing—it sounds screwy."

"You've seen her," Sonia pointed out indifferently.

"Sure. And I'll admit she's a warm looking piece of merchandise." As he reached for his cigarettes, he went on: "She's probably a big help to you in your racket but—" pausing to light his cigarette, he failed to notice the flush march up her cheeks—"but Humbolt's falling for her is a bad angle. Mrs. Humbolt won't believe it and no jury will believe it, even if young Sherrell did swallow it whole."

Sonia didn't move.

"The dinge is out!" Brett declared. "Haven't you some friend you can frame?"

"Frame!" Sonia cried angrily. Brett grinned.

"Young Sherrell paid me five hundred dollars to be on your side. Please don't pull that innocent stuff?"

Sonia asked sarcastically, "Are you on my side?"

"Why not—for five hundred bucks?" Brett replied. "Here's one you don't know: Someone's asked me to offer you fifteen grand for Humbolt's letters."

"Mrs. Humbolt?" she asked quickly.

The click of the office door halted him. Brett shook his head. Tub Holloway entered, saw Brett was busy, and backed out.

"No, someone else," Brett said.

Sonia glanced over her shoulder, then asked: "Who?"

"I don't know." He looked at her, called, "Halloway!"

The fat man entered, stood just inside the door. Sonia's eyes were on Brett.

"You tailed that guy?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What did he do?"

"I tailed him to a bar on 44th. He didn't talk to anyone. Then we took the Sixth Avenue 'L.'"

Sonia half turned in her chair to watch Halloway; Brett leaned forward.

"Then what?" he demanded.

"Well," Halloway spoke slowly, "he got off at Bowling Green, walked back to 25 Broadway and went in. He went down in an elevator and ducked out a side door. He beat it up the alley, crossed Broadway and went in 32. He rode up to the eighth floor and went into a law firm's office."

"What was the name?" Sonia asked.

Halloway turned sleepy eyes on her, his face stolid. Sonia rapped out impatiently: "What was the law firm's name?"

Brett's arm, lying lazily along the desk, whipped out, struck the woman's bag, ripped it free before her surprised muscles could react. Sonia leapt at him, clawing, scratching, cursing. Halloway slipped an arm around her waist and held her back as Brett opened the bag. He took out a cigaret case, tossed it on the desk near her.

"Better smoke it off," Brett advised the raging woman.

As suddenly as it had begun, Sonia Patten subsided. She took a long, fragrant cigaret from the odd shaped case. Halloway held a match to it, obligingly. Brett turned out the contents of the large bag. Among the clutter of intensely feminine articles was an oblong package wrapped in newspaper. Brett waved it gently.

"Maybe this," he told Halloway, "is what Miss Patten was so anxious to get in the bank."

UNVEILED hatred burned in the woman's eyes as she watched Brett slip off the rubber bands, open the newspaper. Brett looked down at a bundle of letters, leaned forward to read the post office stamp, said, "Montclair," and looked up with a grin of triumph.

"Tub! The letters—Humbolt's letters!"

Brett's surprise seemed genuine and Halloway cried excitedly:

"Open them and make sure!"

Brett did so, glanced at the signature and looked puzzled. "Jim," he said. Crestfallen he opened others, frowned.

He shook his head irritably.

"You see?" Sonia Patten sneered, "You've made blithering fools of yourselves."

Brett's face lighted. "Hell," he barked, "Humbolt's second name is Jim—James."

The office door opened, Pat Hirsch entered. He waved a salute.

"Hello, Mr. Brett," he said formally. "Anything new these days?"

"Miss Patten—Mr. Hirsch of the *Bulletin*," Brett introduced. He went on quickly, "Yes, I've got something. As pretty a blackmail plot as you've ever seen."

Sonia stared at him incredulously. Brett continued: "The blackmailer came here to sell me these letters. She threatened my client when I refused her price—one hundred grand. Tub and I took—"

"That's a lie!" Sonia blazed.

"Just a minute," Brett commanded. He called: "Miss Swenson!"

Swedie appeared from the small office, parallel with the corridor, which lay between Brett's and the reception room. She carried a notebook.

"Did you get it all?" Brett demanded.

"Yes, sir. Shall I read from my notes?"

"No. Type them up for the District Attorney." He turned to Pat, chuckled, "I've got the whole works! A verbatim account of what was said, Halloway's testimony, and my own."

