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MAGAZINE

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**THE
GRINDLE
NIGHTMARE**



**By Q.
PATRICK**

**A THRILLING
PUBLICATION**



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DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE

Vol. XIX, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

May, 1947

COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL SELECTION

THE GRINDLE NIGHTMARE

By Q. Patrick



Grindle Valley basked in the somnolent comfort of New England prosperity, till a fiend began to slaughter both men and animals—with a grim and evil cunning that made him proof against detection! 11

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Where readers, writers and the editor get together to talk things over

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The BULLETIN BOARD



WHEN a young man returns in one piece to his home town after five years as Balkan correspondent of a major New York gazette, he has the right to expect tranquillity after an over-rich diet of assassination, mass murder and conspiracy. When his home town is the thriving small city of Clayton and his father is the publisher of Clayton's one successful newspaper, the *News*, he can expect to sit back and take it easy in worth while fashion.

The quiet life was what Dan Cumberland wanted and expected to find when he took over the *News* city desk for his father—instead of which he ran into an undercurrent of violence and hushed menace which made him wonder at times if he had ever actually left Southeastern Europe!

This violence flamed into activity on Christmas Eve when one of Clayton's two remaining modern hotels burned to the ground. Dan could not help but feel that it was more than coincidence such a fire should have occurred almost upon the exact anniversary of a similar fire which had destroyed another of the trio of up-to-date hostleries.

But when he so much as hinted that arson was a definite possibility, his father, Marcus P. Cumberland, landed upon him like the proverbial ton of masonry. Attuned to conspiracy by his experience abroad, Dan Cumberland smelled a large and smoky rat in the ash pile.

How he set out quietly to locate the unsavory rodent is the basic theme of one of the deftest and most suspenseful mystery volumes to appear in many a season, namely—

WHISPER MURDER

By VERA KELSEY

Curiously enough, as the trail of criminal activity became increasingly evident to Dan, it became more and more difficult to follow. That something was very much amiss was

startlingly clear once he discovered the sudden death of the hotel manager and his gorgeous blond wife—apparently via the gas route.

Yet even here there were discrepancies—discrepancies that caused Dan to suspect the facts, once they were all revealed, would not point to suicide but to murder!

A Number of Mysteries

There were a number of mysteries—that of the dog whose whereabouts at the time of the suicide-murder might spell the difference in the cause of death, that of the girl who vanished so completely without leaving even so much as a name, that of Lisa, Dan's old flame who was currently cutting a swathe on the *News*' society page as the wife of the head of the Clayton College chemistry department.

But when Dan tried to get help from the police he ran into a stone wall. The chief was not tough with him—how could he be to Marcus Cumberland's boy? But he reasoned and even pleaded with Dan to let well enough alone and, if he had any thoughts of murder, to keep them to himself.

But Dan had not won his coveted position with the *New York Globe* by taking such hints lying down. He went to work, seeking the mysterious girl and the thread that had to tie together the other discrepancies, seeking them without police aid and against a stubborn core of opposition that seemed always to know his next move before he made it.

The Path of Peril

All in all it was a dangerous task—and a discouraging one as the path he followed at his peril spiraled in upon itself ever closer to home.

But Dan held doggedly to his committed course. And ultimately, after as rugged and thrilling a chase as has ever been put in print, he won through—to a denouement and a criminal as shocking as it was unexpected.

It seems to us highly improbable that even veteran solvers of mystery story puzzles will be able to hook onto the truth behind the death and arson in this story many pages before the author reveals the human identities threatening the very existence of Clayton itself.

FROM THE CRITICS

WHISPER MURDER is a whale of a fine mystery-detective story, one that builds suspense toward a climax that will have you, dear reader, clutching your chair if not your hair. Should our unsupported opinion in the matter seem insufficient, here are the remarks of a few qualified experts anent Vera Kelsey's latest.

The New York Herald Tribune: "Scandals, wheels within wheels, complications and a surprise!"

The St. Louis Globe Democrat: "Excitement is plenty."

The Tulsa Daily World: "Murder under particularly eerie conditions and a suspense that holds to the final chapter."

The New York Sun: "The unusually cold-
[Turn page]"

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blooded plot is carried out with skill and an intensity which sweeps the reader along."

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Which should give you an idea. Nowhere did WHISPER MURDER—originally published by the Crime Club at \$2.00 per copy—receive an unfavorable notice. Entirely in keeping with our declared policy of bringing to you the finest proved mystery novel available, we are featuring this top-flight yarn in our next issue.

FROM OUR READERS

NOW let's look at a couple of letters selected from the many that have poured in upon us since we last went to press—letters which seem to vindicate our efforts in bringing you the best for the least. Here's one, for instance, from W. E. Price of Marbury, Alabama. Says Mr. Price:

Dear Sir: I am dropping you a line to say that I enjoyed the January DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE, especially Helen McCloy's THE ONE WHO GOT AWAY.

For some years I have been reading detective stories now and the reading of them has become a hobby of mine. Speaking from this background, I should like to say that I think your magazine is a mighty good deal all around. I shall be among your regular readers from now on.

I have been Justice of the Peace here for several years and I find much help and enjoyment in reading the stories you select.

Evidently, at least by our lights, Mr. Price is one justice who is far from blind. But he'd better keep his detective magazines carefully segregated or some night, when an eloping couple calls him out of bed to legalize their union, he'll read from the wrong book. We wish no part in even such mild blasphemy.



We have searched the files in vain for a definitely adverse letter to run along with Mr. Price's. But here is one from Wilmington, California, by Mrs. R. R. Bennett, which has an interesting slant upon a question which at times must cause all of us to ponder. She writes as follows:

Dear Sir: I very much enjoyed THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY by Helen McCloy in the January issue of DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE. But the story scared me considerably. Certainly, if it is potentially possible (even in fiction) for an ill-equipped Nazi lout to hide so successfully in an area as limited as that of Scotland, there must be numbers of other former Nazi big-shots in hiding throughout the world.

When I think of whole countries like Spain and Argentina, which may well be offering them shelter, I wonder that we captured any of them to bring to trial at Nuremberg. Perhaps Hitler isn't dead after all. It is not a pleasant thought. But Mrs. McCloy painted so vivid a picture I can't get it out of my mind.

You and the whole Department of Justice, to say nothing of G-2, Naval Intelligence, the British, French and Russians, Mrs. Bennett. However, it seems probable that if Adolph the Heel is still alive, someone will uncover his hiding place some day. He's simply too hot to hold indefinitely.

Everybody—keep those letters and post-cards rolling in! Kindly address them to The Editor, DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

With which we'll sign off for now. See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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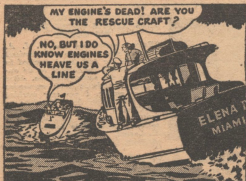
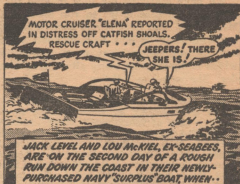
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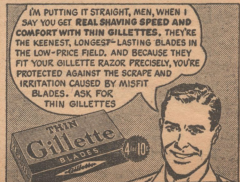
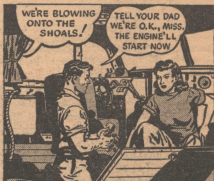
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JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...



20 MINUTES LATER



The GRINDLE NIGHTMARE

by Q. PATRICK



Mark sat down and stared at us without speaking (Chap. II)

Grindle Valley basked in the somnolent comfort of New England prosperity—until a fiend began to slaughter men and animals alike with grim and evil cunning that made him proof against the law!

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CHAPTER I



AS far as I was concerned it all started on a certain Saturday evening in late November or early December. I am sure it was a Saturday because Toni and I had come home from the hospital earlier than usual. I am also certain that the fall was well advanced, for I re-

member that it was almost dark when we passed the forbidding grey walls of the Alstones' house.

Unfortunately, however, I have no record of the exact dates. Later on, when things began to assume such uncanny proportions, I had reason to wish that I had been more observant of the details of those first strange occurrences in Grindle Valley.

As we drove homeward, it was obvious to both Toni and me that something was wrong. At first, I thought it must be a hunt, but Grindle was a conservative spot and did its hunting at conservative times. Whatever the event, the whole neighborhood had turned out for it. There were little knots of villagers at every corner; in the woods we could hear the barking of dogs and there was an occasional gleam from a flashlight.

Voices were audible even above the noise of the car, and every time we caught a face in the headlights, it wore an unfamiliar, important expression. Of course, we should have stopped to inquire, but we were both tired and dirty. We had been working hard all day on a new group of experiments. Besides, it was the week-end and Valerie was coming in after dinner—Valerie and the Goschens.

"Didn't know our rural areas were so densely populated," grunted Toni, as he backed his car into our hideously inaccessible garage.

I thought no more about it at the time, but when I went upstairs to change for dinner, I could still hear shouts ringing across the valley. There was a restless, hopeless quality about them which gave me the impression that our neighbors had gone out to look for something which they knew they would never find—something of which they completely despaired. I remarked on this to Toni who had just emerged magnificent from the shower. But he only grunted again.

And what could one really expect but a grunt from Dr. Antonio Conti, one of the youngest and smartest professors of pathology in America? What was the excitement of a few villagers to a man who had been quite unmoved on the day when he first

isolated Conti's gram-positive organism from the blood stream of a patient with purulent endocarditis, and thus gave medicine one of its most valuable diagnostic aids?

But for all his grunts, Toni was no heartless scientist. I was sure of that when we had first struck up a friendship as research workers and instructors at Rhodes University Hospital. It was Toni's influence that helped me to get in on all the most exciting laboratory experiments. It was he who had urged me to share with him the charming little farm house which he had rented from Seymour Alstone in Grindle Valley some twenty miles out of town.

For some time now we had lived in style as only bachelors can. We were far more comfortable than Mr. Alstone with his lonely old grey house and fleet of servants; far more comfortable than the good-natured Goschens who were always overrun with wetnosed children or noisy friends from town; far more comfortable than the emasculate Tailford-Jones whose wife was continually chasing after other men; and certainly far more comfortable than Valerie Middleton and her mother who lived on the penurious charity of Seymour Alstone.

Our tidy house and well-ordered meals were the envy of the entire married community, and there was hardly a single one of our friends who had not at some time or other made passes at Lucinda—our efficient colored factotum.

SHE had just cleared away dinner and served coffee in the living-room when we learned the reason for the afternoon's unrest.

"The Goschens are early," remarked Toni, as a car drew up outside the door. I switched on the porch light, but it was not the Goschens nor Valerie who entered. Jo Baines, the Alstones' gardener, stood at the door with a man whom I immediately recognized as the village constable.

"Excuse me, Dr. Swanson, but I thought I'd stop by and ask here."

"Ask, Baines?"

The two men scanned our puzzled faces.

"Then you haven't heard, Doctor?"

"Heard what?"

"About my Polly." Baines' voice was low. "She's disappeared. Last night we think it was, though we can't be absolutely sure. Anyhow, we've been hunting all day."

"You mean to say that someone has kidnapped one of your children?" I could not make out whether the strained note in Toni's voice came from polite indifference or incredulity.

"We don't know much about it, Dr. Swanson." Baines had turned his sad eyes on me once again. "When last seen, she was going



There, pressed against a tree, stood a man.
It was Mark Baines. (Chap. VI)

out into the big meadow behind our cottage after her kitten which was always running away. She was afraid-like—well, you know how 'tis with animals round here." He coughed apologetically. "Mark said he saw her calling to it about a hundred yards from the back door.

"That was about eight o'clock and what with Mrs. Baines not being like you might say quite up to looking after the children properly just now, no one thought any more about it till this morning when our Polly wasn't there. You see, she's old enough to put herself to bed now, but her bed hadn't been slept in and neither she nor the kitten has come back home since."

We made sympathetic noises and regretted that we had nothing tangible to suggest.

"I'm going to find her," said Baines as he rose to leave, and there was a strange gleam in his usually mild eye. "I'm going to find

her if I don't eat a bite nor sleep until I've done it. There's other things been going on around here lately, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. I'm going to find my Polly."

Throughout his speech I felt strangely moved. I say "strangely" because I am normally immune to any sort of psychic sensitivity and, at any rate, there is nothing particularly disturbing about a little girl failing to turn up at bedtime. But there was a certain quality about the man as he stood there, his shoulders bowed, his hands clenched at his sides, which made me feel that he knew, or suspected something of which we had no knowledge—something rather horrible.

"Funny!" remarked Toni after they had gone, "that when a poor family has seven children most of whom are congenital idiots, they should get all het up because one of them mercifully disappears. She was a nasty little girl anyway—one of the Baines' less successful efforts."



"Wait till you feel the touch of baby fingers about your collar, Dr. Antonio Conti," I carolled.

"Baby fingers be . . . !"

The intended obscenity was nipped in the bud by the arrival of Millie and Charlie Goschen, our nearest neighbors who own a fair-sized property adjoining the Alstone estate. They are decent people who ride hard, drink hard and are fundamentally incapable of shooting a brace of pheasant or pickling a batch of peaches without bringing in a share to us.

Millie always reminds me of a maternal cherub, if such a thing is possible, while her large, burly husband is still as young and fundamentally as ingenuous as any of his own innumerable children. His passion for horses is rivalled only by his wife's deep-rooted attraction for the candy which she is always swearing to cut out of her diet.

That night they were full of the Baines child—at least, Millie was. Although she succeeded in being flippant, I could tell she was taking it rather hard.

"I just don't see what can have happened," she was saying, throwing away her third cigarette, half-smoked. "I know the child was dumb enough to forget to come in for breakfast—if those poor devils have such a thing as breakfast." Her plump face, usually so pink and shining, was slightly pale. "You don't suppose someone's run off with her, do you?"

I laughed reassuringly. "My dear Millie, people only steal for profit. By no stretch of imagination could you call Polly Baines profitable."

MILLIE did not reply, and in the brief interval of silence that followed, I thought I heard a faint cry outside in the valley. I supposed it was my imagination, but as I strained my ears, it came again—long drawn and melancholy like some exotic night-bird. The others had heard it, too. Toni crossed to the window, pulling back the curtain.

"Mark Baines!" he said. "Mark shouting after his sister."

"Polly was always wandering about," Millie began suddenly. "I think she must have been a bit fey. Time and time again, and quite often in the late evening, I've bumped into her creeping through our property. If anyone had been hanging around, waiting for a chance to grab one of our kids—they might quite easily have gotten Polly by mistake." She lifted her hand from the table, and I noticed it had left a damp mark on the polished oak.

"Something's been wrong with this place lately. For two cents and a stick of chewing gum I'd pack up this minute and take the

children into Rhodes before—before anything else happens. Of course, Charlie's no millionaire, but . . ."

She broke off, laughing again. It was odd that a sane person like Millie with her healthy passions for riding, shooting and child-bearing should seem to be bordering on a neurosis.

"My dear Millie, you're beginning to imagine things. You'll be saying next that Polly was Seymour Alstone's filly out of Mrs. Baines, and that the kidnappers are going to extort an enormous ransom from the old man."

"Far more likely the old son of a gun kidnapped her himself. Anyone that's pulled as many fast ones in business as Seymour Alstone wouldn't stop at kidnapping if he felt like it. I expect he's got her locked up in one of those big empty rooms of his. Or maybe he's eaten her. Our kids call him the Big Bad Wolf."

Millie was quite herself again and launched on her favorite topic—one that was, incidentally, the favorite topic of the whole valley—the villainies, real or imaginary, of Seymour Alstone, the landlord from whom Toni and I rented our cottage. But we were not his only tenants. With a relentless determination to become "lord of the manor," old Seymour had been slowly buying up all the property in the neighborhood. By now practically every estate had fallen into his rapacious clutches, and only the Goschens, with their four hundred acre farm, had managed to preserve a defiant independence.

"My dears!" Millie's face was shining again, pink and seraphic. "I must tell you the latest. I took Mrs. Baines some eggs today and she was rabid about old Seymour—at least, as rabid as she dared be, poor soul, against her husband's employer. Apparently, he'd caught her young Tommy trespassing on his flower beds last week and the old scalliwag lugged him round to the Baines cottage—personally, mind you—and wouldn't leave until he'd had the kid whipped right there and then before his eyes. Mrs. Baines said he just stood and gloated. I think it's positively indecent."

"But the funny part of it was," put in her husband with boyish glee, "that he sent Mark Baines out for a cane, and he came back with a split stick which made a hell of a noise but didn't hurt." He laughed. "Mark's not such an idiot as we all make out. You've got to be pretty smart to fool old Seymour Alstone."

Millie's comeback was cut short by the arrival of Valerie. Valerie Middleton is the type of girl who immediately makes herself felt in a roomful of people. What exactly is the secret of her charm, I have never been able to discover. It is not that she is par-

ticularly beautiful, although her tip-tilted nose and broad, mischievous smile are a constant delight.

It is not that she is witty or brilliant. Luckily she has never caught the contemporary knack of twisting everything into a wisecrack. Perhaps it is her basic honesty that makes her what she is—the honest freshness of her appearance; the honest forthrightness of her manner; and the utter lack of self-consciousness or hypocrisy in her approach to men and women alike.

And she could so easily have become otherwise, for life had given her a great deal of the rough and very little of the smooth. She lived in a small cottage with her mother on the Alstone estate, and the Middletons' lapse into poverty had been almost as sensational as the Alstone's rise to wealth. Valerie's father, who had committed suicide some years ago, had been a brother of Mrs. Seymour Alstone, now long deceased, and had been connected with Seymour himself in a large steel firm just outside Rhodes.

Rumor had it that old Alstone had sold the company's stock short to his own brother-in-law and, in the collapse of 1929, had made a killing in more senses of the word than one. Whatever the truth of this report, it was a known fact that Valerie and her mother were now so crippled financially that they were obliged to live practically on the charity of the man who was supposed to have ruined them.

As she entered now, her pale blond hair slightly tousled, (for she never wore a hat) her cheeks colored by the night air, it struck her for the hundredth time what a gorgeously euphetic creature she was.

She grinned at us and then ran out into the hall, returning with a small and very sulky Sealyham.

"Sorry about Sancho Panza," she said, "but I had to bring him. If I leave him with Mother, they just get together and bark at everything."

Toni brought her a drink and I watched her eyes smile into his.

"I'm late," she said, sipping the highball. "I'll have to hurry and catch up. No news on Polly, I suppose?"

We told her of Baines' visit.

"It's really awful. I feel so sorry for old Ma Baines. What do you think's happened?" "Millie's just been saying your uncle ate her," remarked Toni.

VALERIE laughed. She has a cool, clear laugh like a boy's. "I expect he did. I'm really beginning to believe he is rather a wicked uncle. Mother's been in one of her denunciatory moods. I've heard nothing but your Uncle Seymour this, your Uncle Seymour that, all day."

I started to make some remark, but for the third time that evening we were interrupted. Outside there was the sound of a car stopping, followed by footsteps on the garden path. Our nerves must have been quite on edge by that time, because everyone looked apprehensively toward the door. Even Sancho Panza jumped up and then subsided, growling, behind Valerie's chair.

It turned out to be two of our students from the hospital—Gerald Alstone, old Seymour's grandson, and his friend, Peter Foote. As they entered they presented a violent contrast, Gerald was slight and meek. He always looked as though his childhood had been spent in the way of grown-ups who had no use for him. And now, in his twentieth year, he had a pathetic, unwanted air which doubtless, was due to the fact that his mother and father had been divorced when he was very young. Although he did not wear spectacles, his eyes had a trick of peering myopically at random objects which had no significance in themselves. He was awkward in company.

Peter Foote, on the other hand, was rather handsome in an easy, graceful way. Being the son and heir of very rich parents somewhere in Illinois, friends and self-assurance came easily to him. Before embarking upon his medical career, he had been sent twice round the world by his indulgent mother and from his travels he had acquired that well-groomed sophistication which blossoms so often and so unexpectedly upon the emancipated middle westerner. Although erratic and wildly impractical at times, I had always found him most responsive as a student and Toni had said that he was the most brilliant and hardworking member of his pathology classes at Rhodes.

Neither of us could say the same for Gerald Alstone, who had great difficulty in making the grade. Even his grandfather's money and threats looked as though they would not be sufficient to keep him at medical school another year if he did not make a better showing.

The two boys seemed tired after hunting all day for the missing child. They had nothing new to tell us. No clues of any sort had been found. Baines was still out. They had just met him and he had apparently, repeated to them his vow not to rest until Polly was discovered.

We were all sitting around looking rather frigid, when Sancho jumped out of Millie's lap and ran to the door, barking frantically.

"Sancho, you ass," called Valerie, "this isn't your house. Who asked you to be a watch-dog?"

As she spoke there was a ring at the bell. It seemed that everyone in the neighborhood had chosen that evening to call. But this

was more than a call. It was a visitation. Roberta Tailford-Jones had burst into the room like an influenza epidemic. She was followed by Edgar, her diminutive husband, whom she completely overshadowed, usually to the point of hiding him from view.

Despite the fact that she is hovering around the early forties, Roberta is the most magnificent woman in our community. I might also mention that she does not like me any better than I like her. Tonight she was after my blood. There was a look in her eye that I knew of old.

She nodded distantly to our guests and then turned to me.

"Dr. Douglas Swanson, I demand an explanation."

"If there is something you wish to say to me," I remarked mildly, "perhaps you'd care to talk it over in the dining room."

She gave a scornful laugh.

"I have nothing to say which cannot and should not be heard by everyone. Do you or do you not use animals in your vile experiments out at the college?"

"Why, of course, I—we—" I stammered, feeling like an interne faced with an irate chief.

"And have you been heard to say that the authorities do not give you enough creatures for these—these . . . ?"

"I doubt whether you'll find any research worker in America who couldn't do with more than the quota of animals supplied."

"I thought as much," she snapped. "I knew I was right."

"My dear . . ." put in Edgar timidly.

But she brushed him aside like a cockroach, and wheeled triumphantly to the others.

"Now that explains where my Queenie has gone—the poor dear, precious!" She began to weep noisily, and through her tears we could hear, "I shall write to Dean Warlock tonight—a personal friend of my father's."

"Good God! Roberta's throwing a scene!"

Toni and Peter had come in from the kitchen, both disturbingly handsome after a liberal sampling of the drinks. The susceptible Roberta reacted to them immediately. For a moment I saw Toni through her eyes—the muscular expanse of chest, the splendid teeth, the dark Italian hair. It made me feel very undersized and insignificant.

AFTER a few liquid glances, Mrs. Tailford-Jones stated her case again, and this time, since it was for Toni's benefit, with slightly less vehemence. She had lost her pet marmoset, a horrible little animal which she had dyed to match her hair. Everywhere Roberta went Queenie was sure to go. In fact, it had clung so constantly to her shoulder that it had been difficult to tell where

the monkey began and the woman ended. It had, she averred, completely disappeared while she was out that afternoon. She had seen my car go past her house—the inference was obvious!

Toni had been listening with a curious smile on his lips.

"So you suggest that Doug and I smuggle animals out to the hospital and vivisection them, eh?"

Roberta looked a bit foolish. In her wrath she must have failed to realize that her denunciation, meant for me, would inevitably include Toni.

"Well, I think it's all awful," she muttered. "Terrible and cruel!"

"So now, Roberta, we've taken dear Queenie! You'd better search the house. Maybe you'll find the Baines child, too."

Apparently Roberta had not heard the news about Polly. When we told her she became even more strident and finally burst out with:

"It's positively unsafe to live in Grindle any more. There are things going on—animals tortured in laboratories." She glanced darkly at me. "It'll be children next—if it isn't already." At that moment her eyes fell on the hapless Peter Foote who was innocently wolfing down his third highball.

"You're another of them. Don't let me catch you around my place or I'll—Valerie, I can't imagine how you can bring that dog of yours here. You mark my words and look after it." Gerald, who had been playing with Sancho's ears, stared short-sightedly at the Sealyham and drew away his hand as though from a hot coal. "Experimental animals indeed! Why don't you so-called doctors experiment on each other?"

Smiling lazily, Peter Foote rose. "An excellent idea, Mrs. Tailford-Jones. I've always thought that we ought to be allowed to experiment on human subjects."

"You little beast!" Roberta's blood-red mouth fell open. "You doctors are all just a bunch of sadists, pretending you're doing good to humanity."

With admirable politeness, Peter pulled the well-known gag and inquired whether, if one of Roberta's children were sick, she would refuse him the benefit of diphtheria antitoxin, pneumonia serum, adrenalin or other therapeutic agents whose usefulness had been proved largely through animal work.

But, as the Tailford-Joneses had no children and, short of an Old Testament miracle, were quite unlikely to have any, Peter's remark did not go down any too well with Roberta.

While the rest of us manfully upheld the decencies of polite conversation, Peter Foote continued to spar with Roberta. On both



I lifted the drooping head and saw the face of a man freshly drowned. (Chap. III)

sides the sallies became more and more acrimonious until, at last, realizing that a vulgar scene was inevitable, Peter summoned Gerald from his corner and discreetly left the battlefield.

She had nothing against me, so far as I could see, except that I had never betrayed any consciousness of her luscious charms and that, in contrast with Toni's six foot four of splendid physique, I must have seemed rather a nonentity. That was one of the advantages of living with Toni.

The amorous Robertas of the world passed me by. So—unfortunately—did the Valerie Middletons.

As usual Edgar Tailford-Jones, or the little colonel, as we sometimes called him, did not say a word. He is so inconspicuous an individual and so completely submerged in the over-ripe personality of his wife, that it is difficult to remember whether or not he is in the room. It is difficult, too, to describe him. He is the direct antithesis of a colonel or indeed of any military man. At first glance, he seems to have no face. When one tries to draw a picture of him on one's mind, only the mouth emerges, tiny and almost lipless, as though it had been stabbed out with a pencil point.

I cannot remember anything else that happened—at least, not anything of real significance. Despite desperate attacks with a powder puff, Millie's nose grew more and more shiny as the drinks piled up. Charlie got me in a corner and poured out an elaborate and rather childish theory about the disappearance of Polly Baines and her pet kitten.

Toni and Valerie—as usual—looked a little too long into each other's eyes and, to Roberta's evident annoyance, spent a little too much time in the back kitchen. And, as I watched them, I felt, as usual, that queer constriction in the region which is poetically referred to as the heart but is probably the upper abdomen.

At last, I suppose, everyone left. We had all talked ourselves out, and Roberta had had at least one drink too many. The poor little colonel had some difficulty in supporting her into the car, and she was still talking about Queenie and "vivvysexshun" when Edgar drove her off.

"Well, what do you say, old man?" I asked, as Toni took off his shirt in the living-room. He had an unconventional habit of dressing and undressing anywhere but in the right place.

"Roberta's a goddam fool. But—" he started to switch off the lights—"something is rotten in the Vale of Grindle."

And this remark is memorable in itself, because I never knew before that Toni had even heard of Shakespeare.



THE next day was a Sunday. After breakfast Toni and I borrowed two horses from the Goschens and went for a long ride to blow away the cobwebs of the night before. It was a clear day, sparkling and young. We galloped like centaurs over the hard, frosty fields and

through the woods brown with autumn. We climbed to Old Grindle Oak—a patriarchal evergreen standing on the top of the highest hill in the neighborhood—and raced each other down again. I had forgotten all about Polly Baines.

She was brought back to my mind very forcibly, however, when we struck the road and the honk of a horn made me draw up to avoid a passing car. A middle-aged man was smiling out at me.

It was my old friend, Felix Bracegirdle.

Toni rode on, but I immediately dismounted and tethered Esmeralda to a tree. With Bracegirdle in the car were Jo Baines and a man whom I had never seen before. Bracegirdle shook me warmly by the hand and said that he had been appointed sheriff's deputy in the Polly Baines investigation. I did my best to be helpful and told him about Roberta's marmoset.

"Yes, we've heard plenty about that already," he said with a significant smile. "Love your neighbor' doesn't seem to go so hot around here, eh? Well, well, I don't believe all I hear."

It was evident from his tone that Bracegirdle had already interviewed Mrs. Tailford-Jones and that she had, as usual, been none too polite about me. He gave me a friendly smile.

I had known before that Bracegirdle was in some way connected with the county police authorities, but I had not realized that he would have jurisdiction in our own particular neighborhood. Our friendship had started during the summer under rather remarkable circumstances. His wife had been brought into the University Hospital almost moribund with a rare blood disease characterized by a white-cell count of about 200 and a total absence of polys.

It so happened that I did the hematological work on her case and suggested agranulocytic angina, which afterwards proved to be the correct diagnosis. I also suggested that the case be treated with pentnucleotide, then a comparatively new and unheard of drug which could not be obtained in the small town of Rhodes. Together Bracegirdle

and I had raced through the night to Lampson where we woke up someone in the wholesale drug firm and procured this new remedy.

Mrs. Bracegirdle's response had been spectacular, and her husband always attributed the miracle of her recovery to me, though indeed, I had done nothing but what common sense and good medicine dictated. During that long drive to and from Lampson I had got to know the man pretty well—at least, well enough to be glad for Baines' sake that he was on the job. I had developed a great respect for him, and I think that he, too, believed in and trusted me as an almost omniscient creature.

"Any more news?" I asked seriously.

"No, Doctor. We've combed the countryside for ten miles round without a trace." Bracegirdle removed his hat and scratched his graying hair. "A ten-year-old kid can't get far under her own steam—let alone a young kitten. We're going off to get some bloodhounds before the scent gets cold."

"Well, if you'd like to come along, we'll be back at the Baines place by around two. The state troopers are going to lend a hand and it might be a good idea to have a doctor along. You never know."

When I arrived at the Baines' cottage that afternoon, I found quite a crowd of people collected. I could tell from their eager eyes and unnaturally swift voices that the excitement of the day before had not abated. Bracegirdle was talking solemnly with Franklin Alstone, Gerald's father, who had a sinecure and a large salary in the steel mills which had once belonged to old Seymour. He was a withered stick of a man with a droop and a bald head and, although barely forty-five, looked every bit as old as his septuagenarian father with whom he lived in the large Alstone house.

While they were giving the dogs the scent, I went upstairs to say a few words of professional encouragement to Mrs. Baines. The poor woman's pregnancy was far advanced and she did not seem to take in much of what was going on around her.

WHEN I got out into the sunshine again, the state trooper was holding the dogs on a leash. Slowly they started to pick out the scent on the hard gravel of the garden path. For a while it seemed almost as if they were snuffing aimlessly, their noses to the ground. Then they began to move slowly forward, and the rest of us followed. Apparently the scent was still good, despite the lapse of time.

Silently, ploddingly, the bloodhounds went on, lifting their muzzles now and again to stare round at their master as if for approval. They skirted the side of an adjoin-

ing field, in and out of a little ditch that marked it off, and once again, it seemed, we could see Polly chasing her kitten in and out of that little ditch. There was an excitement, a queer, impersonal thrill in this hunt, such as I had never felt in my life before.

At length the dogs turned toward the old dirt road with which we had been running parallel and followed it to a fringe of woodland about half a mile from the cottage. Here they paused and sniffed the air.

Baines was already moving in and out of the woods shouting "Polly" at the top of his lungs. He had the wild, frustrated exuberance of a man who had got so near and yet so far. Every time his voice rang out we all tensed ourselves to listen. But there was no reply.

The trooper unleashed the dogs and for a while they nosed around in little circles.

"Looks like she must have been picked up in a car," commented Bracegirdle. "Where does this road lead to?"

Franklin Alstone explained that it was an old, almost disused lane which led from Grindle Meadow to the cottage where Toni and I lived. We could see the deep ruts made by generations of cart wheels, but the ground was too hard for the impression of automobile tires. It would have been rough riding for a car.

Meanwhile I noticed that one of the dogs, intent on some purpose of its own, had moved away and was disappearing into the woods. We followed him with our eyes, and for a moment nobody spoke. Soon he came trotting back. In his mouth was a furry body which, at first glance, I took to be a large rabbit or a ground hog. Wagging his tail proudly, the hound laid his burden at his master's feet. As he did so, I caught a glimpse of Baines' face. It was drawn and haggard like the face of a man in mortal agony.

Bracegirdle's broad back obscured my vision and I could not see at first what it was that the dog had brought. A low whistle of excitement made me step forward.

Lying on the brown grass at our feet lay the dead body of a small monkey—the marmoset which had belonged to Roberta Taillford-Jones. I could see at once that it had been dead for some hours and it had been ripped up the belly so that its viscera glistened in the sunlight. The scavengers of the woods had been at it already. It looked, as it lay there, like the mockery of a child's body. I understood at once the expression I had just seen on Baines' face.

"Good God!" It was Franklin Alstone who spoke first. "This is something devilish!"

Then everyone started talking at once, and and I can't remember half of what was said. Eventually, I know, the body was carefully

wrapped up, and we went back to the Baines' cottage.

As we passed through the garden gate, Bracegirdle beckoned me aside.

"Of course Baines is upset just now," he whispered, "and I don't want to cause any more trouble in the family, but this—er—monkey business," he paused to smile at his own unconscious pleasantry—"this puts what you might call quite a different slant on things, Dr. Swanson. I'd like to have a word with that eldest Baines boy, the one who's not quite right in the head. Can you tell me anything about him?"

"They say Mark Baines is a natural around here, but I'd call him more of a naturalist. He works as a kind of part-time gardener and has a real gift for flowers. He's made our little wilderness blossom like the rose."

Bracegirdle lowered his voice still more.

"We—ell, he was brought up not so long ago for hurting two little girls on the Lampson road. Their mother lodged a complaint against him. He said that they'd caught a songbird in a trap and all he wanted was to get it away from them and set it loose."

"Just like Mark," I commented.

"He was let off with a warning that time, but—when a fellow's not right in his head and things like this are going on. . . ."

I laughed.

"Mark is as soft-hearted as a girl. He could no more hurt an animal—here, look for yourself."

I LED Bracegirdle to the disused stable which was Mark's living quarters. The ground floor was lined with handmade cages in each of which there was some living creature. A young fox, stinking to high heaven; a weasel with its leg carefully bandaged; a white owl and an enormous black snake. There were several other animals in this extraordinary menagerie. Mark's sympathies were catholic.

"Don't tell old man Alstone about this," I continued, "but Mark's place is a regular happy hunting ground for destructive vermin. He goes and gets them out of traps, looks after them until they are well; and lets them loose again."

Bracegirdle sniffed.

"Well, if he can live in this stink, he must be queer in the head."

But if the downstairs part of the stable smelt bad, the loft where Mark lived and slept was a veritable paradise of lovely odors. These came from the plants and flowers which he kept there and tended with all the passionate devotion of his warped nature.

As we climbed the ladder and proceeded through the trap-door, I saw, to my surprise, that Mark was at home. Quickly I

stepped backward to speak to Bracegirdle.

"Let me do the talking," I whispered. "We'll get further that way if you don't mind. For some unknown reason Mark likes and trusts Dr. Conti and me. He doesn't take to most people around here and he might be difficult with you."

Bracegirdle nodded, and we pushed our way inside. Mark was bending over some fine amber chrysanthemums and did not look up as we entered.

"This gentleman's interested in flowers," I explained, and after a suspicious glance at Bracegirdle, Mark started to show his treasures, pronouncing their long names with uncanny accuracy. Bracegirdle, was tactful and showed himself to be no mean horticulturist.

Mark's face, as he bent over his favorite blooms, was a study for a sculptor. His long, dark hair and large, vacant eyes made me think irresistibly of a wild, exotic plant which had been metamorphosed by some magic into a country lad of eighteen. At first glance, he looked normal enough. It was only those weird, luminous eyes and the flat shape of the back of his head which showed him to be—different.

After we had botanized for a while, I broached the subject of his sister's disappearance.

"Well, Mark, this is a bad business about Polly."

He sat down on the edge of the dilapidated mattress which was his bed and stared from one to the other of us without speaking. I noticed, as I had often done before, that a sort of film had come over his eyes. He looked like a person who lives in a world other than our own—as one who has crossed the barrier which separates the known from the unknown.

"It isn't no use to go looking for Polly," he remarked slowly. "She's gone and her kitty's gone too. The kitty's dead and that I know and if the kitty's dead, Polly's dead too and it's no more use you chasing around after her. No."

He was looking down as he spoke and playing with the thick hairs on his muscular arms. It was extraordinary, I thought idly, that any youth could resemble at once a flower and a gorilla.

"No more use," he repeated dully.

Bracegirdle was staring at me, obviously awaiting his cue.

"What makes you say that, Mark?" I interposed hurriedly.

"It's like this," he shook his head as if in pity of my ignorance. "That kitty of our Polly's was very wild. She wouldn't come to no one but me, but as soon as she heard my voice, she'd come runnin' up. I used to save her the milk from my supper."

"Yes, but—"

"Well, I was out all last night calling after her—and calling. And there wasn't a neck of the woods around here as I didn't go in—but she didn't come. So that kitty's dead and gone, and, if she's dead and gone, well, Polly's dead and gone, too."

With the serene philosophy of the mentally deficient he seemed amused that we should continue to question the inevitable—that we should probe with impious fingers into the mysteries which he calmly accepted. There was no more to be said.

As we crossed the garden toward the cottage, I saw the tall, erect figure of Seymour Alstone dismounting from his horse. He was hatless and his magnificent mane of dark hair, flecked only here and there with white, seemed like a reproach to his son's sparsely covered head. He greeted me with a curt nod and turned to the sheriff's deputy.

"In charge of this investigation, Bracegirdle?" His voice rang out like a pistol shot.

"Yes, Mr. Alstone."

"Well, you don't seem to be making much progress. My men must get back to work tomorrow. Can't spare 'em any longer."

BRACEGIRDLE assured him that their help was no longer necessary and went on to relate the incidents of the afternoon. Seymour Alstone listened intently, his large head thrust forward, his ferrety eyes boring holes through Bracegirdle as he occasionally fired some pertinent question. It was no wonder, I thought, that the Goschen kids called him the Big Bad Wolf.

When Bracegirdle described the finding of the dead marmoset, Seymour turned to his son, and, instinctively, so it seemed to me, a note of contempt came into his voice.

"Did this animal belong to anyone you know, Franklin?"

"Why—er—yes, I think so." Franklin Alstone was tugging nervously at his high-necked collar, and I remember having the distinct impression that he looked even more nervous and furtive than he usually did when addressed directly by his father. "It belonged to Mrs. Tailford-Jones, I think, at least I . . ."

"Hm! Nice sort of a pet!" The old man made a disdainful motion with his head.

A flush came into Franklin's sallow cheeks. Though bordering on middle-age, it seemed as if he would never get over the unreasonable awe in which he had always held his father. Only once—according to popular rumor—had he opposed the old man's wishes and that was when he had eloped with Gerald's mother from whom he had now long been divorced.

I saw it too—a face pressed against the window pane, a face seemingly without features.
(Chap. V)



Seymour had by this time started to heckle Bracegirdle. I made off, feeling rather embarrassed. Baines was waiting for me when I went to get my car. His hand shook as he took a cigarette from my proffered case. The events of the past two days had aged him considerably.

"There's things connected with this business which aren't what they ought to be." The injured eyes of all the oppressed lower classes in the world were looking at me from his. "This monkey's not the first animal to go. Last week old Mrs. Marvin lost her tabby cat. And there Brewer's sheep found slit up in a ditch. Things aren't right round here, Doctor. But you know how it is. Even if I was to have my suspicions, I couldn't say nothing—not even to the police."

Slightly bewildered, I nodded.

"Well, if I did find anything, I was wondering whether I could get in touch with you in private."

"Sure, call me at the hospital any time. I'll keep it under my hat. Rhodes 21, extension 59. And—" I paused and looked at him as sympathetically as I knew how—"I'm terribly sorry, Baines. I'll do anything I can to help."

I had not driven more than a quarter of a mile toward home when I met the Tailford-Jones' car. Roberta beckoned me to stop and asked for news. Despite the indiscretions of the night before she looked perfectly stunning in her Sunday clothes. Edgar looked suitably stunned.

I described to them the finding of the monkey's dead body.

At first Roberta started to cry. Then she fumed and stormed. Then she began using words which are commonly represented by asterisks. Her tear-stained face was distorted with fury. The make-up ran all over the lot.

"Edgar, drive on. Find that man Bracegirdle. Find him wherever he is."

The little colonel started the engine meekly. Then he turned to me and spoke for the first time.

"You're quite sure that the marmoset is dead?" His pin-prick mouth had formed itself into a "oh."

"Dead as—"

But he was not listening. A violent attack of sneezing had apparently dulled his senses. He was holding a handkerchief in front of his face and making strange, inarticulate noises such as I had not heard since the end of the hay-fever season.

"Hurry up, Edgar."

Edgar hurried up, but before he drove on, I had caught a glimpse of two malicious little devils dancing in his eyes.

He had—probably for the first time in the course of his whole married life—been roaring with laughter.



IT was quite a relief after the disquieting events of the week-end to get back to the comparative peace of my laboratory in Rhodes. Here the continuous struggle of life against death made the disappearance of one little girl seem relatively unimportant. After all, I

was not a detective. My friendship with Bracegirdle and the kindly feeling I had for the Baines family (especially Mark) were the only links that really bound me to the case. My job was research work in medicine—not in crime—and there were other things to occupy my mind besides vanished children and dead monkeys.

Bracegirdle turned up several times during the week, asked me a lot of questions and reported little progress. There had been no further clue to Polly's disappearance and no evidence which elucidated the death of Mrs. Tailford-Jones' marmoset. Nor could anyone offer a particularly good alibi for Friday night or Saturday evening—the times when the two disappearances had occurred. Bracegirdle, it seemed, was relying more and more on me for help, though it was very little that I had to offer. The problem, in his mind, had already developed into a case for the doctor or alienist rather than the police.

I remember that I was very busy at the time on a paper for the Hematological Society, and I did not altogether welcome these intrusions. Still less did I welcome an interruption of another kind which occurred toward the end of the week. I was in the middle of a demonstration to my students when I was sent for by the Dean of the Medical School.

Dr. Warlock was a pompous old ass from whom I wanted nothing except his signature on my salary check at the end of each month.

"Sit down, Dr. Swanson—if you please."

I sat on the edge of my chair, and for a second or two we looked at each other with well-balanced animosity.

"You and Dr. Conti live together out in Grindle, I believe?"

"Yes, Dr. Warlock."

"You are both very young to hold such responsible positions in the college."

I informed him politely that I was thirty-two and Toni thirty-five—no spring chickens, I might have added, to anyone except an old fogey like him.

"Well, well, you are still at an age when

you might perhaps be addicted to—er, shall we say skylarking?” He was making a heavy attempt to sound both indulgent and paternal at the same time. “You and Dr. Conti,” he continued, “are both engaged in animal work, I believe?”

I nodded.

“And you have the usual difficulty in getting all the material you want—?”

“Dr. Warlock,” I interrupted, “have there been complaints about me? I take all the routine precautions with my laboratory animals. I devocalize the dogs. I use anesthesia to avoid unnecessary pain. I—”

“Oh, there is no question of your efficiency—or ability, Dr. Swanson. I was just wondering whether, perhaps, you had tried to enlarge our somewhat limited supply of animals from outside sources.”

“It’s both preposterous and insulting,” I said angrily.

“Come, Dr. Swanson, I am not accusing you. I only want your co-operation.” He took two or three letters from his desk. “I have received complaints this week from the Anti-Vissection Society, the S.P.C.A. and certain private individuals. It appears that various household pets have been missing in your neighborhood. There is a hint of an outrage of a more serious nature. They threaten investigation. I am asking your help to avoid a scandal.”

“It’s all nonsense, Dr. Warlock. There’s a silly woman in Grindle who lost her pet monkey, which, incidentally, has been found, dead in a ditch! A child disappears under mysterious circumstances, but it is fantastic to imagine that either Dr. Conti or I would do anything so foolish as to—why, it’s laughable.”

