

THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL

MAGAZINE

15¢

MAY

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



Death's Old
Sweet Song
JONATHAN STAGGE

A COMPLETE
DR. WESTLAKE
CRIME NOVEL



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THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL

MAGAZINE

Vol. XXVI, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MAY, 1947

Featured Complete Book-Length Novel Selection



DEATH'S OLD SWEET SONG

By JONATHAN STAGGE

Lovers of folk music all too often know not what they sing, as Dr. Westlake and daughter Dawn discover for themselves when grim murder follows the pattern of a Druid's dirge! A melody of murder is a harbinger of crime!

11

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Short Stories

SOUR GRAPES John E. Lang 87
Collins faces a desperate killer, and meets the threat his own way

BLACK CAMELLIA Wayland Rice 91
Private Detective Sam Morgan tackles a baffling greenhouse murder

THE BLOODY ICEPICK Seymour Irving Richin 100
Bunny Lewis is pinned right in the middle of a murder frame

And

THE LINE-UP A Department 6
Where readers and the editor meet

THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL MAGAZINE published every other month by Standard Magazines, Inc., at 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Subscription (12 issues), \$1.80; single copies, \$1.5. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second-class matter July 12, 1935; reentered September 12, 1945, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used it is a coincidence. In corresponding with this publication please include your postal zone number, if any. Read our companion magazines: Detective Novel Magazine, Thrilling Detective, Popular Detective, G-Men Detective, Black Book Detective, Thrilling Western, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Football, Popular Western, Popular Love, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Football, Texas Rangers, Sky Fighters, Everyday Astrology, West, Masked Rider Western, Range Riders Western, The Rio Kid Western, Popular Crossword Puzzles, Exciting Love, Startling Stories, Best Crossword Puzzles, Rodeo Romances, Exciting Sports and Exciting Western. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

*A stranger to her heart!
... but she knew she loved him more
than anything else in the world!*



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girl in a man's world
who taught a killer the
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The LINE-UP

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS
AND THE EDITOR MEET



THE reputation of John Dickson Carr amongst readers of the genus detective story is one as odd as it is distinguished. Stemming all the way back to Wilkie Collins and his tortuous epics, he has made a basic point of treating the mystery yarn as a puzzle—and one which no crossword addict can or actually wants to solve.

As a matter of fact, it is highly dubious whether any such addict can solve a Carr puzzle. For this Anglo-American author is gifted with as much diabolically ingenious brain as has turned up in recent literature. It is probably a highly beneficial factor that Mr. Carr, having created his enigmas, must resolve the damnable things himself.

Take the novel which is to appear in the next issue of **THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL**. Not only is the first victim of his villain slaughtered in an apparently unapproachable hotel room, complete with key in the lock, it is according to all the evidence a crime committed by a hotel servant in full and much befogged livery—a servant who also has a knack for showing up in British country houses owned by South African millionaires.

All in all, this servant is scarcely the sort of hombre, domestic help shortages notwithstanding, whom one enjoys having around the house. And to add to his lack of qualified references, he remains, until virtually the last page, an unknown identity. This then, is the basic plot behind John Dickson Carr's most fabulous and stirring novel:

TO WAKE THE DEAD

By JOHN DICKSON CARR

This mystery, which was originally published by Harper and Brothers at \$2.00 per

copy, is not, however, merely a case of "find the missing towel bearer in befogged livery". It contains a full measure of skulduggery and a hero who is up against something he should not have let himself in for.

A Strange Bet

But being human, such an ambrosial condition failed to satisfy him. He wondered if he had sufficient personal stuff to get along in the world without a proverbial bean. So he let himself be talked into a bet that he could subsist for a certain number of months, to say nothing of achieving transportation from Capetown to London, without walking into a bank or a favorite pub and cashing a personal check.

By the time he got through with the far from soft exigencies of unmonied existence, frere Kent was a sadder and far wiser man—but he didn't count upon having to call the bet off because of murder!

Dr. Fell Tackles the Problem

And neither he nor the killer counted upon running head-on into Dr. Gideon Fell. One of the truly great fictional detectives of this or any era, the good doctor finds himself up against a problem that would put him or anyone else from Sherlock Holmes up to and including Philo Vance upon his collective mettle.

TO WAKE THE DEAD is one of the finest, most stirring and definitely the most ingenious story as a puzzle that this magazine has ever put into print.

If you who are now reading these sorely inadequate lines of praise fail to obtain our gala next issue, which contains this story,



you will be doing yourself a great entertainment injustice.

So get it—and learn under what condition a not-too-proper London manservant appears in a country home in full livery . . . to say nothing of reading a story whose suspense, by indirection worthy of movie-director Alfred Hitchcock, builds to a climax as terrifying as it is insoluble!

FROM THE REVIEWS

BUT should our unsupported word be not enough of a guarantee, here are the remarks of some even more professional gentlemen of letters:

The Chicago Tribune: "Mr. Carr is a master of the eerie detective story. This is a 'whodunit' with fine deductive reasoning. . . ."

The New York Times: "The plot is ingenious, the characters convincing and interesting, the scene natural and well drawn. An excellent novel of crime and punishment. . . ."

The Boston Evening Globe: An "unusual story, that is well told and fascinating throughout. . . ."

The Philadelphia Record: "Dr. Fell rings the bell again. . . ."

The New York Herald Tribune: "A full-bodied tale with plenty of connective tissue and that three-dimensional quality lacking in so many detective yarns. . . ."

[Turn page]

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The New York Sun: "Mr. Carr is getting to be a veteran in this mystery story business. This is his fourteenth book of fiction. It is more proof of his ability to weave a peculiar plot, to show his Dr. Fell at the Doctor's Chestertonian best and to stand the reader in the corner with the dunce cap on. . . ."

And the critics do the rest of our speaking for us, as above, in no uncertain terms of praise.

It might prove to be worth while to follow their far from specious advice!

FROM OUR READERS

IN THE meantime, we have been getting fan mail anent our January issue, which involved a gentleman named Q. Patrick and a story entitled **MURDER AT CAMBRIDGE**. A lady named Laura Speaks-Hooton writes all the way from Houghton-on-Worcester in England as follows:

Dear Sir: I had, of course, following the wartime American invasion of our British Isles, heard of the American detective magazine. From remarks passed in my presence, I had garnered the utterly mistaken idea that it was the equivalent of our weekly thriller or shocker.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, to discover upon first making the acquaintance of this form of overseas publication, to discover that it contained as utterly first class a novel as **MURDER AT CAMBRIDGE**.

I enjoyed every moment of it, although, being a woman, I can scarcely call myself a "varsity man". And those few university men I know upon whom I have forced the novel, seem to share my sentiments. I thought you might like to know, that's all. . . .

We do, and thanks immensely. Occasionally it is nice to hear from close-to-source sources that our stories make the impressions we hope for. However, just to deflate our editorial ego, Henry Squires of Van Buren, Arkansas, is a lot less complimentary. Says Henry:

Dear Sir or Madam: Why on earth an American magazine should print a story about foreigners—and I do mean the British—I don't know. Stick closer to home, will you, after this?

Short and far from sweet—so to Meinheer Squires we send an un-de luxe copy of Wendell Willkie's "One World." It might teach him something:

We pass on to several other comments:

MURDER AT CAMBRIDGE was an excellent novel and I must also congratulate you on its

clever arrangement in your magazine, with the glossary of terms and other helpful features.—*John Markan, Duluth, Minn.*

Three cheers for MURDER IN CAMBRIDGE—one of the finest yarns I have ever read.—*William Worten, Boston, Mass.*

There is something special, always, about a Q. Patrick whodunit—and MURDER AT CAMBRIDGE is the best I've run across. Let's have more Q. Patrick and more stories of this quality. I enjoyed it hugely.—*Bob Elias, New York City.*

Thanks for those kind words, folks—the above letters are typical of many more received. Please keep them rolling in. Kindly address them to The Editor, THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Remember that your criticisms (both complimentary and adverse) as well as your ideas and suggestions are immensely valuable to us in planning future issues! The more letters, the better the magazine. Though we can only quote from a few missives, they are all carefully read and considered and deeply appreciated.

It is now time to bid you adieu until the next issue. See you then, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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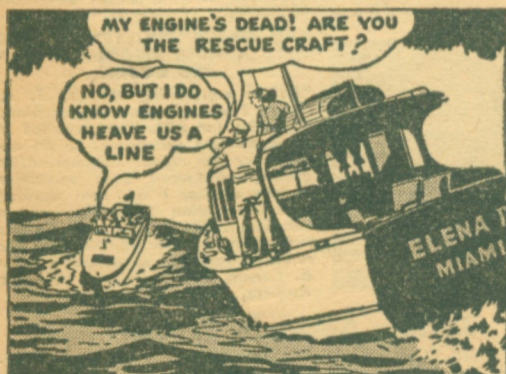
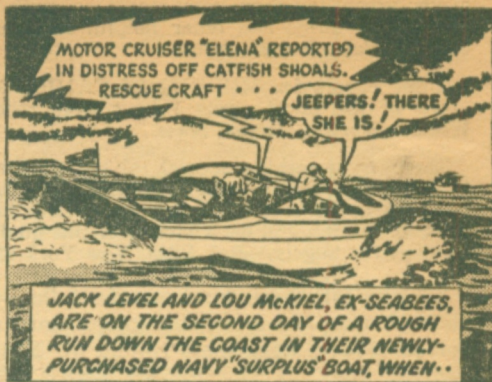
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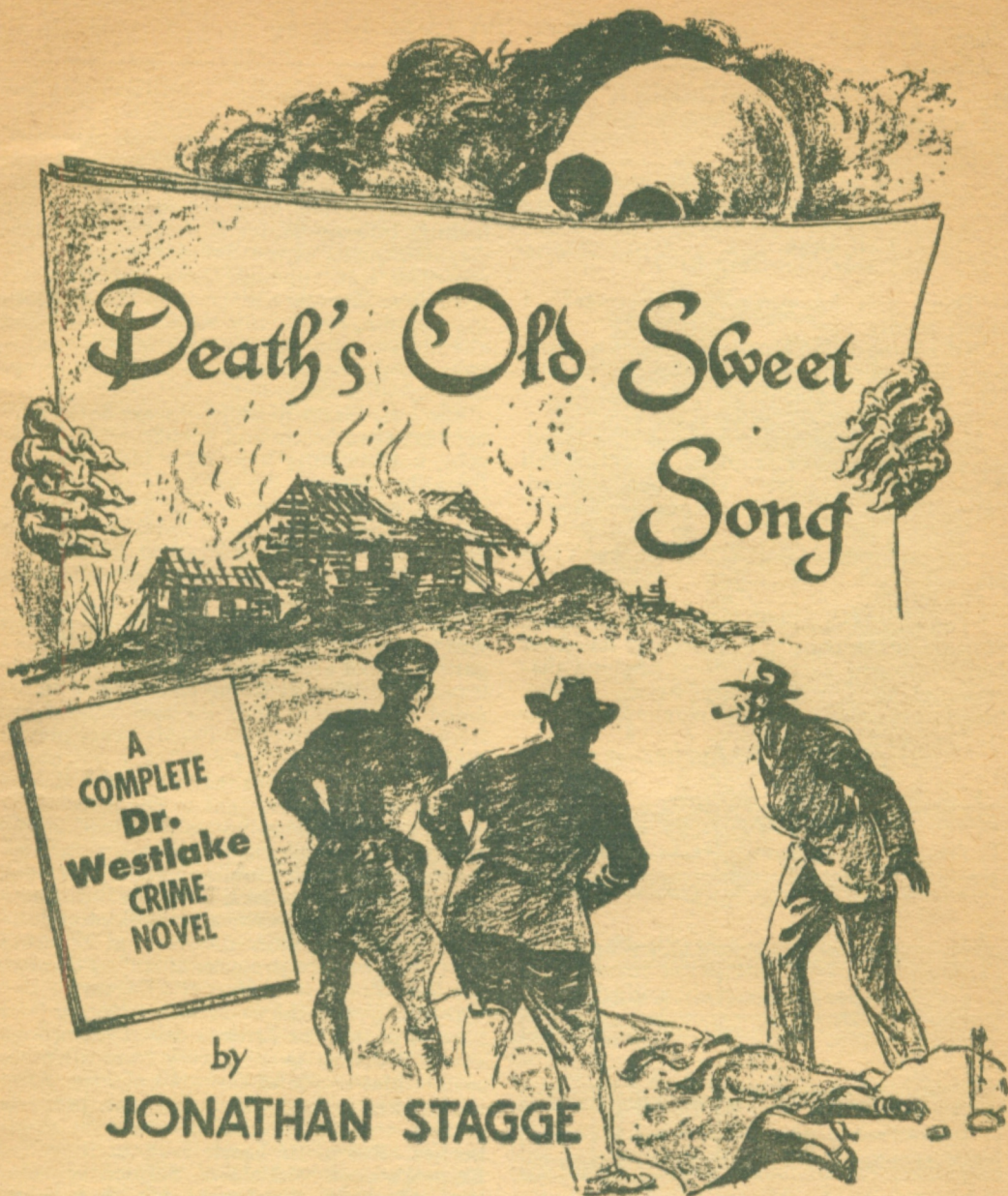
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JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...



20 MINUTES LATER





Lovers of folk music all too often know not what they sing, as Dr. Westlake and daughter Dawn discover for themselves when grim murder follows the pattern of a Druid's dirge!

*Part 1: two, two the
lily-white boys*

CHAPTER I

MY DAUGHTER Dawn was shrilling a snatch of the old ballad she had picked up from Lorie Bray as we climbed the steep maple-fringed drive to the

A MELODY OF MURDER IS THE

Bray house. She had been singing it, on and off, all day. It was beginning to get on my nerves.

*"Two, two the lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green-O.
One is one
And all alone
And ever more shall be-O."*

"Don't you know any other songs?" I asked mildly.

"Of course I do. Hundreds of them. Millions of them. Would you like me to sing 'The Rose of Tralee'?"

"Not very much."

My daughter tilted back her fair head, started with an appalling Irish accent to yell "The Rose of Tralee," and then stopped. "Mrs. Bray's still in New York, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that wonderful? Then she won't kiss me and smell."

"Smell?"

"You shouldn't smell in the country. Smell of perfume, I mean." At twelve, my daughter had developed a sternly New England disapproval of frivolous city luxury. "Mrs. Stone never smells—except maybe sometimes

of bone meal when she's been fertilizing her delphiniums."

In her individual way Dawn had expressed the secret sentiments of Skipton in general concerning Mrs. Ernesta Bray. No one else, of course, would have dared to put their feelings into words, for Ernesta was the undisputed queen of the community and above criticism. But, although Dawn and I had left our native Kenmore to vacation in neighboring Skipton, only a few weeks before, I had already realized that Ernesta held her subjects' loyalty by bribery and brilliance rather than by affection.

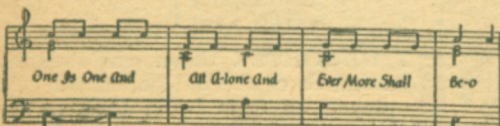
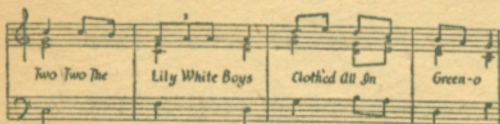
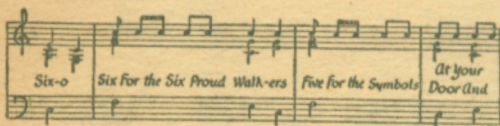
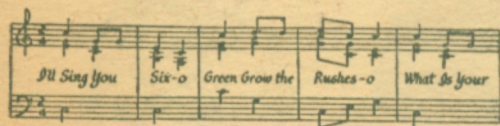
The inhabitants of Skipton were dazzled by her luxurious house and kaleidoscopic wardrobe, but inwardly their dour Massachusetts frugality resented the spectacle of a woman who dared to enjoy her wealth and who managed, in spite of her New York elegance, to grow finer roses than theirs and, even in her smart Fifth Avenue shoes, to outwalk them on any country hike.

The attitude of Skipton's Reverend Jessup was typical. In the name of his small congregation he had accepted with obsequious gratitude Ernesta's gift to the church of a Hammond organ, but both he and Miss Love Drummond, who had for twenty years played the music for the services, were not above complaining in *camera* that Ernesta had subsequently felt it her right to command difficult Bach for the voluntaries instead of the easier and, surely, much more tuneful improvisations which Miss Drummond had been accustomed to offer each Sunday. But, whatever their private reservations, Skipton dutifully listened to Bach and even, at Ernesta's insistence, made a pretense of leafing through the *New Yorker* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Dutifully, too, the so-called gentry, or "our type of people" as Ernesta called them, kept every Saturday evening free from all other sociabilities to attend Ernesta's picnics. After all, smoked turkey and Rhine wine, properly chilled, were not found growing on shrubbery. But in its heart, even as it wolfed Ernesta's exotic delicacies, Skipton consoled its pride with the knowledge that baked beans, or just possibly sausages, formed the only seemly New England diet for an al fresco meal, and that dear Ernesta—so generous—didn't quite understand how country people really lived.

After five seasons of Ernesta, however, the revolutionary spark, never very formidable, had almost flickered out. Ernesta was not only richer, she was also far more dynamic, colorful, and aggressive than any of her neighbors, and they knew it. Even her poorer

Green Grow The Rushes-o



HARBINGER OF GRISLY CRIME!

but more authentic sister, Phoebe Stone, was beginning to forget the delightfully rustic days before Ernesta's arrival when she, with her own modest teas and her spritely local gossip, had been sole *arbitrix elegantiarum*. The battle was already won. Skipton belonged to Ernesta Bray—body and soul.

So much so that, even in her temporary absence, the ritualistic Saturday picnic, which no one, including her daughter Lorie, particularly wanted, was to be held as a matter of course.

A curve in the broad well-tended drive brought Ernesta's house into view. Before Ernesta had bought it, it had been just another of the unassuming rambling farmhouses typical of Skipton. But an imported architect and an imported landscape gardener had transformed it into a sleek mansion which could have held its head high in the smartest sections of Long Island. Gay, un-Skiptonish awnings in white and maroon stripes shaded the windows, and a terracotta-bricked terrace strewn with Italian stone benches and carved flower urns stretched along its façade, commanding a dramatic view down a sharply sloping lawn to the village of Skipton, which lay below, white and virginal on the willow-bordered bank of the Konapic River.

WHEN Dawn and I reached the terrace we found Lorie, Ernesta's twenty-year-old daughter, alone. The de luxe picnic baskets, Ernesta's weekly culinary bribe to the community, were standing ready to be carried to the special picnic ground which, complete with unnecessary barbecue pit, had been created by the landscape architect. A silver cocktail shaker and exquisite crystal glasses stood on a wrought-iron table.

Lorie was wearing a dusty pink slack suit which was faultlessly and expensively cut, but which, like all clothes bought her by her mother, looked faintly ill-at-ease on her.

"Hello, Dawn. Hello, Dr. Westlake. Have a martini." She laughed self-consciously. "They won't be as good as Mother's, but they're the best I can manage."

Years ago Lorie Bray must have decided that she would never be able to do anything as well as her mother, whom she thought the most talented and admirable woman in the world. This excessive worship of Ernesta had given her an equally excessive conviction of her own inferiority which made her awkward and insecure when she could have been attractive. For she was intelligent and almost beautiful in a thin, straight way, with clear features and a mane of almost platinum hair.

Her sense of her own inadequacy was so all-pervasive that she had to hover anxiously while I tasted my cocktail, and, even when I said it was excellent, she looked grateful and said: "Oh, you're just being polite."

Although I liked Lorie, I was never comfortable with her. And that day the realiza-



Doctor Westlake

tion that she had to act hostess in place of her mother made her doubly nervous. We chatted clumsily and inevitably about Ernesta. Parties were never the same without Mother, Lorie said. She only hoped people wouldn't be too bored, but Mother had written from New York and specially insisted that the picnic be held. She had even sent a five-pound jar of caviar. Wasn't it too bad for everyone that Ernesta hadn't been able to get back for the week end?

It was a relief to hear Phoebe Stone's light, bantering voice behind me, exclaiming:

"I think it's wonderful Ernesta couldn't get back. I've celebrated by not changing my dress, although I've been up to my knees in sheep manure all afternoon. It's such a treat to be slovenly for a change. Hello, Lorie dear. Hello, Dr. Westlake. Hello, Dawn."

Ernesta's older sister, who had lived in Skipton ever since her widowhood twenty years before and who had been Ernesta's original reason for joining the community when her own immensely wealthy husband



had died in Palm Beach, pattered across the terrace, her small feet encased in grimy sneakers. She was short and dumpy, and her graying hair, above mischievous gypsy eyes, was as disheveled as her faded garden dress, but somehow, as always, she managed to look authentically and unself-consciously aristocratic.

"Lorie dear, give me a martini—quick. That dreadful climb! I can't imagine why Ernesta chooses to live on a pinnacle. It must be the Valkyrie in her."

As Lorie handed her a glass, Phoebe gave me a friendly, faintly mocking smile. "How respectable you look, Doctor, in that handsome gray suit. Wait till you see Caleb. When he heard Ernesta wasn't back, he refused to put on any clothes at all. Just his swimming trunks and an old T-shirt. Really, this is almost like the old days. Where is he, by the way? He came with me. Caleb? Where are? . . . Oh, there you are."

Her young son had appeared loping silently around the far corner of the terrace. Without greeting anyone, he went to the table and poured himself a cocktail. Caleb Stone had only been back from the Pacific war zone a month or so, and the skin of his muscular bare arms and legs was still golden brown from atabrine. Tall, straight, and blond, he was a sturdier, masculine edition of Lorie. In fact they were so much alike that he might have been her twin, instead of her cousin. He had the same social clumsiness too, except that in his case it seemed more like surliness. Village gossip ascribed his broodiness and sudden bitter sarcasms to some sort of battle psychosis, for he had fought with the Marines in their bloodiest campaigns and had been hospitalized a long time before he was dis-

charged. I didn't know how true this rumor was. But I did know that Phoebe, although she never admitted it, was worried about him.

I could tell she was worried now from the quick, unobtrusive glance she threw at him. I could tell Lorie was worried too. Love Drummond, who was the village Walter Winchell, had informed me that Lorie had been in love with Caleb ever since she was a kid. I didn't know how true this rumor was either. But there was a curious tone, half tender, half shy, in her voice as she said:

"Hello, Caleb. Been working on your map today?"

Caleb glanced at her darkly, a blond lock flopping over his tanned forehead, and grunted some inaudible reply.

Phoebe said, too brightly: "Caleb dear, I've been apologizing for your nakedness."

He grunted again. It wasn't until he saw Dawn that he came to life. His face suddenly lit up with a sweet, gentle smile. He squatted down on the brick floor of the terrace next to her and started chattering. Soon he pulled a couple of dice from the pocket of his blue

The footsteps stopped dead, very close. I could even hear dark, jerky breathing. "Who is it?" I called again (CHAP. 10)



swimming shorts, and the two of them launched into a crap game for immense and hypothetical stakes.

Phoebe seemed delighted at the change in her son's mood. She dropped down on a chair, gazing affectionately at the pastoral view of Skipton, and began to regale Lorie and me with the details of her afternoon in her herbaceous beds. She was still talking simple, country talk when adult voices, mingled with shrill children's voices, sounded behind us. She glanced over her shoulder and then called to Caleb.

"The dice, dear. Put them away. It's Dr. Jessup, Love, and the Double Threat. Dr. Jessup would have a fit if he found you teaching Dawn the Devil's practices."

HIS face going sulky, Caleb slipped the dice into his pocket as two identical

small boys with vivid red hair and neat green play suits, which obviously would not be neat for long, hurtled onto the porch and, running to Caleb and Dawn, started to scramble all over them.

"I'm a war hero," screamed one. "Bing-bing-bing . . . you're a Jap and you're dead."

"Bing-bing-bing," screamed the other, aiming indiscriminately with an imaginary tommy gun.

One of them rushed to the table and grabbed at the cocktail shaker.

"I wanna cocktail. I wanna cocktail."

The other put small hands on wobbly knees and, reeling around the porch, shouted: "I'm drunk. I'm stinking, dirty drunk."

Lorie stared at their depredations hopelessly, murmuring: "Oh dear, if only Mother were here! She could cope with them."

For once she was not overpraising her mother. Ernesta was indeed the only person in Skipton with any ability to subdue the exuberances of the White twins who were two sharp thorns in the community flesh and in particular the flesh of Miss Love Drummond, who was their aunt. Love Drummond was one of those spinsters who constantly do good to others in order to experience the subsequent delights of reminding them how kind she had been. For this reason, presumably, she had consented to take Bobby and Billy for the summer, since their parents were unable to leave New York. This time she had certainly been hoist with her own petard, for no amount of self-glorification as a martyr could compensate for the havoc the twins had wrought in her exquisitely neat cottage and every other part of Skipton.

As she appeared on the terrace with the Reverend Jessup, Love Drummond gazed at her nephews with a despair to which was added a certain malicious satisfaction that it was Ernesta's house and not her own which was being currently beaten up. Bobby had overturned two chairs and was tearing the heads off the flowers in one of the Italian urns. Billy was retching and pretending to throw up as a result of his drunken debauch.

"Billy," said Love faintly. "Bobby."

"Aw, old fat Lovey-Dovey," shouted Bobby.

"Old fat Lovey-Dovey. Old fat Lovey-Dovey," jeered Billy and went back to his sham vomiting.

With a hopeless shrug Love Drummond went to Lorie. "I wish I could have left them at home, Lorie. But I didn't dare. Already today they've broken half my Staffordshire china and tried to hang the cat."

Her thin mouth winced at the memory. She was tall and heavy in the hips, with sharp eyes behind shell-rimmed glasses.

"Don't worry," said Lorie. "They can't do much damage out here on the terrace, and soon we'll all be up at the picnic grounds eating. Food always quiets them."

"I hope so." Love Drummond grabbed the cocktail Lorie handed her and sank into a chair. "Sometimes I wish my dear sister had passed away in childbed."

"Come, Miss Drummond," murmured the Reverend Jessup, who had rather stiffly refused Lorie's proffered cocktail. "They are just lively youngsters, that's all. Lively youngsters."

"Lively youngsters," screamed Bobby.

"Lively youngsters," screamed Billy, grinning fiendishly under his devil-red hair and pinching Dawn.

"Aw, don't pinch Dawn. She's my girl," yelled Bobby.

"Bobby loves Dawn. Bobby loves Dawn. Nyah." The twins hurled themselves at each other and tussled for a few violent moments. Then, to everyone's intense relief, Bobby thought he saw a rabbit on the sloping lawn, and the two of them rushed precariously off in pursuit.

Phoebe Stone watched them disappear. "Maybe they'll break their necks," she said hopelessly.

"I'm afraid not," groaned Love. "They bear a charmed life."

"Really, ladies. Such unchristian sentiments." The Reverend Jessup, who never forgot his responsibilities as the community's spiritual guide, permitted a disapproving frown to wrinkle his knobby intellectual forehead and, with an obvious effort to change the conversation, turned heavily to Lorie. "Saturday evening certainly seems strange without your dear mother, Lorie. Such a forceful personality."

"Yes." Lorie flushed. I knew she was taking Dr. Jessup's innocent remark as a veiled hint that she herself was an unforceful character. "I feel awfully lost without her."

"What's she doing in New York anyway?" snapped Love Drummond.

"Gadding," said Phoebe. "Just gadding. Lorie dear, who else are we waiting for?"

"Just Renton Forbes and the Raynors."

"Oh dear, that frightful Raynor woman. If she's coming you'd better give me another martini, Lorie." She held out her empty glass. "I wonder what she'll be wearing this time."

"A diving bell, probably," said Love. "Or nothing at all. She might as well be Lady Godiva, she's been everything else."

Phoebe giggled. "That's a good idea. I must remember to suggest it to her."

THE ladies launched into their favorite Skipton sport of discussing Mabel Raynor. Since Ernesta herself was too powerful to attack, Mabel Raynor made an ideal substitute for malice, and although I had only met her a couple of times at Ernesta's picnics, I felt she was a legitimate butt. Living with an adoring husband who was convinced of her genius, she wrote long and earnestly pornographic novels under the pseudonym Avril Lane. Small and dainty and fortyish, she thought of herself as small, dainty, and nineteen, dressed with fantastic affectation and giggled in and out of butterfly flirtations with any man foolish enough to take her at her own evaluation.

Soon she arrived, one little arm linked

through her husband, George Raynor's, and the other through that of Renton Forbes. Avril usually managed an entrance with at least two men, and by a subtle feminine smile also managed to convey, quite erroneously, that the man who wasn't her husband was her current lover.

Once we had all been given time to see the tableau and interpret it the way she wanted it interpreted, she disengaged herself from the men with a little silvery laugh and ran toward Lorie.

"Lorie darling, we are naughtiness to be late, but that bad Renton just sat and sat and chatted on our porch so that we lost all sense of time."

Avril—she preferred to be called Avril rather than Mabel—dressed, as she admitted laughingly, to suit her mood. Today she was wearing an Austrian peasant costume with a flaring embroidered skirt. I couldn't guess her mood. Maybe she was feeling like the heroine of the *Sorrows of Werther* or maybe Gretchen in *Faust*. In any case, the mood was a roguish one. She had tied a blue ribbon in her rather too auburn hair and piouretted, letting the skirt swirl around her.

"Such fun. But what a sadness without dear Ernesta! Good evening, Phoebe dear and sweet Love and Dr. Jessup—and Caleb."

At the sight of Caleb's bare, golden-brown legs, a predatory gleam came in her eye and she tripped toward him, holding out both her hands. Over her shoulder she called to Lorie:

"Lorie dear, you're going to bring your guitar to the picnic, aren't you? We must have some of those enchanting ballads of yours."

Lorie looked awkward. "We'll see."

"Yes, dear," said Phoebe. "You must. You know you love to sing, and you sing so well. Besides," she added with her faint malice, "it's one thing Ernesta can't do."

Renton Forbes was watching Phoebe, his handsome, high-colored face grinning amusement. The last of the Forbeses, who had been the leading family of Skipton for generations, Renton at forty-odd was the community's most eligible if impecunious bachelor. He lived alone in the large, decaying Forbes mansion and existed charmingly and shiftlessly on the slender remains of the Forbes income. Recently, not without competition from Avril, Ernesta had made him her tame beau.

"So, Phoebe," he said, "when Ernesta's away you poison her child's mind against her." He smiled at Lorie as he took a martini. "Just exactly what is Ernesta up to in New York anyway?"

"Gadding," said Love Drummond, her spectacles glinting as she watched Avril curl girlishly in a chair by Caleb's side.

"You should know Ernesta by now, Ren-

ton," said Phoebe. "She claims she can't bear to leave her dear old sleepy Skipton, but she'd go stark raving mad if she couldn't get to New York once in a while. She pretended she had to go to pick up her jade that's being restrung at Tiffany's, but Tiffany's is perfectly rich enough to pack the necklace in a box and mail it to her."

Renton was still smiling at Lorie. "I bet you got a firm, motherly letter with instructions about the picnic, didn't you?"

Lorie smiled back at him, a charming smile that made her face suddenly lovely. "Matter of fact I did. She sent caviar too. A five-pound jar."

"Caviar!" exclaimed Love. "Why not peacock's tongues?"

Forbes said: "I got a letter too, Lorie. Very bossy, of course. I was to remember to take my vitamin pills and be sure not to be late for the picnic and to act as host if you needed help." He sighed. "I dread the day when those walkie-talkie radio sets are released to the public. Your mother'll keep us dialed in to her twenty-four hours a day."

Phoebe glanced at Avril's husband, who was standing forgotten in a corner watching his wife and Caleb with dark, hurt eyes.

"Lorie dear, give poor George a cocktail. He looks so gloomy."

With an effort George Raynor managed a smile and joined us. He was large and rather handsome in a soft dark way. He was also quite a few years younger than his wife. I was sorry for the poor guy because he was besottedly in love with Avril and, I was sure, suffered the torments of the damned when she looked at another man, which was practically always.

Lorie gave him a martini. He took it gratefully, as if it were particularly generous of her to include him—an attitude he had developed from years of picking up the crumbs from Avril's table.

"Thanks, Lorie."

FOR the next twenty minutes Lorie's guests settled down to chat and drink their cocktails while the soft evening sunlight splashed gold on the village of Skipton below us and a rather ominous ink-blue cloud started to bank above the mountains. During my short stay in Skipton I had thought that the importance of Ernesta Bray as social leader had, if anything, been exaggerated. Now that she was absent I began to realize just how much the amiable sociabilities of the community depended on her. The same people who sat on this terrace every Saturday evening were sitting there tonight, but the atmosphere, without Ernesta, was different. Avril was flirting outrageously with Caleb, to the obvious discomfort of George Raynor and Lorie.

That was something Ernesta would not have allowed. Renton Forbes was drinking too many cocktails. That was something else that Ernesta would not have allowed. Dr. Jessup was being more stuffy and parsonical than usual. And Phoebe and Love Drummond, usually friendly rivals, were squabbling with genuine heat about the respective merits of their dahlias. The party needed Ernesta's warm, infectious laugh and her unflinching talent for bringing out the most attractive side of her guests. It was going sour.

The crosscurrents of bad temper had become almost marked enough to be embarrassing when the White twins suddenly appeared from the woods that edged the lawn and rushed toward us, their red heads gleaming like bonfires.

"I wanna eat," yelled Billy, catapulting across Avril into Caleb's lap.

"I wanna eat," echoed Bobby. "I wanna eat."

He crossed to Dawn, for whom he had developed a mawkish and precocious passion, put his arm around her neck and started whispering in her ear.

Then simultaneously both he and Billy saw the picnic baskets and made a dive for them, dragging Dawn along.

"Oh dear," said Lorie.

"Billy, Bobby," called Love without her heart in it. "Don't touch those baskets."

"It's no use," said Phoebe. "No human agency's going to stop them. We might as well give up and get going to the picnic ground. George, Renton, go save the baskets before they get at the caviar."

George Raynor and Renton Forbes pulled the protesting twins off the baskets. Lorie, being agitatedly social, shepherded the rest of us off the terrace and, slipping away, returned a few moments later with her guitar in a black case.

It was then that Phoebe voiced the first definite manifesto of revolt against Ernesta's absentee rule. Turning to Lorie, she said:

"Secretly I'm terribly bored with that fancy picnic ground Ernesta's landscape gardener made. Remember the old rock up by the sawmill where we used to picnic when you and Caleb were children? Why don't we eat up there for a change?"

Lorie looked blank and began: "But in her letter Mother said to be sure . . ."

"Pooh, we let your mother regulate us all too much. Don't you think it would be nice to picnic by the sawmill, Love?"

Love Drummond said gloomily: "Nothing's going to be nice with the twins along."

"Don't be defeated, Love. Come on, Lorie. It'll be fun."

"All right, Aunt Phoebe," said Lorie.

Phoebe called: "Everyone, we're changing

the picnic place. We're going up to the rock by the old sawmill."

The White twins running ahead with blood-curdling Indian war whoops, the party started along the quiet, sylvan track which wound up the mountainside behind the house.

Dawn, who had primly disentangled herself from the amorous Bobby, brought up the rear with me.

On an exuberant impulse she started to sing:

*"I'll sing you one-O,
Green grow the rushes-O.
What is your one-O?"*

She broke off and glanced at me. "Daddy?" "Yes."

"Just now Bobby said he was in love with me. Do you suppose he meant it?"

"Heaven forbid," I said.

"Of course he's awfully young, only eight," mused my daughter. Then, abandoning further reflection on this delicate subject, she launched once again into her piping rendition of Lorie's favorite old English ballad:

*"Two, two the lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green-O."*

She stopped. "The lily-white boys. Do you suppose that means the White twins, Daddy?"

"No," I said.

"Well, they are clothed all in green-O today, aren't they?" Dawn grabbed at a clump of black-eyed susans as we caught up with Renton and Phoebe.

"Daddy, what happened to the lily-white boys in the song?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I do know what ought to happen to the White boys in real life."

"What?"

"They should be hit on the head and thrown into the Brays' duckpond."

My daughter seemed to find this suggestion infinitely amusing. She giggled and, pushing past Renton and Phoebe with a shocking lapse into babyishness, started to run up the hill, weaving her way through the other guests and chanting:

*"Two, two the horrid White boys,
Clothed all in green-O.
Hit them, hit them on the head
And throw them in the pond-O."*

"Oh, you naughtiness!" caroled Avril Lane. "What a bad, bad thing to sing."

But she didn't sound as if she meant it. As for the other members of the picnic party, none of them—not even Dr. Jessup—made any comment whatsoever.

CHAPTER II



PHOEBE'S rebellious impulse to change the location of the picnic did not turn out well. The walk to the rock by the old saw mill was longer, steeper, and rougher than the ingeniously designed path to Ernesta's barbecue pit. The climb made the Reverend Jessup wheeze

and complain of his heart. Avril managed to turn her ankle and slip with little breathless cries into a tiny brook from which she had to be rescued by Claeb and subsequently helped up the hill on his arm—a state of affairs which pleased neither George Raynor, Lorie, nor even Phoebe herself, who, I knew, would stand no nonsense between her beloved son and a woman twenty years his senior.

And, when we reached the actual spot, it was not as charming as Phoebe's memory of it. Chokecherry saplings had crept across the clearing, blocking most of the view into the valley. The rock itself was overgrown with yellow fungi; an occasional mosquito whined on the evening air; and Love Drummond, who suffered from rheumatism, found the grass still wet from a recent rainstorm and refused peevishly to sit down until Renton Forbes spread his jacket for her. To add to the general gloom, the ink-blue cloud was infecting the sky with the threat of more rain and accelerating nightfall.

All these were minor tragedies and could have been glossed over by a modicum of social agility on the part of the hostess, and a little good will on the part of the guests. But Lorie was confused and miserable, and the rest of the party, like revolutionary peasants with no disciplinarian to control them, was disintegrating into a rabble.

Once again I realized how much Skipton needed Ernesta Bray.

The only members of the party who were still thoroughly enjoying themselves were the White twins. They had discovered the thick, clammy fungi and, tearing them off the rock, began to pelt each other and everyone else.

"I'm throwing garbage," screamed Billy. "Dirty, stinking garbage."

"I'm throwing garbage," echoed Bobby. "Great, fat, dirty, filthy garbage."

It was, ironically, Ernesta who saved the day by remote control. When Phoebe and Renton Forbes unpacked the picnic baskets, the sight of a luscious maple walnut layer cake quieted the twins. The Reverend Jessup, whose only lay enthusiasm was food, brightened considerably as he caught a glimpse of a lobster mousse and an avocado salad. Even Love Drummond was lured into forgetting

her rheumatism by the jar of caviar, once she had studied its label and made sure that the characters on it were genuinely Russian and that Ernesta had not got away with dyed salmon eggs.

With a touch of brilliant intuition, typical of her, Ernesta had also added two quarts of champagne.

As the champagne circulated, it brought a fictitious gaiety. Dr. Jessup, who made a subtle distinction between spirituous liquors and wines, had a glass and, while the meal was actually in progress, a reasonably good humor prevailed.

But, unfortunately, the effects of the champagne were cumulative, at least upon Avril Lane. Over the walnut cake, her silvery laughter became progressively more tinkly, her pretty, sidewise glances at Caleb more frequent. Finally, completely abandoning her role of genius in favor of the cozier role of Little Woman, she nestled her head against Caleb's bare arm and giggled:

"Oh, Avril, you bad one. I think you're a little tipsy."

To my surprise, Caleb, who, as far as I knew, had always entertained a young contempt for our local lady of letters, seemed affected by the champagne too. He grinned down at Avril intimately and, slipping his arm around her, drew her closer, saying:

"Make you feel better?"

As he did so, I noticed that he darted a strange, almost malicious glance at Lorie. I had no idea of what was in his mind, but I was sure that Lorie had, for, although she made a pretense of not noticing him, a deep flush, half of resentment, half of embarrassment, spread from her throat to her face.

George Raynor was reacting too. There was no anger, however, in the look he threw his wife, only a hurt, dogged bewilderment. Poor George. Probably Avril had explained to him before their marriage that a woman of her exceptional talents was not to be shackled by the vulgar conventions of a bourgeois society.

Renton Forbes, in an attempt to gloss the situation over, started circulating to pick up the empty plates. He only made matters worse, for when he stooped for Avril's, she lifted her free arm and drew him down on her other side, caroling:

"Poor Avril, needs two men to keep her warm."

The twins, in appalling imitation, threw themselves at Dawn, nuzzled titteringly on either side of her, and shouted in unison:

"Dawn needs two men to keep her warm. Dawn needs two men to keep her warm."

The situation was becoming unpleasant, and since neither Lorie nor Phoebe seemed able to control it, I suggested to Lorie that she sing.

CLUTCHING at this straw, Phoebe broke in: "Yes, Lorie dear. Sing for us."

"Oh yes," exclaimed Dawn, ignoring the pawing advances of Bobby White with admirable poise. "Sing 'Green Grow the Rushes-O.' Please, Lorie, sing that."

Her face still a faint pink, Lorie muttered: "All right. If you really want me to."

She crossed to the black case and took out the guitar. The twins, eying it dubiously, suddenly got up together.

"I don't wanna hear any old song," said Billy.

"Dirty, stinking, fat old song," added Bobby.

"I wanna go to the sawmill," said Billy.

"I wanna go to the sawmill," said Bobby.

They started tearing up the slope into the wood. "I'll saw you into a hundred thousand pieces," said Bobby.

"I'll saw you into a million billion pieces," said Billy.

Love Drummond watched them disappear with an expression half of relief, half of apprehension. "I suppose it's safe, isn't it, Lorie?"

"Oh yes, the saw was taken away years ago. There's just the old building and a big sawdust pile."

"Then I won't have their deaths on my conscience." Love Drummond yawned. "All right, Lorie. Go ahead and sing your song."

Lorie dropped, cross-legged, onto the grass, holding the guitar close to her. In the fading light her thin, delicate face had the lonely beauty of a Pierra della Francesca angel and her platinum hair gleamed almost white. She struck a soft chord on the strings. Something in her stillness and the ripple of the chord caught the attention of the whole group. Everyone stopped talking and shifted slightly and then was very quiet.

"You sing the questions, Dawn," she said.

With a starkly simple chord accompaniment on the guitar, she started to sing. Her voice was small and clear and lovely as her face. It had a magic of its own which conjured up old, forgotten things.

*"I'll sing you one-O,
Green grow the rushes-O."*

Dawn's small voice broke in:

"What is your one-O?"

Lorie again:

*"One is one
And all alone.
And ever more shall be-O."*

The strange ballad moved on. "I'll sing you

two-O." "I'll sing you three-O." "I'll sing you four-O." And each time, the answer to the latest question recapitulated all that had gone before. Apart from an occasional muffled shout from the White twins at the sawmill, the whole mountain side seemed silent. The gloom, half storm, half night, deepened over the little clearing. The spindly choke-cherry saplings darkened into silhouettes. A small patch of the Konapic River, just visible below, gleamed silver. The faces around me, shadowy and intent, seemed silver too.

Lorie reached the twelfth and last verse:

*"I'll sing you twelve-O,
Green grow the rushes-O."*

Once again came Dawn's reedy, insistent question:

"What is your twelve-O?"

And Lorie sang:

*"Twelve for the twelve apostles,
Eleven for the eleven who went to heaven,
And ten for the ten commandments.
Nine for the nine bright shiners
And eight for the April rainers.
Seven for the seven stars in the sky
And six for the six proud walkers.
Five for the symbols at your door
And four for the gospel makers.
Three, three the rivals.
Two, two the lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green-O.
One is one
And all alone
And ever more shall be-O."*

There was one last, plangent chord. Lorie put the guitar down.

For a few seconds no one spoke. Then Caleb pushed himself away from Avril Lane and got up.

"That song," he said violently. "I hate it. It always gives me the creeps."

"Nonsense, Caleb." The Reverend Jessup bestirred himself and clucked. "It is a fine old Christian ballad. One of the oldest Christian ballads in existence, I believe."

Avril Lane, bereft of Caleb, had decided, apparently, to hold the spotlight with her alternate personality of intellectual and scholar.

"Oh no, no, Dr. Jessup," she said in the small, pedantic voice which she used when she was being The Great Writer. "The ballad is not Christian at all. It is ancient, yes. But it is definitely pre-Christian. Some scholars, I believe, trace it back to a Druidical origin. Its sources are quite lost in obscurity, but it is known that the early churchmen in England tried unsuccessfully to adapt it to the uses of the Christian Church. That is why

we have the references to the apostles, the commandments, the gospel makers. But those are interpolations of a much later date, a much later date.

"Well, I agree with Caleb," said Love tartly. "It gives me the creeps. The symbols at your door. And the six proud walkers. Who are the six proud walkers?"

"Nobody knows," said Avril. "Some scholars have tried to connect them with King Arthur and his henchmen who are sleeping under a mountain in Wales and will one day emerge to liberate the country. But I find this a most unsatisfactory explanation. It may have a Druidical significance, of course, like the two lily-white boys. Every year, at the feast of the Sacred Oaks, you know, the Druids sacrificed a beautiful, redheaded youth as a blood offering and—"

"Talking about beautiful, redheaded lily-white boys," broke in Love rudely, "what's happened to Bobby and Billy?"

WE ALL listened. The raucous shouts I had heard from the sawmill had stopped. With the spell of the song still on the clearing, the silence seemed faintly ominous.

George Raynor said rather anxiously: "Perhaps we should go and find them, Miss Drummond, before it gets quite dark."

George Raynor was childless himself, a condition, due, no doubt, to his wife's decision that no domestic responsibilities should curb her free soul. And he was the only person in Skipton who seemed to have the slightest affection for the White twins.

Love Drummond got up from Renton Forbes's coat with a sigh. "I suppose you're right." She glanced at Dr. Jessup. "You'd better come too, Hilary. They've never shown any respect for your cloth yet, but you may be able to help."

The three of them disappeared into the woods. We could hear their voices growing fainter as they called: *Bobby. Billy.* They had been gone several minutes when Renton Forbes, slipping into his jacket, said:

"Maybe they need help."