Sonia glared at him, swung on Hirsch. "It's a lie," she cried. "I'm being framed. I'm a prisoner. I—"

"You're no prisoner," Brett growled. "There's the door to prove it." He replaced the things in her bag as he spoke. "Extortion is a tough rap in this state, Miss Patten. I don't care how beautiful you are, the judge will throw the book at you."

"Extortion!" Sonia cried. "We'll see about that. I'll talk to the District Attorney myself—talk to the newspapers. When I get through with you, they'll crucify you."

Brett held the bag toward her. She yanked it from him.

"That's a great idea," he agreed. "The D. A. will be glad to talk to you about Frisco Smith."

For a split second, Sonia didn't move, then she swept from the room. As Halloway shepherded her to the hall, Pat Hirsch stared thoughtfully at Brett:

"Where in the hell does Frisco Smith come in?"

Brett opened his hand. In it were newspaper clippings on the famous gambler's shooting.

"I took these from her bag," he explained. Pat's eyes bulged as Brett turned to Halloway. "Get Cartman?"

"Yeah, the minute you came in with the girl."

"Good. Call Humbolt at the Princeton Club. Have him here at the office at the same time."

XI

AT a quarter past twelve, Tay Brett put away Sonia's clippings and stretched. He ran a lean hand through rumpled hair, said:

"Seventh inning."

Pat Hirsch looked at him curiously. "What's it all about?"

Without replying, Brett cleared the top of his desk, laid out the letters, and put the automobile door latch on a single sheet of white paper. He covered the exhibits with newspaper. He placed two chairs about two feet from the desk, facing it, facing the windows behind it. Tub Halloway was reading a tabloid, Tay jerked his thumb toward the reception room.

"Keep Swedie company," Brett ordered. Halloway grinned, lumbered out with short, jerky steps. Brett said to Pat Hirsch:

"I'm going to square myself with Mrs. Humbolt."

Hirsch nodded as though he understood completely.

A few minutes later, Swedie showed in Howard Cartman. The lawyer was irritable.

"I couldn't make head or tail of your man's message," was his greeting. Brett smiled with his mouth, waved him to a chair. "It was decidedly threatening—er—decidedly so."

"Have a cigaret," Brett invited. "We're expecting someone—"

"I never smoke!" Cartman flared. "Will you be good enough to explain what all this—"

"Here!" Brett thrust Halloway's discarded tabloid into the lawyer's hands. Cartman snorted, threw the paper from him angrily. He glared truculently at the grinning Hirsch.

Swedie brought in Lewis Humbolt.

There was a white line under each of Humbolt's eyes. It started between the eye and bridge of the nose, ran down and out toward the hard angle of his jaw, was lost as it neared his cheek bones. The corners of his mouth sagged as though they were very heavy, too heavy for him to support. From time to time he straightened them, but they sagged again. He nodded to Brett, didn't speak. His eyes gleamed as he took in Cartman.

"Let's have our talk," suggested Brett as Humbolt seated himself. "I'm going to tell you a little story. In January, 1921, two Russians entered this country at Seattle. Their names were Pietr and Sunda Patrenska."

Cartman and Humbolt listened intently, their faces puzzled.

"You can have this, Pat," Brett told the reporter. He went on: "The Russians were brother and sister. They lived in Seattle about a year then moved to San Francisco. Pietr became a shill for a gambler named Smith, old Tarzan Smith. Sunda sang in a joint on the Barbary Coast. When old Tarzan cashed in—from natural causes—Pietr inherited the joint and changed his name to Frisco Smith."

Cartman shifted in his chair.

"About five years ago," Brett continued, "a theatrical man heard Sunda sing and booked her for a part with a road company. By this time she was known as Sunda Patren. She drifted East. When she arrived in New York three years ago, she was known as Sonia Patten."

"Then Frisco Smith, the gambler who was murdered, was Sonia Patten's brother?" Humbolt demanded incredulously.

"Uh-huh."

Cartman asked irritably: "But what has that to do with us?"

"I can prove that either of you killed Frisco Smith."

"What?" Cartman gasped; his face went white. Humbolt's eyes glittered; he didn't speak.

"I don't know whether you did it and I don't give a damn," Brett informed them with utter indifference. "But I can *prove* either of you did the kill."

