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AT LARGE
LESLIE FROST**

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LARGE ***

BY LESLEY FROST

Editor of
"COME CHRISTMAS"



MURDER AT LARGE



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MURDER AT LARGE

I

Ordway Belknap, ex-Judge of the Magistrate's Courts, and for the present a detective of amateur standing, and a semi-professional criminologist, on call at the Homicide Department, leaned comfortably back in an arm-chair in the den of his spacious penthouse apartment on the East River—in Gracie Square to be exact. James, the perfect 'man' that confirmed bachelors dream of one day possessing, entered soundlessly on the deep-napped carpet, and, in a cotton-wool voice, announced Judge Whittaker on the wire.

"Thank you, James," murmured Belknap in a tone modulated to the atmosphere of the room; while James, with the smooth precision of the Roxy Orchestra being lowered, sank from view, the den being a floor to itself.

Belknap slowly ground out a freshly lit cigarette and meditatively examined the telephone at his elbow. His face gathered seriousness as a window gathers steam. He recalled Whittaker's remark of a week ago, made as they passed at the Club: "I will give you a ring soon on a matter of life and death. No, I can't go into it now—I'm running." And though in the meanwhile the matter had slipped his mind he now unaccountably, even to himself, hesitated to remove the receiver. 2

Belknap was a man of fifty-odd, but didn't look it; tall, handsome, with a firm mouth, burning brown eyes, and thick, lustrous black hair. His muscles were steel-hard; and his skin always deeply bronzed, winter and summer alike, for he was one of those elusive and self-styled members of the Long Beach nature club. He enjoyed motoring down on brilliant days even in January to nurse a driftwood fire in the shelter of a shallow dune, basking himself in fire heat and violet ray.

Sun-bathing is the habit of a solitary; but then, Belknap was a solitary in more ways than one. He loved the slow, indolent afternoons, apparently wasted, and with no words spoken. He relished the mingled smell of olive oil, wood smoke and salt; and the sight, through more than half-shut eyes, of 3 gulls, and a ship moving up the horizon like the large hand of a clock, invisibly moving yet seen to have moved. Rodney Drake would periodically rise like an elongated Pict out of the waste of sand and gesticulate against the sky. On the open beach the hardy little Egyptian, name unknown, would squat motionless on his heels over a tin firebox.

So it may well have been these lonely watches that fostered the thing in Belknap that his acquaintances, even friends, called 'queer.' The world in general certainly considered him puzzling, enigmatic. It found him definitely uncommunicative, or, when communicative, ironic, which is a turn of speech that leaves the hearer not much the wiser. His friends claimed for him a sensitive, reserved nature that shed humankind with reluctant cynicism for lack of a better method, a cynicism sharpened and brought to a point through years of close association with the evils and corruption, hypocrisy and injustice of the courts. He had a way of never overlooking an opportunity to be bitter at the expense of law and order as practiced in this enlightened twentieth century.

And it was the hopelessness of the struggle to keep a modicum of 4 honesty in the legal system that, Belknap said, had driven him out to play a lone wolf game tracking the criminal. Too frequently, he claimed, the innocent paid, or no one paid, while the guilty sat in full view of the Bench. He was at least determined to give the eager public a few real captures, if not convictions. In his two most famous cases he had managed the convictions as well.

His first, that of Maria Monroe, strangled in her closed Riverside Drive apartment when it was supposed she herself was in Honolulu, followed immediately on his resignation from office. In fact what he considered the bungling of this case had been the last straw that made him yield to a temptation of long standing. And he was miraculously successful. With every investigating agency in the City against him, and with an apparently impregnable alibi to break down, he saw his man through to the chair.

But it was the Stanton-Mowbray affair the next winter that saw Belknap's amazing and unreasonable technique developed to its greatest power. Stanton was shot at the Villa Bella Night Club in Forty-eighth Street, West, 5 toward the daybreak closing of an exceptionally wild night. No gun was found, although the few remaining guests were searched within a few moments by the police; and even the general direction from which the shot was fired could not be determined. Some said it had come through a window, others from close range. The case had lain dormant for months when Belknap took an interest in it. The chief suspect had been a certain Colonel Blake, a man of great personal magnetism, strong political associations and influential friends. The feeling had become current that he was guilty and that it was being 'hushed up,' that the law was once more proving inadequate. But in this instance Belknap was able to give the law a clean slate. Jumping to insane conclusions in the intuitive manner that was his strongest claim to distinction, he put his finger on little Violet Mowbray, a musical comedy dancer, who had had a last-minute invitation as an 'extra' for Stanton's party. Although it was believed that she and Stanton had thereby met for the first time, Belknap discovered a weird series of events that put Stanton in the most blasting light and gave poor Violet a dozen motives for murder. Violet took her sentence of from ten to twenty years with a quiet protestation of 6 innocence that moved the courtroom to tears and hysteria. No one seeing her frail figure led away that dull December day would have said she could live to see a year of it served.

Since the weeks when he had kept his name and face headlined, together with Stanton's and Violet Mowbray's, Belknap had had several months of comparative quiet. He had given the police some assistance in a few minor matters, but had really fastened his teeth into nothing worth the candle. And at the moment he felt particularly in need of violent distraction. He was surfeited with a week of burning sun; weary of women; stale with an overdose of detective fiction; and disturbed by a tendency on the part of his thoughts to take a gloomier turn than usual.

Yet for some odd reason Whittaker's ring, following the words of their last meeting, gave him pause. He knew Whittaker as a dangerous person, *friend* or enemy, often even more dangerous as the former. Their relationship had of late been strained. Belknap had all but come to the conclusion that any

intercourse between them, kindly or unkindly, had been dropped. Then why this matter of life and death? Oh well, curiosity had killed more than cats. He reached for the receiver. 7

“Yes? Oh, Whittaker? Good to hear your voice.” (a little overdone that. Rang false) “Of course, old boy.” (Now why was he calling him ‘old boy’?) “I’d be delighted, more than delighted.” (Good God, I don’t even mean delighted) “Something thrilling for me to do? You’re going to put me wise? Oh, I see: give me an opportunity to *get* wise. Of course. Any old thing for a change.... No, I don’t exactly catch your meaning. You’re pleasantly mysterious as usual.” (Diabolically so, is what I want to say, and I will say it one of these days.) “A house full of criminals? Since when have you been on week-end terms with Sing Sing? They’ve never been in Sing Sing? You want me to help you put them there, is that it? You bet your sweet life. Anything to do with what you let fall to my ear last week? It has? When do you want me? Dinner tonight. Thanks most awfully. I’ll be there.”

He hung up; but failed to return to the Audubon which lay open on his knees, an original Folio, given him with relief and gratitude by Colonel Blake. 8
Instead he relapsed into a brown study and considered a rather sinister possibility from several angles and in varied lights.

II

Belknap made the distance to Whittaker's Long Island mansion at Blue Acres in something under an hour. His Dusenbergs, long and low-slung, colored to please his own eye, and fitted with special gadgets for defence and utility, was also a demon for speed, and even in traffic had broken many records, largely its own to be sure. He had always driven himself, and he had often reflected that if he had not been a lawyer or a sleuth he would have been ticking off mileage at Daytona. Such was his love of the power and beauty of line of a splendid machine. And he admired as much as he admired any work of art his brown, thin, muscular hand on the wheel, one mahogany, the other coffee.

As he turned into the wide, sweeping drive of Thorngate, he slowed the car to a crawl, and savored for a moment the view of the Sound, the lemon and orange sunset beyond it, the peace of the trees and shrubs and flowers on either side. He listened with one ear to the swish of the tires in the traprock gravel roadbed, and with the other to the cicadas making the mad sound of a semi-anæsthetized brain among the oaks.

Black John, alert and loquacious, opened the door to him, and showed him immediately to a large, luxurious room on the second floor. Belknap stood at the long windows, looking down, and shedding, with the deafness characteristic of his general indifference, John's flow of well-intentioned chatter as he unpacked and laid out Belknap's week-end wardrobe. Belknap was so far removed from it as to be unaware of John's withdrawal. Unaware also of Bertrand Whittaker's entrance.

"You made the trip in short order, I imagine. How are you, Belknap?"

“Splendid, thanks. Yes, I came down fast enough. There is nothing to warrant a leisurely drive on Long Island—until after Shinnecock Hills perhaps. Before that the sooner it’s over the better. You know I am still forever being surprised that there can be such charming and secluded spots as this 11 within a stone’s throw of these atrocious main highways. And yours is one of the best, Bertrand.”

“*Isn’t* it, Belknap!” Whittaker’s face lighted with pleased vanity. But it died on the instant. “I shall hate to leave it. More than I shall hate to leave anything else, I assure you.”

Belknap paused with their lighted cigarette match arrested between them, and quickly met the eyes he had been studiously avoiding.

“Leave? Why, when, and where for? Going abroad?”

Whittaker’s immediate answer was a cold smile. He accepted his light and crossed to a chair. Belknap regarded him intently through puffs of his own smoke, and being a keen student of men when he cared to be, or found it necessary, he remarked a new hardness in the hard grey face. Whittaker was a grey man: iron-grey hair, granite skin, grey-blue eyes, gun-metal suits, and plenty of grey matter. He was a man too able, too willfully brilliant, for the cramped position in which he had to work. So he put the extra energy into deviltry. “That’s just what he is doing now,” thought Belknap, “and 12 God help somebody. Somehow I think it’s God help him for a change.” But he wasn’t prepared for being quite as right as he proved to be.

“Not exactly abroad. Though perhaps yes, in a very broad sense. Sit down, Belknap, and we’ll talk, if you don’t mind being serious on an empty stomach. The drinks will be up shortly.”

“Fire away, man, by all means. You are now making things sound, not only mysterious, but rather important. What’s it *to* you?”

“It’s a great deal to me, I’m afraid. It seems I have short shrift, Belknap. I’m sentenced to death. The doctors have given me six months—or ‘with luck,’ as they put it, an extra one or two.”

“Good Lord! Why I’ve always thought you one of the fittest. What *is* wrong? Whittaker, I’m sorry—too terribly sorry. Is there a thing I can do?”

“Yes, there is.” A flare of wicked humor came and went in Whittaker’s eyes. “But we’ll come to that in a moment. I’m dying of cancer. In a bad spot. I’m in for pain and a great deal of it; more than I can quite bear to put up with, I guess. ‘Six months to live.’ It may sound short enough to you, but to me 13 it sounds an eternity. Six *weeks*, yes; I might have kept a stiff upper lip for six weeks. But that’s about my limit.”

“You mean—it’s suicide?” Belknap asked, and did his level best, in respect to the situation, not to show a fierce impatience that he should have been asked in at the death.

“No-o, not strictly speaking. Though I’ve always contended suicide is justifiable in such circumstances. And I purchased a very pretty little Colt last week for the purpose. But I reconsidered. I’ve been a man who made himself felt going and coming; you can testify to that, Belknap. Then why make this particular exit dull and unromantic, with nothing more said of it than, ‘Mr. Bertrand Whittaker had been suffering from ill health, and it is thought—etc., etc.’ You know the line. So, as I’ve said, I didn’t shoot. For here was the perfect opportunity to go the limit with life and death, nothing to lose that wouldn’t be gain. In other words I could leave a bit of a potter behind me—in commemoration. And, my dear fellow, I’ve hit on an idea that I doubt even you could match.”

Belknap’s face was a mosaic of varying expression: sympathy of a kind, eager curiosity, distrust and threatening disapprobation. A man of 14 Whittaker’s evil propensities could do considerable damage if he was driven, as now, to turn at bay.

“Think twice, Whittaker,” Belknap warned him quietly, “before you mention your idea even to me. We can drop it here and now. I promise to ask no questions. Remember a doctor’s judgement has been as often reversed as a judge’s! Don’t be rash under the first shock.”

“I’m not being rash. This is a certainty, born witness to by my flesh and bones. The doctors didn’t surprise me, to tell you the truth. But I had rather

banked on being tabled, so to speak, and dying under the knife. No such luck. So it's my six months or my week-end, and I'm going to make it the week-end. If that fails me I can always fall back on the pistol. Putting two and two together, do you begin to get my drift?"

"I can't say I do in the least. I suppose I'm stupid."

"For a detective I think you are. Well, to call a spade a spade, I intend to be murdered—with you in attendance to get the murderer. Is that clear enough?" Belknap, without the flicker of an eye-lash, darkly concentrated on a point somewhere between himself and the ceiling. Whittaker examined him secretly and furtively from under overhanging brows. The atmosphere had a tendency to thicken before Belknap drew himself back to the necessities of speech. 15

"Thanks most awfully," he said with a hard, ironic twist of the lips, "for this amazing opportunity. It quite takes my breath away. Undoubtedly I should make a drastic effort to turn your intention, as one is expected to withhold a man about to leap from the Brooklyn Bridge. But I admit I'm frankly curious as to details. So before I seize you around the neck, metaphorically speaking, let's hear more."

Whittaker's body, from a slight stiffening, yielded to the shape of his chair.

"I'm delighted that your first reaction *is* curiosity, Belknap; for in that case I feel sure I can eventually enlist your interest in the bizarre and dramatic elements of the situation. I feared you'd mount the pulpit, or the bench, or the stand of mere friendship, deliver me a moral lecture, and ring up your pet specialist for an appointment. In which event," he added with faint mockery, "I should have resorted to your rival, Silas Berry. So you see I *am* determined. And so far so good. I swear it's been good fun making arrangements." 16

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, putting in what I call my supply of ammunition. Although I have a fair handful of erstwhile, and therefore potential, murderers on my visiting list, it was another matter to bring enough of the

right sort together to insure a pleasant week-end, and a week-end that, as you can see for yourself, may be indefinitely prolonged—for *them*! Several of my favorite respectable killers are in foreign parts. But I've managed at least eight. Do you want a brief synopsis? Of course certain of them are familiar to you."

Belknap tried matching casualness with casualness. He leaned over and lit a table lamp.

"May I enquire how many of them are in the house? And how soon we may expect action? There may easily be a brace of us, Whittaker, before we're through. A more or less famous detective left floating around on the scene of the crime might be considered rather a serious handicap."

And at that moment John, entering with a tray, was responsible for the startled movement of both men. Whittaker remarked on it as he poured them each a highball.

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"Apparently certain death hasn't yet quenched my instinct of self-preservation. Naturally one can't destroy in a week fifty years of vital energy and will to live."

"Listen, old timer, are you sure even now that this is the best way out for you? What about repentance and the Church? Go in for it thoroughly, I mean, and try for the Heavenly Choir. You're too good a tenor to waste."

Whittaker laughed.

"Too good a devil to waste, Belknap. Better devil than tenor I think. No, I'm going out in a sputter of fire and brimstone—no candles for me.... Aha! I hear someone arriving. Possibly Blake. He was motoring in from Southampton."

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III

Standing at the windows, Belknap looking over Whittaker's shoulder, they saw Blake spring lightly from the seat of his Ford convertible, throw out his bags from the rumble, spring back, and "zoom" around the corner to the garage.

Putting a hand on Whittaker's arm, Belknap brought him roughly about.

"Why ring Blake in on this?" he asked, and his voice took a deadly level. His lips also leveled to a straight line, and his teeth showed white in the slit between. "After all he's *too* good a friend, isn't he, of yours, *and* mine? What's the big idea?"

"He *is* a friend, old man, true enough." Whittaker quietly brushed Belknap's hand from his sleeve, and turned away. "But what are friends, true or false, to me now? 'Less than the dust.' Besides, Blake is a crack shot—and a 19 sportsman to boot. Even though you proved so brilliantly that he didn't shoot Stanton, it was just the kind of shooting he might have done, you know that. He gives no quarter to men who run out on debts, or dishonor women. Sort of a knight errant—goes about saving situations in the nick of time. That he finds it convenient to use a gun in most cases is not *his* fault. I can even see him doing me what he would call 'a good turn,' taking me out after a whiskey and soda, and putting a hole through me against the garden wall with a Sorrell-and-Son generosity, 'We mustn't let the poor devil suffer.' Yes, Belknap, you must admit he's a splendid prospect from my point of view. I can't help it that you have scruples against sleuthing him."

"By all that's holy, you are beyond me, Whittaker."

“If you mean by that that I am beyond the pale, I am. And beyond caring. There may or may not be a life in death, but that there is death in life I’m finding out. So what the Hell!”

“Enough said, Whittaker. We’ll leave it at that. I begin to see that it is ‘what the Hell’ and then some.” Belknap was pacing the floor, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. He stopped before Whittaker to ask, “I have a question before we go further. What’s the match, that lights the fuse, that blows up the house that Bertrand built?” 20

“A good match, Ordway, soaked in tar, pitch, and turpentine. I publish my Diary. It’s a substantial, well-filled, truthful Diary, packed with sensations. In a period when confessions and revelations are in such demand, it seemed a pity not to keep abreast of the times. Hearst gives me a small fortune for mine, sight unseen, and it goes, in my will, with whatever else I possess, to my niece Joel—unless, of course, this week-end makes it useless to her; in which case—”

“Joel Lacey! See here, Whittaker, you’re insane! I’ve cared for Joel, and you know it, since she was too young to know the meaning of the word love. She is incapable of murder. But if she *had* committed a crime, and you were letting her down, you would have me to reckon with.”

“Hear, hear! The first threat, and that from my bodyguard. Check it for Berry’s benefit. It happens, my dear fellow, that your estimate of Joel’s character, like that of all true lovers, is mistaken. Joel is a murderess. 21 Her husband wasn’t a suicide. Oh, she had incentive enough, I guess. And it was hardly a murder in one sense: she challenged him to a duel but he scoffed at the very idea. So she fired anyway, and came to me to give herself up. I silenced her. As for letting her in for all this—well, I needed her. I was short of women for the dinner table. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have bothered with her, for my hopes don’t lean very heavily on her, I can assure you.”

“I should have thought you *might* be short of women. Who are the others, by the way?”

“Romany Monte Video for one. The accident in *The Renegade Lover*, in which she killed her husband (who was not her husband in private) with a

folding dagger which didn't collapse was not an accident. The dagger that night was not intended to fold."

"Bertrand, you're a cad. When did you desert Romany?"

"Years ago. I didn't desert her. She left me for— Oh, I can't even remember, there have been so many."

"That's no excuse for such betrayal as this. Who else?"

"Nadia Mdevani. You've met her here once or twice, I think; and of course know of her in a professional way. Not that there has ever been anything proved against her, quite the contrary, and yet where there has been a political murder, here or abroad, during the past ten years, she has almost invariably been questioned. I should say offhand that she is probably the tool of a powerful international ring of Governmental murderers. But her social distinction is unquestioned, her culture and wit are superlative, and her beauty is a thing to be dreamed of. I can say to you now, what I would not have said under any other circumstances, that she and I have been—call it friends, yet I have not breathed a word to her of what I instinctively know to be true: that she is a murderer twenty times over."

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Belknap shrugged to cover a strong, irrepressible shudder.

"You are a braver man than I am, Gunga Din. But then, in a pinch, I've always known you were. Is that the toll of women?"

"There's one other. She is not a murderess, but she is a potential one, for I think she knows that her husband killed a man years ago. Until lately, when, I am sorry to say, Romany has been having her innings with him, Neil and Sydney Crawford were hand and glove in a marriage that I liked to call a marriage. He is a banker;—lives out here at Blue Acres; respected, indeed loved, by everyone who knows him; and the same can be said of Sydney. He got inadvertently mixed up with a gang of boys on the streets of New York, when he was a youngster, and they later proved to be a gang in good earnest. So when Crawford was sowing his wild oats, and had run up a card debt far beyond anything he knew his father could pay, he accepted an honorarium for cutting short the career of a drug smuggler. It was his wildest

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oat. He turned over to a very clean leaf; but I think he would go to any lengths now to save his name for Sydney and the children. And she would do the same by him.”