But before he left the clearing the air was rent with the familiar, jeering yells and Bobby and Billy came tumbling toward us with George Raynor, Love Drummond, and the Reverend Jessup in their wake.

"We've been playing marbles," announced Billy.

"Lovely fat red marbles," announced Bobby. "I licked Billy at marbles."

"Didn't, either."

"Did so."



Thrusting out from the Reverend Jessup's back gleamed the metal handle of a knife (CHAP. XI)

"Didn't, either."

"Did so."

Billy hurled himself on Renton Forbes, who happened to be nearest, shouting: "I pushed Bobby into the sawdust pile. I killed Bobby deader'n dead."

Bobby, more romantic, had scurried to Dawn and, crouching down at her side, his red hair blazing in the dim light, was slipping something into her hand.

Then, chanting: "Dawn needs a man to keep her warm," he bolted again and began to struggle ferociously with his twin.

During the half-anxious minutes of our wait for the White boys, darkness had almost entirely engulfed the clearing. Part of the darkness was caused by the storm clouds. As Phoebe, Lorie, and I scurried around groping for the last dishes to pack in the picnic baskets, the rain began. It was not a violent downpour but steady and chilling. Clucks and little cries of disgust rose from the party. Love Drummond called for a flashlight, and Lorie had to admit she had not thought to bring one. Ernesta would have known how to make this small predicament amusing, but Ernesta wasn't there, with the result that mild panic ensued.

Panic, of course, was too strong a word. Disorganization is more accurate. As the rain strengthened and the last pale strip of sky over the valley vanished, everyone started his or her own aimless, independent way down the steep, overgrown mountainside.

Lorie was one of the first to melt away. I saw George Raynor lumbering after her with one of the picnic baskets, and Phoebe, picking up Lorie's abandoned guitar case, started in pursuit, calling ineffectual advice. I picked up the second basket and, shouting for Dawn, made my way to the mouth of the trail up which we had ascended the hill.

Dawn answered my call. Soon I felt her small body bumping against mine, and together we started down the track. Once I had my bearings in the darkness, the descent was relatively easy. But none of the others seemed to have hit the trail. I could hear confused shouts and exclamations at relative distances from us in the shrubby areas around and behind us. I called to give them the position of the trail, but they were all either too confused or too wet and cross to pay me any attention. Soon Dawn and I seemed to have outstripped them all.

My daughter, who always enjoys minor disasters, was thoroughly happy.

"Miss Drummond will get her rheumatism back and Dr. Jessup will wheeze and Avril will ruin her silly old dress," she announced with a faint giggle. "Daddy, isn't this fun? You can't see an inch in front of your nose." Spluttering slightly from the rain, she started to sing:

"Eight for the April rainers."

After a moment of contented silence she said: "I think Bobby White really does love me, because he gave me a big red marble and said it was an engagement ring."

"He did?" I said. "And you accepted it?"

"Of course." Dawn sounded superior. "It would have hurt his feelings to refuse. Boys are very sensitive at that age." She added sumpily: "Besides he is rather naughty, Daddy, and I think a little feminine influence would have a sobering effect."

Knowing how fiendish my daughter could be herself at the advanced age of twelve, I greeted this remark with some cynicism.

Around us I could hear vague sounds which told me the rest of the party was still stumbling down the mountain. But suddenly I heard a sound that was not so faint. It was the rapid thump of running feet coming toward us from the left. There was something dimly alarming about the quickness of the footsteps, because I knew the ground there was rough and treacherous. Someone was either eager enough or frightened enough to be speeding through that rainy darkness without thought of a possible fall or a sprained ankle.

Dawn and I had both instinctively stopped. The footsteps pounded nearer, and I called:

"Who is it?"

The footsteps stopped dead, very close. I could even hear harsh, jerky breathing.

"Who is it?" I called again.

A FIGURE appeared at our side. I could trace the vague gleam of bare arms and legs and, to my astonishment, I recognized the runner as Caleb Stone.

"It's you, Dr. Westlake, isn't it?"

"Sure. What's the trouble? Something wrong?"

"N-no." His voice was tentative at first and then angry. "No. Why should anything be wrong?"

"You were running as if all the six proud walkers were after you."

"I was? I . . ." His voice faded. His hand groped through the darkness and, finding my arm, clung to it hungrily. His grip reminded me absurdly of a little child clutching its parent for safety in the dark. His fingers were shaking too. He tried to laugh but got nowhere with it, and when he spoke again his voice was rasping, almost out of control.

"There's your war hero for you, Doctor. Sure, I was running because I'm scared. I'm scared of the dark." Bitterness welled up in his tone. "Tough guy, aren't I? It hit me this way after the last nights on Okinawa. At first in the hospital I used to scream all night. I guess they fixed me up pretty good. But

sometimes, even now—" He broke off, adding, almost humble: "Mind if I walk the rest of the way with you?"

"Sure, come on."

I didn't carry his pathetic confession any further. I knew he was young enough to torment himself that this perfectly normal battle psychosis was the result of weakness in his own character, and I didn't want to twist the knife any deeper in his wound. Dawn too, thank heavens, had enough sense to keep quiet.

Caleb didn't speak until the lights of the Bray house glistened ahead of us through the rain. Then he said gruffly:

"You won't tell anyone, will you? I mean, I kind of wish . . ."

"Of course I won't if you don't want me to."

I could see his face now, very young and strained. He gave me an embarrassed smile and strode ahead toward the light. When Dawn and I reached the shelter of the terrace, shaking the rain off our shoulders and hair, there was no sign of him.

There was no sign of the others, either. But one by one they started to stumble, drenched and complaining, onto the terrace. Renton Forbes and Avril came first. Renton had unbuttoned his jacket and had tucked Avril's tiny little body under it too. Normally, this degree of intimacy with a man would have started her excited silvery laugh tinkling. But there was no tinkling laughter now. I understood the reason when Avril came under the light. The curl had deserted her auburn hair, which clung lank and faintly metallic around her face. Some of the delicate mauve shadow under her eyes had streaked across her cheek, and the skirt of her peasant costume flopped clammily around her legs.

She no longer looked dainty, and certainly she no longer looked nineteen.

"Oh, the wetness!" She managed one unconvincing squeaky giggle and ran off to the comfort of the nearest bathroom.

Love Drummond came next, muttering and stamping her feet. Soon George Raynor appeared with the other picnic basket and Phoebe close behind him, pretending she had enjoyed the murky trip in an attempt to justify her unfortunate choice of a picnic ground. Lorie slipped in next. And, after her, the Reverend Jessup, whose soaked clerical black made him look like a wet, sulky crow.

Phoebe sent Lorie scuttling for a bottle of brandy to warm everyone, and jiggers of it had been passed round before Love exclaimed:

"The twins! Bobby and Billy—what's happened to them?"

That was the first moment I realized that

the whole party had returned except for the White boys.

Love crossed to the edge of the terrace and called: "Bobby—Billy."

Her voice echoed eerily out through the rain-swept darkness, but there were no answering cries.

Love turned to Dr. Jessup. "Hilary, I thought you were bringing them down."

The Reverend Jessup sniffed and said irritably: "My dear Love, you gave me no such instructions. I assumed you had them under your wing."

Avril, some of the ravages of the storm repaired, appeared in the doorway from the living room and exclaimed:

"Oh, the little naughtinesses! I expect they've run back to the sawmill."

Love called: "Bobby—Billy" again. Some of the others joined the cry, grouping around her heavy-hipped figure at the edge of the porch.

Renton Forbes growled: "I know we'd all as lief have them devoured by wolves, but we'd better start a search party. Have any flashlights, Lorie?"

"Yes." Lorie darted off.

In a few moments they were all crowding out again into the rain. I would have joined them, but Dawn sneezed at that moment. She was still recovering from a recent mastoid operation, which had been the principal reason for my decision to have a brief vacation from Kenmore in Skipton. I had wanted to give the convalescent a change of scene. Now the sneeze made me more worried for Dawn than the White twins and, promising to join the search on my return, I borrowed a raincoat from Lorie, wrapped it around Dawn, and hurried off down the drive towards home.

BY THE time we reached Phoebe's modest house, which stood on Skipton's single road at the foot of Ernesta's drive, the rain had stopped. There was only a short trip to the house belonging to my old friend Dr. Stokes which I had rented for the two months of our stay. We passed the Raynors' house on the left, Love Drummond's immaculate cottage on the right, and the white, delicately steepled church at whose side Dr. Jessup's rectory nestled in a semicircle of elms. Our house stood across the street from the rectory, and, as I bundled Dawn into it, the faint, thumping strains of an orchestra trailed from the Community House farther down the street, where Skipton's villagers—as opposed to Ernesta's "our type of people"—were frolicking through their regular Saturday night square dance.

The wheezing fiddles and the half-audible shouts of the caller gave the night a certain festive quality. I could still hear the music

as I rushed Dawn into a hot bath, saw her safely in bed, and, with stern adjurations to stay there, kissed her good night.

As I left her, Hamish, our gloomy Scotch terrier, lumbered into the room and jumped into his privileged if unhygienic sleeping place against her pillow.

I was tired and wet myself and had very little desire to return to the Bray house and the search party. But, after a gulped highball, I found that my conscience was still nagging me, so I got a raincoat and a flashlight and hurried back up the street to the dim, clod-hopping strains of "Oh, my darling Nellie Gray" from the Community House.

The storm clouds were dispersing as I started up the Bray drive, and a watery moon poured down a thin strain of light.

I found Lorie, Avril, and Caleb in the Bray living room. Lorie was standing stiffly at the window staring out. Avril was on a couch close to Caleb, who had put on a turtle-necked sweater and blue jeans.

Without turning from the window, Lorie announced that the search party was still out, adding sarcastically that Caleb had been too lazy to join them.

From Caleb's quick, hurt glance at me I could tell that he had not confided his morbid fear of the dark to his cousin and that his pride was suffering badly from this taunt for which he had no reply. To make matters worse, Avril, flirtatious again, nuzzled against him and exclaimed:

"Caleb's not lazy. He just knew someone had to keep poor little me company."

I was glad that my intention of joining the search gave me an excuse to leave immediately. As I stepped out onto the terrace, Lorie called:

"They'll most of them be up by the sawmill. Try the other trail past the duckpond. The twins might easily have taken that by mistake."

I knew the Bray estate fairly well, and the moonlight was strong enough now to make my flashlight unnecessary. I went through the formal gardens and took a path through a dark pine copse which Ernesta's landscape gardener had thinned and made into a feature. Beyond it a dirt track passed between two meadows, winging up the flank of the mountain toward the rear of the old sawmill.

Ahead of me, echoing down the dark slope, came an occasional call of "Billy . . . Bobby," telling me that the other searchers were still on the job. There is always something forlorn and rather ominous about a human voice calling at night. But I was not seriously worried about the White twins. In the past they had thought out methods, infinitely more diabolical than pretending to be lost, to

torment the community in general. The ground was wet underfoot. I was most conscious of my soaked shoes, a general exasperation, and a certain concern over Caleb. I liked him and I liked Lorie. I didn't like the tension between them or Avril Lane's idiotic flirtatiousness.

Rough hedges of chokecherry and shadbush fringed the track. The moonlight cast their shadows in bizarre patterns across silvered gravel at my feet. The trail took a sharp turn to the left, and the hedge dropped away, revealing the gleaming surface of the old pond which had been used as a duckpond in the pre-Ernesta days when the Bray house had been a working farm. A shift in wind or a trick of acoustics suddenly brought me the music of the square dance from the village below. Quirkishly, almost as if he were at my elbow, I heard the rough voice of the caller, singing:

*"Swing with your own
And leave her alone
And swing with the gay caballero.
And when you have done
Go back where you belong
And swing with your Honolulu baby."*

By contrast that gay, bouncy music seemed to make the stillness around me more forlorn than had the voices calling from the mountain. I was abreast of the pond now. No one had paid it any attention in years, and tall reeds had grown up, clogging its margin. Each individual reed was etched stiffly in the moonlight, and as I looked at them I stopped hearing the rustic music from the village and, in its place, a snatch from Lorie's ballad repeated itself naggingly in my mind.

*"I'll sing you one-O,
Green grow the rushes-O."*

The rushes didn't look green here, though. They looked black. I paused a moment, gazing pointlessly over the unruffled surface of the pond. Suddenly, the way those things do, the frivolous and rather unfortunate remark I had made about the White twins earlier that evening came back to me:

They should be hit on the head and drowned in the Bray's duckpond.

AND, as I thought about it and regretted having said it, something pale in the water beyond the rushes caught my eye. I let my gaze rest on it idly at first and then with a prickling of attention. Down in the village all the fiddles were scraping, the caller was singing:

*"Go back where you belong
And swing with your Honolulu baby."*

CHAPTER III

I still stared at the thing in the pond, and horror started to stir in my stomach like a snake uncurling. I lifted my flashlight. I aimed it directly at that shadowy object and snapped on its switch.

The beam of light, cutting through the frame of reeds, revealed a small, green-clad arm and a little white hand thrust up from the surface of the water.

The snake seemed to be writhing through me now. I plunged through the rushes into the water, my feet sinking into the cold mud of the pond's bottom.

My teeth chattering, I pointed the beam of the flashlight downward. The water was not deep. Beneath it, beneath the arm, I could trace the faint gleam of a face. And then, almost more terrible, I saw another arm in the water, six feet away.

The jangle of the music from the village blared on. I was conscious of it. But the tune seemed to have changed. In my mind, no one was swinging their Honolulu baby any more. In my mind, the voice seemed to be chanting:

*"Two, two the lily white boys,
Clothed all in Green-O."*

Plunging my arms into the water, I picked up one of the little boys and rushed with him to the bank. For a second time I stumbled into the pond, lifted the other cold, unyielding body and laid him down on the bank next to his brother.

I was too basically shocked to think, but the doctor in me was working automatically. My trembling fingers could find a pulse in neither of their wrists. Instinctively I turned both the small bodies, in their pitiful sodden green play suits, over on their backs. But before I started artificial respiration I saw something that brought the horror to its climax.

I had been almost sure from the start that the White twins were dead. But there are ways and ways to die. Dimly I had pictured them losing their way, tumbling into the pond and drowning. But I knew now that there had been no accidental tumbling into that pond. For on the back of both of their heads was a crude, matted wound where they had been struck savagely by some lethal weapon.

I started to work on them because in those first moments I could think of nothing else to do.

But, as I did so, it seemed horribly that Dawn was still at my elbow, giggling and singing:

*"Two, two the horrid White boys,
Clothed all in green-O.
Hit them, hit them on the head
And throw them in the pond-O."*



IN A few moments I was sufficiently in control again to stop the useless artificial respiration. But I stayed squatting there by the bodies in the wet grass and weeds. Part of my mind knew that I was coroner for the county and would have to call Inspector Cobb in Groves-

town. But the other part, less organized, scurried from one tenebrous thought to another. Dawn had invented that vulgar parody of the ballad, and someone had made it prophetic. Less than an hour ago we had been ordinary people chatting and squabbling our way through an ordinary picnic. Skipton had been just one of many little Massachusetts towns with its faintly pretentious summer people and its square-dancing natives.

Now everything was different. The two small bodies, gleaming palely in the moonlight at my side, were more disastrous than an earthquake. An earthquake might have altered the contours of Skipton. But this brutal murder of two children would alter the very fiber of the community, the very minds of its inhabitants.

Trailing up from the village, the base thumping of the piano exaggerated, came the strains of "Lay That Pistol Down." A female voice, tired and irritable, sounded from the mountain above me:

"Bobby . . . Billy."

Skipton didn't know it yet—all except one of its members—but life had changed for it as remorselessly as day changes to night. And I had to be the herald of that change.

I stood up. I stared down at the two small boys. They looked so cold. Absurdly, I stripped off my raincoat and laid it over them. I turned back into the trail which led down to the Bray house.

Lorie, Caleb, and Avril Lane were still sitting glumly in the living room. The shock I had experience had been so violent that it seemed almost inconceivable that the three of them, obsessed with their tiny problems of desire, jealousy, and frustration, could have kept their mood unbroken. I half expected too that I must have brought the horror of what had happened with me on my face. But they didn't seem to notice anything.

Lorie said: "Given up already, Doctor?"

Avril giggled: "The bad things, I expect they're having high jinks in that old saw-mill."

I said: "Where's the telephone, Lorie? In the hall, isn't it?"

Lorie's young face hardened then into sudden, anxious curiosity. Caleb swung round too and stared at me brightly.

"What's the matter? Has something happened?"

I didn't answer. I went out into the hall. The telephone stood by a smart, striped sofa in an alcove. Normally Cobb stayed late at his office Saturday night. I called Police Headquarters and reached him at once. Inspector Cobb was my oldest friend. There was no need for any Inspector-Coroner formality with him, but I wasn't sure whether or not my voice could be heard in the living room, so I went into no detail. I merely told him to come and to come quickly and to bring the homicide boys with all their trimmings.

Cobb asked the one, blunt question. "Bad?"

"Terrible," I said.

"I'll be right over."

I went back to the living room. All three of them had risen and were standing in a little group, watching for me. Avril Lane, looking bizarre with her sodden, wrinkled skirt, was arranging her face for Drama. Lorie and Caleb, young, blond, extraordinarily alike in their expression, stood instinctively close together. I was sure then that they had at least heard I was calling the police.

Lorie said: "Something's happened, hasn't it?" And then, tentatively: "Did you find them?"

"I found them," I said.

Avril gave a faint scream. Caleb said: "And they're okay?"

I looked at Lorie. "How about a drink for me?"

She ran to a sideboard, clattered glasses, and came back with a highball.

Caleb repeated: "If they're okay—where are they?"

I took a gulp of the drink. Everything in me shied away from saying the thing that was going so terribly to change our lives.

"Please, Dr. Westlake," said Lorie, "tell us. Are they all right?"

I sat down in one of Ernesta's beautiful gold brocade chairs. I felt suddenly tired and spent.

"They're dead," I said.

Avril Lane clutched her throat. I never knew people really clutched their throats, but she did.

Caleb, his face a sickly gray under his atabrine tan, said: "You kidding?"

Lorie whirled on him. "Don't be a fool. As if Dr. Westlake would kid." Her thin, cold hand clutched my arm. "Tell us. Please, please, tell us. You called the police, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"Then . . . ?"

"Let's wait," I said, "till the others get back. 'They've got to know. I don't want to go over it twice.'"

To my surprise, even Avril Lane had enough dignity not to press the matter any further. Caleb poured himself a drink, and then all three of them sat down, picking chairs apart as if they sensed that life was different now and that the new life might mean a drastic change of alliances.

I SAT with my drink, gazing at the luxurious, well-known room. Little things about it reminded me of earlier parties at Ernesta's . . . The concert grand piano at which one of Ernesta's protégés from New York had played Debussy, straining almost to its uttermost the loyalty of her Skipton following; the long Spanish refectory table at which Ernesta had, much more successfully, served a potent punch. The room was imbued with Ernesta's energetic, bossy personality. Ludicrously, a Skiptonite after only three weeks, I found myself thinking:

This would never have happened if Ernesta had been here.

The moment I was dreading came. Confused footsteps and voices sounded on the terrace. Phoebe, Renton Forbes and George Raynor came in through the french windows. They were disheveled, and their faces wore the tentative expression of people who were worried but did not yet want to appear so.

Phoebe, trying to be her normal spry self, gave a little laugh and said: "Well, this time they've done it, the fiends. Poor Love's distracted. I've made her come back. It's hopeless, just a handful of us. We'll have to call the police and collect a posse from the village."

Renton Forbes grunted: "If I had my way, there'd be two very bruised bottoms in Love's house tomorrow."

He crossed to pour himself a drink. George Raynor, his dark handsome face heavy with anxiety, moved instinctively to his wife. Avril cracked then. The opportunity for being the fragile wife comforted by her big, strong husband must have been too much for her. She ran to him, threw her little arms up to his shoulders and wailed:

"Dr. Westlake found them. They're dead."

Renton Forbes swung from the table, the liquid splashing out of his highball. Panic creeping into her black gypsy eyes, Phoebe stared straight at me.

"It's not true, is it, Doctor? It's just that horrible woman making a scene?"

No one in Skipton had ever been rude enough before to call Avril a horrible woman to her face. Already the new regime was starting. Phoebe's face was so expressive that I could read her thoughts, as easily as if she were speaking them: *Something's hap-*

pened. Ernesta's away. In a way I'm responsible. I chose the picnic ground.

"Where's Love?" I asked.

"She's coming with Dr. Jessup. They must be right . . ."

There were footsteps on the terrace again. It wasn't fair, I felt, to have Love hear what had happened to her nephews in front of the others. I hurried out of the french windows. Love Drummond and the Reverend Jessup were moving toward me.

I said to Love: "Stay there. Please. Please don't move till we come back."

I took the Reverend Jessup by the elbow and guided him down the terrace out of ear-shot. He was Love's oldest friend in the neighborhood. I knew that. While he listened in apparently dazed silence, I told him the bare facts of what had happened to the twins. That is, I told him most of the facts. I told him they were dead, that I had found them in the duckpond, drowned. I said nothing about the blows on the back of their heads.

I said: "I'm going to tell the others now. Take Love somewhere—anywhere. Break it to her."

The old guy was quite wonderful. Years of faithful if plodding service to his God seemed to have given him a certain spiritual fortitude. Asking no more questions, he moved back along the terrace and put his hand on Love's arm.

Rather irritably, she snapped: "What on earth is all this whispering in corners?"

"Come, my dear," Dr. Jessup's voice was steady, reassuring. "I only hope that God will give us strength."

He led her firmly down the terrace toward the french windows which opened into the library. I watched them move away—the old, rain-soaked priest and the tall, ungainly spinster with the heavy hips. I went back into the living room.

Avril was curled up on a couch, whimpering. Her husband sat next to her holding her

hand. Phoebe, Renton, Caleb, and Lorie stood in a phalanx, watching me.

I said: "I've called Inspector Cobb. He'll be out soon."

"The police!" said Phoebe.

"What happened?" Caleb's face now was dark with exasperation. "For God's sake, what happened?"

There was no point in beating about the bush. "I found them in the duckpond," I said. "They were dead. I can't tell yet whether they were drowned or not. But if they were drowned, it was still murder, because they were both hit on the back of the head—hit hard enough to have stunned them before they were thrown in the pond."

The brutality of those facts and the familiar, shining luxury of Ernesta's living room were hopelessly at war. What I had said was too much for them. It took them several moments to adjust to it.

Phoebe was the first to speak. With a natural, feminine pity which, under the circumstances sounded almost silly, she whispered:

"Poor little things."

It was Avril Lane who said the thing that I knew would have to come. For all her silly affectations, her mind moved more quickly than the others'. Pushing herself up on the couch, she stared at me, half horrified, half accusing.

"You and your little daughter," she breathed. "Your little daughter singing: 'Hit them on the head and throw them in the pond.'"

"I know," I said. I added wearily: "Someone must have heard Dawn. Maybe it gave them the idea."

RENTON FORBES cut in quickly: "You mean you think someone on the picnic did—did it?"

"What I think," I said, "isn't any more important than what anyone else thinks."

[Turn page]



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



"No, no, it isn't possible. It isn't possible." Phoebe had clutched her son's arm as if to steady herself. "You know it can't be one of us. Someone from the village . . . or it's all a coincidence. It could be a coincidence."

"It'll be easy to check on the village people," I said. "Most of them will have been at the square dance and will be able to alibi each other."

Lorie had been standing alone, very straight, her arms stiff at her sides. Her eyes, drained by horror of all expression, met mine.

"But why, Doctor? Tell me why? Why should anyone kill those—those babies?"

"It's a crazy person," broke in Caleb gruffly. "Some crazy person, escaped maybe from an institution or . . ."

"But why did it happen like the song? Why?"

I said grimly: "That'll come later. We can all do one thing right now. We can give an account of our movements coming down the mountain. Cobb will ask. We might as well get ready."

A door at the back of the room opened and Dr. Jessup came in. Everyone turned to look at him. He crossed to me.

"Love Drummond is a very brave woman, Dr. Westlake. She wanted to come in with the rest of us, but I persuaded her to remain in the library, and soon I shall take her home."

Phoebe went to him and took his arm silently. They were old friends. Dr. Jessup patted her hand and turned to me with a faint, gentle smile.

"Love has told me all she knows. She came down the mountain alone. She thought the children were with me and did not worry. It was a tragic misunderstanding. I thought they were safely with her." He paused, watching my face. "I have been thinking. You have held back some of the truth from me, have you not? That duckpond is not deep. It is almost inconceivable to me that the children could have stumbled into it accidentally and—"

"They were hit on the head, Hilary," breathed Phoebe. "Dr. Westlake has told us. They were hit on the head and thrown—"

She broke off with a shiver. Dr. Jessup patted her hand again.

"We must be strong, my dear. We can combat the works of darkness only if we have strength."

I said: "I was telling the others, Dr. Jessup, that we would have to account for our movements coming down the mountain from the picnic ground. Perhaps you'd be good enough to begin."

"Of course, although I am afraid I have little to tell. It was dark, confusing. I lost my way and came down through the scrub

as best I might. I met no one on the journey—no one at all."

"Neither did I," said Phoebe. "I heard people around me, of course. But I didn't actually see anyone or talk to anyone."

"I didn't either," said George Raynor.

I glanced at Renton Forbes. "You met up with Avril, didn't you?"

He glanced at George's wife. "Only at the end. We didn't meet until we were almost at the house."

"That is correct." Avril was very firm and precise now. "Earlier, someone ran past me—running very fast. I could not tell who it was. Otherwise I met no one until I encountered Renton."

Caleb had flushed crimson. "I guess the person running was me. I caught up with Dr. Westlake and Dawn halfway to the house. The three of us came in together."

"You saw no one before me?" I asked, although I knew the answer. Caleb, with his morbid dread of the dark, would have attached himself to the first person he met.

Caleb shook his head.

I turned to Lorie. "There's only you left," I said quietly.

Above the delicate shell pink of her suit, Lories' face was very pale. One hand went up to the shining, silvery hair.

"I saw no one. No one at all."

Her lips were trembling. She moved suddenly, running to her aunt and burying her face against Phoebe's shoulder.

"It's all my fault," she sobbed. "I was giving the picnic. I should have taken care of the twins."

The sobs rose, racking her thin body.

"Oh, if only Mother had been here. This would never have happened if Mother had been here."

I wondered if there was anyone in the room who didn't agree with her.

CHAPTER IV



SOON Cobb came. I heard cars approaching and hurried out to meet them. None of the others attempted to accompany me. I think the very idea of the homicide squad coming to one of their houses on official business was difficult for them to absorb. They were all the

type of people whose traffickings with the police hitherto had been limited to a telephone call about a lost dog or a reluctant but civic-minded purchase of tickets to the Annual Policeman's Ball in Grovestown.

There were two automobiles. Inspector

Cobb had come alone in his own old coupé. Grovestown's rather impoverished homicide squad, consisting of Dan Leaf, Cobb's young assistant, a photographer, and three other detectives, arrived in a police car.

They crowded around me curiously. In the glare of the headlights Cobb's weather-beaten New England face, with its deceptively placid china-blue eyes, was wary. He threw an impressed glance at Ernesta's fancy house and said:

"Well, Westlake, what have you got us into?"

I told him the facts bluntly. The photographer whistled. One of the detectives muttered: "Geez." Cobb's face went ominously grim. The inspector was very much the family man. In fact, I personally had supervised the appearance in this world of four out of his five children. This wasn't the kind of case he could be cold-blooded about.

He said: "You're sure it's murder? Not just an accident?"

"I'm the coroner, remember?" I said grimly. "I'm not an old lady in ground-grippers complaining there's a burglar under my bed. Come on. I'll show you."

We tramped through Ernesta's formal gardens, her pine grove, which I believe she called her "spinney," and up the mountain trail to the duckpond. The moonlight was bright enough now for us to see my raincoat yards before we reached it. I hated having to disclose what lay under it, but I picked it up. The circle of men stood around the little bodies, staring down, not saying anything. I pointed to the spot in the pond where I had discovered the boys and the reeds I had trampled down.

"I doubt whether you'll find any foot-prints," I said to Dan Leaf, who was swinging his flashlight around. "I messed up the place pretty thoroughly."

"Wouldn't have been anything anyway, Doc. The rain wasn't strong enough to soften up the grass for foot prints, and the water's high enough to cover all the mud."

The photographer was propped on one knee taking photographs. Cobb had scattered his men to search the area. He stood bulky and quiet watching the camera flash. The music, shrill and twangy, still sounded from the Community House below us.

I said quietly. "A maniac. Someone who's nuts."

He grunted and then asked: "You knew the kids?"

"Sure. They were little demons, both of them. But if sane people started killing off kids because they were demons, there'd be a sharp drop in the population." I added: "There's something I haven't told you—something about Dawn and a song."

I told him about Lorie's ballad and Dawn's silly parody. "'Green grow the rushes-O,'" I said. "'The lily-white boys all clothed in green-O. Hit them on the head and throw them in the pond-O.' It's too much of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Which means you think someone on the picnic did it?"

"I don't think. I'm just telling you the facts."

"Or maybe," said Cobb quietly, "someone who overheard Dawn singing; someone who was lurking around in the fields; someone with a crazy tic in his brain, with some urge to kind of make the song real."

"That would only explain part of it, wouldn't it? The hit-them-on-the-head-and-throw-them-in-the-pond part. A stray nut lurking in the fields—how could he know the twins were called White and that they were dressed in green?" Some of my original horror shivered inside me. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Cobb looked up, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. "These pals of yours on the picnic—could any of them be"—he gestured—"crazy?"

Put that way, it sounded so perfectly absurd. A homicidal maniac in the bosom of Ernesta's little group of "our type of people," Skipton's elite who spent most of their uneventful summers pottering in their gardens or gossiping around a teapot!

"No," I said. "Never in a million years."

I did think of Caleb and put the thought out of my head.

"Then could any one of them have any sort of motive for wanting the kids out of the way?"

LOVE DRUMMOND murdering her nephews because they've broken her Staffordshire China? That was just as fanciful.

"No," I said. "So far as I know—no."

"There's a square dance in the village tonight?"

"Yes."

"And most of the people around these parts go, I guess?"

"Practically all of them—unless they're sick or have babies to mind."

"Then it's going to be easy checking on the village people. If the murderer heard Dawn singing before the picnic and hung around till later to kill the boys, he couldn't have been at the square dance without someone noticing he'd slipped away. Of course, there may be a lunatic loose from the state institution in Leabright. I'll check on that too, but there's been no report of it turned in so far."

Cobb called over two of the detectives and sent them down to the Community House with instructions to inaugurate an exhaustive check on movements. As they hurried

off, he gave a weary shrug.

"We're going to start a panic, Westlake, but there's nothing we can do about it. Even if we tried to hush it up, the news'd be blazing like wildfire through the village by tomorrow morning. Sometimes I wish I'd followed my old man's advice and gone into the hardware business when I was a kid."

"So's you could sell blunt instruments to murderers?"

"Cris'sakes, don't be funny." The inspector stared down gauntly at the two little bodies. "Come on. You'd better introduce me to these friends of yours."

He left Leaf in charge, and the two of us plodded in silence back to the Bray house.

Love had gone home with the Reverend Jessup, but she had left word with Phoebe that she was perfectly well enough to see Inspector Cobb at his convenience. The inspector handled the rest of the party admirably. His solid, almost paternal presence seemed to reassure them, and his questions, although always discreet, covered the whole ground thoroughly. He learned just exactly as much as I had learned from them, no more, no less. But in spite of his ominous warning that a maniac might be at large and that all precautions should be taken, he left them steadier than he had found them.

In a way, I thought with faint amusement, he had taken Ernesta's place.

We drove together to Love's cottage. All the downstairs windows were brightly lit, and the iron-framed door lantern in the porch was burning too. The rather excessively Pilgrim Fathers lantern was typical of the dainty antiquity of Love's whole establishment, and her obsessive distaste for dirt and disorder was so familiar to me that I found myself instinctively warning Cobb to wipe the mud off his shoes before we rang the doorbell.

The Reverend Jessup led us into the small, undilutedly New England parlor where Love was sitting on a horse-hair sofa with her fat gray cat, which the twins had tried to hang that afternoon, curled at her feet. She was pale as ice but enough herself to glance at our shoes as we entered.

"Hilary's been trying to pamper me," she said, laying a large knuckled hand on Dr. Jessup's. "But I don't have to be pampered. I have made him tell me the whole truth. So sit down, Inspector, and ask me any questions you want to."

With caution, Cobb seated himself in a rocking chair which was perilously close to a cabinet filled with bric-a-brac. The Reverend Jessup and I settled ourselves side by side and incongruously on a green love seat.

"It's a lunatic, of course. Some poor, horrible mad person lurking in the woods." Love stared directly at the inspector. "I

didn't like them, you know. They fussed me. They broke my china. They were cruel to my cat. They were like a plague of locusts in my house. I'm too old and unmarried to change my ways. I wished a hundred times a day I'd never offered to take them for the summer. That's what makes it so hard. I can't help telling myself that if I'd been fonder of them, more careful—"

"Now, Love," broke in the Reverend Jessup solicitously.

"Shut up, Hilary. I have a conscience, and no power inside or outside the Episcopal Church is going to keep it from telling me what's right and what's wrong. I've been terribly wrong and I've been terribly punished. Now, Inspector, what do you want to know?"

THERE was very little, of course, that Cobb would want to know. He had her explain her misunderstanding with Dr. Jessup which had caused the twins to be lost sight of at the picnic grounds. He questioned her about her descent of the mountain and asked if there was any conceivable motive for anyone's wishing the boys dead, to which he received the expected reply. The boys had been naughty, but no one kills children because they're naughty. Their parents were not well off, and their deaths were of no possible monetary interest to anyone.

In spite of her spinster tartnesses and her tiny village feuds, Love was of as tough a fiber as a Massachusetts maple. She and Cobb were enough alike to understand each other and approve.

Finally Cobb asked if we might search the boys' room. It was pitifully unlikely that there could be anything significant among the belongings of two eight-year-old children, but Cobb and I climbed the winding stairs to the small attic bedroom. Its disorder was touching. I found three broken birds' eggs and a clumsily set Luna moth in a shoe box. But there was, as I had expected, nothing to suggest that those two obstreperous little flame-headed boys had been destined for so brutal and shocking a departure from this life.

Love saw us out herself standing lumpy but strangely dignified under her Pilgrim Fathers lantern.

"I shall not telephone the children's parents until tomorrow. They might as well have one more peaceful night. Inspector, the necessary complications . . . I mean, nothing will interfere with the funeral, will it?"

"The autopsy should be completed tonight, Miss Drummond. After that, the police have no further need."

"Thank you. Thank you very much for everything, Inspector." Love Drummond smiled a small, wry smile at me. "Poor Dr.

Westlake, what a terrible evening for you too."

At that moment the fat gray cat appeared, winding in and out of her legs and staring up at her, its mouth open in a pink, silent miaow. Suddenly, without warning, Love Drummond lost control. Her lips quivering, she picked up the cat and pressed it against her cheek. In a little, choking voice she said:

"And I forgot your supper. For the first time in your life I forgot your supper."

Cobb and I drove as near as possible to the duckpond, left the car and walked the rest of the way. The bodies had been removed by ambulance to Grovestown. Dan Leaf and his assistant had completed a preliminary and quite unproductive search of the area. The other two detectives were still at work in the village. Cobb called it quits for the night. We stopped off at my house for my car, and all drove to Grovestown.

The city pathologist had been called, and the autopsy was already under way. I was too tired and too disgusted with life to wait for the results. They could be only of technical interest anyway. Whether Bobby and Billy had died from the blow on the head or from drowning, nothing was going to change the fact that they had been murdered.

Before I left, however, Cobb and I examined the little bundle of wet green play suits. In the pockets we found a stick of gum, two pieces of string, an illicit, water-yellowed cigarette, and a soaked package of matches. Cobb, his mouth grim, said: "Nothing there."

A memory came. "Funny," I said.

"What?"

"They'd been playing marbles up at the sawmill. There aren't any marbles here."

"When did they play?"

"Just before we started for home."

Cobb shrugged. "If I know kids, they kept them tight in their hands. I always did. I liked the shiny feel of them."

"And they got scattered when they were attacked?"

"I guess so. Dan'll probably find them tomorrow, or—" He threw out his hands hopelessly. "But what's the difference? We aren't going to solve this thing with a couple of marbles."

"No," I said.

"You headed home?"

"Yeah. I'm having them phone me the autopsy results in the morning. I guess you'll be calling too?"

"I guess so." Cobb suddenly looked up, his blue eyes unhappy and worried. "I'm scared, Westlake."

"Scared?"

"A murder with a motive. That don't bother me. But two little kids . . . that song.

Westlake, does that song have any more verses?"

"Twelve of them," I said.

He didn't say anything more. I drove home and dropped exhausted into bed.

But, sly and insistent as a mosquito, a small tune plagued me:

*Two, two the lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green-O.
One is one
And all alone
And ever more shall be-O.*

One is one and all alone.

What did that mean?

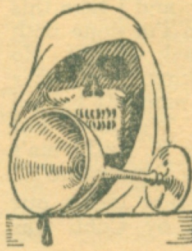
Avril Lane's prettified face seemed to rise in the darkness in front of me. It merged into macabre visions of white-robed Druids tying a naked, flame-haired boy to a stone altar.

Then I slept.

Part 2: three, three the rivals

CHAPTER V

*"Three, three the rivals.
Two, two the lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green-O.
One is one
And all alone . . ."*



I AWAKENED to those words sung in a high, childish treble. They were so opposite to my dreams that for a moment I thought I was still sleeping. But they soon were blurred with the hiss of falling water and I realized that Dawn was taking a shower in the bathroom next door and that Sunday morning, the first day of the new Skipton, had come. Sunshine splashed beguilingly through the window. But it didn't beguile me. I got out of bed, went to my own bathroom and dressed.

As I started downstairs, the telephone rang. I heard the rough, uninhibited voice of Violet, the village girl who "did" for us, announcing: "Sure, sure. I'll get him." Then she came into view, hurrying breathily around a corner.

The everyday Violet had the assured stolidity of a cow in a clover field, but today there was a marked change. Her lipstick was on crooked, her stout legs did not seem quite sure where they were going,

and her eyes stared with a greedy excitement.

"Telephone," she said. "Sounded like that policeman from Grovestown."

It was that policeman from Grovestown. A distracted Cobb brought me up to date. The autopsy had revealed water in the lungs. The boys had been knocked unconscious and left to drown. No inmates were reported missing from the State Institution for the Insane at Leabright. Detectives were still on the job in Skipton, getting nowhere. Cobb seemed at his wit's end and pathetically anxious for me to suggest something helpful. I had nothing to suggest, of course. I did, however, promise reluctantly to keep a neutral and speculative eye on my fellow picnickers.

Violet had been hovering shamelessly in the dining room doorway. The moment I hung up, she came to me, clutching my arm, smelling heavily of five-and-dime perfume.

"Didju find them? Down to the village they're saying as it was you as found them. Smashed on the head and thrown in the Brays' duckpond." Her eyes beetled. "It's a maniac. That's what they're saying. Maybe a couple of maniacs. Broken out of Leabright."

Since I wasn't in a conversational mood, she babbled on: "There was detectives to the square dance last night, a couple of them, asking questions and all. They're still around, Irma says. Ain't it something?"

"It is," I said.

Violet found a forgotten piece of gum in some inner recess of her mouth and started to chew. "Breakfast is ready, and I take this opportunity to tell you when I'm done with the dishes I'm not comin' back tonight. No sir, you don't catch me walking home after dinner in the dark with no maniacs behind every tree. I'm sorry, Dr. Westlake, but that's what I say and I stick to it. And Irma's doing the same down to Miss Drummond's."

She flounced away. We were losing our help. The panic prophesied by Cobb was under way all right.

I was already seated at the breakfast table when Dawn scurried in, followed more sedately by Hamish. After her experience with Bobby White the night before, my daughter seemed to have matrimony on the brain and started to regale with me with her conception of the ideal husband—a conception which, I reflected, was depressingly similar to the one Violet would nourish. Dawn had to be told about the White twins, of course. It would be hopeless to try to keep her from it. But, since the news of the twins' death would hardly assist her appetite, I decided to postpone the breaking of the news and let her romantic soliloquy have full rein.

"Of course," she chattered, offering an

edge of toast to the disgusted Hamish, "you can't always get the sort of husband you really want. I mean, you have to compromise." She paused for reflection. "I think maybe if I simply had to marry someone in Skipton I think maybe it would have to be Caleb."

"Yes," I said. "A war hero, the Purple Heart and everything."

"Oh no, I don't care about war heroes. It's just because he's got such lovely golden hairs on his legs and he looks deep and desperate." She sighed after this immodest revelation and added: "But I don't imagine he'd marry me because I know he'd marry Lorie if he could."

"If he could? Why can't he?"

"Mrs. Bray, of course. Didn't you know?" Dawn looked patronizing. "Lorie would never do anything against her mother, and Mrs. Bray would never, never let them marry, never in a million years."

Faintly curious, I asked: "Why ever not?"

"Cousins," said my daughter mysteriously. "I was up at the Brays' the other day and Mrs. Bray was going on and on about it. Cousins should never marry, she said, because it was very bad. Of course, I don't understand, because I had two guinea pigs once who were brother and sister—remember?—and . . ." She abandoned the sentence, the end of which, presumably, would be too genetic for the breakfast table. She sighed again. "No, I guess I couldn't get Caleb. I'd have to settle for Mr. Forbes. Of course, he's a bit of a wolf, but the wolf type is attractive to girls."

MY DAUGHTER'S worldly phrase was still recent enough to appal me. "Where on earth did you pick up that revolting word, brat?"

"Wolf? Why, everyone at school uses it all the time. It's fashionable and not half as revolting as calling your daughter a brat."

"I'm sorry," I said meekly. "But isn't Mr. Forbes rather old for you? He's even older than I am."

"Oh, I'd much rather marry an old man like you or Mr. Forbes if he's interesting rather than a sissy like George Raynor who's years younger than his wife and lets her boss him, making him cook and do the housework and everything like Violet. He is much younger than her, you know, Daddy, and she dyes her hair. I noticed last night there would be lots of gray in it if she left it alone and"—she paused, reached for the orange marmalade, and smiled enigmatically—"she likes Mr. Forbes better than her husband anyway. She only flirted with Caleb last night because she's mad that Mr. Forbes won't flirt with her any more."

I hadn't intended to let the conversation

sink so deep into the quagmire of local gossip, but, since we'd gone this far, I thought we might as well go further.

"What on earth are you talking about, Dawn?"

"Oh, she did use' to flirt with Mr. Forbes. I know she did because I saw them kissing one night on the Raynors' back porch and I heard her giggle and she said: 'If George and Ernesta saw us now, we'd be in hot water.' She really did, Daddy, and I hate grownup people who giggle, don't you?"

Violet had departed, slamming the kitchen door for the last time when I finally broke the news to Dawn. I didn't say anything about murder. I decided that, even if she did hear rumors around the village, it was better for me to soften the tragedy into an accident. I did, however, take the opportunity for a stern warning to be careful and not to go wandering out alone.

She cried a little, but only a very little, and murmured: "Bobby really did love me very devotedly. I shall treasure that marble."

In spite of my warning, worry for Dawn mounted steadily in me. My duties as coroner and Cobb's unofficial assistant were bound to keep me out of the house most of the day, and although Love Drummond and the Reverend Jessup were close neighbors, I did not like the idea of Dawn being left alone. The menace that had crept into the community was still too incalculable for comfort. But what could I do? Wild horses, I knew, would not drag Dawn to the Cape Cod cottage of my ferocious spinster aunt Mabel, our only living relative. And, if I sent her to camp, she would only come back (as she had done once before), claiming with theatrical and outraged piety that the girls swore, drank, and suffered from hideous, infectious diseases.

When Dawn was upstairs getting ready for church, a happy thought came to me. On our departure from Kenmore, Rebecca, our faithful colored factotum, had been packed off for her first vacation since my wife died ten years ago. She had been reluctant to leave us and had made me promise I would call her if things went wrong. Well, things had gone wrong enough. I went to the telephone and called her in Grovestown, where she was unwillingly staying with unwilling relatives. Rebecca seemed overjoyed to hear of our local tragedy and undertook to be with us that very afternoon.

Dawn came downstairs as I put the receiver back on the stand.

"That was Rebecca, wasn't it?"

"Yes. She's coming back this afternoon."

"In the middle of her vacation? Why?"

"She's bored with her vacation. Besides, Violet's quit."

"She has? How wonderful." My daughter

was enthusiastic. "Now we can give Rebecca a real vacation. I'll take her breakfast in bed. She can sit on the porch and rock all day. I'll cook all the meals. I've always wanted to cook. Persian pudding, blueberry muffins, maybe an angel cake and . . ."

Listing a succession of dishes, the carbohydrate content of which turned my stomach even in anticipation, she opened the front door and we moved out into the morning sunlight.

Churchgoing was painless from Dr. Stokes's house, for the church stood directly across the elm-shaded lane from us, an old, particularly beautiful clapboard church which had been Episcopal but which recently, through lack of patronage, had turned non-denominational. The bell had stopped ringing some moments before, and normally Skipton's small flock of loyal worshippers would already have arrived.

But this morning the road was animated with people hurrying toward the church steps. The air buzzed too with voices, half excited, half uneasy. Parading with two of the Heath farm hands I saw Violet and Irma, whose regular Sunday morning occupation was catching up with the movie magazines. I even saw old Carl Thorpe, Skipton's avowedly atheistical storekeeper, scuttling unobtrusively into the church with his two mousy daughters.

It took a maniac, real or imaginary, to put Skipton in mind of its Maker.

Dawn and I found two of the last seats in the church's cool, hushed interior, and I noticed that Lorie was at Ernesta's Hammond organ. That meant Love had not felt up to performing her usual duties. Then I saw Love herself away up in front. She was sitting with a strange man and woman in black who must be the twins' parents. Phoebe sat behind her, and, surprisingly, Renton Forbes was with her. He caught my eye and grinned sheepishly, a grin which implied he was there against his will, corraled by Phoebe to set a good example to the village.