The Dean looked at me sadly and shook his head.

“You are very young, Dr. Swanson, and you do not realize how careful one has to be where experimental animals are concerned.”

I knew he was speaking nothing but the truth.

“You don’t think that, perhaps, some of the students—? Young Alstone lives in the neighborhood.” The Dean lowered his voice discreetly, as most people did at the name of Alstone.

“No, sir. Gerald Alstone is a shy, retiring fellow. He doesn’t even like to go out hunting with his grandfather. He hasn’t the spunk to hurt a fly.”

“And there’s that other lad, Peter Foote. I understand he stays with the Alstones quite a lot. He used to be rather headstrong and excitable at one time, though now, they tell me, he’s quieted down considerable.”

“Foote’s as clean-cut and normal a boy as ever lived. A very able student, too.”

DEAN WARLOCK nodded. “That’s just what I would have thought,” he said slowly.

“And,” I continued, “in the very unlikely event that either of these two boys wanted to conduct private experiments—they are both very well-off. They could purchase animals for themselves.”

The Dean tapped his paper knife on the desk.

“Well, I’m sorry to have troubled you, Dr. Swanson.”

I returned to the laboratory where a few of my students were still waiting, and finished the demonstration. I was just clearing up a few additional points when the telephone rang. I recall that Gerald Alstone went to answer it and said it was for me.

Baines was on the wire. His voice sounded almost faint with earnestness. He wanted to know if he could see me just as soon as I got back home. There was something—something which he had to talk over with me at once. I told him I was dining out that evening but would be going for a ride early the next morning.

“Well, Dr. Swanson,” he concluded, “if I can’t get in touch with you before, look for me around eight o’clock by the Mill Pool.”

“All right, Baines. Eight o’clock—eight o’clock—tomorrow morning at the Mill Pool. I’ll be there.”

Toni and I had both been invited to dinner and bridge with Seymour Alstone that night, but my room-mate who rarely played bridge and who objected on principle to evenings where one could neither smoke nor drink, had refused on some flimsy excuse. Secretly I was very glad of his refusal because it meant that Valerie would be invited in his place.

And very lovely she looked when I entered Seymour Alstone’s enormous living-room at seven o’clock that evening. In this gloomy house she was youth and vitality itself. Franklin was there, too, boney and bald, but no one paid any attention to him.

Seymour Alstone himself was always at his best when acting the host, and there was something almost benign about his fine old grizzled head as he took his place at the top of the dinner table. Indeed, the party was normally gay and lively as long as Gerald and Peter Foote were there. It was Peter who was largely responsible for this liveliness, for he wise-cracked in front of the old man just as though he were a human being instead of the traditional tyrant of the valley. Several times during dinner Seymour actually broke into a hearty chuckle.

It was not until the two boys left and we settled down to bridge that the familiar sobriety always associated with the Alstone household, descended on the party.

By some strange anomaly in his character, Seymour Alstone, while forbidding cigarettes and alcohol in his house, had no objection to playing bridge for money. By some even stranger kink in his nature, he seemed particularly to enjoy playing for fairly high stakes with the girl whose father he had ruined.

Of course, since Valerie had not a penny of her own, he was obliged to carry her as his partner, defraying her losses and allowing her to keep her winnings. But he did not make such a bad investment at that. She was an extremely good player—far better than my partner, the timid Franklin, who always underbid his hand and seemed terrified of setting his father or even of making a contract against him.

The evening wore tediously on. At eleven o'clock Valerie decided it was time to go home. I paid my losses and went to get my coat. We were all assembled in the hall when Gerald came in by himself. He blinked at us a moment and then said casually:

"Oh, Dr. Swanson, I just met Mark down the road. By the way, I believe his father's been looking for you. Have you seen him yet?"

"No." I answered with some curtness, annoyed that my private appointment with Baines had thus been made common knowledge.

Old Seymour, who was not included in this conversation, looked from his grandson to me with a suspicious frown.

"What's this about Baines?" he asked gruffly.

Reluctantly I was forced to explain how the gardener had called me that afternoon on purely personal business, and urged him to consider the matter as confidential. I was not very convincing, but I hoped that Seymour would suppose the interview to have some connection with Mrs. Baines state of health.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Gerald's face fell as he listened. "I heard you talking to him over the 'phone in your laboratory this afternoon. I didn't know it was private."

"Well, Gerald," I commented mildly, "you're going to be a doctor yourself and you ought to realize that physicians never discuss professional affairs. It doesn't matter this time just so long as you don't let it go any further."

THE boy flushed and looked down shamefacedly. "I'm afraid I've already told the Tailford-Joneses," he faltered. "Peter and I met them in the road just after dinner and that woman asked so many questions that before I knew where I was—"

"If you've told Roberta," I broke in, smiling a little grimly, "that means the whole

village knows about it by now. But I suppose it can't be helped."

"It can indeed!" The expression on Seymour Alstone's face reminded me of one of the Old Testament prophets. "How many times, Gerald, must I tell you not to gossip about affairs which do not concern you? If you spent more of your time studying instead of wasting it in idle chatter, you wouldn't be such a disappointment to your father and me."

Franklin, who had been standing a little apart from the rest of us, nodded his head vaguely as if to show that the old man's words had his full approbation.

Gerald looked up at his father and grandfather, and, for an instant, his eyes revealed an expression of long pent antagonism and resentment.

"Mrs. Tailford-Jones kept asking me questions," he said sullenly. "I had to be polite."

"Polite!" Seymour gave a scornful laugh. "Politeness is only another name for weakness. When are you going to learn to have a will of your own?"

"Will of my own!" echoed Gerald, peering closely at his grandfather and speaking with far more spirit than I had ever heard before. "Whose fault is it if I haven't one? Who bosses me about all the time; tells me what I must do and what I mustn't; when I can go out; when I must work; who I shall see and who I shan't? What else can you expect, I'd like to know?"

He broke off suddenly, catching his breath as if surprised at the temerity of his own outburst.

Both Seymour and Franklin had been listening in blank amazement. All three Alstones appeared utterly to have forgotten Valerie and myself. Gerald was staring at his grandfather pale and breathing hard. Gradually the excitement drained out of his face and he seemed to give way to an emotional collapse. Pushing the hair from his forehead in a small helpless gesture, he slipped away down the corridor.

Valerie and I left almost without saying goodnight to our host. As we passed through the front door, I heard Seymour say to Franklin:

"Very unpredictable, your boy." His tone seemed to include his own middle-aged son in the accusation. "Very unpredictable, indeed! He's beginning to take after his mother."

"You've certainly got a queer lot of relatives, Valerie," I remarked as I helped her into the car.

"Poor Gerald," she said softly. "I'd do anything to help him but it's hopeless. He's so suspicious of everything and everybody. Peter Foote seems to be the only person in this world that he trusts."

As she spoke, the dining-room window was flooded with light. From our position outside we could see two people enter, shutting the door cautiously behind them. They were Peter and Gerald. Peter had produced something from his pocket and was handing it to his friend. I noticed to my amused surprise that it was a hip-flask.

"If Seymour saw that," I said laughing, "it would be the end of Peter Foote."

As usual Valerie and I talked about Toni on the drive home. Some strange fascination always impelled me to bring up the subject for fear, perhaps, she would broach it first. I had hoped for a tête-à-tête upon arrival, but there was a light in the living-room—a sure sign that Mrs. Middleton had waited up, as she always did when Valerie was spending the evening with her neighboring relatives. She had, she was wont to explain grimly, lost one of her family through the machinations of Seymour Alstone and she was not going to lose another if she could help it.

Mrs. Middleton, though normally a kind-hearted woman with a turn for pessimism, led the field in her bitterness against the Alstones. Time and time again—privately and in public—she bit the hand that was feeding her. It was embarrassing for all parties concerned, especially for Valerie. I could see now that she did not want me to come in and meet her mother who would probably be in one of her worst moods. Reluctantly I said goodnight from the car, watching her eyes shine in the headlights as she turned to smile at me.

Her parting words were: "Give my love to Toni."

BUT I was not able to deliver her message, for on my return I found that my roommate was not at home. I had no idea where he was. We had tacitly adopted the principle of not prying into one another's affairs.

As I slammed the front door, I noticed an

envelope lying on the mat. It contained a note from Baines which read:

Please don't forget about tomorrow. I will be there.

Respectfully,

Jo Baines.

For some reason or other I felt a vague sensation of uneasiness as I undressed and went to bed.

It had, however, completely vanished next morning when, after a good night's rest, I walked over to the Goschens' stable and, taking advantage of a standing invitation, saddled my favorite mare, Esmeralda.

It was seven o'clock as we set out, and a slight frost during the night had sprinkled the fields and the roadside with a powdering of white.

After a brisk ride I turned my horse toward the old Mill Pond where I was to meet Baines. As I galloped onward I started, for the first time, to wonder about the significance of his strange call—of his feverish anxiety to see me. If he had news of his daughter why had he not gone direct to Bracegirdle? Could there be anything shameful in the life of this simple, hard-working man—something that must be kept from the authorities? Or, had it been fear that had sealed his lips to all except me? And, if so—fear of what?

I dismounted at the old Mill Pool and, being a little before my time, lit a cigarette. Esmeralda started to chew the grass that grew green by the edge of the creek. Idly I watched the sparse waterfall that trickled over the dam. There was no sign of Baines.

Esmeralda, her head down, was moving along the bank. Suddenly she started and backed away from the water. For a moment I saw the whites of her frightened eyes. Quickly I sprang forward to calm her and

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TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



fastened the reins about a stunted tree. She still shot uneasy glances toward the pool. My eyes followed hers. Close by the bank was what looked like an old sack, bobbing up and down with the lapping of the waters. I looked again. After all, was it a sack?

There was something about the shape of that curve which caused this piece of fabric to move rhythmically. I took a step toward the bank and leaned forward. Not being able to reach it without getting my feet wet, I broke off a stick from a nearby tree and started to pull the object to me. It was heavy and resistant.

As it moved, something else came to the surface of the shallow water—something which made me drop my stick in excitement. It was the dark back of a human head. Forgetting about wet feet, I waded in and clutched at the hair until, at last, sprawled on the bank, face downward, lay the dead body of a man.

He was fully dressed, and his hands still dragged behind him in the water. Although exerting all my strength, I could not budge the body another inch. Involuntarily I looked down to discover the cause of the impediment and, as I did so, I saw something that made me think I must have returned to some primitive age of civilization where blood and iron ruled.

Beneath the wrists there dangled chains. I pulled at them and the hands appeared. Each one was firmly clasped in a spring trap such as they set on the banks of streams for muskrats or minks. The body had been lying face down in about two feet of water, the hands manacled and helpless.

I lifted the drooping head and saw the face of a man freshly drowned; the bloated, purple skin, the staring eyes, the lips parted in a foolish, sagging smile. As I looked, the clock on the village church across the valley chimed eight times.

Jo Baines had kept his appointment. . . .

CHAPTER IV



LEAVING the body where it lay, I grabbed Esmeralda's reins, jumped on her back and galloped home. The first thing I did was to telephone Bracegirdle. Then I dragged Toni out of bed, got out the car and, handing Esmeralda over to the astonished Lucinda, drove like mad back to the Mill Pool. Toni, who was too sleepy to take in what had happened, protested all the way.

"You and your bloody corpses," he kept muttering.

But as soon as he saw Baines sprawled on the bank of Grindle Creek he became alert. "Looks as though he were drowned!" he exclaimed. "But, I don't see how he could in that puddle."

He exclaimed at the swollen wrists, still held fast in the steel traps.

"I imagine the poor devil must have been trying to eke out his livelihood by catching muskrats and selling the hides."

"Yes, but—"

"Yes, but—exactly!" Toni paused and pulled at his dark chin. "And we are supposed to believe that he came here to examine his traps, slipped on the bank, caught his right hand in one and threshed about until he obligingly caught his left in another—and drowned. Doesn't quite gel, does it, Doug?"

"It certainly does not."

Toni had pulled back the wet hair from the dead man's forehead.

"Hey, I wouldn't touch anything till Bracegirdle comes."

"It looks," he reflected, "almost as if someone had tried to skin him first, poor devil. See that patch there—the outer layer of epidermis has completely gone."

My professional interest was now thoroughly aroused.

"Those are the kind of marks you'd get if you were dragged along behind some moving vehicle—say, a car."

Toni interrupted with a low whistle.

"You don't believe, Doug. . . ."

"I've got to the stage when I'd believe anything. I wouldn't bet one penny on Polly Baines being alive now."

Bracegirdle arrived from Rhodes in record time. For the next half hour everything was very businesslike. The coroner inspected the body and had it photographed from every possible angle. The bank was searched exhaustively for clues. When the district attorney arrived a little later, I told my story of the telephone call, the note, and the finding of the corpse. After that the coroner, whom we both knew, called Toni and me into a conference as to how long the man had been dead. None of us, however, was willing to hazard a guess, though from superficial observation it looked as though he had met his death by drowning.

"Well," remarked the coroner with a final glance at the corpse, "we'd better let Dr. Brooks have a look at him. He does our work on this kind of case."

"Mind if I come along?" Toni's voice was eager. "Brooks is a pal of mine."

"Glad to have you, Dr. Conti." The coroner buttoned up his coat. "Glad I'm sure."

I turned to Bracegirdle who was gazing abstractedly over the unruffled waters of the creek.

"The whole thing beats me," he said, his voice flat and toneless. "No motive, no clue; no rhyme, no reason. I've gone into the history of the Baines family in view of Polly's disappearance. There's nothing that you might call suspicious or off-color about them. Poor hard-working people. Baines has been Mr. Alstone's gardener for years. Never had a cent or a secret in his life." He broke off and turned to one of his men. "Hey, Bill, pull up them stakes and bring the traps along, too."

The two heavy spring traps, still attached to the dead man's wrists, were pulled out and the body was loaded into the undertaker's car which had by this time arrived from Rhodes.

As yet Toni and I were the only people in the neighborhood to know of the latest tragedy. I must go and break the news to those most directly concerned.

Mark was working in the garden when I reached the Baines cottage. He listened to my story with stoical indifference, though his large, animal eyes never left my face while I was talking. When I had done, he turned again to his flowers.

"I'd been looking for something of this sort," he muttered, "and there's more to come."

That was the only remark I could get out of him. Whether he was moved or unmoved at the news of his father's violent death it would have been impossible to tell.

MY NEXT self-imposed task was to carry the news to Seymour Alstone. He was surprisingly decent about the whole business. The family certainly should not be turned out until suitable arrangements had been made. Baines' wages would be continued indefinitely.

On the way home, an incident occurred which seemed almost like a humorous anticlimax to my shocking discovery of earlier in the morning. I happened to pass Bill Strong, an old man who lived in a dilapidated cottage near the Mill Pool and who supported himself on about an acre of land and a little poultry. He was cranking up a Ford as I went by, and uttering a stream of language which would have done credit to Roberta or William Faulkner.

"Hello, Bill! What's up?"

Almost incoherent with rage, the old man pointed a withered finger to a dead gosling which lay on the front seat.

"Found that there thrown up on the back porch this morning," he spluttered. "Takin' her in to the sheriff, right now."

I murmured something foolish about a fox.

"Fox!" He spat disgustedly. "No fox killed that bird. You're a doc. Look at her yer-self."

I peered into the car and saw that the bird's neck had been twisted round and round until it looked like a limp corkscrew.

"A pair of human hands done it," went on the old man.

As he drove off like the wrath of heaven, I did a simple feat of mental arithmetic.

- (1) Polly Baines
- (2) Polly Baines' kitten
- (3) Roberta's marmoset
- (4) Jo Baines
- (5) Bill Strong's goose

Well, the corpora delicti in Grindle were certainly mounting up.

On my arrival home I was greeted by Lucinda who informed me in a stage whisper that Mrs. Middleton had just called to see me and was waiting in the living-room. I entered to find the trim little figure of Valerie's mother perched on Toni's stiffest ladder-back chair.

"You must pardon me, Dr. Swanson, for breaking in on you like this. But I have heard the most dreadful rumors. They tell me that Baines has been found dead—and that you discovered the corpse."

I related what had happened, omitting to mention the fact that murder was suspected. Throughout my speech she stood gazing at me in horror.

"How terrible! How really terrible! And one of the most reliable men in the village too." A malicious tone had crept into her usually mild voice. "But it's no wonder he should get killed that way. Trying to turn an honest penny by trapping muskrats just because Seymour paid him starvation wages! I think it is absolutely shameful!"

"I have just been talking to Mr. Alstone," I broke in hurriedly. "He is genuinely distressed and is being more than generous."

"Talk—more than generous!" Her little head was nodding violently. "Seymour is very glib with his tongue, but that poor widow will be out of her cottage and in the nearest gutter before Christmas. Mark my words, Dr. Swanson. Any man who can frighten his own son into divorcing his wife—! And he's done worse than that, if we only knew." She glanced at me darkly.

"You remember all those tales that were going round the village not so long ago, tales of people who had seen a car riding over the country in the middle of the night—a car that was dragging something behind it? You remember all that, Dr. Swanson? Seymour was the first to see that they were suppressed. And why do you suppose he was so eager to stop people talking if there wasn't something behind it?"

I made some noncommittal remark about the village gossip but Mrs. Middleton was far too excited to be put off.

"Ah, Dr. Swanson, you don't know Sey-

mour like I do—and you haven't talked to the people whom he's threatened into silence. There are dreadful things going on in this valley," she continued inconsequentially. "My father lived here all his life, and as a tiny girl, I remember him telling me there was an old saying: 'When the buzzards roost in Grindle Oak, Death comes to the valley'. I have never seen so many buzzards in my life as I have this fall."

She left on this sinister note, apparently satisfied with the impression she had made. Of course, her accusations against Seymour verged on the fantastic. But it was curious that my theory about Baines having been dragged behind a car should have been thus corroborated. One might have thought that she had come on purpose to do so.

TONI did not get back from the autopsy until two o'clock in the afternoon. Although accustomed to working on Sundays, he was absolutely all in and, refusing the enormous breakfast-lunch which Lucinda had prepared for him, went straight to bed. I did not see him again until about eleven o'clock that night when he routed me out of the living-room and expressed a desire for fresh air.

Obediently I followed him into the lane. It was a cold night. The clouds were heavy and the moonlight shone across the countryside in fitful jagged patches.

We had not gone very far before I broached the subject of the autopsy.

"It's a queer business, Doug. Baines was drowned all right. We made a microscopic examination of the particles in the air spaces and alveoli of the lungs. They were what you'd expect in anyone who'd been drowned in a muddy creek."

"When d'you think it happened?"

"Difficult to say exactly because the body had been in cold running water all night. We both agreed that he'd been dead for eight to ten hours when we saw him. Must have died between ten and twelve-thirty last night."

"Same old story. Almost anyone could have done it, eh?"

"But that's not all. The poor devil's body was just covered with abrasions. His clothes were almost in rags—"

"So he might have been dragged behind a car!"

"Looks that way." Toni's voice was deliberately flat and professional. "Whatever it was, he was alive when it happened. He was also alive when his two hands were fastened into those traps. Unconscious, perhaps, but alive. You could tell that from the bleeding and the state of the surrounding tissue."

"God! what a foul way to kill a person."

Despite my seven years of medicine, I believe I shuddered.

I remember thinking how silent it was, and, while the thought was in my mind, a sound broke the stillness. Toni gripped my arm and, as I followed his pointing finger, it seemed to me that a small, dark portion of the landscape had broken loose from its moorings and was moving slowly over the rising field toward the deserted road where the bloodhounds had lost the scent of Polly Baines. Silhouetted against the angry sky, I could see it was a car, jolting over the meadows and without lights. . . .

"Good God! Did you hear that?"

Toni's grip on my arm had tightened. Something in his tone made the hairs on the back of my neck move upward toward my hat.

"No, what was it?"

For a moment we stood and listened. The car was moving onward, slowly, relentlessly. Still, I could hear nothing but the faint throb of its engine. Then, it seemed, came another sound.

"There! Hear it?"

Toni turned and stared at me, his face gleaming white in the darkness.

"Doug! It was the cry of an animal in pain—and it came from the back of that car!"

I shall never be quite certain whether or not I heard that cry, but, as Toni spoke, something seemed to snap in my brain like a cut tendon. I rushed forward and scrambled through a hedge, regardless of scratches and bruises. Then I broke into a steady run, the hard wintry soil scrunching beneath my feet. It was but a short distance to the top of the rise where, at least, I would be able to see in which direction the car was headed. Almost, it seemed, as I tore on, I was on the threshold of a solution.

There were footsteps pounding at my side. Toni had followed me.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "If it's the fellow we think it is, he's pretty tough. Remember Baines."

I did not slacken my pace. The car had now disappeared over the receding edge of the field, but we were almost at the crest. In a minute we would be able to get a good view of the whole valley. I had, however, counted without the capricious moon, for as we stood panting on the top of the incline, she passed sullenly and impenetrably behind a dark bank of cloud. We listened intently, but there was no sound except the usual noises of the night.

We stood still a few moments listening to the sound of our beating hearts. Then, serene and silver, the moon emerged. But it was too late. The car—if car it really was—had vanished.

From our point of vantage, however, we

could still tell something about the movements of our neighbors. There was the Alstones' house in the distance with one light twinkling in an upper window; the Goschens' place bathed in darkness; a porch light only at the Tailford-Jones'; and a bathroom window at the Middleton's. These pinpricks of illumination stabbed the distant darkness. Only the Baines' cottage was bright. That was lit up like a casino.

I was about to remark on this to Toni when I noticed he had turned away and was staring through some bushes into the little wood where the dead body of Roberta's monkey had been found. He held up his hand in warning as I approached. With him I peered through the hedge.

On the edge of the disused road, parked and without lights, was a large, expensive-looking car.

I was in the act of pushing my way through to investigate when I heard something which made me pause. There was a woman inside that car and she was talking, eagerly, shrilly.

"No, I won't do it. . . ."

A MAN said something, but his tone was too low for us to catch. Again the woman spoke.

"He wouldn't stop at anything if I told him. He's jealous, vindictive. . . ."

In the moonlight I could see a grim smile twitching around the corners of Toni's mouth.

"You know what'll happen if you don't. . . . You're a jelly-fish, a goddam, spineless jelly-fish!"

Toni was laughing softly.

"Recognize the voice?" he whispered.

"Roberta?"

"Yes, our local Messalina!"

"She's mad at someone."

"Oh, just a lover's quarrel."

"Doesn't sound much like love."

"If you knew life and Roberta as well as I do, you'd realize that she never bawls 'em out until after she's through with them. Then she eats 'em alive—like the female spider."

The woman's voice was lifted once more.

"Of course he's crazy. That's what makes him so dangerous!"

Toni was pulling me away.

"I've had enough eavesdropping for tonight," he said gruffly. "The number of the car is RX819, so if you want to find out who the owner is, all you have to do is to keep your eyes open."

He seemed to be annoyed about something.

It was after one o'clock when we descended the hill and made our way homeward. It would have been reasonable to suppose that our adventures were over for the night, but just as we were scrambling on to the road, a car dashed past in the direction of the Baines cottage. We followed it round a bend

and saw Mark turning in to the broken shed which served him as a garage. Outside the cottage stood another car. The lights were on and I noticed at once that it was not the one we had just left.

"Midnight automobile show," I commented stupidly.

"I believe that's Thomson's car," Toni exclaimed.

"Must have been a rush call. If that baby's coming he'll probably need some help."

And help was exactly what our excellent colleague, Dr. Josiah Thomson, did need at that moment. In fact, I never saw a man so glad to see two human beings in all my life.

Quickly we sterilized our hands and borrowed clean aprons. I had not helped at a lying-in since my interne days and had almost forgotten what an intricate business it was. In the final stages I was appointed anesthetist while Thomson and Toni juggled perilously with life and death. If it had not been for Toni, Mrs. Baines would almost certainly have joined her husband.

At length the child was delivered, a shrivelled, premature creature which opened its eyes once, and for a brief moment, there was another cry in the night—weak and wailing.

But the thread of life had snapped even before we cut the umbilical cord.

At last we sent Mark down to the kitchen to make us some coffee while Thomson went off to 'phone for an ambulance. He wanted to get the mother to the hospital as quickly as possible.

Over the dark hills, the sun was peeping at Grindle Valley when we finally started homeward. A new day had begun already.

And already it had brought forth Seymour Alstone, the earliest riser in the neighborhood. He was driving round the estate on his morning tour of inspection. When he saw us, he drew up his car and we gave him the news of Mrs. Baines.

"Good thing," he snapped when he heard that the baby was dead. "One mouth less to feed. How's the mother?"

"Bad way," replied Toni grimly.

Seymour gave us a disapproving nod and started his engine. Then he seemed to think better of it, for he switched off the ignition.

"Probably doesn't mean anything," he said. "but I stopped by the kennels just now and found one of my dogs missing. Trainer—the best setter I've got. You haven't seen him about anywhere, I suppose?"

Toni and I looked at each other swiftly, then shook our heads in unison.

Mr. Alstone drove on. Toni was standing in the middle of the road, staring after the car in utter amazement. Then, clearly and distinctly, he exclaimed:

"I-just-simply-don't-believe it."

He became convulsed with almost hysterical mirth.

"Good God!" he gasped, "and she called him a spineless jelly-fish!"

I followed his shaking finger as it pointed after the fast disappearing automobile. Then I saw what it was that so amazed and amused him.

The number of Seymour Alstone's car was RX819.

CHAPTER V



I WISH I could pay sufficient tribute to Bracegirdle for the hours of work that he and his subordinates must have put in to find—precisely nothing. All I can say is that, in their efforts to discover Polly Baines, they literally did not leave a stone unturned in Grindle and they

followed every possible clue that might lead to the murderer of her father.

The crimes had been committed with all the apparent nonchalance of an unreasoning maniac. Yet, when Bracegirdle came to analyze the surrounding circumstances, he found himself up against an uncanny premeditation and cunning which argued a remarkably high level of intelligence on the part of the killer—and, incidentally, a profound knowledge of the habits of the neighborhood.

There were many who firmly believed that the Devil himself was at large. Strange portents were bruited about on all sides. An abnormal number of buzzards in the neighborhood argued more and more disaster.

These rumors had tangible effects on various people. All those who were in any way strange were regarded with odium and distrust. Poor Mark was discharged by all his employers excepting the Middletons and ourselves. Millie, in a moment of panic, fired her excellent Japanese waiter without notice and served such bad cocktails in consequence that the Goschens themselves came to be regarded as having sinister intentions toward their guests.

The shell-shock and other regrettable accidents which Edgar Tailford-Jones had suffered in the war, became exaggerated to psychotic proportions. God alone knows what was said about Toni and me, but nothing and no one was entirely free from suspicion.

On Wednesday I attended the inquest on Baines—a drab gloomy affair without a ray of light or humor to liven up the proceedings. What little evidence there was pointed

definitely toward murder, though it was admitted as possible that his death might have been the result of some hideous accident. For a man of sober habit, however, such a form of death would have been undoubtedly both difficult and improbable. The verdict was deferred pending further investigations.

Now that there were no longer any intriguing medical aspects to the case, Toni promptly lost interest and returned to his rats and guinea-pigs at Rhodes. I, too, showed admirable callousness and, in my free time, continued my riding, hunting and shooting as before.

Social activities increased in proportion to the general uneasiness, and everyone showed that gregariousness which, following upon calamity, is a sure sign of frayed nerves and disquieted minds. Hardly an evening passed when we did not pay or receive visits, but nothing of any real importance occurred until the Saturday evening following the death of Baines.

The disappearance of Polly had left me comparatively cold. My discovery of Baines' body was unpleasantly gruesome, but to a doctor it was all the day's work. The next outrage, however, was so utterly illogical that, even now, I feel a kind of frustrated rage and disgust when I think about it. But then, of course, it happened under my very nose, as it were. Besides Valerie was involved.

On Saturday night Toni and I were invited to the Middletons'. It was, Valerie announced, to be a non-Baines party similar to the non-stock-market parties so frequent in 1929, where any reference to recent calamities was frowned upon as a serious breach of etiquette.

Throughout dinner even Mrs. Middleton observed the rules with unexpected propriety. We all talked and acted like civilized people who had never had even a nodding acquaintance with battle, murder or sudden death. Sancho Panza, too, was on his best behavior and did not bark once until he had emptied his supper bowl and politely asked for someone to open the door so that he might answer the call of nature.

Soon afterwards the Goschens arrived and everyone forgot about Sancho Panza. Charlie had brought a quart of rye and we fixed highballs and started to get as raucous as was possible under the pessimistic eye of Mrs. Middleton.

It must have been about half an hour after their arrival that the first extraordinary incident occurred.

"Where's Sancho, Valerie?" Millie's eyes darted about the room. "Don't say that anything—" She broke off, remembering the rules of the evening.

There was a little lull in the conversation,

and the room seemed strangely still. It was just one of those moments which often occur in the most convivial gatherings when all animation is suspended for the moment as if everyone were watching and waiting for somebody else to speak.

Then, without warning, the quiet air of the Middleton's living-room was rent by a woman's shriek. We all looked at once toward Mrs. Middleton who was sitting by the fire, her face contorted into a strange expression of alarm and surprise. Her hand was pointing shakily toward the furthest window.

"God! did you see it?"

Even as she spoke, I saw it, too, though it had disappeared in a flash. A face pressed against the window pane; a face seemingly without features; an inhuman face in which nothing was recognizable except a fleeting impression of maniacal rage and hatred. . . .

MILLIE GOSCHEN had upset her drink and was staring at the window in open-mouthed horror. But I had no time to take in further details. Toni had snatched a flashlight from the mantelpiece and was striding across the room.

"I'll go," he exclaimed. "No, you stay here, Doug."

He slammed the door and was gone.

No one spoke while he was out of the room. Solemnly I went round and pulled all the shades whilst the practical Charlie poured everyone a stiff drink. I do not know how long Toni was gone, but before he returned I distinctly remember hearing a car start. It seemed as though he was away for an hour, but it was probably less than ten minutes.

At length he stood in the doorway blinking at the lights. His complexion, normally olive-brown, was grey. In his arms he held the body of a dog. At first no one would have dreamed that it was Sancho Panza, whose white, well-groomed coat had always been Valerie's pride and delight. This animal was ragged, limp and dirty. Across its belly there was an ugly brown stain which was darker than the other marks on its matted hair.

White to the lips, Valerie ran forward.

"It isn't—! Oh, my God!"

As she spoke I noticed something which Toni was evidently trying to conceal. Tied tightly around the dog's back was a piece of cord about a foot long. The end was frayed as though it had been hacked off with a blunt knife.

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes." Toni's eyes met Valerie's in a look of understanding and sympathy. "Let's take him out into the kitchen. Maybe Doug and I can do something. Put on a kettle quick. We'll need some hot water." The dog gave a little whine of pain and struggled in Toni's

arms. "Oh Charlie, you might go round to our place and get my emergency kit. It's a black bag and you'll find it in my bedroom. Here's the key."

Charlie was off like a bullet. Then, with admirable calm, Valérie led us into the back kitchen, got rags and hot water, and pulled out the enamel-topped table. It was only when she saw the piece of cord that she showed any symptoms of breaking down. Once again her eyes met Toni's.

"If anyone did this on purpose," she said slowly, "I think I shall kill him—myself."

"Don't worry, my dear. I'll do it for you." Toni patted her arm and smiled. "Now—go get yourself a good strong drink. It's going to be all right."

Sancho Panza was a sad spectacle. His hind leg was broken, and there were large patches of bare skin where the hair had been rubbed off in nasty abrasions.

He was quite conscious and obviously in great pain, for as we washed his wounds he kept whining and turning toward us reproachful brown eyes. There was not much we could do until Charlie got back.

"Was there anyone there?" I asked at length. "That face at the window . . . ?"

Toni shot me a swift look. "Only the dog," he said quietly. Somehow I felt that he was not speaking the truth.

"But I thought I heard the engine of an automobile while you were out."

Toni grunted.

"Well, it looks to me as though Sancho had been dragged behind a car—like Baines."

"If I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut—at any rate for the present—"

Toni broke off as Charlie Goschen came in with his bag, and we were now able to relieve the creature's pain by an injection of morphine. This enabled us to work with greater freedom though it took us nearly an hour to sterilize the wounds and set the leg in roughly constructed splints.

Just as we were tidying up, I became conscious of a curious sound which came in from the open windows. As if in sympathy with Sancho Panza, it seemed that all the dogs in the valley had started to bark. First of all came the deep-throated baying of the Grindle hounds; then Mr. Alstone's hunting dogs started; after a bit, we could hear the whining and barking of almost every dog in the neighborhood. The chorus swelled to open diapason; I went across and shut the window.

We had done all we could for Sancho. Toni gave his final instructions to Valerie when we rejoined the others in the living room.

"Keep him warm tonight and have the vet, in tomorrow. I think he'll live but—" he paused and smiled—"he may be a dot and carry one for a while."

Valerie's eyes looked their gratitude to us both.

The others were eager with their questions as to exactly what had happened to Toni when he left the room. Had he seen anyone? Had there been a car?

Toni replied curtly that he had found Sancho Panza lying by the side of the road, but it was too dark to see anything else. From his tone it was obvious that he did not wish to talk, and he was not the kind of person that anyone cared to question after he had made up his mind to silence.

"I think I'd better be getting home to see that the kids are all right," said Millie at length. "Those noises give me the creeps."

"Wonder what's biting 'em?" Charlie had gone to the front door.

As he opened it, the wailing of the dogs sounded wilder than before. Grindle Valley seemed to be in a state of tumult.

"A sign of death!" said Mrs. Middleton quietly.

Valerie had gone down into the cellar to make a bed near the furnace for Sancho Panza. No one spoke for a moment.

SUDDENLY Charlie came running back into the room. The expression on his face was a mixture of alarm and impish glee.

"Hey, folks, come quick. I believe Seymour's house is on fire. It's light enough to read by out there, and the glare comes from over his way."

Regardless of the night air, we all crowded to the front door. We knew immediately why the dogs had been barking, for the breezes brought the acrid smell of smoke to our nostrils, and there was a weird illumination in the sky. Millie, fearful for her own property, had run up a nearby incline which commanded a view of the valley, and, without bothering about hats or coats, we all followed her.

From our elevation we saw at once that it was not Seymour's house that was on fire, but a large barn standing some three hundred yards from the house itself. One end of it was well ablaze, and the flames leapt skyward in gorgeous spirals of color.

Charlie, who was rather stout, had not kept up with the rest of us. When he reached the top of the slope, I noticed that the expression on his face had changed to one of genuine concern.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's the barn, and Franklin told me today that his father had just put his two hunters in there while the stables were being repaired."

"Come on, let's go and see if we can help."

Toni shepherded all of us (with the exception of Mrs. Middleton) into cars, and, in a few minutes, we were tearing up Seymour Alstone's drive and round to the barn which

lay behind the house.

As we turned the corner by the gun-room, it was like passing from the wings of a theatre on to a brilliantly lit stage. The whole scene—even the sky—was blood red. Quite a number of villagers had collected, and their shadows fell like weird symbols across the strip of grass in front of us. Everyone was shouting, yet it was difficult to catch an intelligible word. The heat was considerable.

In the past I had never taken any particular notice of the barn, except as just another manifestation of Seymour's opulence. He had constructed it several years previously, when, defying the scriptural warning, he had pulled down the original erection to build greater. It was built on a foundation of brick with a superstructure of frame. Already most of the woodwork on the right hand side was well alight, and, every now and then, above the roaring of the flames and the shouts of the onlookers, I could hear a dull crash as the dislodged bricks and rafters tumbled to the ground below.

The Rhodes fire-brigade had not yet arrived. A long chain of people were valiantly passing buckets down from the house. Among them I recognized several familiar faces—one of Alstone's colored kitchen-maids, Hall, the thin, dignified butler, even old Bill Strong from the village. The whole neighborhood seemed to have turned out for the occasion, and were rallying around Seymour in his hour of trouble.

"The horses are still inside. Isn't it awful?" I turned at the sound of Millie's voice in my ear. "Old Seymour's hoping for a chance to get in and shoot them. He has got some decent feelings after all."

She pulled at my arm, and together we hurried across to where Alstone stood with a revolver in his hand. He did not take the slightest notice of our offers of help. I believe he did not even know we were there. Every now and then a servant would run up, and clearly, abruptly, he would give an order. There was something splendid about him. He reminded me of a general in absolute command.

His rugged features, somehow strengthened and hardened by the firelight, seemed to typify Authority. Yet there was another and softer expression on his face. For the first time, I realized that pity did have a place in his composition—pity which he had never shown to his own flesh and blood, but which sprang suddenly up in him now that his horses were in danger.

At that moment the wind must have veered, for suddenly Millie was completely blotted out from view, and I found myself half smothered in a cloud of pungent smoke. I spluttered and rubbed my eyes. Near by

I could hear Seymour shouting something, and then, as though in answer to his voice, came one of the most dreadful noises I have ever heard—agonized and almost human. It was the whinnying of the two frightened horses.

I hurried forward in Seymour's direction. Still unable to see an inch in front of me, I could hear voices in rapid conversation. One of them was Toni's.

"You've got to let me try and make it, sir. Don't you see, it's the only chance we have to save them?"

Seymour's reply came quiet and authoritative.

"I tell you the horses are not yet in any real danger. Their stalls are at the back and well protected. It would be madness to risk a human life in all this smoke and flame. Thank you, Dr. Conti, but I must forbid you to disobey me."

I heard no more, for at that moment the smoke cleared, swerving fanwise toward the creek. I blinked and stared around me. A few feet away, their faces vivid and strangely tense, stood Toni and Valerie. They were gazing at the barn, and Valerie had her hand on the tweed of his coat.

"No, Toni, you mustn't. Even Uncle Seymour says it's madness."

He pushed her hand away and made a move forward.

"Toni, you darned fool," I shouted, "those horses are beyond hope."

But I was wrong, for, honking furiously, an automobile had crashed over the grass and was grinding to a stop within a few crazy feet of the barn. Everyone crowded round obscuring my vision, but I had caught a glimpse of Peter Foote jumping out. He shouted something, apparently asking a question and before anyone could stop him, he was dashing toward the fire.

"Come back! Come back at once!" Seymour's voice boomed loud but somehow futile over the babel of cries that followed the boy.

PETER ran on. For some moments he stood at the door, fumbling with the catch. Then, wrenching the fastening loose, he swung it back and disappeared from sight. Behind him the smoke bellied out like a sail in a high breeze. With the smoke, too, came the sound of horses, louder now and wilder.

Silence fell on the crowd, and in the lull I heard a voice strangely weak and soft after the din to which my ears had grown accustomed.

"Dr. Swanson, Dr. Swanson. We must do something. Peter's gone in there. He's most likely burning to death." It was Gerald Alstone standing at my side, his cheeks deathly white. "Don't you realize? He's in there!

What shall we do?"

I noticed Seymour eyeing him angrily.

"The fool, the little fool," he was muttering.

One could not tell from the old man's voice whether he referred to Peter or to his grandson, who had completely given way and was sobbing hysterically against Valerie's shoulder.

Although it was only a matter of seconds since Peter had disappeared, the crowd was already beginning to get anxious. Even the fire-fighters had paused in their work and were staring eagerly at the barn, the buckets idle in their hands. At this point, however, a vague figure detached itself from the fringe of onlookers and slipped unostentatiously toward the gaping doorway.

"Did you see that?" I shouted to Millie, who had returned and was standing by my side. "Someone's gone in after him."

A few seconds later, everyone tautened, and the vague shouting dwindled to an excited murmur as the figure re-emerged, calm and unhurried. Behind him lumbered two larger forms—the horses. As though accustoming their blinded eyes to the change in illumination, they all three paused. Then they moved toward Seymour. The beasts seemed to have absolute confidence in the man who had saved them. They walked gently, their heads bent downwards, their tails swishing.

As the figure approached Alstone and thrust the halters into his hand, the whole crowd found its breath and shouted:

"Mark Baines!"

Before we had time to realize what had happened, however, Mark had dashed back into the barn. Meanwhile the horses, sensing the fact that he had left them, seemed to go crazy. They both reared and whinnied, doing their utmost to follow him back into the burning building. Seymour fought like mad to hold them down, and forgetting everything else, I rushed to his aid, clinging with him to the broken halters.

When next I was able to look at the barn, Mark was once more appearing through the smoke. This time he carried something thrown over his shoulder. I realized then how incredibly strong he must have been. The body of Peter Foote seemed to have no more weight than that of a baby.

Once more he came up to Seymour while the crowd surged round him, and then, dropping the body almost roughly at his feet, he disappeared before anyone had time even to applaud his heroism.

Toni and I pushed forward and began an examination of Peter. As we did so I heard Seymour ordering someone to lead away the horses and bring up a car.

The boy was unconscious. His hair was

pretty badly singed and his face was blackened with smoke. Otherwise he seemed to have received no damage from the actual fire. His left shin-bone, however, was fractured.

"One of the horses must have kicked him," I muttered. "He might have lain there forever if it hadn't been for Mark."

Throughout our examination, I could hear Gerald's heavy breathing close to my ear, and when we were done, he pleaded to be taken with Peter to the hospital.

By now the barn was hopelessly ablaze, but everyone seemed to have lost interest. Even Seymour was returning to the house muttering something about insurance. After Toni had gone off with Peter, I turned to Valerie and offered to drive her home.

"No, I'll be all right. Was Peter badly hurt?"

"Only a broken leg. I'm more worried about Mark."

"Let's go and find him together." In the glare from the burning barn her eyes were shining. "I think it was one of the bravest things I have ever seen."

"Good old Mark," I muttered as we started toward the Baines cottage. "Just like him to save the horses first!"

CHAPTER VI



"IT WILL soon be just a simple process of elimination," Bracegirdle was puffing at his pipe in my office at Rhodes a few days after the burning of Seymour's barn.

"You mean that if he goes on long enough you'll eventually get alibis for everyone else?"

The deputy nodded. "Yes. That's the way I'm working now. Just on the alibis."

"Then you're presuming that one person is responsible for everything?"

"I can't see any other way to figure it, Dr. Swanson. Of course, he's as crazy as a coot—and cunning as a fox—but even a crazy person can't be in two places at once."

Bracegirdle smiled and opened his notebook. "Now here," he began, "is a list of the possibles in Grindle Valley."

I noticed with amusement that Toni, Valerie and myself were down with the rest.

"As I told you before," he continued, "no one really had an alibi for the time Polly Baines disappeared because no one knows exactly when it happened. The same applies to Baines. He may have been killed while you were playing bridge at Mr. Alstone's, in which case we could rule out Miss Middle-

ton, Franklin, Seymour and yourself. But unfortunately, the medical evidence is not exact as to the time of death, and it may have happened after you left. Then your alibis are in most cases only supported by the statement of one other person."

"I see."

"As for Mrs. Tailford-Jones' marmoset and Bill Strong's goose, we're not going to get much from them except corroborative evidence. They prove, if we need any proof, that these murders are the work of a crazy person."

"And Mr. Alstone's setter?" I put in suddenly. "Still no news on that?"

Bracegirdle's face darkened. "I was going to keep that matter to myself. There's enough uneasiness in the valley already without adding to it. However, I might as well tell you. One of my men found it yesterday."

"Dead?"

"Yes, the same old way. Mr. Alstone has been informed. We can do no more." He cleared his throat and smiled wearily. "Now, with regard to Miss Middleton's dog; we can rule out Mrs. Middleton, Miss Valerie and yourself."

"And Dr. Conti and the Goschens, surely?"

"We'll, I'm not so sure. Mind you, I'm not suggesting anything, but if we're to do this thing right, we've got to note down every possibility. My understanding is that the dog was already outside at the time of the Goschens' arrival. And Dr. Conti went out alone to find it. He was gone for some time."