“Splendid! Go on. This is too good to be true. It is really such a sweet reversal of form—expecting the bad eggs to hatch. Isn’t that Julian Prentice out there with Joel? Who did *he* kill—his crippled grandmother or something?”

“Not so bad as that—or I wouldn’t have let him engage himself to Joel. 24
No, he merely drowned a boy who was all but drowning him during the hazing of freshmen at the University. He pretended cramp to do it. Everything appeared accidental, and of course sympathy was with Julian anyway. There is one other, who makes the fourth man—irrespective of ourselves, and we don’t count. Milton Dorn I doubt whether you know. He is an able surgeon; but he also has a secret laboratory, or operating room, where he experiments on the conscious flesh to the point, but not beyond the point, where life still lingers. I should imagine that would be all you need know about him.”

“Absolutely! My only wonder is that you didn’t apply directly to him for release.”

“I thought of that. But then, as I’ve said, it’s a long row he hoes and I’m looking for a short one. There, Belknap, I guess that tells the tale in brief, doesn’t it?”

“No, not altogether, Judge. There is a point on which I need to be enlightened, with a bright, bright light. Where do I come in?”

“I thought I had made that clear. You are here to find good sport, but to 25
be a spoil-sport.”

“I don’t mean that, Whittaker.”

“You mean the Diary—why, man alive, it makes something like a hero of you. My admiration is written all over it. Perhaps it shouldn’t be. *Have* you committed murder?”

Belknap laughed. "It's not the time to admit it exactly, is it?"

A silence fell between them. Belknap broke it with another question.

"When do you spring it?"

"I thought I might bring it up at dinner. Unobtrusively. Casualness will at first bewilder them. The horror of the situation will dawn on them gradually."

"Has anyone an inkling?"

"No one. Except perhaps Nadia. I mentioned to her the other day that it would be fun to publish my Diary verbatim seeing what a number of things it contains. Her answer was, that if I proposed doing so I would probably never live to see it in print. That sounds hopeful. Oh, of course nothing at all may happen. They may decide to take their medicine for the old rather than be on with the new. I think that would be my solution provided I was in their shoes. And then again anything may happen. Psychologically it's a pretty how-de-do. To throw half a dozen killers together, even civilized ones (in fact the more civilized the more interesting), makes for a strange medley."

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"Stranger than you know, I'm afraid. There is an interrelation of secret currents between your protagonists that is likely to be devastating. You may not even be the only casualty. What about the police?"

"Call them in at the drop of the hat of course. The Homicide Department would be delighted to send Berry along to help you if you suggested it, I'm sure. Well—what about dressing for dinner?"

"Suits me." Belknap put a hand on Whittaker's shoulder as they parted at the door.

"Whittaker," he said gently, "I don't know what to say exactly. I'll have to reserve my judgement until later. But again let me say I sincerely regret the circumstances that have brought us to the present precarious position. For even I can't see my way to withdrawing now. I can't forego the chance of so much excitement, if nothing else," he added, with the flicker of a smile.

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“*Thought* ye couldn’t, boy.” Whittaker stressed the shrewd, cunning accents of his Yankee ancestors.

IV

The luxurious ease, and quiet, well-oiled machinery of service at Thorngate gave no slightest indication of the worm at its heart. Up the long, winding, carpeted stairs the servants glided on their errands, and, in turn, the guests themselves came softly down by ones and twos, with a gleam of jewels, of colored silk, of white shirt-fronts in the halls dimly lit with candles.

Belknap had hastened his dressing in order to be first in the drawing-room. He felt that at any moment he might be needed in the front line, and that no time should be wasted under a shower or before a mirror. His trust in Whittaker was not so perfect as to assure him that he had been honest in saying no one was in the least aware of impending trouble. And there was just the chance that someone, being forehanded, would get away with murder!

Although he had been in the receiving room, which was also library and den, fifty times over, Belknap looked it over with awakened interest. 29 Whittaker, it was apparent, had a leaning toward panelings and oil portraits, medieval tapestries and deep-napped carpets. Here tapestries formed the wall covering from floor to ceiling: none of exceptional value except the Gobelin over the mantel, but all equally lovely in colors and texture. An impulse, not so odd perhaps under the circumstances, prompted Belknap to test what lay immediately behind the surface of woven cloth and, as far as its stretching would yield to his hand, he found space. He tried it at various points and discovered it everywhere the same; and he recalled having heard that it was the safest way to hang tapestries against the rear attack of insects and dampness. Convenient to know, he thought. He was engaged in trying to locate the servants' entrance to this interstitial passage when he became

gradually aware that someone else had come into the room.

He turned about with elaborate sang-froid and met the gaze of a tall, strikingly handsome woman, who stood quizzically regarding him. She wore a black sheath gown with crimson accessories that included the oval 30 nails of tapering fingers and the clear-cut lips of a willful mouth. The crimson handkerchief tied to her garnet bracelets floated lightly up and back at every slightest movement of her arm. The cigarette case of scarlet enamel which she opened with a deft flick of one hand to help herself with the other, gleamed like smoldering coal.

He had met Nadia Mdevani several times with Whittaker; and he had vaguely realized the relationship between them, but had given it little consideration; except that once he had instinctively withdrawn from a case in which her name had figured more or less conspicuously. The sense of her guilt had been conveyed to him on the wings of one of what he called his wild guesses, and he paid Whittaker the courtesy of letting well enough alone. As it happened, she had cleared herself easily.

Looking at her now he realized that she was inwardly disturbed at sight of him. Perhaps she saw in his mere presence a confirmation of the faint doubts she might be entertaining with respect to the week-end. But her poise held perfectly—in fact it was by a shade of its over-emphasis that he caught 31 the inner tremor at all.

“Ah, Mr. Belknap!” she exclaimed, in her slow, husky contralto. “How nice to see you here. Or should I call you Judge Belknap—or Detective Ordway Belknap? I am never sure of the term to your face. Behind your back I call you Belknap for short.”

“Let’s discard them, all four, and make it simply Ordway, to my face, as you put it, *and* behind my back. And may I make it Nadia? Remember Bertrand is an equally dear friend to us both. You are looking divinely, Miss Nadia. Black is your color. Although I have seen you when I should have said the same of red, or white for the matter of that. Red and white are your contrasts. Tonight you are fused into a single vivid figure of black. Whistler would have liked you. You have a way, which most women have not, of lending distinction to a color instead of letting it create you. You have a like faculty

with situations I am told.”

“I am not quite certain what you may mean by that, or whether it should entirely please me. But I have sufficient vanity to be flattered by your recollection of my gowns in view of how little attention you seemed to give them. Will you have one?” 32

She proffered her exquisite box and on his “Thank you, no,” crossed to the hearth where she lifted a crimson-slippered foot to the side bar of the fender, and for graceful balance (pose, Belknap thought it) laid a hand against the tapestried wall. It yielded enough to mar her picture.

“I had forgotten these tapestries are but the semblance of walls,” she murmured. “What a cosy place for rats. Although I suppose it was for the very purpose of perpetrating the Hamlet act against rats that the space was originally reserved.”

Belknap was pouring himself a thimbleful of Scotch at the tray standing in readiness on the divan table. He tossed it off, and turned over the after flavor on his tongue, as his mind turned over the possible subtleties of Nadia’s remark. She had made it piquant by a twist of inflection. A Polonius as well as a rat—or so the tone implied.

“We were speaking of Bertrand,” she continued abruptly. “Do you not consider him a little secretive about the week-end, conveying that there is a *reason* why we are here? Why should there need be a reason?” 33

“There *should* be none, Nadia, except our enjoyment of his unbounded hospitality. But I feel myself, now that you mention it,” Belknap pursued, willing to test where her guards were raised, “that Bertrand has something up his sleeve. Possibly an announcement; he likes to make any news impressive. He may have lost his shirt in the Market, or been left a fortune by his great-aunt Emma in Vermont. You know Bertrand well enough to know he’d celebrate either with equal pomp.”

He heard the little whispering sigh that Nadia suddenly drew.

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” she said, more to herself than Belknap. Then,

quickly: “Is it the Diary?” she asked.

Belknap hesitated by the fraction of a second. By all accounts Nadia Mdevani was dangerous. Her intelligence, fearlessness and beauty were things that might throw dust in any man’s eyes. Her ability to ‘clinch,’ as she was doing now, with a power greater than her own, and cut her way free from within, had won her many a hand-to-hand encounter that if taken blow for blow would have seen her downed long ago. However, Belknap could see no better way at the moment than to close with her. 34

“Yes, it is the Diary,” he said quietly; and stood spellbound by the extreme beauty of her face as the color mounted under the ivory skin, accentuating the high, molded contours of the bones beneath it. He could not have said whether she were more angered or hurt.

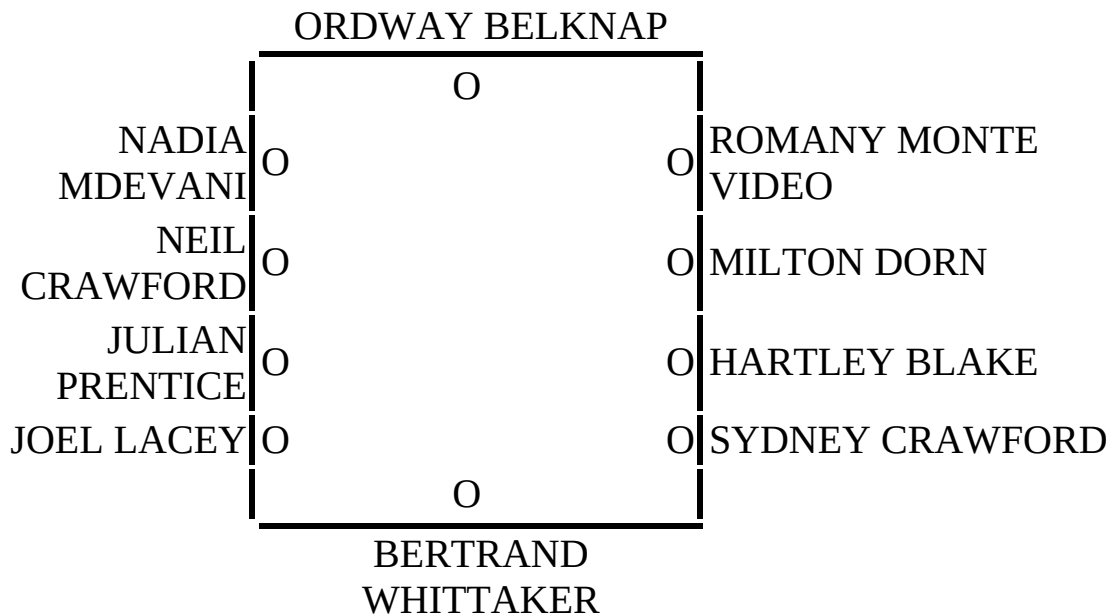
“When?” Her low voice held its ground; not by a shade did it show disquiet. “How much time is granted us to deal with it?”

He was smitten with admiration at the serenity and ease of her apparent candor. With veteran coolness she took him on. He could do no less than to match her play for play.

“He intends letting the cat out of the bag tonight. But there will be nothing published for several days.”

“Thank you. I don’t know why, Mr. Detective, you are being so kind and telling me tales out of school.” She turned fully toward him and gave him one of her rare smiles, lifting her drooped eyelids enough to show two burning high-lights, like two stars under an edge of cloud. “I had to know how swift the sands were running away. Even you can’t speed them or retard them. And you wouldn’t if you could—for you have really seen me tonight for the first time,” she said, with the faint irony he was beginning to adore because in a more subtle and whimsical way, it counterbalanced his own. “May I?” She took a flower from a bowl on the table and broke it short for his buttonhole. At that moment he had regretfully to turn from her. Whittaker, at his elbow, was presenting the Crawfords. 35

V



was the way they sat at dinner.

Belknap regretted Miss Video on his left. He was one of the few who had never been properly infatuated with the Romany patteran, as he privately named her for her continuous flow of inconsequential chatter, and had therefore never liked her. It was one thing or the other with Romany. She was a sylph-like creature with enormous eyes, an auburn Viennese bob, and a disingenuous manner. She ‘needed’ them, was the way men put it, first 37 their friendship, then their protection, finally their passion. You couldn’t somehow let her down by disappointing her. They said she was weak and easily swayed, and each in turn flattered himself he could strengthen her philosophy against a bitter world (a world he helped to

embitter, if he could but see it that way), and help her get on her feet. Yet somehow she had never mastered this art of walking alone!

Belknap, always irritated by willowy natures, now wished her in Kingdom Come. He wanted to renew the dangerous but charming intimacies that had swiftly and strangely sprung up between himself and Nadia Mdevani; and here would have been his opportunity, with Nadia beside him sending odd disturbing currents up the arm that almost brushed hers. He felt her mind being restive and wild, puzzled and angry, and above all keenly intent on a loophole of escape. If anyone else should succeed in silencing Whittaker forever it would not be because Nadia had yielded her designs but because she had delayed long enough to be cunning and intricate in their workmanship. She even seemed, now that the die was cast, rather to relish the added risk of having Belknap in the arena with her. Whittaker, asked 38 for a description of Nadia, would have said the obvious things about raven locks and snowdrift skin, with eyes too revealing to go revealed. Belknap, after this evening, would have spoken of her in terms of a banked fire with a scent of brimstone. With less than half his exasperated attention given to Romany's innumerable reasons, centering in jealousy, why she had not been assigned to lead in *After Midnight*, he glanced surreptitiously at Nadia. Her face, ivory white and immobile, signified nothing. He wondered whether he might be mistaken in thinking the atmosphere so heavily charged between them. His appraising eye passed down the table, appreciating beauty and distinction where he found it, and paused at Joel—dear Joel, not beautiful perhaps, but dear looking. Belknap, in his fashion, had loved her; but for his own bachelor's sake (he was not an unselfish man), as well as for her youth's sake, he had never spoken of it to her. Looking unwaveringly ahead into a night that might well be terrible for them all, he felt a particular pang for her. She was talking *sotto voce* with Julian:

“Hush, dear, people are listening.”

“Then darling, more darling, most darling.”

“Don't, *please!*”

39

“I want to see your amber eyes, not the back of a leaf-brown head.”

“Don’t say things like that at the table. Speak when you are spoken to.”

“Can’t you say something nice to me?”

She looked around at him, half tearful, half laughing, under her lashes.

“Oh, my dearest one, is it as bad as all that?”

“Worse, Joel, much worse.”

Of course it must be a dream, and a very bad one, that Whittaker had been saying things about cancer and murder and murderers. The more so when one looked at Whittaker himself, sitting genially, though perhaps with an extra dash of grey pallor, at the head of his board, lifting his champagne to touch glasses with Sydney Crawford: “To the lips, to the eyes.” The Stein song again! Would its revival never die? Yet it quite applied at Whittaker’s table tonight. Every woman in her way was as fair, as vital, as more than willing to play up, as any man could ask. Even Sydney, with a flash of challenging laughter at her husband, was returning Hartley Blake’s sallies in kind. Sydney was obviously fey tonight, with a heightened color, brighter eyes, and a recklessness of sentiment that might mean trouble. Had Neil and Romany failed in discretion? 40

Blake was in his usual excellent form; and it was plain to see thought his wit of too good a flavor to be entirely spent on a woman, even the excited Sydney. So he was tossing it by means of a slightly lifted voice up over his right shoulder at Dorn. Dorn however looked darkly unresponsive, and, being a man of few words, it seemed probable Blake would never know whether his delightful flippancies and exaggerations were being appreciated. Then, suddenly, he knew:

“As for myself,” Dorn remarked to his side-partners in particular, and to the table tangentially, “I have recently resolved to remain silent unless I feel that I can definitely contribute something worth while to the conversation. Time and energy are indiscriminately wasted in the futile, the repetitive, and the platitudinous. If we could hold our tongues until they were loosed by the real idea, the absolute necessity of speech, there would at least be a deal less noise, and quite possibly a return to the art of thinking which at present is a

lost one.”

It was an insulting and uncalled for remark under the circumstances. [41] Romany, who looked positively crestfallen for a change, perhaps needed a blunt rebuke (she wasn’t suppressed in a day), but Blake, though an inveterate talker, was a brilliant one. His high color showed such anger that the control of his first words was surprising.

“I should not only hold it, Dorn, I should bite it if I were you.”

The silence that fell in the room was deep and ominous. But in it was Whittaker’s opportunity, not only to distract Dorn and Blake, but to call attention to himself. Here, like Jason, he could cast his stone among the dragon’s teeth.

“I believe I *have* a contribution to make to the conversation, to the evening’s pastime, and I hope to posterity.”

Belknap, without looking her way, knew that Nadia stiffened and straightened at the words. As for the others, their eyes turned to Whittaker expectantly, but with no premonitory awakening.

“I had planned letting you learn of what I intend when it had ceased to be an intention and become an actuality. In other words, you were only to know of the publication of my memoirs when you saw them in print. But I really can’t resist a little boasting in advance, and I thought I might read scraps of [42] them after dinner to the assembled gathering, before we get down to bridge.”

“Oh, how wonderful of you, Uncle Bertrand,” Joel exclaimed, eager to help him, as she thought, tide over the embarrassing moment. “I didn’t know you were writing. You have so many irons in the fire, how *did* you find time to do a book? But it must have been pretty good fun, so much has happened to you.”

“It isn’t recent, Joel; it’s been written at odd moments over a period of twenty years. In other words, it’s my Diary. But it *is* packed full of material, and all sorts of things. Everybody’s in it. Oh yes, you are all there, my dears.”

“You talk like Red Riding Hood’s wolf, Bertrand,” Nadia said with cold acidity, and at her tone the first chill, like the first autumn frost, fell on them all. “Just what do you mean when you say we are in it?”

“Exactly that, Nadia darling. I hope you are in it to the life, as I’m sure I am.”

“You mean it is a character portrayal of your friends and foes as well as a revelation of your own nature—you sinner,” she added with bitter lightness. 43

“You express it in a nutshell.”

Blake spoke.

“By what right does one betray one’s friends—even in the cause of literature; and you will excuse me, Whittaker, if I doubt the literary merits of your pen.”

“By the modern right of giving the public what it craves and pays for: the revelation of evil, the worse the merrier. It used to be how I found the true light; now it is how I went plumb to Hell.”

“How you did perhaps, but not how I did.”

“In most instances one touches close upon the other, I’m afraid. It is a platitude of course (I ask your pardon, Dorn) to remark that we none of us can sin alone, but it is true nevertheless. Even the person that hears the tale of a crime is somehow affected. I feel the need of clearing my decks, of things heard and committed.”

“I doubt it would earn you a free pass through the pearly gates, supposing your proposed act comes off. Mark I say proposed.”

“Is that your glove, Blake? You must be able to get gloves at a discount.”

“My glove, yes, but not concealing the dagger beneath.” 44

“I’ll meet you where and when you please.”

“With Ordway Belknap as your second, I suppose? No, thank you; there are

safer ways.”

“Then make it fast, man,” Whittaker cried in a suddenly broken voice as the dew of intense pain stood out on his forehead and he drooped a little forward over the table. “The time is short for both of us.”

“Quick, Mr. Belknap,” Nadia exclaimed, “Romany is fainting.”

It *would* be Romany who took things the hardest.