CALEB was not visible. Neither were the Raynors. But shortly after the rather rattled Bach chorale which Lorie offered for the first voluntary, Avril's tiny figure came mincing down the aisle. She was dressed in the deepest black with a preposterous Quakerish bonnet reminiscent of Christina Rossetti or a pew opener in a Dickensian novel. I suspected that she was trying to be something pure and spiritual out of Hawthorne. She made a deep and rather clumsy genuflection before the unadorned altar, started toward Renton Forbes, and then, seeing Phoebe, veered away and squeezed into the pew next to my daughter.

"You'll have to help me find my place,

Dawn," she whispered. "I'm such a naughty girl. I haven't been to church for ever so long."

"Hush . . . sh," hissed Dawn with a look of intense disapproval.

Avril's smiled moved ruefully to me. I was meant to appreciate the fact that she had sacrificed a morning from her current book to do her duty to her humble community. I wondered what poor George was doing. Cooking dinner, probably, or washing out her panties.

Beneath the formal front of piety there was a strange, keyed-up tension in the congregation. I was infected with it myself. Almost all the village was present, and, as my eyes strayed from face to face during the singing of the first hymn, I found myself wondering. Unlike the less well-informed inhabitants of Skiptown, I knew that no maniac had broken loose from Leabright. If there was a maniac, he might very well be in the next pew to me. But I could trace no stigmata of degeneration in any of the rugged, New England profiles, which seemed wholesome and unimaginative as fall apples.

The Reverend Jessup's sermon, instead of lulling the panicky excitement of his congregation, only added fuel to the flame. With what seemed to me most ill-advised sentimentality, he chose as his text: "Suffer the Little Children to Come Unto Me." He got carried away by his own message, and his words were so moving that, when he painted a picture of innocent little boys playing marbles, with the Angel of Death hovering over them, Mrs. White collapsed, and her husband and I were obliged to help her out onto the porch, causing a minor commotion in doing so. Mr. White and I between us managed to guide the poor woman across the street to Love's cottage, and I returned to my pew just in time for the last verses of the final hymn.

As soon as the congregation started streaming out to Lorie's shy Bach, Avril darted, batting her eyes, to Renton Forbes and dragged him away. Presumably he had a lunch date with the Raynors. Phoebe Stone and I met on the porch.

She said:

"I hear Violet's left you. You'd better come to lunch with us."

I accepted with pleasure, while Phoebe nodded to all and sundry, most of whom were glancing furtively at me, the discoverer of the bodies, as if I were the star exhibit in a freak show.

"Really," murmured Phoebe, "things are getting terrible. Did that inspector have to tell everyone in the village? And Hilary—I can't imagine what got into him. Such a sermon!" She put her hand on my arm. "Here, he's coming with Love. Let's get

away. I can't imagine what I could possibly say."

Soon Lorie joined us. Phoebe sent her on ahead with Dawn, and I told her what little there was to tell about the White twins.

"It's the song that frightens me," she said. "That it should be tied up with the song."

The Stones' house, at the foot of Ernesta's pretentious drive, was unambitious, but it was the nicest house in Skipton. The furniture was old and shabby, and no one ever seemed to dust anything, but it was friendly. It seemed pleased to see you.

We found Caleb in the cluttered living room, his blond head bent over a large-scale map of Skipton on which he had been working for weeks. Map draftsmanship was a hobby he'd picked up in the hospital, and it still seemed one of the few things that could hold his attention for any length of time. He glanced up when we entered, and his face darkened as he saw Lorie.

"You coming to lunch?" he asked.

"You don't mind, do you?" Lorie stared back at him, her thin face faintly flushed. The tension between them which I had noticed the night before was even more marked.

"Why on earth should I mind? Hello, Doctor. Hi, Dawn." Caleb grinned, the quick, sweet grin he kept for Dawn. "How's about eating, Ma? I'm starved."

"It should be ready—unless Marie's walked out on us."

PHOEBE left the room and came back to announce that lunch was ready. As we took our seats, she said:

"Those poor Whites. Love weakened last night and called them after all. They came up on the milk train."

"For God's sake," cut in Caleb roughly, "do we have to talk about the Whites all the time? Can't you let those two poor little kids rest in peace in the morgue or wherever they are?"

It struck me that he was being unnecessarily rude, but Phoebe took the rebuke meekly and murmured: "Yes, you're right, Caleb. Let's forget them for a while."

Lunch without mention of the White twins and with the inexplicable antagonism between Lorie and Caleb wasn't any too comfortable, and after lunch conversation, which usually flowed easily in Phoebe's house, remained dammed up. Caleb, frankly sulky, picked up a book and leafed through it. Both Lorie and Phoebe had knitting. A portrait which I had always admired hung on the wall above the old faded davenport. It was the likeness of a beautiful, rather sad-looking girl with gray eyes and an Edwardian elegance.

Just to say something rather than nothing,

I remarked: "She's very lovely, Phoebe. Is she your mother?"

Phoebe glanced up quickly. "Yes. Ernesta's and mine. She is lovely, isn't she? Everyone adored her."

"She's been dead for long?"

Lorie looked up. Phoebe, her voice rather hurried, said: "Oh, she's not dead. She lives up in New York State."

"I'd like to meet her. Will she be visiting you this summer?"

Caleb threw his book down on a table.

Phoebe said: "I don't think so. She's not in very good health. And, of course, she's quite old." As if I had introduced a topic of conversation that had to be changed at all costs, she reached for the book Caleb had dropped and held it out to me, remarking rather wildly: "Have you read this? It's a biography of Charles and Mary Lamb. Lorie was crazy about it."

Feeling awkward and not quite knowing why, I took the book and said inanely: "I'd like to read it. I used to be nuts about the *Essays of Elia*, and when Dawn was a kid I used to read her Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. You liked them, didn't you, Dawn?"

"Not particularly," said my daughter in her adult voice. "I prefer to read Shakespeare in the original. But, as a matter of fact, I've always been interested in Mary Lamb."

"Why Mary rather than Charles, dear?" asked Phoebe.

Dawn shrugged. "Oh, Charles, he didn't do anything exciting. But Mary was wonderful. She murdered her mother."

There was a ghastly hush—a ghastlier hush, I felt, than was necessary. Dawn, apparently unconscious of it, ran to Lorie and, perching herself on the arm of her chair, said:

"Please, Lorie, sing 'Green Grow the Rushes-O.'"

That didn't improve matters either. Slipping the book under my arm, I rose to leave, and, as I did so, I noticed an ancient automobile, crammed with what seemed like an army of colored people wheezing along the road. In the back seat I caught a fleeting glimpse of Rebecca's plump, maternal profile.

"Oh, Dawn, Rebecca's arriving," I said.

"And we won't be there to meet her!" Dawn's face dropped in horror at this social solecism. "Mrs. Stone, do you mind if I simply dash? It would be awful not to be there when she comes."

"Of course, dear," said Phoebe. "Run along."

Dawn ran out of the room. But as she left the house, we could hear her voice distinctly. She was singing:

"Three, three the rivals.
Two, two the lily-white boys,
Clothed all in green-O."

I happened to look at Lorie. She had dropped her knitting and was sitting very still, her body quivering. Suddenly she threw her hands up to cover her eyes.

"Lorie!" His voice unexpectedly soft, Caleb started toward her. "Lorie, what is it, baby?"

"The song," she whispered. "I sang the song. I made it happen. I know I made it happen—with the song. . . ."

CHAPTER VI



I HAD to pass the Raynors' house on my way home from Phoebe's. It was large and rambling and rather dilapidated, for Avril's literary genius, though cherished by a sensitive few, had not yet won a wide audience. And George, of course, had given up his job after the marriage in order to devote himself entirely, as secretary, cook, and general amanuensis, to his wife's comfort. Avril was in the habit of explaining that she had bought the house because she had just simply fallen in love with its quaint old charm. Phoebe claimed that she had bought it because Skipton's activities were reported in the social pages of the New York papers and that there had been no other house available at the price she was prepared to pay.

I was apt to believe Phoebe.

That afternoon, as I strolled past the sagging picket fence that bounded the lawn, I saw a small hand wave from the porch where Dawn claimed to have caught Avril "flirting" with Renton Forbes, and Avril's silvery voice called:

"Oh, Dr. Westlake, do come in. Just for a moment. We're having coffee."

I had no desire to cope with Avril, but, remembering my promise to Cobb, I turned through the gate and up the "quaintly" weed-infested drive to the house. On the porch I found Avril and Renton Forbes seated together on a glider with a tray of coffee in front of them. Avril had changed her Hawthorne creation for black slacks and a white blouse with a black, Byronic cravat. I'd seen this outfit before. She laughingly referred to it as her George Sand work costume.

"Oh, Doctor, do tell us." She crinkled her little forehead pathetically. "The poor, poor mites. Any news?"

"Nothing to amount to anything I replied, dropping into a chair."

"And that tragic Hecuba of a Mrs. White! I felt so concerned for her in church this morning."

I told her Mrs. White had recovered from her spell.

"Damn silly of her to go to church at all in the circumstances," drawled Forbes. "Damn silly."

"Oh, Renton, you naughtiness!" Avril, girlish again, tapped him lightly on the wrist and put her hands playfully over her ears.

George Raynor came in then. His husky body, which was that of an athlete just starting to go to seed, was ludicrously draped in a frilly pink apron. He held a dish in one hand and a tea towel in the other. My guess had been right. George had obviously stayed home from church to cook lunch and was now cleaning up the kitchen while his wife disported with Renton on the porch.

George glanced rather sulkily at Avril and Renton and turned to me. His face showed genuine concern.

"I saw you come up the drive, Doctor. Any news?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid."

"Those kids. I guess I'll never get over it." His dark eyes showed a flicker of remembered horror. "There they were playing marbles by the sawdust pile without a care in the world. And then—"

"Oh, George, you old silliness!" broke in Avril with the inevitable giggle. "I've told you a hundred times not to come in wearing that silly old apron of mine."

George swung round with uncharacteristic belligerence which hinted that over lunch she must have been goading him more than usual.

"I come in wearing the apron," he snapped, "because someone around here's got to wear it."

"A hit, my dear Avril. A palpable hit." Renton laughed his deep, amused laugh. "Personally, I think George wears his aprons with great distinction. Also, he cooks better than any man or woman in the Berkshires. That Newburg sauce! That was as genuine a piece of art as any of your books."

Avril, trying to conceal the pique engendered by this praise of her husband, gave a little pursed grimace and made shooing gestures at George.

"Darling, please run along and finish the dishes. Then I'm going to bustle both these sweet men off and scurry away to my little ivory tower and my typewriter."

Suddenly and savagely George hurled the tea towel on the floor.

"I'm darned if I'm washing any more dishes today. If you want them done, do them yourself before you scurry away to your ivory tower."

For the first time since I had known them, the worm had turned. George dropped into a chair and sat there stubbornly. Avril's face was momentarily blank with surprise and shock. Then, making the best of an obvious

defeat, she tossed her auburn hair and let her laughter, a little tinnier than usual, ring out. "Why, you old sulkiness, you! A pill, dear, that's what you need. Some of those teeny-weeny white pills for the liver. Come on, Renton. We'll put him to shame and finish the dishes together in a trice."

She jumped up gaily, holding out her hand to Renton. He took it in his large, smoothly manicured fingers.

"I don't mind doing the dishes." He threw a sardonic glance at George. "But, let the suds fall where they may—no frilly apron!"

As they went out together, George scowled after them. Then he slumped back in his chair, looking suddenly insecure and crest-fallen.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he said with a feeble grin. "I guess I made pretty much of a fool out of myself, didn't I?"

"You think so?"

"I haven't any right to lose my temper like that. So petty. Avril's not like other women. I know that. I can't expect her to be—not with her genius. She must be shielded from all the little mundane things, allowed to expand." He was staring at me earnestly. "But sometimes . . . I mean, sometimes when I see her with other men . . . Oh, I guess it's only human in me, but it's weak, selfish. I should learn to control myself. Of course she has to have other men friends; she has to study other types, understand their psychology."

HE GLANCED down at the frilly apron which still decorated his large lap and half rose.

"Excuse me, Doctor. I guess I'd better get back to the kitchen and finish those dishes. I can't have Avril wasting her precious time."

I was tempted to suggest that he should go back to the kitchen and beat his wife with a rawhide whip. But it was not my function to stir up domestic strife. I merely said:

"Let her finish them. It won't kill her. Sit down and have a rest."

"You think she won't mind?"

"Of course not. She's got Renton out there anyway. She can be understanding his psychology at the same time."

Soon Avril and Renton returned from the kitchen. Avril looked none the worse for a little manual labor. In fact, I suspected she'd had a high time with the dishes. She giggled as she entered and dropped me a mock curtsy, saying:

"Dinner is served, sir."

Then, flashing a smile around, she announced: "Time's up, gentlemen. Little Avril has to get back to her dreadful, demanding typewriter and's going to throw all you men right out. But—wait!" She twisted

around to me. "You've never seen my little snuggery, have you, Doctor—the little nook where I create my dream children? You simply must come up and take a peek."

This, I knew, was intended to be a signal honor, almost a royal command. Feeling vaguely nauseated, I let her loop her arm through mine and guide me up two flights of rickety—"so sweet"—stairs to an attic which stretched the entire length of the house. It had been made over into a huge studio which was much more luxuriously and attractively furnished than the rest of the house. It was obvious that the snuggery had priority on the family budget and that Avril believed in good solid comfort when she gave birth to her dream children.

Pirouetting around me, she exclaimed: "Isn't this a big room for such a little person?" She pointed to a huge mahogany desk by the window. "That's the old workbench, Doctor. That's where I wrote *'Tis Fairy Gold*. . . . And, you know? While I'm lost in my writings, airplanes could come and drop bombs and wipe out the whole village of Skipton and I'd never hear them. So absorbed I get, the silliness."

"Wonderful power of concentration," I said dryly. "I also notice you have a wonderful view of everything that goes on in the village."

"Oh, I don't need windows," she said enigmatically. "Not that kind. What I have to do is to keep open the windows of my soul."

I could think of no reply to that.

"And now, off with you while I lose myself in *Where the Bee Sucks*. No one's going to hear a peep out of me until dinner-time." She started pushing me roguishly toward the door. "I have a Shakespearean title, you know, for all my works. I do hope you like the idea."

"Fine," I said. "What's the next one going to be called? *On a Bat's Back*?"

"Oh, you yesss!" She giggled and laid a tiny birdlike hand on my arm. "Dr. West-

lake, just one thing." Her face was tense with drama. "I wonder if you could do me a little favor?"

"Sure," I said.

"Those silly, silly men downstairs. Do try and pour oil on the troubled waters. It's so goosy of them thinking they have to be rivals and fight over poor little me."

I gulped, muttered something vague, and fled.

Luckily there was no need for oil and no particular indication of any troubled waters. George had left the porch, and Renton Forbes, smoking a cigarette, was waiting for me outside the house. The Forbes mansion was at the east end of the valley, so we started walking home together.

As we left the Raynors', Renton threw an ironical glance over his shoulder.

"That poor guy, George," he said. "If he had just a little more backbone, I'd be sorry for him. Know what he wanted to do?"

"What?"

"Scrub the kitchen floor in expiation for having been unkind to dear, wonderful, talented Avril. I can't understand why he doesn't take a meat ax to her and have done with it. I almost told him so, too."

I said: "I thought you were meant to be a devoted admirer."

"Me?" His laugh boomed out heartily.

"Give me credit, Westlake. Give me credit. I must admit last year she entertained me. I was fascinated in finding out just how preposterous she could be. But now"—he shrugged his perfectly tailored tweed shoulders—"où sont les neiges d'antan?"

He chatted on with amusing malice, and I found him a relief after the neurotic egotisms of the Raynor household. Renton was frankly a philanderer, frankly shiftless about money, but in spite of his charm, he had a ruthless common sense that I found attractive. He was wonderful-looking too, well-groomed and lean as a race horse. I envied

[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.

(Adc.)

the elegant way in which he was strolling into middle age.

The ancient sedan which had brought Rebecca was still parked outside my house, and the sound of uproarious festivity issued from the kitchen.

"Looks like you've got company," said Renton.

I explained Rebecca's return and my reasons for summoning her.

"Very wise," he said soberly. "If I had a kid, I'd have the house surrounded with state troopers. It's bad, isn't it?"

"Bad."

"And with Ernesta away." His old, amused smile returned. "We'll never hear the end of it. Till her dying day, she'll go on saying it would never have happened if she'd been around."

As he went off up the lane, I turned for a final glance at the Raynors' house. I was just in time to see a figure disappear into the drive and catch a glint of platinum hair shining in the sun. Whether the visitor was Caleb or Lorie, I was unable to tell.

IF IT was Caleb, I wondered whether Avril would shoo him away as unceremoniously as she had shooed us.

I was greeted by an excited Dawn, who had seen our approach and came running down the garden path toward me.

"Daddy," she announced breathlessly, "Rebecca's terribly happy to be back and she's lost ten pounds and she's brought a goose so we're going to cook it for supper and a harmonica and a stuffed owl which her cousin Avon killed right near our house in Kenmore. And there are seven cousins in the kitchen, and they're all married to each other which shows how silly Mrs. Bray is, and they're all so jolly and it's so hot and they had such a hot ride from Grovestown and, Daddy, don't you think it would be nice if maybe a little beer . . ."

"Okay, toots," I grinned. "There's a couple of cases in the laundry."

From the racket in the kitchen, I strongly suspected that beer was already flowing free and that Dawn was asking only for the sake of appearances, but I didn't care. I was so relieved at the comfortable sense of security engendered by Rebecca's return that I would gladly have drowned her cousins in beer.

Announcing as an afterthought that Cobb had telephoned and would be out to see me sometime that evening, Dawn rushed back to reassume her role of Hebe to Rebecca's escorts. I did not feel in a party mood myself, so I avoided the kitchen and sought sanctuary in Dr. Stokes's comfortable office. Dawn was right about the day. It was oppressively hot. I took off my coat, loosened my tie, and lay down on the couch. I had

intended to put in some serious thinking about the murders, but before I knew it I was fast asleep.

I slept for almost three hours. The sunlight had a touch of evening softness to it when I awoke, and the relative quiet of the house told me that Rebecca's cousins had departed. A delicious smell of roasting goose stole into the room. I strolled to the kitchen and greeted the beaming Rebecca, who, delighted to be back at work, was bullying Dr. Stokes's gas range into producing a very promising dinner. Dawn, forgetful of her virtuous intention to spare Rebecca from household duties, was seated, legs dangling, on the kitchen table. With one arm she clutched an enormous and evil-looking stuffed owl to her bosom while, with her other hand, she ran a scarlet harmonica back and forth over her lips, manufacturing a succession of wheezy notes.

Rebecca seemed completely incurious about the tragedy that had brought her back to us. To her, obviously, it was nothing more than a fortunate excuse for terminating her unwanted vacation. Her solid, good-humored normalcy was comforting. But I could not enjoy it for long. Rebecca was as temperamental as Avril Lane when it came to her own art of cooking. She could not abide men in her kitchen. Soon I was shooed away with instructions not to dawdle around, getting in folks' way, but to read a good book or something.

Her reference to a good book reminded me of the biography of Charles and Mary Lamb that I had borrowed from Phoebe. I searched the office unsuccessfully for it and realized that I must have left it at the Raynors'. Phoebe was one of those generous people who are surprisingly fussy about borrowed books. I decided I had better go and retrieve it before it got appropriated for the snuggery.

I put on my coat, straightened my tie, and went out into the village street. It was cooler now, and Skipton, with its glimpses of the river through the green, feathery willows, looked deceptively peaceful. I met no one on the short walk to the Raynors'. This was the hour, maniac or no maniac, when the housewives of Skipton withdrew to their kitchens to prepare the evening meal.

There was no sign of life in the Raynor house. I walked up the drive and looked into the screened porch. No one was visible. I tried the door. It was unlatched. I went in, calling:

"Anyone at home?"

No one answered, but from upstairs I could hear the faint tap-tap of Avril's typewriter which told me that *Where the Bee Sucks* was still in progress. Since I saw my book lying where I had left it on the porch table, there

CHAPTER VII

was no point in disturbing genius at the moment of creation.

I picked the book up and was about to leave when a strong, pungent odor trailing from the house arrested me.

Cabbage was my first thought. George must be cooking cabbage for supper.

But, if it was cabbage, it was very old, very moldy cabbage, not at all the sort of vegetable one would expect in the kitchen of George Raynor, that paragon of cooks.

I took a step into the living room. The odor was even stronger here. I started to follow it toward the kitchen. As I did so, I realized suddenly what must be causing it. Most of the houses in Skipton used canned gas for cooking, and canned gas is manufactured in such a way that it gives out a cabbage-like stench when the cylinder is almost empty—a rather crude reminder to the customer that a fresh cylinder is due.

Uneasily I hurried down the short passage which led to the kitchen door. It was closed. I put a handkerchief to my mouth and pulled the door open.

The odor, almost overpoweringly strong, rushed out at me.

I might have been prepared for the sight that confronted me, but I wasn't. Sunlight streamed through the tightly closed windows and the glass panels of the shut back door. It played on the range which stood on the back wall with all four of its jets turned full on.

It also rippled over the body of George Raynor which sprawled on the red-and-white linoleum beside the kitchen table.

He was lying on his back. His arms were flung above his head. The frilly pink apron, which had been twisted askew, foolishly and horribly draped his buttocks.

The gas fumes were lethal. I knew that, of course. But that wasn't the only thing. The sunlight revealed blood and matted hair on the back of George's head, and lying on the floor at his side was a heavy wooden rolling pin.

I rushed to the back door and tugged it open. I ran to the range, snapping off all the jets. But, as I did it, I felt a sensation of futility and despair.

And I thought of Avril's little roguish smile as she said: *They're so goosy thinking they have to be rivals and fight over poor little me.*

I thought of a song, too, and that little jingle in my mind was more frightening than a dozen corpses:

*I'll sing you three-O,
Green grow the rushes-O.
What is your three-O?
Three, three the rivals.
Two, two . . .*



STRUGGLING against nausea, I caught George under the armpits and dragged him out of the kitchen. I closed the door on the fumes. Then I half pulled, half carried him to the fresh air of the porch. For a moment I stood taking great gasps of air. Most of the dizziness left

me. I dropped down at George's side. My sense of futility in the kitchen was justified. The chance that he might be in a deep coma and still living was gone.

He was quite dead.

It was the similarity between this murder and the murder on the mountain last night that doubled the horror of my discovery. The "lily-white" boys hit on the head and left to drown in the pond. The "rival" hit on the head and left to asphyxiate in the gas-filled kitchen. I felt stealing through me the panic which, any minute now, would blaze through the village.

*One is one
And all alone.*

Was "one" the murderer? The lonely murderer consistently but insanely putting into homicide the pattern of the song?

Dimly I was conscious once again of Avril's typewriter still tapping away in the snuggerly upstairs. There was something macabre in the thought of that silly little woman beating out *Where the Bee Sucks* while, all the time, her husband had been lying in the kitchen dying by inches.

As I stood, collecting myself, I heard the click of the garden gate behind me. I turned and, to my acute discomfort, saw my daughter hurrying up the path to the house. I ran out to intercept her before there was a chance of her seeing what lay on the porch.

With more than her usual breathlessness, she announced: "Oh, Daddy, Mr. Cobb's at the house and wants to talk to you, but he says he'll stay for a bite of supper anyway, and the goose is cooked and Rebecca says to come at once—or else."

"I can't make it—not yet. Tell Cobb to come over here right away, will you?"

Dawn's eyes widened. "What ever's the matter?"

"It's Mrs. Raynor," I improvised. "She doesn't feel so hot."

"Oh, pooh, don't waste a perfectly good goose for Mrs. Raynor."

"Sorry," I said. "You and Rebecca had better go ahead and start supper." Seeing

the look of disappointment on her face, I added: "And save some of that goose for Cobb and me. We'll be back later."

Dawn pouted. "I bet Mrs. Raynor isn't really sick. It's just that Caleb's got tired of flirting with her, so she wants to flirt with you." She blinked. "I suppose you need Mr. Cobb as a kind of chaperon. I mean, she can't very well flirt too much when there's a policeman in—"

"Don't be silly," I said. "And scram."

Dawn threw a savage glance in the direction of the house and turned reluctantly away back along the village street.

As I returned to the porch, I noticed that the typewriter had stopped. Light footsteps clicked on the stairs, and Avril's voice, half singing, half humming, trailed down to me:

*"I'll sing you four-O
H'm, h'm, h'm, h'm, h'm.
What is your four-O?
Four for the—"*

The singing broke off and she caroled: "George! Georgie-Porgie!"

She was in the living room now. Had she been almost any other woman in the world, natural sympathy would have been strong enough to make me go to her and break the news as gently as possible. But I didn't feel that way about Avril Lane. I thought that a jolting contact with reality would do her the world of good. The detective in me also was curious as to how she would react.

She came straight onto the porch. The door from the living room was so situated that I was behind her, and the body of her husband, in its pitiful frilly apron, lay directly in her path.

Avril saw it at once and stopped dead. It was then that I learned something interesting about the author of *Where the Bee Sucks*. She did not need an audience. She played a part just as theatrically when she thought she was alone.

Her hand fluttered out toward George. Then she lifted it to her temple in the classic pose for a Sensitive Woman experiencing Emotional Shock. With a little cry that was almost a giggle, she exclaimed:

"He did it. Renton, that rash, rash boy—he did—"

Something must have made her conscious of my presence, for she choked off the end of the sentence and swung round to me. In the first instant, her eyes showed consternation and indignation at having been caught off her guard. But my expression must have been grim enough to drag her out of the realms of fancy, because her face suddenly collapsed. For once all her fictitious girlishness deserted her. She looked nearer fifty than forty.

"Oh, oh," she breathed. Then: "He's—he's dead? George's dead?"

"Murdered," I said.

"Like the White boys. Like the lily-white boys."

THERE was terror in her eyes now, and it looked pretty genuine to me.

"Again," she whispered. "The lily-white boys. The rivals. Three, three the rivals."

She took a clumsy, swaying step toward me. I caught her as her body sagged into a dead faint.

I carried her upstairs to a bedroom and left her on the bed, still unconscious. I had more urgent things to do than to minister to Avril.

I hurried down to the kitchen. The gas was dispersing through the open back door, but I opened all the windows for good measure. I expected Cobb at any minute, and when I returned to the porch I saw his solid figure coming up the drive. I met him halfway to the house and told him what had happened. Grim lines settled around his mouth, but he did not say anything. I took him to the porch. He stared down at George and swore softly under his breath. Cobb isn't a swearing man. I knew then just how hard this second murder had hit him.

"What's the idea of the apron, Westlake?"

"He did the housework. His wife's a writer—too talented and valuable to sully her hands with chores. That type."

He grunted. "And you say it's the gas that killed him, not the blow on the head?"

"Yes."

"How long's he been dead?"

"I can't be exact. About an hour, I'd say."

"And how long would it have taken the gas to kill him?"

"That's impossible to tell offhand. It depends on the size of the room, the amount of ventilation, the concentration of the gas, and any personal idiosyncrasies in George's physical setup. Taking a guess, I'd say anywhere between half an hour and four hours."

"You and Forbes left him here around three, you say. Then he could have been hit with the rolling pin any time between then and about a half-hour ago?"

"You can't get much nearer than that at the moment."

"And the wife was in the house all the time?"

"Up in her office working."

"Doesn't it seem kind of . . .?"

"Not necessarily. Just this afternoon she told me a bomb could drop on Skipton and she wouldn't notice it when she's creating. And the gas is heavy. She wouldn't have smelt it up there."

"I don't exactly mean that, Westlake. What I mean is, this murderer must have known she was in the house. For one thing, he'd

have heard the typewriter. Wasn't he taking a terrific chance killing him slow with gas like that when any minute the missus might be running down from upstairs?"

"There wasn't much risk, and anyone who knew Skipton at all would realize it. Avril spends every afternoon and all of the afternoon beating out her brain children upstairs and never comes down till she's called to supper. I guess everyone in the village knows that."

Cobb grunted again. "Seems kind of funny to me, but then I don't have much experience with literary ladies." His china-blue eyes fixed my face solemnly. "Is there a window up in that office?"

"Yes, looking right down the village street. But the same thing applies there. When she's working, she doesn't look out of the window."

"Then anyone could have walked in here, conked him on the head, and walked out and she wouldn't know?"

"It's possible. Matter of fact, someone did call. I know because I caught a glimpse of them going up the drive just after I left. It was either Lorie Bray or Caleb Stone. I couldn't tell which, but I saw the light blond hair."

"Well, we can check on that easy." Cobb sighed and, throwing a last disgusted glance at George, moved into the living room. He sat down heavily on an insecure-looking armchair and, pulling his old brier pipe out of his pocket, stuck it between his teeth. The pipe is one of Cobb's few eccentricities. He sucks on it most of the day, but during the course of our long friendship I've seen him fill and light it less than half a dozen times.

"You know, Westlake, seems like I'm getting old. Seems like I'm licked on this case before it's almost started. Them two little kids. And now this. No more motive than a chipmunk'd have." He cocked his head at me. "This thing she said, Westlake, when she saw the corpse, this about Renton Forbes doing it. Think there's anything to it?"

"I suppose there just might conceivably be. I doubt it, though. I think she was just having herself a time being the irresistible siren that men fight over. She'd got it into her head Renton and George were rival lovers, and I guess she thought—hoped, rather—that Renton had shown his great love for her by bopping her husband one. I may be wrong, but I don't even think she realized he was dead at first. Just thought he was out cold."

"Rival lovers," brooded Cobb gloomily. "How does that plagued song go? 'Three, three, the rivals.' We got to tie up the two murders, Westlake. Even if this Forbes guy did want to kill Raynor over his wife, why'd he want to kill the kids too? It don't make any sense." He stared down at his big hands

and then looked up again. "You think it's a maniac?"

"How else to explain the song?"

HE WAS back staring at his hands. "The boys just brought in a full report from the village. Almost everyone's alibied up tight at the square dance, excepting a couple of old geezers and a few girls minding their babies. I don't figure on any of them crawl-in' around the woods, listening to songs and killing them two kids. Of course"—he paused—"of course, even though there isn't any report on it, maybe there is a loony hiding up someplace in the mountains, but—" He broke off.

"But you're inclined to think," I said, "that it must be someone who was on that picnic?"

He stared at me. "If you want it straight, Westlake, yes. That's what I think."

"It's almost inconceivable."

He waved at the porch. "That's almost inconceivable too, ain't it?"

"I guess so."

Suddenly he asked: "What's the next thing in the song? How does it go next?"

"Four for the gospel makers," I said.

"Gospel." His blue eyes widened. "Jessup. Old Reverend Jessup. He . . ." A faint flush spread over his cheeks. "For Pete's sake, I'm going nuts myself now. Come on. Let's get out to the kitchen and start to work before we begin writing books like this Avril."

But we didn't get to the kitchen. At that moment the door from the hall opened and Avril herself appeared. I was astonished at the change in her. I had left her on the bed, a disheveled, haggard, middle-aged woman. Now she looked extraordinarily young and chaste. A careful application of dead-white powder emphasized the large, tragic eyes whose luminosity was further aided, I suspected, by mascara. Her auburn hair had been brushed back into a clean, simple knot at the nape of her neck, where it seemed less palpably touched up. She had changed her George Sand work costume too for an austere low-cut dress of unrelieved black which gave generous display to admirably white throat and bosom.

The pose was an unmistakable one. It was meant to convey that, though tragedy had struck, it could not conquer her unquenchable spirit.

"Now that I have had time for reflection," she began, "I realize that poor George, like the White twins met his death at the hands of this terrible scourge which has invaded our quiet community."

Cobb mumbled awkwardly: "Looks that way, ma'am. And, if you feel up to it, there's a few—"

"Wait." She threw out a small hand which

fluttered a tiny lace handkerchief. "Before I answer any questions there is one statement I wish to make, freely and of my own volition."

She paused a moment for histrionic effect. "When I came down from my snuggery and found poor George's body lying there on the porch, I did not, of course, know that he was dead. Nor did I know that Dr. Westlake, who seems deliberately to have concealed himself, was also present."

I felt rather guilty.

"In those first terrible moments," she continued, "I said something concerning Mr. Forbes which was liable to misconstruction, should Dr. Westlake choose to be prejudiced and unfeeling. Mr. Cobb"—here she turned the full battery of her gaze on the inspector—"I am an author, a well-known interpreter of the female psyche. Many men have admired my work, and also"—there was the faintest ghost of her old giggle—"many men have admired, well, myself. I do not deny it.

it might be construed as damaging to myself."

Avril was having herself a field day to the obvious confusion of Cobb.

Groping to sum up the burden of her discourse, he offered: "What you're trying to say, ma'am, is that you didn't really mean to accuse Mr. Forbes of the murder?"

"That is correct." Avril smiled a slight, haunting smile. "You must also understand that I never for a moment thought of Mr. Forbes as the aggressor. He is the gentlest of love-of men, and he would not harm a fly except in self-defense. I would not for the world have my remarks so misconstrued that Mr. Forbes would suffer for it."

She must have decided she had squeezed every squeezable ounce of effect from the point then, because she abandoned it and stood, hands folded in front of her, waiting demurely for Cobb to make the next move.

He asked her all the necessary routine questions, and her answers merely con-

Next Issue: TO WAKE THE DEAD, by John Dickson Carr

My art needs the stimulation of male admiration. A woman does not cease to live—as a woman—just because she has tied herself to one man. Renton Forbes admired me as an author and—yes, as a woman. I am not denying that either. Nor am I denying that my husband did not completely understand the nature of Renton's admiration. He resented it. He regarded all my male friends as his rivals."

She broke off with a little sigh. "The poor darling was jealous. I admit it. Though he never, never had real cause. Today at lunch when Mr. Forbes was a guest, that jealousy o'erbrooked itself. Dr. Westlake was probably conscious that there was—unpleasantness."

She spoke the last word with a query at the end of it, demanding an answer. I nodded.

She went on: "I am sure, therefore, that if Dr. Westlake remembers the situation after lunch, he will realize how natural it was that, with my first glimpse of George, I suspected that the earlier unpleasantness might have translated itself into violence. Poor George was hot-tempered and ever one for fisticuffs when he thought I needed protection. When I saw him there, it occurred to me that there had been fisticuffs between him and Renton and that Renton had been overzealous and oversuccessful in defending himself. That is why I made that involuntary ejaculation. I repeat I had not the faintest notion at the time that George was dead. I am making this statement of my own free will, although

firmed what I had already told Cobb.

"George had no enemies," she concluded. "He was always the perfect husband. No faults, unless you could call it a fault to have loved and cherished his wife too fondly."

Since there was a lot to be done and she showed no signs of wishing the interview to end, I suggested that I take her over to Phoebe's house while the grim business of police routine was being gone through.

She shook her head bravely. "No, no, Dr. Westlake." She drew herself up to her full five feet. "I shall be strong. Leave me alone with my sorrow." She started for the door, glancing back at Cobb. "I shall be up in my snuggery if you need me, Mr. Cobb. I shall not fail you when you want to question me further."

At the door she could not resist a good exit line.

"The publicity," she murmured, turning back. "O God, the awful, soul-searing publicity."

A few minutes later we heard the tap-tap of her typewriter above us. Incredibly, Avril Lane was back at *Where the Bee Sucks*.

Probably, if we had asked her, she would have explained that work was the greatest anodyne in times of trouble. But I suspected that this burst of industry had another, less noble motive behind it.

If *Where the Bee Sucks* could reach its publishers before the awful, soul-searing publicity had died down, Avril Lane at least had a sporting chance of hitting the best-seller list.

CHAPTER VIII



WITH Avril out of the way, Cobb started the official ball rolling. He called Grovestown for his men and for an ambulance from the morgue. I could tell that inwardly he was cursing himself for not having taken greater precautions after the death of the White

twins. There was so much to be done that we decided I would be more useful staying in Skipton than attending to my official coroner functions. I called the city pathologist, warned him grimly there was more work for him to do, and asked him to substitute for me as acting coroner.

Soon Dan Leaf, Cobb's other assistants, and the morgue men arrived and began to scramble through the Raynor house. Like all policemen, they tried to keep up a hard-boiled pose, but it was obvious that this second murder in so many days had them jittery with apprehension and excitement.

Cobb supervised the activities in the kitchen for a while and then drew me into the living room. He was still chewing on his pipe, and his face was graver than I had ever seen it.

"Listen, Westlake, we're not going to be able to keep this quiet—not in a small place. It isn't possible. And when the news breaks, Skipton's going to run head on into a panic."

"You don't have to tell me. It was bad enough this morning."

"There's only one way to stop a panic. Keep 'em busy. And the Lord knows, we're going to need 'em. I've only got a handful of boys to spare, and until it's proved different I'm working on the theory we've got a lunatic here, a lunatic who's going to hit and hit again when he's good and ready. Maybe we've got no real leads right now, but we can at least see that nothing more like this happens. And that's what I'm going to do, Westlake, if I have to have fifty men patrolling the street all night."

His blue eyes fixed mine earnestly. "That's something you can fix. You're almost a resident. You know the folks here. Organize the village. Have all the able-bodied men volunteer for patrol duty tonight. They can work it in shifts." He glanced at his watch. "Eight o'clock. I'll have to go back to Grovestown with the boys and try to stop the D.A. from having a fit. But when I've fixed him, I'll be back. Get them all together in some central place, say by ten. I'll talk to them. But tell 'em first to see that their womenfolk stay home, with all the windows and doors locked. If I'd had the brains of a

skunk, I'd have done all this last night."

"Okay," I said. "How about the Bray house for a meeting place? Even with Mrs. Bray away, the village thinks of it as a sort of focus."

"Anywhere's fine with me. Wait a minute. Better make it ten-thirty. Those friends of yours, Westlake—on the picnic—I'll want to talk to them first. Get them together at ten. Have the posse come at ten-thirty."

"All right."

For a moment he sat reflectively. "Look, Westlake," he said at length, "about this Renton Forbes. Having seen the lady in question, I figure he'd have to be crazy as a jay bird to have killed her husband on account of her. But that's the only halfway lead we've got at the moment. He was on the picnic last night and he was here to lunch this afternoon. I saw him last night, didn't I? Tall, good-looking older guy."

"That's right."

"What about him? Any chance he could be nuts?"

"I'd say he's the sanest of the whole bunch."

"How about him as a murderer, then? I mean, if he was to have a motive we hadn't figured out?"

I thought a moment. "That's kind of a tough one, Cobb. But I'd say he's pretty much of a realist. There's a lot of local tongue wagging about his love life, and he's suspected to be kind of forgetful paying bills. Sure, he might conceivably knock someone off for a good, solid, financial motive. But not for Avril Lane."

Cobb grunted. "How about you having a little talk with him? You've got the time? Nothing official, of course. But he's the only one of 'em we've got anything on, and it's a chance we shouldn't pass up."

"You want me to do it now?"

"Why not?" He grinned suddenly. "You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

"No."

"And Dawn all het up about that goose. Unless you want to break that kid's heart, you'd better go back and grab a bite of goose before you move in on Forbes. You'll need some food anyway. Wouldn't like to say when you'll be eating next."

"How about you? Dawn's expecting you too."

HE SHRUGGED. "She'll have to settle for you. The old woman fixed me something before I left Grovestown anyway. Okay, Westlake. No cause for you sticking around. You've got work to do."

He moved heavily back to the kitchen to see how the investigation was progressing.

It was almost dark when I left the house. With a sinking heart I saw that a little group

of tense men and women had already gathered around the ambulance. They were chattering in excited undertones. In the crowd I caught a glimpse of Violet. She saw me too and called my name. In a second I would have been surrounded, but I quickened my pace and managed to escape. Throwing the news out at random would make things worse rather than better.

The street was deserted between the Raynor's and my house. It is strange how potent one's imagination can be. Normally these soft, gray moments before nightfall cast an extra tranquility over Skipton. But tonight there seemed to me to be something brooding about the wooded hump of the mountains, something foreboding in the pale gleam of the Konapic River.

The little song jiggled in my mind:

*What is your four-O?
Four for the gospel makers.*

The lights were on in my house, making a comfortable glow in the gathering gloom. I had almost reached the gate when I heard my name called from across the street. Love Drummond and the Reverend Jessup were hurrying down the rectory's garden path. They crossed the street to me, Love tall and massive, Dr. Jessup a little black shadow at her side.

"Dr. Westlake." Love put her hand urgently on my arm. "Hilary and I have just driven my poor sister and her husband to Grovestown. There was no room for them in the house except the—the children's room, and Blanche couldn't face the prospect, so we took them to a hotel. And just now, on the way back, we saw the ambulance outside the Raynors'. Irma's down there, and your Violet, and a lot of others, and they're saying . . . Tell us, Just what has really happened?"

I couldn't buck a direct question like that. Grimly I said: "What you think's happened has happened."

THE Reverend Jessup gave a little imploring sigh. Love, her face pale and set, snapped:

"George or Avril?"

"George," I said. "George hit over the head in the kitchen, the gas turned on—dead."

"The rivals!" Love's voice tilted upward. "Three, three the rivals."

I wondered how she had got onto that so quickly. I asked quietly: "What makes you think that?"

Love gave a harsh laugh with no humor in it. "By now you should know me well enough to have discovered I have eyes in my head, Dr. Westlake. Renton was there to

lunch, wasn't he? Ever since last summer I've suspected that Renton and Avril . . . And then, the other day—" She broke off. "Two men and one woman. The rivals."

I said:

"We mustn't jump to conclusions. It might be just a coincidence."

"Coincidence!" Love snorted.

The human mind is so quirkish that I felt the news of this second tragedy was almost pleasurable to Love. Hers was no longer the only house to have been struck. The murderer was a general rather than a personal menace now.

SUDDENLY she gave a little gasp and swung to the silent Reverend Jessup, grabbing his arm.

"Four! 'Four for the gospel makers.' Hilary! The gospel maker—that's got to be you."

In a gentle voice the Reverend Jessup said: "Love, my dear, things are quite terrible enough without inflaming them with foolish fancies."

It was my duty to control rather than increase Skipton's jitteriness, but I wanted to make at least one point.

"You're right, Dr. Jessup," I said. "But I also agree with Love up to a point. It may not be the song, but right now there's no other way of explaining it. You should certainly make sure you take very good care of yourself."

"I am not alarmed." The Reverend Jessup's black figure straightened with dignity. "If the Lord so wishes, no harm will come to me."

I found that Christian resignation rather exasperating, but I was afraid, if I insisted further, that they would realize just how rattled I was. Love started to pour out questions. I checked her by telling them Cobb's desire to have all the picnickers at Lorie's house by ten. I also asked the Reverend Jessup's advice as to a good man to approach to collect the village posse. I had thought of Ray Simpson, a young, solid farmer who lived down the lane a quarter of a mile from the village store. The Reverend Jessup approved my choice.

When it was obvious there was no more to be learned from me Love started to hurry back toward her own cottage.

In a few moments, I knew, telephones would be ringing all over Skipton.

And all over Skipton that little song would soon be worming its way through people's minds:

*I'll sing you four-O,
Green grow the rushes-O.
What is your four-O?
Four for the gospel makers.*

Part 3: four for the gospel makers

CHAPTER IX



I FOUND Dawn and Rebecca, both rather sulky, sitting in the kitchen with dirty dishes piled high in the sink.

"We thought you were never coming," said Dawn.

"If it's all dried out, don't blame me. That's all," said Rebecca.

She bustled around the range and soon produced a large and luscious-looking plate of dinner. I wasn't hungry, but, under the steely glance of two pairs of eyes, I made a pretense of enthusiasm. As soon as possible, I banished Dawn, the stuffed owl, and the harmonica to her room and told Rebecca exactly what had happened. Of all the women I know, Rebecca is the most satisfactory in time of crisis. She listened in complete silence. When I had finished, her eyes gleamed determinedly in her dark, plump face and she announced:

"Ain't nothing to it, Doctor. We're packing right up and we goin' back to Kenmore first thing tomorrow morning."

I explained how it was impossible for me to leave.

"Then me and Dawn leaves. We . . . No." She shrugged resignedly. "Guess that ain't no use, not knowing that child the way we knows her. If I was to watch her twenty-four hours out of a day, she'd be slipping away like an eel, running back to her dad. Okay. So we stay?"

"We stay."

I explained my anxiety for Dawn and begged Rebecca to be doubly careful of her. The warning was quite unnecessary. Rebecca had picked up the knife with which she had carved the goose. She fingered its blade.

"You don't have to worry none about that child. I'll be right there beside her night and day, and if anyone tries any monkey business with her—" She finished her speech with a terrifying brandish of her knife.

I felt much easier in my mind then. In fact, I felt vaguely sorry for any maniac who might happen to try any monkey business around our house.

I telephoned Ray Simpson and told him Cobb's instructions. His flat New England

voice was encouragingly unemotional. Sure, he said, he'd get every able-bodied man—except maybe Charlie Heath, who was expecting a cow to drop a calf that night—gathered together at the Bray house by ten-thirty. I called Lorie then. As I suspected, Love had already broken the news. Phoebe and Caleb were up there with her, she said, and would stay there until ten. Then she was going to spend the night at Phoebe's. She sounded frightened but unexpectedly steady. Skipton, it seemed, was at its best under disaster.

I called Renton Forbes to tell him I was coming around and drove the half mile down the pale, moonlit valley to the Forbes mansion. Renton's mother had been a famous hostess, and in her day the Forbes mansion had been one of the show houses in the Berkshires. Since her death, however, and the dwindling of the Forbes fortune, the house was slowly settling into decay. And Renton, who concerned himself vaguely with Wall Street when he felt in the mood, spent only his summers in Skipton, leading an amiable hand-to-mouth existence with an old couple, inherited from his mother, to take care of him. In spite of its unwieldy size and its gradual disintegration the house was Renton's major passion in life. It was frequently rumored around the village that he was marrying this or that wealthy widow in order to restore the mansion to its past glories. But, so far, Renton seemed to have preferred a life of rakish and haphazard bachelordom.