"Very pretty! But you've forgotten the high spot—the face at the window. We were all in the room when we saw that."

"No. I haven't forgotten the face at the window, but you can't depend on things like that. You see, any face, even your own mother's can look unrecognizable and horrible when it's pressed against a pane and seen from inside a lighted room. It might have been the murderer, but then again it might just have been one of the neighbors having a peek in."

"You're not taking any chances, are you, Bracegirdle?"

"Can't afford to. Now, when it comes to the barn, things get a bit easier. You see, we're almost certain that someone set fire to it because several large cans of kerosene were missing from Alstone's cellar. And we can also make a pretty good guess that it was done while you were all at the Middletons'."

"So that gives an alibi for the Goschens, the Middletons, Dr. Conti and me."

HE NODDED. "Yes, and also to young Gerald Alstone and his friend, Peter Foote. Their car broke down on the Lamp-

son road and it took over an hour to fix. I've seen the mechanic at the garage. That's why they arrived so late for the fire."

"How about the others?"

"Well, the old man was in the house, so he said. But it's hardly likely he'd fire his own barn, unless, of course, it was for the insurance. Franklin was working in his outside carpenter's shop, but no one saw him go in or come out. Mrs. Tailford-Jones was at home, so she says, and the Colonel had motored to Lampson. I can't check up yet on either of them, though I do know that Mrs. Tailford-Jones took the roadster out some time during the evening and she was seen to enter the Alstones' drive. But she didn't call at the house."

"I can't see Roberta spoiling her fine clothes with cans of kerosene."

"I can see that woman doing anything." Bracegirdle's honest blue eyes opened wider and then narrowed. "What do you make of her?"

"Oh, she's just a small time gold-digger who had the bad luck to select an—er—inadequate mate."

"Well, you have got some queer people living in Grindle. Take Franklin Alstone—"

"Oh, he's the victim of another mesalliance. He married a girl in a drug-store when he was quite a kid, and his father made him divorce her because there was insanity in her family. At least, that's the excuse Seymour made. She still lives in Lampson and her reputation's none too sweet."

"I don't want to sound insulting. Dr. Swanson, but from an ordinary citizen's viewpoint I'd say that you and Miss Middleton are about the only two people in the neighborhood you could describe as really sane and normal."

I laughed. "Come, Bracegirdle, it's not so bad as all that!"

"Well," he persisted, "would you, as a doctor, be willing to fake the stand and certify to the sanity of the others?"

"I'm not an alienist, but if I were, I certainly wouldn't describe any of them as homicidal lunatics."

"None the less, someone has committed a series of outrages. That someone is a living human being. All we can hope for is that eventually we shall get him by eliminating everyone else."

I smiled a trifle grimly. "If he goes on much longer there won't be any of us left to eliminate."

"That's where you hit the nail on the head, Dr. Swanson. There's real danger at present in Grindle—not only for the livestock and pets but for the inhabitants, too. I can't get Mr. Alstone to realize it. He pooh-poohs all my suggestions and tries to act as though nothing unusual has happened."

"You know, of course, that he's giving a big supper party on Saturday to be followed by his yearly coon-hunt?"

Bracegirdle remarked that he had not heard about it.

"Well, everyone's going, but we're all profoundly shocked—or pretend to be. It's an annual event and this year, I suppose, Seymour is particularly anxious to prove that he's in love and charitable with everyone—except the coons!"

I went home shortly after Bracegirdle had left. On my way I called into see Mark. He had been pretty badly burned on the right arm and thigh by a falling rafter, and there were other abrasions on his body which he seemed unwilling to explain. After terrifying threats of sepsis and gangrene, I had persuaded him to spend a few days in bed.

It was almost dark when I climbed up to his greenhouse bedroom. The invisible flowers greeted me with a great wave of scent. In the obscurity I could make out the vague form of a table piled high with bunches of grapes and unopened cartons of cigarettes. They were, I supposed, inadequate tributes to his heroism from the neighbors. But the hero himself was not there. The bed was empty and the long attic deserted. Feeling considerably irritated, I descended to the ground floor.

Just as I was threading my way through the cages of foxes, skunks and other vermin, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Mark was stepping across the threshold and, in his hand, he had something which I could just make out as a watering can.

"Well, Mark," I began in the stern voice of family physician, "what have you to say for yourself?"

He came up to me, his eyes seeming to gleam in the darkness like an owl's.

"I've been takin' it easy, Doc, like you told me."

"But you're not taking it easy now. You might get those burns infected if you don't take care."

"It's for them flowers," he said resentfully. "They've a right to live just as much as you or me."

He pushed past and began to swing himself up the ladder. I followed to the upper room.

"Well, Mark, you can get on with your watering when I'm through. I want to dress that arm."

Reluctantly, he put down the watering can and, pulling off his shirt, lay on the bed. I lit the three candles that stood on the table.

"I see everyone's been sending you presents," I began fatuously, as I produced bandages and lint. "If it hadn't been for you—"

He turned to me, the candlelight throwing queer shadows across his face.

"Them were beautiful horses, Dr. Swan-

son. I didn't know they were in that barn. Some days I used to feed 'em when the stableman was away."

"I saw Peter Foote at the hospital today," I remarked. "He'll be in bed for at least two weeks. He asked me to tell you how grateful he was."

MARK did not reply. I must have been hurting him more than I thought, for just then I caught a glimpse of his face. It was contorted with pain, and, try as I would, I could not get another word from him.

When I left, he was sprinkling water over his beloved flowers.

On the following day, the weather, which had been exceptionally warm, began to show signs of breaking up. By Saturday, the night for which the coon-hunt had been scheduled, there was a definite hint of snow in the air.

I had been kept later than Toni at the hospital and by the time I got home he was dressed in breeches and leather jacket, and ready for the fray. He was pale and moody, as he had been ever since the accident to Valerie's dog. He seemed to have taken it very hard. Even now that Sancho was well on the way to recovery, my room-mate persisted in his refusal to discuss the matter.

He looked at me a moment as though he were about to say something. Then he turned away.

"You'll be late if you don't hurry up and get ready. I'm taking Valerie in my car."

I was apparently, the last to arrive at the Alstones'. Practically all the automobiles in the neighborhood were drawn up outside the front door. I had to go right round the house and down a little side-drive that ran behind the stable before I could find room to park. Even here, there was another car standing close up against the stable wall. I backed in and, as I switched off the ignition and stepped out, I noticed idly that it was Toni's. He and Valerie must have taken their time driving up from the Middletons'.

It was a most pretentious party. Old Alstone had spread himself. The enormous reception room was a blaze of lights, and there seemed to be servants everywhere handing round exotic dishes.

Franklin was scurrying about, looking rather apologetic and pressing people to glasses of lemon and orangeade. Roberta, noble but a trifle overstuffed in a new pair of riding breeches, was making hay with a group of young men whom I recognized as medical students from Gerald's class at the university. Seymour, of course, was much in evidence. He strolled around the room being polite, yet preserving his usual harsh aloofness.

I saw him bearing down on me, and, feeling incapable of coping with him on an empty

stomach, I hurried to the buffet in search of refreshment and Valerie. On my way I bumped into Edgar Tailford-Jones who was taking little rabbit bites at a sandwich and throwing glances at his wife. He started to say something, but at that moment I spotted Valerie and, smiling vaguely, left him once more alone with his thoughts and his sandwich.

"Hello, Doug, do have one of these squabs!"

Valerie was smiling at me and holding out a plate.

"What an orgy!" I remarked.

"Yes, I'm making an absolute pig of myself."

"Where's Toni?"

She looked up at me, her blue eyes serious.

"I don't know. I've hardly seen him since we got here. I don't think he's well."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Gone on a hunger strike. I did a real Circe act tempting him, but he just shrugged his shoulders and walked away."

I was about to reply when the Goschens came up, Millie ravenous and full of scandal, Charlie red-faced and racy.

Ever since my arrival I had been unable to locate Toni. Now, as I strolled to the door with Valerie and the Goschens, I caught a glimpse of him slipping out in front of us among a crowd of medical students. I flashed a look at Valerie, and for a moment her eyes met mine, worried and questioning.

It was very cold outside. Most of the women had put on gloves and extra sweaters. Even I found my leather coat none too warm. We were all gathered around Alstone on the strip of grass that led down to the barn. I thought it rather an unfortunate spot to have chosen because all the time that Seymour delivered his little speech of instructions and handed out the flashlights and guns, the broken silhouette of the building reared up behind us as a kind of memorial to past horrors and a warning of unpleasant possibilities in the future.

"... If anyone loses the way and is unable to catch up with the others, the house is open, and he may keep himself comfortable there until our return."

Valerie, the Goschens and I kept together in front as the party moved down the slope and out into the open country. It was a dark night and the air was gravid with unfallen snow. We could see practically nothing beyond the bright circles of light made by our pocket torches. From somewhere in front of us came the grunting and panting of the coon dogs which Seymour had hired for the occasion. Millie switched her torch on to them, and for a moment their chestnut coats gleamed vividly.

"Beauties!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it all thrilling? Murders or no murders, I'm going to enjoy myself tonight."

NOTHING particularly exciting happened for the first hour. Coon-hunting can be a slow business. We roamed around the countryside for miles, crossing hedges, creeks and strips of woodland.

In one of the small woods we got divided from the main party. We could still hear their voices, but I was in no hurry to catch up. It was not often that I had a chance to be alone with Valerie.

"I'm worried about Toni," she was saying. "I'm sure he's not on the hunt. Don't you think we should go back and look for him?" Her hand on my sleeve was trembling. "Something may have happened."

I was just about to reassure her, when I heard a faint noise ahead of us. Now there had been noises ahead of us all the evening, but this particular sound was different. It was soft and stealthy as though whatever had made it did not want to be heard.

Instinctively I pulled Valerie toward me.

"What is it?" she whispered.

My torch had become entangled with my tobacco pouch and I had difficulty in extricating it. We listened, and once again came the sound, this time a little nearer. I found myself wishing stupidly that I had accepted Seymour's offer of a gun. At last the torch slipped into my fingers.

"Who's that?" I shouted, sending a circle of light into the darkness.

I had directed the beam with unconscious accuracy. There, pressed against a tree, stood a man. I moved the torch higher, illuminating the face. It was Mark Baines. In the flickering light he looked hardly human. His eyes had the wide, expressionless stare of an animal caught in a trap. He reminded me fantastically of a picture of the martyred Saint Sebastian I had once seen in some gallery or other.

"Mark!" I exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

He did not answer, but a puzzled, reproachful look came into his eyes. I could guess how he felt about the hunt. The very idea of an animal in pain made him physically ill. Some blind instinct, I supposed, had moved him to follow the hounds, hoping in his strange way to warn or protect the creatures of the wood.

I am no sentimentalist, but at that moment I felt rather ashamed of myself and humanity for having such bad taste in our selection of pleasures. Here we were, several dozen adults, devoting an entire evening to dashing about the countryside in search of an animal to kill. The only factor that might have redeemed us in the eyes of Mark and the Almighty was that coons were hard to find. Nine times out of ten our gala hunt deteriorated into a harmless cross-country hike.

For a few seconds the three of us stood in silence.

"You'd better be clearing off home, Mark," I said at length.

To my surprise he obeyed immediately, slipping away between the trees as noiselessly as a fox.

And then, as I turned to Valerie, the dogs started to yelp. For anyone with a trace of hunting blood in his veins, this is one of the most exhilarating sounds in the world. My whole body began to tingle in a ridiculous fashion. I completely forgot my scruples of a moment before and, pulling Valerie after me, ran forward, crying:

"Come on. They've found the scent."

We broke out of the wood and dashed toward the glowing spots of light ahead. Around us, the crisp air rang with shouts. I heard Charlie's voice, and then Roberta's more than usually throaty. We were all running forward, helter-skelter, heedless of brambles, stones and cart-ruts.

In the chase, I had completely lost Valerie.

[Turn page]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of

pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Ado.)

"Where are we?" Even Gerald, who was notoriously indifferent to the sports of the countryside, was excited. I heard him breathing heavily as I passed him.

"Down at Lynch Bottom, not far from Grindle Meadow."

It was Millie's voice that answered, and then, out of pure *joie de vivre*, she let out a loud yodel.

"Come on, Doug, my boy, for the first time in thirty generations, the Alstone hunt has scented a coon. We're making history!"

She grabbed my hand, and together we sped on across the coarse stubble.

The hounds, which were some distance ahead of the main party, were yelping almost continuously as they made up the hill toward Grindle Meadow. I had no idea of what had become of Valerie and, for the moment, I did not care.

Still holding hands, Millie and I leaped a ditch.

"I may be the mother of five," she was panting, "but I still can run. How I'd love to see Roberta now. I bet you a hundred to one those breeches have split."

I shall never quite know how we reached Grindle Meadow, but I remember vaulting the last gate, with Millie still valiantly at my side. In front of us we could just make out Grindle Oak—a remarkable tree which was famous not only from the botanical viewpoint but also as the nucleus of a hundred years of village gossip. It loomed dim and sinister against the snow-laden sky. The dogs must have stopped at its foot. They were yowling fit to wake the dead.

"It's treed!" I cried as we ran on. "Treed in Grindle Oak!"

EXCEPT for the leader of the hounds we were the first to arrive. The dogs had been let off their leashes and were leaping wildly against the trunk. Behind us we could hear shouts and the thud of running feet as the rest of the party hurried up. I switched my torch through the foliage, hoping to catch a glimpse of our quarry. My luck was in. For a moment, two round holes of light pricked the darkness. It was as though my flash-lamp were being doubly reflected in some hidden mirror.

"Look, Millie!" I exclaimed. "See its eyes?"

The lights quivered and then flashed away as the coon climbed higher into the tree.

"Poor little devil!" Millie was murmuring. "If only it had the sense to keep its eyes shut we could never see to shoot."

By this time the whole party had assembled and Seymour was efficiently forming us into a circle, spacing the men with guns at regular intervals round the tree. I noticed that Edgar Tailford-Jones had a gun. He

stood at my side, looking like a little tin soldier. Further down the line I could make out the burly figure of Charlie Goschen. He, too, was gripping a rifle.

"All torches on the tree, please."

At Seymour's command Grindle Oak suddenly sprang into illumination. We watched it, breathless, and every now and then two answering lights glinted at us through the branches.

"Guns ready!" Seymour sounded like a sergeant drilling raw recruits.

There was a rustle, then silence except for the whimpering of the dogs.

"Now, Mr. Goschen, will you please shoot? Fire between the eyes."

So childish is one at these moments that I felt my heart thumping like a schoolboy's. From my right came a spurt of light and a loud report.

There was the sound of splintering wood, and a branch started to fall, showering leaves and twigs before it. Then, higher up the tree, the coon's eyes gleamed out at us.

"Again, Mr. Goschen, please."

Once more a shot rang out. The bough landed at the foot of the tree with a thud. Otherwise there was silence.

As we all bent our necks backward, we caught a glimpse of the coon. It was clinging on to an outer branch, staring down at us and looking absurdly like a small animated fur-coat.

"Isn't he cute?" cried Millie. "And to think I came here to kill him!"

As she spoke, Alstone ordered a volley, and about ten guns fired simultaneously. This time there was a faint crackling high up in the tree which swiftly grew in volume. Something was tumbling down.

"Here she comes," cried Franklin.

The dogs tautened, ready to receive the fierce attack which the animal would inevitably make on them, if it were still alive. A shower of leaves and broken twigs pattered down like rain. Occasionally our torches picked out the body on its slow, erratic descent through the branches.

"Gosh, it's a big one," cried Millie.

A buzz of excitement swept round the circle of watchers, as all torches lowered to the bole of the tree. Then, crashing to the patch of lighted ground, fell a dark form.

"Stand back there," shouted Seymour. "It's dangerous."

The dogs sprang forward, yelping madly. Then, an utterly unexpected thing happened. Their yelping turned into a low whine. They took one sniff at the little mound under the tree and cringed away, their tails between their legs.

We all pressed forward, only to stop dead at the sound of a woman's shriek—harsh and almost insane.

It was Roberta, and she was screaming:
"Polly Baines!"

For a few seconds I thought her hysterical. I thought that the concentrated nervous strain of the evening had merely found its outlet in her. But as I pushed my way to the front of the crowd, I saw that she was right.

It was not a dead racoon that lay there under the tree—but the corpse of a little girl.

CHAPTER VII



EVERYONE lurched forward. In the queer light I could see the ghoulissh curiosity scrawled across their faces in an ugly mask. The medical students from Rhodes were the worst offenders. Their eagerness was positively indecent.

Like a tiger, old Alstone had sprung across the strip of earth that separated him from the body.

"Gentlemen," he roared, "stand back! Remember, please, that this will be a matter for the police. Is Dr. Conti here?"

I could feel rather than see the peering faces of the crowd. Valerie's hand was on my arm, and through the leather of my jacket I could feel her face warm against my shoulder.

"He isn't here, sir," I volunteered.

"All right. Dr. Swanson, you step up, please. Gerald, run to the house at once and telephone Bracegirdle. Give him the directions and tell him to come here immediately."

The boy scampered off like a startled rabbit.

"And Franklin—" the old man was now firing out his orders with military precision—"take our guests home. See they have everything they need. No, thank you. I want no one here but Dr. Swanson. Yes—all of you, please."

There was something about his tone which made every one obey without question. As I stood by his side in the darkness I could see the outlines of their figures as they moved away from Grindle Oak, instinctively keeping close together as though their very nearness lent them security from some imagined danger. Seymour and I were left alone with this gruesome bundle at our feet. For the first time I noticed it was snowing quite heavily.

As soon as the others were out of sight, Seymour turned his flashlight on to the remains of Polly Baines. I stared down, fascinated. The child had been wrapped round and round with rope until she looked like a mummy. It was not pleasant to approach

too near, but I could see from her face and the torn shreds of her clothing that the buzzards had been at work. I thought of Mrs. Middleton's prophetic words: "When buzzards roost in Grindle Oak, Death comes to the valley." There had been reason enough for their roosting.

Seymour Alstone was standing with his back against the tree, gazing out at the swirling snow-flakes. It would have been hard to analyze the expression on his face which never changed save when I lit a cigarette and a frown of deep annoyance puckered his brow.

It was a strange vigil waiting there with that silent man and corpse. Any examination of the body was, of course, out of the question. There was nothing I could do—nothing but occasionally to wipe the snow from the little mound at my feet. I lit cigarette after cigarette burning away the moments until at last I heard Bracegirdle's familiar voice calling my name.

"Thought I'd never find you," he said, shaking the snow from his shoulders. "Mr. Goschen's directions weren't any too plain over the phone."

I remember being distinctly surprised that Charlie rather than Gerald Alstone had told Bracegirdle of the discovery, but my mind was far too occupied with the present calamity to worry about what, at that time, seemed so trivial an incident.

With the arrival of the police, Seymour had become efficiency itself. He told the whole story of what had occurred, and in the rasping quality of his voice I could detect unspoken censure of Bracegirdle's failure to have instigated a more thorough search.

After listening to the main facts, the deputy interrupted him a trifle impatiently.

"I suppose you're prepared to identify the corpse, Dr. Swanson?"

He bent over the body, upon which the coroner, grumbling at the unsatisfactory weather conditions, was conducting a cursory inspection.

"Yes, that's Polly Baines, all right."

"And you're sure it did fall from the tree?"

"No question about it. You could get thirty witnesses to prove that."

"Have you any opinion as to how long she's been dead, Dr. Swanson?" asked the coroner.

"No, doctor."

All this time Bracegirdle was quietly instructing his men. Some shone torches up into the boughs and scoured the ground beneath it. Others, with the aid of a magnesium flare, were attempting a photograph despite the thickly falling snow. I found myself admiring the deputy immensely. There was a certainty about him, a basic common sense, which took all the fairy-tale horror out of

the evening's events. Here we were at midnight in a snowstorm with the mutilated corpse of a child at our feet; yet Bracegirdle simplified it down to a mere matter of daily routine.

"Well, Doctor, there's nothing much we can do tonight." I noticed to my amusement that the deputy was utterly ignoring the existence of old Alstone, who stood restlessly at his side.

HE SIGNALLED two of his men, who very carefully lifted the small corpse and carried it over to the waiting cars.

"If Dr. Conti's around," remarked the coroner, "I'm sure Dr. Brooks would be glad to have him help with the autopsy."

"He isn't here," I answered, "but if I see him I'll give him your message."

The car trundled slowly off over the whitened ground. I watched the lights gradually dwindling into the darkness.

Seymour had always been a mystery to me. Now he seemed even more puzzling than ever. I had never swallowed wholesale the local opinion of him as a dyspeptic nouveau riche with a Napoleon-complex. He had, if prejudiced reports spoke true, indulged in the sort of business career which is not recommended by the Sunday-school pamphlets.

And, of course, there was the incident of the parked car which Toni and I had seen on the night the setter had disappeared. There was the problem of Roberta's angry, broken sentences. What did it all mean? Should I have told Bracegirdle what I had heard? These questions were tumbling about in my mind as together we turned into the Alstone's drive.

But none of them was fated to be answered just then. At the front porch Seymour bade me a curt goodnight and hurried in alone. It was extremely dark down the side path where I had left my car. I stumbled along through the slippery snow, cursing myself for not having switched on the lights before going up to the party.

At last I bumped against a mudguard, and fumbling around the side of the car, slipped my fingers over the door handle.

As I did so, a voice whispered:

"Who is it?"

"Valerie!"

"Oh, it's you, Doug. How you scared me. I couldn't hear you coming in the snow."

I opened the door and squatted down at her side.

"Whatever are you doing here?" I asked.

"Waiting for Toni. This is his car, isn't it?"

Her voice was strained, and I felt she was eager to keep the conversation on banalities. "I never can tell yours from his in the dark. They're both Plymouths, only yours is red

and his is black. Or is it the other way round?"

"I'm afraid it's not only our cars you muddle up, Valerie," I said, laughing. "Sometimes I believe you think of me as just a part of Toni. Addendum—one pleasant, dull room-mate. I'd love to feel I had some sort of individuality to you."

"Don't be an idiot, Doug." Her hand searched for mine and squeezed it. "You have, you know you have. I put you in the category of Major Perquisites—one bachelor, a little above the average height, attractive grey eyes, sweet smile, nice to mother, reliable. . . ."

"That sounds like a butler advertising for 'position in lady's family'."

"And that, Doug," she said softly, "sounds rather like a proposal. You never have, you know."

It was good to be sitting there alone with her, pretending that the horrors of the past few hours had no meaning. In the midst of death, I thought, evolving my first epigram, we are in life. Valerie was young and warm and close to me. And, although for months I had been steadfastly refusing to admit it, I was in love with her. What I might have said in that mood of heightened emotions I shall never know, for suddenly she brought me back to earth and the realities of the moment.

"Doug, what do you suppose has happened to him?" Her hand had slipped from mine, and I noticed the match quiver as she lit a cigarette.

"Toni?"

"He wasn't—er—with the others, was he?"

I PATTED her shoulder comfortingly.

"Don't worry, my dear, he's most likely having a conference with your uncle."

"No, he's not. I waited till all the guests had gone. Then I—couldn't bear it any longer, so I came out here." The burning tip of her cigarette swooped downward as she knocked the ash on the floor. "I suppose it's all over now—I mean the police and everything?"

"Yes, Bracegirdle came. It was Polly, of course. Listen, my dear, you're tired. We'll give Toni two minutes and, if he doesn't show up, I'll drive you home. It's no good hanging around."

"Doug, you're a darling."

"And when you think of taking on a butler, mind I have first refusal."

She laughed. "You're hired right now. Open that window, please, and throw out my cigarette."

I obeyed her, and for the next few minutes, we sat without speaking. I was just suggesting removing to my car, when the door at my side swung open.

Valerie started. "Toni, is that you?"

"Sorry I'm late." My room-mate's voice was curiously strained and low. "Who on earth—oh, hello, Doug."

"And what have you been up to?" I asked as I scrambled out.

"Just mucking around," he answered evasively. "You'd better go on first, I can't start till your car's out of the way."

"Okay. Goodnight, Valerie."

I scrunched through the snow to the other Plymouth and switched on the lights. The engine was pretty cold and it took me several minutes before I finally got started. As I slithered off down the drive, I glanced into the side mirror. Toni was backing away from the wall, his headlights spreading a wide semi-circle across the white ground.

On arriving home I had a good bit of trouble getting into the garage. At the best of times it is a tricky business. One has to swerve in at a particular angle and then back. That night, in the driving snow, it took me several minutes before I finally snapped off the ignition and, leaving one garage door open for Toni, closed the other with a bang.

CHAPTER VIII



WHEN I woke next morning the snow was still falling and the whole countryside was blanketed with white. I looked into Toni's room as I went downstairs to breakfast and saw that his bed had not been slept in.

Hardly had I started on my bacon and eggs when Bracegirdle was announced. After being up all night he had been working with his men in Grindle Meadow since daylight. He accepted my offer of breakfast with alacrity.

"Any clues?" I asked, as Lucinda started to fry his eggs.

"I can't tell you much until the autopsy report comes in, but we've found another body."

"Good God!" Immediately my mind flew to Toni's empty bed, but the twinkle in Bracegirdle's eye reassured me.

"Only Polly Baines' kitten, Dr. Swanson." Or rather all that the buzzards left of it. One of the men climbed that old oak tree and found it caught in the branches."

"Well, what do you make of it all?" I glanced at Bracegirdle who was buttering a slice of toast and sniffing appreciatively at the coffee. "Fastened up there, I suppose?"

"Yes. The child was bound, and then someone must have climbed the tree, thrown the rope over one of the top branches and

hoisted her up—and the kitten, too. The rope had been twisted and tied fast. They might have stayed there till the Last Trumpet if the bullets from your guns last night hadn't just happened to shoot through the rope."

"Still, it's a pretty good place to hide a body—at the top of the only thick, well-branched tree in the neighborhood. Sanitary, too, when you come to think of it."

I had become so accustomed to the idea that Polly Baines was dead that it was impossible for me to get tragic about it now. A note of tragedy, however, was injected into the proceedings a few minutes later when Toni came in, having spent the night at Rhodes helping Dr. Brooks with the autopsy. He, also, had had no breakfast, so Lucinda was dispatched to prepare a third meal.

While he was waiting, Toni lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"This goddam criminal of yours, Bracegirdle, is the most monotonous, the most unoriginal example of a monomania—"

"You mean . . . ?"

"Yes. I mean exactly that. God knows, I've opened a thousand cadavers in my life, but this one was the most complicated business I've ever seen. What with natural decomposition and the fowls of the air—"

"But how was she killed?" I interrupted quickly.

Toni threw away his cigarette and sat down to the breakfast table.

"She died of exposure, loss of blood and, well—general rough treatment. There were five bullets in her, but I'm ready to swear that they came from old Alstone's guns. Apart from that, we could find no lethal wound. In fact, it's my guess that she was alive when someone trussed her up and hoisted her into that tree. Of course, I wouldn't care to be quoted."

Bracegirdle rose from the table, pushing aside, only half-eaten, his plate of eggs and bacon.

"By the way, Bracegirdle, just as I was leaving, one of your men brought in the remains of that kitten. The person who killed it must have liked animals better than children, because there was a neat little hole in its skull which Dr. Brooks said was probably caused by a bullet from a small revolver. Of course I'm no ballistic expert, but it wasn't made by any of Seymour Alstone's guns last night."

The deputy seemed pleased. "Well, that's something to go on anyway."

"Doubt whether it'll help much," said Toni. "He's had almost a month to get rid of it."

After Bracegirdle had left, Toni's mood changed. I asked a few more questions about the autopsy, but his answers were curt and,

while he spoke, he kept staring at me, half-curious, half-amused. Somehow I had the impression that he suspected me of knowing something which I was keeping to myself. But, if that was the case, he was too tired to try and pump me. After the third egg he announced his intention of going to bed and duly disappeared upstairs.

Left to myself I felt restless and uneasy. I had been unable to work on my article for some time now, and the snow made riding out of the question. In desperation, I decided to stroll round to Goschens'. Millie was always a good pick-me-up, and perhaps I should find Valerie there, too.

COMPLETE with arctics and muffler I started off down the drive. I had not gone very far when I saw a car bearing down upon me. Considering the snow, it was going at an unusual speed. I stepped into a drift to let it pass. As I did so, it drew up and old Alstone's head emerged from the window. He called and beckoned imperiously.

"Do you know where I can find the sheriff's deputy?" His voice seemed to lack its usual complacency.

"I expect they're all down in Grindle Meadow, sir," I said. "Is anything wrong?"

"Yes," he replied tersely. "I must see Bracegirdle immediately." He started fingering the brake-lever and then seemed to change his mind. "Care to come along?"

Assenting with enthusiasm, I jumped in at his side. To my surprise I noticed that his hand was shaking as he snapped the car into gear. His face, too, wore an expression I had never seen before. Until that moment he had been the only person in the valley to preserve a completely detached attitude toward the series of crimes that had taken place among us.

He offered no explanation of his peculiar behavior, and I knew him too well to venture a question, yet, as the car turned up toward Grindle Meadow, my mind was full of confused speculations. Had some new atrocity been committed since last night? Had some member of the Alstone family been the latest victim? Or had Seymour discovered some part of a solution—something which shocked and frightened him?

The deputy seemed surprised to see me again after so short a time. He looked even more surprised when he noticed Seymour's pale, curiously altered face.

"You want me, sir?"

"I do." Alstone stared balefully at the oak tree. "My grandson is missing."

Both Bracegirdle and myself were completely taken aback. I stopped dead, gazing at him in frank amazement.

"You mean Gerald's disappeared?"

"I think it is worse than that. I think he

has been killed."

"Killed!"

"One of the maids discovered this morning that his bed had not been slept in. The butler discovered also that the gun-room was in a state of extreme confusion—chairs and tables upset, guns out of place, and all over the floor there was blood."

"There was nobody, sir?"

"No. No sign of Gerald—no sign at all."

"When was he last seen?"

The old man lowered his eyes. "That I cannot tell you. The butler saw him for a moment after the hunt. I personally set eyes on him for the last time when I sent him back here to telephone you. I have yet to ask my guests whether—"

"Is there a 'phone in the gun-room?" I broke in suddenly.

"Yes. There are instruments in all the downstairs rooms."

I turned excitedly to Bracegirdle. "It was Charlie Goschen who called you about the discovery of Polly Baines, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I checked up on it. He didn't see Gerald around, so he rang me to make sure." The deputy looked up from his note-book. "You think someone might have seen Gerald going into the gun-room to 'phone and—stopped him? Someone, perhaps, who wanted to prevent him from getting in touch with the authorities?"

"Exactly."

"Was anything missing, Mr. Alstone?"

"Yes. A revolver."

"And you left everything untouched?"

"Naturally. Nothing has been removed. I had the room locked immediately after I made my examination. No one but myself and the butler who first discovered it has been allowed to enter."

"Good work, Mr. Alstone. We'll be right round. You go ahead!"

Within a very few minutes, Bracegirdle and his men had joined Seymour and me in Alstone's house. The old man unlocked the door to the gun-room and I noticed at once that its appearance bore striking testimony to the truth of his earlier report. Everything was in a state of wild disorder and there were splashes of dried blood all over the floor.

"The revolver is missing from here." Seymour pointed to an empty space in one of the upper racks. "I happened to notice that it was there last night when I came in to get the guns for the party."

"Did anyone come in here after the hunt?"

"No. I'm afraid the butler was a trifle negligent. It is one of his duties to inspect every room before retiring for the night. Yesterday, however, in all the excitement, he omitted to do so."

"No one put the guns back, then?"

"No. They are being cleaned, but—I've had one of my men count them and they're all there."

"Hm." Bracegirdle was staring at the floor and tracing out the path of blood stains. Suddenly he started eagerly forward. "Look!" he exclaimed. "He went through this door—or, at least, somebody did. There's blood on the handle."

THE deputy got out his handkerchief and carefully opened the door.

"Don't touch anything," he cautioned. "This may be a case when finger-prints will help. Scott, call Bill Murphy on the 'phone and tell him to bring his kit out to the Alstones' house. Make it snappy."

The side entrance to the gun-room led out on to a covered porch from which there were steps leading toward the back of the building. As we hurried out I noticed at once that the trail of blood continued over the floor of the porch to the top of the steps. There it became obscured by the thick fall of snow.

"Darn this snow," muttered Bracegirdle. "I wonder—" He turned to Seymour. "His car isn't missing, I suppose?"

"Nothing is missing. I have already made investigations—and reported all I know. I have also sent my son Franklin, over to see young Foote at the hospital. It occurred to me that the boy might be there. But I think it unlikely. Besides, it would have been impossible for him to get there."

"I should like to speak to the servants, please."

Seymour nodded and turned toward the gun-room.

"No, not in there, Mr. Alstone. I want that room locked, if you don't mind." There was a note in Bracegirdle's voice which made me suspect that he secretly enjoyed issuing orders to the tyrant of the valley.

We passed into the living-room, and the servants were summoned one by one. Their stories were remarkably consistent. Dr. Conti had stayed behind for a while after the others had left for the coon hunt. At some period of the evening he had gone out and no one had seen him return, though one of the house-maids thought she had heard a voice that sounded like his later on in the evening. Her evidence, however, was not conclusive since, on being questioned, she admitted that she really could not have recognized Toni's voice if she had heard it.

Hall, the butler, was the only one who made any real contribution. He had opened the door to Mister Gerald at about eleven o'clock—some ten minutes before the other guests returned. The young gentleman had been out of breath and very agitated. He had said nothing to Hall about the finding of Polly Baines' body.

"Did he go to the telephone?" queried Bracegirdle.

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know. I thought I heard his voice as I was going back to the servant's quarters, but I couldn't say whether he was telephoning or not."

"You didn't hear anything else—no fight or quarrel?"

"No, sir."

"And you didn't see anyone hanging around?"

"Wel-l." Hall hesitated a moment. "A little while before Mister Gerald came back, it so happened I looked out because Angy—that is one of the girls, sir—said it had started to snow. I caught a glimpse of a man outside the back door and I called out to him. He said, 'It's only me' and then went around behind the barn."

"You recognized the voice?"

"Yes, sir. It was—Mark Baines."

Bracegirdle shot me a swift glance. "Did you by any chance hear a shot or any noise that was out of the ordinary?"

"No, I didn't—at least, not then, sir. A little later on, after the party got back, I thought I heard one, but I didn't pay much attention, as it seemed to come from outside and at this time of year—what with the cold weather and cars back-firing—"

"Might it have come from the gun-room?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say, sir. I was in the kitchen which is a considerable distance from that part of the house."

"You couldn't say who was in the house when you heard the shot?"

Hall explained that Mr. Alstone had given orders for the door to be left open as soon as the guests began to come back, so he had admitted no one excepting Mr. Gerald. From the noise they were making, he judged that most of them had returned at the time of the shot. He had heard Mrs. Goschen's voice, but could not recognize anyone else's.

"Did anyone stay on after the others had gone?"

Hall thought a moment before replying. "Yes, sir. I remember going in to the reception room to clear away the glasses. Miss Valerie was there alone. She asked me whether I had seen Dr. Conti and, as I couldn't help her, she said she was going home."

"How long was that after the guests had left?"

"About half an hour, sir."

"You saw neither Miss Middleton nor Dr. Conti again?"

"No, sir."

The butler had no sooner been dismissed than he came back into the room coughing apologetically.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bracegirdle, but there's a young person at the back door who wants

to speak to you. Says it's urgent, sir."

The deputy glanced questioningly at Mr. Alstone.

"Who is it, man? Don't stand there trying to make mysteries." Seymour's voice was thick with irritation.

"One of the Baines children, sir. Young Tommy. He says his mother—"

"Show him in."

Tommy Baines, a lad of ten, looked dazed with fear as he was led by Hall into the enormous living-room. Doubtless he was remembering the time not far distant when he had been caught trespassing in the flower beds. Far too frightened to speak, he looked at Seymour in the fascinated stare of a rabbit watching a weasel. Bracegirdle, who sensed the situation, spoke to the boy in fatherly tones.

"Well, Tommy, what is it?"

At length the boy started to speak slowly, but his eyes never left Mr. Alstone's face.

"Please, Mr. Bracegirdle, Ma says she saw something last night that you ought to know about and could you come around, please, sir."

"Your mother!" I exclaimed. "I thought she was in the hospital."

"No, sir. She wouldn't stay so our Mark went'n fetched her yesterday afternoon. But she's in bed, sir, so she can't come over and she's cryin' somethin' terrible ever since she heard about our Poll."

"Tell your mother we'll be over in ten minutes."

The boy trotted off, and, after giving instructions to his men Bracegirdle beckoned me aside and suggested that we should go together to the Baines' cottage.

It was evident that he did not wish Seymour to come along.

CHAPTER IX



MRS. BAINES was in bed when we arrived and looked remarkably well considering all the circumstances.

I congratulated her on her appearance and remarked—rather fatuously—that I was glad to see her back from the hospital so soon.

"Back," she echoed, and a bright spot of color appeared in each cheek as she spoke. "Where would you expect me to be but back home when my family is bein' murdered in traps and tree—"

Bracegirdle made clucking noises like a distressed hen.

"There was something you wanted to tell

me?" he asked gently.

Mrs. Baines gave a little laugh which verged on the hysterical.

"They've taken my Polly and they've taken my Jo, but there's no reason why I shouldn't do all I can do—even though it's a family as—well, never mind. But I saw him there, and murder is murder even if some people are only getting what's coming to 'em."

"Take it easy, Mrs. Baines," I cautioned. "You mustn't upset yourself. You're still weak."

The woman sat bolt upright in bed. "Weak I may be, Dr. Swanson, but not so weak that I can't use my own eyes, and not so blind I can't see what's in front of 'em, even if it was in the middle of the night, and the snow blowin' in the window—"

"Haden't you better begin at the beginning?" I suggested.

"Well, Dr. Swanson, Mark fetched me in from the hospital yesterday afternoon, and Susie—that's my sister—put me to bed and made me comfortable here. The window was open—Susie's a great one for fresh air—and I went off to sleep soon's I had my supper. Some time in the middle of the night I woke up feeling cold, and when I turned on the light I saw the snow blowin' in all over me."

"You've no idea what time it was?"

"Not then, I didn't, but after it was all over, I screamed and Susie came in and put me back in bed and said it was almost midnight. I was cold and trembling, so she went downstairs—"

"But," I interrupted, "what did you see that frightened you so?"

"What did I see?" The woman's voice had sunk almost to a whisper. "I saw the body of young Mr. Gerald—him as they say is missing this morning, like my poor Polly was a while back."

Bracegirdle had spun around and was staring at her incredulously.

"Where—how—?" he snapped.

I shot him a warning glance.

"Just tell us in your own way, Mrs. Baines," I said quickly.

She was waving a weather-beaten hand toward the window.

"I saw him from there," she continued. "I got out of bed and was trying to shut it when I saw a car going down the road toward the covered bridge. I didn't pay no attention to it till after it was gone, and then—then—I saw it. It was dragging along behind like a bag of potatoes. In the light from the window I could see the face as plain as yours, for all it was snowing. And if it was my dying breath I'd swear it was the body of Gerald Alstone behind that car."

No, she could not tell us whether the car

was large or small, roadster or sedan. It had bright lights in front and in back and there was a thick layer of snow on top. Apart from that she knew nothing.

"Well, what d'you make of it?" I queried as Bracegirdle and I trudged through the snow toward the garden gate.

"Hooley—just so much hooley. The woman is sick. She's been listening to gossip. She wakes up in the middle of the night and gets scared. You'll notice that she didn't tell her sister it was young Alstone's body. Apparently she only thought of that after she heard he was missing—just to make a good story."

"But there might be something in it."

"And there might be something in the thousand and one crazy stories that are going round Grindle. I ask you, Dr. Swanson. That woman said she'd seen the body of Gerald Alstone dragged behind a car. It was snowing and there's not much light from her window. How on earth—?" He broke off with the nearest approach to impatience I had yet seen in him. "Why, even in broad daylight it would be impossible to recognize a body from that distance."

We had now reached the road where the snow had already been crushed and dirtied by passing cars. About a hundred yards to our left loomed the covered bridge—an old-fashioned structure which takes the road over Grindle Creek. As I saw it, there flashed through my mind an idea, which, as it afterwards turned out, was my only real contribution toward the solving of the case—the only bit of pure deduction of which I was guilty throughout the whole affair. My brain child was conceived, gestated and brought to parturition in the twinkling of an eye.

I SEIZED the deputy's arm and almost dragged him toward the covered bridge. "Listen," I exclaimed, "if Mrs. Baines wasn't lying—if that was Gerald Alstone's body she saw—well, the car was going in the direction of the covered bridge. There's no snow there—"

"I'm afraid I don't get you, Dr. Swanson."

I was hurrying forward, shouting over my shoulder at the recalcitrant Bracegirdle.

"You think that Gerald was killed either in the gun-room or nearby; then he was carried over the porch and down the steps. Up to that point you can trace him by the blood stains but, after that, the snow made further observation impossible. All right Mrs. Baines said his body was dragged past her window around midnight."

"We know he was—or had been bleeding. The friction with the road would constantly have been making fresh contusions. If it weren't for the snow we might find blood

on the road. But our murderer was either darned clever or darned lucky. His tracks are obscured—that is, whenever he is out in the open. But, there is one place where there's no snow to hide his trail. Here it is."

"The covered bridge!"

And blood we found—after a long and back-aching search. Dried into the old planks of the bridge in two places were minute purpling spots. Bracegirdle chipped off a piece of the stained wood and put it tenderly in an envelope. For about half an hour we were down on hands and knees like a couple of schoolboys playing sleuths. Here and there were fresh abrasions in the surface of the wood. Splinters had been raised and pressed down.

At length we stood up and gazed at each other solemnly.

"Looks as though Mrs. Baines was right," commented Bracegirdle as he felt for his pipe. "I have to thank you for your suggestion."

"Well, what next?"

"I must get back to my men. Find out particulars of all cars passing this way last night. Start a search for the body along the road. There's just a chance that they may have dumped it somewhere. By the way, Dr. Swanson, I think we'll keep this little matter to ourselves for a while. There's no point in getting Mr. Alstone worried unnecessarily." I nodded agreement.

"And, I'm going to ask you another favor, Dr. Swanson. I want a talk with young Foote out at the hospital. I was wondering if you'd go along with me."

"That's fine. I was planning on going in today anyway. I intend to live in my room at the college for a bit."

At three it started snowing again, but Bracegirdle arrived promptly at four, having spent a busy afternoon. The stains from the bridge had been analyzed and proved to be blood. He had started checking upon the cars but, apart from the obvious fact that the Goschens, the Tailford-Jones, Toni and myself were bound to cross the covered bridge on our way home from the Alstones, he had learned nothing.

At the hospital we were informed that Peter's parents were with him and, consequently, we were obliged to wait a few moments.

"There's just one little thing," Bracegirdle began, as we sat together on a bench in the corridor. "Of course, it's a mere matter of routine, but Mr. Foote's leg was broken, wasn't it? It wouldn't have been medically possible, I suppose, for him to have been about last night?"

"Good God! No!" I exclaimed. "His leg's in a plaster cast. But here's the resident.

I'll ask him."

Purvis was bearing down upon us, large and smiling. With admirable tact I phrased my questions in such a way that Bracegirdle could understand and Purvis' suspicions were not aroused. The resident laughed to scorn the idea that Peter could have been one yard from his bed within the last week.

"Hope to have the cast off in a few days," he said cheerfully. "But, till then—"

We were interrupted by the opening of Peter's door. A large, expensive-looking woman with a sweet face and sad eyes was leaving the room. She was followed by Marcus Foote, leather magnate, a short, stocky man with a prominent jaw and the same dark hair as his son.