VI

Half an hour later found the atmosphere of the library anything but comfortable—indeed strained almost to the breaking point. Whittaker's slow poison was beginning to take effect. Ignoring the ominous rolling up of clouds, he had quietly but firmly gone ahead with the plan to read aloud a few pages of the Diary. With malicious casualness he had suggested the withdrawal of anyone who felt more in the mood for billiards or bridge: "You know the billiard room, Blake. Do get up a game if it suits you. There's nothing particularly thrilling about an old man mumbling over his memories of other days. I merely thought one or two of you might prefer a moment's pause in the day's occupation that I could beguile, even if I put you asleep." But, aside from Dorn who had excused himself directly after dinner with, "Doctors, you know, Whittaker. Frightfully sorry. I'll try to get back tomorrow," there was not one that had had the strength to keep away from the spider's parlor. Though for a moment it had appeared that Belknap might follow Dorn's example: "Come now, don't tell me you're off, too?" Whittaker's tone half-mocked, half-threatened him as he stood indecisively in the hall toying with the door-latch. "Oh no," Belknap had answered with impatient asperity. "Hardly that! I have a small contribution to make to the evening's pleasure. It's in the car. I'll be back." He was, in a jiffy, with several bottles of what he said was '11 champagne, and which, as Whittaker knew, came from one of the finest cellars in New York.

But no one else turned even an attentive eye to the gift which Belknap was arranging with exaggerated care on the tray of crystal-bright decanters and dark-bright bottles. Curiosity, dread, and sheer hypnotism, combined to magnetize them into a rigid ensemble about Whittaker's reading lamp. But it was a brittle, surface rigidity—like the first thin ice formed over moving

water. Beneath it the twisting, roiling currents of agonized apprehension wore through and disturbed the dangerous stillness of the room. Nadia Mdevani's puffs at her cigarette were too brief, and she flicked unformed ash too often. Blake in the corner ferociously over-shuffled a pack of cards. At the piano Romany's fingers lacked control, and the snatches of song she attempted lost themselves in broken pitch. But she had at least recovered from her faintness, which she had apologetically laid to a week's indulgence in late hours, and to cocktails for tea at Sands Point. Crawford was turning the leaves of *The Sportsman*, but with such erratic rapidity that he must have been unaware of what he saw. Only Julian and Joel, looking worlds at each other, plus suns and moons and stars, still seemed a little stupidly blind to what was happening. 47

As Whittaker arranged his stage setting—chair and lamp just so, and a pillow at his back—the ritual of after-dinner coffee proceeded with its usual calm and efficiency. A robot maid, pretty and slim-figured in black and white, brought the service, and John passed the cups. He then quietly opened the windows of the terrace to the warm May night, asked his master was there anything further, and retired.

Whittaker cleared his throat; and the sound startled the room as thoroughly as though it had been a shot. It drew the line at conversation and movement. Across the stillness Whittaker's first words assumed an enlarged importance. 48

"As I've told you, this is a day to day record of my life for the past twelve or fifteen years." By a motion of his hand he indicated to them a thick, flexible, thin-paper notebook, bound in tooled suède. "Tonight I am taking a leaf from a day two years ago, June 19, 1929. I recall the day vividly; and I can quite imagine that Markham does. (We'll say Markham—the real name needn't figure until we go into print.)

"Markham called me early this evening to say he must see me immediately. I was engaged for a theatre party, and did not wish to disappoint my hostess, but Markham was obstinate and I yielded. He lives only a matter of minutes from Thorngate. When he appeared it was more than obvious that something was wrong. He was pale, his eyes bloodshot, and his voice somewhere in his shoes. It seems he is being blackmailed on two counts, an old one and a new

one; the new one being a mistress, and therefore dangerous to his family; the old one being a strange case of murder, and therefore more dangerous to himself. It is the murder that I consider worth recounting. 49

“Markham is the son, only son, of old Markham who once broke the bank at Monte Carlo. There is wildness in the family. The boy grew up higgledy-piggledy in a part of New York that was rapidly changing from good to bad and bad to worse. Watched with less than half an eye by a succession of uninvestigated nurses and governesses, when they could be afforded at all, Markham naturally and easily became a member of a boy’s gang in the block; and this gang of children grew up to be the real thing. He was not able to break with them, even if he had cared to do so. They bled his father by way of him. They led him by gradual stages into mischief, into badness and into sin. The day came when, owing one too many grand to some card racketeers working the steamship lines to Havana, he was ready to accept payment for murder.

“A jet-black night in midwinter found him entering an apparently abandoned shack in a lonely curve of the Hackensack on the barren flats outside Newark. Nothing for miles but snow-drifted meadows and a black river turgidly rolling seaward.” 50

“A style worthy of the American Institute,” Julian murmured to Joel, “where vocabulary counts—I mean wordiness.”

“Hush, Julian! Your uncle’s a member.”

“That’s how I know.”

“The single room, into which Markham crept upward by way of a loose floor board, reeked of stale tobacco smoke, soiled clothes, and an odd sweet odor that he had long ago learned to recognize as opium. Knife in hand, he settled against the wall near the locked door to await his victim’s homecoming. There were mice about. He identified mice. And a branch blowing against the window-pane. That was easy. But there was another sound, persistent and regular—like, like breathing. Breathing! Good God, it was breathing. The smuggler wasn’t abroad smuggling, according to plan. The cold sweat broke out on Markham’s palms and forehead. Were they each

crouching in the dark waiting the other's move? The next scuttle of a mouse shattered his flesh and bones like a blow. He was goose-flesh from head to foot, including his scalp which pained him with its effort to lift his hair.'” 51

“You see he thought his goose was cooked,” was Julian's next aside to Joel. Something was at last beginning to take place in Julian. Belknap saw a little sleepy devil waking in him that might not always prove easy to deal with.

“The man on the bed moved; lay still; shifted again. There was nothing for it but to strike. He sprang and struck: and drove the little knife up to his hand in something soft. He was saying tonight that a knife murder is not so good for the murderer whatever it may be to the murdered. He says the physical sensations will last him for life: the scraping of the blade on a bone, its spongy sinking home in a vital part, the sudden sagging of the body under one's own tensi-ty, and the last gasping gurgling breath against the face. Markham had never seen this man's face, never would see it; but he would remember the feeling of the unshaven chin and the small, fat body; and the smell of sweated clothes mingling with the warm smell of fresh blood——”

“If you don't mind, Whittaker,” Crawford said in an inhuman voice, “I should like a glass of water. May I ring?” He tried to rise, staggered, and said, “Help me, Sydney.” 52

It seemed that Sydney had not heard him or was unable to move. She didn't stir, or move her eyes. But Romany, from a huddled, shivering figure on the divan, came to life and ran to him.

“Durian, Neil, my beloved, my only love. What is he doing to you? I can't bear it. I won't let him do things like this—I don't care——”

Romany didn't finish—Sydney had heard, and had struck Romany a blow that threw her against the table. Nadia was laughing terribly as Blake came across toward Whittaker with murder on his face.

“Now by all that's holy or unholy, you have overstepped the bounds, Bertrand Whittaker——”

Whether he ever reached Whittaker remained in doubt for at that moment the room was plunged in total darkness. Someone screamed—a woman. There was a scuffle and a thud. A man groaned. Belknap cried out: “Stay where you are as you value your lives.” They heard him feeling the wall for the switch, and then there was light.

In it Whittaker lay back half conscious in his chair, bleeding at the forehead. The others stood in oddly arrested positions like the players of ten-step on the count of ten. And the Diary was gone.

53

54

VII

As a ditch drains at the opening of a sluice, leaves and twigs sucked one by one, slow at first then rapidly, down the outward current, the library drained of guests, silently, furtively, slow almost to the door, swift as the need to escape the room, the others, and their own astounding collapse under sudden stress, dragged them away. When the last of them had disappeared, Belknap, with John's aid, helped Bertrand Whittaker to his room. They paused at his threshold. For the moment there seemed nothing to say. Both perhaps felt the effects of a certain, for them, anti-climax to the evening's events—something rather hollow, almost something ridiculous, in the situation. Whittaker felt let down. Belknap ugly and impatient.

"How's the head?" Belknap asked stiffly.

"Quite all right, thanks," Whittaker answered with equal stiffness. 55
"Won't you come in?"

"No. Not now. There's too much in the affrighted air. Get some sleep if you can. Though perhaps you think you'll get plenty of that soon enough. Well, you've started the ball rolling with a vengeance, haven't you? Satisfied? God, Whittaker, hadn't you better cry quits? It isn't too late. Tell 'em it was a practical joke; and ask Crawford's pardon on the side. You see for yourself it isn't going to be so daisy simple. A murder! We'll be lucky if it's only half a dozen. There was no lovelight in any one's eyes this evening, except in that poor little goose of a Joel's. And she went upstairs looking withered. Slice this house from garret to cellar right now and it would make as pretty a Desire Under the Elms cross-section as you could find in a day's journey."

“The desire being to get me, huh?” Whittaker asked grimly.

“Exactly. If only whoever gets you would just please make a thorough job of it. Who do you think tried it?”

“Haven’t a ghost; have you? Thought it was going to be the Colonel somehow. But the blow didn’t quite come from his direction. Still, he may have swung around me in the dark. It was a nasty knock, I think with metal, but glancing. That’s what saved me.” 56

“Whittaker, you *are* a cool one. Wish I could match you tonight. But there are moments when I don’t like it. Change your mind?”

“*Never!* No, as I said before, if you don’t like the game, get out. I’ll find a detective to whom it *will* be a challenge to the best work that’s in him.”

“And *I* will never get out. You know that; you know it only too well, you old reprobate. Filthy as the weather looks ahead, catch me refusing to go through it, if it’s there to go through. Well, while we linger here the plot undoubtedly thickens. I’d best get a move-on. Good-by—for the moment.”

“Good-by, and good-hunting,” Whittaker said as he turned away, leaning more heavily on John’s arm. Closing his door he murmured “Ah!” on a breath, meaning, if he had troubled to say all he meant, “Well, well, see what we have here.”

Romany Video, in a great fluff of feathery negligee, lay face downward, a vibrant, hysterical puff-ball, on the bed. She was a mere speck of worried humanity troubling the white waste spaces of Whittaker’s four-poster; but an insistent speck, like a mosquito at a screen. Whittaker regarded her for a moment with an expression of mingled amusement, pity, contempt, and the faintly suggestive what-can-I-do-for-you look certain men always have for a fair damsel in distress. Thoroughly as Whittaker knew this particular damsel, no distress of hers would quite leave him indifferent. 57

But he took his time. There was no harm ever came in letting a woman wait—or weep. He said nothing. Sitting on the edge of the bed, as though Romany were not there, he let John help him exchange his pair of patent-

leather for a pair of pigskin slippers, remove his dinner-coat and stiff shirt, and slip his green silk dressing-gown over his shoulders. Romany, properly responsive to the delayed attention, redoubled her sobbing.

“Thank you, John. That’ll do for now. No, don’t bother about my head. It’s hardly more than a mean bruise. I’ll call you later if I want you. Good-night.”

Whittaker, allowing John to depart, silently studied the trembling, haired-up curls of Romany’s dishevelled head. Then, on the click of the latch, he leaned across and touched her arm. 58

“Come, come, little one. What’s it all about? You’re taking it too hard. I’m sorry it had to be Crawford to begin with—for your sake. But you’ll get over him, if you have time, as you got over me. As you got over Blake. How did Blake let you get over him?”

“Oh, go away, you horrid, mean thing. I can’t bear you. Don’t *talk* to me. Don’t you *dare* touch me.”

“As bad as all that? Dear, dear! You’re taking him harder than you took most of us. You like them good, is that it? Gives you something to do making them over.”

“You bad man! How can you say such things to me? How *can* you, after all we’ve been to each other? You used never to do anything to hurt me. And look at you now. What *has* happened, Bertrand dear? It’s such a cruel world. I can’t bear it. I tell you, I can’t. I’m going to kill myself. I’m going to *die*, Bertrand.”

“My dear, for the first time of the hundred and one you’ve made that threat, there’s a chance of it’s coming off,” Whittaker said, and said the one thing in creation that, instead of aggravating them, could have stopped Romany’s hysterics dead in their tracks. Romany was quiet; desperately quiet. She lifted her head from the foam of maribou and looked at Whittaker with wide, distraught eyes, and parted lips. 59

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

“What I say,” he mocked her whisper by imitating it. “Even if you escape tonight, Romany (for death, whose name you so often take in vain, is on the *qui vive* in the house tonight), you have Durian’s death to answer for.”

Romany screamed, and throttled the scream with her hand across her mouth.

“Bertrand! You are going—to tell—*that*? You’ve written it down as you wrote about Neil?”

“I have.”

“Oh, no-no-no-no. Please, no. I don’t believe it.”

“Then wait and see. But hope isn’t dead yet, Freckles. (Let me see; yes, there’s your one freckle that made me call you Freckles. Remember?) I’ll have to find the Diary, or rewrite it,—unless, of course, I—”

“Oh, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.” Romany bounced back into her hair, her maribou, and the rumpled pillows. 60

“*Don’t* say that!” he cried dramatically. And Romany caught at a straw. She sat up again.

“You care?” she said. “You *do* care. Oh, Bertrand, *why* are you making me suffer so? I don’t understand. *Darling*, is it because you’re jealous?” She threw both arms recklessly around his neck and clung to him with the wild strength of a drowning person. “Did he think his little Romany had really gone away and left him? Did he think she cared about all the other mans? Why, his poor little girl only thought the big man had got tired of her. She did, darling. Truly, she did.”

Whittaker slowly and carefully, with all the force of his hands, disengaged her arms, but, once disengaged, he found his own of necessity engaged in holding her.

“Brat!” he said, on a low, half-laugh, and kissed her lightly.

“Oh,” she breathed with a relieved sigh that rose, softly, from the bottom of her heart. “It’s so long since you called me that. I love it. How *silly* of us to

quarrel, Bertrand. And be jealous! After all these years. To think you could ever have been so cruel as to pretend to tell about Durian to bring me back. Couldn't you have found a pleasanter way, darling?"

61

Whittaker regarded her obliquely through half-shut eyes.

"What about Crawford?" he asked.

She had the grace to color.

"Poor Neil," she murmured. "But that's for him to take care of, isn't it?"

"I see it is." She felt him shiver, but misinterpreted it.

"Happy?" she asked.

"The Devil has that reputation."

He felt her take alarm again, with a defensive stiffening. She laughed shakily.

"Naughty boy! You're being sarcastic."

"Am I?"

Suddenly, Romany sprang away from him and stood trembling from head to foot, and chattering with uncontrolled and unexpected rage.

"You are go-go-going to tell." She stuttered feverishly. "You are going to tell on all of us. You r-really mean it. Don't you? D-don't you?"

62

"Ah, you've figured it out, have you? Yes, I'm telling. How often must I say it to get it through your pretty head?"

"You brute! You beast! You—," like a spoilt child Romany stamped. "You're a hateful, cruel, wicked man. You can't do it. Just you try. No one will let you. You'll be killed first. You can't do it to me, do you hear. I'll kill you myself. You've got to leave me alone. Leave me *alone*. What do you think I killed him for? Because he betrayed me, didn't I? And what are you doing to me? Betraying me, too. You look out, Bertrand Whittaker. There's

nothing I'll stop at if I'm roused. No, not even murder."

Whittaker shed Romany's tantrum as a duck sheds water.

"Histrionics, baby," he said. "You never can get far away from them, can you? Fifth-rate quotations from sixth-rate melodrama. Not that I don't wish you meant your big threat. I do. But if you really mean to kill me, don't shout about it. The house is listening, if I know the house. Do it on the quiet. Now run away home to your room, child, and think it over. I'll drop in later, 63 if I may, and get the results. Pity I haven't the poor old diary by me and I'd mark you the passages about yourself. They're quite thrilling. Make you out a sort of Medici, of the willow-wand variety. You should be honored." Romany swayed. "Don't faint, my dear, *again*. You do it too often. It's becoming a vicious habit. The thing for you to do is to get to bed." Whittaker worked her gently toward the door. "Goodnight—sleep tight—wake up—"

Romany drew away from him with a shudder. Wrapping her gown tightly about her with a pathetic little gesture of pride and courage, she flung a parting shot from the doorway.

"And don't think you're the only one that can tell tales out of school, Bertrand Whittaker. I'll match you revelation for revelation if it comes to the book of revelations. You'll have a tall lot of explaining to do to the law if I let—."

She was in the hall, and had dropped her voice. Whittaker failed to catch a name she gave.

"Who's that you'll let the world know about?" he shouted.

Romany put her dust-mop head back into the room. 64

"*Just you guess!* And I hope you die of fright," she hissed, and, turtle-wise, withdrew the head.

VIII

Julian, in dressing gown and slippers, sank back in the deep arm-chair before the fire burning in his room, and gave himself up to being downright worried. The situation at Thorngate seemed to him bewildering, terrifying, and positively insane, by turns. Obviously there was far more real trouble in the wind than the immediate problem of his own predicament, though heaven knew that was bad enough, largely because of Joel. However he was in a sense relieved and glad that Joel was to know. He had never yet been able to figure out a way to tell her about himself, but now this came along to settle the matter for him: she was bound to know, willy-nilly.

Why, *why* had he ever told Bertrand Whittaker of all people? No one would have ever been any the wiser if he had kept his mouth shut that warm 66 evening last summer when his conscience was eating him alive, together with the mosquitoes, and he had asked Whittaker what to do about it. Whittaker had said, "Oh, forget it, boy. It won't do you, or Roger Dane, or Roger's family any good to come out with it." Then why was Whittaker so thoroughly airing it now? Or was he? Perhaps he considered Julian's hot-headed crime of too light a weight to bother with in his gruesome Diary. But Julian felt that it was playing ostrich on his part to rely on such a hope. For a man is known by the company he keeps. And it began to be desperately certain that the house was full to the gables of murderers in one degree or another. Both Blake and Dorn had been too quick on the rise to speak well for themselves. Romany Monte Video and Neil Crawford had blown to bits under a little pressure. And the Diary had been of sufficient importance for someone to have already attempted murder for its sake. Murder to cover murder. What a weird and preposterous household it was proving to be. What was Bertrand Whittaker's motive in assembling it unless he was playing a

losing game with death? If Crawford were not so chicken-hearted he would have avenged tonight's dreadful betrayal before now. He might get [67] around to it yet. Some of the rankest cowards in an open fight have been known to be excellent stabbers-in-the-back. And if everyone else had a secret murder in his past, whoever got away with the Diary was getting a wonderful thrill—probably reading it now by flashlight in a cupboard or under the shrubbery (one of Julian's most persistent fears was that Dorn, instead of having gone straight up to town, was haunting the grounds with murder in his heart), trembling at every creak of the floor or rustle of leaves.

Whittaker's chances of seeing his scheme through appeared slim enough to Julian: but even should he fail to see a rewritten version of his Diary in print, he had already, by one evening's work, made a rotten mess of at least six lives. Neil and Sydney and Romany could no longer ignore their situation; whatever was between them would from now on be an open wound. Belknap would have definite proof of at least one crime and the criminal behind it. Whether, in view of the preposterous and unfair circumstances, he would decently ignore Crawford's guilt was a doubtful question. Romany had fainted dead away when the Diary was first mentioned, and later had [68] lost her head and confused the names of Neil Crawford and that lover of hers, with the crazy name of Durian, who had been accidentally killed in one of her plays—why, of *course*, he *hadn't* been accidentally killed, that was just it. What a fool he was not to have thought of it before? So now he had three murderers accounted for: Crawford, Romany, and himself. As for Nadia, she looked the part of a poisoner to the letter. Dorn had clearly run away from something. With Blake it probably all depended on your definition of a duel.