I drove up the untidy drive and parked in front of the columned porch. The moment Mrs. Moore, the housekeeper, opened the door I could tell from her pale, uneasy face that the news of George's death had preceded me. Mrs. Moore led me into the huge living room, which still had a shabby splendor of its own. Renton Forbes, very spruce in riding breeches and Harris tweed jacket, came toward me.

"Phoebe just called and told me," he said. "I rode over to spend the afternoon in Beldon Falls with the Rosses, and they invited me to dinner. I just got back five minutes ago, and Phoebe was on the wire. Sit down. Mary, be an angel and bring us something to drink—if there is anything."

We sat down on a slightly tarnished gold brocade sofa. Mrs. Moore bustled out and returned with a tray, glasses, and a half-empty bottle of rye. Renton poured drinks for both of us.

His lean, handsome face was grim. "What can you say? You can say it's bad, terrible, ghastly. But that doesn't mean anything. There's only one thing I really feel. I just don't honestly believe it. I've known Skipton all my life—a poky little place stuck away in a corner of Massachusetts where nothing

ever happens except maybe the woodchucks mess up old Lily Steele's truck patch." He handed me a drink. "And George of all people, that poor, harmless guy broken on the butterfly's wheel." He smiled faintly, then the smile went. "Phoebe says the policeman wants us all up at the Bray house at ten and that they're going to organize a patrol in the village."

I nodded.

He glanced at me then, his eyebrows tilted ironically upward. "Phoebe says you're the policeman's kind of unofficial Boswell?"

"I'm glad you didn't say Watson. They usually do."

"I'm a suspicious man, Westlake. I've been figuring out why you picked me for your social visit. This couldn't be police business, could it?"

RENTON wasn't the sort of man with whom it paid to be cagey. I told him exactly why I had come, neither magnifying nor minimizing Cobb's degree of suspicion. The whole thing, I explained, was really based on Avril's theatrical utterance when she saw the body.

I had expected him to be amused, but he wasn't. If anything, he looked rather angry.

"Jealous lover kills husband of inamorata? Is that what the inspector thinks?"

"He has to toy with the idea anyway."

"What about you?" His shrewd eyes fixed my face. "You know me. Do you think I'd bump off George—and, I suppose, those poor little White kids too—so that I could settle down to solid married bliss with Avril?"

"Frankly," I said, "no."

He grinned, a quick, infectious grin. But his face sobered again and he gave a resigned sigh.

"Well, I suppose it's all got to come out. I brought it on myself anyway. Even in my youth, my mother used to say I was an irresponsible, loose-living profligate and that I would end up biting the dust. I suppose the inspector will want a clear, accurate account of my relations with Mabel. Do you mind if I call her Mabel instead of Avril, by the way? It's her real name, you know, and somehow I think it's much more suitable."

"Go ahead," I said.

"Looking back, I don't really understand how I got into it. Sometimes I even frighten myself. But last summer I did drift into a sordid and quite unattractive dalliance with Mabel. She was so preposterous she must have appealed to some perverted nerve end or other. Besides, she's quite a neat little piece carnally. And, of course, the relationship was strictly carnal. Mabel tried to tie the little pink bows all over it, but then Mabel's a pink-bowed girl."

He was staring down at his glass reminiscently. "By the way, I'm delighted to be telling you this rather than a policeman with a notebook. I'm sure the notebook would be outraged and scream 'Cad!' But then, I guess I was quite a cad about the whole thing. By last September the very name Mabel gave me the mild shudders, but Mabel's pink ribbons can turn into tentacles, and she clung on through the winter. I'd even get little notes on violet paper with quotations from the works of Shakespeare and Avril Lane lavishly sprinkled around. I don't think poor George was a particularly torrid husband, and Mabel's hot-blooded enough to know a good thing when she sees it and to cling on like mad."

He grinned up at me. "That's about all there is to that unsavory little item. This year, we still had an occasional tête-à-tête, usually in extreme discomfort up at the saw-mill, but I've been trying to taper her off. Matter of fact, I've been rather hopeful recently that she's transferring to young Caleb. In any case, I imagine you've heard enough to see that there's a lot of things I'd rather do than kill off her husband and have her on my hands." He paused. "I suppose the inspector will want to know about my movements too. He can check with the Rosses. I started off for Beldon Falls right after we left the Raynors' together. I imagine that gives me some sort of alibi."

"I imagine it does," I said.

His face suddenly darkened. "One thing more. And it's quite important. Don't twist what I told you around into figuring that Mabel was crazy to marry me and bumped George off herself. She didn't want to marry me. I was her idea of the perfect quote lover unquote. And George was her idea of the perfect husband to have, to hold, and to double-cross. He did all the work around the house; he thought she was a genius, which was nice too. And, what was nicest of all, he suffered and had a pain behind his eyes. There's nothing Mabel favors more than a husband who suffers with a pain behind his eyes because his irresistible wife is pestered by men, men, men."

Though not exactly friendly, that seemed to be a fairly exact word picture of Avril Lane.

Renton got up and started to pace the faded rose carpet.

"Matter of fact, Westlake, I'm holding out on you. I'm holding out on the most important thing of all." He turned, watching me quizzically. "If I told you something, could you be discreet about it? Oh, tell your policeman. I don't mind that. But think you could keep it from Love and all the other old quacking ducks?"

"I should think so."

"Under the circumstances, it's almost funny. I think it'll amuse your policeman. You see, if he was a smart policeman, he might figure I was just putting on an act about Mabel—pretending I thought she was a horror while secretly I was mad for her and had murdered her wretched husband in a moment of overwhelming passion. Well, when he hears the truth about me, I don't think he's going to worry along those lines, because, you see"—he threw out his hands—"there's a white rabbit in my top hat. Nothing on earth could ever induce me to marry Mabel, because I happen to have a perfectly good wife of my own."

I was enough of a Skiptonite to stare in astonishment.

"Yes," he said. "I am a husband. I might almost say I am a bridegroom. I have been married for about three months to a charming woman—a woman I've been devoted to for years."

"But where is she? Have you got her locked up in the West Wing like the mad wife in *Jane Eyre*?"

He grinned. "I'd like to see anyone try and lock my wife up in anything. No, she's in New York at the moment, doing a million and one things in her usual whirlwind way. She's nuts about this house, for example, and she's scurrying around after interior decorators to have it all fixed over. That's one of the things she's doing. But the most important thing is her visit to an obst—whatever you call a baby doctor. You see, I'm not only a husband and a bridegroom, I'm making headway toward being a father too."

The truth was beginning to come to me. "You don't mean you're . . .?"

His grin broadened. "Exactly, Westlake. Three months ago in a simple ceremony in a charming Old World registry office in Hartford, Connecticut, I was married to Ernesta Bray."

CHAPTER X



A MARRIAGE between Ernesta and Renton had been favored by the village gossips for some time, but the news that it had actually taken place was a shock.

I asked: "Does anyone know?"

"No one. Not even Lorie. We were planning

to announce it next month and confront everyone with a *fait accompli*."

But why the secrecy?"

"We both had our reasons. With Ernesta

it was Lorie. That's all quite private, and it's not my position to give details. But Ernesta felt very strongly that it was better for Lorie to keep her in the dark until we all leave Skipton next month. Ernesta has plans for a winter for the three of us in Mexico. She was banking on telling Lorie then. Heaven knows now, of course, what's going to happen."

He paused with a rueful smile. "It was Ernesta's original idea to keep the marriage quiet awhile, but it suited me fine too. Maybe you can guess why?"

"Avril?" I hazarded.

"Exactly. Ernesta's quite old-fashioned about sex, you know. I don't hold it against her. Thank God she is. But if she found out that I'd been intimate—as I believe the expression is—with Mabel Raynor during the period when I was supposed to have been the chaste suitor, Ernesta would have thrown several thousand fits. And I couldn't trust Mabel, with her flair for the dramatic. She's got as strong a possessive instinct as Ernesta, even for things she doesn't legally possess. If the marriage had been announced ahead of time in Skipton, Heaven knows what Mabel wouldn't have done. That's why I've welcomed these three months. They've given me a chance to taper Mabel off. I've been hoping her eye would rove elsewhere, so that when the news of the marriage finally breaks, she'll do nothing worse than put on a mild renunciation act and give us the collected works of Avril Lane in vellum for a wedding present."

He finished his drink in a gulp. "Now, with these murders, with Mabel a widow, God knows what I'm going to have on my hands, but as I said before, I brought it on myself." He grinned at me. "I expect you're thinking: What a heel! Right?"

"Love Drummond might, I guess." I grinned back. "What I'm thinking mostly is: What a jam!"

"You can see why I'm not exactly eager to have the village know about the marriage?"

"Definitely."

"And you'll do what you can to keep it quiet? Keep both things quiet, I mean. The marriage to Ernesta and the carryings-on with Mabel?"

"I'll do what I can. I imagine Cobb will too, because one thing's emerged quite clearly from this discussion."

"What's that?"

"Under the circumstances, you'd have to be crazier than ten lunatics to have killed Avril Lane's husband. Cobb'll see that, and he won't have any interest in exposing the details of your love life. He's only concerned with the murderer."

"Well, that's a relief."

I still had a little rye in my glass. I raised it to him. "Incidentally, let me be the first to congratulate the bridegroom."

His handsome face flushed with almost boyish pleasure. "Thanks, Westlake. I never thought an old tired roué like me would settle down with a wife, but I have, and I'm damn proud of her. The village will say I married her for her money, of course. I'm resigned to that. Matter of fact, it's much closer the truth that Ernesta married me for this house. She's batty about it. She has the most grandiose schemes of restoring its former glories and being the hostess to end all hostesses. She's deeding her own house to Lorie. That's something else she's attending to in New York right now. Another dark secret, incidentally. She made out to Lorie and Phoebe that the trip was purely for shopping and picking up her jade from Tiffany's."

He hesitated. "By the way, while we're on the subject of Ernesta's doings in New York, how about this baby?"

"What do you mean, how about it?"

"Well, you're a doctor. I'm kind of scared. I mean, isn't Ernesta a little on the old side?"

"How old is she?"

"Forty-seven. You know her. She takes everything in her stride. She just laughs at me and says that women her age often have babies with no more effort than falling off a log, but I mean—can it be dangerous?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "I can't imagine a little thing like a baby fazing Ernesta anyway. She's quite sure it's true, is she?"

"Well, I guess so. She saw the doctor yesterday; and I got a letter this morning. Here." He pulled an envelope out of his pocket, produced a letter, and sat down next to me, holding the letter out for me to read. "Is he a good man? I want to be sure she's doing the right thing. Here, this paragraph in the middle."

I read in Ernesta's bold, familiar writing:

"Went to Dr. Delacroix this morning and he took an Ascheim-Zondek among a million other things. He'll let me know the results as soon as possible. My physical condition is perfect and he says there's no real danger in spite of my advanced age! Isn't that wonderful, darling? Of course I'll have to be careful. You'll have to see to that. By the way, much more exciting, I found the most divine material for the dining-room drapes. At least, I think it is. I'm sending up swatches. Be sure to tell me what you think. And if you don't like them, be frank, because after all it is your house. . . ."

I said: "Not much to worry about, I'd say. Delacroix's one of the best obstetricians in

New York. The Ascheim-Zondek's the routine pregnancy test. If he says it's okay, it's okay."

"That's the best news I've had in days." He poured himself a little straight rye and raised his glass. "How about drinking to the coming Forbes?"

I did.

I HE GLANCED at his watch. "My God, Westlake, here we've been yammering about my sex life and it's almost ten. We'd better get going."

"I can drive you down in my car."

"About the murders," Renton's face was grave again. "There's nothing like woman trouble to keep your mind off the business in hand. Does the inspector have any lead?"

"Only to you."

"Seriously. I mean, that crazy link-up with Lorie's song—does he really think there may be something in that?"

Oddly enough that interview, exposing as it had so many unflattering sidelights on Renton's moral character, had made me like and trust him more than I had before. But it wasn't up to me to tell anybody what Inspector Cobb was thinking.

I said: "You'll be seeing him. Ask him yourself."

"A cagey Boswell, eh?"

"Or a dumb one."

Renton called Mrs. Moore and gave her a short spiel on the need for keeping the house locked and the inadvisability of either her or her husband going wandering out into the night. Mrs. Moore's face told me that the warning was quite superfluous. Telling her to expect him when she saw him, Renton followed me out to my car.

As we drove through the moonlit valley to the Bray house, he said: "Matter of fact, I'm still worried about Ernesta, Westlake. She's due back tomorrow. This is hardly the atmosphere for an expectant mother, is it? I was wondering if maybe I could send her a wire, cook up some story to keep her in New York awhile."

"You could try," I said, "but I doubt whether you'd get anywhere with it. After the second murder, you can be sure the New York newspapers will pick this up and, if I know Ernesta, nothing's going to keep her away when she hears there's a maniac running hog-wild in her Skipton."

"I guess you're right," Renton sighed. "Matrimony is making me old-maidish. Ernesta's always been able to take care of herself and a couple of dozen other people at the same time. She probably can still."

We reached the Bray house a few minutes after ten, and all the other members of the picnic party were already assembled in

Ernesta's frivolous living room. The news of the second tragedy seemed to have engulfed them in a mood of passive fatalism, and they reminded me of a flock of sheep huddled together helplessly at the approach of a wolf or some less palpable menace. Lorie and Caleb, young and towheaded, sat together on a large couch. Caleb was scowling, his arms folded across his chest. Lorie was nervously fingering a thin, evil-looking paper knife with an ornately carved steel handle. Love Drummond and the Reverend Jessup, side by side in stiff chairs, looked grim and uneasy. To my surprise, I saw that even Avril was present. She had changed her dress again and, while still in black, was wearing a flowing, more austere model which suggested the wife of a Roman senator or a figure on a piece of Grecian pottery. She sat with her hand in Phoebe's and her eyes cast down in Stoic grief.

Lorie had obviously abandoned any pretense of acting hostess. It was Phoebe who rose to greet us, her gypsy eyes bright and strained.

"It's such a relief to see you," she whispered. "I can't do anything with them. They're all sunk in gloom."

Avril lifted her eyes and threw Renton a glance loaded with suffering and courage. Carefully avoiding her, he chose a seat at the other end of the room. I sat down with Phoebe.

As I did so, the Reverend Jessup rose to his feet. Beneath the bulging, intellectual forehead, his face had assumed the solemnity of expression which he used in the pulpit before beginning his sermons. I could tell he had prepared a speech and had been waiting until we were all assembled to deliver it.

"Before the police arrive," he announced, "I wish to make a statement. I understand that the village is to organize a patrol tonight to insure our physical safety, but I feel that in this, Skipton's darkest hour, we should also be mindful of our spiritual security.

There is One to whom we can turn in all tribulation, however dark the road, and I intend to spend the night in the church praying for His guidance. Should any of you wish to join me in prayer for the welfare of our community, there is no need to remind you that you can find no safer place of refuge than under God's roof."

Dr. Jessup's sentiments, though admirably Christian, did little if anything to ease the tension. In fact, silence settled on the gathering like a collapsed tent, and no one spoke until the door opened on Cobb, accompanied by Dan Leaf. The inspector looked pale, tired, and rather rattled. I had been wondering whether he would let these people know that all the evidence at the moment pointed to the murderer's being one of them. He didn't. He merely gave a brief speech, addressing them as the most responsible members of the community and pointing out that it was their duty to do all they could to avert a panic.

WHEN he had finished, his blue eyes surveyed the room carefully and he asked:

"There's one thing in particular I want to know right now. Did any of you go over to the Raynors' house any time this afternoon? Or did any of you see anyone else go?"

I glanced at Caleb and Lorie, wondering what I should do if neither of them said anything. But I didn't have to worry, for Caleb, staring belligerently back at Cobb, said:

"I went over. Around three-thirty, I guess."

"And you saw George Raynor?"

Caleb shook his head. "I didn't see anyone. I was bored; thought I might get someone to join me in a walk to Hurst Pond. I went onto the porch. I heard Miss Lane's typewriter upstairs. I didn't want to disturb her, so I left and walked over to Hurst Pond myself."

[Turn page]

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

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Cobb asked quietly: "Then you made no effort to find George Raynor?"

"No." Caleb flushed. "Matter of fact, George wasn't much of a walker. I'd really been hoping that Avril—Miss Lane—" He broke off.

"I see," said Cobb. "And you didn't smell gas, I suppose?"

"I certainly did not."

Cobb seemed satisfied. His gaze roaming again, he asked: "Anyone else?"

Lorie had been playing agitatedly with the paper knife while Caleb was talking. Now, without looking at him, she blurted:

"Yes. I went over. It must have been about four. The same thing happened. I mean, I heard Avril's typewriter. I didn't want to disturb her—so I went away."

"You didn't look for Mr. Raynor either?"

"No, no. That is . . ." Lorie stammered. "You see, I really went over to see if Caleb was there. I . . . I just thought he might be there."

She reached across Caleb, took one of Ernesta's fancy Russian cigarettes out of a

stationed regularly at two-hundred-yard intervals and was to walk his beat with whatever rustic weapon he had at hand.

When Dan Leaf and Ray Simpson picked up sides, I noticed that Caleb had been selected for the first shift. As the other men hurried off to their cars, Caleb, with a stiff, unconvincing swagger, strode after them. I was anxious about him. I followed, caught up with him on the terrace, and drew him aside.

"You think it's sensible for you to go?" I asked.

"Sensible?" He turned on me, his dark eyes hostile. "Why the hell not?"

"You know as well as I do. It'll be dark out there—and lonely. With this thing you picked up in the Pacific, you—"

"My God, you'd think I was a nut or something. Sure, I told you I'm scared of the dark. And it's true. At least it was true. Maybe I still am—sometimes." He laughed harshly. "But what you expect me to do? Sit home and hold my own hand? It'd look good, wouldn't it—Skipton's lone war hero

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crystal box and lit it. I suppose she was trying to look at her ease. It was pathetically unconvincing.

Obviously both Lorie and Caleb had had an opportunity to kill George, but it was equally obvious that anyone else could have slipped into the Raynor house without being seen.

Cobb must have realized this, for he carried the matter no further, merely inquiring if anyone present had anything to offer that could have any conceivable bearing on either murder. I noticed that Love turned sharply and caught the inspector's eye. But if she had intended to speak, she changed her mind and remained silent. No one else uttered a sound.

In a few minutes the able-bodied men of the village started to shuffle awkwardly in under the solemn leadership of Ray Simpson. Soon I counted twenty of them, and they were all, of course, men I knew at least by sight. Their solid, unimaginative faces were reassuring.

The organization of the patrol turned out to be a simple affair. Cobb divided the men into two shifts. The first, under Dan Leaf and Renton Forbes, was to go on duty at once. The second, under Ray Simpson and myself, was to relieve the first shift at four o'clock and remain on duty until morning. Since virtually all of Skipton concentrated around the single main street, it was easy to provide an efficient guard. A man was to be

cowering at home while all the goddam civilians go out searching a maniac?"

I didn't argue any more. I could tell from his eyes that he was terrified at the thought of a lonely vigil on a dark road. But I could also tell that his pride would torture him if he didn't take his part with the rest of them. I grinned and patted his arm.

"Okay," I said. "Maybe it's the best cure there is anyway. When you're thrown from a horse, you get up and ride. When you're scared of the dark—"

"—you go out into it." Caleb stared past the huddle of cars across the moonlit valley and shivered. "Cold." He turned up the collar of his jacket. "Well, Doctor, wish me good hunting."

"Good hunting."

"And don't tell the others. Don't even tell Mother." His young face was bleak with pleading. "Promise."

"Promise."

He laughed again, a laugh that was meant to be cynical. "If the inspector heard this, he'd probably think I was the murderer. A gibbering lunatic running amok in the dark murdering little boys and writers' husbands. Oh no, George was killed in the daytime, wasn't he? It won't fit. Too bad. Hey, Perry!" He hailed one of the farmers who was climbing into his jalopy. "Take me down, will you? Mother'll need my car."

Without looking back at me, he ran off the terrace and jumped into the moving car.

CHAPTER XI



AS I MOVED back onto the terrace, the tall, heavy-hipped figure of Love Drummond emerged from the living room and came toward me.

"Dr. Westlake," behind the shell-rimmed glasses, her eyes gleamed purposefully—"I've been tracking you down.

There's something I've decided you should know."

"What is it, Love?"

"You'll probably say I'm a nosy old spinster poking around in other people's business, and of course you'll be right. But at least give me credit for not bringing it out in front of her. I was sorely tempted to when the inspector asked if anyone knew anything, but I controlled myself. Hilary would say I struggled with the Devil and won. Anyway, I didn't make a scene, and I've decided to tell you in confidence—and then you can tell the policeman in confidence if you think it's something he ought to know."

"You mean it's something about the murders?"

"Not exactly. I mean, it doesn't in any way explain the awful thing that happened to Bobby and Billy. But—about poor George." She hesitated and then moved a little closer. "This evening, when you broke the news to Hilary and me, I hinted, Dr. Westlake. It's about that frightful Avril and—and Renton.

"We all know Renton, of course, and love him," said Love. "I mean, even Ernesta must know that he's—well, quite a devil with the ladies. And, since Hilary's not within hearing, I'll admit that I don't see why a bachelor shouldn't have a little fun once in a while. But with Avril—"

"You think there's something between them?" I put in.

"I don't think, my dear. I know. I'm on the same party line as the Raynors. And it just happened that last week I picked up the receiver to call Carl at the store for some beetroots when"—she sniffed—"I heard Avril's voice on the wire. I heard her giggle and say: 'Friday, then. I'll slip away when George is doing the supper dishes. Eight-thirty—at the sawmill.' And then Renton answered. I'm sure it was Renton. And he said: 'Okay. I'll be there.' Of course, I hung up immediately and didn't hear anything else, but . . ."

"But—what, Love?" I asked. "Are you trying to say you think Avril and Renton killed George so's they could marry?"

Love seemed flustered. "Now, now, I certainly said nothing of the sort. It's just that I thought you should know. After all, we all of us know that little woman is a preposterous sham, but I never realized that she was actually deceiving her husband behind his back and—"

"Okay, Love." I patted her arm. "I'll think about it. If I think it's necessary, I'll tell Cobb."

"He probably knows anyway, because I'm almost sure someone else was listening on the party wire too." A faint smile moved Love's thin lips. "You can't imagine how much better I feel, coming out with it. I didn't really think it was my duty to tell, of course. It was sheer spite, my dear, nothing but spite. Don't tell Hilary, but when you're old and unmarried like me, indulging your spite is the most attractive pastime I know—better even than a nice, juicy steak."

At that moment the Reverend Jessup came somberly out of the living room and joined us, announcing that he was going to drive Love home. When I saw him, the little goading song in my mind started up with "Four for the gospel makers." I felt a sudden impulse to forbid him from carrying out his praiseworthy plan of spending a night of prayer in the church. Then I decided that, with the patrol, he would be just as safe there as in the rectory. To make doubly sure, however, I caught Dan Leaf just before he left and told him to be certain to post a man outside the church.

When I returned to the living room, only Cobb, Phoebe, and Lorie were left. Those villagers who were not on the first shift had gone home to catch some sleep before their turn came at four o'clock. Lorie, who was spending the night with Phoebe, was moving around, turning out lights.

Soon the house was locked and in darkness. Phoebe and Lorie drove off in Caleb's car, and I took Cobb down the hill in mine. His own car was parked outside the Community House, and he was not staying for the vigil. There was too much to be done in Grovestown.

"Well, Westlake," he grunted, "if anything happens tonight, the D.A. can't blame me. The village'll be crawling with representatives of the law. How's it coming with you? Get anything out of Forbes?"

I told him everything I had learned from Renton. He groaned when he heard the news of his marriage to Ernesta.

"There's that motive knocked on the head." He sucked at his unfilled pipe. "Motive. What'm I jabberin' about motives for? There ain't no motive. Just a lunatic."

"Who's crazy about a song?"

"Yeah. Maybe it's the guy who wrote it,

Westlake. Maybe he's trying to boost it onto the Hit Parade." Cobb turned to glance at me from the wheel. "I've asked you this before and I'm asking you now and I'll be asking you a dozen more times before I'm through. Which one of your pals could be nuts? This Forbes seems to be out. And that writin' woman's too smart a fake to be a loony. What about the others? That Stone boy, he's just outta the Marines, isn't he? A medical discharge, they tell me down in the village."

"Yes," I said with some caution. "He has or had some mild form of battle psychosis. But so did thousands of other ex-service-men. That doesn't prove he's homicidal."

COBB grunted. "What about that Lorie Bray? Seems like a quiet, mousy little thing. Sometimes the quiet ones—" He broke off. "What's the use, Westlake? You beat your brains out and you're back where you started from. The murderer's nuts, the suspects aren't. The suspects are nuts, the murderer isn't. Oh heck, there's my car. Let me off and get some sleep. You gotta be on the ball at four o'clock."

Leaf and Renton had got the patrol off to an efficient start. I was flagged, stopped, and checked on as I drove the two or so hundred yards from the Community House to my own home. And, as I parked the car, I could see the shadowy figure of another watcher patrolling silently to the left of the house. Normally, by this time Skipton on a Sunday would have been lonely as a wood. There was something eerie about the thought of those grim, shadowy vigilantes guarding the village from a peril as real as a man-eating tiger but far more incalculable.

My house was in darkness except for the porch light which Rebecca had left burning. I snapped it out and tiptoed upstairs. Before going to my own room, I tried the handle of Dawn's door. I wanted to make sure she was safely asleep. The door opened less than six inches and then hit an obstruction. Instantly Rebecca's voice growled an ominous: "Who's that?" and I caught the dull gleam of steel in the moonlight. Rebecca had dragged her bed into my daughter's room and had turned herself into a living barricade.

"It's okay, Rebecca," I said. "It's only me."

She gave a discontented grunt. I felt she was disappointed that I was not a legitimate candidate for the carving knife.

In my own room, I set the alarm for quarter of four, undressed, and dropped wearily into bed. During the day I had been too busy for the song to plague me much. But now as I lay exhausted in the dim moonlight, it started up again. The haunting melody nagged me, and the words, so sim-

ple and yet so cryptic, scurried through my mind like mice in the wainscot.

Two, two the lily-white boys, clothed all in green-O. Six for the six proud walkers. Nine for the nine bright shiners. Five for the symbols at your door, and four for the gospel makers.

Who really were the lily-white boys? Who were the six proud walkers? What were the symbols at your door?

Four for the gospel makers.

As I lay there, drifting into an uneasy sleep, I wondered suddenly if there was someone else in Skipton, lying just as I was lying, with that obsessive tune and those obsessive words running through his head—but running in a different way, a tantalizing, goading way, urging him to go out, to go out and . . . kill.

I fell asleep.

The metallic bray of the alarm clock awakened me into pitch darkness. The moon had set. Yawning, confused, I bundled out of bed and started groping for my clothes before I remembered what it was the clock had awakened me for. I found the bedside lamp and turned it on. The clock hands showed a quarter to four. I remembered then, of course. As I hurried into my clothes, I shivered slightly. That was partly because the small hours are cold in Skipton even at midsummer. It was partly too because the song still lingered from my dreams and somewhere deep inside me was still pounding:

Green grow the rushes-O.

Fully dressed, I picked up the flashlight I had placed beside the bed and, moving quietly down the stairs, opened the front door. There was no hint of dawn in the sky; no sign of the silent patrol; and no light anywhere except a dim flicker from the windows of the church immediately in front of me.

That quivering light seemed ominous until I remembered that Dr. Jessup was at his orisons.

I hurried down the garden path and out into the street. My ears, quicker now, picked up faint sounds of life. I could hear heavy footsteps moving regularly to my left. To my right, somewhere close to the Community House, I heard a gruff male voice that sounded like Dan Leaf's calling out. Yes, the patrol was on the job all right.

We had arranged for the second shift to congregate at the Community House, where Ray Simpson and I would give each individual his beat. Then we were to relieve the first shift. I turned right in the darkness and started toward the Community House. I had deliberately given myself an extra quarter

hour. It was too early yet to expect the other men from my shift. And yet the darkness immediately surrounding me seemed disturbingly vacant. I had asked Leaf particularly to put a close guard on the church, and yet there seemed no one near me.

DIMLY anxious, I paused and then turned back, crossing the street, toward the church. The subdued light trembled from behind the plain glass windows as if it were coming from candles.

I reached the church steps. I took one step up and then stopped dead in my tracks, my pulses pounding. For, suddenly, from the needle-sharp steeple above me came the brazen jangle of the church bell.

That the bell should ring at all at that hour of the night was fantastic. But it was worse than that. For there was none of the sedate, measured rhythm that marks the regular summons to pray. The notes tumbled out, a long boom, then scattered fragments of sound as if someone with ever weakening strength was tugging desperately at the rope. Then, in what seemed like only the fraction of a minute, the crazy pealing stopped and there was nothing but a faint humming in the air.

As I paused there, momentarily, on the church steps, Skipton suddenly came alive. The darkness behind me, silent a second before, was bubbling with voices and the sound of running feet. Lights flashed on in houses down the street. An icy fear clutching my heart, I ran up the steps to the church door and pulled it open. In front of me stretched the austere interior of the New England church. Candles burned at the altar. My eyes flashed for a glimpse of the Reverend Jessup. I could not see him.

As I ran down the aisle, people began to pour into the church behind me. Dan Leaf caught up with me, and then Renton Forbes, followed by a group of panting farmers. We reached the altar. No one was there.

It was Leaf who saw the thing first. His eyes dropped to the floor, and suddenly he had clutched my arm.

"Look," he whispered. "Look."

I had seen it too, and my skin shivered with goose flesh. From the altar, leading to the left past the front pews, was a thin erratic trickle of red on the bare tiles of the floor—a thin, red trickle of blood.

"Renton," I shouted over my shoulder, "keep them back. Keep everyone back."

I nodded to Dan Leaf. While an awful silence settled on the little band of people behind us, we moved down the aisle to the left, treading delicately to avoid the spatter of blood. A dusty red curtain, half draped up, hung in front of us. I knew that it screened the belfry.

Leaf and I ducked under the curtain. We were in a small, dark passage. Ahead of us was the base of the bell tower. I turned on my flashlight and threw the beam forward.

I had known what we would see, of course. I had known it as certainly as if I had followed each one of those stumbling footsteps from the altar to the bell rope which must have held out a slender chance of bringing help in time.

The rope hung starkly down from the shadows above. It was still swaying. And—what was most horrible—the Reverend Jessup's thin white hands were still clutched feebly around its end.

But there was no longer any conscious purpose in that clutching. Dr. Jessup lay in a crumpled heap on the cold stone floor. His head, lolling forward, had come to rest against his thigh. The profile shone white and gaunt against the clerical black serge. His eyes were open, and their expression of glazed astonishment was almost unendurable.

But it was only too understandable.

For, thrusting out from his back, gleamed the metal handle of a knife which had been plunged deep into his body beneath the left shoulder blade.

I handed Leaf the flashlight and ran to the minister, dropping down at his side. An examination wasn't really necessary. I had known he was dead from the first moment I had seen him.

But I felt his limp wrist and, as I did so, the faint hum from the steeple above seemed diabolically like a human voice humming, very softly:

Four for the gospel makers . . .

Part 4: five for the symbols at your door

CHAPTER XII



IT WAS going on in spite of all our precautions. That was the first thought that stayed with me, bringing a sense of hopelessness and despair. The song had started to sing itself in blood. We couldn't stop it.

As I crouched at Dr. Jessup's side, my distracted gaze settled on the handle of the knife which thrust out from his back. I hadn't thought about the knife before except

in a general way as the weapon that had committed this latest and most horrible crime. But, as I looked at that ornately carved steel handle, I recognized it at once. It was the paper knife with which Lorie had been playing up at the Bray house that evening.

I stared at it with bleak incredulity because it meant so much. My threadbare hope that, after all, there might be some unknown, alien maniac hidden in the hills was rent to tatters. It had to be one of us now. And, unless one of the farmers from the patrol had stolen the knife, which seemed unlikely in the extreme, Cobb's suspicions had been made a certainty. Skipton's insane murderer was one of those pleasant, everyday people who had for years been attending Ernesta Bray's Saturday night picnics.

Dan Leaf's voice, hoarse with shock, came through my uneasy thoughts:

"Dead, Doc?"

I glanced up. Cobb's assistant was hovering behind me, a lock of dark hair flopping over his forehead.

"Yes," I said. "Only just, though. He must have been stabbed at the altar. He managed to drag himself here to ring the bell. It was his one chance of attracting attention."

"While he was prayin'!" Leaf's handsome young country face was scrawled with disgust and awe. "Stabbin' a minister while he's prayin' at the altar." He paused. "And it must of been someone he knew, someone he wasn't scared of, or he'd have hollered when he come in the church."

Someone he knew.

With the anger of frustration, I said: "Why in God's name didn't you do what I told you to do, Dan? You had a dozen men. Why couldn't you have posted one outside the church?"

His jaw dropped. "But I did, Dr. Westlake. What d'you think I am? You ordered a man at the church. I put a man at the church. Wasn't he on—?"

I cut in: "Who did you pick?"

"I put a good man there special. The best of the lot. That young kid's just out of the Marines. Mrs. Stone's son."

"Caleb?" I said with a sinking heart.

"Why, sure. I—"

"Never mind." I got up, feeling suddenly weary. "It doesn't matter. Sure, he was probably on duty. But we need more than men on duty here. We need an archangel or something."

I became conscious ~~was~~ of the confused murmur of voices in the body of the church beyond the curtain. The whole patrol must be out there by now. Something had to be done about them.

I turned to Leaf.

"Call Cobb," I said. "God knows what he can do when he comes, but call him. I'll get the second patrol organized." I laughed. "It's locking the stable door after the horse has gone—and a broken door too. But that seems to be the smartest thing we can think up."

Leaf was still staring down at the Reverend Jessup. He shivered.

"Him," he said. "Anyone to notify? Any family?"

"No," I said. "No one. He's all alone. 'One is one and all alone and . . .'"

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

I pushed the curtain back, and we stepped into the church. The group of farmers in denims and mackinaws, respectfully clutching their hats in their hands, shuffled in the main aisle behind the straight figure of Renton, who barred the way to the altar. The guttering candles at the altar threw a macabre, shadow-blurred light. I noticed that Caleb wasn't among the group. I hadn't expected him to be, of course. I prayed the others hadn't noticed his absence. As a doctor, I felt Caleb was my charge.

Renton, his cheeks gaunt in the candlelight, stared straight at us.

"Well?" he said.

I nodded briefly and addressed the whole group.

"Don't blame yourselves," I said. "I guess you all did as much as anyone can be expected to do. This thing is just too big for us."

Bill Dusen, one of the hands at the Heath farm, stared at me, gaping. "He ain't dead, Doc?"

"Yes," I said. "He's dead."

A rumble of indignant comment rose. I noticed the tall figure of Ray Simpson at the back of the group.

I called: "Ray, where's the men for the second shift?"

"Right here, most of 'em, Doc. We heard the racket. We—"

"Then, for Pete's sake, get them out of here to their stations. You want another murder on our hands?"

"We didn't—"

"Never mind. Just get them organized right away, that's all. You'll have to boss them alone, Ray. I've got work to do."

"Yes, sir."

Shouting: "Hey, Mac. An' you, George. Bill, too," Ray Simpson collected his men from the group and hurried them out of the church.

I put my hand on Leaf's arm.

"Run along and call Cobb. When you've got him, come back and stay guard here."

"Sure, Doc."

HE ALMOST ran out of the church as if it had become a place of horror to him.

Renton was talking to the men of the first patrol. "You'd better get home, boys, and catch a little sleep. Most of you'll have to be up in a couple of hours for the milking anyway."

As the men trooped out, leaving us alone, Renton turned to me quickly. He looked older than I had ever seen him. All the jauntiness was gone.

"You meant that, Westlake?"

"See for yourself."

I took him past the curtain. I shone the flashlight on the belfry.

"Stabbed in the back," I said. Then slowly: "Stabbed with the paper knife Lorie was fiddling with up at the Bray house this evening."

"Ernesta's paper knife." He stared at the body and then brought his eyes to mine. "Then that means—one of us?"

"Looks that way."

"But . . ." The sentence seemed too much for him. He let it peter out. Then, angrily, he said: "What in heck happened to Dan Leaf? I let him run the patrol. I thought it was more tactful, his being Cobb's assistant. He put me on the beat up beyond the Community House in front of Thorpe's. Why in hell didn't he station someone here?"

"He did."

"He did? Then who . . . ?"

"Caleb," I said.

"Caleb?" His face was blank. "But where in hell was he? He didn't come into the church."

I switched off the flashlight and turned back through the curtain. Renton followed me.

I said: "Keep this quiet. If you can keep it quiet. I don't want to get the kid into trouble. Know what he was hospitalized for before they discharged him from the Marines?"

"Why, no. Haven't any idea."

"Fear of the dark. He picked it up in the last days of Okinawa. Quite a common battle psychosis, I believe. It's a delayed thing from the terrific strain of that Pacific darkness alive with silent, crawling Japs."

Renton's eyes showed understanding and a flicker of pity. "So the poor kid couldn't take it. He got scared? He had to run home?"

"Looks that way. I'm going to talk to him now. I warned him against joining the patrol. It didn't do any good. He's got a lot of spunk, that kid—and pride."

"And, because of his pride, Dr. Jessup ends up with a knife in his back," said Renton quietly.

"I know. I know. That's what everyone's going to say. That's why I'm asking you to

keep it to yourself—at least until it has to come out."

Some of the old banter gleamed for a moment in Renton's eyes. "What's the setup, Westlake? Got a crush on the kid?"

"Yes," I said. "I've got a crush on him because he's done a lot of brave things and he's taken a terrible beating and I'm not going to have him driven into a nuthouse by a lot of loose village gossip."

"Nuthouse," murmured Renton. "That inspector of yours is looking for a nut, isn't he?"

"Everyone's going to say that too."

"But you don't believe it?"

"I don't know what I believe yet. If I think he's guilty, I'm not going to stand up for him. If I don't think he's guilty, I'm not going to let him be hounded. He'll have enough on his conscience as it is when he hears what's happened."

He patted my arm. "You're quite a guy, Westlake. I like you."

He grinned. I grinned back palely.

"Stay here, will you?" I asked. "Until Leaf comes back. Then you'd better get some sleep yourself."

"I could do with it, I guess. It's been a busy day, hasn't it? Church in the morning, murder after lunch, ride to Beldon Falls in the afternoon, murder after dinner." He shrugged. "Okay, Westlake. You run along and hold Caleb's hand. And, when Leaf gets back, you won't see me for dust—sleepy dust, as Mabel would say."

Men were calling to one another in the dark street. Lights were still on in most of the houses. I could imagine the frightened conversation in cold kitchens as the farmers returned with the news to their wives. I could imagine the creeping dread, too, for those Skiptonites who had had no men on the patrol and who had been forbidden out of their houses. Horror had changed the very face of the village, making four o'clock in the morning into a lighted carnival of death.

The lights were burning in Phoebe's living room. That wasn't surprising. The church bell would have aroused Phoebe and Lorie as it had aroused the rest of Skipton.

I climbed the two steps to the dark front door and rang the buzzer. Footsteps sounded inside almost immediately, and then Phoebe's voice called tentatively:

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Hugh Westlake."

A CHAIN clanked free and the door opened inward. Phoebe was fully dressed. She was wearing the old flowered frock which she used for gardening. It brought back familiar, peaceful associations of summer teas on the lawn and baskets full

of wilting weeds. It reminded me of the way Skipton had once been.

"Come in. Come in." Phoebe's eyes were gimlet-bright. She looked like a plump, anxious little mouse. "What on earth was the bell? A signal? A signal for the new patrol to take over?"

I stepped into the hall. Phoebe started to close the door. As she did so, I happened to glance at its outside surface. I saw something I had never noticed before. In a semi-circle across the top panels, someone had carved a chain of crudely executed ornaments that looked like signs of the Zodiac.

Instantly, with an aptness that made my heart pound, the song started up again in my mind.

*I'll sing you five-O,
Green grow the rushes-O.
What is your five-O?
Five for the symbols at your door.*

Phoebe, glancing at me curiously, said: "Haven't you noticed them before? Caleb carved them when he was a kid. He used to be awfully clever at things like that. I wish he'd get interested again."

She shut the door.

"The bell woke me. I had to dress and come down. I made Lorie stay upstairs. She needs her sleep. But there's a fire. I made a fire."

I said: I've come to see Caleb, Phoebe. He's back, isn't he?"

"Why, yes. Didn't the policeman tell you? He came home about an hour ago. He had a terrible headache, he said. The policeman sent him home."

"He's upstairs then?"

"Yes. In his room. But—why do you want to see him?"

"Just something."

Phoebe made a little grab for my sleeve. "Hugh, something hasn't happened?"

I tried to smile. "I'll let you know in a couple of minutes. When I've seen Caleb. You wouldn't be a sweetheart and make some coffee, would you?"

"Of course. Why, of course."

Phoebe stared after me, her black eyes widening with dread, as I hurried up the stairs.

I knew the Stone house almost as well as I knew my own. I turned down the passage, pleasantly cluttered with articles abandoned from the rooms downstairs, and came to a halt outside the door of Caleb's bedroom. Light seeped out from under the door.

I knocked, called: "Caleb" and turned the handle. The door was locked.

"Caleb," I called again. "Hey, let me in."

For a moment there was no sound from the room. Then Caleb's voice thick and un-

certain, called:

"Is that you, Doctor?"

"Yes," I said. "I've got to talk to you."

He unlocked the door then and let me in, closing the door again behind me. He'd brought his drawing board and his map of Skipton up from downstairs. He must have been working on it furiously, trying to keep his mind off his thoughts.

He looked gaunt and young. The gold tan of the atabrine made his skin look brittle, and there were dark smudges under his eyes almost as if he had been crying.

"So you found out?" He was still trying to be defiant. That was his way, I knew. The more he despised himself, the more he put on the swagger. "Come to gloat, I suppose. Come to say: I told you so."

I shook my head. The simplicity of the gesture seemed too much for him. All the aggressiveness went. His face crumpled, and the haunted terror came into his eyes because there was nothing now to control it.

"I tried, Doctor," he said huskily. "I swear to God I tried."

"I know you did, Caleb."

"The light in the chuch—it helped at first. I kept watching it all the time. I kept saying: There's a light. It's only Skipton. There's a light in the church. Dr. Jessup's in there, praying. There's nothing to be scared—" A sob, harsh and wrenching, welled up. "It came suddenly, Doctor. It hit me. And when it comes it's worse than a nightmare. It's as if everything, the darkness, is alive, crawling with life, crawling all over me like lice. I can't think. I can't . . . I just started to run. I got home. I knew I had to tell Mother something. I said I had a headache. I said the policeman had excused me. He didn't. I didn't see the policeman. I didn't see anyone. I didn't ask anyone. It was a lie. I've even got to lie to my own mother, make things up, pretend. I've even got to lie—"

I PUT my arm on his shoulder. I said: "You'll be all right. It won't last. It'll get less and less. Then it'll go."

"You think so?" He looked up hopelessly. "That's what they said at the hospital. It'll get less and less, they said."

"It will."

"Don't tell them." His hand was gripping fiercely into my arm. "Please don't tell them. Don't let it get around the village."

I steered him to the bed and got him to sit down. I lit a cigarette for him and handed it to him. He took it automatically, like a baby taking a proffered rattle.

I said: "Hold onto yourself, Caleb. This is going to take a lot of guts."

He looked up blankly through the blue smoke.

"Okay?" I asked.

"Okay—what?"

"To hear what you're going to hear."

That jolted him back into control. He sat up straight.

"Hear what?"

I said: "It's got to come out, Caleb. And I think you'll be better off when it does. It's this keeping it to yourself that's killing you. Your mother, the village, everyone's got to know you ran out on the patrol tonight. And they'd better know the real reason. I'll tell them. I'll put it the right way. They'll understand. They've got to."

He was clenching his teeth as if I had him naked on a rack, turning the wrenches. "Why, Doctor? Why?"

"You were on duty outside the church, Caleb. The Reverend Jessup got killed—stabbed in the back at the altar."

He got up unsteadily. His hand ran across his silver blond hair as if he had to touch himself to prove that everything was still real.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" I asked.

He didn't seem to hear that question. "Killed!" he echoed. "Jessup got killed after I quit, after—" His hand dropped down to cover his eyes. "I did it then. I'm responsible. I ran away and I'm responsible."

"Shut up," I said. "You're not responsible—not unless you killed him. Tell me. Did you kill him?"

"No." The word burst out of him in a sudden upsurge of fury. It wasn't fury against me. It was fury against himself. "Christ, no. I never killed him."

"Then you see what we're up against, don't you? You were on duty outside the church. Jessup was killed. You went off. The whole village is going to talk unless they know why you went off."

"What does it matter?" He sank down again on the bed, his arms dropping listlessly to his sides. "Let 'em think it. I'm as bad as a murderer, anyway. I'm a coward, a goddam sneaking, sniveling little coward."

I crossed so that I was standing directly in front of him. "Listen," I said, "it's about time you got this straight. You were in the war. You fought. You got injured. Some boys got blinded. Some boys lost an arm. Some boys got a bellyful of shell fragments. It hit you in the nerves. Can't you see it's all the same thing? You've nothing more to be ashamed of than any of those other kids with no arms and legs. You've nothing more to be ashamed of and you're a darn sight luckier, because you're going to get well. You're a coward, yes, but only for one thing. For keeping it hidden inside you as if it were something repulsive—instead of coming right out and saying: 'This is what the war did to me. So—what?' Okay, you fouled things up tonight. So admit it and

tell the world why it happened, and once you've faced that out, you can laugh at the dark."

He listened in silence, but I could tell he was taking in what I said. When I was through, there was a flicker of hope in his eyes.

"You think it can work out that way?"

"It's the only way."

"Okay." He stared down at the golden hairs on the backs of his hands. "Want me to go down right now and spill it to Mother?"

"That's the boy." I put my hand on his hair. "No need to rush things. Cobb will be talking to you tomorrow. Might as well begin with Cobb. Now stop worrying about it. Do something." I glanced at the half-completed map on the drawing board. "Work on your map awhile. It'll calm you down. By the way, what's it for?"