Bracegirdle hurried into the room and Purvis introduced me to Peter's parents. Both Mr. and Mrs. Foote expressed their pleasure at making my acquaintance.

"Well," I said, "you ought to be proud of your son, Mrs. Foote. That was a brave thing he did."

"Brave, but foolish." Mrs. Foote's face broke into a faint smile. "Peter's always been like that—excitable and madcap. I suppose I should be proud of him, having tried to save those horses but"—she smiled again a little sadly—"you know how mothers are."

MARCUS FOOTE had been standing at our side in silence. Now he turned to me.

"You live in Grindle, I believe, Dr. Swanson?" His voice was smooth and well-modulated.

I nodded.

"It's about this fellow, Baines, Dr. Swanson. I understand he's a little difficult to approach and, after all, he did save my son's life. I was wondering whether, perhaps, you—"

He produced a check book from his pocket.

"A trifle, a mere trifle," murmured Mrs. Foote. "It could be done without any fuss."

"Your name is Douglas, I believe?" Foote senior was scribbling in his check book. "I will make this out to you, if you don't mind. I'm sure you'll be willing to do this for us."

They had gone before I realized what had happened. As I glanced down at the slip of pink paper in my hand, I saw that it was a check to my order for one thousand dollars.

Stuffing it in my pocket, I hurried into Peter's room. The boy was sitting up in bed talking excitedly to Bracegirdle.

"...Yes, the operator said it came through around eleven-thirty." He smiled at me and then continued, "I was asleep at the time and got no notification of it till this morning. The nurse told me that whoever it was that had called had been scared or worried about

something. He had asked for me, and then, being told he couldn't get me till the morning, rung off, leaving no message."

"He hasn't called again today?"

"No, the only call I had this morning was from my father."

"There's nothing else you can tell that might throw light on the business, Mr. Foote?"

"Nothing at the moment. Mr. Franklin Alstone came to see me this morning. I told him all I know, which was not much. But let me think things over. Something may come to me."

Bracegirdle grunted and, beckoning to me, took his leave. Without a word I followed him down the corridor to the telephone operator's desk. The girl on the five till twelve shift had just come on duty. Yes, she remembered the call in question. Someone had asked to be put through to Mr. Foote's room at eleven thirty-four. Said it was very urgent. Seemed kinda jumpy. Of course, it's most irregular to put calls through to patients after nine-thirty.

"Was it a man or a woman?" asked Bracegirdle.

Miss Potts pushed at her vivid yellow hair.

"Well, it's difficult to say, Mr. Bracegirdle. You see, Mr. Bracegirdle, the voice was sort of high and excited. And what with so many calls coming through, a girl doesn't pay much attention."

"You asked him if he wanted to leave a message?"

"Naturally," she snapped. "That's the regular procedure."

"And he wouldn't?"

"I don't know. He or she was just about to say something. There was a sort of scuffling sound and the receiver banged down."

Bracegirdle looked surprised. "You mean it sounded as though someone had interrupted?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Bracegirdle," she remarked.

Just after he had left, I bumped into Toni. He wore a dirty apron and carried a rack of test-tubes in his hand.

"Hello, Doug. What've you been doing all day?"

"Sleuthing."

I outlined the day's experiences.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he asked suddenly.

"Do? There's nothing we can do."

"So?" His mouth twisted in a curious inward smile. "All right, Doug, my boy. If you don't want to be confidential—don't."

He paused as if expecting me to say something.

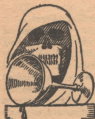
"I might mention," he continued, and now he was smiling frankly, "that if you don't

want to be confidential, I needn't either. In fact—"

He broke off and was gone.

But what he meant by these curious remarks I had not the faintest idea.

CHAPTER X



FOR the next few days the snow remained impenetrable. Consequently, Toni and I stayed on at the hospital, leaving Lucinda in sole command of the farm house. Except for the inquest on Polly Baines which I was subpoenaed to attend, I was entirely cut off from inside develop-

ments in our local mystery. The inquest itself brought to light very little that was new.

The pathologist's findings were such as to shock even the hard-boiled country jurors, and after a verdict of willful murder had been passed, the coroner characterized the crime as the most outrageous and fiendish in the annals of Cotuit County. In view of the latest facts, he added, it was obvious that Jo Baines, too, had been the victim of willful murder. The same day a verdict was returned to that effect, and the killer in Grindle had two deaths officially to his credit.

After having lived in the very midst of the crimes, sleeping, eating and drinking them, as it were, it was curious to find oneself on the outside, depending entirely upon the newspapers for information. It was curious, too, and a little disconcerting to realize what a difference Gerald Alstone's disappearance had made in arousing public interest.

There is, apparently, nothing of particular significance in the strange death of an obscure gardener and his little daughter. A small paragraph on a middle page was all that it had rated in the minds of the newspaper editors. With the intrusion of Mr. Alstone's grandson however, the affairs in Grindle suddenly became headline news.

But the papers had nothing really tangible to offer. Only a percentage of the actual evidence was published. The real causes of Polly's death were wisely withheld, and a general statement was issued to the press to the effect that she had been shot and hoisted dead into the tree and that five bullets had been taken from her body.

During the bad weather work was very heavy at the hospital, but I found my mind constantly returning to Grindle and the unpleasant phase through which it was passing.

Since our removal to Rhodes, Toni had been acting very curiously. I felt more and

more strongly that he knew something which he intended to keep to himself—something which made him avoid being alone with me and parry any attempt to discuss the affair. I have always believed in respecting other people's moods and did nothing to discover what it was that caused his reticence, but I found myself constantly involved in conversations which seemed to have some implication that I could not grasp. Luckily for my peace of mind, I was too busy—or too stupid—to work out its real significance.

During the week I paid frequent visits to Peter Foote in his private room at the hospital. In the past I had known him only as one of the more promising students in my class; now I discovered that he had surprisingly good sense and a wide knowledge of subjects outside medicine—a most unusual attribute in a medical student. The first shock was over now and he seemed eager to talk about Gerald and to elaborate a theory he had evolved.

"I know I haven't much to back me up," he said, leaning forward, his dark eyes strained and restless, "but I can't believe anything's happened to Gerald. Up to now the murderer's been a very sensible person—and a very sound psychologist. He's deliberately chosen his victims among the sort of people who don't get much attention from the public or the newspapers. Polly Baines, Joe Baines, even a few more Baineses might have been killed without the whole force of the police stirring and setting about it.

"But, once you start doing away with the grandson of a rich and famous person, you're asking for trouble. Every eye in the nation is on Grindle; everything that money can buy has been put into the case. The murderer's chances for escape are small—and what's probably worse from his point of view, it's practically impossible for him now to indulge the impulse to kill when it comes on him." He thumped the bedclothes with his fist. "Don't you see? He can't have been such a fool as to bring this on himself!"

"Very ingenious!" I murmured, pulling a grape from an expensive looking plate of fruit beside the bed. "And I agree with you up to a point. From now on it's going to be very difficult for the murderer to make a killing. But, isn't it extremely unlikely that Gerald should happen to disappear at the right moment?"

"Not if you know him. He's been my best friend ever since I came to college and I suppose I understand him better than anyone else does. Now this is in confidence"—he lowered his voice—"but I've known for some time that he's been wanting to get away from Grindle. He's scared stiff of old Seymour. Hates him. And not only that, he's terrified of failing in medical school. A short

time back he had quite a scene with his grandfather about the low grades he was making."

"After it was over he told me he couldn't stick it out any longer. Swore he'd clear off, but I managed to talk him out of it. Now supposing he'd been in one of those moods on the night you found Polly Baines. He's a mild guy and rather nervous as you know. Seeing that body drop from the tree might well have been the last straw. He could easily figure out that if he were to disappear then, everyone would think he had gone the same way as Polly."

"I see what you mean," I broke in. "Seymour would search for his body, but wouldn't think of searching for him. It was a pretty good moment for a getaway."

"Sure, Dr. Swanson"—Peter's youthful passion for theorizing was well under way—"and I was laid up with a broken leg. I wasn't on the spot to stop him. Now, you remember that 'phone call that came through for me the night he disappeared? I'm sure it was from Gerald, telling me what he was going to do. If only I could have spoken to him, I could have done something."

I LEANED forward in interest. "Well, supposing you're right, Peter, where would he have gone?"

"Have they interviewed his mother?"

"You don't think he was with her!"

Peter shook his head. "No. I'm afraid it won't be as easy as all that. Still, he might have got some money from her. His father gives him a very small allowance, you know."

"Is Mrs. Alstone wealthy?"

"She gets quite a large sum in alimony from Franklin, I believe." Peter lit a cigarette, and I noticed that his fingers were trembling with eagerness. "Has Bracepirdle checked up on all the outgoing boats?"

"Of course they've done all the routine things."

"Gerald was always keen to travel. Seymour kept him stuffed up in Grindle all his life. I sometimes used to tell him about the places I'd been to and he was just crazy to see them for himself." Peter stared at me fiercely. "If only the police had had some sense, I'm sure they'd have found him at one of the ports."

"It's easy enough to criticize the police—and I hope you're right," I said, straightening the bedclothes which had slipped away from the cast, "but aren't you forgetting the two most significant points?"

"You mean the gun-room and Mrs. Baines' story? In a sense they are difficult to explain, of course, but they can be fitted in from the psychological angle. You see, Gerald's the most thorough person I know.

Once he'd made up his mind to disappear, or rather, to pretend to be murdered, he wouldn't be satisfied with leaving it all to chance. I believe he staged the gun-room scene just to make it more convincing. Chairs and tables upset, guns out of place, a revolver missing; it's too obviously an encounter with a homicidal maniac to be the real thing."

"And the blood on the floor?" I asked.

"Just the finishing touches. Of course, I don't know exactly how he managed it—but it's not too difficult to get blood with all those chickens around. It's the blood on the door handle more than anything else that makes me believe it was a put-up job. The murderer himself doesn't seem to run to anything so crude. He gets them out of doors, strings them behind a car and..."

"Strings them behind a car, exactly," I put in. "How about the car Mrs. Baines saw? How about the trail of blood under the bridge?"

"Oh, that's another matter." Peter stubbed his cigarette and his voice rose excitedly. "You may think this is far-fetched, but I believe these things are much more likely to be far-fetched than the police make out. I believe Mrs. Baines' story. But I don't believe it was Gerald she saw."

"So you suppose there's still another corpse in the neighborhood?"

"No, I expect it was a sheep or a dog. You see, I've been doing quite a lot of thinking while I've been lying here; and I've a theory about the murderer, too."

I smiled. "Let's hear it," I remarked.

"Well, I think that there's some reason for the fit of homicidal mania coming on him—some external irritant. I think that the murderer was on the coon-hunt: saw Polly Baines' body discovered; and then, the actual sight of one of his victims started the old blood lust in him. So you see—it wasn't just chance that the car Mrs. Baines saw and Gerald's disappearance coincided. They were both motivated by the same thing—the discovery of Polly Baines."

"You've been reading the text books, Peter," I said, glancing at the table where several manuals on psychiatry and morbid psychology were heaped among his favorite travel books.

As I turned, I noticed Toni standing with his back to the door, flipping over the leaves of *Cannibal Quest*.

"So you're interested in the psychological aspect of this case, Foote?" He was speaking to Peter, but his eyes, strangely enough, were fixed on my face. "So am I."

For a moment none of us spoke, then Toni continued.

"I see this book's about the East Indies. Ever been there?"

Peter smiled. "Yes, twice. Once in Borneo. Once in New Guinea. Wish I were there now, out of this damn snow."

"Must be interesting," Toni turned over a page casually. "I've always wanted to study primitive sociology. You must take me there some time," he added, grinning, "and show me the ropes."

The conversation then became strictly medical. The cast was to come off Peter's leg that night, and the next day he would be able to place his foot on the ground. The fracture had united beautifully.

AS I left, I laughingly told Peter that I would speak to Bracegirdle about his suggestions.

And I was destined to see the sheriff's deputy sooner than I had anticipated. The next day I had just come in from buying an evening paper and was looking at the headlines. At first I could hardly believe what I read. Scrawled across the top in heavy black letters were the words:

LAST WIND-UP IN GRINDLE VALLEY. MANIAC
TRAPPED BY POLICE!

From our special correspondent comes the sensational news that Mark Baines, part time gardener and son of Jo Baines, one of the victims, has been arrested by the Rhodes police today in connection with the death of his father and little sister, and the disappearance of Gerald Alstone. There are also additional charges for torturing and slaying several animals including Mrs. Tailford-Jones' marmoset. Our readers will recall how, in her last article in this paper, Mrs. Tailford-Jones hinted that such a result might be expected. . . .

It went on to give a lurid pen-portrait of poor Mark and his curious mode of living, explaining also how he had had no alibi for any of the times of the killings, and how he had already been charged with hurting two

little girls several months earlier. As I read this, I recalled how Valerie and I had come across him on the night of the coon-hunt.

Things looked pretty tough for him, although I was convinced he had nothing to do with the affair. I was angry, too, with Bracegirdle for arresting him without, as I felt sure, sufficient evidence. It was with relief that I remembered Mr. Foote's thousand-dollar check which still reposed in my pocketbook. At least, it would help Mark to get good legal advice.

Throwing down the paper, I called up Bracegirdle. I was told he was actually on his way to the college. About ten minutes later he arrived looking very much the worse for wear.

"What's this about Mark?" I asked. "You don't think he did it, do you?"

"Well, Doctor," Bracegirdle smiled wearily, "I'm ready to believe anything. He's as likely as anyone else. His alibis are utterly vague, and Hall did see him hanging around the Alstones' house the night Gerald disappeared."

"Is that all?"

"There're certain other things against him. He's queer—just the sort that might go haywire. Besides, he obviously knows something."

"What d'you mean?"

"He's been holding out on us ever since the arrest. In my job you get used to telling whether a man's coming clean or not."

"What on God's earth are you driving at?"

"Just what I say. Of course, you've been out of the valley for several days now. You don't know what things are like down there. The whole countryside is hysterical, and now that Mrs. Tailford-Jones has started acting this way—"

"What's Roberta been up to now?"

"Don't you read the papers? In her clean-up of the valley she picked on Mark, and made things so hot for him that, if we'd been

[Turn page]

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a bit further south, he'd have been lynched by now. That's one of the reasons why we arrested him."

I whistled. "God, what a woman! I've a good mind to spill a few pornographical beans about her."

"I should be a bit careful." Bracegirdle was watching me shrewdly. "Mrs. Tailford-Jones has also stated that Mark had a confederate. Of course, I'm not suggesting anything, but in public I should pipe down on that sympathy for Mark if I were you."

"So dear Roberta's still getting at me!" I crossed to the table and took a cigarette. "Nothing else's happened, I suppose?"

"Nothing important. Mr. Alstone has put up a five thousand dollar reward for the recovery of his grandson, dead or alive. Incidentally, this came for him in the morning mail."

Bracegirdle fumbled in his pocket and handed me an envelope. It had a Grindle postmark and contained a sheet of ordinary white paper on which was typed the following unsigned note:

Now you are getting the kind of treatment which you have shown to other people and which you so richly deserve. You think you can buy yourself out of it, don't you—just as you've always been able to buy yourself out of things in the past? Well, this is one thing that all your money won't pay for. I hope you're enjoying it.

I handed it back to the deputy.

"When things are in this state," he replied, "I don't take much stock of anonymous letters, but—you never know. Have to look into them just as a matter of routine."

"Talking about a matter of routine," I replied, "a most unpleasant individual wrested my finger-prints from me this morning. Am I under suspicion?"

BRACEGIRDLE smiled. "I'm having everyone in the valley done, Dr. Swanson. We might get something out of it. There are those fingerprints on the gun-room door to check up on, you know."

"Any help from the neighbors?"

Bracegirdle frowned. "I've given up expecting any help. They don't even seem able to produce half-way decent alibis. At the best of times they've only one other person's word to back them up. In my opinion they've

all got something to hide. But I can't very well arrest the lot of them!" He swallowed the remnants of his highball and set down the empty glass. "We won't get any farther until we find the body."

"Peter Foote doesn't think he's dead," I remarked, and went on to tell him what Peter had said the day before.

"If it interests the young man," he said at length, "You might tell him we've done everything he suggested—with no result."

That same evening I went to visit Mark in the City Hall. I did my best to get him to talk, but he no longer appeared to have confidence in me. He sat staring moodily at the floor of his cell and all I could extract from him were a few noncommittal monosyllables.

Although I felt I knew him well enough to be convinced of his fundamental innocence, I had to admit that he seemed to be holding something back. He appeared unable to grasp the fact that Peter's father had given him a thousand dollars. He steadfastly refused to accept the check and also turned a deaf ear to my suggestion for legal assistance. The fate of his animals and flowers alone interested him.

In the light of his silence, I realized that things looked pretty bad for him. The public had eagerly adopted him as a peg on which to hang their vague suspicions and fears.

Nevertheless, his arrest had done little to restore confidence in the valley itself. One day the Goshens suddenly migrated to an apartment in town, where, as Millie put it over the phone, the kids were more likely to "remain alive." They told me that there was no child or animal to be seen in Grindle. The police had issued orders for them all to be kept under lock and key. I had not realized that the affair had reached such a pitch.

When I was beginning to believe that no further complications would arise, I received a letter. It had a Grindle postmark, and was typewritten on ordinary white paper, similar to that of the other anonymous epistle.

It read:

It isn't only in hospitals that animals are tortured, is it? It isn't only for 'humanity' that children and harmless creatures are slaughtered. You thought you had the monopoly of it, didn't you? Maybe you're right!

I read this peculiar document and handed it over to Toni who had just come in.

He returned it with a smile.

"Well, well, Doug," he said slowly, "that is unexpected, isn't it?"

There was something about his smile that I did not understand.

Sb-b-b!

WHISPER
MURDER

NEXT ISSUE!

CHAPTER XI



AFTER ten days or so, the weather changed. On Friday morning I awoke feeling heavy and unrested. The air from the open window was warm, and I noticed that the iron-hard piles of snow, lying along the street, had sagged during the night.

At the hospital I ran into Peter Foote, who, with the aid of a crutch, was now able to attend most of his classes. On hearing that Toni and I planned to return to Grindle that evening, he asked for a lift. He wanted to see Mr. Alstone, he explained, and to become officially enlisted in the search for Gerald.

It was late afternoon when the three of us arrived in the valley. I shall never forget the curious sensation of apprehension and excitement I experienced as we drove by Grindle Oak.

As we helped Peter out onto the Alstone's porch, Franklin was standing there alone, staring over the snow. It was difficult to realize that this was the father of the boy whose disappearance had aroused such nation-wide indignation. He seemed so slight and shadowy a figure—one not designed to play a conspicuous role in life.

How had this affair affected him? I wondered. Did he worry about his missing son? Did he seem as insignificant to himself as he did to the newspaper reporters who had completely overlooked him in favor of his aggressive parent?

He listened in silence to Peter's request to be allowed to help in the search for Gerald.

"Very kind, very kind, indeed," he said at last. "We must ask father."

My first task, after our reunion with the delighted Lucinda, was to see Mrs. Baines and present her with the thousand dollars. She was up and about when I reached the cottage. I found her peeling potatoes, surrounded with a mob of querulous children. I told her of Mr. Foote's action and handed her the check. She accepted it without gratitude or enthusiasm, muttering that it would come in handy now that there was no man about the house. Her mind was obviously elsewhere and she kept glancing out of the window across the snow which still glowed dimly in the fading light.

On the way home I made a detour, stroll-up the lane which led to the Lampson road. It was strange to see the Goschen's house lying there dark and deserted after the blaze of light which had always been wont to greet the passer-by. The Tailford-Joneses, how-

ever, still expended the usual amount of electricity. There was a light in almost every window, and I could see Roberta moving about in the living-room. For a moment she absorbed my attention, and I didn't notice Edgar standing by the gate.

"So you're back with us, Dr. Swanson." His voice was quiet and low.

"Oh, good evening, I didn't see you."

"People sometimes don't." The little colonel tapped his fingers gently on the wood of the gate. "Well, the snow will soon be gone."

"Yes, it's been a foul month, hasn't it?"

Edgar leaned over the gate and, in the light from the house, I could see he was smiling.

"Very unpleasant, Doctor. I wonder what January has in store for us."

There was a tone in his voice which was difficult to interpret.

He turned, and I saw his diminutive figure pattering up the path to the house.

When I got home I found Toni entertaining Valerie and Mrs. Middleton in the living-room. The sight of Valerie made me realize how much I had been missing her.

"Hello, Doug," she said smiling. "It's good to have you back."

"Yes,—" Mrs. Middleton's little blue eyes were regarding me solemnly—"now the Goschens have gone, you are the only friends we have in the valley. We must all cling together in times like these."

Toni brought me a highball. "They say things have been pretty tough here in our absence."

"We've all had our finger-prints taken," put in Valerie. "And we're not supposed to go out after dark. There are policemen all over the place who ask you where you're going and what you intend to do. We haven't been allowed to take Sancho out for days." Her eyes softened as she spoke. "He's much better, by the way, and raring for exercise!"

Mrs. Middleton moved uneasily and shot a glance at the window. "The police may do all they can," she said, "but they can't stop things happening. We've not seen the end of it yet. The snow is going, and when it's gone—"

"Oh, Mother, let's not be gruesome tonight. I want to enjoy myself." Valerie crossed to the piano and began to play.

From then on, despite Mrs. Middleton, the shadow of death slipped temporarily into the background. It was not until our guests were leaving that our strange position was brought back to us.

WE WERE all standing by the garden gate, when we heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and a flashlight was shone on us.

"Those ladies can't go out alone," said a

gruff voice. "Is one of you gentlemen escorting them?"

"Yes officer," replied Toni. "I am."

"All right, brother, but you'd better take a torch."

The policeman moved on, swinging his flashlight from side to side as he went.

Soon after the others had left, the telephone rang. It was Peter Foote calling from the Alstones'. His voice was high-pitched and excited.

"Hello! Dr. Swanson? Have you heard the news? Mark's escaped!"

"Escaped!"

"Yes. Sometime this evening. Bracegirdle's just phoned Mr. Alstone. He's coming right over from Rhodes with an armed squad."

"Any idea where he's gone?"

"Bracegirdle seems to think he's headed in this direction. Nothing definite, though. I rather hope he makes a get-away. I owe him a lot."

As he spoke, an idea flashed through my mind, an idea which called for quick action.

"Listen, Peter," I said, "will you do me a favor? Keep Bracegirdle occupied for a few minutes when he comes. Fake some story—do anything, but don't let them go after Mark, just yet. I think I know where he is, and I don't want that armed squad turned loose on him if I can help it. Give me a quarter of an hour. That's all I want."

"Okay, Doctor, anything you say. But snap into it. I've a feeling they'll be right over."

I threw down the receiver and dashed out into the lane. In front I could still see the flickering light of the policeman's torch, but I hurried on, pushing past him with a curt good-night.

He shot the flashlight up into my face.

"Hey, there, what are you up to?"

"It's only Dr. Swanson," I shouted, and ran on.

I could hear him starting after me. Then his footsteps ceased. He had, I supposed, decided I was above suspicion.

It was a dark night, and the ground was slushy. Before me loomed the covered bridge. I crossed it and hurried on toward the Baines cottage.

The windows were curtained and unlighted. Keeping close to the wall, I made for the old stable and pushed at the door. It was open. Inside the darkness was intense. I groped my way forward, and stumbled over something. Quickly I struck a match and, in the fitful illumination I saw it was an empty cage. The others were empty, too. Someone had let the animals loose.

"Mark!" I whispered.

There was no answer.

I called again and, reaching the ladder, swung myself up into the loft.

"It's Dr. Swanson, Mark. Don't be afraid."

As I felt round the wall, my face brushed against something soft, and the heavy scent of flowers suddenly invaded my nostrils.

"Are you there, Mark?"

I could distinctly hear the sound of someone breathing. I could feel, too, that someone was watching me. It had always been a notion of mine that Mark could see in the dark and now I half expected his eyes to gleam in the obscurity—luminous as a cat's. I moved slowly forward, my hands stretched out to guide me. Then I bumped against the foot of the bed, and my fingers touched the rough material of a man's coat.

"Mark, why didn't you answer me?"

I produced a match-box and lit one of the candles which I knew to be by the bedside.

He was sitting upright, his eyes staring blankly into mine.

"How on earth did you get here?" I asked.

"Saw my chance, and jumped a truck."

"But why, Mark? What good will it do you? They'd shoot if they saw you."

"I had to come back and see them animals was all right, hadn't I? Tommy's just a kid. He doesn't know how to look after 'em good."

"So you broke jail just for that?"

"I turned 'em loose. They're better outside now, the snow's gone than cooped up here with me away."

"Listen, Mark. The police will be here any minute. You're going back with them, aren't you?"

"It's all right now them animals is gone. Tommy knows how to water them plants."

H HE ROSE and started to move round the room, fingering the leaves and the blossoms.

I followed. It was like dealing with a child.

"When the police come—"

"Police!" His mouth broke into a sudden smile. "I could tell them a thing or two if I wanted. But what's the use? They wouldn't understand. They ain't got no sense!"

I put a hand on his arm. "You know something about the murders, don't you, Mark? Why don't you tell me?"

He did not reply and, in the candlelight, I saw that his eyes had once more assumed a vague, faraway expression.

As we stood there in silence, I heard a car grind to a stop outside in the road.

"That's the police now, Mark. You stay here and promise me not to move. Those cops are quick on the trigger. They'll shoot if you try a get-away."

Obediently, he crossed and sat down on the bed.

Below there were shouts and the sound of heavy footsteps. Hurrying down the ladder, I stumbled to the door and swung it back. The strip of lawn leading up to the cottage

was dark with shadowy forms. As soon as the door opened, they seemed to tense.

"Is Bracegirdle there?" I called.

One of the men detached himself from the crowd.

"Dr. Swanson!" The deputy's voice was hoarse with surprise. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Just seeing nothing happens to Mark. He's in there, waiting. I'll go up with you. You don't need your regiment."

He followed me into the barn, and I told him in a few words why Mark had run away.

"Listen, Bracegirdle," I said and, for the first time since the beginning of the case, I put what little authority I possessed into my voice, "I think you respect me as much as I respect you. We are friends, and I have never before criticized anything you've done in connection with this business. But I want to tell you right here and now that you're making a big mistake in believing Mark has anything to do with these murders. He's just a kid and innocent as a lamb!"

"Maybe you're right, Dr. Swanson," he said slowly, "and maybe you're wrong. But, murderer or no murderer, that boy knows something, and it's my duty to find out what it is. I can understand how you feel. You know him. You're fond of him, but—"

"But—nothing!" I said. "I'm a doctor and I know that if he's treated to any more of this stuff, he'll lose what little wits he has left. He may have seen something; he may even have seen one of the murders committed. Well and good, but you're not going to get it out of him by locking him up. The only way to make him tell is to get him to trust you."

"Okay, Doctor. No one's going to treat him rough. Come on. We'd better get him."

Mark rose as we entered the loft. Without a word he pushed past us and started down the ladder. At the foot he stood waiting patiently for us to descend. The sight of the squad of policemen on the lawn seemed to have no effect on him. He closed the stable door carefully after us and let himself be conducted to the car.

As they drove off, he turned and smiled at me.

The next morning over breakfast, I told Toni all that had happened. He listened in silence, gazing out across the lawn where now there were only a few dirty brown heaps to mark where the snow had been.

"Do you know what Mark's holding back from the police?" he asked.

"No. I don't. Maybe it's something important. Maybe it's just something he imagined. You can't tell with Mark."

"He's never talked to you—not even before he was arrested?"

"Never said a damn thing," I replied

irritably. "You know as much about it as I do."

Toni smiled the curious smile which he had adopted of late.

"That's just exactly what I was thinking, Doug. Pass me the marmalade."

For a few moments we ate in silence. Then I happened to look up and noticed Valerie on Esmeralda riding down the lane outside the window. She waved and pointed up our drive, indicating that she was coming in.

I nodded my head and waved back.

"She's up early," I remarked, as I swallowed the last drops of my coffee. "Expect she's glad to be able to ride again. Charlie wants his horses exercised, by the way."

Toni grunted and lit a cigarette.

"I'll go let her in," I said.

"If you're going out into the garden," he called, as I strolled into the hall, "you might as well close the garage. I think I left it open last night."

I lingered a few moments at the front door, waiting for Valerie to tether Esmeralda. She seemed to be taking her time, and I was just about to investigate, when she ran up. Although she had seemed gay and debonair when she passed the window a little while before, I could tell at once that in the interval something terrible must have happened. Her face was deathly pale. Her lips were white. In her hand she held a short piece of rope.

She thrust it toward me and stood staring into my eyes.

"Here, Doug," she whispered, and her voice was hoarse and unnatural. "You know what to do with this."

Before I could open my mouth to question her, she had brushed past into the dining-room.

I fingered the length of rope foolishly. It was very light, not much thicker than sash-cord. One end was frayed and it was knotted and stained a dirty brown. I gazed at it in complete bewilderment and then, stuffing it in my pocket, I hurried after Valerie.

She was standing by the window, talking to Toni, and there was an expression on her face I had never seen before. For the first time I realized that she could look hard-boiled.

"Nice to have the snow gone, isn't it, Toni?" she was saying.

"By the way, how much is the reward for finding Gerald?" she continued slowly. "Five thousand dollars, isn't it?"

We both nodded, staring at her stupidly. "I suppose you're going to claim it, aren't you?"

Toni got up.

"What on earth are you driving at, Valerie?"

"So you don't know where he is?"

"Naturally not."

"Well, then, I suppose I shall have to tell you." She turned and stared me straight in the eyes. "I've just found him. He's lying out there in your backyard—not five feet from the garage door."

CHAPTER XII



WE STARED at her in utter incredulity. "I just don't believe it," I said at last.

"See for yourself."

Valerie turned abruptly to the door, and we followed her round the house to the patch of ground in front of the garage. There, wedged between a pile of

rubbish and the little wall which skirted the yard, lay a body. It was half imbedded in the drift of dirty snow which still clung around the foot of the wall and it had obviously been there for some time. I bent down and peered at the face.

Unquestionably, it was Gerald Alstone.

"My God!" I exclaimed. "He must have been there ever since it started snowing."

Valerie's eyes held mine in a long, level gaze.

"Yes," she said. "Ever since the coon-hunt—and you didn't know anything about it!"

I joined Toni in a cursory examination. The body was in an excellent state of preservation despite the fact that Gerald had probably been dead for almost two weeks. The shroud of snow must have arrested all traces of decomposition. The mouth was twisted in a strange, ironical smile, and the eyes protruded as though the boy had been under the stress of some strong emotion at the time of death. Toni was gingerly lifting the head which had been frozen into the hard mud at an unnatural and very ugly angle.

"Hm," he murmured. "Look at that mess!"

On the right side of the head was a gaping hole round which one could make out dried fibers of sinew and brain.

"Shot!" I exclaimed. "Clean through the skull."

Toni, who seemed to be unconscious of Valerie's presence, had pulled a small magnifying glass from his pocket and was examining the edges of the wound.

"Pretty close range," he muttered. "Our friend was a bit more humane this time." He looked up at me, a strange smile in his eyes; then he started to inspect the wrists and ankles of the dead boy.

"Any funny business?" I asked.

"What do you make of this?"

As he spoke, Toni lifted the left leg of the body. There, twisted round the ankle was a piece of blood-stained rope. The replica, I noticed with a sudden stab of apprehension, of the fragment just handed me by Valerie. My eyes swiftly turned to the garage, which lay open, revealing the broad backs of the two Plymouths; then they moved to Valerie, who was standing motionless, her lips tight closed. Could she have found that piece of rope attached to Toni's car? Had she given it to me because she wanted to protect him? Whole vistas of strange, unbelievable suspicions opened up in my mind.

"Look at the clothes, Doug," Toni was speaking again. "Same old story. Ripped to pieces. Those scratches, too. Our murderer seems to be very regular in his habits. Only this time, he had his little joy-ride with a corpse."

"A corpse!" broke in Valerie. "So Gerald was dead when—he was dragged along!"

"Looks that way. Can't swear to it."

"Thank God!" She gave a sigh of relief and closed her eyes.

"How on earth did he get here?" I exclaimed.

Of course no one replied. For a full minute, it seemed, the three of us stood there like dummies. It was Valerie who broke the silence.

"Hadn't someone better call Bracegirdle?" she suggested.

I hurried to the house, and, having told the deputy of the discovery, rejoined the others in the yard.

"He's coming right over," I said. "Told me not to touch anything."

"Mother said that when the snow was gone, something would happen," said Valerie with a shudder. "I never thought it would be—as bad as this."

The silence that followed this remark was tense. I felt an almost overwhelming desire to break it—to try and bring the three of us back into the realm of normal, commonplace life.

"You'll get the reward, Valerie," I said, striving to be casual. "Five thousand's a nice bit of money."

"Very nice!" Her tone was too calm to be healthy. "All the same, he was my cousin, you know. And now, if you don't mind, I'll go into the house. I believe I'm going to be sick."

Strangely enough, it was with palpable relief that, a short time later, I saw the police car draw up outside the gate. Bracegirdle hurried toward us with the coroner and a small group of policemen. He was as businesslike and unmoved as ever. Realizing, perhaps, how potentially awkward the situation was for us, he did his best to give the investigation a flat, impersonal quality.

While the coroner was making his examination, I took the sheriff's deputy into the house to interview Valerie. He asked the bare minimum of questions and then told her she could go home if she liked, but must hold herself in readiness to testify officially to the finding of Gerald Alstone.

AFTER Valerie had taken her leave, Bracegirdle and I returned to the garage. I noticed that a second car had driven up. The coroner had finished his examination and was talking with the district attorney and an old, white-haired man whom I recognized as the sheriff himself. The deputy approached them, and for a few minutes the four officials conversed together.

Then Bracegirdle and his men began a thorough search of the yard.

A short time later the "dead-cart" appeared from Rhodes. By now, I reflected grimly, I was getting quite well-informed in police technique. Gerald was carefully extricated from the narrow space behind the rubbish heap and carried to the hearse.

"I'll have to ask a few more questions later on, Dr. Swanson," Bracegirdle was saying, "but I needn't bother just now. I'm leaving several men here, and the yard will be roped off. I'm afraid you won't be able to use your cars today."

He joined the sheriff, the coroner and the district attorney and started to move down the drive, Toni and I followed.

At the gate, Toni turned to the coroner.

"I'll come down with you to the morgue if I may, Doctor," he said. "There's usually something for me to do, and Brooks and I often work together."

The coroner flashed a look at the sheriff, then at the deputy.

"If you don't mind, Dr. Conti," broke in Bracegirdle quickly, "I think Dr. Brooks had better see to this matter alone. In the circumstances"—he paused—"well, I leave it to your own good sense, sir."

Toni shrugged his shoulders.

The rest of that Saturday was a nightmare I shall never forget. First of all our garage and yard were roped off and occupied by the police. Being unable to get at our cars, we were virtually prisoners. After mooning about the house for a while, however, Toni managed to escape through the back door and left me alone to face the barrage of photographers, pressmen and curious villagers.

I appointed Lucinda to play Angel with the Flaming Sword, and from then on, it was woe betide the hapless reporter or the casual inquirer who tried to crash through either in person or over the wire.

Once and once only did I hear the maid's voice soften. In the later afternoon she had gone to answer the telephone with her

customary indignation, but immediately she thawed.

"No, ma'am," she crooned, "he's not here, ma'am. All right, ma'am."

"Who's that?" I called, as she put down the receiver.

"Miss Middleton, sir. Calling Dr. Conti."

Lucinda pushed a beaming face round the door and then hurried off to the kitchen.

For the hundredth time I pulled from my pocket the piece of knotted rope which Valerie had slipped into my hand so furtively that morning. What did it mean? Were those brown stains just dirt—or were they blood? Why had she been so reticent, so evasive in her manner? Could this be the explanation of Toni's strange behavior since the night of the coon-hunt?

I walked up and down the living-room racking my brains to find an answer to these questions.

Evening came, and still Toni had not returned. By this time I had started drinking and might have achieved a pleasant state of insensibility had not Lucinda interrupted me by summoning me to a more than usually excellent dinner. I believe that she, sweet soul, was thoroughly enjoying herself. All her protective instincts had been given full rein. Reporters, neighbors, sightseers—all of them had fallen before her resolute defense of the house. Even Bracegirdle, when he finally arrived after dinner, had considerable difficulty in obtaining admission.

I was alone with my coffee when I heard his voice—low and almost apologetic compared with that of the new Lucinda. I jumped up with relief and bade him enter.

The deputy was pale and haggard. The constant strain of the past few weeks with their sleepless nights and monotonous trail of crimes was obviously taking its toll of him. I indicated a chair and, pulling out his inevitable pipe, he sat down heavily.

"Well, Bracegirdle," I asked, after a few moments of silence, "have you just dropped in for a chat or is there something to tell me?"

"The autopsy showed that Gerald Alstone was shot with a thirty-two," he said slowly. "The same type of gun that was missing from Mr. Alstone's gun-room. He was, I should say, killed by someone standing close to him. Death was instantaneous. Apart from that we can only guess, but it looks as though he'd been tied on to a car and-dragged along for quite a distance. His body was just like Baines'—all scratches and bruises. Only this time, according to Brooks, he was dead before it happened."

"That's what Toni thought. Pity he isn't here, by the way. He'd be terribly interested."

Bracegirdle cleared his throat. "Just as

well he's not," he remarked suddenly. "I'm in a tough spot, Dr. Swanson, and I've decided that you're the only person who can help and advise me. Ever since you saved Mrs. Bracegirdle's life last spring, I've felt—"

"Can that," I said laughing, "and have a drink."

Lucinda brought in two enormous mint juleps.

BRACEGIRDLE was fingering his glass as if unwilling to carry it to his lips. "I've got a great respect for you, Dr. Swanson, and you've been very white with me all through this wretched business. That's why"—he broke off and took a long pull at his drink—"that's why I hate to say what I'm going to say."

"Is it something about Mark?"

"No—it's worse." Bracegirdle's tone was deadly serious. "It's Dr. Conti."

I laughed a little louder than was necessary, inwardly praying that my laughter sounded more spontaneous to him than it did to me. "Why, Bracegirdle, you're crazy with the heat."

"Maybe I am, I hope so. That's why I thought, perhaps—if we talked it over a bit, we might be able to figure out just where I'm wrong. You see, Dr. Swanson, I've always aimed at being a bit different from those policemen you read about in books—and in real life, too—who are pig-headed about their ideas and stick to a pet theory right or wrong. I'm open to correction—but, well, the D.A.'s been hauling me over the coals pretty badly today, and they're all clamoring for action."

"Of course, it's tough on you, Bracegirdle, but for God's sake don't go and make a big mistake. Dr. Conti—why, it's fantastic!"

For a moment there was no sound in the living-room except the distant noise of cars and men's deep voices. They reminded me a little grimly that, while we sat and smoked, the machinery of the law was still grinding relentlessly on.

"If I might tell you my reason, Dr. Swanson—" His voice was strangely humble.

"Go ahead—only don't expect me to agree with you."

"All right. Now, first of all, let's take the man himself. His father was Italian and, at one time, concerned in quite a bit of political trouble. A headstrong, violent man. Dr. Conti is a scientist, and everyone knows that they're often a bit queer in the head—with all due respect to you."

I smiled. "Toni's 'queerness' looks like getting him the Nobel prize next year. That is, if his work on carcinomatous tissue—but, never mind, go on."

"Of course," the deputy continued, "I don't make myself out to be one of those new-

fangled psychologists, but I believe I'm right in saying that brilliant intellects often go hand in hand with a kind of warped outlook on life—"

"Behavioristic complex coupled with maladjustment to externals," I mocked. "Bracegirdle, you've been reading Freud!"

"Well, forgetting character and background for the moment—" Bracegirdle's mouth moved, but his eyes were not smiling—"Dr. Conti is the only person, apart from Mark, who has no really satisfactory alibi for any of the times that the outrages were supposed to have been committed. He was out somewhere the night Polly disappeared. No one knows where he was when Baines was killed. He didn't go on the coon-hunt, and his behavior that night caused a lot of gossip."

"That's nothing," I said hotly. "Toni can be far ruder than that. And, as for alibis, I haven't got any either. Why not arrest me?"

"Well, do you know where he was, Dr. Swanson? Does he tell you where he goes when he makes off at night?"

"Bracegirdle," I said, "Dr. Conti and I are grown men. We're not a couple of school-girls. I wouldn't dream of questioning him about his private life any more than he would me."

"But the fact remains that he can't give any very satisfactory answers. Every time I've questioned him, he's been curt and rude. And, since the night we found Polly Baines, he's been even worse. You can't fool me, Dr. Swanson. I know he's holding something back—just the way Mark is!"

All the time Bracegirdle was speaking, my mind had been working furiously. After all, there was a great deal of truth in what he said. Toni's night movements had always been sporadic. His treatment of me recently had been decidedly odd. But the idea of Toni deliberately killing animals and mutilating little girls was beyond belief. My thoughts raced backward over all the circumstances, and then—suddenly—two facts detached themselves from this doubtful tangle of half suspicions.

"Aren't you forgetting about the night Mr. Alstone's setter was lost, Bracegirdle? Toni was with me, you know, when we saw that car—and heard the cry of the animal."

THE deputy looked at me closely. "No, I'm not forgetting that, Dr. Swanson, and I'm not forgetting how you told me the first time. If you recall, it was Dr. Conti who drew your attention to the cry—you admitted that you were not at all certain about it yourself. Don't you see that if he was intending to kill that dog later on in the evening, the unlighted car gave him a marvelous chance to establish a phony alibi. There's a

great deal in the power of suggestion."

"Well, there's one suggestion you can't make—that it was Toni whose face we saw at the window, or that it was he who fired the old man's barn."

"I've told you once before that I don't attach any importance to that face-at-the-window stuff. As for the barn, I don't believe for a moment that it was done by the same person who did the other things."

"That's a change in policy, isn't it?" I took a long pull at my mint julep.

"Well, it's like this, Dr. Swanson. Criminals are creatures of habit like you and me. In any chain of murders you usually find that the same little tricks crop up time and time again. It often happens that this repetition is the undoing of the man—like the case of that English fellow who killed all his wives by drowning them in bathtubs. Anyhow, a man who stabs doesn't often shoot—a professional burglar never kills except in self-defense. Our criminal has original ideas of murder. He'd never sink to anything so cleancut as arson."

"Very pretty, Bracegirdle, but who fired the barn then?"

"Between you and me, I think it was one of the villagers. When things go wrong in a community, the simple folk are very apt to blame it on the richest man in the place."

"So you think they were just taking it out on him, eh?"

The deputy nodded.

"Well," I continued, "you may or may not be right, but you haven't yet brought forward a particle of real evidence to show that Toni was mixed up in all this."

Bracegirdle rose to the fireplace and knocked out his pipe.

"I haven't told you everything yet, Dr. Swanson, and when I've finished what I'm going to say, I'm sure you'll agree that I have some grounds to go on. Let's forget the Baineses for a while and confine ourselves to the night of the coon-hunt, which, so we believe at present, was also the night that Gerald Alstone was murdered."

"All right."

"As you know, Dr. Conti did not go on the coon-hunt. The servants' evidence showed that he stuck around the house for a while and then went out. My belief is that he returned to the Alstones' just before Gerald came back from Grindle Meadow. You remember Hall heard the boy talking to someone and didn't know whether or not he was telephoning?"

"Well, we know he did not finish his call to the hospital, so he was probably interrupted by Dr. Conti. Perhaps they had a fight, and Gerald was shot. Dr. Conti carried him out to his car just before the others returned. Then he drove home. Yes, I've

checked up on that, too. Your colored maid says he got back at about eleven-thirty—roughly the time Mrs. Baines saw that car go by."