But then there was Joel! Something must be wrong with his whole figuring, or Joel wouldn't be where she was. Surely Whittaker wouldn't include an innocent niece in a crime wave unless there were others as innocent to make it proper. Julian smiled at his own charming conceit. But it might be that Whittaker was so intent on crushing the alliance between himself and Joel that he was taking drastic measures to acquaint Joel with her lover's villainy. He *must* see Joel. He must see her before things developed beyond anyone's control, as they were rapidly doing.

He jumped to his feet and almost out of his skin at a tapping on an inner [69]

door of his room that led God knew where. Should he lie low and gaze hypnotized at the door knob, or shout boldly "Come in," or open the door suddenly and take the intruder off his guard? Julian had by now strung himself up to such a pitch that his own murder wouldn't in the least have surprised him. Before he could decide on a course of action the door quietly opened and Joel appeared in a flowing blue robe. All his breath deserted him at the vision of her in his room.

"Joel!" he whispered.

"Yes, dear, I'm on the other side of the door, with the key on my side. Must be more plot in that, don't you think? If we fall any deeper into trouble than we have fallen already—I mean if it comes to calling the police or something—there'll be a scandal about the connecting door between the rooms of Mr. Julian Prentice and his fiancée. Fiancée my eye, it will suggest! And if, hearing a shot, we should dash into the hall, it would add that we were seen emerging from the young gentleman's room, in negligee, at—" she glanced at her wrist watch—"at 12:30 A.M. The fact that I am marking the time, with you as witness, may prove frightfully important. It is late, isn't it?"

70

"Very, yes." Julian's over-emotion at Joel's nearness showed itself in understatement and a boyish stiffness that made Joel love him beyond anything. "Come and sit here, won't you? While I stir this fire. What *are* you doing out so late, dear heart?"

"I did a little listening and snooping in the halls and found everybody else doing likewise. So I naturally can't sleep. The house is fairly creeping, Julian. I wish it would get to its feet and walk off. Perhaps in the sense of very strong cheese, it will eventually. Oh dear, I'm so tired, and therefore a little silly, as you see, darling."

"I don't wonder—that you're tired I mean. Here, put your feet on this cushion and let me warm your hands that are so cold. Tell me, Joel, what do you think your uncle is up to; what is he doing to everybody, including himself?"

"I don't know; truly, Julian, I don't know, and I don't care what he is doing to himself and all the others but us. But I do care dreadfully what he does to you and me, and I have come to see whether we can't, you and I, pass a

magic wand over ourselves to keep out his evil genius and whatever it's leading to. That we may even begin to do it, I realize I must be very brave and tell you about myself. We can't in the face of things leave any stone unturned between us." 71

Julian looked up at her with a swift, tender smile.

"Now you are going to tell me *you* have committed murder, too," he said.

"Julian, be still; don't be amused. Yes, I am going to tell you that I have committed murder. I have. But listen, please; don't laugh that way. I can't bear it."

"Darling, I can't help it. Oh my God, I was just coming to tell you about my murder before you should hear about it from another, or read of it in a tabloid, or have it sprung upon you when I am cross-examined. Joel, we are in for a very great deal of horridness—worse than we realize."

"Not worse than *I* realize," she said, with inexpressible weariness. "Julian dearest, you must listen to me; and then," she smiled faintly, "I will hear about your murder."

He put her hands to his lips.

"*Don't*," she said, drawing back. "Perhaps you won't feel that way when I've told you. After all if you have killed one—husband—" She found it almost beyond her to say the word. 72

"Joel, you didn't kill Jerry. You didn't, you didn't. Say it, I tell you. Say you didn't."

"I did. But it wasn't quite a murder, really it wasn't. Listen, Julian, stop crying. I swear to you it wasn't altogether a murder."

"I don't know what you mean 'not altogether a murder.' Murder is murder, you can't get away from that." Julian's tone was low and dull. "Joel, I can't bear it."

"I should have thought being in a glass house you wouldn't throw stones,"

bitterness had crept into her voice.

“Mine was self-defense—in a way it was.”

“And mine was an affair of honor—in a way it was. I am going to tell you the whole story. It’s our only hope, Julian—for us both to tell everything.

“Jerry and I had been in love, really and terribly in love, for several years. It was after we knew Junior was on his way that we married. Oh, not because we *had* to. It was Jerry’s idea that we’d call that our own private marriage, if we found that we could have one, and then accept the necessary 73 legalities for its sake. You see what I mean. I thought it a sort of romantic super-modernism, a beautiful way of counting out the world. Don’t laugh at me, Julian; for the laugh *was* on me. The first shock came when we knew. He said, ‘I wonder whether we really *need* to go through the outward form!’ Puzzled, but no more, I said, ‘Of course, don’t you think so?’ and his answer was, ‘Just as you say, of course.’ ‘As *you* say,’ note that. It took me months of increasing pain to realize that it wasn’t romance for him, but a way of keeping free himself while achieving a son.

“Well, I thought it all out; and it seemed to me I had been deceived as surely as any girl in melodrama. After all it’s six of one and half a dozen of the other, the old Tess of the D’Urberville way and the modern, talking-it-all-out way, isn’t it? Instead of the enraged father and brother going on the warpath (fathers and brothers have been made to feel gun-shy these days) the woman herself, whose boast is that she can take care of herself, should have more than the theoretical right to do it. She should be able to fight it out to the death. Call it a new form of dueling if you like. So I went to work to clear my honor. That’s what it amounted to. I had ceased to care, to love him, of 74 course, or I suppose I couldn’t have done it. I took shooting lessons at the 79th St. Armory. *He* had been a good shot since the War. Then I challenged him, coolly and seriously. I meant it. I named the hour, and the spot (in Central Park), and said he could name the day.”

“*Joel*, what did he say!”

“He laughed. I suppose I should have known he would. But I was made blind angry by it. So I went for a gun and—ended it all.”

“How did you get away with it?”

“I didn’t intend to. But I had taken his pistol from the drawer—and that, with the position in which he lay, pointed to suicide. It was never finger printed. Our friends claimed we were the most devoted couple they knew. I went to Uncle Bertrand immediately (he was Judge in our Precinct at the time), but he persuaded me, wrongly I know now, to keep silent; he said Jerry had it coming to him. But I wish I’d just run away from him instead.” Joel was crying with eyes wide open.

“Oh, Joel dear, you poor extraordinary child. I would have killed him for you.”

“Perhaps, but you weren’t around in those days; and besides, it was the feeling of defending my own name that made me do it. I wouldn’t have brooked a *man*’s defending me.” 75

“Now that I’ve got to do something about your uncle, what would an extra murder more or less have mattered?”

“Julian,” she said quickly, “you can’t stop my uncle if he is bound and determined, even by killing him. He would have a way of getting around his own murder, if it took his ghost to do it.”

“I won’t try murder, sweetheart. But I am going to have a talk with him—*tonight*.”

Julian stood up and bent over to kiss her.

“I’ll be back soon, I promise. Don’t you move.”

“Julian, please stay. I don’t want to be left alone in this awful house.”

But the door had closed behind him.

IX

And down the corridor Neil Crawford closed another door behind himself and Sydney. Their eyes met with a bleak and hopeless questioning.

“Oh, Neil,” she breathed. “What are we going to do?”

“What am *I* going to, you must say, Sydney. Remember, my dear, you are not in this. And remember that whatever I do or don’t do will be entirely governed by my love for you and my desire to *keep* you and the children out of it.”

“You *can’t* keep me out of it, Neil, even if you wanted to. That is the way, with things relating to one or other of two people who are closely united, both are in them for good or bad. So I’m in this with you to the very last—that is, if—if—”

“If I want you?” He took her shoulders in either hand. “Is that what you are trying to say? You know I want you. You know I love you, that I never have loved, never will love, anyone but you. I can’t help myself. We were made in patterns that match, like a jig-saw puzzle. We wouldn’t match anyone else, no one else would match us.” 77

She did her best to control the wave of feeling that made her draw free of him.

“She doesn’t feel so, Neil, or think you do. She loves you; and said it tonight too definitely to make me feel you have not returned in kind. Neil, where are our promises?”

“My God, Sydney, since when were you such an innocent as to think promises were anything more than baubles, pretty but—but vain. The promises to love forever until death do us part—”

“Keep still, Neil! You know as well as I do that those aren’t the promises I am thinking of. Besides, we never made those particular promises. But we did promise we weren’t going to go living around with other people unless we *meant* it—meant it down to the ground, do you hear me?” She was trying to keep her voice under control, but it would rise spasmodically. “And here you seem to have done just that.”

“I wasn’t just living around, Sydney. You know me well enough to know I’d be fastidious about such things. Romany and I got into it somehow, quite naturally. Why can’t women realize how little such things mean to a man, and to some women. She’s one of them. We’ve never spoken of love; do you hear that?”

78

“Neil, how silly to say such a thing, when by its very nature love is somehow involved. In the very essence of it—your winnowing of the physical from the spiritual—it is the ruin of all idealism. Someone we know, who was it, was saying the other day that the trouble with the younger generation is that it lacks guts. You are exactly what he meant, Neil.”

“Don’t be vulgar about it, Sydney. Vulgarities doesn’t suit you. Only the sophisticated can get away with it. Your delicacy is one of the reasons I care for you. And I *do* care. You can’t say I don’t love you, or you me. Can you say it?”

“Which only makes it frightfully much worse. And don’t lie to me. She couldn’t have written you a letter like that if you hadn’t used love, in one form or another, toward her. Don’t quibble about the meaning of the word love.”

“What do you mean ‘such a letter’?”

79

“I saw a letter on your desk, Neil. I had to read it, you can see that.”

“Then you got just what was coming to you, Sydney. Even a wife, a wife

least of all, doesn't read a man's private correspondence unless she wants to get hurt."

"All right! Say it if you will. It can't make matters any more terrible than they are. I saw the address on the envelope (I knew she had been in Hollywood this spring), and in a flash I remembered that—that night. It's asking too much of human nature to ask it to turn its back on the truth at such a moment. And you can't say it isn't better to know the truth at whatever cost to us both."

"If you think so, yes." Crawford's anger died as he saw her face change. "Oh, Sydney, don't look at me like that. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He tried to take her hands and failed. "And now this other thing to hurt you. I can't endure it."

"This other is bad, yes. But not really bad, my dear, as compared to my trust and respect, trust in you and self-respect, splintered to atoms overnight. Bertrand Whittaker can do his worst, can put you behind bars, and me talking to you through bars, but it won't be a patch on the edge taken off what 80 we have been years in building. Marriages aren't built in a day. There must be something wrong with me and my dreams, I suppose. Before we left home tonight I happened to pick up a picture of Bunny, and realized it was the one that had been in the town house all winter, watching you—watching you—," she trailed off helplessly. "I seem so to confuse illusions and realities."

"Don't confuse them. Don't have illusions. Yet that's why I love you, for the image you make of a perfect life. But it can't be lived, Sydney. It can't."

"*Our* chance is gone, if that's what you mean."

"I don't see how it affects us in the least if our love remains to us. I have never told her I loved her."

"How charming for her!"

"That wasn't what she wanted. She understands. I'm not the only one for her. It isn't as if she were— She can take care of herself." He paused. "Oh, I

wouldn't mind if she were dead if it would do us any good."

"Neil, hush! Nothing, not even our own deaths, could do us any real good again. How can you think wrong will right wrong?" 81

"I don't know. I don't know how I think a lot of things I'm thinking. For instance, Bertrand Whittaker must be stopped dead in his tracks. He can't be allowed to do this to Bunny's life, or yours, or mine either. I'll kill him first. The past is over and done with and he has no right to revive it."

"The past is over; yes, the past is done with. She said she had your picture and Bunny's on the dresser before her. Listen to that—*Bunny's* picture. What's Bunny to her under the circumstances, I'd like to know, that she should be able to make free with her picture: stepchild, love child or godchild? I don't suppose any of them fit, but they sound so refreshingly shocking it's fun to use them."

"*Stop* making a scene, Sydney! I didn't think you had it in you to make scenes and say such wild, bitter things. I can't *tend* to a scene now. Can't you see I can't?"

"When did it all begin, Neil? Don't say it began in the common old-fashioned way at the common old-fashioned time. Don't say it began when Bunny was coming." 82

"Of course it did. When did you think it would have begun? You didn't expect me to be a monk, did you? Sydney, let's stop talking, please; and think about what's got to be done. What do you say we clear out of the country and make a fresh start. Australia or somewhere."

"A fresh start! How devastating it sounds—to start over after eight years. It can't be done, and the soul still live. As if one were told, after a terrible day of sled-pulling in an Arctic storm, that one had to retrace one's steps without rest or food. It couldn't be done, and the body live. That's how I feel."

"Sydney, quiet. Quiet, dear, you must stop. And help me plan. I must find Giordano. I see it clearly. I must find him tonight. He will deal with Whittaker."

“Oh no, no, no, no. You mustn’t get in touch with those men again. You are finished forever if you try that. Neil, don’t do anything rash. I’ll talk to Bertrand the minute I have a chance. He will listen to reason. You know we have always said the day might come, and we promised to keep our heads. Our promises again! She said the rain where she was made her remember your night rains. Neil, Neil! what does that do to our rains, our trains, our meteorites, our—our—.” She was sobbing now with a desperate tearless exhaustion. 83

“Nothing. Nothing. It doesn’t do anything to them, dearest one. We have our love. With Romany, as we agreed, it was all just a symbol. Do you hear me, Sydney? Stop crying. Stop it. I have something that has to be done. *Stop it.*”

He went to the telephone on the stand between the beds. She screamed.

“Keep away from that telephone, Neil. Can’t you see what frightful things may be going to happen in this house tonight. A call can be traced—you mustn’t *touch* a telephone.”

She sprang toward him; but he had lifted the receiver and she couldn’t struggle or argue with him against the ear of the operator. The number he gave was AUdubon 2-1801. It answered.

“Hello. Crawford speaking.” Then he never *had* been out of touch with them. “Pick up Disuno if you can find him. If not, one of the others. The address is Bertrand Whittaker’s, Blue Acres. Outside the park gates at three.” 84

Neil hung up.

“You have made the mistake of your life, Neil Crawford. If a breath of what you have just done reaches the police it’s all over but the shouting, Bertrand or no Bertrand.”

“And it’s certainly all over if I do nothing. No, this is going to be Whittaker’s life or mine.”

“Ordway Belknap may be here for a purpose.”

“They have foiled better men than Belknap.”

“You have been with them ever since?”

“You didn’t for a minute imagine I could have been anywhere else did you? Once with them always with them as far as the underworld is concerned. They never release us.”

“And you never told me how it has been with you!”

“You couldn’t have helped in the least. I’ve saved Giordano from the chair twice over. And Disuno hasn’t hide nor hair that he doesn’t owe to me. Now I need them, that’s all. And you, my dear. And always you.”

He took her in his arms now, but she was strangely unresponsive. For her the living spark of whatever it was that had existed between them, whether love is the word to call it or not she had never known anyway, was as snuffed out as though it had never been. 85

X

Belknap entered his room just before dawn and turned up the light. Nadia stood against the wall inside the door, both hands at her throat, her breath coming in gasps. Her face in the sudden light was as pale as the under side of willow leaves before a storm, or after. Here it seemed that the storm must have passed a moment since.

Belknap sprang to her and seized both her wrists in one vice-like grip.

“Nadia! you haven’t done it?”

“No, no, I haven’t done *it*, as you call it,” she whispered.

“What *have* you been doing then?”

“I have been running, my dear detective; don’t you see that?” She tried to laugh.

“Why? What from? I thought nothing could ever frighten you. Once and for all, Nadia Mdevani,” he continued as her eyes fell before his, “I ask you to keep out of this. Can’t you begin to see what I am here for? I am here for game, and you are not fair game. Or perhaps it’s that you are too fair.” His voice wavered. “Anyway, keep clear.”

“I can’t, Mr. Belknap. On my soul, I can’t. There is too much at stake. If I were the only one. But I am not.” She handed him a slip of paper that had been crumpled in her hand.

He took it to the table, and smoothed it under his palm.

“Did you follow instructions?” he asked, in a low voice. “Is that what the running was about?”

“No, no. I didn’t do it, on my word of honor.” Then her eyes suddenly lifted wide open. “There is someone in the hall behind me. Do you hear?” Her body was stiff, her face frozen.

“No,” said Belknap, matching the softness of her voice. “But it seems quite possible. It *would* be strange if you and I were the only ones abroad in the house tonight, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” she whispered. They stood motionless. “It is going downstairs. Oh my God, it will find it. Do something, Belknap. Quick, destroy that paper, 88 if you love me!”

A long, long scream penetrated the house from corner to corner, like a knife thrust. And then the silence fell again. Nadia drew a deep, shuddering breath, and when she spoke her voice was stronger.

“Perhaps you had better go down, Mr. Belknap. Something seems to be wrong.”

“Something does. You may come with me if you care to.”

They went down and to the door of the library where there was a light. Sydney Crawford stood over a body lying crumpled on the floor. The body was Hartley Blake’s, and was stabbed so well and so often as to have watered the rug thickly with blood.

Sydney, with stricken eyes, met Belknap’s gaze.

“I found this,” she said. “I’m sorry to have screamed, but it was a little unexpected.”

Belknap turned on his heel and rang the service bell. He crossed to the telephone on Whittaker’s desk and lifted the receiver.

“Sit down, Mrs. Crawford. You, too, Miss Mdevani. Don’t look at the body. I shall have the police here in a moment. But perhaps I can help you, Mrs. Crawford, if you have anything to say to me before they arrive. I shall undoubtedly be on the case, since I have had the misfortune to be at Thorngate this week-end—(Police Department? Ordway Belknap speaking. You may or may not know my name. I am up at Judge Whittaker’s place. Yes, Whittaker. There has been a murder committed here during the night. Body just discovered. You had better send up a sergeant with a few men. The guests, I am afraid, will have to be held. Pick up a doctor of course. Right you are.)”

89

He hung up, and crossed to the divan for a lounging robe which he flung quickly and deftly over Blake’s body.

“Blake’s dead,” he said to Julian and Joel who had just put in an appearance. “The police are on their way. Meanwhile, if you will excuse me, I shall look the ground over. Seems to have been an impulsive affair,” he continued, “with the knife left behind.” He picked up the long, thin, bronze paper-knife, which lay, stained with blood, a little to the left of the body. There was also a woman’s lace handkerchief, which Belknap offered to Sydney.

90

“That is not mine,” she said quietly.

“Just as you say,” Belknap replied, thrusting it into his pocket. “We’ll soon know whose it is.”

John came to the door.

“Did you want me, sir?”

“I did, John. Will you round up everyone in the house, including the help. There has been a murder. Colonel Blake. The police will want you all for questioning. Not that most of you aren’t here already,” Belknap smiled at the room. Crawford had come in on Julian’s heels. Romany and Whittaker, however, were still absent.

Belknap bent to the body and examined rapidly and thoroughly.

“There’s the off chance we might find something, Mrs. Crawford,” he remarked. “If Blake, under cover of darkness, returned for a cached Diary and met his death because of it, the murderer may not have had time to relieve him before you, or shall we say I, appeared.”

Sydney made no answer; but her two lovely hands lifted from her lap in a little helpless gesture of futility. 91

“It is quite obvious,” Julian said unexpectedly, “that you intend to make Mrs. Crawford responsible for Colonel Blake’s death, Mr. Belknap. I feel called upon to ask you to keep your suspicions, even such proof as you may have, until a moment more in keeping with judicial etiquette.”

Belknap flushed darkly.

“Don’t be too hard on our detective, Mr. Prentice,” Nadia cried. “He does not suspect Mrs. Crawford of this ghastly affair, but he very much wishes he did. And the wish has been father to the possibility. He really suspects me. Therein lies the difficulty.”