"The map?" He looked up. "Oh, it's nothing. I like fooling around with maps. Aunt Ernesta asked me to make it for her. She's nuts about hiking, you know. She doesn't really need it. She knows every track and path around Skipton. I guess she only asked for it to give me something to do that would keep me out of trouble."

He laughed. It wasn't his usual, jerky laugh. It had much more stability to it.

"Keep me out of trouble. That's good, isn't it? Gets me to make a map to keep me out of trouble."

CHAPTER XIII



PHOEBE was waiting for me in the living room. She had built up the fire, and coffee was ready. In the Stone house even the unearthly hour of five o'clock in the morning seemed amiable. Phoebe poured coffee for me, and I dropped into a squeaky old wicker chair which somehow managed to be more comfortable than the most upholstered of Ernesta's sofas.

Phoebe squatted on a stool at my feet, her small feet in their dilapidated garden shoes pointed toward the fire.

"I want terribly to be flippant," she said. "I want to say something very funny and laugh. Or even something not so very funny. But I can't. Doctors are supposed to have poker faces. You don't. Tell me what's happened, Hugh. Let's get it over."

I didn't mention Caleb's part, but I told her everything else. As I talked, she seemed to shrink into herself like a leaf curling up in a fire. Her face seemed to have shrunk too when she turned to me, and something about her reminded me of Caleb, the same

hurt, lost look, the same defiant tilt of the chin.

"Hilary! Poor Hilary! He asked me to stand vigil with him in the church. I thought how cold and uncomfortable it would be and refused. I've never been very holy, you know." She shivered. "If I'd gone with him, I might have saved him."

"Or been number five," I said.

"Number five." Her quick eyes flashed to mine. "Five for the symbols at your door." I see now why you were staring at Caleb's carvings."

"You'd better not take any chances."

"Huh, you really thinks it's the song?"

"Think! What else can it be? The lily-white boys, the rivals, the gospel maker."

"And the knife—Ernesta's paper knife. It proves it was one of us?"

"Almost for certain."

"One of my close friends. Someone I know better than I know you."

I thought she was going to add that she couldn't believe it, but she didn't. I had finished my coffee. I reached for the percolator and poured myself another cup. I never thought about formalities in Phoebe's house.

I said: "You're the smartest person in Skipton, Phoebe. Tell me your slant. Have you had any suspicions?"

"Of course. Lots of them. You know me. I enjoy thinking horrible things about my friends." She sighed. "None of my ideas makes any sense though."

"Tell me anyway."

"You'll think I have a deplorable mind."

"I know that anyway."

I smiled at her. She smiled back palely.

"All right. If you really want to know. At first I thought it was Love. When the twins died, I mean. Of course Love's my best friend. That proves what sort of a mind I've got. But it had to be someone. And Love suffered the torments of hell from Bobby and Billy. Oh, it's strained, I know, to suspect a woman of killing two little children because they brought mud into the house and broke her china. But that cottage is Love's obsession. She puts newspapers on the carpets when the sun shines. She'll get up in the middle of the night when she thinks that maybe she didn't dust one of the Staffordshire dogs on the mantel. And even with George . . . Love's very prudish about sex, almost as bad as Ernesta. With much more justification, because she never had any, poor dear. She suspected Avril of having an affair with Renton. I know that, because she told me. She despised George, too, for being a complacent husband. I thought it was just conceivable that . . . But now, with Hilary dead, it cuts Love out completely. She was terribly fond of Hilary, and she's a terribly orthodox churchwoman. Love killing Hilary

in front of the altar! Oh, the whole theory was preposterous anyway."

"What else?" I asked.

"Everything else is just as preposterous."

"Even so."

"Well, I thought of Renton. If Renton had wanted Avril and George had stood in the way. I think Renton would have killed George without turning a hair—provided there was a sporting chance of his getting away with it. That's one of Renton's main attractions. He gives the impression of being ruthless, reckless. But then he didn't want Avril. I know that. The only woman around here that interests him is Ernesta, worse luck. I had designs on him once myself."

She took a cigarette from the pack I had thrown on the table, something she rarely did.

She lit it, puffing intently as if she were afraid it would go out.

"And then, of course, Renton wouldn't have been too squeamish to kill the White twins if there'd been a good solid motive, if they'd been his wards or something and he'd insured them. But they weren't his wards. And when you get to Hilary . . ." She gestured with the cigarette. "Renton couldn't have killed Hilary. Oh, the sacrilege of it, the Thomas à Becket at the altar, that wouldn't have worried him. But Hilary was the only person in Skipton who played chess, and Renton has a passion for chess. They played together every Tuesday night. You know that."

"Okay," I said. "No Love. No Renton. Then—who?"

"Avril?" Phoebe stared rather balefully into the fire. "I left Avril till last because I've always disliked her and I want it to be her, which means I'm prejudiced. I can't really think of a case against her, though. Of course, she'd do anything to get the spotlight. You know how Ernesta always snubs her and keeps her down. With Ernesta away, she might have run amok. She just adores being the tragic widow. You saw her playing it tonight. And I wouldn't put it past her to have killed George just to boost her next book. But why should she kill the White twins and Hilary? There's no limelight in that for her. Besides, she'd never have carried the twins into the duckpond and got her little twinkling feet wet. I'm sure Avril would never get her feet wet, not even while she was committing murder, unless there was a big, strong man to kiss them and make them well." She sighed again. "It's no use, is it? I'm being facetious and unattractive and I'm not even being useful. Nothing fits."

"Nothing fits," I said, "because you're trying to find sane motives. A maniac doesn't have to have a motive—except an insane urge

to kill, an insane fixation on an ancient, creepy song."

IT SEEMED to me that her small body suddenly stiffened.

I said: "That's all Cobb's working on now. A maniac. He'll be searching into everyone's past, trying to trace insanity in the family. Not that it proves much, but it's a clue. Phoebe, maybe you could help on that. You've lived here most of your life."

She turned to me very slowly. "He's going to do that? Trace people's families back?" I nodded.

Her face was shockingly pale. The cigarette burned close to her fingers.

"I knew it would have to come," she said.

Startled, I said: "What come?"

"I thought you'd guessed at lunch yesterday. I was frightened. I tried to stop you. Oh, it's not because of the murders. It's because we've kept it secret so long—Ernesta and I, all of us. When you keep a secret for so long, you begin to think you're safe and that it's never, never going to come out."

Her eyes moved upward and settled with stricken intensity on the portrait of the girl in gray which hung above the mantel. I remembered then the strange awkwardness that had settled on the family group when I had asked polite questions about Phoebe's mother. I also remembered the ghastly hush which had followed Dawn's silly remark about Mary Lamb.

"She was a wonderful woman, Hugh. Brilliant, beautiful. Everyone worshiped her. No one ever dreamed. Oh, she used to have terrible headaches. Ever since Ernesta and I can remember, she'd have her headaches and go to bed. But everyone else had headaches. It didn't seem—strange. And then, suddenly, it came. Mother was forty-seven, just Ernesta's age. Ernesta and I weren't married then. Mother was in bed with a headache. Father took her supper up to her. And there was a terrible scream. Ernesta and I ran up. Father was stumbling out of Mother's room. There was blood streaming over his sleeve. She had stabbed him in the arm, tried to kill him. And it was Mother who was screaming. She screamed for an hour without stopping. She was quite mad."

Phoebe buried her face in her hands. There was something infinitely pathetic about that childish gesture contrasted with the untidy gray hair.

"Father wouldn't send her away at first. He did everything, everything. But it was hopeless. She was diabolically clever at stealing knives, anything sharp. And it was Father she attacked always, and she loved him. She'd always loved him. There was nothing we could do. Father took her to a place upstate in New York that was supposed

to be good. It broke his heart, and he died soon after. Mother's never recovered. She's been there thirty years. And it's just the same today."

In a choked little voice, she added: "We never let anyone know. People know she's alive. Maybe Love—some of them—suspect, but we've tried so hard."

I put my hand over her small cold one. She gave a little sob.

"That's why I'm so afraid," she whispered. "When Caleb came home, when he seemed so different . . . he'd never tell me what was the matter, what had happened to him in the Marines. I never dared think, hardly. But it gnaws and gnaws like a rat." She swung round, her eyes suddenly fierce. "But he didn't do these things, Hugh. Believe me. A mother knows. I know, I know, I know. He didn't do these things."

"I believe it." I took both her hands and drew her around to face me. "I know what's the matter with Caleb. I won't tell you, because he's going to tell you himself. It is something of the mind, yes. But it's something that happened to hundreds of other soldiers. It's an occupational malady. It has nothing to do with insanity—hereditary or otherwise. And it'll go."

"Something of the mind?" she repeated the one phrase that tormented her.

"You mustn't worry, Phoebe. He'll tell you. You'll know." Quietly I added: "Does he know about your mother?"

Phoebe shook her head dully. "Ernesta and I knew we would have to tell the children sometimes, but when he went away to the Marines, he seemed so young. I put it off. And now that he's home, I . . . I haven't dared."

"But Lorie knows?"

"Ernesta told her. Only a few weeks ago. I don't know whether she did the right thing. She asked me first. We argued. I was against it. But she did. You see, there's a complication."

"A complication."

"Caleb and Lorie." She wasn't trying to keep up a pretense in front of me now, and her haunted eyes gave me a glimpse into what she must have been suffering all this time while she had played, so perfectly, the role of the caustic, carefree dispenser of tea and local gossip. "They're in love, Hugh. They've been in love since they were old enough to know what love was. Oh, they're difficult, stubborn, both of them. Half the time you'd think they were hating each other instead of loving each other. But I've always known. So has Ernesta."

SHE reached for an old coat that lay on one of the wicker chairs and threw it around her shoulders as if she were cold.

"I don't know—about heredity, I mean. I don't think anyone knows really. I've read books. I've asked people. But I still don't know. Neither does Ernesta, but Ernesta makes up her mind anyway, and she made up her mind that it would be too dangerous ever for Lorie and Caleb to marry each other. They were safe enough if they married into new blood—look at Ernesta and me. But marrying each other—" she broke off. "Ernesta made up her mind anyway, and there's nothing on earth can change Ernesta's mind. When Lorie and Caleb were young, it didn't matter, but now with Caleb back from the wars and Lorie more crazy about him than ever—"

"Ernesta told her to keep her from marrying Caleb?" I asked.

She nodded, a small weary nod. "I don't mind myself. If they love each other, I think that's the only important thing. I think it's worth risking anything for. But Ernesta's so heartlessly practical. She was terrible with Lorie, terrible. She not only told Lorie the truth; she told her—oh, that she'd do awful things if Lorie did marry him."

"Like disinheriting her?"

"No. She can't do that. Lorie is to have money of her own. But . . . but she said she would break with her forever. She was only doing it to be kind, of course. She desperately wants to save Lorie. That's all she's thinking of. The memory of that day with Mother, it haunts Ernesta. It's with her all the time. It's worse with her than with me. If Lorie and Caleb were to marry and had a child that . . . It would kill Ernesta. That's why she was so brutal. And to Lorie, Ernesta's God, of course; she's never done anything Ernesta didn't want her to do—never."

I was beginning to see so many things now. I understood why Ernesta was so eager to keep her marriage to Renton secret. She was terrified that, if Lorie knew, it might prove an incentive for her to break the maternal apron strings and marry Caleb in defiance. I saw Lorie and Caleb in a different and tragic light too. Two kids in love with each other, one fighting against it because the mother she worshiped had warned her that love meant insanity; the other, eaten up with a sense of his own cowardice, feeling himself unworthy of the girl he loved and even flirting with the preposterous Avril so that Lorie could see just how unworthy he was.

Quietly Phoebe said: "You can tell the inspector, of course. He'd find out anyway."

"Sure," I said.

"Hugh, when he knows, do you suppose he'll . . . ?"

"Suspect you, Caleb, and Lorie? I guess he'll have to suspect you, won't he?"

"Caleb and Lorie aren't doing it," she said.

I didn't answer. Her hand came out quick-

ly, taking my sleeve.

"Hugh, as a doctor, you don't really believe that, do you? I mean that just because they have a maternal grandmother who—"

"No," I said. "I don't hold much store by heredity from maternal grandmothers."

Her whole little face brightened. "You really mean that?"

"I really mean it."

"Then . . . then who . . . ?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know."

I got up, moved to the fire, and kicked the smoldering logs into flame.

"There's only one thing in my brain right now—one goddam, frightening phrase."

"What's that?" asked Phoebe.

"Five for the symbols at your door."

CHAPTER XIV



WHILE we were talking, the windows framed by their faded rose drapes had paled from black through gray into opalescence. I had dimly noticed the approach of dawn, but the first feeble ray of sunshine splashing across the carpet took me by surprise. The night-

mare Sunday had slipped imperceptibly into a Monday of doubtful promise.

I had spent too much time at the Stones'. Cobb would have arrived at the church and would be looking for me. Later there would be the inquest on the White twins. Probably the inquest on George Raynor too. I had a morning ahead of me all right.

I was promising Phoebe that I would keep her posted when Lorie came in. Ernesta's daughter was wearing a smoky-blue suit with a white blouse. Like all the clothes her mother insisted on her wearing, it belonged with the sort of country scenes fashion photographers build in studios rather than with the rough-and-tumble reality of Skipton. Her hair, pale as the morning sunlight, fell softly to her shoulders. Her delicately angled face was pale too and unapproachable.

She darted me a quick glance and murmured a low good morning. Then she said to Phoebe: "I don't think Caleb slept at all. His light's still on."

Phoebe said: "You're up rather early yourself, aren't you, dear?"

"I've got to get home." Lorie's lips tightened with determination, as if she knew what she was going to say would be challenged and was preparing herself for attack. "Mother's coming back today. I'll have to get everything ready."

"You've got three servants up there, dear. I should imagine they can get everything

ready. At least you can stay for breakfast."

"No, thank you, Aunt Phoebe." The determination was stubbornness now. "You know Mother. She's driving up. She may arrive any time. I've got to be there to let her know what's—what's happened. She can't just hear it from anyone."

Almost crossly Phoebe said: "You should have done what I suggested and called her last night. At least she would have been prepared."

"I told you. It would only have worried her. There wasn't anything she could have done."

I was surprised to hear it had been Phoebe who had suggested calling Ernesta and Lorie who had vetoed it. Normally the positions would have been reversed, Lorie, with her fantastical dependence on Ernesta, mad keen to call her mother, and Phoebe calming her down.

Lorie dropped into a wicker chair, stretching her thin hands out to the fire. The light from the flames emphasized the geometric planes of her face. I thought I could see a kind of creeping dread in her eyes. It was understandable enough. The poor kid had more than her share of horror to contend with.

Without looking at me, she asked: "Why did the church bell ring, Dr. Westlake? Was it the signal for the second shift of the patrol?"

Phoebe glanced at me quickly. I shrugged. The shrug was meant to convey that Lorie might as well hear from me as wait a couple of minutes and hear a garbled version from the servants in Ernesta's house.

I said: "It was worse than that, Lorie."

"Worse?" Her hands, still stretched to the flames, were shaking, but she still didn't look up. In a very small voice, she said: "You mean it did happen, don't you? That's what I've been thinking about, lying upstairs in bed. It did happen—to Dr. Jessup?"

"It happened," I said.

"The gospel maker." Her voice was dry as

ashes now. "The lily-white boys, the rivals, the gospel maker."

Suddenly she dropped her face into her hands. If she had sobbed it would have been better. She didn't. She just sat hunched there, absolutely still, as if she were made of wood.

I went to her and put my hand on her rigid shoulder.

"It's tough for all of us. It's no worse for you."

Phoebe, absurdly but humanly practical, said: "You'd better stop for breakfast, dear."

Lorie didn't seem to hear either of us. After a moment she dropped her hands to her sides. She got up like an automaton. In a prim, little-girl tone, she said:

"I shall have to go now, Aunt Phoebe. Thank you for letting me spend the night."

I said: "I'll walk you up to the house."

She didn't pay any attention.

Phoebe said: "You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Aunt."

She started for the door. Phoebe said: "Go with her, Hugh."

I nodded and followed Lorie out into the hall. She flipped the chain out of its socket, opened the door, and stepped out into the August morning sunshine.

ERNESTA'S drive went right up the mountain to our left. We did not have to go into the main street, so I could not tell whether the patrol was still on duty. For a few moments we walked side by side in complete isolation from each other.

It was painful to see Lorie walking as if her heart were frozen. She worried me more than Caleb did. Caleb at least let his hatred and disgust for himself burst out in bitter self-accusation. Lorie was the little Spartan girl with the fox gnawing at her vitals.

Trying to jolt my way through to her, I said: "Phoebe told me about your grandmother. It has to come out now, you know."

[Turn page]

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The inspector will have to be told."

"I expect he will," said Lorie.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it. With one generation skipped, any hereditary taint is fairly remote. Your mother takes it much too seriously. You mustn't let her scare you."

Lorie shuddered. It was as if she had trodden on a snake. "Mother?" she said.

"Phoebe told me why Ernesta let you know about your grandmother. If you ask me, that's a lot of hokey. You're not crazy and you're not going to have crazy children—even if you do marry Caleb."

It was a pretty drastic thing to say, and I was all too conscious of the fact that I was meddling in affairs that did not concern me, but, as a doctor, I knew that icy film of fear had to be broken somehow.

I did get an emotional reaction, but it wasn't the one I expected. She started to tremble. In a little choking voice she said: "Leave me alone, will you? Just leave me alone."

"I wouldn't worry about Caleb, either. He loves you. If he hasn't been showing it, it's because he's as much of a coward as you are. He has his little pet fears locked up in a private box with red velvet lining just the way you do. But I hope and pray he's going to have enough guts to unlock the box. And, as for his feeble pretense with Avril Lane—"

"Shut up." She swung around on me savagely. Her eyes were blazing with a desperation that seemed rooted in some horror deeper even than the horrors I knew about. "You don't have to tell me how Caleb feels. You don't have to tell me whether I'm crazy or not. You don't have to tell me about Mother and—"

She broke off. Plunging forward on her too fancy shoes, she started to run away from me up the drive to the house.

I didn't follow her. For better or worse, I had fulfilled my function. But I didn't understand, either, and, because I didn't understand, I worried.

I was too tired and distracted to worry for long, however. The responsibilities of the morning started to pour in on me. Cobb—I would have to find Cobb. I hurried down the Bray drive and out onto the main road.

The patrol was still on duty. At least those of the men who did not have early morning farm chores to attend to. On my way to the church I passed two men, sleepily and glumly walking their beat. It must have been a thankless task, patrolling when already the patrol had been found to be so pitifully inadequate.

Cobb was in the church. Dr. Jessup's body had been taken away. No one was with the inspector except Dan Leaf, who looked half dead in his tracks from lack of sleep.

"No fingerprints in the Raynor kitchen,"

the inspector grunted. "Nothing on the knife. No clues here. Just like the murderer was a ghost."

"Don't let it get you down, Cobb."

"Down? Couldn't be downer than I was to begin with, Westlake. What in the name of glory happened to young Stone?"

"I'll tell you that later. Right now you'd better come over to my house and get some breakfast. There's nothing more to do here, is there?"

"Guess not. Maybe I could do with a bite to eat at that. Dan needs something too."

I said: "Dan looks right now as if it's a bed he wants. There's plenty of them at my house, Dan."

He grinned weakly. "Thanks, Doc. But I'll be okay after some coffee."

The three of us moved out of the church and down the steps to the street. As we did so, I saw Dawn, accompanied by a large, defiant-looking Rebecca, going up the street in the direction of our house. Both of them clutched a bottle of milk to their bosoms.

Dawn saw us and ran excitedly across the street to us.

"Hello, Daddy. Hello, Inspector. Hello, Mr. Leaf. I had it all planned to get up terribly early and fix breakfast for Rebecca like I said I would, only Rebecca happened to be sleeping in my room too and she won't tell me why except to say she was lonely, which is funny because she was never lonely in Kenmore and anyway she woke up too and we found the Heaths hadn't delivered the milk so we went and got it and . . ."

The sentence collapsed through lack of breath.

Cobb grinned at her and said: "Well, you're going to have company. Dan and me's been invited to breakfast."

MY DAUGHTER said politely: "Oh, that will be very nice." And then: "I was going to make hot cakes but, I mean—well, maybe Rebecca makes them better than I do and . . ."

We crossed the street to join Rebecca, who had been standing massively still like a large black monolith.

"Mornin', Mr. Cobb," she said.

"Morning, Rebecca."

Rebecca darkly indicated Dawn, who was running unconcernedly ahead. "She don't know nothin', Mr. Cobb. So don't you open up with any fancy talk in front of the child."

"Okay," said Cobb.

Dawn came running back then and trotted at my side, chattering, as the five of us made our way toward our house. I was too busy with my thoughts to pay her much attention.

As we reached our garden gate, I was vaguely conscious of her saying: "And she'll be madder'n a hornet when she finds out."

You know how she always is, so fussy, polishing things and dusting things all the time."

"I guess she is," I said automatically.

Dawn looked up at me. "Then you saw them too, Daddy?"

"Saw what?"

"What I've been talking about," said my daughter, faintly pained.

"What have you been talking about?"

"About the things on Miss Drummond's front door."

"What things?"

"The things—the sort of drawings."

I stopped dead. So did Cobb and Dan Leaf. We all three stared at her.

"What sort of drawings, Dawn?"

Now that she had so obviously attracted our attention, Dawn seemed bored with the whole thing.

"Oh, just some silly old scribbles. Sort of signs and things. Scribbled all over her front door in chalk. You can see for yourself. Some kids, probably. . . ."

I glanced at Cobb, a shiver going down my back. Trying to sound calm, I said: "You run in the house with Rebecca, Dawn, and start getting breakfast. We'll be back in a minute."

"But, Daddy—"

"Come on, child." Rebecca took her firmly by the arm and started to pull her up the garden path. "Don't you know enough to do what your daddy tells you?"

Once the two of them had disappeared into the house, Cobb, Leaf, and I crossed the street and hurried toward Love's cottage, which stood next to the rectory, white and smugly neat in the early sunshine. I reached the gate in the picket fence first and, pushing through it, started between the prim borders of rosemary and myrtle to the door.

The warm, herbal scent of the rosemary impregnated the morning air. The wistaria, flopping over the porch, was hung with long purple blossoms. The pilgrim lantern gave a cozy, welcoming touch. The very gentleness and blandness of the scene was like a thorn under my nail.

I had seen what was on Love's door before I had turned out of the street. No one could have missed them, for they were scrawled in scarlet chalk. But, as Cobb and Leaf hurried silently after me to the porch, I could see them in every detail.

Swastikas, crosses, meaningless hieroglyphics, scrawled with bold, scarlet crudeness over the smooth, white panels.

In the first despairing moments, as I stared, I could only think absurdly: *I thought it would be Phoebe. I thought it would happen at Phoebe's house.*

"What the heck?" asked Dan Leaf. He didn't know the song. "What in heck does it mean?"

It was Cobb who said it and, spoken in his flat New England accent, that cryptic phrase brought a peculiar frisson.

"Five for the symbols at your door."

I rang the bell. Love had one of those bells that ring with a soft, musical chime. I heard the lilt of it echo from the kitchen and fade. I rang again. I knew it was useless, but I rang. There was absolute silence. Then, faint at first but growing nearer, I heard the thin, forlorn miaow of a cat.

Almost out of control, I started to throw myself at the door.

"Stop, Westlake." Cobb's voice was almost a shout. "The window. Dan, you got a knife? Break the lock."

Dan Leaf ran to the nearest window. I heard the screen rip and the dry scrape of his knife at the lock. Then he pushed the window up. He scrambled through the window. Cobb and I followed. Even then it didn't seem right, breaking Love's screen and clambering with our dirty shoes through her window into her dining room.

There was nothing in the dining room. Nothing wrong. I knew the house. I ran out into the hall and through the open door into the living room.

Love's fat gray cat was ahead of me. It padded to the ottoman under the window and, with a tiny, bewildered miaow, jumped up onto it. It sat there, curling its bushy tail under it, staring at me from flat, yellow eyes.

But I didn't look at the cat. There were other things to look at. The little table beside the couch had been tilted over. A porcelain vase, shaped like a Victorian garden basket full of rosebuds, lay broken in two on the carpet. And by its side lay a heavy bronze candlestick. . . .

It was the ottoman itself, however, that kept my gaze hypnotized. There was something on it, something concealed beneath the multicolored afghan on which the cat was sitting. Cobb and Dan Leaf hovered behind me. I went to the ottoman. I pulled the afghan away, sending the cat scurrying to safety under the love seat.

Love Drummond lay there. She was wearing the same gray suit she had worn the night before at the Bray house. Her arms were folded across her breast. The gray skirt was wrinkled up, revealing an expanse of cotton stocking. A white, crocheted antimacassar had been wrapped tightly around her face.

I picked it up. It was sodden wet.

Wet wool over the mouth and nostrils can asphyxiate in a matter of minutes.

I looked down at Love's face. Then I looked away. I'd had enough horror. I couldn't take any more.

"Dead?" Cobb's voice came to me in a query that had no hope. "Westlake, is she dead?"

"Westlake, is she dead-O?" I echoed.
 "Green grow the rushes-O."

Part 5: six for the six proud walkers

CHAPTER XV



THE police ritual, so disastrously familiar now, started once again. Cobb called Grovestown. We searched Love's cottage from its immaculate attic to its equally immaculate cellar. We found nothing helpful. Love had followed Cobb's safety instructions to the letter.

Every door and window was locked. It was pitifully obvious what had happened. The murderer was someone in whom Love had such complete confidence that she herself had let him or her in through the front door.

The bronze candlestick had been disastrously handy.

From my preliminary examination, I gauged that she had died around four o'clock. With a daring the contemplation of which chilled the blood, the murderer must have exploited Dr. Jessup's murder to commit another. He had known the church bell next door would awaken Love. When she heard a knock on her door and recognized the voice of her visitor, she would have assumed that he too had been awakened by the bell and was probably bringing her news of what had happened. This ruse had given him the opportunity not only to kill Love but also to hide in a place of complete safety from the aroused patrol.

Grim as it was, however, this information told us nothing new. It only confirmed what the stabbing of Dr. Jessup with Ernesta's paper knife had already clinched. The murderer belonged to Love's small circle of good friends. Or, putting it another way, the murderer was one of the Saturday evening picnic party.

This fifth murder, coming on the heels of the fourth, had plunged both Cobb and myself into a mood of frustrated despair. The more precautions we took, the more wholesale the slaughter became. A carload of Cobb's men arrived from Grovestown. Eventually an ambulance took the body away. Cobb left one of his assistants in charge, and he, Dan Leaf, and I drove to Grovestown.

Something had to be done about Love's

cat. It couldn't be abandoned. I stopped off with it at my house and explained to Rebecca why we had once again failed to show up for the meal she had prepared. The arrival of the cat would make Dawn curious, I knew. But I had given up all hope of being able to keep her in the dark any longer. She would have to know the truth now.

In Grovestown, Cobb went dispiritedly off to what would be a stormy session with the D.A. There was only an hour before the inquest on the White twins. I spent it drearily with the city pathologist. The inquest itself was short and dismal and, inevitably, a verdict of death at the hand of person or persons unknown was returned. The parents of the White twins attended. After the proceedings I had the thankless task of breaking the news of Love's murder to them. They were still so stunned by the death of their own children that they could hardly absorb the news of this latest disaster.

My pity for them helped me feel a little less sorry for myself.

Cobb and I, having had no food that day, had sandwiches sent up to his office and ate them gloomily. There had been no time for us to do much talking. I told him then about Caleb's fear of the dark which had made him desert his post on the patrol. I also told him about Caleb's grandmother. Most policemen, under as much pressure as Cobb was, would have jumped on that information as an excuse to make an arrest. But Cobb isn't that way. He asked me, as a doctor, whether I thought that the battle psychosis coupled with bad heredity could have made Caleb into a homicidal maniac. I told him it was possible but I thought it unlikely. The chance of inherited insanity applied just as much to Phoebe and Lorie anyway, and Caleb's fear of the dark was such that his every impulse, when it came upon him, was to cling desperately to the first human beings he met, not to murder them.

Cobb said: "And this Mrs. Stone and the Bray girl?"

"Phoebe's completely sane. I'm sure of that, Lorie . . . Oh, what's the use of going over this again? I don't think Lorie's insane. I don't think Renton Forbes is insane. I don't think Avril is insane. I know them. I've gone around with them. Whatever their problems or poses or frustrations, they are ordinary, rational people. And I don't believe in those homicidal maniacs you read about who behave like normal citizens for twenty-three hours a day and then run amok with foaming fangs for a sixty-minute orgy of madness."

"So the murderer's a maniac and the only suspects are sane." Cobb grunted. "We're back where we started from, aren't we? That's where we got to last night." He paused, adding dejectedly: "The D.A. wasn't

exactly pleased to see me."

"I'm not surprised."

"It's my fault, of course. If I'd have been halfway efficient, these two murders wouldn't have happened. That's what he said." His blue eyes watched me miserably. "He's sending the troopers out there this afternoon. From now on, there's going to be everything but martial law in Skipton."

"I guess that's a good thing."

"Sure, it's a good thing. But it makes me look pretty much of a dope, don't it?" He shrugged. "But then I guess that's only right. I am a dope on this case, Westlake. I've never known anything like it. With all my experience, I've never been this strapped. Five murders in two days. And not a clue. Not a grain of sense to it, either."

"The song," I said.

COBB stared down blankly at the remains of sandwich on his plate. "Well, Westlake, we might as well know who's going to be dead by the time we get back there. What happens next in the song?"

"Six for the six proud walkers. Then seven for the seven who went to heaven."

"Heaven," Cobb grinned sourly. Then his eyes met mine again. "The six proud walkers. What in glory's name are they?"

"I don't know."

"But who could it mean in Skipton?"

"I've been trying to figure that out too. If Ernesta was here—she's the one who's so crazy about hiking. Caleb, maybe. He treks around a bit. He's making a map of the country around Skipton for his aunt."

Cobb did not speak for a moment. I could tell he was following some new train of thought. At length he asked: "You said there was carvings on Mrs. Stone's door, didn't you?"

"Yes. Caleb did them when he was a kid."

"Then if the murderer was really following the song, why didn't he kill someone in the Stone house instead of having to scrawl those symbols on Miss Drummond's door in chalk?"

"There were three people in the Stone house. Love was alone."

"Even so"—Cobb had brought his brier pipe out of his pocket and was sticking it between his teeth—"I'm not a fancy medical man or anyone that knows about craziness. But if this murderer is really hipped on that song, strikes me he wouldn't figure that way. He wouldn't figure: 'There are three people in the house with the symbols at the door, so I'll go make symbols on Miss Drummond's door and kill her instead.' Get what I mean, Westlake? If he was really nuts on the song, he'd just wait. The symbols on the door would mean the Stone house to him. It would have to. He'd just wait and then, when the

chance came, he'd get someone in that house. See what I mean? Figuring this murderer really is a maniac, the way it's been looking."

What he said made sound common sense whatever way you looked at it. With a faint stirring of excitement, I said: "The murderer's insane and the suspects are sane. Maybe you've got something, Cobb. Maybe the song's just a red herring. Maybe he wanted to kill those five people and realized he could fit them more or less into the pattern of the song and sell us on a maniac theory."

"Yeah. The lily-white boys fitted, of course. And the gospel maker. But wasn't it kind of faky too to tie up Raynor with the rivals?" His eyes had come to life. "What if it's that way, Westlake? What if someone had a good solid motive for killing the White twins and George Raynor and Dr. Jessup and Miss Drummond?"

My excitement was flickering out. "How could anyone have a sane motive for wanting to kill such a disconnected bunch of people?"

"They were all at the picnic." Cobb was chewing on the unlit pipe. "If it was that way, Westlake, the clue'd have to be at the picnic."

"You don't kill people because they go on a picnic."

"Maybe you don't. But maybe . . . Westlake, what about that picnic? Think about it. Tell me everything that happened. Who said what, who was sitting where, who did what."

Infected by his enthusiasm, I turned my mind back to Saturday evening and reconstructed for him everything that had taken place on the Bray terrace and later at the picnic ground. I had reached the point where Lorie had been persuaded to sing and the White twins ran off when Cobb broke in:

"The kids ran off? Where did they go?"

"They went to fool around in the old sawmill which is back there in the woods."

"How long were they gone?"

"Not long. About ten minutes, I guess."

"And then they came back?"

"No, it was getting set to rain any minute, and the party broke up. Love went to look for them."

"Alone?"

It came to me then. "My God, Cobb, she didn't go alone."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Sure. That's exactly what I mean. George Raynor was the one who started to fuss about them first. He suggested maybe they should look for them. Love agreed. And she lugged Dr. Jessup along too. That's the way it was. I'm certain of it. The people who went to the sawmill to pick up the kids were Raynor, Jessup, and Love."

For a moment we stared at each other. The idea was so new and so revolutionary that it

had thrown us back on our heels.

It was Cobb who spoke first. "At the last minute, on account of Mrs. Stone, the place for the picnic was changed, wasn't it? I mean, if Mrs. Stone hadn't squawked, you'd have eaten your picnic down in the regular picnic place Mrs. Bray had made for her?"

I NODDED.

"Then no one could have expected ahead of time that a bunch of people was going up there to that deserted place by the sawmill." Cobb leaned over his desk. "Anything could have been hidden up there, Westlake, without there being a chance of anyone stumbling across it in weeks. Right?"

"Right."

"So the kids run off to the sawmill. They see this thing, something no one's supposed to see. Raynor, Jessup, and Miss Drummond go after them. They see it too. They—"

"Wait a minute," I cut in. "If they'd seen anything out of the ordinary, they'd have told us."

"Not if they didn't know it was out of the ordinary. Figure it that way, Westlake. Figure they saw something which was terribly important once they got wise to what it was. Supposing they didn't get wise, but the murderer bumped them off because he knew that sooner or later they would get wise."

"Something like—what?"

"Something—or someone—" Cobb broke off. "Wait a minute, Westlake. How far is this sawmill from where you were at?"

"Only a couple of hundred feet, I'd say."

"Then if there'd been someone hiding in that sawmill, someone who hadn't any right to be there, they could've heard the Bray girl singing the song?"

"I should think so."

"Then maybe we've fooled ourselves from the beginning, Westlake. It doesn't have to be someone who was at the picnic, see? Someone could have been up there in the sawmill. The kids come in. This person managed to hide, maybe. But there's something left lying around that, if the kids get wise to it, proves this person's been there. The same applies to Raynor, Jessup, and Miss Drummond. They see this thing too. The murderer's heard the song. He knows he's got to bump off those people. And he sees how, by putting the deaths in the right order, he can tie it up with the song. And here's the point." He paused triumphantly. "That way, with the song, he can make it look as if the murderer's got to be someone who knew the song and therefore someone who was on the picnic. That's the way we've been figuring, of course, and could be we're all off the beam, on account of it was planned that way. Could be the murderer's someone completely out of the picture so far, someone who thinks he's sit-

ting pretty because he's got us concentrated on suspecting the people at the picnic."

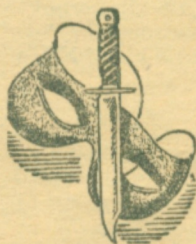
"And who would this person be?"

"Anyone. Maybe a criminal of some sort. Someone hiding out from the law. Anyone. That isn't the point right now."

"I guess you're right," I said. "I guess the point right now's to get to that sawmill plenty fast."

"Check," said Cobb.

CHAPTER XVI



COBB and I drove to the old sawmill along back roads, skirting Skipton itself. Although the inspector did not admit it, I felt he wanted to avoid the humiliating spectacle of the state troopers installed in the village. Having been born in a farmhouse in the Skipton

neighborhood, he knew the country as well as Ernesta or Caleb, and he maneuvered the car up dirt roads and overgrown trails the existence of which I had never known.

The day had grown terrifically hot. Apart from the shower which had disrupted the Saturday picnic and a heavy thunderstorm on Friday, the summer had been virtually without rain. The parched countryside had already sucked up every gram of moisture, and the rough mountain vegetation was coarse and dry as tinder. The sky blazed a hard, uncompromising blue.

A particularly rutted trail brought us directly to the sawmill. It must have been the road the loggers had used when the mill was in operation. Cobb parked the car, and before entering the mill itself I led him down through the thick pine trees to the little clearing where the picnic had taken place. A champagne cork and the carton in which Ernesta's caviar had been sent, and which Phoebe and I had overlooked when we tidied up, were the only signs that any human being had been there for weeks. We left the clearing and, following the trail that the White twins had probably taken, moved past a large, straggling sawdust pile, covered with raspberry vines, back to the mill.

The mill itself was a long barnlike structure with a dangerously sagging roof. At one end of it was a small two-storied clapboard cottage where a resident operator must have lived. In spite of broken windowpanes and a front door half split off its hinges, this building was in reasonably good repair.

I remembered Renton telling me that this had been the locale for most of his reluctant

trysts with Avril Lane. Avril would have needed to tie a great many mental pink ribbons on the cottage before she could have thought of it as a romantic setting.

We searched the mill itself first. Almost immediately Cobb gave a little grunt and pointed down to a tire mark on the dusty, rotting floor boards.

"There's been a car here recently, Westlake. Don't look to me like the kind of place someone would come for fun."

There was an undercurrent of excitement in his voice. I reacted to it for a moment. Then I remembered what Love Drummond had told me. She had overheard Renton and Avril making a date over the phone for Friday to meet at the sawmill.

I told Cobb. "It's probably Renton's car," I said.

"So this was the place he and Mrs. Raynor picked for their carryings-on?"

"That's what he told me."

"And they were up here Friday?"

"Love said she heard them make a date for eight-thirty. I don't know if they actually came. I didn't ask Renton about any specific dates."

Cobb grunted. "Ask him."

"Okay."

"Better ask Mrs. Raynor too. Make sure their stories check."

The prospect of questioning Avril Lane about her clandestine amours was not one I relished, but I said "Okay" again.

There was nothing else of interest in the sawmill. We moved through the flapping front door into the cottage itself. Our new theory was still so vague as to detail that we had no idea what we might find. There were two rooms downstairs, one a kitchen where a dilapidated sink still stood under a window, the other a small living room which was furnished with two old rickety chairs and an ancient couch.

Cobb eyed the couch distastefully and said: "Well, I guess it's everyone to his own taste, Westlake. But this isn't the spot I'd bring my lady friend."

"I didn't know you had one," I said.

He looked annoyed and said: "It was just a manner of speaking, Westlake. Don't you start talking that way around Mrs. Cobb."

After a few minutes of careful searching, it became obvious that there was nothing downstairs that the twins could conceivably have endangered their own lives and those of George, Dr. Jessup, and Love by seeing. This did not, of course, disprove Cobb's theory. If some malefactor had been hiding there, he would have had ample time to remove the thing, whatever it was, whose presence had been so incriminating.

In growing dejection, Cobb on his hands and knees made an exhaustive and barren

examination of the floor boards. Finally he admitted defeat and the two of us climbed the precarious outside staircase which led to the second floor.

THERE were two rooms upstairs, matching those below. Sunshine splashed through the broken windowpanes on walls tangled with cobwebs and rippled floors thick with dust. The heat was almost unbearable.

I was the one who first noticed the footprints. It was no major feat of observation, for the dust was thick and, in one of the rooms, the whole floor was patchworked with prints as if someone had paced restlessly up and down there. The prints were of a woman's shoes. That was obvious. And the fact that a woman had been there was clinched by a lipstick-stained cigarette butt Cobb found in a corner.

The inspector picked up the butt, peering at it intently. "Recent," he said. "Can't have been here longer than a couple of days. No yellow stains. What is it? Some kind of foreign cigarette?"

I inspected it and recognized it at once as one of the special Russian brand with which Ernesta's house was always stocked.

"A woman," said Cobb. "A woman pacing up and down up here, smoking one of the Bray cigarettes." His china-blue eyes were triumphant. "What'd a woman be doing up here in this hellhole? Mrs. Raynor, if she'd come here for a date with Forbes, she'd have stayed downstairs, wouldn't she? No reason for her to come creeping up here."

"Avril doesn't smoke, anyway," I said.

"She don't? Then who else'd be up here smoking a Bray cigarette?"

"Not Phoebe," I said. "She never uses lipstick. Lorie, I guess. She's about the only person I can think of who'd be smoking that brand—unless one of the maids at the Bray house snatched one and came here. I don't see what a maid would want with smoking a cigarette up here, though."

"Nor Lorie, for that matter. Westlake—"

"Before you get carried away, Cobb, I might point out that you're not proving anything. Okay. Maybe Lorie was up here. So what? She was on the picnic, so she couldn't possibly be this person you've dreamed up who was hiding here when the twins came in."

His face fell.

"And," I continued, "there's no particular reason why Lorie shouldn't have come up here. After all, this place is on her property. She could have gone for a walk and thought she'd give the old place a once-over."

"I guess you're right at that."

"Anyway," I added, "you're not going to make me believe the White twins and George Raynor and Dr. Jessup and Love Drummond

were murdered because they maybe did and maybe didn't see a lipstick-stained cigarette up here."

Cobb stood a moment in gloomy thought. "Then you think the whole idea's a bum one?"

"Not necessarily. There may have been something here—and it's gone now."

"But what? What sort of thing could it have been? Something they could have seen and paid no mind to, but something the murderer knew he had to kill them for seeing?"

"I don't know. But I know one thing. Whatever it was, it wasn't here Friday—not if Renton and Avril were actually here Friday."

"Why not?"

"Because if they'd been here and it had been here, they'd have seen it. They'd have been just as dangerous as the others. They'd have been killed too."

Cobb gave a savage little grunt which indicated that things were getting too much for him. "Maybe they will be killed," he said. "Maybe the murderer just hasn't got around to them yet." I don't think he'd been serious when he said it, but after he had spoken, a faintly awed expression spread over his face. "Westlake, you don't think there's anything in that, do you? The six proud walkers. That wouldn't tie up with Forbes or Mrs. Raynor, would it?"

"Avril never walks a step unless she has to. And Renton rides around on a horse all the time."

"Proud walker," mused Cobb. "A guy on a walking horse. Isn't that a kind of proud walker? Couldn't it be twisted around that way?"

"Well, there's no connection between Avril and the seven stars in the sky. My God!" A thought came: "I'll sing you eight-O."

"What's that?" asked Cobb dubiously.

"Eight for the April rainers," I said. "Avril's French for April. Rainers—Raynor."

We stared at each other. Then Cobb gave a shrug.

"Westlake, we're both going nuts. Let's get out of here before our brains fry."

We left the house, spent some fruitless minutes searching around the two buildings and the sawdust pile, and went back to Cobb's car.

I felt almost as frustrated as Cobb. We had found a most unrevealing cigarette butt and that was all. We had neither proved nor disproved Cobb's theory. But the more I thought of it, the more convinced I was that the inspector had almost hit upon the truth. The fact that the people already killed had been the people who had followed the twins to the sawmill was too remarkable, surely, to be a coincidence. And a sane motive, however

cryptic, was far more satisfactory to me than a theory which rested on an apparently non-existent homicidal maniac obsessed with an old song.

We got into the car.

"Well," I said. "What next?"

"The Bray house," said Cobb. "To find out whether Lorie smoked that cigarette."

"And if she didn't?"

"If she didn't, maybe it was smoked by the murderer."

CHAPTER XVII



AT THE Bray house we found Phoebe sitting small and alone on the terrace. In the broad August sunshine, with the green-and-white view of Skipton shimmering in the heat below, that luxurious terrace reminded me painfully of the old easy days when Ernesta

had been in social command and nothing more lethal than a squabble over dahlias had disturbed the village tranquility.

But our days were far from easy now, and the casual simplicity was gone from our relations. I felt awkward as Phoebe rose to receive us, and she too seemed withdrawn from me behind a barricade of caution, as if the inspector and I symbolized impending danger. Disaster had broken us up into little groups, each defending his own.

Phoebe turned her dark, watchful gaze on Cobb. "I suppose Dr. Westlake has told you about my mother?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Cobb quietly.

Phoebe turned to me, her face breaking into a sudden warm smile. "Caleb took your advice, Hugh. He told me what's been worrying him. He's telling Lorie now." She laid her hand, rough from gardening, on my arm. "You can't think what it's done for me, hearing the truth. I suspected something—so much worse."

"It's not bad, Phoebe. It'll go in time."

"You're sure? You're really sure?"

"As sure as one can be. Especially now he's not keeping it bottled up inside him."

She hesitated. "I told him about Mother too. I thought it was best to get everything over with at once. But he knew already."

"He knew?"

"Lorie had told him. I'd had no idea. A mother seems to know so little about her children." She glanced at Cobb. "The inspector knows about that too—about why Caleb left his place on the patrol?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Cobb again.

She moved to face him, standing squarely on her short, firm legs. "You'll be suspecting

all of us—Lorie, Caleb, myself. I realize that. You have to, of course. It'll be up to us, Inspector, to convince you that we aren't any of us the sort of people to have done these terrible, mad things."

"Matter of fact, ma'am, I wouldn't worry your head too much about madness, things like that." Cobb's voice was unexpectedly gentle. "Fact is, we're working on a different line now."

"A different line?"

Caleb and Lorie appeared at the french windows then. I was amazed at the change in them. It was particularly noticeable in Caleb. He was no longer the lost boy I had left in his room early that morning. His eyes had a steady self-confidence and also a faint wonder, as if something almost too good to be believed had happened to him. Lorie seemed buoyed up too with the same inner excitement.

When they saw us, Caleb's mouth tightened, but none of the assurance left him. He crossed to us, putting his atabrine-gold hand on his mother's shoulder. He stared straight at the inspector.

"I guess Dr. Westlake's made my confession for me—about the patrol."

Cobb nodded.

"I realize my responsibility. It's my fault Dr. Jessup is dead. What are you going to do about it?"

Mildly reproving, in the tone he might use to one of his own kids who had not changed wet shoes, the inspector said: "You shouldn't have gone on the patrol, you being sick. You should have excused yourself."

Caleb flushed. "I realize that too."

"But what's done's done. No use crying over spilt milk."

Caleb's face was a study in astonishment. "You mean you're not going to arrest me?"