He paused, but I nodded to him to go on.

"Well, you can imagine how he felt when he put the car away and found the body missing. You yourself have told me that you have to turn to get into that garage of yours. It was quite a logical place for the body to drop off. Remember it was snowing hard and the corpse would have sunk pretty deeply in the drift."

"He would have been unlikely to have seen it even though it was so close at hand. He couldn't have guessed at what point in the ride home the rope got broken. Anyhow, he realizes he has to give himself an alibi, so he drives back to the Alstones' house and parks his car where it had been before. By this time other cars are milling about and no one notices him."

"But, what about Miss Middleton?" I asked. "She was in his car when I went to get mine."

"I checked up on her movements, too. She stayed behind in the house for quite a while after the guests had gone. Then she went out and sat in the car, thinking quite naturally that it had been there all the time. It was a clever trick."

"But where was he all the while she was waiting? Why didn't he show up and take her home?"

"I think I can answer that, too. He was within a few feet of you both. He was doing something which one of my men caught him doing again this morning. He was looking about in the snow for the gun with which he shot Gerald Alstone and which he had either dropped or thrown away a short time earlier."

"Good God! you mean that someone actually found him there this morning?"

"Yes, Dr. Swanson." The deputy's voice was grave. "And what is more they found the gun within a few yards of where he had been looking for it—behind the stable where Dr. Conti's car was parked that night."

"The gun!"

"The thirty-two revolver that was missing from the rack in the gunroom. Mr. Alstone has identified it. Unless I am much mistaken, it is the gun with which Gerald was shot. You see, sir, it was imbedded in the snow and we might never have found it except for the thaw—and Dr. Conti!"

"It's a plant, Bracegirdle. I can't believe that Toni—there must be some ghastly mistake."

"Well, Doctor, if he didn't do the shooting, how did he know where to look for the gun? And that's not all either. The report of our finger-print man came through today,

and he found Dr. Conti's all over the gun-room."

"That's nothing. He probably found mine too—and yours."

"He did." Bracegirdle's voice was very low. "But almost all the marks left by Dr. Conti happened to be bloodstained. Why, even on the door handle—"

I JUMPED from my chair and for a moment Bracegirdle and I looked each other in the eyes.

Had it been any other man in the world, I think I might have said things which I would afterward have regretted. I did not—could not—believe that Toni was guilty, and yet, there was something about the deputy—his clear eyes, his calm unruffled tone—that convinced me in spite of myself.

Convinced me, that is, of the reasonableness of his theory. Common sense told me that the prognosis for Toni was decidedly poor.

How much worse would it have been had Bracegirdle known about the piece of stained rope which Valerie had handed me that morning and which still seemed to burn a hole in my pocket!

"Well, Dr. Swanson, now you know all about it, what would you advise? Should I serve my warrant on Dr. Conti as the D.A. suggests?"

"Warrant! You've actually got one with you?"

"Yes, but I don't need to serve it right away. If, for example, you, as a friend of mine, know anything that could prove me wrong, I'd trust you, Dr. Swanson. And I wouldn't blame you if you'd been keeping back any information."

My brain seemed to be reeling. I had been drinking pretty steadily before and since the deputy arrived, and any concrete idea that I might or might not have had was by this time spinning away in fumes of alcohol. One thing was certain, however. I must play for time.

"There's nothing I can tell you now," I said, "but, if you'll give me twenty-four hours, I think—perhaps—there are several things that are worrying me, and I might be able to do something when my head's clearer."

Bracegirdle nodded soberly.

"Don't serve that warrant," I went on, "till tomorrow night—say, at ten o'clock. That gives me a whole day. And don't question Dr. Conti any more than you can help. I know him pretty well and I'm sure there's some reason why he's not being frank. Leave him to me."

He rose to his feet and held out his hand to me.

I took it—doubtfully.

CHAPTER XIII



AFTER Bracegirdle had left, I sat alone in the living-room, wondering—a little drunkenly—what to do. I had twenty-four hours in which to disentangle the web of suspicion that chance had so insidiously wound about Toni. My task seemed as hopeless as it was melodramatic.

During the past few weeks, I had let myself be swept along in the current of events without troubling to interpret or deduce. I found myself now left stranded with neither theory nor clue.

In my talk with Bracegirdle I had told him there were several things that worried me about the case, but it was difficult to put my finger on any one event around which my suspicions could be crystallized. Apart from the piece of rope, there was only one fact I possessed which was unknown to Bracegirdle—our discovery of the parked automobile in which Roberta and her mysterious male friend—later presumed to be Seymour Alstone—had been quarreling.

This was as good a starting point as any other. Despite the mint juleps I found, strangely enough, that the snatches of overheard conversation came back to me with singular clearness—"He wouldn't stop at anything if I told him. He's jealous, vindictive" . . . "You know what'll happen if you don't. You're a jelly-fish, a goddam spineless jelly-fish!" . . . "Of course he's crazy. That's what makes him so dangerous!"

It was difficult to make much sense out of these incoherent remarks, but they did have a tendency to prove that Roberta knew something which, so far, she had not divulged to the police. My best bet, I supposed drearily, was to have a little visit with the resplendent Mrs. Tailford-Jones next morning and tell her bluntly that her rendezvous in the wood had been observed. It was just possible that some sort of a confession could be frightened out of her. At any rate, there would be a certain piquancy in turning the tables upon a person who had been so unscrupulous in her accusations of others.

Though I was up early next morning, Toni was ahead of me. He had gone to Rhodes leaving a verbal message with Lucinda that he had important work to do at the hospital and was going to beg, borrow or steal a lift.

Glad, in a sense, that he was out of the way, I ate my Sunday breakfast alone and then went off along the dripping lanes in search of Roberta.

A disdainful maid showed me into the living-room where blasts of steam made the atmosphere both unwholesome and uncomfortable. I waited half an hour, at the end of which time my temper was none too good. The sight of Roberta herself in a flaming red peignoir did not improve matters.

She was obviously curious to know the reason for my visit. Her slightly protuberant eyes regarded me with a half hostile, half contemptuous stare.

"Well, Dr. Swanson," she said, as she draped herself carefully across the settee, "and what can I do for you?"

"A lot," I said tersely.

A look of suspicion crept into her eyes.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I think you know something and I want you to tell me what it is."

"And since when have you been in a position to order me about?"

I passed a hand through my hair.

"Listen, Mrs. Tailford-Jones," I began patiently, "things have got to the stage where innocent people are being accused of crimes they could not possibly have committed. I think that you as much as anyone—"

"If you're referring to that half-wit friend of yours, Mark Baines," she said acidly, "I'll tell you right here and now that I think it's an excellent thing for us all that he's locked up and out of the way. It was a crying scandal that he was allowed about as long as he was."

"I didn't come here to pick a quarrel," I said, trying to keep my temper. "I came here to ask your cooperation. It is of vital importance that we all get together and thrash this thing out. I think you know something—I may be wrong—but I ask you in all humility to rack your brains and tell me if you know anything that may have some bearing on this case—anything that hasn't so far been brought to light."

Roberta lifted her head and straightened the scarlet cushions. "A very pretty speech, Dr. Swanson! But I still don't see what you're driving at. If you're trying to pump me, however, believe me, you won't succeed."

"I'm sorry you're taking this attitude, Mrs. Tailford-Jones," I said quietly. "You force me into being unpleasant. I'd prefer not to be."

"I've never noticed that you need much forcing."

"Well, that makes it easier, doesn't it? It may interest you to know that I saw a car driving across the fields toward the disused road on the night that Mr. Alstone's setter disappeared. I followed it to the crest of the hill." Here I employed theory as fact. "And there I saw it parked in a small wood by the side of the disused road."

ROBERTA picked up a cigarette.

"Well?"

"Lacking the finer feelings of a gentleman, I listened to a conversation that was going on in that car. I heard one voice only. It was yours."

"Eavesdropping is just the sort of thing you'd expect from someone who spends his life torturing dumb animals," she said with sudden ferocity.

"I hate to have to bring other people into this," I continued, "but Dr. Conti happened to be listening, too. You were talking to a man. And you were having a quarrel. I don't know what it was all about, but I do know that you were in one of the Alstones' cars."

Roberta was obviously becoming uncomfortable under this inquisition. I decided to adopt the well-worn tactics of trying to sting her into admission by some obvious improbability.

"I suspect," I went on mendaciously, "that you were with Gerald that night. I suspect that something happened between you which may be of extreme importance in this case. Gerald was killed you know, not long after. It would possibly interest the police if I told them what I heard."

Roberta's eyes were blazing. She rose to her feet, crushing the cigarette with a scarlet-nailed finger.

"Gerald! You think I was with Gerald? That little sissy. You insult me."

"I insult you, as you so quaintly put it, because my room-mate happens to have a warrant out against him for that 'little sissy's' murder!"

"You're lying!" Roberta's face was the color of a gravestone. "You're absolutely crazy!"

"So that interests you, does it?" I said. "Bracegirdle's going to arrest him this evening unless we can produce evidence to prove he's wrong."

Roberta sank back on the settee, this time completely regardless of effect. In the five years of our acquaintance, I hadn't realized her capable of such emotion. I had certainly never suspected her of having any sentimental feeling for Toni. She had always been at her most alluring with him, but I had supposed the seductive glances and the hand-clings to be nothing more than an instinctive Roberta reaction to six feet four of he-manhood.

"What have they got against him?" she asked quickly.

"Plenty," I replied. "I can't tell you the actual facts because Bracegirdle told me in confidence—but they've got enough to convict him unless we can find out something new. Now will you tell me why you were in that car?"

My question seemed to help her recover her poise. She drew herself up and gave me a scornful look.

"Gerald, indeed!" she snapped. "You fool, it was Franklin. That moron has been chasing after me for years. You must be a pretty bum detective if you didn't realize that the Alstones have five cars."

"What were you doing?"

She adopted an air of injured innocence.

"It's no business of yours, but if it helps Toni any—we were having a private chat."

"What about?"

"About—er—Queenie."

She threw me a spiteful glance.

"If you really want to know, I was trying to get Franklin to make Seymour take the whole matter up with the hospital authorities. You know what I think about you, Dr. Swanson, and your habit of murdering animals—"

"Don't let's go into that now," I interrupted. "What did Franklin say?"

"Oh, just what you'd expect. He's too darned scared of old Alstone to do anything."

"So just for that," I said, laughing, "you called him a spineless jelly-fish!"

SHE shrugged her shoulders and pulled the red peignoir more tightly around her. "And to whom did you refer, Mrs. Tailford-Jones, when you said: 'He's jealous, vindictive. He wouldn't stop at anything if I told him?'"

"If you can't guess, you're more of a fool than I thought you were."

"Well, let's leave it at that. Did you drive to the wood over the fields?"

"Why on earth should we when there's a perfectly good road?"

"What time did you get there?"

"I don't know, but it was quite early."

"Before eleven-thirty?"

"Yes. Edgar left for Sampson at about nine. I guess we must have gotten there around ten."

"Did you see or hear another car pass close by you at any time during the evening?"

"I don't remember."

"You didn't hear an animal howling?"

"I did not."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"There's another point," I continued, suddenly remembering something Bracegirdle had told me. "You drove to the Alstones' on the night the barn burned down. You didn't go to the house. Where did you go?"

"To see Franklin."

"Where?"

"In the carpenter shop."

"About the same business?"

"More or less."

"And that's all you know?"

She turned, her eyes dark with anger.

"Listen, Dr. Swanson. I've stood enough impertinence from you. You come into my house; cross-question me in my own living-room; treat me as though I were a criminal. I won't stand for it any longer, I tell you. You've heard all I know. Now, get out!"

But I did not rise.

"Are you sure that is all?" I said quietly.

"Remember, if you're holding anything back, you're making it all the worse for Toni."

She got up and started pacing about the room, puffing fiercely at a cigarette. The peignoir bellied out behind her like a scarlet spider-web. Her voice, when she spoke, was curiously low.

"I've always disliked you, Dr. Swanson. Don't think I haven't noticed how you're trying to get Toni away from me and foist him on the moon-faced Middleton girl. You've been fighting pretty hard, haven't you? Well, you won't succeed. And, what's more, you can't blame me if I did a bit of fighting back."

"Just what do you mean?" I asked, completely at sea.

She came up to me and pressed her heavy face close to mine.

"I sent you that letter," she said. "And I'll do it again. Here you are, acting the little detective—pretending you're just too worked up because your boyfriend's in danger. But, all the same, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you didn't know more about it than any of us—you and that idiot, Mark Baines!"

She drew away, sending a cloud of blue smoke up into the air.

"So you wrote the anonymous letter," I exclaimed. "Did you send the one to Alstone as well?"

"Alstone? Which Alstone?" Her mouth hung open in surprise. "I didn't even know there was one."

There was a conviction in her voice which made me inclined to believe her.

"Well, that's all," I said, rising. "I'm sorry if I've upset you, Mrs. Tailford-Jones. But it was absolutely necessary. If you should remember anything else, I wish you'd get in touch with me immediately. Bracegirdle's serving the warrant tonight."

She followed me to the door, and I felt her soft hand on my sleeve.

"Dr. Swanson!" Her throat was working convulsively. "You must tell me what they've got against Toni. Don't you see? I might be able to help."

I paused, my fingers on the knob.

"Help? How could you help?"

"I don't know, but there's still a chance. . . ." Suddenly she seemed to have become overwhelmed with grief. "I'll do

anything to save him. I swear I will. All you've got to do is to tell me!"

"All right."

I returned to my chair and told her some of the less damning evidence against Toni. She listened until I started to speak of his suspicious night-outings and of his complete lack of alibis for the times at which Polly and Jo Baines met their deaths. Then she gave a triumphant laugh and sprang to her feet.

"If that's all they've got against him," she exclaimed, with a strange glint in her eye, "I can tell you where he was on the night Polly Baines disappeared, and on the night her father was murdered. He was with me!"

I looked at her in complete amazement.

"You?" I repeated weakly.

"Yes. You never guessed that, did you? You never guessed that all the time you were throwing him on the neck of that Middleton girl he was coming out to see me." She stood there a few moments, drawn to her full height. Then she collapsed. Her head drooped and her hands fell limply at her sides. "I think I'll go upstairs and lie down," she said softly. "You can find your way out."

Pulling the scarlet peignoir around her, she crossed to the door. Despite my partial scepticism, I could not help feeling a little sorry for her. She looked like a dejected cardinal bird that had been caught in the rain.

AS I hurried down the drive, my mind was full of Roberta's sensational confession, which, if true, would help to prove Toni's innocence with regard to the earlier crimes. But, despite a strong desire to believe her, I found it difficult. She was an hysterical, theatrical woman whose life, lacking inherent reality, was built up around just such dramatics as this. It was possible that she really had worked herself up into an infatuation for Toni. It was possible, too, that he had had some sort of affair with her, though surely—if he cared for Valerie as I believed he did—this must have been a thing of the past.

Still, there were several puzzling facts which such a relationship might explain. On the night we had surprised Mrs. Tailford-Jones' rendezvous with Franklin, Toni had acted in a peculiar fashion. I remembered wondering vaguely at the time whether there had not been something between them. He had seemed irritated and almost jealous to find Roberta alone with another man.

Still slightly dazed by my recent encounter, I abandoned these fruitless speculations and busied myself with the more concrete of her statements. At least I had fathomed the reason for her dislike of me. She had, apparently, suspected me of acting the over-zealous chaperon to my room-mate.

In the light of this, I was reasonably convinced that my anonymous letter had come from her. The style and content were both so obviously Robertian. As for her relationship with Franklin, "the spineless jelly-fish," that could easily be checked. Gerald's father, I imagined, was not the type to stand up under cross-examination. The next step in my curious pilgrimage was clear. Turning down the lane, I made toward the Alstones' house.

Hall, the butler, ushered me into the library, and in a few seconds, Franklin came bustling through the doorway.

"You wished to speak to my father, Dr. Swanson?" he murmured, slipping a cold hand into mine. "He is down in the stables—"

"No, Mr. Alstone," I interrupted, "I've come to visit you. There's a little matter which I want you to clear up for me."

Franklin gave me a wintry smile.

"Oh, yes, yes. Won't you sit down?"

His pale eyes played on mine nervously, then flicked away, glancing along the crowded bookshelves to the majestic picture of Seymour Alstone in full hunting costume.

"I want you to confirm some information," I continued, "which I have just got from one of our neighbors. The matter is trivial and, at the same time, rather delicate, but it helps to explain away several things that have been bothering me. I came to you myself, because I have no desire to make this a matter for the police, and I am particularly anxious to prevent innocent people from being accused of something they did not do."

Franklin coughed and looked down at the carpet.

"You see," I went on, scrutinizing his face closely, "I've just been talking to Mrs. Tailford-Jones."

Franklin's embarrassment at the mention of Roberta's name was so apparent that it seemed hardly necessary to continue my inquisition.

"It refers," I went on, "to a certain interview you had with her in the wood by the disused road—an interview which I happened to have overheard."

I noticed that the bald dome of his head had turned an unwholesome pink.

"I don't know what Mrs. Tailford-Jones has been telling you," he said suddenly, "but I must ask you to hear what I have to say before you form any opinion of my actions. It was not through meanness on my part that I decided to stop payment—"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Alstone," I broke in, realizing immediately that he had supposed Roberta to have been more frank with me than in fact she had. "Let's have this from the beginning. Of course, I understand that it's a personal matter, and one you have a perfect right to keep from me."

Franklin looked at me with a strange expression in his eyes. His mouth, I noticed, was trembling.

"No, Dr. Swanson, now that she has brought the matter up herself, it will give me great pleasure to be able to confide in someone. I do not trust that woman. I have no wish that you should be left with only her version of the incidents."

"The meeting was made by appointment, of course?" I said, trying to give the impression that I was in full information of the facts.

"By appointment, yes," Franklin threw a look over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Of course, Dr. Swanson, you will appreciate that all this is in strict confidence. It is a highly personal matter, and I should hate to think that my father—well, he is a man of very strong prejudices. It is very difficult to get him to see things in, shall we say, an unbiased fashion?"

I ASSURED him that whatever he told me would go no farther.

"Good, good," Franklin was very excited. "Well, you doubtless know of the unhappy circumstances of my marriage. For many years I have been without the pleasure of—er—feminine society. I think that it was this, coupled with the knowledge that she, too, suffered in a similar manner, that first attracted me to Mrs. Tailford-Jones. It never was a friendship of mutual respect or taste. At the time I never felt really at ease with myself, but against my better feelings I gradually became involved in an affair from which it was more and more difficult to extricate myself."

He broke off, and his expression was a strange mixture of fear and hatred.

"Colonel Tailford-Jones, as you know," he went on, "has very little to live on except his army pension. Mrs. Tailford-Jones has no money of her own, either. At the—er—crest of our friendship, it seemed only just to me that I allow her a reasonable sum with which to buy the little things that mean so much to the feminine mind."

So that explained the local mystery of Roberta's mink coats and diamond bracelets, I thought with inward amusement. It also explained her reticence about telling me what had actually occurred in the car that night.

"You didn't talk about the marmoset during the meeting with Roberta?" I asked carefully.

"Why—yes, possibly. She was one of the small presents that I gave to Mrs. Tailford-Jones."

He paused, as though expecting some sort of indication that I understood and appreciated his action.

"Naturally," I murmured, "And very generous!"

"Generous I have been with her," he said, with the nearest approach to fierceness I had ever seen in him. "Generous in the extreme. But there comes a time when even I must refuse to finance a woman who obviously looks upon me as nothing more than a convenient source of income—something from which she can obtain the pretty things she uses to attract other men."

He came quite close to me and stared into my face. His whole body shaking with fury.

"As long as she made some pretence of fidelity, I was amenable," he went on. "But there came a time—well, I need not embarrass you by proceeding further."

He referred, apparently, to my roommate's supposed affair with Roberta.

"So you told her," I asked, "that you could no longer give her money?"

"I did!"

Franklin's lips twisted into a smile of remembered pleasure.

"And she turned nasty?"

"There's more to it than that—" he began, but was interrupted by the opening of the door.

He started and turned guiltily toward the intruder.

"Mrs. Tailford-Jones is on the wire, Mr. Franklin."

One of the maids was standing on the threshold. I realized instantly that Roberta had decided to get together with Franklin on my visit. Luckily for me, she had left it too late.

Franklin was glancing at me furtively. "Tell her I am engaged, please, Mary. I cannot be disturbed."

The maid nodded and withdrew.

"It was she who made the appointment," continued Franklin breathlessly, as soon as the door was firmly shut. "I expect she tried to make you think it was I. When her husband had gone off, she called me, and at her suggestion, I picked her up in one of father's cars and drove to the wood."

"And there the scene took place?"

"Exactly. I told her precisely what I thought of her. I told her that it was useless to expect anything more from me!"

"And her reaction?"

FRANKLIN bowed his head. "She is not the sort of person from whom one can expect consideration," he said softly. "She demanded a lump sum of money, threatening me with exposure if I refused to give it to her."

"Exposure?"

"As you know, Dr. Swanson, my father—" His hands flopped loosely at his sides.

"You gave in?"

"What else could I do? I arranged to meet her and hand over the money."

"That was to be in the carpenter's shop?"

He nodded.

"On the night the barn burned down?"

Franklin started as though I had accused him of complicity in that affair.

"Yes, yes, I believe that was the night."

Now the story was told, the strange, almost demoniacal force that had seemed to have taken possession of him, slipped away. He sank down in a chair and blew his nose.

"I must thank you, Mr. Alstone," I murmured, "for being so frank with me. You've been extremely useful, and while I know I have no authority in all this, I would be grateful if you would answer a few more questions."

He waved the handkerchief in assent, but still did not look up.

"During the time you were in the wood," I asked, "did you, by any chance, hear a car?"

Franklin seemed to be thinking for a moment, his eyes shifting uneasily.

"Why, yes," he said suddenly, "I think I do remember hearing one."

I pricked up my ears.

"About what time?"

"Let me see now." He seemed eager to help. "I should say offhand that it was sometime about midnight."

"Fine!" I exclaimed. "You didn't see who was in it?"

He smiled faintly. "I'm afraid I was rather—upset at the time. I did not pay much attention. I doubt if I even saw the vehicle. You know, the trees there are particularly dense."

"Quite. You didn't hear any other sound? The barking of a dog, for example?"

"No. Of that I am sure."

"See any lights?"

He shook his head. "I just heard the car driving by. That is all."

I felt my despondency return. This was no new information after all. Merely a corroboration of what Toni and I myself had seen. It did raise once more the complication of someone driving about the countryside in an unlighted car—someone who was not Roberta or Franklin. But there was nothing in it to prove that I had in fact heard that cry. Nothing to help in my attempt to disprove Bracegirdle's accusations.

A few minutes later I took my departure, leaving Franklin standing thin and pathetic before the great oil-painting of the father he so much feared. I thought of the expression I had seen on his face during his diatribe against Roberta, and one thing made itself clear in my mind. Seymour Alstone was not the only person that this strange thwarted individual feared—and hated.

CHAPTER XIV



BY the time I reached home, it was almost noon. I had spent the best part of the morning tracking down what had turned out to be a mare's nest—a mare's nest, incidentally, that left a decidedly unpleasant smell in my nostrils. I had learned that Franklin had been entangled in Roberta's spider-web; that she had

been indulging in a very neat piece of blackmail and that, in the bargain, she professed to be in love with my room-mate.

But, with all this startling information, I was no nearer any sort of solution to the mystery. If Toni really had been paying those nocturnal visits to Roberta, a definite proof of it would help considerably in absolving him from complicity in the first two killings. It would not, however, explain away the much more damning evidence against him—the bloodstained fingerprints, the search for the revolver, and the so-far undetected clue of the piece of rope. I found myself regretting my dramatic plea to Bracegirdle. To produce an empty bag at the end of the day would be far more harmful than never to have suggested the hunt.

Feeling extremely inadequate, I decided to continue with my policy of annoying the neighbors. Confessions had simply tumbled out of Roberta and Franklin. Perhaps I would strike some more profitable vein in the others. After all, one fact was certain. Somebody must know something.

Before embarking upon my several wild-goose chases, however, I was resolved to call Valerie and hear the worst about the piece of rope. I had been shirking the issue all morning, but now I felt that anything would be preferable to the vague uneasiness which the presence of this unexplained clue stirred in my mind.

Mrs. Middleton answered the 'phone in one of her pessimistic moods. Valerie was in her room. No, she was not sick; just thoroughly overwrought. No, she could not call her to the 'phone. She was nervous enough as it was, without having to be bothered by anything fresh. NO, she didn't know what I wanted to say but she was sure it was something worrying.

I interrupted her, pleading to be granted a short talk with her daughter. It was very important. I would not keep her more than a few seconds.

Grudgingly, Mrs. Middleton conceded, stating that she would put Valerie on the upstairs 'phone. Then, as an afterthought, she announced her intention of listening in

on our conversation.

I was forced to accept this very second best. Valerie's voice sounded extremely tired. There was also a certain aloofness in her tone, the significance of which I could not appreciate. The first few moments I spent in idle chatter for the benefit of Mrs. Middleton. Then I came to the point as directly as I dared.

"Listen, Valerie, you know that thing you gave me yesterday? I want you to tell me where you found it."

"Where I found it?" She seemed surprised. "Why, is there any need?"

My heart sank as I heard her. The piece of rope had now inevitably to be placed on the debit side of Toni's account.

"I see what you mean," I continued despondently. "I just thought you might have some other explanation."

"And I was hoping you had, Doug. Listen, you've got to tell me what happened. You must tell me about everything. Haven't I given you proof that you can trust me?"

I pictured Mrs. Middleton's ear clamped to the receiver and replied with a sigh.

"I can't say anything now, except that the abscess is coming to a head—and that I'm expecting it to burst tonight at ten o'clock. If we can't do anything before then, I'm afraid the patient will be in a pretty bad way. If you can think of a cure, however desperate, come round at ten. God knows we need it."

With admirable astuteness, Valerie got on to my meaning.

"Very well, Doug. Ten o'clock? I'll be there to see you through, whatever Mother says."

At this point Mrs. Middleton broke in. "You go back and lie down, Valerie. You've done quite enough talking."

I was just about to hang up the receiver, when I realized that Mrs. Middleton, as well as anyone, would do for my next cross-examination.

"Oh, could you spare me a few minutes," I said hurriedly, "if I came right round?"

MRS. MIDDLETON seemed less chary of her own maiden presence than that of her daughter. I could tell immediately that she suspected me of having some fresh and calamitous news. She agreed to my suggestion almost with eagerness, but added that, whereas she was quite willing to talk with me, her daughter must be left undisturbed for the rest of the day.

When I stepped into her immaculate living-room, she was waiting for me, her small, beady eyes alight with foreboding.

"Well, what is it now? Has there been another—er—tragedy? So many dreadful things have happened, so much horror!"

"No, Mrs. Middleton," I replied, with a persuasive smile. "I'm still trying to clear up the old ones. I came to you in the hope that you'd be able to help me discover the murderer!"

Mrs. Middleton started, and her eyes opened wide.

"Murderer! How could I help?"

"I must tell you in strict confidence," I continued, "that one of our neighbors is going to be arrested. I am convinced of his innocence, but unless we can find some fresh evidence, he'll have a hard time proving it."

Mrs. Middleton was full of shocked curiosity which I would not satisfy further. I assured her that I was in earnest and pleaded with her to let me know whether there was not something, however trivial, that she had been holding back from the police. At first she seemed injured that I should suspect her of hindering justice, but I was almost certain she was not speaking the truth. After several minutes of tactful intimidation on my part, she began to grow nervous. Her bright eyes turned evasively from mine.

"If there was one little thing," she faltered, "do you suppose that . . ."

She broke off, flushing deeply.

"Never mind how unimportant it is," I persuaded. "It may help."

"Well, if I tell you, is it necessary—I mean, will the police and everybody else get to know?"

"Bracegirdle may have to be told. I assure you it will go no further."

Mrs. Middleton smiled feebly and fingered the brooch on her bosom.

"I should not like anyone to be accused for something I did," she began in a low voice. "Of course, I've been miserable for days, but I think you'll understand when I tell you. I wouldn't exactly say that I hate him, although he's done such terrible unjust things to me. But still, however Christian one may try to be, one can never quite forgive a person for causing the death of one's husband, can one?"

I nodded.

"And for all you may say," she went on, "I still think he has something to do with it. But I should never have done what I did. Now, if I had had the courage to sign my name, it would have been different. But, an anonymous letter—"

"Anonymous letter!" I exclaimed. "So you sent it to Mr. Alstone?"

Mrs. Middleton looked very woebegone.

"I regret it, Dr. Swanson. I really do. But for the moment my feelings got the better of my taste. I swear I would never do such a thing again." She had taken out a handkerchief and was twisting it in her hand like a naughty but contrite schoolgirl. "Can I ask you to keep this to yourself? Of course,

I suppose the police should be informed, but . . ."

I assured her that the maximum of secrecy would be observed and rose to take my leave.

On the porch Mrs. Middleton took hold of my sleeve and stared up at me with an important expression on her face.

"You say they're going to arrest someone else?" she said. "Does that mean that Mark will be released?"

"Why, yes. If Bracegirdle's theory is correct, Mark had nothing to do with it."

Mrs. Middleton's mouth moved into a sly smile.

"I'm very glad to hear that," she said. "And if it's really true, I can tell you something else."

"Something else?"

"Yes." She was staring out across the bare strip of lawn. "You remember that face at the window the night Sancho was hurt?"

I nodded.

"Well, it was Mark."

"Mark?"

"I was far too startled to recognize anything at the time. But later, when I thought it over, I remembered having seen that dark lock of hair that hangs over his forehead. I recall it vividly. Of course, the face was distorted by the glass, and I thought the lock was some sort of scar. But now I am positive it was he!"

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

Mrs. Middleton's eyes twinkled.

"I am very fond of the boy, and he's done wonders with our garden," she said. "Besides, I was convinced he had nothing to do with the murders. And you know how the police are—always ready to put the worst implication on everything." She took my hand and squeezed it. "You can tell Bracegirdle about the letter. But I think we should keep the other little matter to ourselves."

I DEPARTED, feeling that I had always underrated Mrs. Middleton.

Once in the lane I started to consider my next move. I seemed to have developed quite a talent for acquiring useless information.

Castles fell at my knock, but, unfortunately, they were not the right castles.

It was interesting to know that Mrs. Middleton's spleen against Seymour had got the better of her, and that it had been Mark who had stared at us through the window. But, after all, neither of these discoveries had anything but a negative bearing on the case. For positive information, there were still the Goschens, Peter, Seymour, Edgar, Mrs. Franklin Alstone and Mark Baines. Each of them would doubtless be ripe for

confession—each of them but the murderer.

Deciding, for the moment, to rest on my scanty laurels, I returned home in the hope of finding my room-mate.

Toni was in the living-room when I arrived.

"Well, Doug," he exclaimed, grinning over the top of the morning newspaper, "have you got a good bloodhound, too? I've had a big flatfoot following me around all day. He waited for two hours outside the hospital this morning and seemed to thrive on it. I'm expecting him to peer furtively through the window at any moment!"

"Listen, Toni." I began, "there's something I've got to tell you—"

But, as I spoke, Lucinda came in and interrupted me with the announcement of lunch.

For a man with a potentially guilty conscience, I must say that Toni ate with remarkable appetite. Being hungry myself, I avoided all controversial subjects until after we had finished eating.

"All right, Doug," said Toni as soon as we had lighted our pipes, and kicked aside the Sunday newspaper. "Let's hear you pour out your soul."

"This is serious, Toni. For God's sake, listen."

"I've been wanting to listen for about two weeks."

His eyes were slightly mocking.

Without waiting for any more I burst forth into an account of my talk with Bracegirdle. He did not interrupt me until I came to the reconstruction of his movements on the night of Gerald's death. Then, to my surprise, he started to roar with laughter. It was the healthiest sound I had heard in the house for several weeks. In fact, I had never seen Toni so cheerful. His hot southern nature, which, like Vesuvius, usually lay dormant, now seemed on the verge of unexpected eruption.

"And you listened to that yarn, Doug? Knowing what you know, you let Bracegirdle—hell's bells, man, but you're an old fox."

He laughed again.

"Of course I know he must be wrong," I replied, "but you see, his men found you behind the stable looking for the gun yesterday morning. How did you know where it was?"

"I didn't, but I had a little theory of my own. Well, what else have they got against me?"

I went on to describe my visit to Roberta. If Toni had laughed before, this time he bellowed.

"Oh, my God, Doug! How Roberta must have enjoyed making heavy drama out of our cock-eyed little affair. I'd have given a

lot to have been a fly on the wall at that interview! Roberta playing the fallen woman all over the room and you very thin-lipped and Sunday school teacher."

"But, don't you see, Toni—at least she gives you an alibi."

"I'm not at all interested in my own alibis. What tickles me is the ones she gives herself. Franklin . . . that human hairpin! And we both thought it was the old man!"

He was still chuckling when I went on to tell him of Mrs. Middleton and her disclosures. It was not until I mentioned the piece of rope that he seemed really interested.

"Damned decent of her, Doug. It means a whole lot when a girl like Valerie suppresses material evidence. Incidentally, we'd better throw it in the fire."

So saying, he snatched it from my hand and shoved it deep among the blazing logs.

"Toni," I expostulated. "You can't get rid of things like that. We've got to take this business more seriously. It's two o'clock now and in eight hours Bracegirdle's coming around to serve that warrant. You do know something, don't you?"

MY ROOM-MATE'S mouth twisted into a queer smile as he turned his dark eyes on my face.

"Sure, I know something," he said slowly. "I know just about as much as you do. I'm waiting for you to begin the girlish confidences."

"You goddam fool," I said irritably. "I know as much about it as—as Lucinda. And I'm sick of your hints and half-statements. If you want to be arrested, well . . ."

"You mean," he said incredulously, "that you really don't know who shot Gerald Alstone and dumped him in our backyard?"

"No, of course not. If I had the faintest idea, I wouldn't be sitting here bellyaching at you."

"Well, Doug, if you don't know, then I don't either. Let's start considering a few possibilities, shall we? Personally, I vote for Roberta." He seemed excited, and his hair had fallen over his forehead. "She's destroyed many a young man in her time."

"No sale, Toni. How could she have killed Baines?"

"All right. How about Edgar? I like the little colonel even though he is a snub-nosed gelding. It's rather piquant to think of him playing the werewolf at night times—tying little girls up in trees, disembowelling Queenie, the wares of his wife's sin."

"It doesn't fit," I remarked. "Nothing seems to fit."

"Well, then, the old man himself. Perhaps he can't satisfy his lust for power any longer. No one to bully except the bald Franklin and

the bear-eyed Gerald. Whoops and off we go! Over the hills and far away to find a dog, a cat or a goose. Hunting's been lousy this year, by the way."

"Much more likely to have been Franklin," I said joining against my will in Toni's mood. I was still considerably surprised to hear my room-mate talking like this. For one usually so calm and monosyllabic, this outburst seemed to verge on hysteria.

"Yes, or Peter Foote. For a young man who's travelled widely this must be a very dull neck of the woods. Why shouldn't he have thrown away his plaster cast and flown to Grindle on the night of the coon-hunt? Dropped Polly in the tree and then lassoed Gerald on his way to tell the police. A little skilful piloting and anyone could pitch a corpse into our garden. Has the idea of an aeroplane occurred to anyone, Doug?"

"Listen, you ass—"

"Or Mrs. Baines—in the intervals of parturition I expect she rides forth on a broomstick, possibly accompanied by Mrs. Middleton. Oh, boy, what a headline. HARPIES HARRY VALLEY. It's worth proving it just for the story."

"Well, there are enough crazy people around Grindle for anyone to prove anything."

"Yes, Doug, and that's why I think that you did it. The one sane man amongst us. You—with the possible connivance of Bracegirdle. I don't see why we should leave him out, poor fellow. He has to do something to relieve the tedium of sleuthing."

I rose from my seat. "Listen, Toni, you must be sensible. Let's get down to it and admit that there's not a single person in this valley who's capable of doing these things."

Toni had stood up, too, and his eyes were shining with uncanny brilliance. "As you say, Doug, my boy, not a single person was capable—" He broke off. "You give me an idea, Doug. A positive inspiration." He hurried out into the hall and started to pull on his overcoat.

"Hey, where are you going?"

Toni smiled. "I'm going to ask my shadow to give me a lift to Rhodes. It'll be more fun for him than standing out there in the cold."

"To Rhodes again?"

"I've been the silent partner long enough. I want action. I'm going to work up the idea you've just given me. And, by the way, is the library open today?"

"Sunday—good Lord, no."

He paused and I noticed that his face fell. "Damn, damn, damn," he muttered. Then another idea seemed to strike him.

"Is young Foote in Rhodes, by the way?"

"I think so. Why?"

"He's got some books I want—some medical books. Saw them on his bed table at the

hospital the other day. So, if I can't get into the stacks, I'll borrow his."

"But—?"

Toni had opened the front door, and a gust of cold wind blew into the house.

"Don't worry about me, Doug—and don't worry about yourself. I'll be back in plenty of time for Bracegirdle. Now go finish your knitting and no more prying into the private lives of your fellow citizens. Good-by."

He slammed the door and was gone.

CHAPTER XV



DINNER had been waiting almost half an hour when Toni finally returned. With him came Peter Foote, and between them, they carried five or six medical books, some of which were Peter's, some of which, they explained, had been borrowed from the Professor of Neurology and Psy-

chiatry.

As Peter limped upstairs to wash for dinner, Toni ordered me quite peremptorily to mix a big shaker of dry martinis and to have Lucinda lay another place for dinner. It was obvious from his manner that something important was about to happen. In his eye there was a strange, almost triumphant gleam.

Dinner was one of the tensest meals I have ever sat through—and, incidentally, one of the most alcoholic. Lucinda, disapproving and late for her church meeting, was constantly ordered to bring more and yet more whiskey highballs. Over his third, Toni announced mysteriously that he and Peter had been engaged all the afternoon in a very interesting piece of research. He steadfastly refused to reveal anything further. Peter, I could tell, was dying to talk, but, under the eagle eye of my room-mate, he was obliged to control himself.

At last the pumpkin pie was polished off, and Lucinda stumped away to church. Clapping our glasses, we removed to the living-room.

Toni's Swiss cuckoo-clock ticked arrogantly on. The wooden hands pointed to eight forty-five. It brought back to me the astonishing circumstances of this assembly. In seventy-five minutes the police would arrive with a warrant. And here was Toni, bright eyed and half drunk as though the whole affair were some strange, hectic farce.

"Well, prisoner at the bar," I began, "spill the beans if they're not too half-baked."

"Don't rush me, Doug."

My room-mate reached over toward the

books which Peter had arranged by his chair and jerked one from the bottom of the pile. For a moment none of us spoke; then, in a mocking imitation of his classroom voice, Toni started his oration.

"Gentlemen, as you know, I am only a poor pathologist. But this afternoon I have had the privilege of delving in the realms of morbid psychology and psychiatry. And, before going any farther, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my friend and colleague, Mr. Peter Foote, who is still young and optimistic enough to attach some importance to what is commonly termed the weak sister of medicine."

"What's he talking about?" I asked, turning to Peter. "Is it all hokey?"

The boy was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees.

"And here," continued Toni in the same serio-comic tone, "I have to thank and to acknowledge the suggestions of my colleague and room-mate, Dr. Douglas Swanson, who, by a chance remark, helped me to a scientific and brilliant explanation of the most unreasonable and, at the same time the most amusing series of incidents. . . ."

"It's almost nine o'clock," I broke in, "and hot air won't warm you when Bracegirdle takes you out into the cold, cold night."

Toni laughed and, pouring some whiskey into his glass, handed me the bottle.

"You seem very eager to get rid of me, Doug. Well, we shall see what we shall see. I'm quite prepared to be serious, but I warn you that you'll have to listen to a very dull spiel first. Foote, produce the data."

He threw the book he had been holding at Peter who opened it at a marked page and handed it back.

"You will remember, Doug," my room-mate went on, "that in our little talk this morning we agreed that the perpetrator of local crimes must be suffering under some form of insanity. Furthermore, being less tolerant than you, I suggested that almost anyone of our neighbors was screwy enough to be the criminal. You agreed in part. And then—and then, oh, Doug, you made your profound, your illuminating remark which gave me the idea."

"If I said anything brilliant, I assure you it was unintentional."

"Your words, my dear Douglas, were not brilliant per se, and certainly they were not brilliant intentionally. You said, if I remember correctly, 'There's not a single person in this valley who is capable of doing these things.' Do you see the significance of that word, single?"

Smiling pityingly, I passed the whiskey to Peter.

"I can't say that I do—unless you mean single as opposed to married."

"Come, Doug, this is no time for sex. I mean nothing of the sort. I merely mean single as opposed to double. In short, our murderer is two murderers!"

"Phooey!" I exclaimed. "There's about a ten million to one chance against your finding two similar maniacs in the same small place at the same time. Where's your respect for statistics?"

Toni sighed and looked down the pages of his text book.

"If you don't believe me," he chanted, "and if you think I lie, go to Dr. Schalkenbaum and he will tell you why. Now, Doug, this is the said Schalkenbaum's book on insanity—used, incidentally, in all the medical colleges from Rhodes to Stamford." He looked up at me, grinning. "In this standard text-book, we find a clue. Ah, yes, Miss Agatha Christie, the so exquisite and 'ow you say, needful clue. It has all come out of the little grey cells of Dr. Schalkenbaum.

"It has a French name which Poirot could pronounce far better than I, and all the literature on it is either in French or German. Hence Mr. Foote, my polyglot secretary. He's dug up all kinds of stuff today and translated it for me. Now, you listen, my boy. It will do away with all your scruples about twin-maniacs, because it officially recognizes them. You can even have some of your beloved statistics." Toni passed the book back to Peter. "Here, you'd better read it. My foreign pronunciation is lousy, and dear Doug's so sensitive."

Peter smiled and took the book.

"I think it's a knock-out, Dr. Swanson," he remarked. "Just listen to this."

"*Folie à deux*, or communicated madness. This condition was first accurately described by Laseque and Fabet in eighteen seventy-seven and later by Regis under the name *folie simultanée* in eighteen eighty. It is a condition in which one person, (known as the primary patient) usually a stronger or domineering type, infects another person, usually of weaker or inferior intellect, with his or her own insanity and delusions.

"The process is often a gradual one and is seen most commonly in persons of the same family where an older member usually infects a younger one. Sexual perversions, isolations, and religious inhibitions are often contributing causes, which may account for the fact that this condition is most frequently met with in lonely country districts. This form of insanity may often pass unnoticed for many years since the patients generally present all the outward appearances of sanity when encountered individually and apart from each other.

"But in its later stages, it forces itself upon public notice when the patients, overwhelmed by the strength of their delusion,

commit outrages or other anti-social acts which give cause for complaint. The condition is essentially one in which the delusion or frenzy of one individual is communicated to another, who is known as the secondary patient.

"True cases of *folie à deux* are rare, but there are common manifestations of the same underlying neurosis in the excitation which is imparted from one person to another in revivalist and other mass meetings. Suicide pacts may often be traced to this disorder. Diagnosis is difficult and the treatment is such as one would normally adopt for insanity!"

PETER put down the book and eyed me eagerly. "What do you think of that?" "Very interesting!" I said sceptically, "but it smells of the lamp. You may be right, you may be wrong—"

"Oh, Douglas, Douglas—" Toni kicked his legs into the air—"don't you see that it's the only explanation? Think of the alibis, man. Everyone in the valley has some sort of an alibi. But this splits them wide open. 'Where were you, Dr. Swanson, on the night that Roberta's marmoset was murdered?' 'Please, sir, I was with my friend Dr. Conti.' 'All right, pass along.' But"—he leaned forward peering into my face—"what if you were with your friend, Dr. Conti—and, at the same time, you were in the very act of eviscerating the hapless Queenie?"