“Spare the noble gesture, Nadia.” Whittaker was standing in the door. “I suspect you myself when you go altruistic. Ah, Belknap! in your element I see! I can’t believe it. Blake murdered! That it should have happened in my house. Terrible! John said he was unable to rouse Romany with his knock, so I sent one of the maids to her room. And I gave orders for the servants to wait in the hall. Does that meet with your approval, Belknap? I shall sit down, if I may. Last night and this morning, taken together, are more than is good for me.” 92

As he sank heavily into a chair there was a windy bustle at the front door, a careless, strident laugh, and a stamping of feet, that in its sincere disrespect for the traditions and restraint of Thorngate, announced the arrival of the police. Belknap stepped toward the library door.

“This way, Sergeant. We have been waiting for you.”

“Don’t Sergeant me, Belknap,” came a pleasant, resonant answer from the hall; and a man of medium stature, with clear, blue eyes and gold-bronze

hair, faced him in the doorway. "Your humble servant. It's nice to see you again. I'm only sorry for one thing, that you have the jump on me as usual."

"Berry! Why, land alive, where did *you* come from? Don't worry about being a step behind me. There's going to be plenty for both of us. Come in. Whittaker, you know Lieutenant Berry. There's only one other in the room important enough for you to meet at the moment. Berry, this is Colonel Blake. Colonel, Lieutenant Berry has come to see what he can do for you." Belknap indicated the body with a motion of his hand. "You brought a doctor? It will be convenient to know about when death occurred." 93

"Yes. Doctor Giles is here. Giles," he called. "Get on the job, will you? Come along in, Sergeant. This is Sergeant Stebbins, Ordway Belknap; Belknap, Sergeant Stebbins. Now, old man, what's the story? The sooner we catch the scent the better. When did you arrive?"

"Before the trouble began. That may help us, and it may not. What do *you* say, Whittaker? Shall I—"

John's voice was heard in the hall.

"Oh, Judge! Lily has fallen downstairs. I think it's a faint, sir."

"Pick her up," said Whittaker.

John and two cops between them lifted her to the library couch.

Berry glanced at her.

"If the superstition that the object last beheld leaves its mark branded on the face I should say your Lily had been seeing things! Where has *she* been?"

"To the room of one of the guests," Belknap said. "Perhaps we'd better take a look." 94

But Lily opened both eyes and gazed glassily at the ceiling.

"Miss Romany's stiffer'n a post," she said.

XI

“Sergeant,” said Belknap quickly, “will you and Berry go up to Miss Video’s room? John, show them up. You may begin to notice there’s something damn wrong with things around here. There *is*. And I must have a word with the Judge alone. He’s the one to bring it to a standstill—if there is still time.”

He seized Whittaker by the arm and half led, half pushed him into the dining-room. Berry and Stebbins made the stairs three at a bound. Julian dragged Joel onto the terrace outside the windows.

“Julian—*darling*,” Joel protested, “*please* leave me alone. I must go to bed. I’m ill, really I am; and so is poor Uncle Bertrand. Didn’t you see how frightfully he looked?”

“Now don’t poor your Uncle Bertrand in front of me, Joel. If you begin sticking up for him now that he’s in such a pickle you and I part company. He’s downright responsible for the whole mess. And don’t you dare talk about going to bed either. I’ve *got* to talk to you—to you or someone else—or I’ll simply burst. And I refuse to burst in front of Belknap. You must spare me that, dear. Now listen to me.” His voice fell almost to a whisper. “I’ve got a clue—a *clue*, do you hear me? A tangible clue! Darling, *don’t* shut your eyes. Look.”

Julian produced a little square of fool’s cap with letters as unintelligible to Joel as hieroglyphics typed across it. Joel feverishly rubbed out its network of wrinkles and squinted at it as though she were near-sighted.

“Oh, Julian, I don’t want to know about this. Don’t let’s get mixed up in it.

Let's run away, do."

"*Run away!* Me? Why it's the chance of a life-time to make a reputation for myself. You aren't going to be the kind of wife that asks her husband to sacrifice himself for her on the eve of establishing his career, are you?"

"No-o—only I'm afraid of it, like a bomb. I'd rather somebody else handled it. Let's take it to that sergeant, or Mr. Belknap, or Lieutenant Berry. 97 Perhaps it's really important."

"*Perhaps* it's important. I like that. It *is* important. It's a code message. A *code*. And codes are my middle name. Didn't you know that, darling? Good in arithmetic, fair in geography, poor in deportment, rank in spellin'; but perfect in codes. I know as much about codes as that Philo Vance man knows about all other subjects put together. I have an idea he crams, while I have made codes my life work. Began in grade school behind those old desk tops we used to have, do you remember, when what was learned on top was nothing to what was learned under cover."

"Oh, Julian, do stop fooling. If you get into one of your fooling moods there'll be no keeping even these murders serious. For heaven's sake, if you know so much about codes, don't keep me in suspense."

"It's a difficult code, Joel. One of the toughest. That Japanese thing they used during the War. But I've figured it. Listen. 'Blake has been tapping the STC wires. This week-end is your chance. Get him.'"

"Addressed to whom?"

"*Addressed*, stupid! You didn't think they'd write a code and address it, did you? If it came here at all it came by messenger, of course. But it's unlikely it came here. Whoever received it brought it with him." 98

"And if we knew who received it, it would at least settle Colonel Blake's murder, wouldn't it? Oh, Julian, you *are* clever. Where did you get it?"

"On the stairs as I came down."

“Julian, it’s a wonder you’re alive! To think *you*’ve been the first to pick up a clue with all these great detectives about. And where were you all night? I waited and waited—and worried and worried— Why didn’t you come back?”

“Joel, I’m so sorry. Truly I am. But do you know what I did, dearest? I went to sleep.”

“To *sleep*?”

“To sleep, that’s what I said.” Julian came to his own rescue before her tone of reproach. “What’s so funny about that? I was tired. I went to your uncle’s room and he wasn’t there. So I waited. I dropped off on the lounge. He never came back as far as I know. When I woke it was all hours. I’d heard nothing. And coming out into the hall I was welcomed by Mrs. Crawford’s 99 reveille.”

“Julian, how *can* you say such things. When I’m feeling so terribly, too. *Do* make me rest somehow, dear. My head—my eyes— No, there isn’t time for it, I know. We must take your wonderful clue to Mr. Belknap.”

“Not Belknap, sweetheart. Never Belknap. He has the fanatic’s eye and it doesn’t appeal to me. Perhaps Berry, sometime. I rather cotton to Berry. But for the nonce I hunt alone. I might accomplish miracles with a dash of luck. You must realize I have a deductive mind—as well as a *seductive*, darling.”

“*Please— Don’t*. I can’t play with you. We must go—”

Go where was settled on the instant by what Julian would have sworn were two shots in rapid succession, which rang out in the interior of the house. Two policemen, guns in hand, breath shortening, came scuttling around opposite corners of the house.

“Prisoner’s Base or Run Sheep Run?” asked Julian delightedly. “Or just plain catch-as-catch-can?” he added, springing ahead of them into the 100 library. Nadia sat alone in the room—with Blake’s body almost at her feet. Her head lay back on the divan top. A lighted cigarette hung between very red lips. She had taken time out to make up. There was not the flicker of an expression in the more than usually mask-like face. Nor did it unbend as

Belknap opened the dining-room door, asking for Doctor Giles.

“Quick. I’m afraid they’ve got Whittaker. Where in Hell are the police?”

Whittaker lay huddled over the table, his face in his arms. Dr. Giles’ hasty examination showed that he had been shot from behind. The bullet had entered below the left shoulder blade, passed through the heart (death being instantaneous), and lodged in the table, splintering the wood deeply. Berry remarked on the last.

“Close range, that,” he said. “Are you *sure* there was no one else in the room, Belknap? Could someone have slipped in behind you both?”

“It seems very unlikely. I should have said the shot came from the direction of the library. But I myself was facing that particular door.”

“There were two shots fired,” said Julian.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Prentice.” Belknap was short in his speech.

“There was one shot fired as you can see.”

101

“Not necessarily. Every shot doesn’t hit its mark.”

“Granted. But that will be ascertained in due course.”

Sergeant Stebbins had been a strong and silent man since his arrival. A square-headed, ruddy-cheeked, heavy-jowled man, he gave the appearance of being a stone wall instead of a hurdle to anyone who didn’t take him cautiously. And something in Belknap’s last remark seemed to have set his back up.

“Due course!” he rumbled. “Due course! I guess that’s what’s been the whole trouble around here. You’ve been taking your time, haven’t you? Due course! In all your fancy detective work, Mr. Belknap, haven’t you caught on that when it’s one murder you act quick, when it’s two you jump into it, and when it’s three greased lightning shouldn’t have a look-in. I’m sorry to say it, but I think there’s been criminal negligence, Detective. Three murders in as many hours is rather a record in *my* observation, and under your very nose, so to

102
speak. It's clearly my duty to put everyone in the house under arrest. You're damn lucky I don't include you. Now we'll get down to brass tacks. A little examining of witnesses won't come amiss. Who was in the library when the Judge got his?"

"I was; and I was there alone." Nadia was contemptuous.

"I thought so, lady," Stebbins said. "You look the kind. We'll begin with you. The rest of you can clear out of here; and wait your turn in there." He signified the library with a twist of his thumb.

"One minute, Sergeant," Belknap coldly interceded. "My impulse of course is to pick you up by the neck and throw you out, your silly nickel badge to the contrary. But, strange as it may seem to you, I have a positively fiendish desire to get to the root of this succession of violent crimes that have spoiled a good week-end. That I happened to be present in an unofficial capacity may be a misfortune in a sense. Privately speaking, it is. But it has also given me certain angles of an extraordinary situation that you could never arrive at if you questioned yourself blue in the face. Whether or not you may wish to take advantage of what I have to offer is *another* question. I assure you it will be perfectly agreeable to me to paddle my own canoe, and let you 103
paddle yours."

"Hold on, boys," Berry interrupted quietly. "My dear Stebbins, you and Belknap had better get together on this. I'm sure we're all determined upon clearing things up as rapidly and expeditiously as possible. You and I naturally recognize that Mr. Belknap is in a most embarrassing position; and it is more than decent of him to remain on the case. But since he has agreed to throw in his lot with us, I think we should be open to the charge of negligence if we refused his evidence, don't you? Besides, you can appreciate that he and I are birds of a feather and must work the same airways. So losing him, you lose me."

Stebbins grumblingly changed his tune. "Have it your own way, Mr. Berry. Have it your own way. I'm sure Mr. Belknap has valuable material to contribute—only the sooner he comes across with it the better, and safer, for all concerned."

XII

“Keep your opinions until they are called for, man,” Belknap said curtly. “Or until you know something of the lay of the land.” Swinging on his heel he made an imperious, inclusive gesture that swept the room clean of momentarily irrelevant persons.

“Clear out of here,” he ordered.

As the door closed on the retreating group, that tried to make its exit with dignity, but somehow failed to convey better than the appearance of a disorganized partridge brood scuttling into a thicket, Belknap returned to Berry and the Sergeant.

“Now,” he said, “let’s you and I start from scratch. I’ll concede you that much. I’ll throw down what I’ve seen and heard to date. After that I make no promises.” He smiled with a bleak mockery. “There are conclusions and conclusions—*and* conclusions. And what I may make of a given detail may differ widely from what you make of it. Then again, it may not: ‘great minds,’ they say.— However that may be, don’t let’s make a girls’ dormitory of it and hang confidences around each other’s necks. I’ve always played, and always will play, a lone wolf game. I’m an Akela or nothing. So you’ll have to—”

105

“We will, Belknap, we will. Don’t worry about us.” Berry interrupted gently, trying to conceal a faint embarrassment. “What’s to do now is to get going, isn’t it? Before your friend’s body here has gone cold. Quick, Belknap, snap into it. Every second may count.”

Belknap regarded Whittaker with a swift, half-averted glance, and a spasm of pain twitched the taut little muscles drawn slantwise across his square jaws.

“God be merciful to him,” he said in a lowered key. “Though he doesn’t deserve it, I fear,” he added, hardening instantly, as a man does who dislikes being caught out with an emotion. “First of all, you must know he is largely to blame for the argument I expect he’s having with St. Peter. I won’t waste precious time going into the story now. It’s rather complicated. 106

The point you need to know for a starter is that he did a sneaking, low-down thing last night that set the house completely by its ears, where it still is. Under cover of reading us a bit of original manuscript to amuse us, he made it a passage from his Diary that disclosed—names withheld, but entirely obvious—one of his present guests as an erstwhile murderer. (Neil Crawford, the man in evening dress.) What made matters more acute was that he had claimed, at dinner, that the Diary was on the eve of being published, real names given, his own included. I doubt the truth of the claim somehow. But we can check it. Be that as it may, there has been no congeniality or conviviality in our midst for the past eight hours, as you can well imagine. I had had an inkling there was trouble in the wind. In fact the Judge had given me to understand he was out for blood.”

“Wanted you to keep an eye on Crawford in case of—of reprisals, is that it?” Berry, as he threw out the question, was rapidly taking notes. He was a methodical man, Berry, and, though he had an excellent memory, 107 refused to depend upon it.

“Something of the sort.”

“And when did the first storm warnings occur?”

“Immediately,” Belknap continued, pacing the room restlessly. “And it was right there I somehow made my first blunder. And having lost the trail once I’m afraid I’ve blundered often. In fact, as I see it now, I probably made a serious error even earlier when I let one of the party slip away without even getting out orders to have his trail picked up. A man by the name of Milton Dorn left directly after dinner last night—though I’m sure his first intention had not been to leave before morning. Doubtless there’s nothing more in it than that he foresaw bothersome complications; but he’s someone to look

up.”

“Just to get back to what happened after the old man came clean about this guy Crawford,” Stebbins growled, with a distrust of your famed detective that was slow to be appeased. “What about it?”

Belknap’s invulnerable self-complacency affected Stebbins and Berry in totally dissimilar fashion. It stirred in the Sergeant a confused, 108 stubborn rage, such as the English peasant feels for the arrogant huntsman heedlessly taking his fences, even though the hunter does no actual damage. While Berry, understanding Belknap’s natural pride, and realizing all that nourished it, only wished that a man of so great a professional stature should know the meaning of humility. “Perhaps the day will come,” Berry thought in passing, “when he will come a cropper in a case of importance, and, bowing his head, will bow his heart.”

“I was coming to that,” Belknap was saying. “Forgive my lack of speed and clarity in presenting the facts. My own thinking leads me astray. Each item, as I check it for your benefit, gives me pause to reconsider. To go back: Whittaker read his Diary. Suddenly, at a bad moment in the gruesome tale, Crawford gave himself away, if that were needed, by a call for water and help from his wife. Apparently she was so bewildered by the catastrophe that was falling upon the family she let another catastrophe present itself head over heels. For she delayed going to her husband long enough to allow his mistress—that little red-haired minx you’ve just seen upstairs—fall about his neck and prove how *they* stood. Also if proving was necessary. But it 109 brought Mrs. Crawford to her senses, and *she* was knocking Miss Video into a cocked hat when Colonel Blake seemed to consider knocking the Judge into one. Then the lights went out. They *would*! Well, instead of going to the Judge’s rescue, which I guess is what I should have done, I spent my time reinstating the lights. They showed, when they came on, rather a mess. Whittaker was pretty well floored by what must have been a blow with intent to kill. Mrs. Crawford and Miss Video were looking murder at each other. Crawford appeared about to die of heart failure.”

“Who stood where?”

“The ‘foreign lady,’ as you call her, Sergeant, was nearest to the Judge. Blake

seemed not to have reached him. Though he may have been on the spot and retreated. The rest were as they had been, as far as I can recall.”

“Gosh-all-hemlock! Pretty good pickin’s, eh?” Stebbins, flushed with excitement, was forgetting the chip on his shoulder. “What next, Mr. Belknap?”

“Little enough for awhile. *Too* little. It was ominous. There was 110 nothing much *I* could do, really. Every one went to bed, or pretended to. I think they would have gone home, to a man, last night, but were downright ashamed to suggest it. Or perhaps they felt, as I did, that with morning a bad dream might vanish. Perhaps it’s the best excuse I have to offer for not proving much good in the crises. I assisted Whittaker upstairs, and suggested he apologize to Crawford and clear the air. I said he was getting the house into all sorts of a pickle—to say nothing of the real danger to himself. But he was in a mean mood. He had been ill lately and not himself. I’ll tell you about that later, too. Anyway, he stuck to his guns. He wasn’t badly hurt, though might have been. A slight head wound that someone will have to account for along with everything else.”

“Did *he* have any ideas?”

“None. We discussed the loss of the Diary. But that didn’t seem to worry him much, either. I imagine the threat of printing it was merely a ruse to drive his point more terribly home to Crawford. Poor Crawford.”

“Poor Crawford!” Stebbins snorted. “Haven’t you eyes in your head, Belknap? Why, I’ve had that dress-suited fellow spotted from the minute I came in here. I’ll have *him* on toast in a jiffy. A little rough 111 stuff and he’ll—”

“Loss of the Diary?” Berry asked, having caught up on his notes, and ignoring, as did Belknap, the fact that Stebbins had spoken. “What do you mean?”

“What I said. It disappeared during the fracas. Not that it matters much. I can retail you enough of what was said of Crawford to see him convicted hands down, if that’s the count we want to get him on. Somehow, I think it isn’t.”

“We’ll see. And after you all withdrew—what then?”

“Nothing, my dear Berry. I was a night-hawk; more so than usual, though at my best I’m up and about most of the night. Rotten sleeper. Always was. Possibly the most telling bit of evidence I picked up during my sleepless walking was what I’m convinced was a glimpse of the departed Dorn. From an upper window I saw a figure I’d swear was his run along below the terrace wall and into the shrubbery at the north corner. It moved with extreme rapidity and a lightness of footing that made me almost uncertain I saw more than a shadow. But for a twig that snapped as he vanished I would 112 have let him pass as shadow. I went immediately down, and around by the opposite side, with intention of circumventing him, but, though I remained concealed in a niche of the north wing for at least half an hour, he never materialized.”

“So that was that. Interesting, but not particularly helpful. Who else did you cross footsteps with during the night?”

“With several. Every one had dragged anchor and was adrift. Miss Video spent a few moments in Whittaker’s room. I believe he found her there when he went up. And she seems to have enticed him to return the visit. For Mr. Prentice, the young man in negligee, spent most of the night asleep in Whittaker’s room waiting for the absent to return. *He* may have had designs on the Judge.”

“Or the Judge on Miss Video? What about Crawford?”

“Never saw him. What became of him I haven’t a notion. Probably was the one person to go quietly to bed, having a wife to see that he got tucked in. I bumped into Miss Lacey in the library, quite late. Said she was after a 113 bracer, and looking for her fiancé. She’s engaged to young Prentice. And she’s Whittaker’s niece, as you doubtless know. I saw her to her room, as she was in a state of nerves. And, soon after, I decided the tenseness of the situation had eased, for the time being at least, and turned my back on it. But I’d hardly entered my room when Miss Mdevani came on a visit. She was quite incoherent, but before I could begin to make head or tail of what about, we picked up the first death broadcast. Mrs. Crawford had found the Colonel. Says *she* was looking for her husband, which leads one to believe he wasn’t

in bed after all, as do the clothes he's wearing. Or else she's trying to cover *her* tracks."

"You don't think your Miss Mdevani was—fresh from the kill, so to speak? Her manner might suggest it."

"I've thought of it, of course. Who wouldn't? But—well, with Miss Video's death, and the Judge's, I've rather discarded her. I feel the three are the work of one. A woman is seldom a good wholesale murderer."