"Arrest you? After all those medals and things you won in the Pacific?"

Caleb's face was crimson now. Lorie, smiling radiantly, said: "I told you, Caleb."

"But I . . . I don't get it. Why the hell's everyone so nice to me all of a sudden?"

Cobb's eyes went stern. "It's the murderer we're after, and if you turn out to be the murderer we'll stop being nice to you, plenty quick." His gaze shifted to Lorie. "Matter of fact, Miss Bray, I've come because I want a couple of words with you."

All three of them stiffened.

"With me?" faltered Lorie.

"Yes. Looks like you might help us out."

THE new happiness had fled from Lorie's face. A fear that seemed extraordinarily disproportionate to the situation took its place.

"You smoke, don't you, Miss Bray?"

"Why, yes, yes. Of course."

"And you use lipstick. I can see that for myself. All girls do nowadays it seems." Cobb paused. His earlier gentleness made this new gravity doubly ominous. "And you often smoke those Russian cigarettes your mother keeps in the house?"

"Yes, I do. I—"

"Know the cottage by the old sawmill up the mountain—near where you had the picnic Saturday?"

"Of course I do."

Cobb looked down at his hand and then up quickly. "Been there recently?"

"No." The word came explosively from her. "No. I haven't been there for months."

"You're sure?" Cobb felt in his pocket and produced the lipstick-stained butt, holding it out in his cupped hand. "We found this upstairs in the cottage. Thought maybe it could be important. Then we figured we'd have to check with you first because, seeing your mother owns the place and everything, there wasn't any reason why maybe you hadn't just dropped in there recently to see what sort of shape the place is in."

Lorie had never been good at concealing her emotions. But she was particularly unsuccessful then. The creeping dread which had come into her eyes that morning when I had walked with her up from the Stone house was back again. She looked at the butt as if it were something awful and unclean. Then, suddenly, she blurted:

"Yes, yes, of course. How stupid of me. I completely forgot. When was it? Saturday. Yes. That's it. Saturday morning. I went for a walk up in that direction. I passed the house. I just thought I'd take a look inside. Of course. Yes."

"And you went upstairs?"

"Yes. Yes. That's right."

Phoebe and Caleb were staring blankly.

His voice very even, Cobb asked: "And you didn't see anything—out of the ordinary?"

Lorie was a little steadier now. "No. What sort of thing?"

"I don't know. Just something out of the ordinary."

"There wasn't anything at all. Just the way it always was."

"I see." Cobb shrugged. "Well, I guess that explains the butt." He put it back in his pocket. "Wasn't nothing to it, after all."

To me Lorie's story sounded as unconvincing as her moment of terror had been inexplicable. But Cobb was at least pretending to be satisfied. Turning from Lorie to Phoebe, he said:

"I guess you've heard the news from the village."

"The news?" Phoebe's voice was sharp. "Caleb and I were home all morning. Then we came up here. We . . . what news?"

Lorie gasped: "You don't mean there's been another—"

"Miss Drummond," said Cobb. "Westlake and I found her. Symbols scribbled in red chalk all over her door."

Instinctively, as if for comfort, the three of them moved close together.

"Love," breathed Phoebe.

"The symbols at your door." Lorie gave a little wrenching sob and buried her face against Caleb's chest.

The horror was back with them. I could feel it almost as if it were something gray and clammy that had fallen on them from the sky. For a moment things had seemed better. Caleb had won his little moral victory over himself. Perhaps even the hopeless impasse that blighted him and Lorie had seemed for them miraculously to have dissolved. And now this had come and the hand of the murderer was upon them again like the hand of death.

At this singularly inopportune moment a silvery voice tinkled behind us:

"Is anyone home? Is . . . oh, there you all are."

I turned to see Avril Lane stepping daintily onto the terrace. Her costume was, as usual, different and carefully planned. She wore an off-black dress and a white, faintly Quakerish cap that hid the auburn hair. Whatever her mood was, it was something very demure, small, and helpless. At the sight of Caleb her lips pursed into a smile of incipient archness. Then she saw that his arm was around Lorie and her face froze into blank unrecognition.

"I see the inspector is here. It occurred to me that I might find him." She fluttered to Cobb's side as if she were being propelled, not by legs, but by a faint breeze. "Inspector, I come to you as a suppliant." She paused and then, her voice faltering, added: "I must plead for protection."

"Protection, ma'am?" Cobb was looking rather uncomfortable.

"Naturally I have heard the news about poor Miss Drummond." Her little hand nuzzled onto the inspector's sleeve. "It is terrible, more terrible than I can say, and it leaves no doubt in my mind that there is some poor warped creature—we must not call him a maniac, that cruel, unfeeling word—but some poor twisted creature who is—er—rhyming in blood that ancient ballad, 'Green Grow the Rushes-O.'"

"Yes, ma'am. We've kind of figured that out ourselves."

AVRIL looked a little pained. "But have you studied the ballad, Inspector? I, naturally, have studied it closely. And I cannot but be convinced that the whole holocaust is spiraling toward me. Eight, Inspector. 'Eight for the April rainers.' Of course, there

is another version. 'Eight for the eight bold reigners.' But I do not think we need concern ourselves with that. April rainers, Inspector. As you may know, the name I am known by in literary circles is Avril Lane. 'Avril' is the French for 'April.' And 'Raynor'—"

"Yes, ma'am," broke in Cobb. "We've already figured on that too."

Deprived of her dramatic climax, Avril was momentarily deflated. But only for a moment. The hand grabbed onto Cobb's sleeve again. "Then you realize there is danger for me, Inspector. Real, imminent danger. I am a woman—and alone. I have come to plead with you that you will be able to house one of your men in my home at night." She paused and added, a trifle too hurriedly: "There is a young man I have noticed in your entourage. He seems a clean-cut, dependable boy. I believe his name is Leaf. I approached him on the subject yesterday and he expressed his willingness, provided of course that the move had your sanction."

It was not the right moment for comic relief, but, inappropriate though it was, I found it rather refreshing. In spite of the death of her own husband and the deaths of four of her neighbors, Avril was still being incredibly Avril. Dan Leaf was a good-looking boy. She was shamelessly exploiting the situation for an opportunity to get him under her roof after nightfall.

She was staring at Cobb, the picture of forlorn, trusting girlishness. "Protection, Inspector. All I ask is adequate protection."

Cobb, his face solemn, murmured: "Well, ma'am, I think we should be able to fix you up. Now I don't know that Leaf's quite the man. Too much work to do. But I'll see you get someone. I agree it isn't right having you there in that house alone. Maybe Bob Crawley. He's dependable as they come."

A very slight wink to me told me that the inspector was onto her little game. And he had foiled her splendidly, for Bob Crawley weighed two hundred and eighty pounds and had an equally plump wife and four kids in Grovestown.

Avril's lashes flickered, but before she could speak again Cobb said:

"Matter of fact, ma'am, it's lucky you came. We were going to find you. Westlake here has a couple of questions to ask you."

"Me?" Avril swirled around to me, the ears of her Quakerish cap wabbling.

I said: "Maybe Lorie would let us use the library for a few minutes."

"Of course," said Lorie.

I led Avril into the house. I knew my job, and I was resigned to it. But it was not going to be easy to question Avril about the details of her amorous rendezvous at the sawmill with Renton. In the first place, I wasn't meant

to know that a liaison between them existed, and it would be unfair to Renton to let her know just how frankly he had spoken to me. By the time I had her settled in the library, I had my plan of campaign worked out.

She was excited at the prospect of being questioned. Anything went with Avril so long as it kept her in the limelight.

"I thought the authorities might come to me," she offered. "A writer, you know. Sometimes they see more keenly into the heart of things."

She was obviously expecting to receive some fascinating inside dope. I disappointed her. But I was very careful to accept her at her own valuation. I told her that we had obliged Renton to admit that he had occasionally met her in private to discuss aspects of male psychology connected with her work, and that these meetings had sometimes taken place at the old sawmill. There was enough delicacy in this approach to keep her femininity unaffronted. In fact, she admitted to the meetings almost with gusto. Yes, Renton had great penetration; he was an interesting type psychologically; indeed, she was modeling one of the principal male characters of *Where the Bee Sucks* after him. That was why these little chats had been so helpful. With a rueful grimace she added that I knew how jealous poor George had been. That was why these purely innocent meetings had to be held apart from telltale eyes at the sawmill.

I ASKED her if she had met Renton on Friday. She admitted that she had. But any hopes I may have entertained of a dramatic revelation were dashed. She was perfectly ready to be frank, except, of course, concerning anything of an amorous nature that might have passed between her and Renton. But she had seen nothing different about the sawmill. Nor had she heard anything, although once there had been a faint scuffling outside and Renton had gone to investigate what had turned out to be a rat.

"A great big brute of a fellow." Her little giggle tittered up. "Such a scare for me because I'm goosy about rats just like a silly child."

The pedantic Avril was giving way to the flirtatious one, and I decided the time had come to end the interview. Reminding myself to check with Renton about the rat, I guided her back to the terrace.

In my absence a trooper had come up from the village with a message for the inspector from the D.A., and Cobb had left. Lorie, claiming a headache, had gone upstairs to lie down for a while before her mother's return. Phoebe and Caleb walked down the hill with Avril and me.

Caleb maneuvered things so that his

mother and Avril went ahead. He dawdled behind with me, and when the others were out of earshot he said in a gruff, boyish voice: "I've got a lot to thank you for, Doctor."

"I don't see why."

"I'd never have told Lorie about . . . you know, the dark and everything if it hadn't been for you."

"And you told her and she didn't mind?"

He grinned at me. It was a broad, sunny grin. "I guess I won't ever understand women. I thought she'd despise me, think I was a coward. But she seemed to be pleased. Seemed to think it made me need her more or something." He paused, staring down at his feet like any other ordinary young man having difficulty saying the most ordinary thing. "You know, Doctor, I've been crazy about Lorie for years. Out in the Pacific—sentimental, of course—I used to think about her all the time. But then this thing hit me and, well, I kind of closed up, I guess. Got a complex, you know. Thought I wasn't enough of a man for any girl to marry and—"

"Sure," I said. "I know."

"Guess I was pretty much of a dope. Done a lot of crazy things. Made Lorie pretty miserable." He kicked a stone, but he kicked it happily. "Anyway, all that's over now. Westlake, this is a ghastly day for Skipton, but it's a day of miracles for me. Don't tell Mother or anyone yet, but I asked Lorie to marry me just now. She said okay."

We both stopped. He stood, tall and tanned, grinning at me.

Rather uncertainly I said: "In spite of her mother?"

"That's the miracle. When Aunt Ernesta told Lorie about Grandmother's being in an institution, she made Lorie swear she'd never marry me. Aunt Ernesta's hipped on the subject we'd drive each other crazy or something. And Lorie's never gone against Aunt Ernesta—never before in her life. But this time . . ."

I was thinking of the elaborate plans Ernesta had made to keep her own marriage secret so that just this very thing should be avoided. Personally I was delighted at the prospect of a marriage between Lorie and Caleb, but I was uncomfortably conscious that I had tampered most effectively with a situation that was no concern of mine.

"Yes," Caleb was saying, "I can still hardly believe it. From the way Lorie talked, you'd have thought that her mother suddenly didn't mean anything to her. I guess what they say in the movies is right. I guess love is a wonderful thing."

It was natural enough for Caleb to ascribe Lorie's precipitous change of viewpoint to love.

But suddenly I started to wonder.

And as we caught up with Avril and

Phoebe, I was wondering—and wondering.

CHAPTER XVIII



THE state troopers had taken Skipton over all right. When the four of us emerged from the Bray drive into the main street, a motorcycle was parked outside the rectory and at least two troopers were in sight pacing ominously up and down. A third was visible down at the village

store conversing with Violet and Irma, whose echoing giggles suggested that, for the time being at least, the talk had shifted from murder to more everyday topics. The Konapic River flashed like a mirror in the blinding sunlight. It was the only feature of the Skipton landscape that remained impervious to our change of status.

Renton Forbes was hurrying down the elm-fringed road. As our little group paused outside my garden gate, he joined us. Renton seemed more resilient than the rest of us. He looked, at least, as spruce and debonair as usual. With a distinctly ironical: "Morning, Mabel" to Avril, he turned to Phoebe and asked whether Ernesta had returned yet.

As he did so, Dawn burst exuberantly from the front door and ran down the path toward us.

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so glad you're back at last. Isn't it excit—I mean, isn't it awful about so many people dying that way? There was a state trooper in the house just now. At least he wasn't in the house because Rebecca wouldn't let him in. But he was looking for clues and things and, Daddy, I wish Rebecca'd let him in because I'm sure the marble Bobby gave me is a clue and probably I could have found some more. But Rebecca said no one wasn't to cross the threshold and..."

She curbed her enthusiasm sufficiently then to greet our various neighbors. But they could not suppress her for long. Soon she was off again, rattling:

"And Love's cat likes Hamish, Daddy, only Hamish doesn't like her much yet and chased her under my bed and I suppose it takes time. But I gave her milk and..."

Phoebe and Caleb had to pick up something at the store. Avril walked on with them. Shepherding Dawn ahead of me, I invited Renton in for a drink. It seemed as good an opportunity as any to learn his version of the Friday meeting with Avril.

Rebecca was not visible. I brought the drinks into Dr. Stoke's office. Renton was candid as ever about his relationship with Avril. He remembered the rat too. He had

gone to investigate and had seen it scuttle away. Nothing else unusual had happened. The only thing that had differentiated this rendezvous from the others was that he had finally persuaded Avril it should be the last. With his tongue, no doubt, very much in his cheek, he had convinced her that his usefulness to her as a literary inspiration was over and that, painful as it was to him, she should, for her genius's sake, break new male ground. He had suggested Caleb, and apparently the prospect of a younger swain had been pleasurable enough for her to have parted from him graciously.

"I'm delighted I cut the pink ribbons once and for all, Westlake. I hated having to drag on with her after my marriage, anyway. And now that Skipton's wallowing in a blood purge, all our little secrets are bound to come to light. That's why I'm hanging around for Ernesta now. I'm going to confess the whole thing to her—not for any laudable reasons, but because I know that if she doesn't hear it from me she'll hear it from someone else. I'll be able to present it in a slightly rosier light, I hope."

He grinned. "Ernesta's going to be very stern, I'm sure. But if I'm boyish and rueful enough I think I'll get away with it."

It was typical of Renton to be wholly concerned with his own amorous entanglements when his neighbors were dropping like flies around him. I suppose I should have disapproved, but I didn't. People like Renton were anchors. They reminded you that one day life would be normal again.

I would have liked to tell him that Caleb and Lorie were going to marry and that, in her consternation over the news, Ernesta would have no time or energy to worry about his peccadilloes. But the announcement had been made to me in confidence, and I had no right to pass it on. Besides, Renton could take care of himself without any assistance from me.

"Do you suppose you'll announce the marriage now?" I asked.

He shrugged. "That'll be up to Ernesta. Now I've got Mabel subdued, I can't wait for our wedded bliss to be proclaimed to the world. But with Lorie and everything... we'll see. Maybe with a new little stranger on the way, Ernesta will give up being so motherly about Lorie."

He left soon to resume his watch for Ernesta, and I was alone in Dr. Stoke's office.

I poured myself another drink, took off my jacket and tie, and dropped down on the couch. Although I had had practically no sleep the night before, my mind was very alert, and the question which Caleb's remarks about Lorie had started continued to nag me. Ernesta had told Lorie categorically

that if she married her cousin it would mean a permanent break between them. It had been a brutal move on Ernesta's part, but obviously a well-intentioned one, since the specter of her mother's madness loomed large in Ernesta's mind and she was genuinely frightened of the results of a marriage between Lorie and Caleb. I could understand Ernesta's attitude. What I found hard to understand was Lorie's sudden decision to disobey her mother.

I was sure she loved Caleb, and with most girls love itself would have been a sufficient motive for a break with her mother. But Lorie wasn't like most girls. She had always worshiped Ernesta and taken her every whim as gospel. Why had she suddenly changed? Was it because Caleb's confession of his night fears had brought on a rush of pity stronger than her love for her mother? That was possible, of course.

BUT I had a hunch that the truth lay deeper. Something was wrong for Lorie. Of that I was sure. I remembered the unexplained shudder that had racked her body earlier that day when I had mentioned Ernesta's name. I remembered too, of course, her extraordinary behavior when Cobb had confronted her with the cigarette butt.

At first she had denied having been to the sawmill in months. Then, when she had actually seen the butt, she suddenly changed her tune and admitted to that most unconvincingly narrated episode of her visit to the sawmill on Saturday morning. Why had she switched her story? And why had that look of uncontrolled terror come into her eyes?

The cigarette butt led my thoughts back to Cobb's theory of the sane motive lurking behind the bloody phantom of the maniac. Once again I had that exasperating sensation that he had almost stumbled upon the truth. The White twins, George Raynor, Dr. Jessup, and Love Drummond had all gone to the sawmill on Saturday evening, and they were all dead. That was an inescapable fact. But what could have been in the sawmill, a glimpse of which had been sufficient to doom those five people to die? Whatever it was, it could not have been there at eight-thirty on Friday evening. Renton or Avril would surely have seen it. Then the thing or the person must have arrived later. Friday night or Saturday morning. This was possible because I didn't believe Lorie had been to the sawmill Saturday morning.

Thing or person? Could Cobb be right that there had been a person lurking there in the sawmill? Someone completely unconnected with the case so far who had managed to focus suspicion on the picnickers? For a moment I toyed with the idea, although I could think of no type of criminal

who would fit the pattern. Then, with a sudden jolt, I remembered the paper knife which had killed Dr. Jessup.

The paper knife surely destroyed Cobb's theory once and for all. Because the paper knife had been in the Bray house on Sunday night. No outsider could have known it was there, let alone have broken in and stolen it. The paper knife could have been taken only by Lorie, Caleb, Phoebe, Renton, Avril, or the farmers of the patrol. I could not seriously suspect the farmers. That brought me right back again to the point from which Cobb's theory had originally taken us.

I took a glum sip of my drink. Lorie had lied about going to the sawmill. The cigarette had made her lie. She was prepared to break forever with a mother she had worshiped since infancy. Those were the few facts I had. I let them wander aimlessly in my mind. And, suddenly, like a view emerging from an early morning mist, I saw the only way in which those facts could fit together.

Lorie loved Caleb. She wanted to marry him, but she would not have married him unless something had happened to diminish her respect for her mother. All right. Ernesta had done something that Lorie knew about and that Lorie thought discreditable. Had Lorie found out about her mother's secret marriage? It was possible, but that solution offered no explanation for Lorie's pretending she had dropped the cigarette butt when she hadn't. It was another, much more dramatic but more logical reason for Lorie's having turned against her mother. Lorie had pretended she had dropped the cigarette in the sawmill presumably because she was protecting the person who had. And the only woman Lorie would protect was Ernesta.

Ernesta who wore lipstick, smoked Russian cigarettes, and was the only person in the world who had not been on the picnic and yet could have both known about the paper knife and been able to steal it.

It was wildly impossible, of course. On Friday night, when the butt had been dropped, Ernesta had been in New York, busily writing letters about the results of her visit to the obstetrician and her discovery of a "perfectly divine" material for the living-room drapes.

I sat a moment, dazzled by my own deductions.

Then I went to the phone. I put in a long-distance call to the New York hotel at which Ernesta had been stopping.

I was told by the room clerk that Mrs. Ernesta Bray had checked out. I knew that, of course. Any minute now she was expected to drive past my house.

"But when did she check out?" I asked. "Today?"

There was a pause. Then the clerk's voice announced: "No, sir. Mrs. Ernesta Bray checked out Friday afternoon."

"Thank you," I said.

I put the receiver back, rather shakily, on its stand.

Incredible as it still seemed, my theory was taking on flesh and blood. At least one thing was certain.

Wherever she had been since the wave of murder hit Skipton, Ernesta Bray had certainly not been in New York.

CHAPTER XIX



I WAS still giving uneasy thought to this new development when Rebecca came into the office and darkly announced that a girl, who claimed to be a friend of mine, was at the door. Rebecca's tone implied that the visitor was almost certainly a homicidal maniac and was not

going to cross the threshold if she could help it. I went out into the hall to find Lorie—the person I was most eager to see.

For the first time since I had known her, Lorie was not expensively dressed. She wore an old gray sweater and a pair of blue jeans. It was an outfit that would have horrified her mother, but it became her. There was a flush in her cheeks too which gave her a new vividness.

"Hello, Lorie. Come in."

Rebecca, seeing that I accepted Lorie as a guest, relaxed her vigilance with obvious reluctance and stumped upstairs, presumably to protect Dawn from any sinister results of my rashness.

Lorie said: "I'm going to be an awful nuisance. I need your help."

"Of course."

"It's Mother. She's arrived. A call just came in. She got a flat over on Breakneck. She's left the car and's walking back over the mountain."

Any movement Ernesta made was of great interest to me now.

"Walking back?" I said. "It's about five miles, isn't it?"

"That's nothing to Mother. She's crazy about walking. You know that. But she wants me to go fix the flat and pick up the car. That's where you come in. Caleb doesn't have a car, and Mother suggested I could ask you to drive me out."

That was so typical of Ernesta, not only to abandon her car for her daughter to fix, but also to decide by remote control exactly which of her subjects should be elected as chauffeur.

"I know it's an awful bother for you right now of all times, but—"

"It's no bother at all."

It wasn't of course. It gave me an ideal opportunity to test my new and extraordinary suspicions. If I was right, Lorie might hold the key.

As we started down the garden path, Dawn's voice sounded from above us. I looked up to see my daughter leaning precariously out of her bedroom window with the dark shadow of Rebecca hovering behind her.

"Oh, Daddy, Rebecca says I'm never to go out and I do want Mr. Cobb to have my clue so I've wrapped it up in cleaning tissue so the fingerprints won't be spoiled and I've tied it with a ribbon so no one will know what it is and think it's a present, I mean. And will you please give it to him and explain . . . ?"

Leaning still further into space, my daughter dropped a small round package, clumsily tied with a pink ribbon. I caught it and put it in my pocket.

"Thank you, Daddy. Hello, Lorie. Miss Drummond's cat used to like Hamish and Hamish used to hate the cat, but now Hamish loves the cat and the cat hates Hamish. And it scratched Hamish and Hamish howled and Rebecca says . . ."

Her voice trailed after us down the path.

Lorie said: "What on earth did she drop to you?"

"It's just a marble one of the White kids gave her. She's being The Great Detective. She thinks her marble's going to give Cobb a blinding inspiration."

Soon we were driving through the valley toward the treacherous dirt road up the mountain where Ernesta had come to grief. It was obvious that Lorie had to be handled with care. Even if she had the information I thought she had, she would guard it jealously. I knew that from the way she had lied about the cigarette butt.

I started with a safe subject. "Caleb's told me the good news, Lorie. I'm all for it, believe me."

"Thank you." Her face lit up with a smile. "I'm terribly sorry I was so rude this morning when you talked about Caleb. Things seemed so black and hopeless then. I couldn't believe there could ever be a truly happy ending."

"You had a right to be rude. I was butting in where I didn't belong."

"You weren't. Oh, you weren't. And I can never be grateful enough, because it was you who really did it. Caleb was obsessed by his fear of the dark, though it made him a sort of pariah, not good enough for anyone. If you hadn't made him see things properly, he'd never have asked me to marry him."

EDGING around, I said: "I hope your mother won't be too tempestuous. She's not going to like this, is she?"

"Oh, Mother." Lorie's smile went. "No, she's not going to like it at all. But I'd never let that stand in the way." She paused and then added: "I'm an awfully shameless piece, you know. When Caleb came home, I thought he'd ask me to marry him right away. I've always loved him and I thought he loved me. But the weeks dragged by and he didn't ask me and he acted stranger and stranger. Last Friday I couldn't wait any longer. I asked him to marry me." She laughed shortly. "He turned me down flat."

"Friday?" That was the day before the picnic.

"Mother was away. I was alone in the house. I had dismal visions of things being stalemated between Caleb and me forever, so I plucked up my courage and called him. In the old days we used to go for walks in the woods at night. We know every track, every clearing. I asked him to meet me in the place where we always used to meet. I was terrified he wouldn't come, but he did."

I kept my eyes on the road ahead. I didn't want to break into her flow of words.

"Mother'd told me about Grandmother being insane. You knew that, didn't you? She'd said it would be utterly impossible for Caleb and me to marry. But I didn't believe it. I won't believe it, because I'm not afraid. I know Caleb. I know me. I know we're all right. I swear I do, Doctor."

"I know it, too."

"But I knew Aunt Phoebe hadn't told Caleb. About Grandmother, I mean. And I thought that was wrong. I thought it was only fair to let him know. So when he came, I told him. I told him Mother was dead against our marrying. I told him everything. But I said I didn't care. I said that being married to him was the only thing in the world I wanted. I said: 'Please, please, marry me. Let's forget Mother and everyone and go away.'" She gave a little shiver. "It was ghastly. He just stood there. I could see his face in the moonlight. It seemed cold, hating me. And he didn't say anything. He just turned on his heel and hurried away through the trees as if he couldn't see the last of me fast enough."

Her voice faltered. "I wanted to die. I thought he didn't love me any more and that I'd embarrassed him frightfully by throwing myself at his head. And then next day at the picnic it was even worse, because he was flirting with that frightful Avril in front of me, deliberately, I thought, to let me see what he thought of me."

She put her hand up to her face. "That's why I've been in such a terrible state lately. It was that, even more than the murders.

You see, I didn't know the truth. I didn't know that Caleb had this crazy feeling about not being worthy, that he was flirting with Avril and everything to try to make me hate him so he wouldn't be a burden to me." The hand dropped back to her lap. "But it's all over now. Incredibly, everything's all right. And you did it, Dr. Westlake."

I took a hand from the wheel and put it over hers. "If it hadn't been me, it would have been something else."

The whole saga of Lorie's relations with Caleb was clear to me now. It was touching, as all stories of thwarted young love are touching. But it wasn't my chief concern at the moment. Disliking the role I had to play, I eased the conversation back to Ernesta.

"You'll tell your mother the news when you see her?"

"Of course."

"She threatened to break with you entirely if you married Caleb, didn't she?"

"She threatened, but she won't do it." Lorie's voice was hard. "I'm grownup now, anyway. She can't rule my life. It isn't as if she even trusted me."

"Trusted you?"

"She doesn't trust me. I know she doesn't. And if she doesn't trust me, I don't have any obligations to her."

"What makes you think she doesn't trust you?"

"I just know."

I said quietly: "You know something else about your mother too, don't you?"

"Something else?" Her eyes, suddenly on their guard, flashed up to meet mine. "What do you mean?"

I came out with it then. "You know, for example, that she's been in Skipton when she was meant to be in New-York."

A GASP, almost like a sob, broke from her. "That's not true."

"It is, Lorie. That's why you lied about the cigarette butt. You hadn't been in the saw-mill for weeks. But you knew your mother had been there Saturday night, and you pretended you'd smoked the cigarette there—to protect her."

The old haunted expression was in her eyes. I hated doing this to her.

She said: "I don't know what you're talking about. Why should Mother—?"

"If you go on denying it, you'll make me think she's tied up with the murders. After all, if she'd come back for some innocent reason, there'd be no harm in admitting it, would there?"

"But—"

"Tell me, Lorie. I called her New York hotel. I know she checked out Friday afternoon. The whole story'll break, anyway. It's

much better this way—between you and me.”

In a small, icy voice, she said: “Mother had nothing to do with the murders.”

“You know why she came back, then?”

“Yes.” She swung round to me. “It was mean, not like her. But she’s hipped on that one subject. I wouldn’t give her my promise not to marry Caleb. She was terrified I’d go ahead in spite of her, and she wanted to put things to the test. That’s why she pretended to be in New York. She came back to spy on Caleb and me.”

“How did you know she came back?”

“I saw her. Friday night. After Caleb had left me. I was coming home through the woods. I crossed the back trail that leads up to the sawmill. I saw a car’s headlights. I wondered who it could be. I slipped back behind the trees. Then I saw Mother’s car. I saw her at the wheel. I saw her drive up to the sawmill.”

She added softly: “I saw her again Saturday night too. After the—the twins died, after you’d all gone home, I couldn’t sleep. At about four I got up and went down to sit on the terrace. I heard a car coming down the trail. The headlights were off but there was a moon, and I saw the car—Mother’s car—slip by.”

We reached the turn-off to Breakneck Hill. I swung into it. My theory was right, then. Almost certainly Ernesta had been in the sawmill on Saturday evening while the picnic was going on. Almost certainly she had been there when the twins, George Raynor, Dr. Jessup, and Love Drummond had broken in on its mysteries.

But what were the mysteries of the sawmill, those mysteries which now seemed definitely to implicate Ernesta? What in the sawmill could have been so important that five of Ernesta’s neighbors had to be killed in cold blood?

Cold blood. A new thought brought me a stirring of uneasy excitement. Both Lorie and Phoebe had told me that Ernesta was the one member of the family who had always been haunted by the specter of her mother’s madness. Perhaps she had been obsessed with this terror because she thought she could trace the seeds of the same madness in herself. After all, her mother had been forty-seven when the first attack came. Ernesta was exactly forty-seven now. What if her fears had preyed on her mind to such an extent that they had become an actuality? She was going to have a baby. That in itself was enough to unsettle a woman of her age. Coupled with memories of her mother and her exaggerated anxiety that Lorie might marry Caleb against her will, it might have unhinged her mind.

With a vividness that was rather awful, I imagined Ernesta, goaded by neurotic sus-

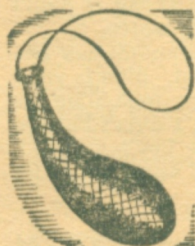
picious, returning to Skipton to spy on her daughter. I imagined her hiding in the sawmill, struggling against the furies of her own coming insanity. I imagined happy, laughing voices drifting up to her from the picnic ground, and then the lilting melody of that insidious song:

*I’ll sing you one-O,
Green grow the rushes-O.
What is your one-O? . . .*

It is impossible to guess what happens in someone else’s mind. Perhaps that song had some half-forgotten connection for Ernesta with her mother, the mother who went mad and tried to kill the man she loved. Perhaps that was the moment when insanity had finally engulfed Ernesta and the song had given her mania a pattern.

*One is one
And all alone
And ever more shall be-O.*

CHAPTER XX



I GLANCED at Lorie, sitting pale and tense at my side. My thoughts had taken me down dark channels where I could not have her follow me.

I said: “Then you think your mother came back just to spy on you and Caleb?”

“I know it’s true.”

“It isn’t just that you hope it’s true?”

“It’s got to be true,” she whispered. “What other explanation could there be?”

From the way she said it, I could tell she too was tormented by doubts, but I could also tell that she would never admit to them. A blight had fallen between us—that blight which sooner or later tainted every conversation in Skipton nowadays. We rode in uneasy silence. And then, ahead, halfway into the ditch at one side of the road, we saw Ernesta’s black sedan.

The flat was in one of the rear wheels. I changed the tire for the spare while Lorie made an ineffectual pretense of helping. She was obviously relieved when the job was completed and we could make the return journey in separate cars.

She went ahead, driving down the steep incline at a reckless speed. When I reached the main road she was out of sight.

I started back toward Skipton. I paid no attention to the parched August countryside which stretched around me, dappled with the long shadows of late afternoon. I was thinking of Ernesta Bray somewhere above me on

the mountainside striding home through the woods. Ernesta who had pretended to be innocently in New York collecting her restrung jade from Tiffany's, and who then had pretended with a deviousness that was thoroughly terrifying that she was returning to Skipton.

The image of her, striding through the woods, grew clearer and clearer in my mind. She no longer looked like the Ernesta I knew. She had become a portentous figure of doom. And, quirkishly, chanting along in rhythm to her imagined strides, came the song. It was almost as real to me as if I were actually hearing someone whispering it slyly behind my shoulder:

*I'll sing you six-O,
Green grow the rushes-O.
What is your six-O?
Six for the six proud walkers.*

The song and the puppet image of Ernesta were still jerking their way through my thoughts when I noticed the smoke. I had turned a corner in the winding road leading to Skipton, and suddenly that heavy gray pall became visible hanging over the treetops on the mountain flank to my left. I could trace a red pulsing in the center of the smoke too, and then a spire of flame thrust up into the blue sky.

Dread of a forest fire lurks in the back of everyone's mind in a country community. This one was not yet large, but, remembering the aridity of the summer, I watched the smoke with mounting anxiety. Skipton was still new to me. I could not gauge the location of the fire with any accuracy, but it was dangerously near the village. I was sure of that.

I pressed down on the accelerator. The fire fighters would already be out, but man power would always be needed.

Another turn brought Ernesta's car into view. It was parked in the middle of the road, and Lorie was standing by its side. When she saw me she waved. I stopped. She ran to the car, clutching my arm through the open window. Her eyes were dark with fear.

"It's right behind our house. Up by the sawmill. It's spreading through the woods. And Mother's up there."

Her fingers dug into my arm. "Follow me. I know a back trail."

She ran to Ernesta's car and shot off down the road. Infected by her anxiety, I followed. The song and the image of Ernesta were still in my mind. But now there were flames too; flames sprouting from the sawmill which had kept its secret so well; flames encircling Ernesta as she stumbled through the tangled undergrowth.

Lorie was driving wildly. Suddenly she swung off the road into a trail to the left. I turned too. As our cars lurched up the overgrown track, wisps of smoke blew around the treetops above us and I could hear the sound of the fire—that sinister roar like the hum of a giant swarm of bees.

We were headed directly toward the fire. In a few moments I heard confused shouts and caught glimpses of active, running figures.

Lorie stopped her car. I did too. Together we hurried along the trail toward the fire fighters.

THE slight evening breeze came from behind us, and the main body of the fire was sweeping away from the village up the side of the mountain. This was only a minor tributary of the conflagration which had already been stamped out.

But the ground we ran across was black and charred.

Ahead, a group of men from the village under the supervision of a state trooper were beating out the remaining cores of flame with spades and brooms. Lorie went to one of them.

"Joe, where did it start?"

He passed a hand over his sweating face and said:

"Up by the sawmill, Lorie. The sawdust pile, they think. Some crazy fool must have dropped a match."

"It's getting under control?"

"Seems that way. There's the troopers, the inspector from Grovestown, and pretty near the whole village up fighting. They stopped it spreading down the valley. Ain't no danger to your house, no more."

I asked:

"Know where the inspector is?"

He nodded to the right.

"Likely he's over by the mill. That's where the main fire is. There's a whole bunch of them there."

Lorie and I hurried on. There were dozens of fire fighters, and the fire had been checked with admirable efficiency.

It was still climbing the mountain, but the danger of a really serious outbreak seemed slight.

Almost before I realized it, we reached the picnic ground. It was a scene of desolation. The chokecherry saplings and the young pines had been burned out. One large pine was still alight, blazing and crackling like a huge candle.

The ground was hot and still pulsing with red.

We picked our way through the smoldering weeds toward the mill. To our right the sawdust pile had been transformed into a glowing inferno of heat. Beyond it, already

no more than a ruin, loomed the charred skeleton of the mill.

A group of eight or ten people were collected in the clearing in front of it. There was something about them, a sort of unnatural stillness, which told me instantly that something more than the fire was wrong. They were huddled with their backs to us, and they seemed to be looking down at something that was responsible for the extraordinary silence.

I caught a glimpse of Inspector Cobb's broad back in the group. At first I thought all the others were men too. Then, as we got nearer, I noticed the small figure of Phoebe Stone.

Before we reached the group she turned and saw us.

She stared at Lorie, and her face was the face of someone who had looked on the ultimate horror.

With little jerky steps she came running toward us.

"Don't go there, Lorie." She clutched her niece's arm and started to drag her away. "Lorie dear, come home."

Something in her voice sent a chill up my spine.

I gazed at her. So did Lorie.

I said:

"What's the matter?"

"Yes," broke in Lorie urgently. "What's happened, Aunt Phoebe?"

Phoebe put up a hand to cover her eyes. "We should have known from the beginning that it would happen. We should have known from—the six proud walkers."

"Mother!" The word burst from Lorie. "Aunt Phoebe, is it Mother?"

The image was back in my mind, that terrible image of Ernesta encircled in flames, stumbling blindly forward.

Phoebe was whispering:

"She had almost reached the mill. She had almost got home."

Thinly Lorie said:

"In the fire? Burned?"

My mental image of Ernesta had violently changed. She wasn't Ernesta any more. She was a wild, nightmare figure of a mad woman who had killed five people and was hurling herself into the very heart of the flames.

Phoebe's face was gray as the incinerated weeds at her feet. "It wasn't the fire, Lorie. They found her on the trail beyond the mill. The flames had gone right over her. But it wasn't the fire. They could tell."

"Tell what, Phoebe?" I asked harshly.

She looked up at me, and the horror in her eyes seemed alive.

"It must have happened before the fire. Someone must have crept up behind her. They could tell from her head. She had been hit . . . and hit . . ."

Part 6: one is one and all alone

CHAPTER XXI



FOR a moment the news stunned me, not only because it was so terrible, but because it proved how wrong my deductions had been. I had built Ernesta up in my mind as an insane murderess. Now she had turned out to be just another victim. The real murderer was still as

shadowy a figure as he had ever been, someone who seemed to know everything and could strike wherever and whenever he wanted. He must have overheard Ernesta's call to Lorie on the party line. He must have been waiting there by the sawmill for this sixth victim whom he had chosen to represent the six proud walkers. As I stared at the little group huddled in front of us, it seemed impossible to me that we should ever find a sane motive for the killings. And yet the sight of the ruined building reminded me that Ernesta, like the other victims, had been at the mill Saturday night. Did Cobb's theory still hold? Whatever the reason for Ernesta's secret return to Skipton, had she been killed merely because she had seen the forbidden thing in the mill? And had the murderer postponed killing her until her death fitted into its logical sequence in the song?

I felt Phoebe's hand on my arm. "I'm taking Lorie home, Hugh. I'll be there with her if you need me."

I said without thinking: "You'd better tell Renton, too."

"Renton? Why Renton?"

Phoebe looked blank, and I realized that I was still the only person in Skipton who knew of the marriage.

"Never mind," I said. "I'll do it."

As she moved away with her niece, I crossed to Inspector Cobb, who stood in the center of the group of village men. I hated having to look at Ernesta, but it had to be done. What Phoebe said was all too right. Ernesta had been struck on the back of the head, far more savagely than the other victims. Almost certainly the blows themselves and not the fire had been responsible for her death. A coat had been put over the body. I replaced it and stood up. As I did so, Dan Leaf arrived with two stretcher men. They took Ernesta away.

Cobb and I walked together out of earshot of the others. The inspector was obviously at the end of his tether.

"Must have started the fire to try to destroy the body, Westlake."

"Why would he want to destroy the body? He didn't destroy the others. It's more likely he started the fire to destroy the sawmill."

"The sawmill," he repeated blankly. "What in the name of glory could have been in the sawmill?"

That, of course, was the unanswerable question.

Now the body was gone, the group of men were moving off to help with the fire fighting. From their leisurely, almost listless pace, it was obvious that the danger was over and the fire virtually under control. Cobb stared down at the charred grass at his feet.

"Guess I was wrong again, Westlake. It's got to be a crazy motive. Mrs. Bray only fits in the pattern on account of she was fond of walking. She wasn't even here Saturday night."

"Matter of fact, she was. Lorie saw her. She came back secretly Friday night. Lorie saw her again Saturday. Both times she was either coming from or going to the sawmill."

Cobb's blue eyes stared in unwinking astonishment.

"What she come back for?"

"Lorie thinks it was to spy on her and Caleb, to see whether they'd try to elope while they thought she was away. But it doesn't really matter why she came back now. What matters is that she chose the sawmill for her hideout."

"So she was the one who dropped that cigarette butt?"

I nodded.

Cobb glanced at the burned remains of the mill and the cottage. "Looks now like we're never going to find out what was in the mill." He paused. "Talk to Mrs. Raynor and Forbes about Friday?"

"Yes."

"Did they see anything that helps?"

"Nothing—except a rat. They must have left before Ernesta showed up."

"A rat." Cobb gave a frustrated laugh. "Maybe that's it, Westlake. Maybe there's this homicidal rat used to live in the barn and didn't like people disturbing its privacy."

"And didn't like music, either."

"Yeah. That's it." He shrugged. "Well, they don't need us up here. Those troopers have the fire licked. Isn't much to do, but at least we can get down to the Bray house and find out more about what Mrs. Bray's been up to."

Phoebe was alone in the Bray living room. She was sitting in one of Ernesta's green

brocade chairs. With her untidy gray hair and haunted face she looked completely out of place in that elegant setting.

"Lorie's upstairs. I made her rest. It won't do her any good, but one has to suggest something." She stared at Cobb challengingly. "Does this have to go on and on, Inspector? Isn't there something you can do?"

Cobb said awkwardly: "We're doing all we can, ma'am."

"Matter of fact, Phoebe," I said, "we've come here now because we want to find out about what Ernesta was doing. You feel up to answering questions?"

"What is there to say about Ernesta? She went to New York to shop and get her jade. She came back. She got a flat. She walked home across the mountain. She—" Phoebe put a hand up to her forehead.

"It's not as simple as that, Phoebe. Ernesta went to New York, yes. But she came back here again Friday night."

Phoebe stared. "Friday?"

"You didn't know?"

"Of course I didn't know, and I don't believe it. She wasn't here at the house. Where did she stay?"

"We don't know. Maybe in one of the nearby towns. But we do know she went to the mill Friday night and again Saturday night."

"But how do you know?"

"Lorie saw her."

"Lorie didn't tell me."

"She wasn't going to tell anyone. I made her admit it."

Phoebe got up and glanced from Cobb to me. "But why would Ernesta have done something so strange?"

"There's quite a lot you don't know about Ernesta. Did you know, for example, that she'd been married to Renton for three months?"

"To Renton? Married? Why, I knew they—"

"She'd been keeping it a secret because she was afraid Lorie would use it as an excuse to marry Caleb. There's something else. Ernesta was going to have a baby and went to New York to see a doctor. At least that's what she told Renton. Maybe there wasn't any more truth in it than in the reason she gave you for the trip."

Phoebe made a bewildered gesture. "But why didn't Ernesta tell me all this? I was her sister. I—"

"She was probably afraid it would get back to Lorie. But that doesn't matter right now, Phoebe. We're trying to piece together what she did. She went to New York Wednesday. She came back Friday. She went to the sawmill. She either stayed there or went away again and came back Saturday. She left the

mill again Saturday night very late. Where she went, we don't know. We don't know anything more until she called about the flat tire this afternoon." I paused. "When she called, why didn't Lorie warn her how dangerous it would be walking home alone over the mountain?"

"She couldn't. Ernesta didn't make the call herself."

I STARED then. "She didn't?"

"You know there's no phone anywhere near Breakneck. It was some farmer or someone passing in a truck. She asked him to deliver the message and started walking home."

I remembered then the phrase Lorie had used when she told me about the flat tire: *A call came through from Mother.* She hadn't said Ernesta herself had called. I had only assumed it. An idea began to stir. I put my hand in my pocket for a cigarette, and my fingers felt a small object. In the first second, it meant nothing. Then I realized it was the package which Dawn had thrown out of the window to me. I slid the object out of its wrapping and recognized it by touch as my daughter's red marble.

And suddenly a second idea, even more revolutionary than the first, came racing into my mind.

I turned to Phoebe excitedly. "What color was Ernesta's jade?"

She looked at me as if I were crazy. "Why on earth do you want to know?"

"You always think of jade as green. Was it green?"

"No. It was very valuable and quite rare, I think. It was a sort of dark red."

"Like this?"

I brought Dawn's marble out of my pocket. I had never had more than a glimpse of it before. At first glance it was extraordinarily like a marble, round, smooth, about the same size. But its dark red surface gleamed with a richness that was far too beautiful for a child's marble and, as I turned it in my fingers, I saw that a tiny hole, for threading, had been drilled through its center.

I held the marble out to Phoebe. She peered at it with an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, yes. That's one of the beads from Ernesta's necklace."

Cobb stood at her side, staring down, his face scarred with astonishment. "In the name of glory! The marbles the kids played around with!"

I said: "You never found those marbles, did you, Cobb? They weren't in their pockets, and Leaf never found them by the duck-pond?"

"No. And I guess they slipped my mind. I never figured that—"

"—that the case could be solved by a

couple of marbles," I quoted. "Exactly. Neither did I. And I laughed at Dawn this morning when she said the marble was a clue. But don't you see it now? The kids found their marbles in the mill or near the mill Saturday night. George Raynor, Dr. Jessup, and Love went to the mill to pick up the children and saw the marbles too. But they none of them realized how important the marbles actually were." I turned to Phoebe. "Had anyone in Skipton seen Ernesta's jade?"

"No one but me, that I know of. She only got them a few weeks ago. They belonged to her husband's aunt. She died and left them to Ernesta. She never wore them because they had to be restrung."

"Get it, Cobb?" I was almost as breathless now as my daughter. "The thing in the sawmill. The thing that seemed innocent but really was terrifically dangerous. The thing was—the jade beads. The kids were killed because they found them. Love and George and Dr. Jessup were killed because they'd seen them. All three of them talked about the marbles. Sooner or later, if they'd stayed alive, they'd have talked about them in front of Phoebe, and Phoebe would have realized exactly what the marbles were. They were all killed because, if they hadn't been killed, they could have destroyed the murderer by one chance word."

Phoebe broke in: "But I don't understand, Hugh."

"The twins, George Raynor, Dr. Jessup, and Love Drummond all had to be killed, and someone else's death had to be fitted into the pattern also. The murderer thought of the song. It was an ideal framework to string the deaths on—a device that would carry us miles away from the true motive."

"But I still don't see."

"You must see. Ernesta didn't leave her car with a flat tire on Breakneck and make the telephone call this afternoon. The murderer did. Ernesta didn't drive her car down from the sawmill Saturday night. The murderer did. Lorie saw the car, but it was dark, and she didn't see the driver. She only assumed it was Ernesta. But she did see Ernesta in the car on Friday. Ernesta drove up to the mill on Friday to meet the murderer. Ernesta never came back."

"Westlake!" Cobb took a quick step toward me.