"There's no need to be so pictorial," I said, "But, go on."

Toni winked at Peter.

"It must be right, Doug. Why, there's so much humor in it—so much good clean fun. Isn't there something in you, some deep secret part of your nature, that wouldn't enjoy going off in a car at night with a well-chosen companion. Lassoing nasty little girls and stringing 'em up in trees; catching poor, hard-working gardeners, and sticking them in their own muskrat-traps; wringing the necks of nice plump geese—shooting squawking kittens; mutilating Sancho Panza, doing old Seymour in the eye by killing his hunting dogs and his grandson. Hoopla!

"Why, man, the thing is just too fascinating for words, but I do insist—and here's the point—I do insist that it wouldn't be any fun alone. These are not the sort of crimes that are committed by a repressed-tortured maniac. They are the handiwork of someone with a robust, Rabelaisian humor. And that someone would have to have a crony. A good back-slapping pal. Someone to laugh with when Polly gets stuck half way up the tree—someone to . . ."

"For God's sake, shut up!" I cried suddenly.

For some reason I found a curious appre-

hension creeping over me. Until today I had never seen the unemotional Toni like this. His eyes were blackened gleaming, and his voice had a tense, high quality which I did not like. The wildest and most horrible suspicions raced through my drink-fuddled mind. Could all this be leading up to a disclosure which neither Peter nor I had expected?

I glanced at Foote, but he smiled reassuringly.

"Let him finish," he said.

"But"—Toni swallowed what was left of his drink—"there's another thing. Don't run away with the idea that our murderers were just maniacs. Oh, no, not by a long shot! Their killings are as motivated as those of the best Chicago gangsters. Think how they happened? Our two friends are on one of their nights out. They see a kitten. Goody, goody, they shoot it. But then what? Polly Baines comes tripping along after her darling pet! They see her, and she sees them. She's only a poor little half-wit girl—but she can talk." Toni was almost glaring at me.

"She can run home to mother and say, 'I saw so-and-so and so-and-so shooting my kitty.' She has only to do that, and the game is up. So what do our murderers do? They run and catch her. It's not much of a step from animals to humans. It must have been fun—it was policy, too."

"I see what you mean," I broke in. "The animals were just killed at random, but Polly, Baines and Gerald were all murdered deliberately because they had found out something. You're most likely right, but that doesn't help us discover who did it. And it doesn't help to prove your theory that two people are responsible."

"Maybe not, Doug. But haven't you noticed how everyone in the valley does hunt in twosomes? Think of all the loving couples that swarm in Grindle! How do we know what orgies are indulged in by Seymour and Franklin when doors are barred and shutters are closed?"

"Have you ever tried to imagine the private life of Charlie and Millie Goschen after the children are put to bed and the last highball drained? Take our own dear Middletons. Why shouldn't they perform the mystic rites of Hecate, clad in their night attire? Then there's Mark and Mrs. Baines consorting with the skunks, toads and foxes. And there are, or were—Peter and Gerald, young bucks who'd do anything for a lark. Perhaps they used to make clay figures of old Dean Warlock—God bless them—and stick pins into him.

"There's you and me, too. People who torture poor harmless guinea-pigs in a vain effort to cure suffering humanity. We're capable of anything in the eyes of Roberta.

Why shouldn't we have developed a passion for killing animals, and then murdered Polly to stop ourselves from being struck off the medical roll? And Edgar—Edgar and Roberta. But when you come to Roberta the combinations are as infinite as spirochetes. Don't you see, man?"

"I see that you're drunk, if that's what you mean."

"Oh, Douglas is going prim on us. Oh, you naughty, naughty boy. Go to bed!"

"There's an awful lot of sense in it, Dr. Swanson," put in Peter, who was holding his drinks better than either Toni or I. "Apart from anything else, it makes the actual murders so much easier to understand. I mean, from a physical point of view. It's hard to get a little girl up a tree or a grown man into a trap if you're working single handed.

"But, if there are two of you, both possessed of that extraordinary strength of a lunatic!" With youthful confidence in chapter and verse, he picked up another book from the pile at his side. "Now, here's something else. I found it in *Dercum on Mental Disease*."

His eyes scanned the page, then he read:

"The secondary patient is always feeble and degenerate and lacking in individuality."

The boy's eyes were shining excitedly as he looked up from the book.

"Don't you see how that helps? All we have to do is find someone in Grindle who answers that description!"

In spite of myself, I was beginning to get seriously interested.

"Franklin Alstone," I suggested.

"Mr. Tailford-Jones," put in Peter.

"Douglas Swanson," shouted Toni.

I started to laugh weakly. A glance at the clock checked me.

"Listen," I said, as calmly as I could, "the time is now nine-fifteen. We have exactly forty-five minutes in which to discover something real, definite and tangible. Instead of getting down to it, we're getting drunk and indulging in an orgy of wild speculations. It's not me who's going to be arrested, so I have no personal interest in the affair, but I do suggest that we try and be sensible, if only to save the most promising young pathologist in Rhodes from his own marble slab."

Peter smiled and Toni clapped uproariously.

"Personally," I continued, "I don't think a great deal of your theory. In the first place, it is a theory. In the second, I have no faith in *folie à deux*, Schalkenbaum or no Schalkenbaum, Dercum or no Dercum. It is my own belief that it was invented by alienists of small scruples in order to save wealthy murderers from the death penalty. No one had ever heard of it until the Loeb-Leopold case, and no one would have heard of it

then, if a bunch of millionaires hadn't been involved."

"Douglas, Douglas," put in Toni, "I was waiting for you to bring that up. The Loeb-Leopold case was something quite different. It was sexual. The examination of the victim's body definitely proved that. Now, our little affair has nothing to do with sex. I maintain that it started off as an escape mechanism—a frenzy springing from an ebullient and youthful lust for sport. Later, through force of circumstances, it developed into a half-sadistic, half-panic stricken killing of witnesses or supposed witnesses."

"I'm not so sure you're right," Peter was leaning forward eagerly. "I don't see why it shouldn't have been sexual in a less obvious form. The bodies weren't violated, but you notice that, at any rate, the first two victims were not dead when they were hauled up the tree and pushed into the trap. There were no bullets in them. Now"—his voice rose excitedly—"it's quite a common form of perversion to feel a desire to hurt without actually killing. Why shouldn't two people who, for some reason or other, were unable to have ordinary relations have indulged in this sort of thing instead?"

"Good God! Edgar and Roberta! That's the first sensible thing that's been said today."

Toni was smiling curiously. "You're right there, Doug. That's another of your so-very brilliant remarks. It's the first definite piece of evidence we possess."

In the brief moment of silence that followed, I consulted my watch.

"Nine twenty-two!" I exclaimed. "What are we going to do about it? There's not much time."

"There's time enough," said Toni.

He rose suddenly and stood in front of us. His smile had faded and his mouth was twisted in an ugly curve. His eyes still on ours, he moved slowly to his coat and took something from it which he slipped into his trouser pocket.

I stared at him, feeling a spasm of alarm.

"What on God's earth are you doing?"

I asked.

He plunged his hand into the pocket.

"Toni, what have you got there?"

He did not speak.

We all three gazed at each other in silence as he produced a ball of thick cord. Involuntarily I rose and crossed to Peter's chair.

Then, Toni pounced.

I received the full strength of his enormous body on my shoulder and, crashing to the ground, hit my head against the edge of the table. Dazed and horrified, I scrambled to my feet to find him bending over Peter, twisting the cord round and

round him and binding him to the chair. My room-mate's lips were moving, but I could hear no sound coming from them. Peter was struggling fiercely and kicking out with his one good leg.

"Toni, you're crazy," I shouted.

"Crazy, am I?" Sweat was gleaming on his forehead as he turned abruptly and stared into my eyes. "I'll show you."

I made a move toward Peter who was now strapped tightly to the chair, but my room-mate gripped my shoulder and held it firm. His face was utterly transformed.

"You see that boy, do you?"

I nodded weakly.

"Well, take a good look at him. He may be the only specimen of his kind you'll ever see. He's—he's—our primary patient."

CHAPTER XVI



THE blow on the head, combined with the liquor, had temporarily stupefied me. For a moment I could do nothing but stare at the amazing spectacle before me. Toni, huge and wild, was standing over the bound figure of Peter Foote, his fist clenched. He seemed utterly to have

forgotten my existence.

"You killed Polly Baines," he was shouting. "You killed Jo Baines. And, incidentally, you killed Gerald Alstone. You think I've got nothing on you, don't you? Well, you're wrong. And, what's more, you're going to do a little bit of talking, too." He gave a short laugh. "You see that clock over there? The hands point to nine twenty-nine. In just one minute the cuckoo will pop out, and in just thirty-one minutes Bracegirdle will be here. Now, don't you think it would be nice if we could tell him the whole story before he takes you away?"

Peter was staring up at him, his face a picture of studied bewilderment. He moved uncomfortably on the chair.

"This is hurting my leg rather, Dr. Swanson," he said calmly. "I wonder if—"

Toni swung round on me like an angry bear.

"You keep out of this, Doug. It needs an Italian on the job. We make good gangsters and we know how to make little rats squeal!"

"God knows what you're doing," I exclaimed, finding my voice at last, "but I can tell you right here and now that if all this is a bit of cheap drama, you're cooking your own goose and, what's more, you can't expect any sympathy from me."

As I finished speaking, the bird shot out of the clock and cuckooed once.

Toni laughed.

"That's the answer to you, Doug," He turned back to Peter. "Now, I'm going to tell you what I know, and, afterwards, I'm going to make you finish the story. Come on, Doug. You're so goddam punctilious, you can be the jury."

"Dr. Swanson, I wonder if I could trouble you for a cigarette." Peter's voice was casual.

I lit one and put it in his mouth, loosening the cord around his broken leg.

"Are you quite comfortable?" I asked.

"Yes, I don't mind."

My room-mate pushed me aside. He had rolled up his sleeves and was standing squarely in front of Peter, his eyes fixed on the boy's face.

"In the first place, Peter Foote," he began, "you're a nasty spoilt brat who knows all the answers just because he took a trip around the world. In the second place, animals don't like you—and that's never a healthy sign. Valerie's wretched dog growls whenever it sees you. Did it growl, by the way, that night you lassoed it and started dragging it behind a car?"

"If this is the best you can do, Toni," I broke in, "God help you. And God help me for being such a fool as to let you do it."

"It's all right, Dr. Swanson," remarked Peter. "Let him have his fun."

Toni bent his arm, revealing the strong muscles that rippled under the skin.

"Fun later," he said. "Business now. Those horses kicked you the night you went in to fetch them out of the barn. Pretty canny of them to recognize a killer even when you were saving them, wasn't it?"

"Most absorbing!" murmured Peter. "Why don't you write to Ripley about it?"

"I expect you'd like it if I did," went on Toni swiftly. "You enjoy publicity, don't you, Foote? That's why you went into the fire—to be the center of attraction. Exhibitionism is only another manifestation of sadism, after all."

"At any rate," I put in, "you can't say it wasn't brave of him."

"Brave! All his week-ends in the valley were brave and dramatic. Incidentally, have you ever realized how all the crimes happened over the week-end?" He turned to Peter. "The only time you were in Grindle. It was lucky that Baines found out about you on Saturday, wasn't it? If it had been any other day, you'd have had to make a special trip to kill him, and then, even the dear, dumb Bracegirdle might have cottoned on to something."

"How'd you mean, Baines 'found out' about him?" I asked.

why Baines was so eager to see you? He wanted to tell you he'd discovered the criminal! Most likely he had caught Peter snooping around Grindle Oak, noticed the buzzards, and drew his own conclusions. Of course, we can't be certain of the actual facts, but that's the way it happened. He didn't tell the police, simply*because he was too much afraid of old Seymour to say anything against one of his guests—his grandson's chief buddy, at that!"

"But where's your proof?" I exclaimed.

"Proof! Hell, there's proof. Remember that 'phone call Baines made to date you up for Sunday morning? Who overheard it? Gerald and—Peter. Now they claimed that they met Roberta in the road and she wheedled the information out of them. But did you or your pal, Bracegirdle, ever check up on what happened? No, you did not. But I did. Roberta claims that Peter mentioned the matter to her of his own accord and, for the first time in her life, she is telling the truth. Don't you see? Peter was very careful to make it certain that everyone in the valley should know about that eight o'clock appointment before he went out, found Baines, and dragged him behind the car to the Mill Pool."

"Curiouser and curiouser," I murmured.

"And I'm not through yet. Have you ever told a patient that he has some disease, Doug? Of course you have. Well, what's the first thing he does? He buys all the books on the subject he can lay his hands on. Why did Peter have all those books on morbid psychology? Why did he research with such ardor into the intricacies of folie à deux this afternoon? I'll tell you why. It's because he suffers from just that disease."

"Nice way to show your gratitude," remarked Peter placidly.

Throughout these bizarre proceedings, he had preserved an unruffled calm. He seemed almost to be enjoying the situation.

"And since our evidence all seems to be coming out of books, Mr. Jury—here's one that might interest you. Its name is Cannibal Quest, and I borrowed it from Peter just for a little light reading. It's all about those fascinating East Indies of which our young friend is so fond. There's a lot of absorbing information in it. In particular, it describes the habits of the native Papuans—an intriguing race. They bury their dead—in trees!"

I gave a gasp of surprise.

"But there's a difference," he went on relentlessly, "between those savages and our civilized friend here. They hang their corpses up dead. Peter Foote prefers to have them—alive!"

"Go on with the evidence, Toni," I interrupted, fighting back a crowd of insane impulses which were invading my senses.

TONI turned to me excitedly.

"Didn't it ever occur to you to wonder

"You've only got a quarter of an hour. No time to waste on monkey business."

"Well, now we come trotting up the last lap, Doug," Toni laughed triumphantly. "Here's the confession we got from his very mouth. You heard just now how Peter Foote tried to build up a case against Roberta and the poor little colonel. That was very skilful of him, but he made one bad mistake. He told us that Polly was alive when she was trussed up in that tree. Well, how did he know?" He swung around to face me.

"It was given out in all the newspapers that Polly was shot. Those bullets from Seymour's guns on the coon-hunt were supposed to have been the shots of the murderer. The real medical evidence was too beastly to publish. You, Bracegirdle, the ballistic expert, Brooks and myself were the only ones to know the truth. The only ones—excepting the murderer!"

The sweat had broken out on Peter's forehead.

"Dr. Conti," he said, and there was a strange dignity in his tone, "will you kindly release me at once? You're hurting my leg and you're being libelous. My father will bring suit against you for this. He—"

"Yes," cut in Toni. "You're right there. Your father most likely will bring suit. And, what's more, he'll most likely win his case. I've got evidence to burn, but I realize it's only circumstantial. Now we're going to make it positive. That's where you come in!"

"Toni!" I exclaimed. "We're both absolutely crazy. We're forgetting the only two significant things. Peter has a water-tight alibi for the burning of the barn. And he was laid up in hospital at the time of Gerald's death. If you can get over that, I'm with you."

"I can get over that," remarked Toni grimly, "for the simple reason that I know (a) who burnt the barn, and (b) who killed Gerald Alstone. But you must trust me for that. Now, the time is ripe for a little persuasion."

MY ROOM-MATE'S voice was quiet, but the strange wildness, which had been in him all day, seemed to be increasing steadily as the clock ticked on toward ten. Now, it was surging up in him like a great wave. He sprang on Peter and gripped him by the arm.

As he did so, a curious thing happened—a thing which, to this day I regret with all my heart. I do not want to excuse myself, but I had been drinking pretty heavily, and the whole crazy affair had played havoc with my reason. As I watched Toni bending over the boy, I felt some of his frenzy become communicated to me. A few moments ago I had laughed at the idea of folie à deux as a clinical entity, but now—gradually, imper-

ceptibly—I began to understand the sensations of the secondary patient. . . .

I recall nothing but Peter's final shriek of agony and his eyes gleaming mad and evil when he shouted:

"You fools! It wasn't me—it was Gerald!"

That brought me back to my senses. Even Toni quieted down. We stood off from Peter Foote, staring into his eyes.

"Yes," the boy babbled, his face grey with hatred, "it was Gerald, and I tried to stop him. You can't prove a thing against me—and, even if you could, you wouldn't dare. And I'll tell you why you wouldn't dare, Dr. Conti. You killed Gerald Alstone yourself!"

At that moment a car drew up outside, and there were steps on the gravel. Throwing a warning look at Toni, I hurried out into the hall. As I opened the door, something pushed past me, but I was still too bemused to notice it. Valerie was standing on the porch, her eyes dark and worried.

"Listen, Doug," she whispered, gripping my arm, "I've just passed Bracegirdle down the lane. Is he coming here?"

I nodded. "Yes, he's bringing the warrant!"

"My God! we must be quick. You've got to tell me what to say. I'll do anything, say anything you want me to." She smiled valiantly. "You know I'm all with you, Doug, don't you?"

She broke off at the sound of angry snarling issuing from the living-room. We both made a move toward the door to see Sancho Panza creeping out, his hair bristling, his teeth gleaming white. He was followed by Toni, whose appearance was even more grotesque than my own.

At the sight of Valerie, he pushed a hand through his hair and approached her with an admirable show of composure.

"Hello, my dear," he said, grinning. "I'm afraid we're in no fit state to entertain a respectable female friend at the moment. Pardon the hair!"

As he spoke, another car swung up the drive. Valerie glanced at me, her face deathly pale.

"Bracegirdle!" she whispered.

CHAPTER XVII



WE MUST have made rather a strange group, haggard and hollow-eyed like phantom guests at a phantom dinner party. We had been listening to Toni, who, restored to his sober, scientific self, was trying to convince Bracegirdle of the truth of his theory.

In the living-room

waited Peter Foote with two policemen. I think he was uppermost in all our thoughts as we sat there—adding a final touch of horror to the strange fantasy of the evening.

"Quite apart from anything else, Bracegirdle," Toni was saying, "we have his confession. Dr. Swanson heard it, too."

The deputy shook his head. "Doesn't mean a thing, Dr. Conti. A clever lawyer could tear that down in a minute. Extortion—threats—violence. It might be very bad for you and Dr. Swanson."

"Toni, may I ask something?" For the first time since Bracegirdle's arrival, Valerie spoke. She leaned forward, and her movement was curiously echoed by her shadowy reflection in the table. "Maybe I haven't followed you properly, but, are you suggesting that Peter Foote killed Gerald, too?"

My room-mate did not answer.

"Exactly, sir," Bracegirdle's honest blue eyes looked searchingly into his. "Miss Middleton has put her finger on the weak spot in your argument, Dr. Conti. Young Foote had a perfect alibi for the time of Gerald Alstone's death—don't you see how the defense could break your case down completely on that?"

He paused, and for a few moments the room was absolutely silent. We were all staring abstractedly into the yellow light of the candles.

"I know who killed Gerald Alstone," broke in Toni suddenly.

I felt Valerie start and I saw her eyes, wide and anxious, staring into mine.

"Dr. Conti, are you serious?" Bracegirdle's voice was stern.

Why, oh why, were Valerie's eyes staring so frightenedly into mine?

"May I begin at the beginning?" asked Toni politely.

Bracegirdle nodded.

"Well, it really started the night of the fire—or rather, just a little earlier in the evening when Miss Middleton's dog was hurt. You see, I've never been quite frank about what happened that night because—well, I didn't want to get someone into trouble."

Bracegirdle stirred uneasily. "You needn't name names if you don't want to, Dr. Conti. We aren't so dumb as you sometimes think, us policemen, and we can shut our eyes to things as often as not."

"Thanks, Bracegirdle. Well, I'll go back to that night when we were all at the Middletons. There was a face at the window, if you remember, which scared the ladies quite badly. It didn't scare me because I recognized it at once as belonging to Mr.—er—Nameless. I went outside by myself to investigate and found I was right."

"He was holding the dog in his arms and the story he told was about as horrible as

anything I've heard. He had just stopped his Ford by the roadside when he saw a car moving toward him—a car without lights. From behind it came a series of cries such as are best left to the imagination. Luckily, our friend had a knife and a great deal of courage. He ran forward, threw himself down on the road and hacked the rope which held the dog."

So that, I reflected explained the abrasions about which Mark had been so non-committal.

"The car sped on," continued Toni, "but our friend had heard—or thought he heard—a voice coming from it. It was, so he claimed, the voice of Gerald Alstone."

Whether or not we had expected this, I do not know, but we all started and stared at Toni incredulously.

"You may well stare," he continued, "and that's just what I did when I took the dog from the arms of Mr.—Nameless. I admit that there was murder in his eye. I argued with him and implored him not to be impulsive, but I was talking to deaf ears. He jumped in his car and rode off in a fury. I strongly suspect that he rode in the direction of Mr. Alstone's barn. . . ."

Bracegirdle closed one eye at me. "I'm listening with half an ear, Doctor," he said.

"Well," Toni continued, "you see the awkwardness of my situation. Our friend was not very strong mentally and I had no reason to believe his word. At the same time, Bracegirdle, I couldn't come to you, because if I'd been wrong, it would have meant the hoosegow for Mr. Nameless. Arson is a serious business. Besides, he was a hero—not only for saving the life of Miss Middleton's dog, but also—"

BRACEGIRDLE winked again. "I imagine he felt pretty badly when he found the horses were in the barn," he said mildly. "I think that was punishment enough."

"Exactly—and you do see my position, don't you? I couldn't believe then that a weak, puny individual like Gerald could be responsible for such acts of violence. Of course, I knew that there was insanity in his mother's family. I knew that was why Seymour arranged the divorce, and brought the boy up in cotton padding. But, the folie à deux theory didn't come to me until this morning. Gerald, as a solitary maniac, I could not credit. I didn't realize then what a perfect secondary patient he would make—how ripe he was for the influence of a person like Peter Foote."

"But what happened next?" broke in Valerie quickly. "What did you do after the barn burned down?"

"I decided to tax Gerald with Sancho's mutilation as soon as possible. But I

was pretty busy at the hospital and didn't have a chance to see him until the night of the coon-hunt. I believe my behavior has been criticized by a lot of you." He smiled at Bracegirdle.

"I must have seemed queer, but I had no alternative. I didn't want to make a scene about Gerald in public in case I was wrong. I didn't want to accept any Alstone hospital-ity—in case I was right. At the reception Gerald kept close to his friends and I couldn't get him alone. He was, also, one of the first off on the hunt. After the others had gone, I potted around for a while, waiting, and then I went home at about quarter past eleven."

He paused a moment, straightening one of the candles which had crooked over sideways.

"After I'd put the car away in our garage," he continued slowly, "I remembered with, I'm afraid, rather belated gallantry, that I was responsible for Miss Middleton"—he bowed and smiled at Valerie—"so I got it out again and drove back. At about 11:30, as I was going down the Alstones' drive, I saw Gerald. He was running like mad toward the house. I put my car behind the stables next to Doug's, where it had been before. Then I went into the house by the back door. Gerald was in the gun-room. I heard him give the number of the hospital and ask for Peter Foote—"

"So that clears up the 'phone call," remarked Bracegirdle to himself. "Go right ahead, Doctor."

"Then he must have realized I was there, because he hung up all at once. He was in a terribly nervous state, but he told me nothing about the discovery of Polly Baines' body. Well, I accused him point blank of mutilating Sancho. You must remember that then I knew nothing of Peter Foote and had no real reason to connect Gerald with anything so—er—boisterous as the death of Baines. He stood with his back to the wall like a frightened animal, but he didn't say a word."

"Then, suddenly, he reached up to the gun-rack and pulled a revolver on me. Luckily, I had enough sense to realize that Mr. Alstone is far too efficient a man to leave his guns loaded in their racks, so I took it away from him"—Toni paused and looked round a trifle apologetically—"and then I gave the little bas-beast the soundest thrashing he's ever had in his life. I knocked him down in every way I could think of and made his nose bleed until the room looked like the retreat from Mons."

"The trail of blood across the floor!" I cried. "That was made by Gerald's nose bleeding!"

"Exactly, Doug. But I didn't hurt him

badly, because, when I was through, he made for the door and gave me look which would have curdled all the milk in Cotuit County. 'I'll get even with you, Dr. Conti,' he said, and I can still hear him saying, 'I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do!'"

"You never saw him again, Dr. Conti?" asked Bracegirdle.

"Not until—until"—for some unknown reason Toni was smiling broadly at me—"until yesterday morning when they dug him up in our backyard."

"Well, why didn't you come to me with your story as soon as Gerald was reported missing?"

"I intended to, Bracegirdle. After Gerald left the gun-room, I walked round to call on Mr. Nameless to see if I could get him to come forward and give evidence. While I was there, someone came in to tell him about the discovery of Polly's body. I left immediately because I was keen to get in on that autopsy. After taking Miss Middleton home, I drove into Rhodes, as you know, and worked all night with Brooks."

"But you just said now that you knew who killed Gerald Alstone," said Bracegirdle with an impatient glance at his watch.

"Yes, I thought I knew that night. In fact, I was pretty sure. But I had reasons for keeping it to myself."

"It strikes me you've kept a good deal to yourself," Bracegirdle's tone was sharp.

"Exactly," Toni smiled. "But it turns out to be just as well that I did. Otherwise an innocent man would certainly have been put to a—er—great deal of inconvenience."

"But you know now—"

"Yes. I know now and I can prove it, thanks to the efficiency of your man who discovered the revolver and, incidentally, almost arrested me for trying to do the same thing yesterday morning."

I STARED at him, trying to make up my mind whether or not he was bluffing. Had he still some evidence which none of the others of us had been able to obtain? Did he know something which would lead yet another inhabitant of the valley to arrest?

Valerie had risen to her feet, her face obscured in the shadows.

"Toni, you're crazy." Her voice was high and tense. "You can't know! You can't know for certain!"

Toni glanced up at her and continued calmly. "Consider first Gerald's character. I want you to try and put yourself in his place on the night of the coon-hunt. Remember he was the weak sister of the pleasant little duet. The mighty Foote had been laid up with a broken leg for over a week and Gerald was on his own."

"You can imagine his sensations when that

body fell from the tree. You can imagine the fear that gripped his vitals as he ran homeward. He goes to the 'phone to call Peter and tell him the game is up and then—on top of it all—I appear like an avenging Fury. I beat the hell out of him.

"Unnecessarily, because he is licked already. Licked, yes, but remember he has a warped and revengeful nature. He had vowed to get even with me. That alone was uppermost in his mind when he left me to meet—as it was afterwards revealed—his own death."

"Who killed him?" broke in Bracegirdle sharply.

"I heard Valerie catch her breath."

"Who killed him?" Toni laughed. "I said just now it was Peter Foote. So it was indirectly. But actually it was—Gerald Alstone."

He stopped suddenly, and for a moment there was absolute silence. Valerie sank into her chair, passing a hand across her forehead. Her hair looked almost grey in the half light.

"I think," went on Toni, "that he had made up his mind to suicide the moment Polly's corpse fell out of the tree. But, after his interview with me, his distorted imagination fixed on a far more cunning and original plan. What if he were to arrange his suicide to look like murder? And not only to look like murder, but like another in a chain of murders?"

"A body dragged behind a car—the old instinct comes out in him. He loads his gun and sneaks out to where my car is parked. A piece of rope round his ankle is tied to my bumper. Bang! He dispatches himself and the evidence remains with me—a doubly damning piece of evidence because it is a dark night, the snow is falling, and it's ten to one against my seeing the body when I start the car."

Bracegirdle bent forward over the table. "You suggest that Gerald Alstone tied himself to your car and then committed suicide?"

"I suggest precisely that. You found the gun just where I parked that night, didn't you? In fact, it was in the exact position where it would have fallen from his hand."

"Was that what gave you the idea?"

"No, not exactly that. As I told you, I had had other suspicions."

"Dr. Conti, I want you to understand me quite clearly." Bracegirdle had risen to his feet and was now very much the police officer. "Don't think I am not grateful for your suggestions and don't imagine for a minute that I want to throw discredit on your testimony."

"I do feel, however, that for a man in your position, a professor in one of our leading

universities, you have acted in a manner that is open to serious criticism. It is over two weeks since Gerald Alstone died and all this time, you have withheld material evidence."

Toni spread out his hands and smiled. "Would you have come forward in my place, Bracegirdle? Remember, things looked pretty black for me even before the body was found in my own backyard. I know enough about police routine to realize that you would probably worm some sort of story out of the servants to the effect that I was seen snooping around the Alstones' house on the night of the crime."

"I imagine you probably found my fingerprints. If I was to come forward with a gratuitous tale of having beaten up the corpse about five minutes before its death, it would have been asking for trouble. It could easily be proved that I had ample reason to want to kill Gerald—"

The sentence was scarcely finished when we heard a commotion in the living-room. Suddenly the door was kicked open and Peter Foote, his wrists handcuffed behind him, stood in the doorway.

"You're right, Inspector," he cried, and if there had been any doubt before of his madness there was none now. "He saw Gerald and me in that car the night we lassoed Sancho Panza. The goddam hypocrite pretended to be shocked because the poor little animal was being hurt. But he did worse than that himself. He killed Gerald—I tell you—and he would have killed me if I hadn't been in the hospital. Ask him—ask him—" His voice had risen to an ugly screech.

TWO stalwart figures loomed up behind him. Bracegirdle nodded them toward the door.

"Take him out to the car," he said. "I'm coming in a minute." He turned to us. "Dr. Conti, I'm pretty well satisfied with your story, but there are one or two little points that'll still have to be cleared up. It's too late to do anything about it tonight, but I shall want to see you and Dr. Swanson in the D.A.'s office tomorrow morning."

The deputy took his leave and outside we could hear the police car drive off. Neither Valerie, Toni, nor I spoke for a few minutes. Then Toni lit a cigarette and tilted his chair.

"After all that talking," he said, smiling, "I need a drink. I'm hoarse."

He hurried into the kitchen, and I could hear him attacking the ice noisily. Valerie and I stood close together and looked at each other. Her eyes were shining and I thought I had never seen her so lovely before.

"He'll be all right," I said softly. "Don't worry anymore."

"I'm not worried, Doug. I—oh, it's all so beastly."

I put my arm round her. "It was wonderful of you not to say anything about that piece of rope you took from the car," I whispered.

"Oh, that was nothing," she said dully. "Any girl would have done the same to save the man—she loved." She raised her head and gave a sad little smile. "The only trouble is that he doesn't seem to realize it, does he?"

"Perhaps he does," I said foolishly and, as I spoke, I felt her move a little toward me. Her cheek brushed my face and then I felt her lips light against mine.

"Good-by, Valerie," I said quietly, "and please don't think I'm sorry about it. He's a swell guy."

"Good-by, Doug."

Toni was coming into the room with some tinkling glasses.

"You're not going, Valerie!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

As she turned at the door, I caught a glimpse of her eyes wet with tears. Then she was gone.

"Come on, Doug." My room-mate's voice was cheerful. "Just time for a quick one."

I took a glass from the tray and then set it down again.

"Listen, Toni," I said, "you've manhandled me pretty badly tonight, and I ought to be mad at you. But I'm not."

"I should damn well hope you aren't."

"Well, you certainly deserve a bawling out for not spilling the beans earlier. Bracegirdle was dead right. Of course, I understand your silence at first when you wanted to protect Mark. It was damn decent of you—but, why on earth did you keep quiet for so long after the night of the coon-hunt? You may fool Bracegirdle into believing you were scared on your own account, but you can't fool me."

Toni sipped his drink and smiled very engagingly.

"Well, Doug, how would you have acted if—say—you'd thought that I murdered Gerald?"

"What the hell has that got to do with it?"

"You see, I was quite convinced until yesterday that you had done it. Not that I blamed you, mind. God knows, I almost polished the little bastard off myself."

"You thought I murdered Gerald Alstone?"

"Naturally! I thought Mark had told you about the dog and you'd gone me one better. And then, after the coon-hunt, when I saw

with my own eyes—"

"Saw what?"

Toni gave an impish chuckle. "You mean you haven't tumbled to that even yet? You see, our cars were near together, they're both Plymouths. And, when I got back the second time, I happened to park on the other side of you."

I stared at him in amazement.

"Yes," he continued, "Gerald made a mistake. He tied himself to your car."

"Oh, my God!" Light seemed to be pouring in on me from every direction. "You mean that I dragged Gerald all the way home. That it was my car Mrs. Baines saw. That it was I who made those stains under the bridge—"

"Yes, Doug. You never were very good at getting into the garage anyway. Just like you to drop the corpse off in the yard."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

Toni was enjoying my bewilderment. "And I'm very sorry to say, Doug, that it was you I suspected of doing the murder. I gave you a chance to be confidential on several occasions but you didn't seem to want to talk. It was only when the body turned up yesterday that I realized it must have been an accident. That's what made me look—elsewhere. God knows, you're dumb, but you're not dumb enough to leave such damning evidence on the doormat."

"You say you saw the body behind my car!"

"With these very eyes."

"Good God!" I clutched the sleeve of his coat and almost spilt his drink. "Did Valerie see it, too?"

"No one will ever know, but I think not. I kept her engaged in idle banter to divert her attention."

My face fell. "So she thought it was your car she took the rope from."

"Of course not, you mutt. Anyone can tell yours from mine in the daytime. Besides, she's been calling me wildly all day asking what lies she can tell to save you from the electric chair."

My thoughts were racing now. "To save the man I love. . . He doesn't seem to realize it. . ."

Outside I could hear Valerie starting her car.

I knocked over a chair on my way to the door.

"Hey, Doug, are you crazy?"

"Sure," I shouted, "just another case of *folie à deux*!"

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

WHISPER MURDER, by VERA KELSEY



Lizzie Bryce screamed as Pedro raised the bookend

BLACK IS FOR DEATH

By RAY CUMMINGS

Pedro's gratitude to his benefactress was expressed in a very strange way—a way that called him murderer!

PEDRO had ridden fast all the way from Almarez. The little sorrel mare was getting winded, but still he urged her on, digging the long rowels of his spurs with impatient jabs into her sleek sides. Not that he was personally in any hurry; it was still barely midnight. But the old woman would be annoyed, maybe angry, at having him

come home so late.

Lizzie Bryce could be very nasty when she was annoyed. The men she employed were all fond of this little woman who had taken over the Q Ranch when her husband died, and she was running it with marked efficiency, but they all respected her anger.

Pedro decided that he had pushed the little

mare hard enough. At the bottom of an ascent he slackened his speed and let the horse get back her wind. It was a cloudless summer night, no moon, but the purple sky was brilliant with blue-white stars. The undulating hills of the Texas range stretched dim purple out to the purple horizon.

But Pedro was not thinking of the beautiful night. An hour ago, yes—when he had sat with Miguelita and they had planned such a future as they would have when he married her and took her to Hollywood. It was Miguelita's idea: Pedro's voice, and her dancing. And she could sing too. They would get into pictures.

Miguelita would be much better than Carmen Miranda or any of the others. But it would take much money, and that was for Pedro to fix. Then of course she would marry him. Miguelita was twenty-three, though she did not look it. Pedro was just twenty.

At the top of the rise, the ranch came into sight nestling in the little cradle of the hollow, with the purple hills around it. The bunkhouse off to the right, were all dark now. The whole place was sleeping in a soft starlight glow. Then Pedro saw, like a little winking eye, that one of the lower windows of the ranchhouse was lighted.

Pedro had been adopted by Lizzie Bryce and her husband when he was four. They had found him, an orphan, uncared for, on the Caribbean island where he was born. It was Lizzie Bryce who had brought him up, and who still treated him as though he were not yet a man. He lived here at the ranchhouse with her, and some day, of course, when she was dead, he would own it for himself. But that would be a long time. Miguelita surely would not wait that long.

The boy swung the mare down the last slope, heading for the dark little shed behind the ranchhouse. Somehow the sight of that winking eye in the lower window made him shudder. The old woman had told him, when he left at sundown that evening, that he must get back home early.

"I have something I want to talk to you about Pedro," she had said.

She seemed to have a queer look on her face, a queer edge of sharpness in her voice, as she had said it. He had forgotten all about it while he was with Miguelita, but he was thinking of it now.

The shed and the yard back of the house were faintly pallid with starlight. Pedro unsaddled the mare, put her in her stall and

bedded her down. The horse had recovered her wind, and the lather was beginning to dry on her sides. She buried her nose in the bucket of water and then nuzzled around for something to eat because she was always hungry whether it was time to eat or not.

Pedro left the shack, crossed the two hundred feet of yard and went in the back door of the ranchhouse. His big, loosely strapped spurs scraped the flooring as he entered, and at once from the front room came the old woman's voice.

"That you, Pedro?"

"Yes," he said.

"Come in here. I've been waiting up for you."

He tossed his wide-brimmed hat to the hall table. He was a slim, muscular, graceful youth with wavy black hair and a handsome, swarthy face.

"Here I am," he said.

THE little front sitting room was dim with lamplight. It was a gloomy room; Pedro had always thought so. The matting on the floor was dark, and the couch cover, cushions and other adornments were of dark, sombre colors. Ever since her husband had died, five years ago, Lizzie Bryce had gone in for black—her riding clothes, and when she was around the house, a billowing black taffeta dress that made her look much older than her fifty-five years.

"Well, you didn't hurry yourself, Pedro, did you?"

"Yes, I did," he said. "Is it late?"

"Midnight. Sit down, Pedro."

He spread his length in a big wicker chair. Lizzie Bryce was seated in her favorite rocker. She was a small, wiry woman, with iron gray hair that she wore primly parted in the middle, drawn back, and wound it into a knot at the back of her head. She didn't look it, in this taffeta dress, but around the ranch and on horseback she was still as agile as any man.

She was doing her interminable needlework. A big embroidery frame was in her hands.

"What's that you're doing now?" Pedro said conversationally. His heart was beginning to pound. She had the same look on her face now that she had had when he left this afternoon. He wanted, somehow, to stall what she might say. "That's kind of complicated," he added. "Isn't it?"

Lizzie Bryce's hobby was embroidering

big, foot-long squares of linen with a scene of her own design—usually in black, like this one. Pedro leaned forward in his chair, regarding it. The thing seemed to be a single figure—a seated woman looking off into the distance. Mrs. Bryce's big needle was sweeping skillfully back and forth, filling in the background. It was a gloomy thing, nothing but black.

"That's nice," Pedro said. "What you plan to call it?"

She stopped in the middle of one of the big black stitches.

"Why this sudden interest in my foolishness, Pedro?" Then with a gesture she waved away the subject. Her needle continued to sweep back and forth. The spool of black silk thread in a basket on the floor beside her jumped around as she pulled it. "You saw that trollop Miguelita Rojas again tonight, didn't you?" she said with a sharp glance at Pedro.

"Why I—"

"You did, didn't you?"

He was a grown man, and she still treated him like a child.

"What you do, trail me around?" he asked sulkily.

"I told you what she was, and I told you to stay away from her, didn't I?"

"You—"

But Pedro couldn't talk. He could only sit and stare, and feel the hot anger rising in him.

"There's a lot of things you think I don't know about you, Pedro—but I do," Mrs. Bryce went on. "That woman had a bad reputation in Vera Cruz, and before that in Guadalajara. I didn't have to play detective to know that. There are twenty boys here around the ranch. They all know about her, and all I had to do was ask them."

The widow's voice softened now.

"All my boys love me, and respect what I tell them. All except you, Pedro. That's too bad, isn't it? Because I thought I'd earned your love. Bringing you up—sixteen years of treating you as though you were my own flesh and blood—"

"I told you I appreciate it. You needn't—"

"Sure!" she said caustically. "You appreciate it! Like a stranger does, when he thanks you for doing him a favor. You're a queer character, Pedro. I've never been close to you. I've never understood you."

What was she getting at?

"Okay," Pedro said. "I am sorry. And I

am tired too. Can I go to bed now?"

He started to rise, but she waved him back. "In a minute, yes. I suppose that woman thinks you're a good catch, eh Pedro?" Her voice was hard again. "That someday you'll own this ranch, and maybe you'd be fool enough to marry her. Is that what she thinks?"

"What do you mean, Aunt Lizzie?"

"You know very well what I mean!" she retorted. "And you can tell her something from me. The day she marries you, your connection with me and the Q Ranch is finished!"

Pedro's anger was like a quick, hot tide.

"And here's something else you don't think I know about," Lizzie Bryce continued. "Some of our heifers have been missing—not many, just a few here and there before we get to brand them. I didn't say anything about it before, and I told the boys not to say anything either."

It had come! He had always known it would, but he hadn't faced it! Pedro was sitting stiff in his chair now, rigid, transfixed, his muscles frozen. It was as though everything about him had stopped, with only his racing heart and the hot blood tumbling through his veins, pounding in his head, blurring his thoughts.

"I don't know how you managed it, Pedro," Mrs. Bryce was saying. "But I guess it wasn't very hard for you to run them off and sell them cheap. But you're at the end of your rope now. I don't know quite what I'm going to do with you."

"I didn't! You—that's a lie! I don't know what you're talking about—"

"You're not going to be around the ranch any longer," she went on, as though Pedro had not spoken. "I've decided that much. Maybe I'll send you north. You're twenty now. You don't need me, just a sharp-tongued, prying old woman. I've done my job in bringing you up, but it didn't turn out very well."

SO that was her game—to throw him out! Not have to have this ranch some day. If only she had died yesterday, been killed when that colt threw her! This place could be sold to the Jamison outfit. Old man Jamison had said lots of times that he'd pay fifty thousand cash, and maybe twenty thousand or so a year, for the Q Ranch just as it stood. With money like that he and Miguelita could go to Hollywood. They could even

start in a week or two.

"A lot of the men'll tell me I ought to slap you into jail," Lizzie Bryce was saying. "You haven't made yourself very popular with the boys, Pedro, with your conceited, arrogant swagger as though you were better than they—"

"Why you—"

Pedro knew suddenly that he was out of his chair. The room was a swaying red blur. Everything was blurred except the old woman's sarcastic voice and the dim, lamplit vision of her sitting there so placidly.

"You needn't get excited, Pedro—"

Not get excited! With his world tumbling down around him? He could feel his cold shaking fingers gripping the handle of his knife in the sheath of his belt.

"Pedro!" She must have seen it too. She was bolt upright in her chair, now, startled terror sweeping her face. "Pedro—"

It seemed that he had to do it. But his knife was stuck! Like a flash, he turned to the wall where there was a little shelf of books propped together with heavy metal bookends. He seized one of the metal blobs.

"Pedro! Put that down!"

Lizzie Bryce screamed, just once. And then it was over. She fell sideways across the chair as the big bookend clumped to the floor. Pedro staggered, gazed numbly at the dead thing dangling over the chair. The only movement in the room was the chair as it gently rocked back and forth.

Lizzie Bryce was dead. It was just as though she had died yesterday, been killed by that colt. Everything was the same as that. The thought of it drove away Pedro's terror and made his pulses race with triumph. Everything was just right.

But Lizzie Bryce had screamed as she died. Screamed, just a few seconds ago! That scream, echoing out through the still night air of the quiet ranch, must have roused the men and they'd be here at any moment. The bunkhouses were on the front side of the ranchhouse. He must head the other way!

Pedro turned, ran back through the dark little hall. He remembered just in time that he had left his hat on the hall table. He picked it up, jammed it on his head. Already he could hear the distant shouts of the men.

As he darted out the back door into the dim starlight of the yard, he knew what he must do. No one had seen him arrive ten minutes ago. But he couldn't get the mare saddled and away now without them seeing

him. He must pretend he was just arriving.

He hurried into the shed, dragged out the startled mare and flung saddle and bridle on her. They could never prove he hadn't just arrived. There wasn't a thing in the world that connected him, any more than any of them, with the killing.