"Granted. But she's tarnation clever. Her record isn't savory, as we all know. Though I admit the motives, such as we have, don't fall her way. This man Crawford has motive enough for a couple—perhaps even the third, for if he wished to destroy the Diary, as he conceivably would, and Blake was the first to nab it, Blake might have to die. Yes, it looks black for Mr. Crawford. What do you say, Sergeant?" 114

"My feeling exactly. It looks mighty black for Mr. Crawford. Him that kills once can kill again and kill easier. Come on: let's catch him cold before he clears out. And before there's any more shooting. One, two, three murders—"

XIII

The words were scarcely spoken when the air was again split by gunfire. A very sharp report came from somewhere: the yard, the basement, or the servant's wing. It acted as a signal for a pell-mell return of the others from library to dining-room.

"If that was in the kitchen," Julian, who led the re-entry by a yard, said with solemn severity, "it looks to me as if they'd invaded neutral territory and something *should* be done about it."

Sergeant Stebbins, who seemed to have a keener ear for direction, hurriedly threw up the window on the view, and shouted in the stentorian accents of the law:

"Say, what's the shootin' all about, idiots? Haven't you no restraints? What'd you see, a jack-rabbit?"

"We wasn't shooting, sir," a distant voice came up as through a funnel. "There's somebody way back down in under the porch. Guess they fired accidental-like."

116

"Accidental Hell! Go get 'em."

Apparently there was an attempt to obey his order to the letter, for it was only a matter of seconds when, to judge by the firing, a regular battle was in progress.

"Hi, wait for me!" Sergeant Stebbins, bristling with zealous duty, turned on

the room. “You folks stay where you are if you know what’s good for you. I guess we’ve grounded him—and sooner than I thought by a darned sight.”

“Dorn!” Julian exclaimed. “Well, it only goes to show that the first hunch is generally the right one.”

Joel was leaning weakly against the sideboard and sobbing in little gasping breaths like a spent runner. She held her head between her hands to close her ears against the racket.

“I can’t stand any more. I can’t. Oh, I can’t stand it. Turn that shooting off. Turn it off!” she cried.

“It isn’t the radio, darling,” Julian said quietly, putting his arm about her shoulders. “Though I admit it sounds like the Colt Revolver hour or something. What you think is static is being produced off stage by the housekeeper and that maid Lily who are rapidly losing their inhibitions in the pantry. Listen, dear, I *do* want to see what’s going on.” There was a fresh burst of gunfire. “Please can’t I go to the lattice and be a Rowena to your Ivanhoe?” 117

“Oh, go along. Go away. I don’t care what you do. *Julian*, don’t go near that window. You’ll be killed.”

But Julian had taken her first words at their face value.

“A lot of ammunition used and nothing done,” he announced from a daring stand in full view of the lawn. “That man Dorn will have time to dig himself out under the house and make a dash for it by the front gate. The sergeant has drawn off all his men from the western front to cope with this unexpected offensive; and I’m sure it’s an un-Sound move. Did you get that one?”

“*Stop* it, Julian! If you’re the kind of man that can pun at such a moment as this you aren’t fit to marry. And I never *will* marry you—never, never, —*Come* away from that window.” 118

“Don’t worry, the firing’s all in the wrong direction so far. The police are waiting to see the whites of their eyes. And that’s going to need television,

considering where the enemy is in hiding.”

Sergeant Stebbins apparently thought so too. The disturbance came from under the porch of the servants’ wing, and from the floor of the porch to the ground, a drop of eight or ten feet, a fine-meshed lattice enclosed a garden tool-room and formed a walled passage to the basement. Its outside door was closed, undoubtedly barricaded. Stebbins had tried the basement approach and found it closed and sealed. But he had decided on squeezing tactics. Two of his men, stationed in the cellar, were to burst through the inner door at the moment of a supporting attack from the yard.

Without warning Sergeant Stebbins gave his two-shot signal. And the din was on. Julian, really pale, stepped back and held his hand across his eyes.

“Shiver my timbers!” he said, with a deep, trembling shudder. “God 119 help whoever it is. He has pluck.”

The smell of gunpowder had sifted into the room. Underfoot the sounds of the splintering door were somehow more affecting than the actual shots. The tensiity and misery of the five in the dining-room were reaching an unbearable pitch. The loss of the restraining influence, though not a happy restraint, of Belknap and Berry, who had gone to the front as staff officers, was tending to break down such morale as had existed. Joel was moaning as if she had been wounded. Sydney Crawford, with staring eyes, was gripping Neil’s arm between her two hands until every knuckle showed white. Neil was shivering from head to foot as a man shivers after too long a swim in cold water.

Suddenly it was the silence, crashing back into place, that seemed deafening, like lightning-cut cloud meeting in thunder. In it, Nadia Mdevani, who had appeared to be holding her nerve, lost it. She pointed, as if at blood.

“Look! In the name of Christ, look there. There’s what spelled Bertrand Whittaker’s death.”

It was a figure eight in the form of two overlapping holes bored in the paneling of the wall at the height of a man’s head. Freshly cut: there was a faint salting of sawdust on the hardwood floor beneath. 120

It took Joel to break the stillness in the room. With a face like a death-mask she gazed at the dark spot on the wall.

“I know now,” she said. “I know who killed Colonel Blake and Romany and Uncle Bertrand. But it can’t be true. It can’t be true that—” Julian didn’t let her finish. He crushed his hand over her mouth as Belknap came in from the butler’s pantry, with the sergeant and Berry.

“Hush! you little fool. Don’t go saying things. Don’t *you* be responsible for hanging somebody. Let Mr. Belknap take care of that.” He shook her desperately. “Whatever you know or think, keep it to yourself, do you hear? *Do you?* Don’t let ’em get it out of you.”

But Belknap had heard enough.

“What’s this you know, Miss Joel?” he said. “Come now, out with it. No, don’t cry like that. I’m sorry. What’s the trouble, Miss Mdevani?” He turned to Nadia as Joel collapsed.

“You should have been barred from detective work on account of your eyes,” Nadia said. “Look.”

121

“Aha-a-a? So that’s the way the wind blows? We’ll investigate directly. We have another matter to deal with right now. All right, Sergeant, there’s your man.” He indicated Crawford.

Stebbins went to Crawford and touched his arm.

“I place you under arrest, Mr. Crawford, charged with instigating the murder of Judge Whittaker. Your hired accomplices have confessed.”

Crawford looked dazed. Then he swung on Stebbins.

“They have *not* confessed,” he said. “For they did not kill Whittaker. If this is what is meant by third degree, you can do your damndest. They are as innocent of this crime as you are. You can do your worst to me; but not to them.”

“The worst has been done to them I’m afraid,” Berry said quietly. “They are

both dead. They told us to tell you the account is squared. Whatever that may mean. So I guess you have to go along with us. That gives us *one* of our men, Sergeant. Now what's this hole-in-the-wall business, Belknap? Neat work on your part, Crawford? You had things ready for business, I see."

“There must be some entrance to the space between the wall and the tapestry of the library,” Belknap said. “We’d better call John.”

John came. He showed them a thin door within a door—a long, narrow, hinged panel that formed a door jamb in the dining-room-library doorway. Belknap went through it. No one spoke. When he returned he carried a Colt twenty-two in his handkerchief. He went directly to Nadia.

“I would offer you this back,” he said in a low voice, “but we shall need it. I’m truly sorry.”

“Don’t worry in the least.” She looked him straight in the eyes. “It is mine, yes. I missed it when *I* needed it last night.”

XIV

Late in the afternoon a 'London' fog had crept up from the Sound, and smothered in its furry, suffocating waves, Thorngate was sinking into depth below depth of depression. Julian asked weren't there seven levels of Purgatory because if so they must be about six down at five o'clock and rapidly approaching the bottom. It was the total lack of headway made by the investigators, and the apparent helplessness of the law, that tripled and quadrupled the early gloom of the second night. Hours upon hours of questioning and cross-questioning by Stebbins, Belknap and Berry in turn had gathered no really tangible results. Yet the steady, unremittent grilling went on—and on and on and on, as Julian said, like the tail of Christopher Robin's mouse.

Julian was unquenchable. During his own brief appearance in the witness box—an uncomfortable, straight-backed chair at one side of the dining-room table, the dining-room being the temporary seat of legal authority—he had played a combination of clown and dunce, to the rage of Stebbins, the scorn of Belknap, and the amusement of Berry. For Julian had at last made up his mind to throw in his lot, and his clues, with Berry's, as soon as he could isolate Berry. And it was for this he was managing to keep his own counsel. He wasn't casting bread on the troubled waters for that Savonarola Belknap, or Stebbins, to pick up and grow fat upon. But he *did* feel that he perhaps shouldn't rate a whole investigation to himself, seeing it was his first. It would be positively presumptuous to suppose he had a chance to make a coup (not that he didn't suppose it just the same) against such a field of stars. Belknap might even be called a first magnitude.

So when Stebbins was severe with him, chronically severe, he took refuge in

an india-rubber persiflage.

“Miss Mdevani saw you on the stairs at 4:30 A.M. What did you say you were doing about that time?”

“I swear I was doing nothing whatever about it. Time is one of those things you save time by leaving to its own devices.” 125

Stebbins huffed and he puffed; Belknap cleared his throat; Berry smiled.

“I said what were you doing in the hall at 4:30 A.M.?” Stebbins’ voice did all the things Stebbins would have enjoyed doing.

“I had put my shoes out at 11 P.M., and I thought they might be back by four.” Julian was examining the end of his tie.

“Contempt of court, Julian,” Belknap said. “Come now, boy—”

“You leave him to me,” Stebbins thundered. “I’m talking to him, Mr. Belknap. Now, Mr. Prentice, will you repeat that again about you and Miss Lacey?”

“The others must be tired of hearing it; but if you want it, I’m never tired of saying it.” Julian struck a sentimental attitude. “I love her.”

Stebbins blushed.

“I’m asking you what went on in your room—I mean what was Miss Lacey doing in your—I mean— Oh, get to Hell out of here. I’ll call you again when I need you. Bring in Crawford.”

‘Bring in Crawford!’ All afternoon the word had periodically come out: ‘Bring in Crawford,’ and at each call Crawford, more shattered, more bewildered, more desperately ill with weariness and anguish, was led in, only to come out again to a stark and tragic Sydney who, between rounds as it were, tried mechanically to warm his hands with her colder hands. 126

Stebbins decidedly had it in for Crawford. Naturally he was prejudiced by a nasty little battle that had left him two badly wounded men.

“What was Judge Whittaker’s Diary to you? You needn’t answer. I know. And we’ll get you for that anyway. Where is the Diary now?”

“I don’t know.”

“*Answer me.*”

“I don’t know.”

“When you killed Blake to get it what did you do with it?”

“I didn’t kill Blake.”

“What were you doing at 3 A.M.?”

“I was down at the Turnpike.”

“After killing Blake.”

“I told you I didn’t kill Blake;” with infinite weariness.

“Were you in Miss Video’s room at 2:30?”

127

“No. She was with someone else.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I heard voices and didn’t knock.”

“What *did* you do?”

“Saw to the basement door for admitting my men.”

“Taking time to dispose of Blake.”

“I didn’t kill Blake.”

“Does your wife know of your relationship with Miss Video?”

“She does.”

“Since when?”

“A few days ago.”

“Did you quarrel?”

“Not exactly.”

“Did you suggest putting Miss Video out of the way?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Did you say, ‘It’s Bertrand Whittaker’s life or mine’?”

“I did. I have not denied my intention to kill Whittaker.”

“When did you admit your men to the house?”

“They were never in the house.”

128

“Are these the gloves with which you filched Miss Mdevani’s pistol and handled the paper knife against Blake?”

“I didn’t kill Blake.”

And so on, over and over, with Crawford’s voice dull and monotonous. But driven and hounded as he was he never yielded a point beyond his admission of an old murder and an intended one. But, as Stebbins said to Berry, it was merely a matter of time before they had a full confession from Crawford: he was the kind that eventually succumbs to third degree methods. And Stebbins was the one man sure of the way the wind blew!

He treated Nadia on the other hand with due respect, as they did all three. Stebbins obviously feared her. Berry sat gazing at her, spellbound. Belknap looked anywhere but at her, paced the floor, threw spokes in the wheels of Stebbins’ questionnaire, and put up defences that, in his blindness to them, he apparently thought were as invisible to others.

“Your handkerchief, Miss Mdevani?” Stebbins produced the handkerchief

found by Belknap.

“Mine.”

“That handkerchief,” Belknap interposed impatiently, “was on the library floor when I helped Whittaker to his room at 11:30.”

129

“This is the first we have heard of it,” Stebbins snapped.

“I haven’t the least idea when I dropped it,” Nadia went on, ignoring the interruption. “Possibly it was when I found Blake, about 4:30.”

“*You found Blake?*” Stebbins pounced on her.

“I did.”

“And why didn’t you notify someone immediately?”

“There was scarcely time. Mrs. Crawford did it for me.”

“Where were you when Mrs. Crawford screamed?”

“In Mr. Belknap’s room.”

“You had gone to tell him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Had you heard anything on *your* rounds? The way trails *didn’t* cross last night beats everything.”

“I heard that rat in the library walls—you recall my mentioning him, Mr. Belknap? His teeth turn out to have been a tool called a gimlet.”

“Is this your pistol?”

“It is.”

130

“When did you have it last?”

“It was on my dresser when I came down to dinner.”

“Have you a permit?”

“I have. I have carried a weapon for years. A lone lady, you know,” she smiled.

“Why did you leave it on your dresser?”

“I had taken it from my handbag when I was fishing for my lipstick. I neglected to return it.”

Belknap stood directly in front of her, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

“I saw it there myself not later than one-thirty, or two. Your window was open to the balcony. It was when I went to close it that I saw the figure on the terrace which I am willing to swear was that of Dorn.”

“You are forever ringing your Milton Dorn in on this, Belknap. For God’s sake produce him.”

“My scouts are out,” Belknap said with suave contempt. “The report comes that he never has returned to town. So far, so good. I think if you would dwell a moment on this phase of the case you would find the house bore me out in saying Dorn left here last night in a strange state of perturbation. He 131 looked like a man about to lose sane control of himself.”

“I think you make a good point, Belknap,” Berry spoke. “In many ways the whole campaign has the earmarks of the inspired scheme of a maniac, conceived and executed with that type of brilliance. We must at least leave no stone unturned in the hunt for Dorn. That’s enough of you for the present, Miss Mdevani. Now let’s have a crack at Miss Lacey, Sergeant. In a moment—time out for drinks.”

It was a terrified and incoherent Joel that faced her three interlocutors—more terrified than seemed quite called for under the circumstances, bad as the circumstances were. Horror was to be expected, and fear of a sort perhaps, but not stark terror. But Joel was the victim of a terror that alternated

moments of intense shivering with a rigid paralysis of movement. She bravely tried to control herself, and sat sipping the brandy Belknap had poured for her and smiling mechanically. Berry was extremely kind.

“Will you tell us, Miss Lacey, as clearly and consecutively as possible, the story of your night last night? There is no slightest wish on our part to 132 hurry or confuse you. We need your help in settling an affair that *has* been tragic and is likely to be more so unless we do something about it. Will you describe to us the way you spent your time between 10:30 last night, when I understand you retired, until 4:30 this morning when Colonel Blake’s murder was discovered?”

Joel, in broken snatches, told them of how she had gone to her room in a perturbed state of mind—puzzled by her uncle, bewildered at the startling rapidity with which a dangerous situation had fallen out of the blue, and inwardly shaken by a tale of murder that had struck home to one of their own number.

“Did the fact that your uncle read a passage of this Diary relative to a crime actually committed by Mr. Crawford mean that he might equally well have touched on crimes of others present? Or do you think he was choosing this way to cruelly pay off a score against Crawford?”

Joel drew a deep breath and looked quickly at Belknap.

“I think it must have been a personal question between my uncle and Mr. Crawford,” she said firmly.

Belknap appeared deaf to question and answer. Joel shuddered a little 133 and dropped her eyes.

“Thank you, Miss Lacey. There seems to be mutual agreement on that point. You went to your room, you say. What next?”

She had prepared for bed slowly, for there was no hope of sleep and she wished to fill the time. She had stood at the window, walked the floor, sat by the fire. She thought, and thought; about shoes and ships and sealing wax, but about sin in particular, and finally about sin in the abstract.

“That’ll do,” said Stebbins curtly. He had been bothered by the way all his witnesses were inclined to wander off the beaten track into philosophizing and psychologizing. “Go on with the story.”

Then the idea of going directly to her uncle had occurred to her. At least she might find out why he was in this cold, bleak, inhuman mood. It might be he was facing a dilemma that was slowly but surely cornering him. Put in a corner for badness Bertrand Whittaker always went from bad to worse. This was worse.

She had crept out and along the hall—last night’s atmosphere had called for creeping—and was about to tap on her uncle’s door when she heard 134 voices within: her uncle’s and Romany’s. Joel turned swiftly and slipped into a darkened doorway; and Romany had made her exit with a last dramatic fling over her shoulder. “All right, Bertrand, I’ll match you revelation for revelation if that’s your game. There are several of you due for a fall if I let so-and-so out of the bag. And I’m going to let her out.” Joel had caught so-and-so’s name and promptly lost it again in the frightful medley of subsequent events. She hoped it would come back. It was troubling her with a feeling of its vague familiarity.

Romany had disappeared, and no longer wanting a scene with her uncle, Joel had returned to her room and knocked on Julian’s door to ask for comfort and sympathy. She and Julian had discussed pros and cons, thises and thats, until Julian felt it was his turn to try to pour oil on Whittaker. He had left her sitting alone and desolate—promising a quick return; but he had never come back.

And very late, feeling badly in need of a bracer, she had summoned the courage to venture down to the tray of liquors in the library.

Here Joel paused in her slow, hesitant narration and trembled 135 uncontrollably from head to foot like a spent runner.

“What’s troubling you, Miss Lacey?” Berry asked gently. “Did something happen in the library? Come now, what was it?”

“No, nothing happened exactly. I’m easily frightened I guess.”

“You were frightened?”

She seemed unable to answer, and turned an appealing glance toward Belknap.

“I came in from the dining room when Miss Lacey was there,” Belknap said in a low voice, holding Joel steady with his eyes. “She was hysterical and overwrought, but it hardly seemed surprising considering the general tension of the household. It appears I was wrong. Can’t you tell us what upset you, Joel dear?”

“You—came in from the dining-room,” she whispered, her face colorless. “I was tired and nervous, that’s all. You startled me dreadfully. Nothing more.”

“You are sure, Miss Lacey?”

“Absolutely sure. Of course. Mr. Belknap was so kind as to see me to my room. I was doing my best to fall asleep when Mrs. Crawford screamed.”

This was the most they could win from her—even when Stebbins 136 insisted on a turn of the screw. She became stony and expressionless under pressure and they dared not urge her for the time being, though they felt she was decidedly withholding something of real importance.

“You had better go and try once more for a little sleep, Miss Lacey,” Berry said. “We all need it,” he added with a weary sigh. “What do you say we call it a day, boys? Can I have a word with you, Belknap? *What* a fog!”

Belknap had been unable to guess which way the cat was jumping as far as Berry was concerned. He had not shown his hand in the least; and as for his face it was the perfect detective face, charming but expressionless, bland and open, but with as much depth as a plaster cast. It was only, as Julian remarked to Joel outside, when you took the trouble to meet his eyes squarely that you positively jumped, as if you had caught the eyes of your ancestral great-great-great somebody-or-other rolling at you from the wall. A secret chamber, and holes where the canvas should be! In Berry’s case that must mean something—if nothing more than that he was seeing more than he let on. It was certainly one of the first reasons why Julian was intending to 137

take matters up with him alone.