"The jade, Phoebe," I said. "Don't you understand? The jade necklace was very valuable. And it must have broken. Ernesta would never have left the beads lying around the sawmill if she'd been alive."

"Then . . . ?"

"That's it. And if one of the White kids hadn't had a crush on Dawn and given her one of his marbles we'd never have known.

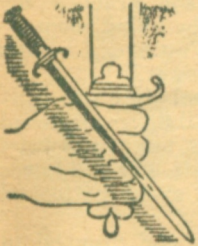
The thing in the mill was Ernesta. On Saturday night, during the picnic, Ernesta was lying dead in the mill. And the twins, George Raynor, Dr. Jessup, and Love Drummond had the clue."

I paused, staring down with awed fascination at the little red bead which had proved so much.

"That's what I meant about another death having to be fitted into the pattern. Ernesta wasn't the last to be killed. She was the first. And that's why the fire was started—to keep us from telling that the body had been dead several days. Ernesta wasn't the six proud walkers. If we have to fit her into the song, she was:

*"One is one
And all alone
And ever more shall be-O."*

CHAPTER XXII



THE problem which had seemed insoluble a few minutes before was astonishingly simple to me now. Both Cobb and Phoebe were watching me with a sort of awed wonder.

I said: "I don't think Ernesta lied about anything. I think she just didn't tell all the truth. She went to New York to pick up her jade, the way she told Phoebe. She also went to see Dr. Delacroix, the way she told Renton. She even sent a jar of caviar to make sure the picnic would be a success without her. The one thing she kept to herself was that she intended to sneak back here secretly on Friday night when we all thought she was still in New York. What her object for coming back was, I don't know. But it's easy to see what happened."

Cobb said: "She went to the sawmill."

"Yes. She arrived there, went to the upstairs room and waited, smoking a cigarette. Probably she had a date. The person she had planned to meet came. Either the whole thing had been a calculated plot to murder her, or there was some unexpected quarrel. The necklace was broken in the struggle. The beads scattered unnoticed on the floor. Ernesta was killed."

I went on: "Say the murderer didn't know that Renton and Avril used the mill for their rendezvous. He certainly didn't know that we would decide to change the picnic ground and go up there on Saturday. To him the mill would have seemed as safe a place as any in Skipton to conceal the body until he had worked out a plan for disposing of it."

"And Mrs. Bray's car too?" asked Cobb. "Yes. The tracks we saw in the mill were probably made by Ernesta's car. She probably parked it there and the murderer decided it was the best place to leave it."

Phoebe was still staring at me. Cobb had taken out his brier pipe and was putting it between his teeth.

"The murderer was in a spot," I said. "Everyone thought Ernesta was in New York. If her body was found, the first thing we'd have done was to investigate her reason for coming back early. That would have led us directly to him. Ernesta was due to return today. He must have decided to fake the death so that it would look as if she had come home today as scheduled and had been killed walking home. He probably planned to use the trick he used eventually. He probably planned to leave the car and the body at the mill until today; then to drive the car up to Breakneck; to send the phony message about the flat tire; and then to start a forest fire. If it had worked, there was a very good chance that we'd have accepted her death as an accident, never have checked on her movements in New York, and never dreamed that she had, in fact, been murdered three days ago."

Cobb was sucking ferociously on his pipe. "You've got it, Westlake. Pretty sure you've got it. That's the way he was figuring on fixing things. Then it all went wrong because on Saturday, instead of going to Mrs. Bray's regular picnic ground, you all went up to the clearing near the mill. The murderer was on the picnic, of course. He saw the White kids going off to the mill. He saw George Raynor, Dr. Jessup, and Miss Drummond go after them. He heard them talking about the marbles when they came back and realized they'd found the beads from the necklace. The body itself had been hidden somewhere safe, of course, maybe in the sawdust pile."

"Sure," I said. "And once they came back to the picnic chattering about the marbles, he saw he'd have to kill five more people unless he wanted to run the risk of almost certain exposure. Lorie was singing the song while the twins were away. Dawn had already made up her jingle about throwing the 'horrid White boys' in the pond. Those two things must have given him his idea. The people he had to kill could be fitted into the pattern of the song. He could use the song to make us think his necessary murders were the work of a senseless maniac. He could also use the song to make us think that Ernesta's murder was the last in the chain instead of the first."

Cobb was looking at me grimly. "I guess that covers 'most everything, don't it? Lorie saw the car coming down from the mill Saturday night. That's easy enough to explain.

With the twins killed, he couldn't risk leaving Mrs. Bray's car up at the mill. He waited till late and then drove it someplace safe until it was time to plant it with the flat tire on Breakneck."

"Sure," I said.

None of us spoke for a moment. The quietness of the room was charged with suspense. Suddenly Phoebe said:

"But who did Ernesta come back to meet? What happened between them? Why was she killed?"

Those, of course, were the points that remained obscure. We knew everything now except the all-important fact of who had murdered Ernesta and why.

At that moment the telephone in the hall rang. The three of us exchanged tentative glances. I was nearest to the door. As I stepped into the hall the phone shrilled again.

I picked up the receiver. I said: "Hello."

A VOICE came from the other end of the wire. It was Rebecca's voice. I recognized it at once. But it made my heart turn over inside me because it was shrill and incoherent with panic.

"Dr. Westlake, thank the Lord that you... Come quick. You got to come quick."

"What is it, Rebecca?"

"Dawn," she gasped. "They got Dawn. I tried, Dr. Westlake. Honest I tried. But they got her."

"I'll—I'll be right over."

As I dropped the receiver back on the stand, fear was like ice in my veins. I heard sounds behind me. I turned. Cobb was at the door of the living room, staring at me questioningly.

I grabbed his arm. "It's Dawn," I managed. "Something's happened to Dawn."

The inspector's face crumpled with anxiety. Simultaneously we ran to the front door. Ernesta's black sedan was parked outside where Lorie must have left it. The keys were in the ignition. Cobb jumped into the driver's seat. I clambered in next to him. He started the car roaring down the hill.

The moments of our drive to my house were the worst I have ever experienced. Rebecca's choked, despairing voice still echoed in my ears. Now that it was perhaps too late, I saw how inevitable the danger for Dawn had been. Earlier that afternoon she had prattled about her marble when all the suspects were collected outside my door. The moment the murderer knew that Bobby White had given her one of the beads, Dawn must have been sentenced to death. She was an even greater menace to him than the other victims had been, for she had not only possessed one of the beads, she was already calling it a clue.

Sick with fear, I realized then why the

murderer had specified over the phone that Lorie should select me to help her retrieve Ernesta's car. He had wanted me safely out of the way in order to leave the field clear for his seventh and most cold-blooded crime.

And I had abandoned Dawn with no one to take care of her but Rebecca who was loyal as a spaniel but no match for the man who had killed six people in three days.

I was tortured by self-recriminations. Why had I insisted upon staying on in Skipton? Why hadn't I taken Rebecca's advice and fled back to Kenmore two days ago? Why, oh why had I gone off with Lorie to get Ernesta's car?

We reached my house and, leaving the car, I dashed up the path to the front door. It was thrown open by Rebecca, and the sight of her only added to my panic. She was in a state of almost complete collapse. Her large bosom was heaving, her apron and her bare arms were stained with blood, and her eyes were the eyes of a wild woman.

Babbling incoherently, she grabbed my arm and dragged me into the living room.

"She don't answer, Dr. Westlake. I hollers her name and she don't answer."

Dimly, as through cheesecloth, I was conscious of my daughter's small figure stretched out on the couch. She was wearing a brief blue dress which left her bare legs and knees exposed. To my tormented eyes, she looked tiny and unreal as a doll.

I stumbled to the couch and dropped to her side, putting my ear against her breast. I could only hear the pounding of my own heart. I groped for her pulse, but I could feel nothing except the blood racing through my own fingers.

"Let me, Westlake."

Cobb was gently pushing me away. He lowered himself beside the couch and took Dawn's wrist. I tried to watch him, but I couldn't. Rebecca was whimpering and wringing her hands. With all the strength left in me, I forced myself not to listen to her.

A great gap of time seemed to stretch between the moment when Cobb pushed me aside and the moment when finally I heard his voice murmuring:

"She's okay, Westlake. Unconscious, but her pulse is okay."

I turned to look at his tentatively smiling face, which seemed to have lost ten years since I had seen it a few moments before. I felt twenty years younger myself.

In control again, I ran to the closet, picked up my medical bag and returned. As I examined Dawn the last vestiges of anxiety left me. The inspector had been right. Dawn was breathing regularly and, even as I held her wrist between my fingers, the pulse strengthened. There was no sign of any

wound, no drop of blood, but behind her left ear was an ugly swelling from a blow which, had it been struck an inch or so higher, might have proved fatal.

I applied a few simple restoratives, and miraculously the color crept back into her cheeks. A minute or two later her eyelids fluttered open. She stared up at me with a smile that was almost triumphant.

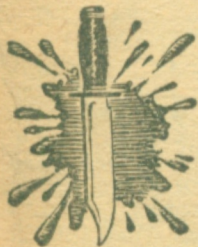
"I told you I had the clue," she said. "I knew it wasn't a real marble. There was a hole through it. It was a jewel, wasn't it? A jewel of great price. And he killed everyone to get it."

Having delivered herself of this colorful though inaccurate conception of the case, my daughter closed her eyes and gave a little sigh.

In a few seconds she was fast asleep.

She did not even wake as I carried her upstairs and slipped her into her bed.

CHAPTER XXIII



REBECCA'S recovery was even more spectacular than my own. When I returned downstairs she was sitting in the living room with Cobb, grinning contentedly and completely oblivious to the charnel appearance of her blood-stained apron.

She glanced up at me eagerly. "She all right now, Doctor, ain't she?"

"Sure. When she wakes up, she'll be as good as new."

"If anything happened to that child, I could never have rested easy in my bed." Rebecca nodded her head darkly. "No, sir. And me acting so foolish when I was meant to be protecting her."

Until then both Cobb and I had been too obsessed by our fears for Dawn to investigate exactly what had happened. Now it was of the utmost importance to me to know. Rebecca was only too eager to hold the floor.

"About half an hour ago it was, I guess, Doctor. The telephone rings. I go to answer it, and it's this man's voice and he says: 'You the cook at the Westlake house?' An' I says: 'Yes, an' what's it to you?' An' he says: 'I'm one of the inspector's men, an' the inspector tole me to call and say you're to come right up to the Bray house on account of something important and the doctor says you're to come.'"

She shrugged large shoulders. "I must of been out of my mind, Doctor, paying attention to some phony story like that. But he goes on and on and he sounds like he's a real policeman and something's happened and you

needs me. So finally I say: 'Sure, then, I'll be right up.' And Dawn's upstairs in her room, fooling with that owl my cousin brought her. And I calls up the stairs that I'm stepping out a minute and she's not to leave her room whatever happens. And she calls down: 'Okay, Rebecca.' And I makes sure all the doors is locked. Then I steps out of the kitchen door and locks it behind me an' keeps the key in my hand an' starts up the road some toward the drive up to the Brays'."

I knew Rebecca well enough to realize that the story was going to be told her way. There was no possibility of cutting her short. I did my best to curb my impatience.

"An' there I am, Doctor, walkin' up the drive to the house the Brays got there. An' I'm halfway up when sudden it comes to me—like a premonition or something. Like it was a voice sayin': 'Rebecca, you're doing the wrong thing. That wasn't no policeman calling. That was some party trying to get you out of the way.' And, straightaway, before I hardly knows what's happening, I'm turned around and running back here fast as my legs would take me."

Carried away by the drama of her own story, Rebecca leaned forward, fixing Cobb with a bright, narrator's stare.

"Don't look nothing different about the house, Mr. Cobb, but there's still this voice tellin' me. An' I sneaks around to the kitchen door, real quiet, and I lets myself in. And the moment I come in the kitchen, I know on account of I can hear voices plain, Dawn's voice and some man's voice, and they're talkin' in the office. And I says to myself: I might of known with that child. She say so sweet and good: 'No, Rebecca, I promise I don't leave my room.' But she's a deep one and she's gotten this crazy notion she's a detecative or something. An' I might of known the minute my back was turned she'd be up to something crazy like letting any strange man as asks into the house and me away."

SHE paused for breath, crossing her arms over the sinister apron.

"I kep the carving knife right there in the drawer where I can put my hand to it. Real quiet, I tiptoe over and picks up the knife and creeps through the hall to the office door. The door's closed an' I waits there a minute, listening. An' I don't hear no more voices from inside. And I thinks maybe I was dreamin' 'em up, and that Dawn's upstairs in her room after all. And, just as I figures maybe I'll run upstairs, I hear this cry kind of from the office. A little kind of holler and then a thud like someone's falling on the floor."

Rebecca's mobile face was reliving the drama of that moment. I was reliving it too,

and it made me jittery with anxiety even though I knew the story had a happy ending.

"When I hears that holler, Doctor, I like about die. I grips the knife and I throws open the door, hollering myself like to bust my lungs. An' there's Dawn lying on the floor like she was a dead child. And there's this feller stooping over her. An' in his hand there's this big rolling pin I used when I'm rollin' out pastry for pies. An' I holler again. An' he swings around and he stares at me. Then he starts toward me with this rolling pin."

She nodded her head at me. "I sees red then, Doctor. I actually, positively sees red. Red all around me like it was swimming in the air somehow. An' I goes for him. I can't think of nothing but Dawn lying there and maybe dead an' it all being on account of my foolishness. An' I hardly know what I'm doing. Guess for a while in there I was clear out of my head. Then, after a time, I comes to myself an' I picks Dawn up an' carries her into the living room an' lays her down on the couch. Then I run to the phone an' I telephone for you to come."

I said: "But this man, Rebecca, he's the man who's killed all the others. Who is he? Tell us—who is he?"

Rebecca looked rather pained. "You know I don't know none of the folks around these parts, Dr. Westlake. And it weren't no time to go around askin' him his name."

"But what did he look like?" cut in Cobb quickly.

"Oh, he was just a feller. Kind of taller'n he was short an' . . ."

Cobb, his eyes bright with impatience, turned to me. "We'd better wake Dawn, Westlake. We've got to know who it is."

"Wake Dawn! What you want to wake that poor sleepin' child for? You can see for yourself who he is." A gleam of grim amusement showed in her eyes. "He ain't run away."

I stared at her. Then: "You mean . . .?"

"I tole you I sees red when I goes at him with that knife. I wasn't playin' with that knife, neither, no sir." Rebecca straightened a crease out of her lurid apron. "I just leaves him laying there on the floor in the office and turns the key on him."

Both Cobb and I jumped to our feet. Rebecca rose too. In spite of her regal bearing, faint anxiety showed in her eyes.

"Before you goes poking your noses in the office, Mr. Cobb, I ain't getting into no trouble for what I done?"

"Trouble," exploded Cobb. "You'll have a statue put up for you—six statues if you want them."

Rebecca seemed somewhat relieved and handed him a key.

"I wasn't intendin' nothing," she mur-

mured. "I was just thinking of Dawn laying there and it bein' my foolishness an' . . ."

We didn't wait for any more. We both ran out into the hall. Cobb's hand was shaky with anticipation as he inserted the key in the lock. He threw the door open. He stepped inside. I followed him.

Rebecca had certainly seen red all right. There must have been a terrific struggle. Chairs were overturned. The whole room was in chaos.

But I wasn't interested in the room. I was interested in the man lying motionless in a pool of his own blood in front of the desk.

Cobb and I moved tentatively toward him.

The inspector breathed: "In the name of glory, Westlake, it was—him."

I dropped to the man's side. Almost immediately I saw there was nothing that could be done for him.

Renton Forbes was mortally wounded.

CHAPTER XXIV



DAWN was still asleep when Cobb and I returned from Grovestown. Rebecca, who had been released without bail on a purely formal charge of assault, was in the kitchen being toasted as a heroine by a swarm of cousins. I had done what little I could for Renton Forbes

and had rushed him to the hospital. But there had never been a chance of saving his life. Before he died, however, he had regained consciousness long enough to answer questions. Skipton's reign of terror had no more mysteries.

I made drinks for the inspector and myself. Cobb still looked worn out, but the hard lines of anxiety had been smoothed from his face. He produced the inevitable briar pipe and watched me over it from blue, sober eyes.

"Well, Westlake, guess that about winds up that. We had the facts from the beginning. We just didn't fit them together right."

"I ought to have been able to," I said. "I knew Ernesta. I knew how Victorian she was about morals. I also knew how jealous she'd be of a man once he was her own property. It was natural for Lorie to think her mother came back to spy on her. But I should have had the sense to realize Ernesta was more interested in her own love life than her daughter's."

Cobb nodded. "How did Mrs. Bray first get suspicious about her husband carrying on with Avril Lane?"

"Love Drummond made some crack that

started her wondering. Then she overheard Avril making the date with Renton for Friday at the sawmill. The Raynors and the Brays are on the same party line."

"Forbes tell you that?"

"Yes." I sipped my drink. "Everything Ernesta did fitted with her character. She'd married Renton because he fascinated her, the way he fascinated most women, but she wasn't the type to stand any nonsense from a man. She was appalled at the idea that her husband might be having an affair with a cheap little number like Avril before the marriage had even been announced. Some women would have come right out there and then and challenged her husband. But Ernesta never acted unless she was absolutely sure of her ground. That's why she thought up that elaborate idea of a trip to New York."

I paused. "She had to go, of course, to see Dr. Delacroix. She really was having a baby, and the fact of the baby made the idea of Renton's outside amour even more shocking to her. So she gave him a chance to meet Avril, sneaked back and hid upstairs in the mill to overhear what went on. If the meeting was innocent, she'd have spared herself from making false accusations. If it wasn't, she'd be able to confront Renton with the evidence of her own eyes."

Cobb chewed on his pipe. "She arrived at the mill before Renton and Avril. We got that figured wrong because Lorie wasn't definite about the time she'd seen her mother's car. She must have been upstairs when they came. Maybe she couldn't hear so well up there, so she tiptoed down the outside staircase. Avril and Renton heard her. Renton Forbes went out to investigate. He told Avril it was only a rat, but he'd seen Mrs. Bray and realized he'd been caught red-handed. I guess he managed to get rid of Avril, and then he and Mrs. Bray met. Right?"

"Sure. Ernesta didn't break in on the two of them. She had too much pride to make a scene in front of Avril. But once Avril was gone, she confronted Renton. She was seething with righteous indignation. She told him exactly how she'd set the trap for him. She told him she realized he'd only married her for her money and announced that she was going to sue for divorce immediately. Renton said he tried to argue with her, tried to explain that Avril meant nothing to him and that he was merely trying to disentangle himself from a relationship which had only been for laughs anyway. But he cut no ice with Ernesta. She was through and he knew it. He'd married a meal ticket and lost it in less than three months."

Cobb grunted. "Seems like his financial affairs were a lot worse than anyone suspected. There were a terrific amount of debts,

and he stood to lose the house and everything he possessed if he didn't get money and get it quick. He'd thought he was sitting pretty with Mrs. Bray and, just because he hadn't been smart enough to break with Avril in time, he'd bungled the whole set-up." He shrugged. "Must have been a big temptation to a guy like Forbes. Once Mrs. Bray left that mill, he'd be penniless and discredited. But he was still her husband and she'd made no will. The only way he could benefit financially out of her any more was to kill her."

"He told me it was an accident, that there was a struggle and she fell and hit her head. But I doubt it. Renton was unscrupulous, and he was a gambler. I think you're right. I think he realized his only chance was to murder her. He probably thought out his whole plan for hiding the body and starting the fake forest fire while they were still arguing. He slipped up on the necklace, of course. He didn't notice it break in the struggle, and he didn't realize how terribly important it was until the White twins had found the beads and it was too late."

COBB had taken the unlit pipe from his mouth and was rubbing his hand around the bowl. "He was a gambler all right. Most murderers in his shoes would have given up once the White kids found the beads. But not Renton Forbes. Five more people had to be killed. Okay. So he killed five more people and managed to make his position even safer by building up an imaginary maniac who was hipped on 'Green Grow the Rushes-O.'"

He was staring ahead of him reflectively. "Know something, Westlake? I think there was a lot more back of his use of the song that we never got. I mean, I don't think he was just trying to build up a maniac in a void. He could have done that without fitting the deaths with the song. I've been thinking. Lorie was crazy about that song, wasn't she?"

I nodded.

"And probably Forbes had found out from Ernesta about the streak of insanity in the family. I've got a hunch Forbes was working around to throwing the blame on Lorie. Maybe a hint here, a hint there that Lorie was acting kind of queer. Then, maybe, one morning we'd have woken up to find Lorie'd 'committed suicide' during the night. That way he could have made her the scapegoat and also picked up her share of the Bray money." He grinned rather sheepishly. "Of course, Westlake, that's only theory. Guess we won't ever know now what might have happened. But that's kind of how I figure it."

"You could be right."

His face grew grave again. "And you realize how he almost got away with it, West-

lake? If Dawn hadn't been given that marble, maybe he would have. Maybe he'd have gone on to kill Lorie and we'd never have caught him."

I let the happenings of the last few days pass in review through my mind. "Renton was smart enough and daring enough to have planned something like that. He was smart, the way he handled me. He knew he'd have to announce the secret marriage sooner or later if he was to claim Ernesta's money, so he told me about it just at the moment when he could use it to show he had no motive for wanting to kill George Raynor. The way he killed Raynor was certainly daring too. Realize how he managed it?"

"I've been thinking about that. He got himself a perfect alibi for that afternoon with some folks in Beldon Falls. I checked it."

"He had an alibi for the afternoon, sure. That's where the daring came in. By afternoon, Raynor was already as good as dead. Renton hit him on the head and turned on the gas while I was actually in the house upstairs in Avril's study. When I came down, Renton was waiting for me outside the porch, and I naturally joined him. I never dreamed George was lying unconscious in the kitchen. Of course, killing Love and Dr. Jessup was a

cinch for him. As one of the leaders of the patrol, he could go anywhere and do anything without arousing suspicion."

My old friend sat in silence for a while, fingering his pipe. Then his steady blue gaze moved to my face, and there was a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"Well, Westlake, you picked a good place for a vacation, didn't you? A nice quiet time. That's what you've had."

"Yes," I said. "A nice quiet time."

One of Rebecca's innumerable cousins had turned on the radio in the kitchen. Strains of "Love's Old Sweet Song" floated in to us. Cobb hummed along with the orchestra for a few bars.

"Pretty tune, that. Mrs. Cobb used to sing it when I first started going with her. Real pretty."

"At least it's a change."

"From 'Green Grow the Rushes-O.'" Cobb nodded. "Guess that one should have been called 'Death's Old Sweet Song.'" He frowned. "Come to think of it, I never did hear the tune of that song. Was it pretty too?"

"You'll never know," I said firmly. "Not if I can help it. That's one song that's never going to be sung around my house."

PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB THE CORPSE!



CHRISTOPHER KENT, who was worth a fortune, stood in front of a hotel one morning with nothing in his pockets. He was hungry, and it had begun to snow. But there was a reason why he couldn't get a penny or disclose his identity for forty-eight hours, a reason which made it logical that he might be able to wangle a breakfast in the hotel. If he simply strolled into the restaurant and gave the number of a certain room—

It worked—up to a point. Through a curious series of accidents, he was compelled to go to the room whose number he had given. There was a "Do not disturb" sign outside—and a murdered woman inside!

That's the start of an exciting novel whose ingenious twists and turns have hardly begun when Kent takes his troubles to Dr. Gideon Fell. The case has sudden, amazing developments which make their inevitable appeal to Dr. Fell's fancy, and his brilliant solution of the crime makes **TO WAKE THE DEAD**, by JOHN DICKSON CARR, one of the cleverest and most entertaining of detective novels! It's in our next issue—look forward to it for a reading feast of thrills and suspense!



One corner of the sharp-bladed shovel sank into Flemm's right shoulder

SOUR GRAPES

By JOHN E. LANG

Hank Collins faces a desperate killer, and meets the grim threat to himself and a buddy in an unexpected fashion!

HANK COLLINS put yesterday's newspaper down on his home-made kitchen table and relaxed in his old wicker rocker. The World War I wound in his left leg was bothering him slightly, but he still felt pretty contented with his fifty-nine years.

A few rays of the early morning August sun found their way past the foliage of the grape vine, through the open back door, onto his freshly waxed linoleum. That long trellised archway of grapes was Hank's particular pride and joy. Grapes the size of these this far north in Washington were something

to be proud of.

Suddenly part of the sun ray's were cut off by a shadow. Looking up, Hank saw a man of medium height in the doorway. There was a .45 Colt Shooting Master in the stranger's right hand. But it was the man's white, bony face, rather than the gun, that caused Hank's fingers to tighten on the arms of the rocker.

Hank looked from that grim, expressionless face to the photograph on the front page of the newspaper. There was no mistaking them. They were one and the same man.

A few of the details in the caption under that photograph raced through Hank's mind: "Harry Flemm. Age, 31. Escaped murderer. Last reported in Bellingham. Shot and killed 72-year-old confectionery store owner. Believed heading south towards King County on motorcycle stolen from Canadian Tourist. Vehicle easily identified. English B.S.A. One cylinder. Warning! Take no chances with this man. He is a known, cold-blooded killer. . . ."

Hank watched the hollow-cheeked Flemm ease himself into the room. He seemed to glide across the floor towards the table. His movements, Collins thought, were like those of the lizards that melted in and out of the rocks back up in the Skagit Range behind his small hillside farm.

FLEMM draped a leg over the table. Hank watched the man's eyes sweep around the room and he guessed pretty well just what his pallid-faced visitor was thinking. There was plenty of evidence around that this homestead was occupied by only one person. Flemm's gaze paused for a while on the newspaper with his photo on the front page.

"So, you know about me, eh, Gramps?" "Enough."

"So, that two-wheeled English puddle-jumper is hot, eh? I figured that and stopped ridin' it as soon as it got light. I pushed it off the road, up that bush lined path to your back gate."

"Uh-huh."

Flemm shifted to a more comfortable position. "Listen closely, Gramps. These are the plans I decided on while watching this dump from the bushes out there. First, I intend stayin' here 'til tonight. I'll also need three or four real good big meals while I'm here. Food has been my biggest worry since I went over the wall at the State hotel for naughty boys. And lastly, I'll take that old Overland

coupe of yours I saw out back. Of course, Gramps, you won't be in any condition to worry about anything when I leave. All that plain enough?"

"Very."

"Good. Now get busy cookin' up my first meal."

Hank nodded. He hauled himself to his feet and started to busy himself at the polished wood stove. His mind though certainly wasn't on his work.

Every once in awhile Hank peered out of the window beside his stove. He could see over his upper rail fence to the homestead above his on the gradually sloping hill. It belonged to his old World War I buddy, Joe Bradford. Joe was his only neighbor within four miles. The two homesteads were laid out side by side on the hill with about a hundred yards of scrub Douglas firs separating them.

Right now Hank could see old Bradford up on a stepladder picking his MacIntosh Reds. Joe was cursed with two rheumatic arms, and Hank concluded that his neighbor would be at his apple picking job all morning.

A sudden idea popped into Hank's brain. He pondered it a minute and then started limping back and forth, between the stove and the sink handpump, a lot slower than was really necessary. He kept rubbing his left leg as an excuse.

"Listen, Gramps! I'm really hungry," protested Flemm. "This meal can't be ready too soon to suit me."

"My leg." Hank rubbed it again. "You could bring me some potatoes from one of those boxes there by that back door."

Hank watched the escaped murderer slide off the table and back up to the boxes. Collins saw him hesitate for awhile between the two of them. He reached in finally and brought over four large potatoes.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Hank. "These are seed potatoes. The new ones are in that other box."

Flemm tossed the potatoes in the sink. "Spuds are spuds to me, Gramps. I picked these because they were cleanest." He backed up to the stove and, reaching down, picked up a thin piece of firewood. "Now you get this meal Grandpa. And get it quick. See? And get it by yourself. I'm no kitchen flunkey." He juggled the piece of firewood threateningly.

Hank nodded and limped around a little faster. It was with an effort that he withheld

the desire to smile right in the killer's face.

"So Mr. Flemm doesn't know seed potatoes from new ones, eh?" said Hank to himself. "That means that rural life is strange grounds for him—which suits my little plan just perfect."

WHILE the droopy-eyed Flemm was finishing the meal Hank had prepared the old homesteader went into the second part of his act. He started rolling a cigarette and purposely made his movements nervous and jerky.

"Somethin' troublin' you, Gramps?" Flemm wanted to know.

"Yes," said Hank. "My neighbor up there. We had a long confab last night. He knows I intended getting all my grapes picked today, come hell or atomic war. If he doesn't see me outside somewhere, he'll most likely come wandering down to see if something's wrong."

"Yeah?"

"I was worrying that you might get careless with that gun."

"Hmmm," said Flemm thoughtfully. "I guess we may as well avoid all the trouble we can. Go ahead and pick your grapes. But no funny stuff."

A few minutes later Hank was on the outside of his trellised archway. He was picking his big, yellow grapes and putting them in a large wicker basket. Flemm was seated inside the archway in the old rocker with a case of Hank's beer beside him. There was an open bottle in his left hand. The long-barreled .45 was still very prominent in the other.

Hank put a few of the yellow grapes into his mouth. After he spat out the seeds he spoke casually to his ever watchful guard.

"So, you don't like grapes, eh, Flemm?"

"Never did like 'em." Flemm waved the bottle of beer slowly. "You stick to your grapes. I'll stick to this."

When Hank had filled the wicker basket, he turned and glanced carelessly up the hill over the top of the Douglas firs. His neighbor was nowhere to be seen. Collins' heart gave a wild leap. He started rolling another cigarette in an effort to control himself. He was positive that his plan was working and that his neighbor was somewhere in the trees on the path that led down to the back gate at the end of the archway of grapes. Hank removed a large red handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"Getting warm," he said as he noticed the beady-eyed killer watching him suspiciously.

"Not in here, it ain't," Flemm returned smugly.

As Hank returned the handkerchief to his hip pocket he got a short glimpse of his neighbor on the outside of the fence near the back gate. Old Bradford waved once and then disappeared into the trees back in the direction of his own place.

Hank felt a surge of confidence sweep through him. Bradford must have seen the B.S.A. there at the back gate or he most likely would have come in. Joe had been a pretty sharp thinking buddy back there in '17, and the years hadn't dimmed his reasoning any. Hank recalled that on the preceding night they had sat drinking coffee and discussing the escaped Mr. Flemm. Hank concluded that if Bradford had noticed that distinctive B.S.A., he had guessed just about everything by now.

"Somethin' wrong, Gramps?" Flemm's ugly voice made Hank start.

"Uh?—Oh, no. No." He recovered quickly and resumed his grape picking. But a few minutes later, as he was spitting out some more pips, he saw something that put a chill cramp in his stomach.

Bradford was up on the hill, and he was walking away from his house back towards the trail. Joe wasn't going for help! He was returning back down the trail! This was something Hank hadn't figured on.

Hank concluded that Joe had returned to his own place for only one reason. To arm himself with his old Frontier Model .44 revolver.

FOR the first time since Flemm had appeared Hank forgot the fear he had for his own life. His neighbor and old buddy was walking unhesitatingly down that trail to try and help him. Hank thought of what might happen if Bradford, with his rheumatic arms and shaky hands, pitted himself against this hardened killer who was known for his marksmanship.

Hank had walked that path enough to know almost to the second how long it would take Joe to reach the place where the trail curved through the trees closest to the upper rail fence. Collins knew that anyone in the trail at that spot had a clear view through the trees of this whole side of his small clearing. When he figured Joe was at that particular point, Hank dropped the bunch of

grapes he was holding. He spun quickly and started off towards the toolshed.

The shed was built a short distance from the house and faced the rail fence. The shed door was open. Hank scurried inside just as the .45 boomed out behind him. A slug plowed through the grayed boards of the swinging door, inches from his head.

Hank peered through a knothole in the wall. He saw Flemm advancing carefully along the outside of the trelliswork.

"Well," said Hank quietly. "I got him out in the open. Joe will be able to see him. Know where he is. Bradford won't be walking into a blind setup."

Hank could see that Flemm was quite close, moving stealthily alongside the house. The trapped homesteader peered out through the open toolshed door towards the upper rail fence and his breath caught. Sitting on the top rail was Joe Bradford aiming the old .44 in Flemm's direction.

Hank's gnarled fingers gripped the handle of a spade as he heard the old gun roar out. He jerked his eyes back to the knothole just in time to see the slug plow into the house a few feet from Flemm's head. The killer spun quickly about and started back for the protection of the vine-covered archway.

Collins rushed from the toolshed swinging the spade as an athlete swings the sixteen-pound hammer. Before he could let it go, he saw Flemm toss a glance towards the fence and then throw a snap shot at Bradford. Out of the corner of his eye Hank saw his neighbor pitch forward onto his face.

With an oath Hank let the shovel go. It went true to the mark and one corner of its sharp, knifelike blade sank into Flemm's right shoulder. As the shovel struck, Hank grabbed a long-handled hoe by its blade and started towards the reeling killer.

Flemm was turning to retrieve the .45 which had been jolted from his grasp.

"No, you don't," said Hank with a snarl.

He threw himself forward, flat on his stomach, and swung the hoe in a vicious horizontal arc. The end of the handle smacked into the gun and knocked it through the grape vines into the archway. Flemm started for an opening in the trellis.

"And you don't do that either," gasped Hank.

On his hands and knees, he scurried forward and rammed the hoe handle between Flemm's legs. The killer hit the ground with a teeth-jarring thud

WITH his lips moving in silent curses Flemm slid his left hand under a whitewashed rock. He got shakily to his feet, raised the rock over his head, and then leaped towards the still crouching Collins.

Hank jabbed the blade of the hoe into the ground and held it with his left hand. He slipped his right hand halfway up the handle and then suddenly jerked the end of it into the air on a forty-five degree angle. It caught Flemm right in the pit of his stomach.

"Ever buck a line like that before?" grunted Hank as the killer pitched forward slowly onto his hands and knees. "And this," added Hank, "is what is called, taking a man out of the play—completely!" He took a short grip on the handle with both hands. There was a smart, sharp crack as the hoe end came down forcefully on the back of Flemm's head.

"Nice going, Hank."

Collins spun around to see Joe Bradford standing there. From a superficial wound over his left temple, a thin trickle of blood had run down his left cheek and coagulated. The two homesteaders grinned at each other.

Hank got a length of rope to truss up the unconscious Flemm. While he was explaining what had been happening, the victim opened his eyes and listened grimly.

"Hold it a minute, Gramps," Flemm said in a thin voice. "You talk as though this guy didn't wander down here on his own. That with me sittin' there watchin' you every minute, you got some sort of a message up there to him?"

"He did," Bradford answered. "These grapes are Hank's proudest crop. He knew that if he started picking them one month before they were ripe I, or any other farmer, would be curious enough to come down and find out the reason for such a crazy action."

"Not—not ripe?" There was a puzzled look on Flemm's face. "But—but they're yellow! I—I thought—"

"These are Concord's," explained Hank. "They're not ripe until they are purple."

"But—but I saw you eatin' them."

"I did that so you wouldn't get suspicious." Hank made a wry face and pressed both hands to his stomach. "And right now those same grapes are starting to give me a stomach-ache."

"Sour grapes will give most anyone a stomach-ache," said Bradford.

Hank looked at the miserable expression on Harry Flemm's face.

"You ain't kidding," he agreed wryly.



Dayne stood there with Benoit's body at his feet

BLACK CAMELLIA

By WAYLAND RICE

When he is called upon to solve a baffling greenhouse murder Private Detective Sam Morgan runs up against a hot-tempered florist who feels sure that his own life is also threatened

HE WAS a short, stocky little man with an incredibly red face. You could tell he was one of the kind with an ungovernable temper, and who rarely try to check it. The way he slammed Sam Morgan's office door indicated he was not feeling any too charitable toward the world.

Sam Morgan, seated behind his cheap oak desk, waved a hand toward one of the office chairs.

Morgan was an even thirty, slim enough to look like an athlete. He had steady gray eyes and unruly brown hair. He could have been mistaken for a man in almost any line of

business, but he did not look like a private detective. Which he was.

His brand-new client flung a panama hat onto Morgan's desk, dug a hand under his coat and pulled out a wicked-looking .45 automatic. Sam Morgan's right hand moved quickly toward the heavy pen and pencil desk set. But the client crashed the gun to the top of the desk, let go of it and leaned back, breathing hard.

"You're a private detective," he said. "At least your office windows and your door say so. I need someone like you. I need help."

"To do what?" Morgan asked, a wary eye on the gun.

"To keep me from killing a man. Yes—committing murder! Because that's exactly what I feel like doing and I may do it yet. I want you to come out to my place. There's a deal on. Until it is all settled, I am in grave danger of killing my business partner. Will you take the case?"

Morgan hesitated. "Well, it is somewhat unusual."

"My name is Morton Dayne. I don't make a habit of fooling around with matters. I'll pay you a hundred dollars just to come to my place. Another hundred tomorrow—if Lou Foster is still alive. But you'll have to leave with me at once."

For a two-hundred-dollar fee entailing no more than twenty-four hours' work, Sam Morgan was ready to go by horseback if necessary. He got up, reached for his hat and picked the automatic up from the desk. He put it into his pocket and gave Dayne a crooked grin.

"If I'm to prevent a murder, I'd better retain the means to do it with. You can tell me the whole story while we're going to your place. I have a car outside."

"We'll use mine." Dayne looked around the cheaply furnished office and snorted. "It's probably a much better car than you drive."

IT WAS. Sam Morgan never bothered even mentally to compare the sleek black Lincoln with his 1939 Chevvy. He was content to sink back against the cushions, let Dayne drive, and listen to his explanation. It was going to be a weird case, Morgan thought. He liked them that way.

Dayne didn't open up until he was out of Manhattan and traveling across Long Island. Then he gave Morgan a side glance.

"I warn you," he said, "I am a man of the most violent temper. I've always been

afflicted that way. I do things I'm sorry for afterward, but you can't be sorry for killing a man. Too late for that after he is dead."

"What has your partner done to make you so sore at him?" Morgan queried.

"It's what he is going to do. Lou Foster and I have been operating a greenhouse—florist business—for the last eight years. He has done the selling and I've raised the flowers. We made a lot of money. We're both sick of it, and want to sell. But Foster has always been too commercial. He thinks of flowers only in what kind of money they'll bring. My interests are more in line with those of an expert who works to achieve certain results, and to the devil with money."

"I'm beginning to get the setup," Morgan said. "Vaguely though. You'd better keep talking."

"We have two bidders for the business," Dayne went on. "Don't get the idea it's small. We employ more than a hundred people. The greenhouses cover a couple of miles of land. It's big stuff. One bidder has made a generous offer. The other—well, only about two-thirds of his rival's bid."

"Then why not take the largest offer?" Morgan asked.

"Keep quiet," Dayne snapped. "Or you'll have me boiling all over again. The highest bidder will commercialize the business to a ludicrous extent. The other buyer intends to run it as I did. He loves plants and flowers. For their individual worth, not their cash value. But the contract Foster and I have states clearly that we must sell only to the highest bidder unless we both agree to a lower price. Foster holds me to the contract. See what I mean?"

"And why don't you want to take the highest bid?"

"Because Paul Benoit, a man with whom I have no patience, is the one who offers us the most. For years I've worked on a hybrid. A camellia plant. Given the proper amount of attention it will eventually develop black camellias. They've never been grown. It's an achievement worthy of anyone's time. And Benoit says if he gets the greenhouse, he'll stop working on the plant and cultivate and sell it as it now stands. A dirty brown color. I tell you I won't permit it!"

Morgan nodded comfortably. "I see. Benoit will utilize the skill and work you have put into growing this new type flower, only so far as the flower has progressed. The other bidder?"

"He's a gentleman. His name is Arnold Stanton."

"This Mr. Stanton, then, will not attempt to commercialize on the new flower until it is a complete success. You're licked, Mr. Dayne. Your partner holds all the cards."

Dayne gave a twisted smile. "Almost all the cards. The contract also states that we both have to agree to any sale, regardless of the bid. I'm not agreeing. And every time we hold a meeting, I get madder and madder. Last night I almost killed Foster. Maybe I will tonight."

Morgan clucked his tongue. "Over a flower? Black, brown, pink or any other color? It isn't worth it, Mr. Dayne. What's really behind all this?"

The car gave a savage spurt of speed as Dayne's foot came down hard on the gas pedal. He was taking out his temper on the auto now.

"Nothing. I'm hiring you to stop me from killing Foster. That's all. You are to be concerned with nothing else. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Morgan replied quietly. "I'll see that you don't kill Foster. If I have to break your fool neck preventing it."

HALF an hour later, during which no words were spoken, and Dayne got redder and redder, they pulled over a rise and Morgan saw the layout. It was big business. There must have been half a million windows in those greenhouses.

Dayne's nearby home was not palatial, but half a dozen average-sized bungalows could have been comfortably fitted into it. There was an estate surrounding it, perfectly landscaped and with all sort of shrubs, bushes and trees. The estate extended back until it merged with the outside shrubs connected with the greenhouse business.

Dayne brought his car to an abrupt stop and climbed out. He gestured for Morgan to follow him. They entered the house. In the living room sat three men. Morgan almost could have identified them without an introduction.

Lou Foster, Dayne's partner, was an efficient-looking man, well dressed, about forty-five and keen-eyed. Beside him sat Paul Benoit, equally efficient-looking. Both were the kind of men who thoroughly believed that success was counted in cash. Morgan was inclined to agree with them.

Arnold Stanton, who wanted to buy the business because he loved flowers and would

baby them, just as Dayne did, stood beside a window-box in which some strange flower grew. It had long petals the color of a tiger's pelt. He was gently fingering the leaves and smiling softly at the plant.

"Morgan is just an old friend of mine," Dayne said. "He's going to spend the night here. And now, if you boobs have agreed to do things my way, we can settle this business at once."

Lou Foster looked at Morgan and smiled as if trying to make him understand how things were.

"Mort, you bellicose old curmudgeon," he said to Morton Dayne, "we haven't settled a thing and you know it. Benoit's offer stands. Stanton won't raise his a dime. I don't blame him. He can't. Now be reasonable, Mort. We built this business up and we should get all we can out of it. Your silly excuse for selling low is ridiculous. All because of some strange breed of flower."

"It happens to be strange, yes," snapped Dayne. "And wonderful. Stanton knows it. He'll develop it. Something every flower grower has been trying to do for ages. Success is no more than a couple of years away—and you want to throw it all aside. No, I won't stand for it. Even if the flower didn't go with the business—and it does. I can't take it with me."

"Then you won't sell to anyone because I'm holding out," Foster snapped. "I'm sick of trying to reason with you."

Dayne didn't answer in words. For a moment Morgan thought the man's anger-red-dened face would explode. Dayne made a wild grab for a metal vase. He scooped it up, raised the lethal missile and dived at Foster. Morgan began earning his two hundred dollars.

He lunged forward and got between the two men. The vase made a swipe at his head, but missed. Morgan grabbed Dayne's wrist, gave it one expert twist and the vase crashed to the floor.

"Now, now," he chided gently. "You could have killed Foster with that vase."

The color gradually receded from Dayne's face.

"I meant to kill him," he muttered. "Thanks. But get that man out of here. Benoit, too. Get them out before I do something I'll be sorry for."

Morgan let go of Dayne and walked over to Foster.

"It's best that you leave," he suggested.

"Give me a chance to calm him down."

"I'll leave the house, because he owns it," Foster growled, "but the greenhouses and the properties that go with them are half mine. I'll stay there and no stupid, crazy old fool will kick me off." He turned to Dayne. "I'll be ready if you'd like to try, Mort. I wish you would try."

Dayne was getting red again. Morgan whisked Foster out of the room, and Benoit followed. He took the whole thing calmly enough and only muttered a few imprecations at the absurdity of Dayne's behavior.

Morgan watched the two of them walk off into the gathering dusk. He went back to where Dayne was slumped in a chair and Stanton still bent over the window-box, studying the plants. Morgan sat down.

"You weren't kidding," he told Dayne. "You do need someone to bop you every time that temper starts stewing. Personally, I think you need a psychiatrist more than you do a private eye."

"Who cares what you think?" Dayne growled. "Do your job and don't interfere." He hurled a half-smoked cigar into the fireplace. "I'm going upstairs. Right now I wish I hadn't hired you. It would be worth facing trial for the pleasure of killing Foster."

HE STALKED out of the room, pounded up the stairs, and slammed the door of his room. Morgan shrugged and glanced at Stanton.

"Why don't you pull out of this?" he asked. "You'll be party to a murder if you don't."

Stanton smiled. "No, I hardly think I'll pull out. I want this business. I offered the top price I can afford and I think I'll win. Dayne is right. This business should go to someone who appreciates it. Raising black camellias isn't a fraction of it. He has a dozen other wonderful experiments progressing nicely. Benoit will fire them all out and concentrate on just making money."

Morgan stirred out of his chair. "I'm going upstairs. There is probably a back way out and if Dayne takes it and meets Foster—well, that would be one way you'd get to buy this business."

Morgan patted his hip pocket, where the automatic snuggled heavily. He went up the stairs. The hall lights were not on even though it had grown quite dark. He couldn't find the switch and walked along in the gloom trying to locate Dayne's room.

He was far from satisfied with the setup.

Dayne's excuse for getting mad enough to kill a man hardly stood up. Foster was deliberately tantalizing him and Benoit, with his constant sneering in silence, didn't help matters. Stanton was much too complacent. The arguments that went on around him didn't seem to mean a thing.

Murder and death were in the wind. Morgan could almost feel the force of circumstances closing in to engulf him too.

Something clicked. It was a door half-way down the hall. It had opened and stood ajar about two inches. No light came from the room.

"Mr. Dayne?" Morgan said aloud. "Are you there?"

He received no answer. Morgan walked up to the door, pushed it open. Nothing happened. He moved into the room, and had about one one-hundredth of a second to curse himself for being such a fool. There wasn't time to jump erect and turn to meet the attack. It came with savage speed, prophesied only by the shadow that flitted across the wall.