"But motive—what motive could I possibly—"

Brett cut short the lawyer's frightened babbling. He lifted the newspaper.

"Here's the motive—Humbolt's letter to Sonia. The cause of all the excitement. With Smith out of the way, Sonia couldn't go running to her brother for help."

The sight of the letters actually there before him seemed to hypnotize Cartman. Unexpectedly, he rubbed his small hands together and giggled, first to Brett, then Humbolt.

"The letters," he crooned. He smirked

at Brett. "You've earned ten thousand dollars, Mr. Brett, ten thousand—er—grands."

"If I sell to you."

"But—but that was our agreement," Cartman whined.

Brett surveyed him coldly: "Sure—and then you fired me."

"It's hot!" Humbolt broke in suddenly, his voice hoarse. He eased his coat around the bandaged arm, laid it across his knees. Brett turned to him:

"Anything to say?"

Humbolt shrugged, but something like hope struggled to his eyes. "I haven't ten thousand dollars," he confessed. "But I could pay it to you over a period of, say, six months."

Pat Hirsch's eyes were glacial as he watched Brett. The detective pointed to the piece of metal, said:

"Here's another thing: The right-hand door latch of a La Salle. It was sawed off."

No one spoke for a minute.

"Where did you find it?" Humbolt demanded at last, his voice steady. Brett pushed back his chair, stood directly behind the desk.

"It was a tough assignment, but we got it," he said. He went on: "There are two nice little exhibits. The letters—motive for murder. The latch—evidence of an attempt. And they are not for sale."

Cartman made an unintelligible sound in his throat. And Humbolt's hand appeared from under his coat holding a Colt automatic.

THE gun jutted, dark, menacing. No emotion in his face, and his voice was toneless. "Steady!" he warned. He covered the space to the desk in one step, and his bandaged arm reached out to sweep the letters and latch toward him.

Pat Hirsch said, "Hey!" in a surprised voice.

Humbolt swung the gun slightly, shifted his eyes from Brett to Pat. Brett's right fist shot out, caught him on the left side of the jaw, snapped his head toward his right shoulder. Brett struck again. His left hand suddenly twisted the gun back, then out.

Halloway jerked into the room, a gun in his left hand. He swung it up, was

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about to smash it on Humbolt's head.

"Never mind, Tub!" Brett ordered. He looked at Humbolt. The man's right hand was on the desk, his head hung forward, he stared down with glazed, sightless eyes. Brett said: "Damn fool! He couldn't have gotten out of here anyway."

He tossed Humbolt's gun to the agency man who caught it and went out.

"When citizens like you go on the bend," Brett said in a hard voice, "it's bad business. You ball things up, pull dumb stunts. And there are always too many angles."

No one in the room moved or spoke.

"I don't know how smart you are, but if you know anything at all, you know I've got you dead to rights. Dead to rights for gunning Frisco Smith and for trying to murder Mrs. Humbolt." Brett studied them, then asked: "Or must I show you more?"

Cartman squirmed and Humbolt was about to reply when Brett's finger shot out, pointed at the lawyer. He said contemptuously, "And that goes for you, too, Cartman!"

"But suppose I'm innocent, absolutely innocent," Cartman wailed.

"Then see that nothing happens to her," Brett advised. "I don't like you anyway."

Slowly they rose. Humbolt wiped a fleck of blood from the corner of his mouth. Hallowsay's head appeared around the door. Brett directed:

"Give Humbolt his gat and let them out, Tub."

When the closing of the outer door had signaled their departure, Brett leaned back in his chair. He pulled open a drawer, took out three glasses.

"We've earned this," he remarked.

Pat Hirsch put down his drink and reached for the bottle. He said: "You've covered Mrs. Humbolt all right, but you've put yourself on the spot."

"That's what I get paid for," Brett replied carelessly.

With no preliminary knock at the door, a large man lumbered into the room. Police detective was stamped into his hide.

"Listen, Brett," he began without preamble, "Captain Moeller wants to see you. We're still not convinced you didn't do this Frisco Smith rub-out."

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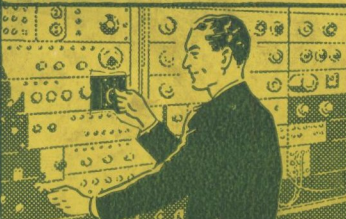
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