As he was tightening the cinch strap of the saddle, he could identify some of the voices of the men in the house, shouting with horror at what they had found. Then somebody yelled to phone for the sheriff over at Almarez. Suddenly the back door opened and some of the men were coming out into the yard. One of them held a flashlight. They were bending down.

"Hey, look Pete—"

In the stillness their voices floated clear and sharp to Pedro.

"Hey, look—it runs right out the back door here!"

"It was movin' a minute ago!"

Runs right out the back door? Moving a minute ago? What in heaven's name could that mean! . . . Pedro could see them advancing now across the yard. Then suddenly he realized that he was supposed to be just arriving, having just ridden in and heard the turmoil.

"Hi, you fellows!" he called. Then he stepped out of the shed into the starlight. "I thought I heard a scream as I rode up! What has happened?"

Then they were around him. Lean and lanky, big suntanned fellows. He had always hated them. They crowded now in a crescent, and one of them—the one with the flashlight—was still bending down.

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun!" this man exclaimed. "There's where it goes! Take a look, everybody!"

He stood up, pointed the flashlight down at Pedro's feet. The men crowded forward.

"Say," said one of the cowhands, "sure ain't no argument on who killed her, is there? It starts in the house and runs right to here!"

"You—leggo me!" Pedro panted as rough hands took hold of him. "I just rode in from Almarez, haven't unsaddled yet! I don't know what you—"

"Oh you don't? Well, take a look!"

Numbly Pedro stared down into the pool of light, saw the black silk embroidery thread which was entangled in the big rowel of one of his spurs—the little black trail of death leading from him to the woman he had killed!



PROMISE TO KILL

By ALAN PAUL

Detective Wylie is not a magician—but he needs to pull a rabbit out of his hat to solve the murder of that blond!

MY DOORBELL rang, and I let her in. She had youth, blue eyes hesitating between fright and flippancy, a mashable-type mouth, real blond hair, a real mink coat, and beneath that a dressful of curves as real as Carl Hubbell's. She was welcome.

"Ben Wylie?" she asked.

I nodded, showed her a chair. She wasn't tired.

"Sorry to invade the domestic hearth," she said, the flippancy gaining, "but there's

no office listing under your name."

"One rent is cheaper than two," I said. "I'm fond of money."

The kid batted long lashes and looked simple. Then she dug a hand into her bag, and for a second I thought she was going to indulge my fondness. But instead she came up with a note and handed it to me. It read:

Miss Keating: You owe me \$10,000. I like to do business with people who pay their debts. People who don't pay their debts I do business with too. Only they don't like the way I do

business then. Gambling debts are uncollectible under the law, but I'll get my dough, or else. That's a promise.

Nick Collit.

Very crude, very clumsy, I thought, for the slickest wheel-and-table operator in the city. Nick Collit worked too clean with the law to fumble as publicly as this. It didn't add.

"This yours?" I said.

"I'm Fran Keating," she said, swallowing something large.

"Who sent you to me, Fanny? Why not to the police?"

I watched a couple of her curves rise prettily and fall. She wanted to be modern and flip as a cocktail before breakfast, but she was scared.

"Uncle Mart said not to pay. Uncle Mart says Nick's wheels are crooked. He said to go to the police, but George—my stepfather—said the scandal would kill Mother. George found your name in the book."

"Ten thousand dollars! Did you lose that kind of dough at Nick's?"

She bit her lip. "More—and I've paid too. Mr. Wylie, I don't know what to do!"

"You've done your share," I said. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Protect me," she said.

I put the note in my pocket.

"Two hundred retains me," I said. "Plus a hundred a day for as long as the guns go off."

She rifled the bag, scooped out a sheaf of bills.

"Here," she said, handing me three of them, "three hundred dollars." The sheaf survived unscathed.

"That covers you until midnight," I said pleasantly. "What are your plans for tomorrow?"

The kid was so easy that I was almost ashamed to accept the additional hundred she forced on me.

"You're staying here for a while," I said. "I'll be back at"—I looked at my watch—"about five. That'll give me three hours."

"Where are you going?" When she asked questions her mouth made you forget her money.

"Down to the bank," I said, waving the bills, "before I lose this. Don't open the door unless it rings one long and two short."

MY garage was two blocks away. While the car was being gassed I telephoned Jerry Frick at the *Morning Beacon*.

"Ben Wylie," I said. "Frances Keating—where's the dough lie in the family?"

"Keating?" he said. "Park Avenue style?" I supposed so, and let him spill.

"Grandfather, Adam Keating, died a year ago. Five-six million to little Fran. If Fran departs this vale, Mama gets it. Mama's married to George Urich, a nobody until he married Mama. Martin Winther handles the estate. Enough?"

It wasn't, but it was all he had.

"Enough, Jerry, thanks," I said. "No, no story yet. You'll be there when it happens. G'bye."

I'd just got the Plymouth out to the street when Dave Burns came flattening up, opened the door, and eased in about two hundred and seventy pounds of detective-sergeant, homicide. "Going uptown?" he wheezed.

I eyed his various chins, the coat that despaired of encasing his middle.

"Yeah," I wheezed back, "but ever so much more slowly now."

We always wheezed in conversation. We were allergic to each other.

"Looking for you, bright boy," he said. "Policemen's ball tomorrow night. Brannigan said you'd want about five." He parted his fat face in a smile.

"At two-fifty a bite?" I sneered.

"Now Benny, a good citizen ought to feel honored, supporting the Department."

"I break half your cases for you," I growled. "How much more support do you need?"

We bickered all the way uptown, as if we were really pals underneath, but he got out still holding the tickets in his hand.

Nick's place was forty minutes from midtown traffic. Plenty of ground opened around the place itself, with heavy woods between the highway and the house. About a mile of concrete road cut expensively through these trees. It must have been new. I had been here before, and the road then had cut off from the highway a quarter-mile farther along, and twisted like a drunk's progress through country even more thickly wooded.

A character with a boneless nose and ungovernable hands took me into the office. Nick Collit sat behind a mahogany desk. He had no gold teeth. His hair shone without grease. His fingernails were clean. He wore expensive, sober clothes, no jewelry, and an air of quiet attentiveness.

"Hello Nick," I said, taking an easy chair in front of the desk. "I'm Ben Wylie."

He spoke quietly. "I remember. You used to come here. You used to win."

"You used to let me. Fifty, sixty a night; nothing big. Maybe you thought I was working."

He gave me a tired smile. "We never know about you private boys. We try to keep clean."

I got the note out. "This yours, Nick?"

"You working now?" he asked.

I thought he looked less tired. I also thought he was stalling.

"How come you put your name to anything as loud as that, Nick?" I asked.

He had been scratched. He wasn't the least bit friendly now.

"Get to it, Wylie. Say something, and say it in round, well-shaped words!"

"Miss Keating says she owes you the money, Nick. I'm authorized to pay you the ten thousand. Is that round enough? Shapely enough?"

He was a gambler, his face wasn't supposed to show anything. But he should have answered. He shouldn't have had to sit there weighing it.

There must have been a clock in the room. I heard its stately ticking in the long silence, and I had an impulse to look around the room for it. I held my eyes on Nick.

Both his hands came out of his lap, slowly, evenly, to show me they were coming up empty. It didn't impress me. I wasn't carrying a gun and he knew it. He knew that the boy who had admitted me owned inquisitive fingers.

He spoke. "Put the dough on the desk, Wylie."

He should have said something different, entirely different. The room suddenly got cold. I stalled.

"How about a receipt, Nick? You know, business being business and all that."

He smiled broadly, in relief I thought.

"Actually, Wylie, you haven't got the ten grand, have you? You just came up here nosy-like, didn't you?" He sighed. "Too bad."

"Now look, Nick," I began, "my client—"

"Shut up," he snapped, "and listen while you have time. This is too big for a penny-rustler. Stay away from here. Make your coffee and cake on what your client throws you. But stay out of my way! If you have any trouble remembering that in the future, think back to how it felt when you left." He looked up. "Okay, boys."

I SPUN around in my chair. The character with the sensitive fingers had company. An adequate description of the company would be that he had large hands, because that's all I saw of him. One of them, well-knotted, caught me on the cheek and knocked me into the desk. I bounced, came off the desk swinging. I got some weight behind a right hand to Fingers' mouth and heard him gurgle when teeth hit his throat.

The guy with the hands found time to clip my jaw. I staggered, but lurched forward, fastening onto him. I gave him some knee and when he groaned I slammed his mouth shut with my head to his chin. Then something solid, something with an edge, crashed the point of my jaw. It was Fingers earning his pay.

The room didn't go black; just a soft, decorous gray, with furry little streaks of light relieving the tedium. I was held from behind while the guy with the hands returned to the wars. He alternated, his left to my face, his right to my stomach. I counted to seven, holding on just long enough to get sick on Nick Colli's Kirman rug. Then I passed out.

I woke up sitting behind the wheel of the Plymouth. The rear-view mirror told me I was a loser. My face was dried blood from my eyes to my chin. I could see this through the one unclosed eye. A front tooth rocked in insecure set, but somehow the sharp-shooter had missed breaking my nose. My stomach still bucked.

I looked at the entrance to Nick's place. He had said to remember how I felt when I left it. I would. . . .

Fran Keating let me in to my office after two shorts and a long on the buzzer. She tried to slam the door shut when she saw my face.

"It's me," I mumbled. "It's Wylie."

"Good heavens!" she said. "What hit you?"

"The bank teller." I headed for the shower.

"Your dough was Confederate."

She followed me, gratifyingly concerned.

"Where were you? How did that happen?"

I told her where the brandy was and asked her would she please mind stepping outside the bathroom as I preferred not to shout over the noise of the plumbing. The shower stung. But after it I could blink one eye almost painlessly and wag my jaws without first making a resolution. While I was patching on adhesive she poured me some brandy.

"Who is Uncle Mart?" I asked her.

"He's not my real uncle. Just a family friend. When Grandfather died, Uncle Mart was appointed trustee of my inheritance until I'm twenty-five."

I nursed the brandy down. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," she said quickly, and tried to look it.

"More like nineteen?" I said. She blushed.

We drove to the Keating house.

"Uncle Mart must be here," she said. "That's his car." It was a long black Caddy, and I parked behind it.

The butler showed us into a room without boundaries. The three people sitting there looked lost, and in contact with the outer world by wireless.

Mrs. Ulrich was handsome, massaged into comeliness, but bloom-gone. She had cold eyes that went simper-soft when she looked at her husband, and a hard jaw. Someone had said the scandal of Fanny going to the police would kill her. I didn't believe it. She acknowledged the introduction frostily.

George Ulrich may have been a nobody until he married a somebody, but now he looked as if he belonged. Tall, good features, ten years younger than his wife, Mrs. Ulrich's choice was not incomprehensible. He was curious about my bruises.

I took a chair and a brandy.

"A couple of Nick Collit's friends," I said.

"Well," said Martin Winther, "in your business, Mr. Wylie, things like this are not entirely unforeseen. How did you happen to go there?"

Uncle Mart had pale eyes, like the underside of a fish. You had to look again for his chin, but his voice rolled out as if his larynx were in his lungs.

"Happen to go where, Mr. Winther?" I asked innocently.

"To wherever you were when Nick's men—uh—welcomed you." He had a manner all right. "Don't you think," he went on, "you should spend as much time as possible with Miss Keating? You have been hired to protect her, you know."

"Yes, Mr. Wylie," snapped Mrs. Ulrich. "What kind of protection has Frances got when you're out somewhere getting yourself disfigured?"

"Let's understand something," I said. "Your daughter's a target. Should I hold her hand and make it a double target, or should I go out and try to draw off the heat? Does that make sense to you, Mr. Winther?"

He smiled. "Very logical, Mr. Wylie, and quite heroic. But what did you accomplish—besides receiving a beating?"

SOMEHOW I didn't like this guy. I didn't particularly like any of these people. The key to Nick's note was in this room, and one of them had it. I decided to blast.

"I accomplished this," I said, getting winter into my voice. "Nick Collit isn't working alone, and there's more than ten thousand involved." I paused and remembered back to Jerry Frick's information. "About six million is."

Mrs. Ulrich sat cold and unmoved. Her husband widened his eyes in surprise.

"Did Nick—Mr. Collit tell you this?" Martin Winther said.

"You didn't, Mr. Winther," I said, giving him a thick ration of smugness.

I liked him better now I'd learned something. But I needed more. I needed some proof. It was clear to me that I wasn't a welcome guest in this house, but I had to stay.

I stayed until Winther left. When the Cadillac turned over and took off I had my foot on the threshold, and a moment later I was weaving behind him through cross-town traffic. His course was erratic, but that didn't bother me. I knew what he was looking for.

When he found a drug store I raced for the next nearest phone. In under ninety seconds I was in a cigar store booth and had the operator trying to ring Nick Collit's number. The line was busy. I told her to ring back when it wasn't. From the shop doorway I could see the drug store entrance at the end of the block. A minute passed. Winther came out, and behind me the telephone rang.

It was 7:30 when I got home. My head hurt, my mouth felt as if I'd been teething on a file. And my telephone was ringing.

"Hello," I said, into the phone.

"Mr. Wylie. I'm Rita Slane—Sixteen—twenty-seven East Eighth Street. Can you be here in an hour?" Urgency sharpened her voice.

"I can," I said, "but I won't."

"You're working for Miss Keating, aren't you? She'll be dead tomorrow." There was still more urgency than real threat.

"What's your connection with Miss Keating?"

"Just get here, Wylie. Apartment Two-C." My telephone caller hung up.

I went into the bathroom, sloshed some cold water on my face, and tried to think. Rita Slane might be a .38 booming out at me about 8:30 on a dark street in the Village. I didn't know enough about what was going on to be a real menace to anybody. But Nick Collit might think so. Martin Winther might think so too. On the other hand Rita Slane could be leveling and I might learn enough to set off an explosion of my own. . . .

Sixteen-twenty-seven was a standard, walk-up apartment house flush with another house on one side and separated from a third by an alleyway. I parked around the corner and walked back to the house, keeping in the shadow I could find, resting one hand on the .44 in my overcoat pocket.

Almost abreast of the alleyway, I heard a door slam and feet come pounding along the cement. I flattened up against the wall, getting my gun clear. The guy was in a hurry. He shot out of the alleyway, cut down the street away from me, and faded into the darkness. I hadn't seen his face.

I thought a moment about ringing the bell, but decided to come unannounced. I had a hunch the runner had begun his dash from Slane's apartment.

In the alleyway I found the door that had slammed. Inside, I climbed the stairs to the second floor and I stepped like a ghost down the corridor to 2-C. A light shone through the crack at the bottom of the door, but there was no sound. I eased the .44 into my palm and closed the other hand around the door knob, turning with a steady pressure.

I threw the door open and stepped inside, the .44 ready. The lights went out, I heard a whirring close to my head, something took me behind the ear, and then all the light went out.

It was 8:45 when I opened my eyes. I'd been slugged again. Behind my ear I wore a plum. I was sore too. Even at good prices this business was getting hard to take. Besides, I was beginning to look stupid.

Rita Slane hadn't been young. The veins in her legs had swollen too heavily and there was gray at her scalp, under the blonde. But neither had she been old enough to die. Her mouth had been pretty and her figure not unattractive. She lay on the floor with a hole shot through her forehead, the blood clotted and blackened on her face.

Cabinet doors were open, in the bedroom the drawers were out of the dresser, and

papers and letters lay around the place like bottles after a party. But nothing was broken, not even a chair overturned. The killer had killed and searched.

Under the chair I found a picture. A woman and a man at the beach. The woman, about ten years ago, and without blood, was Rita Slane. The man looked familiar. He looked familiar enough to be George Urlich.

BACK at my place I called Fran Keating.

"Can anyone hear you?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

"All right, now listen and don't be frightened. Tomorrow someone may try to kill you." I heard her gasp. "It'll be all right, kid. Just keep listening. Get up early tomorrow and cut some scratches into the outside sash of your bedroom window. And make some footprints in the ground outside the window. Rub them out, but be sure to leave marks. Then call the police. Tell them you thought you heard a prowler last night, but laughed it off to imagination. In the morning though, when you found your window tampered with . . . Understand?"

"Yes. Yes, Mr. Wylie, but—"

"That's just to keep the police around tomorrow morning while I'm out somewhere else—probably getting sapped," I added.

She understood finally, and I went to sleep.

I rode out to Nick's place in the morning. The note still stopped me. Why would he sign an admission of his intent to kill Fran Keating when he knew she was going to be killed? I had the feeling that in some incalculable way, perhaps by absorption into my skull along with the rappings of his sap, I would get it clear at his place.

This time I went past the new road and took the old dirt one. It twisted more, and I could approach the house without being seen. I swung off the highway, and then I stopped.

In the hard-packed dirt I saw a tire mark, freshly made. Why would anyone with good intentions choose a rough, dusty road in preference to a shorter one of concrete? It looked dishonest. I geared my car to a creep, following the tire tracks and watching the trees at both sides of the road. I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but anyway I wasn't going to die surprised.

About a quarter-mile along, the tire tracks swerved to the edge of the road, and where the winter-dead grass was chewed, the car

had evidently been braked. I stopped and got out. I looked around. Trees, bushes, a few birds that hadn't heard about Florida. Nothing else.

I went into the woods, looking, not knowing what for. I came out toward the road again, and then I saw it. I noticed the sawdust first, lying in a mound at the foot of the tree, then the tree itself, sawed almost all the way through but held erect by a steel wire lashed around it about ten feet up its length. I followed the wire back through the woods about thirty yards to a little clearing. The wire ended there, wrapped around a thick stake driven into the ground.

The clearing stood higher than most of the ground around it. From it, only thirty odd yards from the road, I could see the spot where the tree would fall. And I had a good view of the road coiling below me almost to the highway, though I myself couldn't be seen from the trees.

I went back to the braced-up tree. It wasn't large but it had a wide spread of branch. When it fell across the road, a car would have to stop.

I stood a moment and thought about it. No attempt had been made to carry away the sawdust, or darken the wire. Aside from the fact that the road was rarely used, the whole set-up lay wide open, waiting for the eye to see, begging to be understood. It was Nick's note all over again, self-incriminating, obvious. As obvious as water whose depth you didn't know.

I backed down to the highway and headed for the city. As I passed Nick's new road I looked up, and saw a black sedan coming out. I slowed, and when it turned in my direction, I let it pass me. It was a police car, and in the back sat Dave Burns. I honked, and rolled alongside as the police car stopped.

"Hello, Duffy," I said to the driver. "Since when do you have to drive the heavy one to his places of amusement?"

Duffy grinned, and deferred to Burns.

"You'd like to think you had got hold of some dirty laundry, wouldn't you?" Burns said, giggling a couple of sides of cheek in laughter. "No, Benny, I just come from after letting Nick make a piker out of you. A hundred tickets he takes. A hundred! Don't you feel small?"

"Don't you wish you could?" I said, but absently. Something was trying to nudge its way into my brain. "And you wouldn't be setting Nick Collit up as a model for virtu-

ous behavior, would you?" I was just talking around, trying to make room for what was nudging me.

Burns guffawed. His cheeks came up and his eyes got lost.

"The heck I wouldn't!" he gasped. "That's just it, Benny boy. I just brought Nick his part in the sketch we're putting on at the ball tonight. What do you think he's playing?" He didn't wait. "Warden Lawes! Honest! Wouldn't it murder you?" He laughed so hard I thought he'd render himself.

I laughed too. I felt like it. The nudging had stopped.

"That's pretty good, Dave," I oiled. "How'd you manage to talk him into it?"

"No—his own idea. Nick hears about the sketch and calls up Brannigan and suggests himself for the part. And all his boys are in it too. He paroles 'em!" Tears made the long journey down his face.

"Sounds good," I said. "I wouldn't want to miss it. What time does the sketch go on, Dave?"

"Nine sharp," he said, shoving a handful of tickets through the window. "How many, Ben?"

"Five you said, didn't you, Dave?"

I DROOLED over him and gave him a ten and a five. He drooled over me and gave me six tickets instead of my two-fifty in change. We were so happy.

I left the highway, found a general store and bought two balls of twine. On the highway again I headed back to the old road, parked about twenty yards past it, grabbed my twine, and dived into the woods.

I tied a loop around the nearest tree, then worked my way in, letting out the twine and looping it around a tree about ten yards farther along. It took a half hour to run a guiding rail of twine from tree to tree to a point near the clearing where the wire was staked. The last loop I threw around an old oak, commanding a view of the clearing, and wide enough to crouch behind.

Then I went back and started from my first tree, eyes closed, feeling my way along the twine, back to the oak. I stumbled a few times and got my face whipped and scratched by unfriendly branches. But on my face, by this time, blood was becoming. I made the blind trip in twelve minutes. . . .

At my apartment I rang the offices of Martin Winther, and his secretary gave me

to him.

"This is Ben Wylie, Winther," I said. "I've got a lump behind my ear."

I heard him choke, and hung up. Then I called Fran Keating.

"Did the police come?" I asked.

"They just left," she told me. "They didn't believe me, but they stayed around, asking the servants questions."

"Good. Now listen. Stay in the house all day. If you have to leave, call me and tell me where you're going. Call me here anyway at four-thirty. If my phone doesn't answer, call the police and tell them about Nick's note. You'll find it over here, where you found the brandy. Clear?"

She sounded tired, whipped. "Yes," she said, "I understand. But really I don't . . . Oh Mr. Wylie, can't you tell me what's going on?"

I felt like I'd torn her nylons.

"Tonight, honey, I promise. You'll know the whole story. So long now."

It was 1:30. I had nothing before me but a three-hour sweat. My brain had the thing tight, but it kept wanting to spin. I held it, and let my stomach skitter instead.

The minutes passed processionally. I checked the clip in my .44, and filled a spare. I drank some brandy, wanted more, and was afraid I'd have more, so I took the bottle and flushed the stuff down the drain.

At 4:15 the sun went out of the sky. The time was growing ripe. At 4:30 no call. At 4:33, my fingers as steady as a cork in a whirlpool, I dialed the Keatings.

"Miss Frances has just gone out," the butler tolled at me.

"How long ago? What for?"

"Her car just pulled out of the driveway, sir, and Miss Frances didn't say where."

I spent thirty seconds maligning Fanny Keating, her ancestry, and—if she lived through the night—her progeny. Then I did the same for myself for wasting thirty precious seconds. I lost another minute calling Jerry Frick.

"Here's your story, Jerry," I told him. "Give me fifteen minutes, then call a copper and beat it out to Nick Collit's place. Take the old dirt road."

Then I lost another minute calling Nick Collit.

I chose Ninth Avenue for speed, and broke onto the highway doing fifty-five. The needle inched up to seventy-eight and pegged there. I didn't pass Fran on the road, so I must have

come out of traffic before her. My heart came out from between my teeth.

I drove past my tree and parked. The sun had gone down, but it had left a memory of light. I found the tree without trouble, and felt for the twine. I followed it. The branches remembered me, harshly.

It was darker in the woods. My ears heard everything, sounds that weren't being made. I dug in my coat for the comfort of the .44. The oak couldn't be far off now, and beyond it the clearing. I was cold in my heavy coat.

A twig snapped up ahead. I froze, and went deaf with the blood in my ears. It was quiet. I crept to the oak. I waited.

I counted the inhalations of my breathing, to pass time, and to get the silence out of my ears. I'd reached eighty-four when the hum of a motor reached me. I could see the glow spreading on the road below, but not the lights themselves. Above me in the clearing I heard a rustle. The gun felt wet, almost leaped from my palm when the tree crashed. It hit the road, bounced, and lay still. The car squealed to a halt and Fanny got out.

In the fuller glow I saw him, out of the clearing now, advancing on the girl, his arm raising, a gleam coming off the gun in his hand. I crept forward two steps and cocked the .44. I had to, for the timing was honed to an edge.

But I didn't have to. Heavy caliber coughed from above, and I heard the slug go slap into Winther as he fell.

FANNY screamed. Two figures materialized, moving toward the fallen body. They couldn't be recognized from the road, or from where I stood. I got behind them.

"You're dead if you move, Nick," I said.

The man with him chanced it. He was spitting lead as he turned, but wide, and mine was true. He dug two hands at the hole in his chest, big hands, the hands that had worked me over yesterday morning. Then he dropped.

I heard the girl scream again, but I didn't look. Nick stood still, the gun in his hand at his side. I was trembling. My heart was square as a box and kept turning over with a galumph, and hurting as it did. The gun in my hand felt alive. I was remembering what Nick had told me to remember—how I felt when I left his place yesterday. I had a fever.

"You killed Winther, Nick." It choked me to wait, but I wanted to hear him.

"You're crazy! My gun hasn't been fired. I'm clean!" His desperation was music.

"Nobody'll ever know, Nick. The girl tells my story. Come around shooting, Nick, or take it in the back."

He tumbled to the ground and fired. His slug burned my neck. I pressed evenly, level on him, and shot him through the mouth.

Fanny was out cold when I reached her. I put her in the car, and, a few minutes later Jerry, Dave Burns and his cops crept up on the situation with sirens screaming.

"There's three of them in there," I said, and waved to the woods. "You'll find George Ulrich at home, chewing on his wrists."

At the Keating house where our little caravan trekked to pick up Ulrich, I spilled.

"It works out pretty simple from this end of it," I said. "Nick and Winther originally engineered the deal. Fanny gets six million when she reaches the age of twenty-five, but they decided she should never reach said age. With Fanny gone, Mrs. Ulrich would inherit. Which, in view of her addled affection for her husband, meant the same thing as George inheriting the six million. That's what pulled George in."

Ulrich, in a chair flanked by two of Dave Burns' boys, swallowed and attempted defiance.

I went on. "That made it a two million cut each way. Nick Collit wouldn't stick his neck out for a measly ten grand."

"But Nick wouldn't stick his neck out for two million, either," said Dave. "Why would he write a note like the one you described?"

I smiled. "In my own way, large one, I'll answer all your questions. Nick put a murder threat down on paper. Winther kept Fanny from paying off the gambling debt. George, here, kept her from going to the police. In other words that threat was built to stick. If Fanny paid, the threat would be invalidated. If she went to the police your boys would have picked Nick up, and the threat would have come unstuck. Coming to me was all right. I couldn't put Nick out of the way, and besides I could testify against him after the kill. To plant the guilt stronger, the murder was to take place at the rigged-up tree, on Nick's property."

"That don't sound like Nick Collit," Dave sneered. "It smells."

"I thought so too, Dave. But you came along and perfumed it up." I made a low bow to him.

When he got excited he set all his spherical

surfaces to jouncing.

"I did? I didn't know a blame thing about it!"

"No, but you told me that Nick was going to attend the ball. Act in the sketch even. What better alibi than the whole city police force swearing that Nick Collit had been in plain sight from, say eight to eleven-thirty. During which time Fanny is being fanned out by Winther on the old dirt road, say at nine-thirty. The coroner will swear within an hour. Neat? All the evidence points to Nick, yet Nick is out playing Warden Lawes in the company of several thousand of our finest."

Burns didn't like the picture I cut in the spotlight.

"Well, they already tried to bump her, and it's only six-fifteen now. What happens to your theory?"

"Patience, round one, patience. I arranged the early try myself. When I offered to pay the debt off, Nick knew I was bluffing and didn't have the money. That's what first showed me the connection between Nick and Martin Winther. So when I met Winther here yesterday I threw a curve at him. I let him believe that Nick had told me the pay-off was six million. I wasn't supposed to know that. As a matter of fact I was guessing. But Winther had to check, to see if Nick was crossing him.

"He called Nick from a drug store booth, and evidently got straightened out. But today I called him and threw another scare into him, let him know I knew too much. He had to get out from under. He had to dump it on Nick, kill the girl earlier, before Nick could start to prepare the alibi at the ball."

I LOOKED around at Fanny.

"By the way, you little fool," I said, "how did he get you to leave the house?"

"He called me and said that Nick had kidnaped him, that he was up at Nick's and would be killed if I didn't bring the ten thousand dollars. He warned me not to tell the police and to use the back road so I wouldn't be seen."

I spread my hands. "Probably the same method that would have been used later tonight. Are you following, Dave, or are we going too fast for a man your size?"

He flushed, and grumbled, "Go ahead, wise boy. Talk yourself into something."

"Well, I phoned Nick, tipped him that Winther was pulling the job earlier to un-

load the kill on him. So naturally Nick showed up in the woods to stop such dastardly goings-on."

"How come Nick to get killed, Ben?" said Dave, as if he had been waiting some time now to hang it on me.

"Somebody shot at me in the dark. I shot back."

I gave it to him, daring him to prove me a liar. I didn't wait for an answer either.

"May I go on?" I asked. "I'll clear up another little item for you, Dave, as long as all you boys are so busy with your shindig tonight. Last night, down on Eighth Street, one Rita Slane got murdered. I think if you bust George up enough he'll admit that he killed her."

Urich went whiter than desert bones. He opened his mouth to let his tongue at his lips, but that was all he opened it for.

I kept talking. "What she had on George, I don't know. But he killed her and was looking for something in her apartment when Winther came along and scared him off. Winther found what George was looking for. It had something to do with George and Rita in the long ago, and with it Winther could blackmail George into remembering to divide the six million. Otherwise George could yawn and forget he owed his partners an equal share. Check, George?"

He had nothing left. His handsome head lolled, and he spoke as if the rope were burning his neck.

"Rita was my wife—my real wife," he said in a flat voice.

Mrs. Urich gasped, but George wasn't paying any attention.

"I left her in Denver, thought she got a divorce," he went on. "But she hadn't. She found me here, married to—someone else. She blackmailed me. I couldn't shake her. I offered her a lump hundred thousand for a divorce. She didn't believe I could raise it, and I had to tell her the plan. The murder scared her. She wanted out, but I couldn't have her running around loose, knowing, so I killed her. I was looking for the marriage certificate. Winther found it."

Mrs. Urich—come-lately rose, her lips tight, her face suddenly drawing even with her years, and left the room.

"That's it, Dave," I said, "and you've done another great job."

He glared at me. "You dance around pretty cute. One of these days, Ben Wylie—"

"You'll take me out," I finished. "Tonight, shall we say. To the ball?"

I caught Fanny's eye and winked. The kid looked delicious. I thought maybe some day I'd take her dancing—when she got to be twenty-five.

"Never Say 'Murder' Aloud!"

DAN CUMBERLAND tried to convince himself that the town of Clayton could not harbor the evil and threatened violence he felt in the air—but when the police chief pleaded with him never to say the word "murder" aloud, he could no longer ignore the obvious.

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Arthur couldn't reach the knife,
because now Joe had him by
the throat



CLEAR AS CRYSTAL

By C. K. M. SCANLON

Joe Hawkins discovers that the fearsome eyes of a hated man can be even more terrifying in death than in life!

BOB DARRELL was really worried, but he decided he'd better not show it. He grinned at his sister across the supper table. It was neatly set for two, with the feminine touch of a small bowl of flowers in the center.

Jeanie was a strange girl. She was a good cook, she kept the apartment shiningly clean, and she showed amazing intelligence in some ways—but in others she was like a scatterbrained child.

"Look," Bob said patiently, "if you'd calm down for a minute, maybe you'd see what

I'm getting at. I don't like those two guys."

"I do see," Jeanie retorted. "I see you're trying to insult my friends just to show off how smart you are. Just because you're supposed to be a good judge of people, you—"

"All right," Bob interrupted, "but I do know people and it's about time you realized it. Remember how I solved that Lefty Schultz case?"

"Must you talk shop?" Jeanie drawled. "We all admit you're a smart detective, but that doesn't give you any right to snoop into

my affairs. I like Arthur and Joe Hawkins. You don't. I'm not asking you to like them, am I? Or be friends with them, am I?"

Jeanie was a very pretty girl. She looked even prettier with the flush indignation brought to her cheeks now, the sparkle that anger put in her hazel eyes. That was the trouble, Jeanie was too darned pretty. And when she was annoyed, you couldn't cross her. Bob knew that would only make things worse.

"Take it easy," he said quietly. "What I'm saying makes sense."

"Not to me." She shook back the dark red mane of her hair with a defiant toss of her head. "Anyway, I don't care to discuss it any more," she said loftily.

"Maybe not, but I do. And what I say goes."

"Why?" Jeanie asked.

"Because you're a dope," he told his sister affectionately. "And because I'm six years older than you are. And, also, because there's nobody else to boss you around." The smile went out of his eyes and they grew as serious as though he were working on one of his toughest cases.

"I'm telling you I don't like those two lads," he went on soberly. "I don't like the idea of your going out with either one of them."

But he couldn't tell her why he didn't like them. She had him there. Perhaps it was only a hunch, but it was strong enough to worry him. As a matter of fact, he knew nothing at all about Arthur and Joe Hawkins. They had come to Valley Grove about six months ago. Jeanie had met them some weeks later, at the home of a friend who also knew nothing about them.

FROM Jeanie, Bob understood that they were half-brothers. They were wholly different types. Arthur, the elder, was undersized—a weazened, pallid little runt, with big, horn-rimmed spectacles. He was what Jeanie called the intellectual type. Vaguely, he was writing a book. Actually, he got himself a petty job in the Valley Grove Bookshop.

"He's just a lot of hoovey," was Bob's comment, when Jeanie had introduced them.

And Joe Hawkins was worse. He had gotten a factory job and promptly lost it—nobody ever said why—and now he was looking for another. He was six-feet-two and wide-shouldered, with curling black

hair and a beautiful profile—but no brains.

It wasn't any of this that really bothered Bob, though. It was Jeanie's attitude. Maybe the cause was her impressionable age, and the lack of young men during all the war years. Anyway, Jeanie was impressed.

Bob knew she had been flirting with both the Hawkins brothers, leading them on. Maybe she was really serious. Bob didn't know, and he doubted that Jeanie herself knew. And yet, somehow, the thing seemed to be dynamite, and he couldn't tell why. It was as though Jeanie were walking fatuously along the edge of a precipice.

She was gazing at him now across the supper table.

"Let's drop it," she said.

"You're going out with one of them tonight?" he persisted.

That made her laugh.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm not. Arthur's been away for three weeks. The bookshop sent him to New York on a buying trip. He's coming home tonight."

"Listen," Bob said, "did it ever occur to you that both those men may think they have a chance of marrying you?"

"Maybe they have," Jeanie said. "And because I have some money now, I'm suddenly alluring, is that it? You're not very flattering, Bob."

The Darrell inheritance had come quite unexpectedly to Jeanie and Bob about a year ago. It hadn't made them rich—a matter of some twenty thousand each, in total assets—but it certainly couldn't make Jeanie look any less attractive.

"Okay," Bob said. "You're old enough to boss yourself, Sis. That's true. If you can fall for that Joe Hawkins, why—"

"What's the matter with him?"

"Nothing. Just a handsome hunk of junk. And that slimy little four-eyed Arthur—"

The argument went on for quite a while. But it didn't get anywhere. Yet somehow Bob Darrell knew that his instinct was right. There was something decidedly queer about Arthur and Joe Hawkins. . . .

At eight o'clock that same evening, the Arthur Hawkins, about whom Bob and Jeanie Darrell had been bickering, swung down from the train steps to the platform at Valley Grove station. Carrying his small suitcase, he glanced at the cloudy sky. It was a chilly night, but it wasn't raining, and he decided to walk the two miles to the little frame house near the edge of

town which he and Joe had rented. Joe would probably have dinner ready, he thought.

Arthur Hawkins walked swiftly, shifting his heavy suitcase from one thin hand to the other. His heart seemed to be racing, not from fear, but from excitement. He wanted a showdown. Now. Tonight. He'd find out just how Joe stood, or thought he stood. Joe was so dumb he'd tell, all right. And if things were the way he figured they might be between Joe and the girl, why he, Brother Arthur, had an answer to that.

Murder, he thought. He had thought of it so often lately it had become almost an obsession with him. And why not? The chance of maybe a lifetime. With twenty thousand dollars, he could chuck this two-bit bookshop job and set himself up in a decent business, run the twenty thousand into a million, maybe. And there wasn't a chance that that old criminal record against him would pop up. Especially with Joe out of the way.

The thought made Arthur's heart jump and seem to stick in his throat. Why, of course—it was even necessary! When Joe was sober he had little enough brains, but when he was drunk, he had none. Any little slip of Joe's tongue about the past—their father who had died in the mental institution—was in itself enough to prove that Joe wasn't right in the head. And if all that stuff came out, it would be the end of Jeanie, of her beauty, and her money.

THE village of Valley Grove frayed out quickly here at its northern edge. There was just the sullen, greasy river, with drooping trees along its banks, and the small road beside it along which Arthur Hawkins was trudging.

The lights were all behind him now. Then he saw the light between the trees which he knew was in the lower room of their home.

He opened the front door, closed it behind him. The smell of something frying was heavy in the dimly lighted hallway.

"That you, Arthur?" Joe called.

"Yes."

Arthur put down his suitcase and tossed his hat on the hall table. He was hungry. The supper smelled good.

Joe came out of the kitchen and they met in the living room where the big lamp illumined the table which Joe had set for

two, throwing a circle of light on the table and leaving the rest of the room in comparative darkness, but with enough light to paint grotesque shadows on the walls and ceiling. The kitchen doorway was a rectangular yellow glow. The window blinds of the room were all tightly drawn.

It was remarkable how the mind could work on so many things at once, thought Arthur. With the blinds drawn, any chance passerby wouldn't see what went on here now.

Joe loomed over him, a smoking frying pan in his hand. He set it on a wooden chair.

"Hello," Joe said. "Supper's about ready."

"Good. I'm glad of it. I'm hungry."

And now he could see that Joe had a look of blank astonishment on his handsome, stupid face.

"You're not wearin' your glasses," Joe observed.

"No. I'm not. Go ahead and bring in the supper."

But Joe only stood gaping, surprised at his brother's altered appearance. It made Arthur chuckle to himself. Not wearing those heavy, horn-rimmed spectacles certainly made him look better. Jeanie would think so, he was sure. And the same idea had evidently come to Joe's slow-witted brain.

"S'pose you think that'll make a hit with Jeanie," he said sullenly. "That your idea? Is it?"

"Go ahead and bring in the supper," Arthur said. He sat down at the table.

It was queer how the subconscious mind works. He was sitting here hungry, getting ready to eat, but he was planning—planning murder. It would have to be just one blow with something heavy, because Joe was strong as a bull. If a fight started and Joe ever got hold of him, that would be just too bad. He could remember how Joe had grabbed him once, when they were both kids, and had tried to strangle him. Joe was out of his head with anger, and he was so strong it had taken four other kids to pull him off.

"Smells like pork chops," Arthur said. "Is it? Go ahead, bring it in, I tell you. Stop staring at me like a loon! I'm tired from the trip, and hungry."

The mind can think so many thoughts in a second! Arthur realized that Joe had Jeanie on his mind all the time. Maybe

he'd seen a lot of her in the past three weeks. Maybe he'd gotten somewhere with her. Girls are strange. Jeanie admired brains in a man; she'd told Arthur so. But maybe if a big handsome fellow like Joe ever got up the nerve to grab her and kiss her, why he might get somewhere.

You could explain all that with Freudian stuff, easily. Arthur remembered when he had first heard of Freud—way back when he was a little kid and they had had him and Joe in the hospital, flinging questions at them. Arthur had read a lot about Freud since. It was mighty interesting stuff.

"Without your spectacles, you think you're a swell-lookin' man," Joe was saying. He didn't turn back toward the kitchen. He just stood staring, and his big hands were working. "You think Jeanie will think so, don't you? Well, she won't. She likes me, not you."

"Does she?" Arthur turned in his chair. There was a sharp-pointed carving knife on the table, just out of reach of Arthur's hand. When Joe turned his back now—

"Yes, she does," Joe said, breaking into his thought. "She likes me—she's the most beautiful girl I ever saw and I'm going to marry her. You can't stop me—"

Joe was coming slowly forward so that Arthur suddenly shrank back in his chair. It was like a bull stalking you when you were penned up in a fence corner, he thought. And if the leer on Joe's face was any indication. . . .

JOE could see the fright in his brother's eyes, and it made him glad. There wasn't any reason to be afraid of anybody when you could see they were afraid of you. All his life, somehow, Joe had been afraid of little Arthur—afraid of Arthur's scornful look, afraid of Arthur's angry words that he could throw at you so fast you couldn't fend them off.

"And you can't stop me," Joe was saying. It surprised him that he wasn't afraid to say it.

"Oh I can't, can't I? What do you mean, I can't stop you? You—you big, stupid—" His voice trailed off.

See? Arthur couldn't talk now, because he was really frightened. Joe stood looming like an angry giant beside the table, with little Arthur twisting to reach out a hand, and twisting his neck to look up at him.

"'Cause she's my girl, an' I want her."

Joe hardly was thinking what he was saying. It was so wonderful to feel big and strong and not afraid of anybody, least of all Arthur.

"Why—you—you clumsy—"

"I been thinkin' about it right along—you comin' back an' makin' Jeanie think she likes you. I was thinkin' about it when she an' I were dancing the other night."

"You crazy—let go, you—you big, crazy—" Arthur was screaming it now. He couldn't reach whatever it was he was after, because now Joe had him by the throat. . . .

It was sort of frightening, being alone with the dead thing lying there so still on the floor, Joe thought, and those glistening eyes that seemed to be still alive, watching him.

Joe leaned back from where he had been crouching on the floor, gripping the crumpled, twisted thing which had been Arthur—gripping it by the throat, thinking of nothing except that he must still keep on gripping it, squeezing until it was dead.

And it was dead now, but it was still watching. Joe stood up, with the floor seeming to sway under him. And the dead eyes kept on watching. It was as though Arthur was watching to see what was going to happen now. And Joe found himself wondering what was going to happen, too.

The policemen would come. They always came when somebody got killed. They'd ask a lot of questions. That would be all right if you had time to figure out what you were going to say. But sometimes the questions came too fast, and you let something slip, and they locked you up in jail.

Joe stood trying to think about it. Somebody else killed Arthur. He must remember that and stick to it. But who else, when he and Arthur had been alone here? He realized suddenly that it would be a good idea to take Arthur outside. Out in the bushes by the road would be a good place.

The dead thing was just like a child in his arms. Joe saw Arthur's hat lying in the hall. He took it. And then he thought of the suitcase, and he took that, too. He put everything in the bushes out by the road.

It was still dark, but now the moon came out through the clouds. The dead thing was still watching. It stared when Joe tossed the suitcase and hat down beside it. It watched with those horrible, glistening eyes, that had the moonlight glowing on them now.

It seemed to keep watching as Joe took the wallet out of Arthur's pocket and hid it under some stones over by the river edge, so that people would think Arthur had been robbed.

"You needn't keep watching me, because it won't do you any good, because you can't say anything," Joe was muttering.

The dead eyes didn't flicker and they were so gruesome, so frightening, that Joe put up his hand to ward off their gaze. It was weird to suddenly feel frightened, when all this time he hadn't been frightened at all. Anger swept him, and then a sort of frenzy, so that he crouched down and gouged at the staring eyes with his knuckles.

"You quit it! You quit it! You can't scare me, Arthur! Not when you're dead, you can't. You can't make me give myself away to the policemen, because I won't. I'll tell them—" His voice became an unintelligible, fear-stricken babble.

Arthur was just trying to frighten him. That's what he'd done all his life, and now that he was dead, he was keeping on with it. But it wouldn't work.

"I know just what I'll tell the policemen when they ask me," Joe said aloud. "I've got it all learned. I won't forget it."

HE KEPT muttering that to himself as he went back to the house. He ate his dinner in the kitchen. The other room was all in order, because he had carefully picked it up.

"Hello in there! Anybody there?"

It was a man's voice calling from outside. A man who sounded excited. Joe went out with a piece of pie in his hand. A middle-aged man stood there, and down by the road Joe saw the lights of a car.