Whatever the object was, it hit Dayne squarely on top of the head. The gray light of the room turned intensely black. Morgan's right hand moved lazily toward his hip pocket. Subconsciously he wanted to draw the gun. Another blow exploded against the back of his head. This time there was no subconsciousness. Just a great, heavy pain and oblivion. . . .

Someone was trying to force water down his throat. Morgan opened eyes that refused to focus at first. Then he saw that the lights were lit in the room. Lou Foster crouched beside him, pillowing Morgan's head against one knee.

"Snap out of it," Foster said urgently. "Something has happened. There was a shot a moment ago. It came from out back of the house, where the greenhouses are. I came in here looking for Dayne. He's missing."

Morgan's wits swam back into position. He struggled to his feet. "Shot?" he choked.

He slapped his hip pocket smartly. The gun was gone. He reeled toward the door, breaking out of Foster's grip.

Morgan negotiated the stairway with some effort. Foster hurried to overtake him. They left the house through the rear door.

Half-way along a dark, arbored path, they encountered Arnold Stanton. He'd been running until he saw them, but now he was doing his best to appear quite nonchalant.

Morgan seized his arm. "There was a shot!" he snapped. "Did you hear it?"

"Why yes. Yes, I did. Five or six minutes ago. It came from the direction of the small greenhouses where Dayne was developing his black camellias."

"You should have been interested enough to learn who was shot," Morgan snapped. "Stay around, Stanton."

Morgan's legs were stronger now, his wits back to near normalcy. With Foster pounding beside him, he passed the largest greenhouse and allowed Foster to lead the way from there on. Foster turned into a path between beds of flowers.

They saw Dayne. He was silhouetted against the light coming out of the greenhouse door. At his feet lay Paul Benoit. Morgan reached the scene first. He saw the automatic he had been keeping for Dayne lying beside the body of Benoit.

MORGAN knelt, made a swift examination. Benoit's inside coat pocket had been pulled out. Morgan arose with a sigh.

"He's dead. Shot through the back. The gun was pushed right up against him. By the size of the hole it made going in, it came from your gun, Dayne. Did you kill him?"

Dayne turned around. His face was dead white. He raised one hand and pointed in the direction of the greenhouse.

"My plants! My beautiful plants. Wrecked! Smashed! Somebody killed them all."

Morgan grunted, hurried into the small experimental greenhouse—and gasped. A vandal had been at work here. Every one of the carefully tended plants had been ripped out of the soil, twisted and hurled to the floor. A dozen or more of them were ruined. Morgan went back to where Foster and Dayne stood beside the body of Benoit.

"Dayne, snap out of it!" Morgan said. "Your plants may be dead, but a man is dead too. Did you kill him?"

"No. No, I didn't, but if he killed my plants, I'm glad he's dead. I wish I'd had the privilege of killing him."

"Get this through your head, Dayne," Morgan said. "The difference between killing plants and killing a human being is that they fry you for killing a man. Benoit is dead. Shot with your gun which was taken away from me by someone who waylaid me in your room. Tell me what happened. Wake up, man."

"It was time to water my plants," Dayne said. "I started for this greenhouse. Benoit was lying there, just as you see him now. The greenhouse door was open. I went in and saw my plants all dead. I thought if Benoit wasn't dead too, I'd finish him. But I never laid a hand on the man."

"Did you hear the shot that killed him?"

"I heard a shot. About two minutes before I reached Benoit. It seemed to come from this direction. I'm not sure."

Foster turned away slowly.

"Dayne," he said, "we're a couple of fools. Prize idiots. Our differences have caused a man's death. I don't know if you killed him. I hope you didn't, but the whole thing wasn't worth it."

Morgan made no attempt to stop the two men as they walked slowly away into the darkness. He turned the body over. The bullet had emerged through the chest. He picked up the gun gingerly and slipped out the magazine. One shot had been fired. Then he carefully put the gun back.

Obviously, Dayne was the man who had fired it at Benoit, whom he suspected of killing his precious plants. But Morgan was not satisfied. He squatted there beside the body, and turned over a dozen ideas in his mind.

Lou Foster had been bringing him out of unconsciousness when the shot had been fired. He had an alibi of sorts, though Morgan knew he, himself, never would be able to back the man up. Not with any time element, because time had been a vague thing with Morgan when the killing had happened.

Yet Foster had no reason for killing Benoit. It was through the dead man that Foster would profit the most.

Stanton? What had he been doing out on the estate? Stanton was like Dayne, a fanatic about flowers. He wanted the greenhouse business badly, but couldn't meet Benoit's price. Had he killed him then, knowing that Dayne would be suspected?

Morgan walked slowly toward a pile of burlap bags, filled so heavily that they bulged. Each sack was labeled with some trade name for a dry fertilizer. He leaned against the pile of bags and tried to think it all out further.

The police would have to be called. If they reacted as did the cops Morgan knew, they would handcuff Dayne within ten minutes after their arrival. Morgan was not sure about Dayne. Until he was, he intended

to protect his client.

He sniffed. That fertilizer was potent stuff. He had been in better smelling places.

Morgan studied the position of the corpse. Benoit had been facing the entrance to the greenhouse when he had been shot through the back.

Morgan took a metal pencil from his pocket, turned and dug the sharp end of it into one burlap bag. He worked it around until he had created a small hole. Some of the dry fertilizer ran out and formed a neat little heap on the ground.

H E PUT the pencil back and walked briskly toward the house. Dayne, Foster and Stanton were there, all gulping highballs that looked strong, if the color of the mixture was an indication.

"We can't delay calling the police for long," Morgan said. "But before we do, I want to be sure. Dayne, you say you didn't kill him. Foster, you were with me when the shot was fired. You heard it clearly?"

"Quite," Foster said. "I'm not saying who fired it though. I haven't the faintest idea." "You heard it too, Stanton?"

Stanton nodded. "Certainly. There was a shot fired. They are usually heard. I thought—well, knowing Dayne's temper as I do—"

"You blasted pipsqueak!" Dayne shouted. "Of course I didn't kill Benoit. Why should I? I could have stopped him from buying the business. It was Foster I hated so much. Right now I wish we'd sold to Benoit and the devil with the flowers. They're all dead anyway."

"Dayne," Morgan asked, "were there any other guns around the house?"

"No. Only the automatic I gave you."

"Were either of you three men in the habit of carrying a gun?"

Stanton shook his head vigorously.

"Not me," Foster said. "What's all this about a gun, anyway? The murder gun was right beside the body."

"Was it?" Morgan countered. "How did you know that automatic killed him? The bullet went clear through his body. For all we know another gun could have been used and the automatic planted there to throw blame on Dayne."

Foster whistled softly. "That's true. I never even had the slightest doubt about the murder weapon. You talk and work like a detective, Mr. Morgan."

"I am one," Morgan said. "Dayne hired me

to hold his temper in check."

Stanton made a derisive sound. "You've certainly made a good job of it."

"Foster is still alive," Morgan snapped. "He's the man Dayne was afraid he might kill. Benoit wasn't even in the picture."

"But his death stopped the sale just as much as Foster's would have," Stanton said eagerly. "What's the difference who you kill—the buyer or the seller?"

"That's right," Morgan's eyes were narrowed. "Dayne had a reason for stopping the sale. So did you, Mr. Stanton. The death of Benoit places you in the lead for possession of this business. Ever think of that?"

"It's a silly idea. I didn't kill him. Why, I couldn't harm anyone. You take a man who loves flowers and you'll never find a killer."

"What about Dayne?" Morgan grunted. "It looks as if he did this murder. He loves flowers, too. I don't know who shot Benoit, but I intend to find out. If it's Dayne, I'll turn him over to the police, client or no client. The first thing to be done is to find that bullet. I'll need the help of all of you. We must work fast."

"The bullet!" Stanton curled his upper lip. "You detectives and your clues!"

"I'd rather have Morgan looking for clues than the police," Foster said. "They'd be tougher."

"On you," Morgan said slowly. "Now you and Benoit left the house together. How does it happen you were not with him when he was shot?"

Foster shrugged. "He said he wanted to look over the property again, thinking that if he went up a little in his offer, Dayne might change his mind. He asked me to let him make the tour alone. I walked back to the house. I was in the room with you when the shot was fired. I went there looking for Dayne. To try and make peace with him."

Morgan walked to the door. "Come on. I've a couple of things to do, but I'll meet all of you at the greenhouse where Benoit lies dead. Start looking around for the bullet that passed through his body."

MORGAN hurried out onto the estate, walked toward the rear and stopped to hide behind a bush while the others trooped down the path. He waited until they were out of sight, ran back to the house and into the study. There he scanned the local phone book. It seemed there was only

one bank in this small town. The names of the officers and their residential phones were listed below the name of the bank.

Morgan called the cashier. He identified himself.

"I can save you a lot of trouble," he went on. "The police will want an answer to this question. If you give it to me, I'll keep them off your neck. Did any one of these men I'll mention draw a lot of cash out of the bank recently? Lou Foster, Arnold Stanton or Paul Benoit?"

"Benoit did. Quite a lot of money. Too much to be carrying around. Has something happened to him?"

"Yes. Something definite and permanent. Thanks."

Cradling the phone, Morgan ransacked the desk first, then a filing cabinet. He scurried through several rooms on both floors, but his search revealed nothing. Returning to the study he sat down for a few moments. His eyes encountered an ornamental inkwell with a pen lying in its receptacle at the base of the set. The pen point was wet. Morgan frowned and went into the hallway. The topcoats of Dayne's three guests were hanging in a closet. Morgan searched them. He found nothing.

He couldn't delay meeting them any longer so he hurried to the experimental greenhouse. All three were nosing around in a hunt for the missing bullet.

Morgan spent about ten minutes doing the same thing. Finally he straightened up.

"It's no use," he said. "Too dark. We'll have to leave this for the police. And I think we'd better call them right away."

"Let's talk this over first," Foster said. "Get our stories straight. Anyway, I need another drink."

Stanton didn't require a second invitation. He walked off into the darkness. Foster also headed toward the house. Morgan fell into step with Dayne.

"Let's have it," he said. "Did you kill Benoit?"

Dayne didn't boil over this time. He was too dejected.

"No, I swear I didn't," he said earnestly. "But the police will say I did and probably work up a good case on circumstantial evidence. Hiring you to keep me from committing a murder was the craziest idea I've ever had. That alone will point a finger at me."

"A whole fist full of fingers," Morgan said.

"Did Benoit ever approach you independently and offer to make some sort of a deal?"

"I wouldn't even talk to the man. No, he did not."

"How badly does Stanton want the business?" Morgan asked.

"He'd give both arms to get it. The man is as fascinated with growing flowers as I am. Morgan, do you think he eliminated Benoit, figured I'd be blamed and Foster would be so disgusted with the whole thing that he'd sell?"

"It's a motive, Mr. Dayne, and murders are based on motives. How well was the business doing?"

"Fairly well. We had a hard time keeping going because of help shortages. Actual profits haven't been too good. I didn't mind. I spent most of my time experimenting. I had always saved my money anyway. Foster more or less forced the idea of a sale. His financial condition isn't too hot."

Morgan wagged his head solemnly from side to side.

"You're going to have some tough going, Mr. Dayne," he said seriously. "I wish I could have been more helpful. But a man with your reputation as to temper is going to be highly suspected. You hired me. I'm sticking until I know who killed Benoit. If the police lock you up, you can be sure I'll still keep digging."

"Thanks," Dayne said. "I don't deserve the slightest consideration after the way I acted. This has taught me a lesson I should have learned long ago. I've got control of my temper now. I realize what it could have done to me—what it actually did."

WHEN they reached the house and entered the living room Foster was mixing drinks. Stanton looked rather dejected sitting alone. Morgan walked over to the telephone. He dialed the operator, pressed the receiver closer to his ear, then replaced the instrument.

"It's dead," he said. "Rather a coincidental time for the phone to give out. But in a way this works to our advantage. We can use it for an excuse in delaying a call to the police. One of us will have to leave, though, and personally I don't know who should go. If I go I might be letting a murderer slip right through my fingers."

Stanton looked up. "Are you insinuating that I killed Benoit?"

"You could put it that way," Morgan

grinned. "Thanks, Foster, I really need a drink."

Morgan accepted the glass, waited until the others were ready and raised his glass in a silent toast. He didn't have the faintest idea whom to honor with a toast and neither did anyone else. The drinks were consumed fast.

"Personally," Morgan said, "I refuse to make a decision as to who should go for the police. It's quite a distance. There aren't any houses or buildings nearby. You three argue it out. I'm going to take a little walk. Upstairs, to the room where I was slugged. Who can tell? There might be a clue."

He left them, went up the stairs and closed the door to Dayne's room with sufficient force to have it heard below. But he didn't stay there. He stepped out, crept along the hallway until he reached the back stairs. He went down them quietly and out onto the grounds. He started running once he was clear of the house and didn't stop until he reached the experimental greenhouse.

There he took refuge in the darkness around a bush. Benoit's body was sprawled out, illuminated by the faint light from the greenhouse.

Five minutes went by. Morgan heard a car starter whine and the motor take life. Tires slurred against the cement drive. Someone was going for the police.

He lay prone, wishing he could risk lighting a cigarette, and deciding against it. If anything was going to happen it would happen soon now.

The man didn't come onto the scene from the direction of the house. He must have circled the larger greenhouses, because he popped into view from the north side of the experimental greenhouse. He walked past the corpse without even a glance at it, bent over a mountain laurel bush and parted the branches. When he straightened up, he was holding a gun. It looked like a .45 automatic. He shook dirt off the weapon.

With the gun in his fist, he walked directly to the stacked-up sacks of fertilizer. Reaching into his pocket, he took out a knife and opened a blade. He dug the blade into the sack which showed the hole Morgan's pencil tip had made.

Morgan was rising slowly. He hadn't figured on the gun. No matter now. In a few moments the killer would realize that this was nothing but a trap. Morgan had to swing into action at once.

He stepped from behind the bush and carefully approached. The man's back was toward him. Morgan held his breath. He was within ten feet of the killer when the man suddenly looked over his shoulder. He swung around, the automatic leveled. Morgan faced Lou Foster and what looked like certain death.

"You won't find the bullet," Morgan said conversationally, though every nerve in his body was screaming. "I made that little hole, talked about the missing slug, and knew darn well the killer would come back to get it. You had to, Foster, because the bullet which killed Benoit didn't come from Dayne's gun. You had one of the same caliber. If the murder slug was found, ballistics would soon prove another gun killed Benoit."

Foster smiled. It was a lopsided grin.

"I thought you looked smarter than you acted," he drawled. "What's it going to get you, Morgan? Just a bullet through the heart. I've got to kill you now."

"Why?" Morgan kept his hands rigidly away from his body. "Sure I'm smarter than I look. I always string along with a winner. If you kill me, how will you lie your way out of it? Pay me off instead. I know where the missing bullet is. I'll get it, meet you later and exchange it for, say, half the cash you took off Benoit."

FOSTER shook his head.

"I can kill you and get away with it. Right now I'm supposed to be going for the police. I planned it that way by crippling the phone and convincing them I should go. I drove away from the house, turned into a lane that leads down beside the greenhouses and I can get out the same way. When I return with the police, you'll be dead. I'll be alibied and they'll blame Dayne for killing you. Tie Stanton in too, if he tries to say that Dayne never left the house."

Morgan stalled. "I see. So they picked you to go for the police as probably the most innocent man. You were with me when the shot was fired. It won't work, Foster."

"It will if you can't talk."

Foster backed up a step and the gun steadied. Morgan tensed. He didn't like jumping a gun, or even moving in the face of one, but the situation called for something drastic. He suddenly did a nose dive. Not at Foster, but to the ground beside Benoit's body.

Foster fired once as Morgan moved, but the shot was too high because Morgan had acted fast. Foster slanted the gun down. Morgan lay prone beside Benoit.

"What did you think that would get you?" Foster asked.

There was one shot fired then. But Foster didn't fire it. He was slapped back against the filled sacks by the force of the slug that ripped into his right shoulder and paralyzed his shooting arm. Morgan was up quickly. He held a twin to Foster's automatic. He stepped up to the killer and easily disarmed him.

"You were so intent upon your new murder," he said quietly, "that you forgot there was a gun beside Benoit. Get going—back to the house. . . ."

Half an hour later, after Foster had been led away, Morgan told Dayne and Stanton about it.

"I really didn't know which one of you did it. But Benoit had been searched. His inside pocket was half-pulled out. Benoit drew a lot of cash from the bank today. I think it was at Foster's suggestion. Perhaps to flash in front of you, Dayne, so you'd listen to reason. Foster was in serious financial difficulties and had to have money fast. He knew he'd get nowhere with you, but if he got that money it wouldn't make so much difference if he had to sell to Stanton.

"He left the house with Benoit, shot him down in cold blood. Benoit probably never knew what happened. Foster simply pushed the gun against his back and pulled the trigger. An automatic, muffled that way, doesn't make enough noise to be heard.

"He then dashed into the experimental greenhouse and destroyed all the plants, pulling them out by their roots, twisting and crushing them. Why did he do this? Because he knew that to the police it would look as though Benoit had done the damage and Dayne had caught him in the act, and killed him in his rage. Also, he knew that by destroying those plants he would hurt Dayne deeply and it would serve him right for holding out selling to Benoit, because of those plants.

"Foster next ran to the house, entered by

the back door and went upstairs. Why, I don't know. Perhaps he was going to try and plant evidence against you, Dayne. At any rate, he saw me coming up. He tricked me into that room, slugged me hard. Then he took the gun I was carrying and hurried back to the greenhouse, fired a shot and placed the gun near the body.

"He returned to the house, brought me to, and told me he'd heard a shot. He had a fair alibi. Good enough with all the suspicion lodged against you, Dayne. I suspected him, but I had to discover some motive. Benoit meant more alive to Foster than dead. So far as we knew.

"I sensed that Foster was greedy from the way he held out on this business deal. I telephoned a bank officer and learned that Benoit had withdrawn a lot of cash.

"I had to make Foster prove his guilt so I emphasized the missing bullet and he saw a hole I'd made in one of those bags of fertilizer. He thought the missing bullet was there, waiting for him. Only I waited instead."

"But the money you say he took from Benoit," Stanton asked. "Where is it?"

"Oh—that. I'll give you odds it's in the R.F.D. mailbox in front of the house. Addressed to himself. He used the study desk for something. You go see, Stanton."

Dayne arose and offered his hand.

"You saved my neck, Morgan. I owe you two hundred dollars."

"Three hundred," Morgan said, and smiled. "I always get an extra fee for being shot at."

Dayne's face started to redden. He bit his lip, growled something, and went over to write a check.

"It's worth the extra hundred," he told Morgan. "Because you saved me, but mainly because whenever someone holds me up for extra money, I let my temper go. This time I checked it. I can do it, you see."

"If it ever slips again, I'll expect you." Morgan folded the check carefully. "At a fee of one thousand dollars a day. People like you can get private dicks into the doggonedest messes."

Morgan passed Stanton on his way out. Stanton waved a bulky envelope.

Boas forced Al to look down at the victim



THE BLOODY ICEPICK

By SEYMOUR IRVING RICHIN

Bummy Lewis had plenty of wriggling to do when he was pinned in the middle of a murder frame by a pair of tough detectives!

SOMETHING clung to Al Lewis's face, hurting him. He sought to duck, to twist, to yank away. In vain. It clung, aching. Eyes tightly shut, Al pawed at it with a big-boned hand.

"Leggo, leggo," he said thickly and stupidly. The word staggered on his tongue, dripping liquor.

"Florrie," he said dazedly. "My face, they're hurting my face. Where are you, Florrie—?"

He tried to open his eyes, feeling panicky,

lost. Glare struck at them, tightening the pupils into cringing pinpoints. He was on the wrong end of a flashlight beam held aching-ly close. He squinted and fought to see but he couldn't make it. The flash shriveled his skin and sealed his eyes with its yellow blaze.

"Where, what—? I don't understand—?"

No one answered him and he knew fear. The light burned his face.

From the feel of the hard-backed chair, from the softness of the rug underfoot he knew he was in a room. But it wasn't his

room. What would he be doing in somebody else's room?

A voice floated out of the darkness beyond his tightly sealed eyes. It was not directed at him.

"He's coming out of it, Bax."

"Yeah."

"He sure had plenty, didn't he, Bax?"

"A full load. When will these babies learn that liquor and murder don't mix?"

"They never learn."

The man called Bax made a sucking noise with his lips.

"He's the one with the girl friend, ain't he?"

"Sure." There was a low, soft laugh.

"They all got girl friends."

Al Lewis shuddered. His mind clung to that laugh long after it had ebbed into silence. He'd heard that laugh before. It was a laugh he hated; he knew that, too. But, who—?

"He doesn't look like a killer, does he, Bax?"

"No." And then a laugh that was more jeer than laugh. "They'll hang him just as high though."

"Just as well. He's nothing but a bum, Bax."

"A bum?"

"Sure. His name's Al Lewis but they call him Bummy. There's a good reason."

There was silence. The fear within Al Lewis burst through to his skin in needling drops. The flashlight still seared his face. A voice came closer to him, the voice he remembered.

"Bummy? Do you hear me, Bummy?"

He turned his blind face toward the voice.

"Villon, Bummy. Ever hear that name? It's the name of a dead man, Bummy."

He shook his head, violently. A rush of words tumbled from his lips. He had nothing to do with it. And Bummy—they shouldn't ought to call him that. He was Al—Al Lewis. They had the wrong guy. He didn't want trouble, couldn't they see? Sure, once there was a big trial and murder but that was long ago. Why he had a girl friend now, a girl he loved—

A hand cut down and smashed his face. The blow jarred to the teeth. The voice, carrying the edge of laughter, struck at him again.

"Take a look around, Bummy. A good look. Take a look at the man you murdered."

He heard the last, his senses numb. The scorching flashlight dipped from his face.

He opened his eyes, slowly, warily, but he couldn't see. He waited for the glare to wear off, nudging his eyes with the thumbs of both hands.

"I knew you'd kill him," the familiar voice said. "You always hated Villon, didn't you, Bummy?"

He shook his head.

"I didn't kill—I—don't know what—"

The voice was hard.

"Cut it, Bummy. It's so simple. There's an ice pick in him. An ice pick with a yellow handle." A finger stiff as a pencil, poked him. "Your icepick, Bummy."

AL LEWIS didn't answer. Fear dragged at his heart and he wanted to shout, "You're wrong, you're wrong!" but he didn't answer. He'd only be wasting strength by answering. His lower lip trembled and he caught it between his teeth. Now was no time for the jitters, not now. He was in the hard and mauling hands of detectives. Somewhere back along the reeling trail of drunkenness, murder had happened and they were tying a rope to him.

"Florrie, Florrie," went painfully through his mind. He saw again her pale but bravely smiling face. Florrie in that white hospital bed, just a few hours away from a surgeon's knife. She wouldn't want to live if she heard of this.

"You hated Villon, didn't you, Bummy?" It was that voice again, driving at him from the blackness. "Because he sent your brother to a gallows rope. He was a smart one, Villion was, turned State's evidence and let your brother hang. So you killed him, eh, Bummy?"

"No," he whispered and wondered wearily if it would always be the same. How long would they hound him because he was a killer's brother? For years this had been going on. Police watching him. Police following him. Police waiting for him.

"You shouldn't have left the ice pick in him, Bummy. The liquor—you tripped over a bottle, Bummy."

He was beginning to see. A hard and lean head took shape slowly, gaunt-skinned and glistening with sweat. The fleshless face had eyes like holes, black and watchful. There was no mercy there. This man, this Bummy Lewis mustn't get away, wouldn't get away. The hard face had hard lips. They were colorless and pressed together. They were not for smiling, those lips.

"Grimm," Al Lewis whispered, remembering. "Detective Grimm."

"Hello, Bummy."

Al Lewis's face tightened against that face, against that name. How he knew this man, this Grimm! The detective had given him the name he hated and others had jeeringly taken up the cry. *Bummy*.

No matter what he did, they flung that name at him. From grade school to his first job. He hadn't kept the job long. The name marked him as different, a man with a loathesome stain. It made him the butt of every vile joke; it leveled a cop's gun at him at the first outcry of crime. He wasn't Al Lewis, a young fellow trying to get along, a decent fellow, a friendly fellow. He was *Bummy*.

The name had taught him the meaning of contempt.

You didn't trust a bum. You don't ask him to your home. You berate your sister if she walks a block with him. And beyond the distance of his ears and fists, you say he's a killer's brother, a killer who died on the rope.

"Ain't you going to say hello, Bummy?" There was always that taunting edge to Grimm's voice. He was a seasoned murder cop. His voice was a weapon and a good one. He picked at Al Lewis's nerves like a violinist picks at strings. "And me an old friend, Bummy."

"You," Al said. Anger was in his long-boned fingers, in their nervousness, in the way he clenched them tightly. Above, Grimm's gaunt-skinned face was not a face but a target. His fists tightened so hard they ached. They wanted to batter at that watching face and it was all he could do to keep them down. For years this face had watched him, dogged him. He liked his job, this man, Grimm. Loyalty and a seething hate for a cop killer's kin had made him so.

"My sidekick died under your brother's gun," Grimm had told him. "A guy with a wife and kid. So I'm watching you. If you've got blood like his I'm going to spill it."

NOW—murder. Al Lewis was motionless under Grimm's laugh and voice. Fear gathered and took a sickening grip in his middle but still he didn't move.

"Look around you, Bummy. There's a dead man. You want to see?"

He couldn't contain that smoldering fear forever. The grip in his middle burst open and the fear flowed to his hands, trembling

them, and to his face, whitening his skin and lips. He was not handsome now. He might have been. His face had a strongboned cut, and there was depth and warmth in nice gray eyes. His hair, flowing back from an intelligent brow, was soft and brown and wavy. But fear changed him terribly now. Fear for Florrie.

One hand moved stumbly for his lapel and groped about. He had to find something to do, something to steady the trembling of his hands. He always wore a carnation, a white blob of color pinned brightly to his lapel. Always. It was a good luck charm, and he liked to remove it from time to time and idle with it, twirling it in his fingers. His hand didn't find the flower.

Odd, he thought.

His fingers searched again but only met a gaping button hole and the smoothness of gabardine. He couldn't believe it. His fingers moved swiftly, a little frantic now, but he couldn't find it. Could he have lost it? He'd never lost a flower before.

"You hated Villon. Say you hated him." Grimm was speaking softly.

Al's glance lifted to the lean, bony face above. It was a bitter glance.

"I didn't kill him, Grimm."

"Look behind you. You should have been a butcher, Bummy. That ice wagon job wasn't for you."

Grimm was not alone. Slowly, Bummy became aware of things around him, of furniture, of the velvet drapes, of the other man. A round face, as heavy as Grimm's was lean, made a soft disc at the detective's shoulder. The man held his hands behind him.

"He likes you, Baxter," Grimm said and laughed. "He's looking you over."

The heavy face grinned. It was just the beginning. Laughter rumbled at the core of his enormous girth, shaking his shoulders and the loose face convulsed, swallowing the eyes.

"Yeah," he said in a voice like heavy piano chords. "He likes me. Think of that, Grimm."

Bummy took it with a grimace. He looked wonderingly around the wealthy room. It was half shadow, half bright; a shrouded vase-like lamp in a far corner cast a feeble spill of light two thirds across the room. It was a wave that lapped at their feet.

Fat furniture pieces, swelling with pride, were tastefully placed. A flecked marble fireplace with gleaming candlesticks at the ex-

treme ends, squatted imposingly in the middle of a broad, blue-tinted wall. Between them, a framed portrait of a woman caught Al Lewis's eye.

She was beautiful, warmly smiling. His face stiffened in surprise. There was something familiar about that face, that smile. Unmistakably, he'd seen it before. And he knew instantly where that smile had first struck him. A night spot, not too elegant a place; she was a singer. He remembered fully now. He'd taken Florrie—

"Behind you, Bummy." It was Bax who spoke this time. A fat hand caught and gripped Al's shoulder, hurting him, and lifted him from the hard-backed chair. He reeled on weak legs. The hand left his shoulder and seized his neck and jolted his head down. Closer to it.

He saw a shadowy form sprawled face down on the rug. There was a sharp click as Grimm put his flash into play and a coin of light struck the wall, slid inch by inch toward the dead man.

"We'll give you a good look, Bummy."

Al watched the tiny spot descend, his heart sinking with it. The fat hand in his neck hurt him and he tried to wrench away. It only tightened.

"Keep still, you."

The yellow disc caved where floor met wall. It flattened on a rich rose carpet and kept moving.

GRIMM was having a good time. He knew just where that loop of light was going. He could have raced it but he liked it that way—slow and easy. He saw the sweat drops on Al's face, saw his trembling hands, so he moved the flashlight slowly. He'd caught a few killers before.

"The' beginning, Bummy."

The yellow coin of light was suddenly motionless. It clung to the dead man's shoes. They were small and black, highly polished, with perforated tips. The leather and the tooling were of the finest. Above catgut laces, silk socks lost themselves beneath the rich and glossy black of tuxedo trousers.

"Watch now, Bummy," Grimm said.

The coin moved. It moved more swiftly as if it had tasted of death and was greedy now and eager for more. For a time it caught on nothing. It slid higher along the shadowy length, past the man's coatless hips, higher and higher to the center of his back. And stopped.

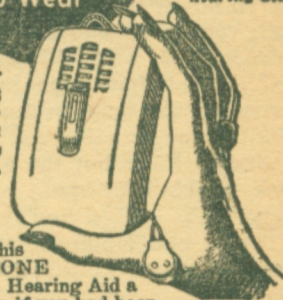
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THE ROSICRUCIANS
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

"No," Bummy whispered. "No."

The yellow coin was flecked with blood. In its center was the handle of his ice pick, its length of steel deeply lost. Lewis's hands groped loosely as if searching for words, something to say. Just a day ago he'd used that pick. He'd hacked at the huge blocks of ice when making deliveries. . .

He stared at the bloody coin, his face stiff. A confusion of words moiled in his mind but he uttered no sound. He was too completely stunned. With terrible dread, he remembered the drinking. He hated Villon; Grimm was right. He'd hated no man more than this dead man on the floor before him. Was it possible that he actually. . .

He tried to think but the aching grip on his neck wouldn't let him.

"Leggo." He ducked and twisted, and he heard the fat man laugh viciously. The grip became more gouging until Lewis didn't fight it anymore.

"Show him some more, Grimm."

The coin moved to Villon's shoulder and along the length of white-shirted arm. Below a white shirt cuff, a gold-plated wrist watch flashed in the moving yellow and the coin was still again. Like a tiny spotlight it centered on a soft, small-boned hand. Villon's was a delicate hand; its skin white and unroughened by toil. It was a roisterer's hand, a hand for highballs and women.

It lay palm down in death, fingers distended and rigid. The third finger was torn and bleeding. It was obvious. A ring had been roughly yanked from it.

"There's more, Bummy," Grimm said. "Take a breath, Bummy. And watch."

Lewis's eyes clung with horror to that leaping spot. He saw the flower dumbly, his flower. It was a crushed blob of color inches away from the fallen hand. It was a white carnation and its edges were crusted with blood.

The gripping hand dropped from his neck. It caught his shoulder and spun him around. An overhead light was suddenly fluffed on, flooding the room with light. The fat hand shoved his chest and Lewis went staggering down into the chair.

"The ring, Bummy." Above him the lips in the gaunt face moved. Grimm was keeping his hands off him. He wouldn't bruise a knuckle on the man called "Bummy." That was Bax's specialty. "Villon had a big ruby ring. We want it, Bummy."

He shook his head, feeling a chill crawl of sweat. He tried to say he was innocent,

but the words wouldn't come.

"You stole that ring," the lips accused. "That ruby could bring dough, a hatful. Your girl is sick. She's in the hospital and that takes money, doesn't it, Bummy?"

HE NODDED, his face wooden. Then Grimm knew everything. He knew where he worked and what he did and what he ate for breakfast. And he knew about Florrie, too.

"Yeah, that's right," Lewis answered with bitterness. "She needs an operation. And I needed the ring, sure. But not enough to kill. Not even him."

"Okay then." Bax said. "Answer this, then. You were picked up drunk two hours ago. Where were you drinking, Bummy? Who were you drinking with?"

He didn't answer and Bax laughed, the looseness of his face burying his eyes.

"He doesn't know, Grimm. The innocent lamb has lost his tongue. Soon the lamb will lose its life. Led to the slaughter." Again, there was that rumbling upheaval of laughter. "That's a good one, eh, Grimm?"

Bummy hated the sagging fatness of him, the laugh, and the hooking hand he'd suffered in his shoulder.

"I was drinking," he said. "That's why I can't remember. I had to blot out the sight of a knife, see? My wife under a scalpel. But, no, you don't see."

He saw it was useless. They didn't believe him; they'd never believe him.

"A woman," Grimm said. "Villon dead and he talks about a woman. He's in love, Bax. *Him*." It was almost as if he had spat. "It's on a high class plane now—"

How could Grimm understand? This man found his love in dives. He was like Villon. The thought caused him to stiffen.

"Villon." He said it so softly they stared at him. Both of them. "You take a look at Villon, Grimm."

Their glances didn't budge from his face. "*He's in a tuxedo, Grimm*. All spruced up to go. Women were candy to Villon—he liked a new flavor every day. You get away with that until, well—Maybe one babe didn't care for the brush off, Grimm."

"No good, Bummy," Grimm said. "He was maybe going out. So what? You talk about the flower, Bummy. Or the ring."

"It's in his back," Bummy said. "Ever think of that? The icepick is in his back. That's kind of important, isn't it, Grimm?"

The detective was silent.

"Maybe he trusted the killer. Maybe it was a babe; Villon was never afraid of a babe. He'd never in this world turn his back on me!"

He lifted a finger and pointed to the picture above the fireplace.

"The last of his cuties."

A lovely face, a face of warmth and gentleness, smiled out of a frame of hammered gold.

"Nice." The comment came from the fat man. Grimm's head hadn't moved.

"Ever study a picture, Grimm?"

Grimm laughed out loud.

"Games, Bax." He nudged the fat man. "He's playing games—Information Please. Should we let him play?"

"No," Bax said softly. "Let me play." Al saw the fat man's hands pack hungrily into fists. They hung level with his eyes.

"I'll get that ring from him. I'll bust this case wide open."

AL DIDN'T take his eyes off Grimm.

"The picture," he said steadily. "You look at it. Plenty time to sock me around, Grimm."

The hard face turned inch by slow inch. Lewis's eyes hung on it; he saw Grimm's glance collide coldly with the warmth of the smiling photo. He saw the lips part under a deep, deep breath. For an instant, something happened to Grimm as the shining eyes looked gently at him. The hardness was still in the face's bony cut, the black eyes were still cold, but something had happened there.

"A dame," Grimm said. "A pretty one. So what, Bummy?"

"I know her," Al told him.

"So?"

"She's a nice kid, a singer. There's a girl that's not for sale, not to Villon or anyone. See? She'd hate the touch of him. And now

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he's dead. I want to know more about that picture, Grimm."

"And I want to know more about that ring. The girl don't wear a flower or chop ice. Does she, Bax?"

Bax laughed. Inches away the huge fists were waiting. Al's glance rose slowly and hated that flabby face and dropped again to the fat man's middle. A thin brown belt, caught in the first notch, was sunken into a wide circle of flesh, the looseness spilling over the buckle. The fat man ate too much. His middle was as weak as his fists were strong.

"Time, Grimm?" the fat man wanted to know.

"Yeah, it's time."

"The fists?"

"No, Bax. Use a gun butt and save the knuckles."

Al said nothing. He watched the fists loosen into fingers. Bax's hand ducked under a tweed jacket, came out with a police .38. He tapped the curved handle against the cup of one hand.

"Too bad for you, Bummy."

The soft face hardened. The gun swept high to strike.

Hatred broke its leash and Lewis's fist leaped for its flabby target. It landed terribly. It sank and the loose flesh rolled over the knuckles. The soft, disc-like face was a wretched, contorting gray, its eyes gone, its mouth working for air.

The man's legs gave and the flabby bulk struck the floor with a shuddering crash. His head struck solidly against a heavy oak chair. The .38 landed near Al's shoe tops and he scooped it up. Grimm's hard eyes were bright with disbelief.

"Scared, Grimm?" Bummy's finger coiled under the trigger guard. "How do you like the wrong end of a gun?"

The lean face regained its composure. It was tough again, its lips sealed, its eyes darkly cold.

"It won't do you any good, Bummy."

"Al," Lewis told him. "You got to talk, you call me Al."

Grimm just watched him.

"You do what I say," Bummy said quietly. "You don't and you get it. I mean it." He jerked a thumb toward the chair. "Sit down."

G RIMM obeyed. He was not a coward. His steps were even and steady; there was fear in him but it showed only in the drops on his face. He found the chair with

his hands and lowered himself into it.

"A pretty hot seat, isn't it, Grimm?" The black eye of the gun backed away. The edge of the fireplace met Bummy's shoulder. He took the portrait, broke it open, and removed the glossy print.

"She fits into this thing, Grimm."

The detective's lips didn't move.

"You didn't even try to find her. Why not, Grimm? You're supposed to be a pretty good cop."

Still the lips didn't move.

"Maybe you know her. Maybe you like her, eh, Grimm? And yet Villon had her picture. Does two and two make murder, Grimm?"

The lips moved.

"The flower, Bummy. And the icepick—add that up for me. If you can."

Bummy folded the picture and stuffed it into his pocket.

"I'm going to find this girl, Grimm."

"A waste of time."

"I'll see. I'm going to do your job for you, Detective. That's nice of me, isn't it?" He moved the gun a little closer. "On your feet, Grimm. Slow now and keep those hands

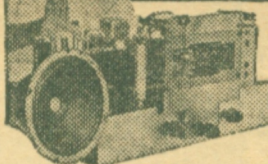
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high. Up! And keep them up. This gun is aimed at the back of your head."

Lewis did it swiftly, rushing forward on soundless toes. The gun went aloft and came down hard. Grimm reeled. The long legs broke like toothpicks and he collapsed and flattened on the rug.

Bax was an unconscious heap in the center of the room. Lewis got out of the place unseen. Outside, he filled his lungs with clean night air.

"Florrie," he thought, "soon, Florrie. Maybe I'll be free soon."

The noise and smell of a second rate night spot was harsh on Bummy's raw nerves as he pushed up to a circular bar. It was the fourth place he'd visited. Somewhere beyond a haze of smoke a piano tinkled. It was the end of a grueling night and the player was curved and weary over the keys, just getting by.

"What'll it be, bud?"

"Scotch." He watched the drink pour from a flask-shaped bottle. He lifted a slow glance at the barkeep. "I'm looking for a girl, Mister."

"They're all looking for girls." The barkeep thought that was quite a remark. He grinned. It didn't do much for his face. Too many fists had landed there. He was a barkeep who should never have gone into the ring.

"This is special," Al said. He took the jigger in two fingers and tipped it up. The liquor flowed down and he was grateful for the burn of it. "A special girl, see? I hear she sings here."

He had to guess at it. She was in one of these places, but there were so many—

"They're all special, bud," the barkeep said.

Al laid the photo on the bar, turned it around for the barkeep to study.

"Sure I know her. Lots of people know Gilda, bud. You're right. She's special." His eyes were knowing. "It won't do you any good, buddy. Was I you, I'd get another dame."

"You would?"



NE wise eye tightened into a wink.

"You're the tenth. And you ain't near as well heeled. Some roll up in slick cars, loaded with dough. And it don't do them a bit of good. Think that's a rib?"

Al said, no, he didn't.

He motioned to the shot glass and the bottle dipped and filled it. For a while there

was silence and only that tinkling piano.

"Maybe she hasn't met the right guy, Mister," Bummy said.

The barkeep shook his head. He seemed surprised at what he himself was saying.

"There's a 'no sale' tag on her. Sure, she's in a fast racket, and good at it, but it's not her speed. I know, bud. She's for a small town, a preacher, and church on Sunday morning. *Every* Sunday. But you'll find out—like the other two guys."

Bummy's hand shook a little. He steadied it on the jigger. He drank the liquor fast, without tasting it.

"What two guys?" he asked softly.

"More scotch?"

"No more scotch." He said again, softly, "You said two other guys."

"Sure." The barkeep took the shot glass away and mopped the bar. "They thought they could get Gilda, too. The rich one, Villon. You heard of Villon? He has more dough than Fort Knox. Keeps coming around, keeps bothering her. He had her believing him in the beginning but not no more. He's out of the running like the other guy."

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"The other—?"

"Yeah. He bothers her, too. He don't know when a door slams it means goodbye."

"His name. You know this fella's name?"

"Sure. I know his name and I know his face. It's a face I don't like buddy. It's a face that would spit in your eye. He's clean nuts for Gilda but she don't want him. Or Villon." He grinned. "She don't play cops and robbers. Get that, buddy? This guy is a cop, a detective. A dick by the name of Grimm. . ."

"Okay, Fatty, watch how you move. This gun has been on you for ten minutes. Don't make me lose my temper."

Al stood widelegged and grim in front of the fireplace, his gun hand commanding the room. The flabby-faced man was on one heavy knee, just climbing out of it. He rose shakily, eyes on the unrelenting gun, and his lips moved in a silent curse. It was his gun and he didn't like the wrong end of it.

"I had to slug your playmate." The gun point roved and picked out Grimm. "But he'll come awake soon." A faint smile tugged at Bummy's lips. "I got a big surprise for you, Fatty."

Grimm moved. He groaned. His face twisted and the eyes were blotted out in their narrow pits. Painfully, he dragged himself to one knee, to both knees, finally hauling himself erect with the aid of a nearby table.

"Hello, Grimm," Al said easily. "You be a good little boy, Grimm. You still have your gun but that's for temptation. You go for it and this goes off."

Something happened to that gaunt face again. The lips were still the same hating clamp and the eyes were coldly hard, but something had happened there. The skin was too pale. It was a face of fear. And not because of the gun.

"I've got something to tell you, Grimm. About a murder. Keep your ears open, Fatty. You don't want to miss a word of this."

Grimm was watchfully silent. He never glanced at the fat man. His right hand was restless at his side. Under his armpit was the hard bulge of a .38. He couldn't forget that.

"I just played a game of Sherlock Holmes," Lewis said. "I've been putting numbers together and they add up bad for you." He smiled a little. "She's a cute number, Grimm."

Grimm was silent. Tense. His right hand lifted an inch.

"Tell you what I found out; Grimm. You

and Villon were in love with a girl. Not the kind you whistle at. The girl in the picture. Hear that, Fatty? Grimm was in love with her."

THE soft face swung to Grimm, sharply. It creased. It was a puzzled face. Bax wondered why Grimm wasn't talking up, talking back.

"You didn't want Villon around, did you, Grimm," Bummy pressed. "You thought with Villon dead you'd have the inside track. You didn't know you had the wrong number. With enough dough and Villon dead you'd buy her like any two buck doll. That's what you thought, wasn't it, Grimm?"

Words broke through the tight seal of the detective's face.

"Talk. That's pretty cheap stuff, Bummy. You're talking through your hat."

Al Lewis moved toward the door, whipped it open. She was standing there, slim and lovely in clinging black—Gilda. Under a stately upsweep of black hair was the beautiful face of the picture.

"Point him out, Gilda. The man who's been chasing you."

She moved into the room, taking timid

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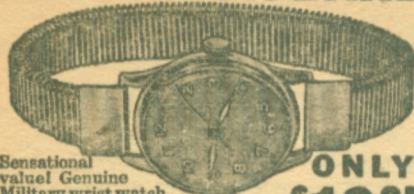
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steps. She saw Grimm and for a moment, he frightened her. Then a crimson-tipped finger lifted in an unwavering line on Grimm. "That's the one."

"Exhibit A," Bummy said quietly. "The finger points, eh, Fatty? You're a sweet kid, Gilda; I couldn't have swung this without you. She believes in love, Grimm. I told her about Florrie and about this frame up. So she came along. What have you got to say, Grimm?"

The detective had nothing to say. His mouth was sealed again and for a moment he flung a killing glance at the girl. At his side, his hand rose a little more. It would leap soon. It would leap when it had to.

"It had to be you, Grimm. You've been a following watch dog too long. You would know about my ice truck job. You would know about the white flower I always wear. It was a cinch to frame me, wasn't it, Grimm?"

The fat face was suddenly stiff with awe. Bax turned and faced Grimm with probing eyes. He'd heard enough to make him wonder. There was something too quiet and guilty about the detective's face.

"But that's not all, Grimm," Al said.

Grimm's right hand spread wide like a fan. It lifted a little. His hard glance reached toward the soft face and back to Al again.

"The ring, Grimm. Remember the ring? Al moved forward on agile toes, the gun holding a spot on Grimm's face. "Worth plenty, that ring, you said so yourself. Enough maybe to buy a girl who hated the touch of you. That's what you thought, eh, Grimm? Oh, you were clever. You thought no one would search a detective—"

There was panic sharp and sudden in Grimm. He went for his gun.

A roar blew out of Al's watchful fist, and a .38 slug caught and smashed that hand into a dripping rag. The tight-sealed face burst open, screaming.

Bax raced at Grimm's staggering legs and hit them with two hundred diving pounds. The long height teetered stiffly and then crashed. The fat man took no chances. His

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hands like lumpy sacks poured wrathfully into the killer's middle and up at his face. Until Grimm was unconscious, his body still.

Bax's hands loosened and probed Grimm's pockets, searching for the ring. He found it only after he removed the detective's gun. It lay buried beneath the .38 tip in the leather snout of the holster.

He rose, the ruby like a drop of blood, flashing on his upturned palm. "He had it all the time."

"Yeah," Al Lewis said. He walked over to calm the girl who leaned against a wall, trembling.

"He killed him," Bax was saying. "It was him all the time." It was almost as if he couldn't believe it. "And he tried to blame you, Bummy."

Al swung on the fat man, his voice savage. "Al. My name is Al, get it? Al! No more Bummy."

"Sure, sure," the fat man corrected hastily. "Al." He rubbed his overflowing middle sorrowfully. "You've got a good punch, Al."

Al Lewis smiled and the two men shook hands. It was good to hear, he thought. The papers would make a big splash of this, and it would be Al from then on. He couldn't wait to tell Florrie.

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