Berry had so far only shown an interest in funny little irrelevant, or seemingly irrelevant, details. His total contribution to the afternoon's entertainment had been sudden pesky interruptions, at inopportune moments, when he insisted upon shelving the important point at issue for the sake of what was a minor matter to Belknap and a very, very minor one to Stebbins. Stebbins saw things in black and white. Belknap was more willing to consider the shadings, but he had had to admit that a great many of Berry's nuances escaped him. Berry's "pardon-me" was a vague murmur about an Achilles heel—that one never knew in what out of the way spot the weakness might turn up. Best to probe them all with your spear thrust.

For instance, there was the sprinkling of the few dried carnation petals fallen across Romany's rumpled hair and pillow—Stebbins had them now in a cup at his elbow, somehow pathetic, as if they had been her ashes. Romany, as she was discovered by Lily, and later examined by Berry and Stebbins, was a little heap of pink maribou dressing gown on her bed—her face ivory white under her amber hair—theatrical and unreal: "Call it *La Mort du* 138 *Cygne*, or, better still, *She Who Gets Slapped*," Julian had said, standing in the doorway of her room that morning. She had apparently been unexpectedly seized and held firmly, there was little sign of struggle, by two hands, with the thumbs pressing deeply at the base of the throat where there was a faint congestion and discoloration. There was only the one material clue: the carnation petals. And that seemed immaterial, since there was a bowl of carnations on the bedside table, which made it more than likely she had been holding one for its scent. Or was it possible the murderer had his sentimental moments!

But Berry made harpstrings of those petals and played on them in and out of season. Had anyone worn a lapel flower the evening before? Everyone was agreed that Dorn was wearing one—but they were equally agreed it was a gardenia. Belknap himself was positive on this point, although some of the others lost their certainty. Belknap also said *he* might have been wearing one himself; he exchanged glances with Nadia.

"Next time you offer me a flower for my buttonhole, Miss Mdevani," he said in a gently bantering tone, "don't let anyone's presence deter you. I should be

charmed to have one from your fair hand.”

139

“It will be freshly plucked,” she answered him, her eyes very bright, high color on her face.

“No innuendoes!” Berry had cried. “You two need a moor and a moon. Remember this is a court of law.”

“I am not likely to forget it,” she said. “But, dangerous as it is to me, the moor and the moon would be more so,” and she tilted her chin at Belknap.

This had been a temporary fade-out of Berry’s interest in the carnation. But he had returned to it often, as he had to other apparently illogical and tiresomely remote incidents. It had the effect, however, of whetting Belknap’s appetite for enlightenment: had Berry a theory, or no theory; was he throwing dust to cover what he considered the crux of the whole business, or was he merely floundering in a waste of motives, unable to take the bull by the horns? Certainly it was time the two of them went into a huddle and exchanged views, even if the views were limited.

So it was with great expectations that Belknap answered Berry’s proposal.

140

“Yes, let’s go into retreat. I have a little to say myself.”

141

XV

“Nadia!”

“Mr. Belknap! God rest you merry gentleman!” Belknap had approached Nadia where she stood alone, in an alcove of the great East Room. She had been trying to concentrate on a specimen of modern French art. The fog pressed a whited face against the windows near her.

“Your mood is a difficult one, Nadia. I want to talk to you.”

“Let nothing you dismay.”

Belknap threw out his hands in a helpless gesture.

“You’re not kind,” he said. “Shall we go outside?”

“No, *thank* you. Remember your Mr. Dorn.” Her dim smile, secretive, came and went.

“Come now, what would you have had me do? Tell them about the code—or have you conveniently forgotten the message? By the way, did I give it back to you? I haven’t been able to find it.”

142

She whirled on him.

“Didn’t you destroy it?”

“Perhaps. I can’t remember. Mrs. Crawford rather upset our tête-à-tête.”

Nadia looked him critically, menacingly, up and down from chin to brow and brow to chin. Her nostrils quivered; her cheeks sucked in; her eyes narrowed to shining cracks.

“There are moments when I suspect you of double dealing, Detective. You may be out to get me after all, and are finding the back-handed method the cleverest. (*Damn* the O’Neill reiteration of that fog horn!)”

In a flash he saw the single frayed thread by which she held her nerve.

“That is not true, Nadia, and you know it.” Belknap returned her look with one as piercing and equally cruel in its way. “Guilty or not, it’s all one to me. But I *am* out to get you. Yes, I want you.”

Her look was filmed with another, a softer one.

“You—want me. What does that mean? Is ‘want’ the word you intend?”

He admired her frankness; though he hated the woman of it, that must always have the facts sugar-coated. He was hard to her. 143

“That is the word I meant. Want. Are you suggesting that overnight it should or could be anything else?”

She gave an odd little sigh.

“That’s that,” she said with a faint shrug of her lovely shoulders. “Only there is so much want and so little—of the other.”

“Possibly. My impression is we wouldn’t need much of the other.”

Because he didn’t touch her, they were both being hurt by the desire to touch. She flinched a little before the brutal magnetism of his eyes. She felt gutted by them as by a fire; and shuddered her whole body to shake herself free, as a dog shudders rain.

“We won’t talk of it now,” she said restlessly.

“We must take advantage of the time that remains to us.”

“Meaning by that that my hours are numbered?” She threw him a quick sidewise glance under a curve of her lashes. “Don’t you *truly* think your studied lack of interest in me will get me off? Really, that’s altogether too modest!” 144

“You are unfair, my dear. I am doing my best for you.”

“Go on. Say it: ‘without belief.’”

“Belief! Belief in what? Your innocence? God in His heaven, you didn’t imagine your love potion as strong as all that, did you? Let’s be honest. We can afford to be, you and I. It takes courage, but courage is the coin of our particular realm.”

“Who is to be honest?”

“Both of us, beautiful.”

“You begin.”

“Ladies first.”

“What you crave, I suppose, is a full confession, brief and to the point, omitting details. Mr. Belknap, I could almost think you are making love to me (oh, using the word lightly, don’t be alarmed!) to acquire information to be used against me. It may be you are regretting your gestures in my favor. Are you worrying about the reputation of Detective Ordway Belknap?”

“Hardly so late in the day. It’s been already thrown to the dogs. I have an intense distaste for attitudes or I should say I had thrown it at your feet, cold heart.” 145

“Not so cold as you might think perhaps,” and there was a tremor below the voice. “I seldom meet a man I feel is my match or better. I had hopes of you. You disappoint me.” The acrimony crept back. “To give me to understand that you pass up a brilliant display of your methods when you fail to put your finger on me doesn’t speak well for yourself, John. Even Sergeant Stebbins admits I’m too easy to be right.” She had the audacity to look mischievous.

“Stebbins be damned. It’s just his bull-headed sort than can’t see the obvious for dust. Nadia, you’re beating around the bush most successfully, but though I like to hear you play with words let’s clear the decks. And then my congratulations. Three in an evening is a jolly good bag.”

“Mr. Belknap,” she said with a sudden hard seriousness, “I have killed no one at Thorngate—neither Blake, nor Romany, nor my beloved Bertrand. Put that in your pipe and smoke it. Desperate as my case may look the fight isn’t over yet. It’s just begun. I expect to produce a murderer to take my place, and I believe I have my man, using the word to cover the female of the species, under surveillance.”

146

“Confide in me?”

“No-o-o, I think not. Finder’s keeper’s, until—oh well, until.”

Belknap’s dark face darkened another shade. Even *his* control was wearing as sharp and thin as an edged tool. This futile fencing with Nadia Mdevani, taken with the savage unaccountable ache she stirred in him, was trying his last ounce of endurance. Yet there seemed to be no other way with her unless it were to eat humble pie; and be damned if he’d bend his nature for any woman.

“You and Miss Lacey appear to know it all.” His tone harbored scorn at the root of its being. “I should say it was about time you did something about it.”

Nadia looked serious.

“There *is* something troubling Joel Lacey,” she said. “But she is keeping it well to herself, in spite of you and that Sergeant Stebbins; and even me. For I’ve been hot on her trail. I should say it was loss of nerve and not lack of knowledge that is holding her tongue-tied. Perhaps she’d *better* let well enough alone. Do you know, dear man, there are times when terror rises in me like a cold fountain. Not that I’m afraid of death exactly; but I don’t relish it just around every corner. Did you see ‘Outward Bound’?”

147

“Yes, why?”

“Nothing much. Only those blind ships blowing down there in the fog reminded me of it. Who will be next, Mr. Belknap?”

“You take it for granted there *will* be a next.”

“Don’t you?” her eyes were steady on his.

“Then perhaps it is my duty to see you under lock and key. You don’t go so far as to deny I could command your arrest, do you? There is that Berlin-Viennese Murder Ring to account for.”

“You know too much,” she murmured with serpent softness. “Did Bertrand *tell* you more than he knew? Or did he write it?”

“Meaning?”

“Exactly what you care to have it mean.” She paused. “Are you asking for it—my arrest?” There was no slightest trace of apprehension in her manner.

“No; not exactly. I’m asking for something far more necessary to my peace of mind.” He took her wrists suddenly and drew her towards him. 148

“Kiss me.”

She twisted her hands free and turned away. But her lips were drawn a little, and her face very white.

“I think not,” she said. “The Devil’s in it I know, and Bertrand Whittaker. Possibly Cain, Orestes, Brutus, Hamlet’s mother and a few besides. But let’s keep Judas out of it if we can.”

XVI

Stebbins had departed. Headquarters needed him. And he had gone, warding off with both arms a hornet's nest of reporters all down the drive to his parked car. He said he'd be back if he was wanted, or something turned up in the way of evidence. For all the help he was he might as well stay away, Julian said, but perhaps he was good camouflage. The house did somehow feel a little more exposed without him; although he left a substantial guard.

There was a tense, uncomfortable, haphazard meal in the nature of a buffet supper. The kitchen was so disorganized it was a miracle anything like food came out of it. No one was on the best of speaking terms with anyone else—unless perhaps Julian with Joel, and she was too distressed with weariness and fear to know what he was saying. So he had resigned himself to sitting near her where she lay on the library divan, her tear-darkened lids closed over her tired eyes. He tried to figure rhyme or reason into the events of the twenty-four hours. He traced patterns and followed clues to where they disappeared in storm and mist. He tried flying below the clouds, tried to get above them, and failed to make it either way. For all he knew he was flying upside down. And yet his mind seemed lucid, even brilliant. It was extraordinary how nearness to Joel had the power to heighten and stimulate whatever he was doing, talking, thinking, feeling, dreaming. If she now and then failed to catch his innuendoes, the stupid darling, yet it was her very presence that made him even half-way witty. And, if she didn't quite understand music as he understood it, it was her closeness to his shoulder at a concert that lifted him beyond the appreciative to the creative listener. He leaned over now and kissed her cheek gently, not to disturb her.

He very much wished she would tell him what had been so upsetting her

since she had seen that black figure eight in the wainscoting. Not that it wasn't a strangely sinister and upsetting discovery—even Julian 151 couldn't control a shudder at the thought of it. But Joel's upset condition had been chronic. It was just because she claimed it would upset her more to talk of it than to try to forget it (oh, if she only *could* forget it!) that he had decided not to urge her. Besides, she had said it was all a frightful nightmare, utterly impossible and false. She must, simply *must*, put it out of mind.

Julian, though, had been having a few weird and outrageous ideas himself; and he would have liked nothing better than to compare notes with Joel. Dorn was troubling him like a ghost or a vampire. The least stir of the curtains, the quietest footstep, went through his body with a needle-thrust of exquisite horror. Perhaps Belknap had not been alone in having a fleeting glimpse of the man—if man he still was. To Julian to be insane was to be inhuman. Something *had* happened when Joel was in the library, Julian felt convinced of that. By signs of a strained understanding between her and Belknap he came to the conclusion they both knew what it was. He could almost have said they shared a guilty secret, as if they were shielding someone, against the rules of the game. Why in the name of heaven should they shield 152 Dorn? He might have been a friend of Whittaker's, but as far as Julian knew Joel had scarcely met him; and Belknap, the night before, had shown a positive dislike for him.

It might be Mrs. Crawford they were combining to protect. There seemed to be an all-around conspiracy to spare Sydney. Well, who could wonder, really? After Whittaker's unspeakable betrayal, and Neil's and Romany's, and the thought of the Diary with its ghastly story ever appearing in print, who could blame her for getting her hands on the Diary if it meant Hartley Blake's life—for revenging her honor if it meant Romany's life—or her husband's honor if it meant Whittaker's? Or perhaps Belknap and Berry were closing in on Sydney obliquely, by way of pressure brought to bear on Neil. *That* might break her to admission. Although the way she looked tonight, coming and going from the room where Neil lay ill and delirious, nothing short of death would break her.

They had been hard on Neil Crawford—unnecessarily so, Julian thought.

Though even if someone had been ahead of his assassins in the case of Whittaker, as Crawford insisted, he supposed the law could do something about the mere fact of intended murder. And Crawford, as well as his wife, had reasons for wishing Romany and the Diary disposed of. When it came right down to it any one of them might have killed Whittaker. But how thankful one was, Julian drew a deep breath, to have it done for him. He even wondered if there mightn't now be a chance for some of them to wiggle out scot-free—with the past still a closed book. One thing about Belknap he had to admit was jolly decent—and that was his not stressing what must have been as obvious to him as to the others, perhaps more obvious: namely, that Whittaker's intention had been to make a clean sweep of his guests. Not only was Belknap being discreet with regard to the content of the Diary, but he was actually soft-pedaling it. No doubt wholly in consideration of Nadia Mdevani as usual! But in this instance he was benefiting others than Nadia. And Julian for one was deeply grateful. 153

Again, who had killed whom? Who had chased whom around the walls of what? However you looked at it any one could have killed every other one. And quite possibly victim could have killed victim—perhaps two-thirds of the murderers were among the murdered. Which could lead to conjuring in terms: victor-victim, or victim-victor. Blake may have killed Romany, Romany Blake. Even the doctor was unable to tell which had died first—the times had apparently so nearly coincided. Or Whittaker could have killed both. The one proven fact was that neither Blake nor Romany could have killed Whittaker. It was hoped there would be one more fact settled with the matching of markings on the bullet and pistol. *The* bullet. Julian was still bothered by the question of his two shots. One must have been an echo. 154

And *had* Nadia Mdevani fired her own weapon? She had been found in the library—its only occupant. But she gave the appearance of not having stirred for hours. Perfect acting. But it would take superhuman agility to have cleared the wall-space and become rooted to the couch before he had sprung in from the terrace outside. And why had she left her gun lying around? Perhaps she thought nothing would be discovered before she returned in quiet to dispose of it. No, that wouldn't do: she herself had spotted the holes. The margin between being innocently honest and too honest because of guilt is so slight it would take a wiser and more practiced analyst than 155

Julian considered himself to be to gauge it. Here again he had hope of Berry. And it was clear Berry was not particularly inclined to Nadia's guilt. He seemed to have other fish to fry. What fish?

For if Nadia, Sydney and Crawford, by a bare chance, were all innocent, who was left? Joel, himself,—and of course that mysterious Dorn. Why couldn't they find Dorn? Talk about the ineffectiveness of the police! The one thing you'd think they might accomplish would be the finding of a human being who had had less than twelve hours' start. Particularly if he was, as began to seem more than likely, hanging around Thorngate. If it wasn't for this blasted fog he'd go hunting himself, even if it meant a hand-to-hand encounter. Anything was better than waiting for Dorn to move. What was that noise now—like a finger-nail on glass? A twig rubbed on the window by the wind? But there wasn't a wind. Wind and fog don't go hand in hand. The thing to do was to find Berry and get down to work. It was this terrible inactivity 156 that was beginning to tell on his nerves.

He hated to leave Joel, even for a moment. Looking at her sad, white face as she lay there sleeping (she had fallen into a restless sleep) his heart ached for her. Forgive her her murder! He had scarcely thought of it since she had told him of it. He would protect her against the past as well as against the future. He prayed the future had nothing worse in store for her. He touched her hand.

"I *will* come back soon this time, my darling," he whispered.

Joel stirred, shifted. Her lips moved, though her eyes were closed. She whispered something, and Julian bent down quickly to listen.

"Violet Mowbray, that's the name. You see I *did* remember. Violet—Violet—Violet—" She trailed off into indistinguishable sounds.

Julian waited, hoping she might, while she was about this opportune sleep-talking, give away more important matters. But she didn't speak again, and Julian, pleased as Punch anyway with what she had revealed, went off to find Berry.

XVII

Then, very suddenly, Joel woke up. She came wide, staring wide, awake. The library was dark. It hadn't been dark when she fell asleep. *Something* had waked her. Was it the snapping of the electric switch? Was it the closing of a door—the door must be shut for there wasn't a glimmer of light? Was it the Presence by its mere presence? For there was a Presence. As sure as death there was Someone in the room with her. She could almost, her nerves were so tense, so painfully sensitive, tell exactly at what spot the Someone was. Her nerves were like the antennæ of a beetle or the searchlight rays of a battleship, reaching out and feeling It somewhere between her and the terrace windows. She couldn't move her eyeballs in that direction—not that she could have seen It if she had. But without hearing It she knew It moved, and without hearing It she knew It breathed. Her flesh experienced such a pain of terror that it stung even the inner membrane of her nostrils, like intense cold, and brought the tears of intense cold under her eyelids. If she could scream or move! But she was incapable of either. Except for the waves of fear that went over her in pain, her body was detached and subject to no sweating exertion of the will. Her brain alone was active, in a strangely shrunken but vivid way. Like a little cornered rodent, very small but very much alive, it tore quivering about in a tiny brightly lighted trap. It had static, feverish, stricken eyes and it ran up one side of its cage only to fall back and hysterically attempt the other. If something would mercifully happen—instantaneous death instead of waiting for it in a condemned cell.