"Listen," the man said. "Out there by the road there's a dead man! The headlights of my car showed it up as I came around the bend! You got a telephone?"

"A dead man?" Joe said. "No, we never had a telephone."

"We got to phone the police! Where's your nearest neighbor who might have one?"

They ran down the road to Simmon's place, and the man with the automobile called the police.

Joe could see that the police were sorry for him, because it was his brother who had been killed. They had brought Arthur's body up here now. It was lying on the sofa in the sitting room, with a sheet over it.

They were waiting, Joe heard them say, for the official doctor to come and examine it. There was a policeman here named Timmons. Sergeant Timmons. He had talked to Joe and the man with the automobile who had found the body. Then they had let the man go.

Joe was sitting now on a chair by the sitting room doorway. He sat on the edge of it, with his big-knuckled hands dangling between his knees. He was watching and listening to what was going on—the policemen poking around the house, but mostly around the ground down by the road. Joe hadn't forgotten the story he was going to tell them. He had told some of it to Sergeant Timmons already. It was very easy to tell, and Joe wasn't frightened about it at all. He wasn't frightened about anything. He was thinking that now he wouldn't have to worry about Arthur with Jeanie. He kept telling himself that, over and over.

The policemen had been talking about what girls Arthur went around with.

"He knew Jeanie Darrell pretty well," Joe had said. He hadn't meant to say it, but the words just slipped out.

"Jeanie Darrell!" one of the policemen exclaimed. "Why that's Bob Darrell's sister—he's with the Homicide Squad over at Blake City!"

Two of the policemen went away on their motorcycles, soon after that, to do some telephoning. And now Sergeant Timmons came suddenly and stood in front of Joe.

"Sit down, Hawkins," Timmons said, smiling, when Joe stood up. "That's all right, sit still. I just want to ask you a few other things."

"Yes, sir," Joe said.

"You said you thought you heard some sort of scream outside? What time was that, do you think?"

"I was gettin' supper" Joe said. "Arthur told me, when he went to New York, he'd be back on the eight o'clock train tonight."

"And you were getting supper ready for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"An' maybe it was about eight o'clock then, when you heard—"

"Maybe it was a little later," Joe said. "I was thinkin' he ought to be along. I heard what maybe sounded like a scream—I guess it wasn't very loud because—"

"And you rushed out," prompted the policeman. "Did you go far?"

"No, sir. I just took a look from the back door. I thought maybe it was down along the road, but I didn't see anything or hear it again. So I came back and went on getting supper. Then I figured it was so late Arthur must not have come on that train. So I ate my supper, and then—"

"That fellow Jackson came along in his car and discovered the body," Timmons supplied.

"Yes, sir."

"We only found a few coins in Arthur's pockets," Sergeant Timmons said. "Tell me, did he have a wallet or anything like that? Or did he just carry his paper money loose?"

"He had a swell wallet," Joe said. "Did it get stolen?"

"Evidently it did. Somebody waylaid him as he came walking home from the train. In the fight, Arthur got strangled. The thief took his wallet, but didn't take his ring or his watch. Don't you think that's queer, Hawkins?"

"Yes, sir," Joe said. He had never thought of the ring and the watch.

THERE was a commotion outside, and then Jeanie came in, with her brother Bob. Joe had only met Bob Darrell a couple of times, but he remembered him very well. Jeanie looked so pretty. It seemed to the staring, gulping Joe that he had never realized how pretty she was. And now there wouldn't be any Arthur around with his slick talk to take her away from him.

"Lo, Jeanie," Joe said.

She stared at him with big, frightened eyes.

"Hello," Jeanie murmured. She looked so very frightened Joe wanted to go and comfort her. But her brother had put her on a chair in the little hall outside the sitting room.

"Hello, Mr. Darrell," Joe said. "Remember me? I met you—"

"I remember," Bob Darrell said coldly, cutting him short. He looked very solemn. His mouth was a thin line. His gaze swept the towering Joe.

Then he said, "You sit there, Jeanie. Don't come into the sitting room. You shouldn't have insisted on coming here. There's no need for you."

"I'll sit here," Jeanie said. "Oh Bob, what do they think?"

"And don't talk," Bob said, ignoring her question. Then he murmured something to

Sergeant Timmons and both of them went into the sitting room where the dead thing still lay covered by the sheet.

Joe wanted to go and talk to Jeanie, but what might be going on in the sitting room seemed more important somehow, and he went and stood by the partly opened door. He could see inside a little, not much. But he couldn't hear anything. They were murmuring to each other too softly for him to catch their words.

A lot of time went by. Joe could see that Bob Darrell had lifted the sheet and was examining Arthur's body. Sergeant Timmons and two or three other men were standing by the sofa, but just for a minute Joe caught a glimpse of Arthur's dead face. It was frightening, that face. The mouth was partly open, and the eyes stared. Without his spectacles, somehow Arthur's eyes looked more stern and frightening than they ever had with the spectacles on.

"... and he's so dumb, can't see how he could hide it if we jump on him."

Somebody had raised his murmuring voice excitedly, so that Joe caught the words.

"Shut up!" somebody else said. "We need more evidence, first."

And then there was Bob Darrell's sharp voice. "But look here, Sergeant. Look at his eyes."

Then the sergeant was stooping down and Bob Darrell was showing him something.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned," the sergeant said. "I've heard of them, but I never saw any before."

"Hit him in the eye, looks like," Bob Darrell said. "Or maybe gouged at his eyes, in a frenzy. Look, the eyeball is bruised, particularly the right one."

Joe stood tense, trying to figure out what they were saying. And then Bob Darrell suddenly jumped to his feet, and they saw Joe there by the door and they were pushing him forward.

"Let me take a look at your hands," Bob Darrell said. His eyes were stern too, like Arthur's had always been.

"My hands, why sure, sure," Joe said.

He held them out. It was queer that they were shaking.

"My hands? What's the matter with my hands?" Joe asked.

Bob Darrell was gazing at them, and then he had a little magnifying glass and was bending over, examining Joe's hands closely.

(Concluded on page 113)

Murder of No Importance

A Gripping Complete Mystery Novelet

By NORMAN A. DANIELS



Old Jake hurled the bottle, which missed—but Blake's fist did not

CHAPTER I

DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

THE State Police car was really burning up the highway. And using its siren full blast to clear a path. Behind the wheel sat State Trooper Ted Blake, thirty, six feet tall and with the shoulders of a logger. At his side was Captain Whipple who had heavy jowls, the beginning of a

good paunch, and a dominating chin that stuck out as if asking for a jaw-breaking haymaker.

Neither man was in uniform for they were members of the State Police Detective Division and at the moment were rolling toward the scene of a crime of utmost importance. The degree of seriousness matched that given to it by any department. Fights, burglaries, highway robbery, larceny and even kidnapping, all ranked high in importance, but the



When State Trooper Ted Blake investigates the killing of a ditch-digger on a millionaire's estate, his findings hark back to an unsolved five-year-old crime!

one at the very top had an ugly name. It was Murder!

Captain Whipple never batted an eyelash as Blake held to a straight course until the radiator of the police car seemed ready to climb the tailboard of the truck ahead. Then he swerved out, with a blast of the siren, and passed the truck like a jet plane passes a transport.

"This is going to raise an awful smell, Blake," Whipple said. "Really bad. Oh, I know murder is murder. It doesn't make any difference what social standing it hits, but this is a murder on the estate of Roland Locke, and they don't come any bigger."

Blake didn't say so, but he couldn't see why a murder on the Locke estate was any more outstanding than a killing in some slovenly tenement flat. Only what the newspapers would make of it. To a cop, murder was murder.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Thanks for taking me along. Since I'm the newest member of the detective division I thought I didn't rate an assignment like this—even as an assistant."

"You're a smart lad," Whipple commented. "Strong, and quick with a gun. Handy to have around. And you handled that hijacking gang neatly. Couldn't have done much better myself."

"Did they say who had been killed?" Blake asked.

"No. The butler phoned. Just said it was a killing and for someone to get right out there. Boy, that estate is a good place for a killing too. It's about four miles in extent. They even stock the forest around the estate with game. Imagine that."

BLAKE smiled just a trifle. Whipple always had been impressed by money and the impression made by Roland Locke would therefore be overwhelming.

"Locke retired right after the end of the war," Whipple went on. "But he did his

share. Built more ships than anyone outside of Kaiser. We've got to clear this up quickly, understand? By the time the newspapers get it, we want the murderer in a sack."

Whipple suddenly shut up, grabbed the window handle for support and held on while Blake swerved off the highway and onto the paved road which led to the Locke estate.

A man in a chauffeur's uniform was waiting at the gate, and he jumped on the running board to act as guide. Under his instructions, Blake circled the enormous mansion, passed the garage, a greenhouse, and several smaller outbuildings. At least half a mile to the rear of the buildings, he braked to a halt.

"It's over there—in that ditch," the chauffeur pointed out. "Don't ask me to go with you. I—get kind of sick when I see things like that."

WHIPPLE squeezed out of the car, broke into a trot, and Blake followed him. They reached what seemed to be a long trench which began somewhere behind a fringe of trees and ended right at the point to which they were headed. A man stood there, leaning on a rake and staring intently into the trench.

Blake looked down too, when he came to a stop. A man lay there. A dark-complexioned individual with a huge mustache. He was about fifty. One side of his head was a bloody mass, the other side gray in the grayness of death.

"You're the State Cops, I suppose," said the man leaning on the rake. "I'm the gardener here. The man who is dead came to work yesterday. I hired him. He was supposed to dig up the sewer line. There's a break some place."

Whipple cleared his throat importantly. "So what happened? Who put a bullet through his head?"

The gardener gaped. "Now how would I know? His name was Salvatore Something-or-other. I got a theory though. There's poachers in the woods right behind us. They hunt quail and partridge which Mr. Locke stocks the woods with. My guess is that they were looking for something to shoot at and Salvatore here turned out to be the target."

Blake jumped lightly into the trench. He judged the dead man's height, bent his knees to approximate it, and discovered that only his head showed above the top of the trench. He stood erect.

"Captain, the gardener may be right. This ditch-digger had only his head showing and if he was at work, he must have been moving. Somebody with a too-quick trigger finger thought he was seeing a rabbit or a fox, and blazed away. Then, when he found out what he'd hit, he beat it."

Whipple looked disgusted. "It sounds logical. Let's go to the house and see what the Lockes say about it."

Back in the car, Captain Whipple gave voice to his disappointment.

"Some ditch-digger shot by a hunter, purely by accident. What kind of a case is that? Why didn't that fool butler give me some facts? Well, I'm here and I'll have to go through with it."

The butler met them at the door. He wasn't half as haughty as he was pugnacious-looking, and at first Blake thought they were going to have some trouble getting in. But Whipple's important manner got them by the door. They walked into a music room, off the hallway, where there were two grand pianos, a harp, a set of drums and traps, an organ and even a small stage. And even these looked somewhat lost in the vastness of space in this music room.

There was a fire in the fireplace, and three men sat before it. Blake recognized squat, white-haired Roland Locke at once. The trooper had seen the man's picture in the newspapers a score of times. The other two men were strangers.

Locke arose and offered Whipple his hand.

"I hope you find the man who killed that unfortunate chap," he said. "It upset my wife and my daughter badly. Of course it was a poacher. They're the bane of my existence. Every kid or man with a gun thinks he can hunt on my property. I wouldn't mind so much except for—well, things like that which just happened."

"We'll find the man all right, sir," Whipple said. "I'm assigning Trooper Blake to the investigation. He's young, but he's smart. I'll help, of course, unless the thing settles into a routine. Then Blake can handle it. Now—did anyone hear the shot?"

"Shots," Blake broke in drily. "He was hit twice."

LOCKE gave him a quizzical glance.

"No, Officer," he said to Whipple, "none of us heard a thing. The gardener found the body. We don't even know how long he has been dead."

"About two hours," Blake chimed in, and disregarded Whipple's savage look. "Sunlight filled the trench and kept the body warm. I'm going by the extent of blood coagulation."

One of the other two men gave a whoop of derisive laughter.

"Well, well, a regular Sherlock Holmes, we have here. I expect you'll clear everything up in the next ten minutes or so."

Blake smiled. "I wish I could, sir. But I do promise to clear it up."

The man he addressed was lean and bronzed. He looked like a professional dancer who used a sunlamp a great deal, except that he was a bit too old. His hair was gray-ing at the temples.

The third man grinned at Blake. "Don't mind Walter, Officer. He's a born skeptic and his tongue is forked. I'm Paul Clark, Mr. Locke's son-in-law. Our sarcastic companion is Walter Locke, the great man's brother."

Blake nodded to both men. There wasn't much else. Whipple cleared his throat, nudged Blake and they left, accompanied only by the butler, who didn't seem to care much about cops in general.

Whipple got behind the wheel of the police car.

"Well, Blake," he said, "I'm letting you take charge after all. See what you can do. Question people who have been known to poach on this estate. Check rifles and all that. Clear it up."

"Yes, sir," Blake said.

Whipple tramped on the starter.

"Keep out of the way of the people in the house. Remember their position. This is your first homicide case, Blake. Not a very important one. Just some poor ditch-digger who got himself shot for a rabbit. Report in when you close the job."

"Yes, sir," Blake said again, but his eyes were somber and his lips tight.

He suddenly didn't like Captain Whipple much. Still, Blake had considerable satisfaction in his heart and brain. He was guess-

ing that the laborer in the trench, the unimportant victim of sudden death, had been coolly and deliberately murdered.

CHAPTER II

MAN WITH A RIFLE



BLAKE turned, as the car pulled away, and he was rather surprised to see Paul Clark, Locke's son-in-law, standing there. Clark looked grim as he came forward.

"I heard that," he said. "About the case being of no especial importance. I

feel that you don't agree with your superior, Blake. Am I right?"

"To me the death of any man is important, Mr. Clark," Blake said. "Whether he is an incredibly wealthy man like your father-in-law, or a man who has to work with his muscles digging sewer ditches. In a case of murder, every act of violence should be investigated equally, without regard to the victim's station in life."

"Did you say—murder?" Clark gasped.

Blake shrugged. "A figure of speech. Everyone seems satisfied that the poor guy was shot by someone who mistook him for some sort of game. Why shouldn't I?"

Blake left Clark there and went back to the sewer line, no mean walk from the house. The gardener was gone. Only the dead man was left. Blake stood at the end of the trench, looking down into it, and his eyes grew narrower and narrower.

First of all, he saw that the ground here was packed hard, was stony, and had necessitated the use of a pick. But the laborer had stopped using a pick about eight feet from the limits of the trench. Why? The earth was just as hard and just as packed with stones.

Furthermore, the trench deviated about six or seven inches from the straight line it had followed and it wasn't as deep as the rest. Below this point the conduit pipes were fully exposed. Here, no attempt had been made to clear the pipes.

Blake was still studying this interesting set-up when a hearse pulled up. The village medical examiner was with the undertaker, both dispatched by Captain Whipple.

The doctor was obliging enough. He man-

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aged to extract one of the lethal bullets from the dead man's head right on the spot and promised to send the other over to Blake right after the autopsy. Then Blake was alone.

The interest the Lockes showed in this death was negligible. Blake wondered how they would react if he could prove that one of them happened to be a murderer. He sat down on the edge of the trench, let his feet dangle over, and did some heavy thinking.

In the first place the assumption that one of the Locke household had committed this crime seemed preposterous. Why would anyone in that house murder a harmless, hardly known laborer engaged in digging up the pipes? The utter lack of any motive seemed to put them all in the clear. Maybe they knew this, and realized they couldn't possibly be suspected even if it were murder.

He noticed that the dead man had occupied what seemed to be an especially dug out part of the trench floor. As if he had been digging his own shallow grave.

Then Blake's eyes spotted a button. A large coat button and there had been no coat on the dead man. Blake found another. He studied them intently. They appeared to be eroded somewhat. The glaze was off them and they were pitted with tiny holes, as if the elements had eaten away at them. The holes, through which the thread had passed, were packed with dirt.

He thought he heard bushes crackle and peered over the top of the trench. Someone had been watching him. Bushes at the edge of the forest were still moving. Blake got out of the trench and walked quickly toward the brush. He plowed through it and found himself in thick forest growth. He kept going, pausing now and then to listen.

The attack came from behind him, but the man who made it had been a trifle too careful. He had let Blake get too far ahead and as he rushed toward him with an upraised rifle which he gripped by the barrel, Blake heard the crash of the assailant's feet.

Blake spun around, one hand going for his hip-holstered gun. But there was no time to draw it. The rifle was coming down and if it hit him on the head, he would be as dead as the laborer in the trench. Blake threw himself to one side. The rifle stock made a whizzing sound as it missed his skull by an inch or two.

But a rifle held that way is an impotent

weapon, if the first attack fails. Before the man who grasped it could get into position, Blake was at his throat. The man let go of the rifle and started fighting. He was strong, wiry, and heavily built, but so was Blake and he knew all the tricks of fighting.

BLAKE inserted a foot between the man's legs and deftly dumped him on the ground. A second later he landed on top of him and there were handcuffs in Blake's fingers now. They snapped shut and he had a prisoner. Blake hauled the man to his feet and shoved him against the trunk of a tree.

Someone else was coming. It turned out to be Paul Clark, the Locke son-in-law, and Blake's apprehension passed. Clark rushed up to the scene.

"What in the world!" he cried. Then he looked at Blake's prisoner. "Jake, what happened?"

"Do you know him?" Blake demanded.

The man called Jake gazed sourly at the cuffs around his wrists and cursed lustily.

"This guy is a poacher of some kind," he said in a snarling voice. "He was snooping."

"Jake, you idiot!" Clark said. "This man is a detective."

"A copper? No kiddin'?" Jake looked the picture of astonishment. "Honest, I figured he was after some of them new hen pheasants we turned loose a few days ago."

Clark glanced at Blake. "This man is Old Jake. He lives in a shack at the edge of the estate and acts as unofficial game-keeper. Locke lets him live there, rent free, so long as he keeps an eye on the estate. Jake made a mistake, that's all."

"Some error," Blake grunted. "He knew I had no rifle, and you don't hunt pheasant with a revolver or a sling-shot. He didn't ask me who I was. He simply rushed me from behind, and if I ever saw murder, it gleamed in his eyes. However, I'll let him go if you vouch for him."

Jake gave a derisive howl. "Huh! I'd like to see you do anything to me. Why Mr. Locke would—"

"Shut up!" Clark snapped. "Blake took the cuffs off you. Get out of here."

Jake turned obediently, picked up his rifle and started to walk away. Blake moved after him and yanked the rifle from his grasp. He looked the weapon over, then threw it back at the man.

"Just checking," he explained. "That's not the same caliber as the gun which killed the

trench-digger. You can go, Jake. I'll talk to you later—and you'd better be around."

Jake disappeared and Clark apologized. "He's just an ignorant lout. I never could understand why Locke permits him to remain here. Some day he'll get all of us in trouble. What good is he anyway? A man who drinks himself into a stupor once or twice a week."

"Tell me something about the family," Blake urged, as they walked back toward the trench. "The Lockes are fabulous people, you know."

"From a distance, maybe," Clark grunted. "When you get to know them, the glitter soon wears off. Mind you, I married Locke's daughter and we get along fantously. I pretend to work at one of his shipyards. In reality, all my work is done for me, except endorsing the fat check that comes around every couple of weeks. The old man is all right. He has a violent temper, though, and he thinks he is especially blessed of heaven. It's his brother I don't like. My wife's uncle."

"You mean Walter?" Blake asked. "What's the matter with him?"

"You can't put a finger on it," Clark remarked. "He just rubs me the wrong way. Let's talk about something else. The killing of that poor guy, for instance. Anything new?"

Blake's right hand, in his coat pocket, fingered the buttons he had found.

"No," he said. "Did you expect anything new?"

Clark laughed. "Look, I'm not a policeman, but if this were my case to handle, I'd check up on the people who have been arrested for poaching on the estate, examine their rifles, and—well, you'll probably find that one of them shot the ditch-digger."

"Maybe," Blake said. "Is the big house occupied all year around?"

"Yes. The old man doesn't like to travel any more. He rarely leaves the place. Walter doesn't, either. Fran—my wife—and I get away whenever we can. In fact, we returned from Canada only this afternoon."

They reached the trench and stopped there for a moment.

"Do you have much trouble with this pipe line?" Blake asked. "It's an awfully long one to have to be dug up every few months."

Clark shook his head. "The last time it caved in was five years ago. How do I remember so well? They were digging it the

day I married Fran. She and I slipped away from the wedding party, and we had a car parked on the other side of the forest. We nearly fell into the dog-gone trench that day. So I remember all right."

BLAKE grinned, and kept fingering the buttons.

Finally Clark left him and sauntered back to the house. Blake waited ten minutes before he retraced his steps and headed toward the forest. He wanted to see how Old Jake lived in his supreme isolation. That, and to see if Jake owned another rifle. Blake couldn't forget the murderous light in Jake's eyes when he sprang to attack.

He found the shack easily enough by following a trail which Jake had created over the years. It was getting dark and Blake wanted to get back to the big house instead of getting lost in the forest, but there was an experiment he wanted to try first—if conditions were right.

They couldn't have been better. Jake sat alone, on an old box in front of the dilapidated shanty he called a home. It had been repaired with tar paper until the place looked as if that were what it had been made from originally. Jake had a bottle, and while Blake watched him, he tilted it often and long.

In a short while, Jake closed his eyes, wriggled his back squarely against the wall of the shack, and fell asleep. Blake smiled, stealthily made his way past the man and into the shack. He saw the rifle Jake had carried the time the man swung at him, but a search revealed no other weapon except an ancient pistol. Jake might have been ingenious about hiding the murder rifle however.

Blake put the rifle on a closet floor and covered it up. Then he slipped past the sleeping man again until he was hidden by the brush.

He picked up a couple of small stones on his trip back. He threw one accurately, and it hit Jake's arm. The old man muttered, moved a trifle, then opened his eyes. Blake rustled the bushes hard.

Jake leaped to his feet. The whisky might have affected his brain, but not his limbs, for he moved like a cat. He dived into the shack. Blake could hear him shouting while he rummaged for the rifle. He didn't find it, and when he appeared in the doorway, he was gripping the old gun that resembled a

horse pistol. It was useless, for the gun didn't even have a hammer.

Jake waved the weapon ferociously, but Blake stole quietly away. He knew what he had come to find out. Jake didn't have another rifle. The man would have been bound to arm himself with a capable weapon if he had had one.

Blake passed the trench by hopping over it. The grounds were quite dark now, though the big house glistened with lights in almost every window. Blake heard someone's shoes crunching gravel on a garden path. It was Roland Locke. The owner of the estate saw Blake's shadowy form and came to an uncertain halt.

"It's all right, sir," Blake called out. "I'm the State policeman."

Locke lit a cigar, his face stern and uncompromising in its light.

"I thought you'd left," he growled. "Why are you staying around? Anyone would think this has turned into an important murder. Why, it's obvious! Or don't you so-called detectives proceed according to the obvious?"

"We don't take chances," Blake corrected him, with a laugh.

"Well, you can get off my property," Locke said tightly. "You have no reason for prowling about here, and I don't like it. I'll have Harrison drive you into town."

"Fine," Blake said. "I was trying to get up enough nerve to ask the loan of a car. Captain Whipple left me with only my two feet for traveling purposes. But it's only fair to warn you that I intend to come back, Mr. Locke."

"Why? Why the devil do you persist in acting as though this were a murder case?"

"Because it is," Blake said softly. "I won't answer any questions, and I won't be intimidated by your money or power, Mr. Locke. If you put me off this property, I'll come back with a search warrant, and if you interfere, then I'll see that you are taken to the constable's lockup in town. You're noted as a tough man. How do you like being treated tough for a change?"

"Don't suppose I do," Locke grunted. "Look here, Officer, I'm entitled to know the facts. If a crime has been committed, I'll do everything I can to help you find the man who did it. You can trust me."

"I'm sorry," Blake answered. "I don't trust anyone."

"But I'm Roland Locke. Everyone knows me."

"You might be the murderer I'm after," Blake said in a gentle voice. "Anyone here could be. Now how about that car, Mr. Locke?"

He got it, with the uniformed chauffeur to drive. Blake decided that Roland Locke had been too stunned to think of refusing.

CHAPTER III

A QUESTION OF SHOES



THE chauffeur was friendly, talkative, and not curious. He liked working for Locke and didn't mind saying so.

"You hear all kinds of stories about the old boy," he laughed. "He just sounds tough, that's all. The guy has a heart as

soft as a flat inner tube. The real tough guy of the family is the brother, Walter. There's a man I don't trust."

"What about young Clark?" Blake asked.

"He's okay, I guess. Never has much to say. Walter fought the marriage, but he didn't get far. Why, I don't know. Where you heading for, Sergeant?"

"The constable's office—and don't go putting stripes on my arm," Blake replied. "I'm just a plain cop."

The constable was an old hand at dealing with the State Police. He allowed them to have their way, gave all the information he could, and let them solve cases for which he later on took a certain measure of credit.

He answered Blake's first question with a shrug.

"Anybody disappeared around here? Trooper, if everybody lived as decently as we country folk, your big city Missing Bureau would go out of business."

"Five years ago," Blake prodded. "Or maybe six. No later than that. Certainly once every ten years or so somebody vanishes, if only for a short time."

The constable got up, went to his desk, and opened a huge record book. He turned back over the years. It took him half an hour to find the entry.

"Yep," he said then. "I just wanted to be sure. Couldn't think of the man's name or the facts, but they're all here. Don't appear to be a disappearance case anyhow. Fellow named Gordon boarded up at the Bellows

place, five years ago this summer. He was a professor of some kind. I never laid eyes on him."

"But he was reported missing?" Blake persisted.

"Well, Mrs. Bellows said he went out one night and didn't come back. He left his baggage—nothing much—and never returned for it. But I say maybe he reached town, decided he had to go back to work, and just got on the train. If he'd really disappeared, somebody would have come looking for him by this time. His folks would have known he was stopping at the Bellows farm."

Blake switched the subject before the constable became too curious.

"What about this Old Jake who lives on the Locke place?"

"Him?" the constable snorted. "Him I know. He's been a guest in my lockup a score of times. He's a good-for-nothing bum. Now and then somebody at the estate must slip him a few dollars. That's when he comes into town and gets roaring drunk. Owes every bar, as I hear it. The liquor store too, but he must pay up once in a while."

Blake thought he had exhausted this source of information, thanked the constable, and went back to where the chauffeur was parked with Locke's car. He went on by, though, and walked into the nearest bar. He marched up to the bartender.

"I'm Old Jake's nephew," he lied smoothly. "I found out he owes a lot of people for liquor and I want to pay up."

"That's nice of you, mister," the barkeep said. "But it so happens Jake don't owe me a dime. Paid up, he did, not more than a few hours ago. Paid everybody and surprised us so much he got a load on from free drinks."

Blake expressed profound surprise, and walked back to the car. He told the chauffeur to drive him to the Bellows Farm. It was some four miles beyond the Locke estate.

Mrs. Bellows turned out to be a motherly woman, a widow, and eager to answer questions once she got over the shock of having a State Trooper call on her.

"I remember very well," she said. "Professor Gordon got my name in town somewhere. When he came here he said he was going to make an indefinite stay. He was a nice old man. Then one night he went out without saying a word, and he never came back."

[Turn page]

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"No one ever asked any questions about him, Mrs. Bellows?"

She shook her head. "Never. I've still got his bag and baggage in my attic. I figured he was absent-minded and forgot to come back. Or he didn't care. There wasn't much he left behind him."

"Could I see it?" Blake asked.

He followed her to the attic where she produced one cheap canvas traveling bag. It contained shaving equipment, a few clothes, and some odds and ends. There were several note-books, all having to do with the chemistry of ersatz rubber.

BLAKE reflected that about the time the professor vanished, every scientist in the country was trying to produce synthetic rubber for the war effort.

"Do you happen to know," he asked Mrs. Bellows, "if Professor Gordon knew anybody at the Locke estate?"

"I'm sure he didn't," she answered. "Those people have little to do with outsiders. I remember the Professor asked me who lived there, but he didn't even recall how important Mr. Locke was then. He even asked me how Mr. Locke got all his money. I'm sure he didn't know him."

Blake thanked Mrs. Bellows and had the chauffeur drive him back to the estate. For the first two miles of the ride, Blake just sat staring unseeing out of the window. Finally he turned to the chauffeur.

"Harrison," he said, "are the members of Mr. Locke's family good drivers?"

Harrison gave him a sharp look. "Listen, I'm not supposed to talk about the people I work for. It'll get me in trouble."

"I'm not asking you out of curiosity," Blake argued. "This is police business. And I promise they'll never know where I got my information. It probably won't mean anything anyway."

"They're swell drivers," the chauffeur said promptly. "That is, those of them who drive. Walter Locke doesn't know how. The boss is good. So is his daughter, and so is Mr. Clark, the daughter's husband."

"No accidents?" Blake asked gently, and held his breath.

"I don't remember any."

"Think hard. I know you have worked for the family more than nine years. Go back, say, five years. Associate the time with events that happened then. Like Clark's wedding.

The pipes being dug up just as they are now."

Harrison shook his head. "No accidents," he said flatly.

But he was driving with one hand and the free fingers held a cigarette which trembled enough to shake the ashes loose. Blake saw that.

"Okay, Harrison," he said. "I've changed my mind. Take me back to town. I want to visit the garage which does Locke's repair work."

Harrison spat an oath. "Copper, you keep sticking your nose into Locke's business, and he'll burn it right off your face. . . Okay. They'll tell you at the garage, so I might as well. I'm not trying to hide anything except maybe the accident wasn't reported. The big sedan came back with a busted headlight, a caved-in bumper and a bent fender. That was the night before the wedding. I don't know who drove it, or what happened. They don't talk about their business to a chauffeur."

"And I won't talk about what you just told me," Blake said. "Thanks, Harrison."

"It's okay," Harrison said. "I remember, because Clark and Locke's daughter were going to use that bus for their honeymoon and I had to stay up all night getting another car ready for them. Clark gave me ten bucks for the extra work. He's a good guy."

They rode in silence for the next mile. Then Harrison said:

"Look, why all the questions? Some poor guy gets his head full of bullets today. A poacher did that. Anyhow, the dead man was just a ditch-digger. He wasn't very important."

"That's why I'm interested," Blake said. "He was unimportant. Just a poor ditch-digger, but he needs somebody to go to bat for him. Let me off at the front door, like a good guy."

The chauffeur didn't comment. He couldn't understand what it was all about. Blake went into the house and found Clark, Roland Locke, and his brother Walter, seated in the music room.

"I'm sorry," Blake addressed them all, "but I must ask that none of you leave the premises. And I want the butler to collect the shoes of every man in the house."

"Shoes?" Roland Locke blurted. "What in the world are you up to?"

"I'm running down a killer, Mr. Locke. I don't believe I have to say anything more.

And I'm going to use your telephone."

He walked to the phone in the next room, leaving the door open. He called the bar-racks, and got Captain Whipple on the wire.

"Things are developing," he said suavely. "I want the mobile laboratory sent here at once. With experts who can trace where dirt on shoes came from?"

"Are you crazy?" Whipple roared. "Listen, that's the Locke estate. You can't do a thing like that!"

"Fine." Blake grinned slightly. "It will be here shortly then. No, I don't need any other help."

"You'll get yourself bounced off the force by dawn!" Whipple bellowed. "Blake, think what you're doing. I'm coming over. I shouldn't have left you alone in the first place!"

"Thanks just the same, Captain," Blake said. "I really don't want anybody here. Suppose I fall flat on my face. Well, I can take the blame alone then. I may be all wrong. There are certain bits of evidence I must have. If I fail, well—"

"I wish we didn't have to go by Civil Service rules!" Whipple shouted. "I'd fire you on the spot. Okay, I won't come down. I refuse to get involved. When I show up, it will be to scoop up the pieces. Of what's left of you. Don't be a fool, Blake!"

"Good-by, sir," Blake said calmly. "Tell the boys on the mobile lab to snap it up."

WHEN Blake returned to the music room, all three men were sitting rigidly erect, as if they expected something to happen at any second.

"I sent the butler for the shoes," Roland Locke said. "An incredible order on your part. I don't intend to let this drop, Officer."

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"I don't either. Incidentally, gentlemen, do any of you dabble in rubber? Direct manufacture? Stock market?"

"I own rubber stocks," Walter Locke snapped. "What of it?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," Blake said, and added, "For the moment. Oh, yes, please remove the shoes you are wearing now. The butler can bring you slippers. And if the shoes are touched in any way, the laboratory experts will know it. The person's shoes who have been scraped clean will be forced to answer a lot of serious questions. I leave you to take charge and see that the shoes are intact, Mr. Locke."

Roland Locke nodded. His brother got up. "I'll get my own slippers. This is the most high-handed piece of business I've ever encountered. Officer, if this is a joke or the results of your stupidity, I'll see that you pay for it."

"Your brother mentioned something along those same lines," Blake broke in. "Thank you, gentlemen. I'll be back soon."

"Back soon," Walter Locke snorted. "Where are you going now? To conjure up some more devilry? Like making us turn over our socks next?"

"Not quite. I'm going after Old Jake. He wears shoes too. Which is rather surprising for his type, don't you think?"

Blake chuckled softly as he left the house and headed for the garage. Harrison, the chauffeur, was busy washing a car. Blake went up to him.

"How's your nerve, Harrison? I need help."

"Now, listen!" Harrison pleaded.

"If you take a certain amount of risk, I can promise that Mr. Locke will see that you're repaid. You'll help me find a miserable killer and avenge that little ditch-digger nobody thinks is important. How about it? The job will be dangerous."

Harrison reflected a moment. "I'm not scared, Trooper. I was in the first war and I saw plenty of action, but I like this job. You're sure the old man won't be sore at me?"

"If it fails, he'll never find out you had a part. Nothing may happen—and everything may. You can refuse if you like, and I'll have to get another trooper down here. The delay may mean a world of difference."

"Let's go," Harrison said. "The more I think about that poor guy in the ditch, the madder I get. They seem to believe his death doesn't mean a thing. Maybe he had a family."

Somebody has to help him, like you said."

Blake nodded. "I thought I had you tagged right. Take my gun. We're heading down the forest path toward Old Jake's shack. I expect some trouble on the way."

CHAPTER IV

THE HIDDEN CORPSE



HARRISON and Blake were midway through the forest, with Blake taking the path openly and Harrison quietly slipping from tree to tree and keeping out of sight when the first bullet came. It came dangerously close.

Blake let out a yell.

"Hold your fire, you idiot! This is the State Police!"

Another slug came whistling and crashing his way. Blake stealthily slipped behind a tree. Harrison was a half-dozen feet away.

Blake lowered his voice to a faint whisper, to speak to the chauffeur:

"Throw a branch out. When the shooting starts, fire back. Keep firing. If you see anybody, shoot to kill. If your gun becomes empty, make tracks for the garage. The gunman thinks I'm all alone."

Harrison made a circle with thumb and forefinger. There was just enough starlight filtering through the trees so Blake could see him. Blake retreated as quietly as possible, until he was some distance away. Then he moved fast through the forest, toward Old Jake's shack. It was a slower, roundabout route, but there was time enough if Harrison held out.

Twice Blake heard the crash of Harrison's gun and four times the flat crack of a rifle reached him.

He came into sight of the shack. There was a light in it, but Old Jake was not there. Blake skirted the shack and, well behind it, paused to listen and peer through the darkness.

Finally he saw what he knew must be somewhere in the darkness. A feeble light like that of an old oil lantern. Old Jake owned one. Blake had seen it in a corner of the shack only a few hours before.

He crept toward the spot. The yellow light illuminated the scene fairly well. Jake

[Turn page]

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was working furiously with a shovel. His rifle was propped against a tree close at hand. Jake was barefoot, and his trousers were rolled up as high as he could get them.

Blake approached by dodging from tree to tree. He was afraid of that rifle and Old Jake would shoot if he got the drop. He had to. Blake had reached a spot no more than ten yards behind the laboring man when Jake straightened up, as if listening. The crack of the guns came faintly from the forest. Jake pulled a bottle from his hip pocket, removed the cork and tilted his head back.

That was the moment when Blake moved closer. Jake, intent on his drinking, heard nothing but the pleasant gurgle of the liquor. Blake tapped his shoulder. Jake whirled around. He hurled the bottle. It missed by a foot. Blake's fist didn't.

He tied Jake up, using the squatter's clothing as ropes. Then he hoisted him over one shoulder and, with a glance into the hole Jake had dug, he picked up the lantern and started off.

He walked boldly past Jake's shack, stooping under his burden, and blew out the lantern in front of the shack. The shooting in the forest had stopped. Blake kept on going, taking another circular route back to the garage.

Harrison was there, in a cold sweat. He stared at Blake. The trooper made as brief an explanation as possible and left Jake in Harrison's custody. He took back his gun. There was one bullet left. For the first time Blake missed his uniform with the extra cartridges neatly arranged in a holster belt. He walked straight into the house. They were all there. Blake faced them.

"I was fired upon a few minutes ago. I want to know which of you men left this house. I nearly got killed."

"I almost wish you had," Roland Locke snorted. "None of us left the house that I know of. Walter was upstairs most of the time. Paul stayed down here with me, and then went for a bottle of brandy in the cellar."

"Which means none of you have an alibi," Blake said.

He sat down on the edge of a chair. Roland Locke watched him closely. Walter Locke held a glass of brandy and soda in his hand and his eyes were narrowed. Paul Clark relaxed against the back of his chair. There was a magazine on his lap.

"I have a little story to tell," Blake said. "Preceded by a few questions. Walter, I know that you objected to Clark marrying your niece. Why?"

"That I don't mind telling, because I have never liked Clark," Walter said. "I knew he drank too much. I warned Roland that Clark didn't deserve his daughter in marriage."

"How did it turn out?" Clark asked, with a laugh. "Go on, Walter, tell the nice man."

WALTER shrugged. "Well, I have to admit that Paul stopped his drinking and settled down. Give the devil his due. But if I had my say—"

"Thank you," Blake broke in. "Now I'll tell my story. The ditch-digger was murdered in cold blood, and with plenty of reason for the crime. Five years ago a Professor Gordon, who was a chemist and working on ersatz rubber at the time, boarded with Mrs. Bellows four miles up the road from here. He vanished. Left the house one night and never came back. Apparently he had no relatives, and no friends close enough to investigate his disappearance. That same

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night a car from the garage behind this house was involved in an accident. That accident was never reported or explained."

"I knew nothing about it," Roland Locke said.

"You weren't supposed to," Blake told him. "That car, driven by one of you three men, hit Professor Gordon and killed him. The driver realized that if this became known, he would be in trouble. A whole lot of trouble which would make his fondest plans go awry. So he recalled that the sewer was being dug up. A neat, handy grave. Part of it had been filled in before the man on the job had quit for the day.

"So our hit-and-run chan conveyed Professor Gordon's corpse to the ditch, covered it up nicely, and nobody noticed that a little more of the ditch had been filled in. He was safe. Perhaps later he planned to remove the body, but never got to it. Old Jake helped him, and Jake was paid off from time to time. Today he helped again."

"Don't be so ambiguous!" Roland Locke thundered. "If you have an accusation to make, make it."

"I shall," Blake said. "First though, I'll tell you why the laborer was murdered. He uncovered what was left of the body. Naturally, he became frightened and called the first man he saw. Unfortunately for him, this man was the one who had killed Professor Gordon. This man told the laborer to get back into the ditch and stay there until he got back with help. Only when he came back, it was with a rifle—and he approached the ditch from the direction of the forest. He shot the laborer through the head twice. Would a poacher shoot twice? That theory never suited me.

"With Old Jake's help then, the brand new murderer removed all traces of Professor Gordon's body. Except for two buttons. The thread had been eaten through by time and water. And the laborer's body had fallen on top of them anyway. Gordon's body was reburied behind Old Jake's shack. Tonight I succeeded in frightening the killer enough to make him order Jake to move the body once more. Because he realized that the mobile lab—which isn't coming at all—might be able to locate the new grave by tests of soil from the murderer's shoes."

Roland Locke gave his brother a curious glance.

"This Gordon was doing work in ersatz rubber," he said. "You lost your shirt when

that stuff began to come through, Walter."

"So," Blake commented, "facts are coming to light. But there is a much easier way of determining the killer. In fact he, himself, told me he had killed the laborer."

"He told you?" Paul Clark said incredulously. "Are you ribbing us, Blake?"

"On the contrary, I mean every word of it. You see Walter and Roland Locke were right here at the house when the digging started. If the killer had been present, he would have done something to delay the work, for he knew the corpse was bound to be uncovered. So the man who didn't know, came upon the scene too late to stop it.

"Clark, there's a gun between the pages of that magazine. There's another gun in my pocket. Want to race and see who shoots first? Because if I win, you'll get a heavy slug through the middle and the pain will be terrific. On the other hand, your gun must be small. It probably wouldn't stop me even if you shot first."

Clark didn't shoot. He just closed his eyes, turned a mild green, and slid out of the chair

[Turn page]

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to the floor. Blake got the gun and put handcuffs on a murderer.

"That's superb, Officer," Walter Locke said. "I never suspected a thing."

"I did," Blake insisted. "But there was so little to go on. Until Jake tried to kill me. Clark did too, a little while ago. He slipped from the cellar to intercept me before I reached Jake's cabin, and either kill me or keep me busy while Jake moved the corpse in his bare feet so the mobile lab wouldn't find a trace of the new location of the grave."

"You see, five years ago, Clark wanted to marry your daughter, Mr. Locke, but he also wanted one last fling. He got it and killed Gordon on the way back. If arrested as a drunken driver, the wedding would have been off. So he was compelled to hide the corpse, just as he was compelled to kill the man who uncovered it today."

"I'm very grateful," Roland Locke said. "I wish there was something I could do."

"There is," Blake said. "Phone Captain Whipple and tell him the story. He'll never believe me."



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(Concluded from page 95)

"My hands—" Joe began, but Bob Darrell's cry interrupted him.

"Take a look, Sergeant!"

"It's there?"

"Sure it's there!"

And then the Sergeant bent down with the glass, and he said, "Well, I'll be dog-goned!"

"I don't guess I make out what you're talkin' about," Joe said.

"Your brother Arthur was wearing contact lenses," Bob Darrell explained. "Maybe that's Greek to you, I wouldn't doubt it. What they call the new invisible eye glasses—an unbreakable lens that fits over the eyeball."

"Invisible glasses?" Jos stammered. "He always used to wear spectacles."

"And this time in New York, he got himself something more modern. And between the lens and the eyeball, you have to have a transparent fluid." Bob Darrell was explaining it to Sergeant Timmons now. "It's a saline solution, with a small percentage of boric acid in it. And when Joe Hawkins hit the eyes, or gouged with his knuckles, whatever he did, some of the fluid got on his knuckles and it dried and left those crystals! Salt and boric acid crystals."

Joe stood staring at his hands. Everybody knew now that he had killed Arthur. "I didn't think anybody would ever find it out," Joe heard himself stammering. "I didn't think anybody ever would."

Then Sergeant Timmons and two or three of the men were shaking him by the shoulders, and pulling at him, and asking him questions all at once. He tried to answer them and tell them about it, because he wanted them to understand how strong he was, and that he wasn't frightened. Especially he hoped that Jeanie would understand.

He couldn't get a chance to speak to Jeanie, though, because her brother had his arm around her and was taking her away.

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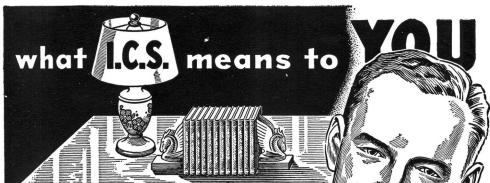


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