158

She remembered! How much she remembered, in flashes, with the clarity of flying bird shadows on sunlit snow; and in bitter irony watched herself remembering, realizing it was what one conventionally did during numbered seconds. There was that terrible hanging story of Ambrose Bierce's when you

didn't know until the last sentence that the whole action took place in the man's mind between the tightening of the noose and the extinction of life. She herself had had a somewhat similar experience on a bobsled run on an icy hill that led across a river at the foot, when it became certain that a skid on a turn was going to throw them clear of the bridge into the gorge. Her soul had deserted the doomed ship and calmly watched the end of her body. That she lived through it wasn't by her soul's grace! Hadn't she heard of a preposterous religious notion that dying a violent death, smashing up the body, meant the soul was a long time making Heaven, being slow to extricate itself from the flesh? Why, at this moment her spirit had walked out on her and was leaving her body to encounter the dreadful thing unattended. *Too* dreadful—she fled it down the nights and down the days. 159

She remembered climbing a big maple when she was a child—a maple in autumn leaf—and being drowned in a wave of pure, translucent color, and lost to the world until she emerged on the crest of the wave to a new world, seen from a great height, and by new, color-stained eyes. She remembered, as a test of courage, being made by her father to traverse a grove of pines alone at night and being frozen stone cold by the approach of what proved to be pastured cattle. Uncle Bertrand was sending them all through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. How few of them—*It moved!* Her mind sprang from this hiding place of memories and fled precipitously to crouch in an opposite corner: she remembered a cool summer evening when she and her girlhood friend raced around the block on bicycles, and the horror that burst between them when a monster car, in the days when cars were few and monstrous, caught Margaret, and instantly killed her. She remembered picking English cowslips, unlike our American cowslip, in a Gloucestershire meadow, when she wore a pink muslin dress with white polka dots, and the yellow flowers with their imperishable, indescribable scent drew her on like Persephone from field to field. She remembered being dragged screaming from her first moving picture, a silent picture except for the gun fired point blank at her by a Western desperado in a close-up of face and gun-muzzle. If she could scream like that now! She screamed inside until her throat ached—and not a sound came. She sprang to her feet and fled to the door, stumbling, falling, stumbling—and yet she had not moved by the fraction of an inch. Her mind, unable to face things, again escaped. She remembered spearing for suckers on a spring night, wading up a wide, slow 160

and not a sound came. She sprang to her feet and fled to the door, 161
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fraction of an inch. Her mind, unable to face things, again escaped. She
remembered spearing for suckers on a spring night, wading up a wide, slow

brook, and the way they were all, with spears unlifted, fitfully illumined in the light of oil-soaked torches. She remembered the day on the beach at Shelter Island when Jerry had said, “Your wedding, you mean” to her “Is this making two ends meet, when you spend more money than we possess, always to be my funeral?” She remembered her black-and-red anger when he had laughingly mocked her; “Come now, my dear, I admit you’re a sweet bluffer, but for God’s sake don’t try being European with me. A duel? I know you too well. You haven’t the lightness of touch to get away with it.” Jerry! She mustn’t think of Jerry now or she would find herself between two fires—this new outer terror and the old inner one. Jerry’s face as—

Oh my God, It moved again! Too close this time for *any* escape. Of course It knew she was there. That’s what It was here for. Where was Julian? Why had he left her? The last image of her open eyes had been of Julian sitting 162 near her—the last image of her mind’s eye had been of him still leaning over her, watching her drift into sleep. For one flash she considered It as Julian. No-no-no-no-no. *No*, he may have been a murderer once, but he wasn’t doing this to her now—he wasn’t, he wasn’t. It was—was the one she knew had killed the others: Blake, Romany, her uncle. It was— And then, with relief not even to have to *think* the name, she suddenly yielded, and gratefully drank in the faint sweet odor of a cloth that was thrown across her face and bound at the back of her head. The little rodent, with its petrified eyes and thudding heart, couldn’t have stood the thudding, as of a motor too powerful for the body, another conscious second.

XVIII

Detective Lieutenant Silas Berry of the New York Homicide Squad was fine-tooth-combing Romany's room for possible clues.

"Mr.—Inspector—Lieutenant Berry." Julian was inclined to embarrassment. "Can you spare me a few minutes? I want to talk."

Berry laid his magnifying glass on the dresser.

"Nothing would please me more, boy," he said cheerfully, folding his arms and leaning against the bed post. "As you have undoubtedly observed, we detectives just sit around waiting for someone to be kind enough to confess and save our faces with a critical public. What's on your mind? I think it was you, Prentice," he continued without interruption, "who thought there were two shots fired at Whittaker this morning. Not that he didn't deserve a dozen to judge by the shambles he's made of the place by that betrayal of poor old Crawford. Are you still of the same opinion about those shots in spite of Mr. Belknap's equal certainty to the contrary?"

164

Julian was filling his pipe with unsteady fingers in an effort to cover his excitement and pleasure at Berry's tone of easy, natural camaraderie!

"Yes, Mr. Berry. I am. But I admit my willingness to be proved mistaken by anyone but Mr. Belknap."

"I've remarked that you and Mr. Belknap don't exactly see eye to eye." Berry's lips twitched in a half-smile. "Or is it that you've sighted identically, to the point of interference—had *you* hit on the Dorn solution too? You don't

fancy such a formidable rival, is that it?”

“Perhaps. Yes, Dorn was my original suspicion, and begins to look like my last. Do you really think he’s Mr. Belknap’s, though? Isn’t Mr. Belknap afraid of the woman in the case?”

“You mean Miss Mdevani, I suppose. Hold on now, you shouldn’t be asking *me* questions, young man.” Berry caught himself up. “You’re here to answer them. Don’t misunderstand me and think I’m taking you on as a Watson.”

But severe as the tone was, a quick glance at Berry’s face revealed a twinkle behind it, and Julian was thrilled down to his bootstraps at the intimate badinage. 165

“I promise not to flatter myself too much, Mr. Berry,” Julian smiled shyly. “Now about those shots, sir,—and then I have a clue or two I’ve been hoarding just for you. I heard two shots, unless my hearing had gone double. I *was* tired, but I hadn’t been drinking. However, I’m wrong by the facts; the Colt had been fired but once. So my testimony doesn’t signify.”

“Amateur reasoning, Prentice. Try to figure out why after you go to bed tonight—I hope you are *going* to bed—and the effort will put you to sleep better than sheep-counting. Or come and tell me if you *do* find the nigger in your wood pile. All right, give us your clues. I’m all excited.”

Julian produced his slip of thin white paper with its cryptic message.

“You see Colonel Blake was tagged and numbered,” he said.

“I’m surprised you knew the code. Very keen of you. Where did you find this?”

“On the stairs, after Mrs. Crawford screamed.”

“Is that the sum total of your knowledge of its antecedents, birthplace, and purpose in life. Then we’re about as well off as we were a month ago.” 166

Julian looked quenched.

“Can’t it be traced?” he murmured.

“What with—a stencil? Never mind. Don’t let it worry you. Oh, I’ll *keep* it,” he added, as Julian extended a hand. “Our friend Stebbins will enjoy it. *If* I show it to him. He hasn’t a flare for motives, but he eats up clues. Have you others?”

“No, not exactly. But I thought I’d better mention that Miss Lacey just remembered the name she was trying to recall. *You* know, the name mentioned by Romany. It’s Violet Mowbray. Does it mean a blessed thing to you? It doesn’t to me.”

Berry’s eyes were intent on the pattern in the rug. Again Julian could make nothing of his face. Then Berry clicked his tongue, with a sound like a miniature gunshot, and for the startled Julian it registered the click of an idea.

“Uhhmm?!” Berry prolonged the interrogatory exclamation with exaggerated softness. “Very strange. In fact, *very* strange. Thank you, 167 Prentice. You *are* contributing your bit at last. It fits. It jolly well fits. Which is what I’m looking for, you know—things to fit *my* preconceived idea. There are two ways of working this detective racket, son—theory first and theory last. Mine’s first. I make my facts fit the crime.— Hello, Belknap. Come in. Prentice and I are having a truth party. Or rather he’s come across with a little truth after keeping it back all afternoon. But I’m being lenient with him because he claims it’s all due to my charms. He saved up just to give me a few pointers. Aren’t you jealous?”

“Rraather.” Belknap always went his English ancestors one better in accent whenever his dignity was endangered. “Shall I retire?”

“By no means. I’m sure even the untutored Prentice will agree that in matters of codes and Violet Mowbrays three heads are better than two. There’s no such thing as too many detectives, is there?”

“Violet Mowbray!” Belknap showed sudden and marked interest and for a man who rarely showed any it *was* remarkable. He closed the door. 168
“What about Violet Mowbray? I thought I had her under lock and key.

Is she abroad?"

"We don't know. It was the name Miss Lacey couldn't remember and has remembered."

"Let's see. How was it Miss Video mentioned her. 'Revelation for revelation, with Violet Mowbray thrown in?' Was that it? It might mean anything. After all, Violet Mowbray did have a past. However, we'd better look into it."

"Yes, Miss Lacey wasn't the only prowler last night." Berry squinted at Julian, who stood looking bewildered but pleased at the response to at least one of his hopeful suggestions. "The remark may have meant more to another than it did to her. And it can do no harm to look up Violet, poor girl. One of your cruel cases, Belknap. Brilliantly executed, of course, and justified in consequence I suppose, but sinfully cruel. I'm surprised she's living. Though this doesn't prove she is."

"It was a sad affair. I regretted it myself. But Blake was a close friend, and I saw my way to be able to clear his name. Shall I give the prison a ring? One of us could see her tomorrow—or we could send a man out."

"Do. But cast your mind's eye over this before you go."

169

Belknap took the coded message, scarcely glancing at it.

"Oh yes. I wondered when I'd see this again. Where did you find it?"

"Prentice recovered it on the stairs."

"I must have dropped it there. I really hadn't wanted to enter it as evidence unless it was necessary. Particularly since I am convinced it has no bearing. I received it from Miss Mdevani. She was in a trap, as you can see. She brought me this to show me in how desperate a trap. It was to her advantage under the circumstances, to prevent murder here last night. Though if it had been just between the two of them with the world well lost I'm sure she would have blown Whittaker's brains out and considered he escaped lightly for his damned treachery. Mind, I'm holding no brief for her character. This would rise up to deny me." He smiled ironically, lifting the paper at them.

“She is no angel. But I shall have to be shown about the present case. If you think, on this account, I shall be less help than hindrance to you and Stebbins I shall gladly withdraw, with no hard feeling, I promise you.”

170

“Not for a minute, old man. Don’t dream of deserting me and the ship. In fact I wouldn’t, I *couldn’t*, get on without you. I’m not as cold-blooded as you; and I don’t in the least relish being left alone by night, in a fog, with the rats either dead or deserted. No, I guess I could bear up as far as that’s concerned. But I *do* look to you to provide the missing link to what seems to me a pretty bad tangle. Which reminds me I have an important question to put to you. Run along, Prentice, will you, like a good fellow? The powers that be want to confer.”

Julian, having just congratulated himself on the fact that they seemed to have completely forgotten him, was sadly disappointed. He left them with their heads together.

171

XIX

Yes, Belknap and Berry at last had their heads together in peace and quiet—if being cheek by jowl with a tongue in each could be said to be having their heads together. Greek was meeting Greek, and, with reservations (decidedly with reservations!), they put their cards on the table.

It was a *kind* of peace and quiet in which the two men conversed. Nothing, thought Berry, had ever seemed to him more hollow-still than Thorngate that Saturday evening: fog outside, and illness, depression, and possibly guilt inside. Like the central vacuum of a cyclone it seemed to augur as much trouble ahead as behind. He wished for a moment that he and Belknap had let Sergeant Stebbins carry out his obstinate desire, which had been to run the whole lot down to the Blue Acres lockup for the night. It had really been because he relished the thought of catching somebody red-handed that he had joined in Belknap's quiet but determined resistance to the idea. 172

Belknap's claim was that the scandal in society was bad enough as it was without herding several prominent and supposedly honorable ladies and gentlemen into prison as if they were one and all guilty of murder. It was hardly likely they *were* all guilty, and the danger of injured innocence was not fair to risk.

But Stebbins would undoubtedly have had his way about the arrested Crawford, whom he had proved backwards and forwards to his own satisfaction guilty of Whittaker's murder, if Crawford had not chosen an opportune moment to collapse and be put to bed. Even the hardened Belknap had shown a gleam of sympathy for the prostrated Crawford and asked if someone hadn't a sleeping drug. It was Nadia Mdevani who produced the little red bottle from her vanity bag, poured a few half-inch capsules into her

cupped hand, and re-poured them into Belknap's, who transferred them to Sydney Crawford's.

"I couldn't survive without these," she had said. "They're harmless enough—allanol or luminol, or one of those things."

So every living soul that had been dining at Thorngate the night before, always with the exception of Dorn, was still there. It was this fact of his absence that brought Dorn uppermost in the Belknap-Berry discussion. 173

"No report on Milton Dorn?" Berry asked.

"None of any exact value to us. But one of your men has unearthed a hidden room at the back of his Eighty-fifth Street office, and in it several human specimens in varying degrees of dissection. None of these can hope to endure, but none have been dealt the finishing stroke of the knife. The press is hot on *that* scent, as you can well imagine. And of course nothing will satisfy it but that Dorn is guilty of our three murders and a few besides. I wish I felt as sure of the three as of the few besides."

Berry shivered.

"You say that's all of no value to us? I should think as a mark of character it might shed light on the situation. However, it's useless to jump to conclusions. *Our* whole case against Dorn is summed up in his disappearance, added to your possible glimpse of him."

"Perfectly true. My answer referred merely to the fact that he himself has not been traced, much less located." 174

"I see." Berry stroked his chin and glanced up at Belknap with one eye shut. "You're not in too good a humor, old man. Stuck for an answer? Don't tell me!"

"I guess I am, Berry. I'm mired." Belknap smiled slowly, but failed to quite meet Berry's open eye. "The trouble being I haven't a flare about this business. And unless my instincts are at work I flounder. I'm not good with a

magnifying glass, I must admit.” And Belknap made a thrust of his head at the glass on the table.

Berry laughed.

“Neither am I, really,” he said. “I bow to convention. I know you don’t. But neither are my instincts particularly violent. A little luck, some thinking, and an enormous amount of hard work have got the poor boy where he is today. Don’t disparage him. A glass like this is a pretty little tool of the trade. Boys like Prentice like to see a detective without one as little as they like to see a naturalist without a butterfly net. I’m a detective, you see; you’re a genius. That’s the difference—and oh, the difference to me! Gee, that rhymes, 175 Belknap—internally.”

It was true that on the face of it Belknap’s reputation exceeded Berry’s because of the ‘hunches’ that made him spectacular. Yet Berry, for just the reason that he lacked them, perhaps averaged a greater percentage of successes than the older man. Whereas Belknap’s failures, according to the fortune of heroes, passed unrecorded or were forgotten overnight, Berry’s went down in history.

Berry had recently written *finis* at the end of a slow, grueling, painstaking case, begun five years before—having of course had his hand in numberless affairs, successful and unsuccessful, in the meantime. The Star Diamond robbery round-up, seen in a bird’s eye view from beginning to end, was a masterpiece of intricate workmanship and cunning design, with Berry the spider. But it had been too much to expect a fickle public attention to remain riveted to a five-year hunt that led around the world and back again. And what newspaper would take the time to review it at sufficient length to bring out its pattern in bas-relief.

Belknap, on the other hand, seldom was interested in crimes at their birth. They had to pull themselves together, assume character, even become 176 aged and ripened in the detective cellars, before he woke up to them. Then suddenly with the warp and the woof before him he saw the flaw, the weak thread, and unraveled the whole in a breath. Belknap had a certain contempt for Berry’s methods, though a sincere respect for his achievements.

“I’m not so sure about the luck in your case, Berry,” he said generously. “I’m afraid there’s always been far too much of it with me. I’m *not* a hard worker. And as for thinking, it happens in wedges of intuition driven in between sleeping and waking. I have damn little to do with it. That’s why I’m up a tree now. I haven’t had a good sleep since the returns on these murders of ours began to come in.”

“You don’t look it. And unless I miss my guess we’ve got a bad night ahead of us. So let’s run over our lists to date and not leave the household too long on its wild lone. Who are there to be considered? Mr. and Mrs. Crawford; Prentice and his girl-friend; Miss Mdevani; and this missing Dorn. And *that* leaves out of account the quite possible possibility that Blake killed Miss Video, or *vice versa*, or that Whittaker killed both. Violet Mowbray’s 177 name may be a stepping-stone and it may prove just another stumbling-block. What really interested me in Miss Video’s remark was the ‘revelation for revelation’ bit. Did she mean that because Whittaker was exposing her lover Crawford she was going to pay him off? For what she *could* have meant was that if you are exposing *me* I’ll get even with a story about you and Violet Mowbray. In which case it would bear out a little suspicion of mine about that Diary you people seem so anxious to forget. Perhaps the Diary had ‘em *all* in it—not merely Crawford. Whittaker may have been letting fifty-nine cats out of the bag instead of one. He was an old scoundrel, Whittaker, by accounts. If that was so, with most of those here having interrelated parts, what more likely than the only way for any one of them to come clean was to wipe out every other one, and the Diary with ‘em.”

Belknap carefully regarded a thumb-nail, pausing before he spoke.

“Astute reasoning, Berry. You’re uncannily warm, you’ll be pleased to know. I haven’t had a good opportunity to explain to you the method in this 178 madness, if there is any. Such as it is, it’s Whittaker’s. The poor devil, though I swear I can’t be as sympathetic as I should be, was dying of cancer, and witness his bright idea of a way to shorten the sentence. He called me in at the last minute to watch it done—too late to more than expostulate and then resign myself to what I thought was going to be rather a gruesome lark, and has proved far too much of a good thing. I assure you I didn’t anticipate a

shambles! I've kept this item for your ear alone because—well, *you* know the police. Can't you picture that damned sergeant hot and bothered on the trail of a lot of stale crimes when the time is too short for the new? What do you say about it?"

Berry walked across and threw up a window. "Bad night," he said, and spit. He knocked the ashes from his pipe on the stone outer sill, closed the window deliberately, and came a few steps back, refilling his pipe as he came, and keeping his eyes on that.

"You've let me do quite a bit of feeling around in the dark, haven't you, boy? Oh, I don't exactly blame you. After all, it was your case, not mine. There's a catch-as-catch-can element between us I guess we can't avoid. And 179 aside from that I agree with you that it would be rather low-down to allow your friend the Judge to blight the careers of his criminal friends because of certain age-old professional secrets between them. For I take it that's what you're trying to tell me."

"I am, exactly. But now that you *are* enlightened what good is it to you? It's been of little help to me to know that the Miss Laceys and Mr. Prentices have their pasts. Can you see either one of them with any of last night's blood on their hands?"

"Not particularly. But we've both had our tragic experiences with gentle creatures who have spread the veil of innocence over a positive welter of sin. No, given your tale of what Whittaker had set out to do, and has done to a T, the matter boils itself down to a neat psychological one. We're unable to budge with the circumstantial evidence; unless the fact that all the circumstantial points directly at your foreign lady, Miss Mdevani. But I, for one, feel it's planted on her. I gather it strikes you the same way? However, we can't afford to eliminate her. As far as everyone is concerned we only have their sworn word as to how they spent last night: Miss Lacey in 180 Mr. Prentice's room, for the most part; Mr. Prentice in the Judge's, except when he wasn't; the Judge in Miss Video's, you think; Mrs. Crawford in her own; Miss Mdevani very much out and about—and yet not seen until her visit to you; Mr. Crawford further out and about but not seen because of the assignation with his wops. The few instances in which we can check their stories we find them quite uncommonly truthful. You saw Miss Lacey when

she says she came to the library for a drink. Mrs. Crawford saw Mr. Prentice as he came from the Judge's room, when she was on her way down to find her husband and found Blake instead. No one saw Blake. You kept moving and saw damn little—unless you *did* see Dorn. I wasn't in the picture until after two of the important episodes, and too far afield to get much out of the third. You were actually present at the third, and a lot of good it did you. Which reminds me. I just want to check that shooting with you again. It bothers me. One shot, you say, from the direction of the library wall, in other words from the holes therein. Prentice *does* insist on two."

"There was one shot," Belknap said with controlled quietness. "I 181 should think it would be unnecessary for me to repeat myself. But there *have* been cases of simultaneous, or all but simultaneous, shots that might deceive one, more particularly the person nearest the scene of action. Do you suggest it might have been something of that sort? Miss Mdevani in the wall, and Crawford or his hired man in the pantry, shall we say?"

"My idea in a nutshell. You see this is what I found to make me such a nuisance on the subject."

Berry produced the bullet of a 22 calibre Colt automatic from his vest pocket—a bullet apparently identical to the one found in the table that morning.

"May I inquire?" Belknap asked gravely, taking the pellet on the palm of his hand and crossing it from one to the other.

"In my meticulous, persnickety way," Berry said with his little twisted smile, "I made a cleaner sweep of the dining-room tonight than you and I and the Sergeant did this morning when working in unison." Berry had been known to strip a freshly papered wall in his thoroughness! "And this article is the net result. Found *in* the sideboard—you noticed that Chippendale thing between the windows—inside, deep in the back board, with the doors closed 182 and no hole in the doors. Meaning the doors were standing open when the shot was fired, which, incidentally, means nothing."

"Exactly; nothing at all. And of course it may have been in hiding there for years, the relic of some earlier shooting picnic at the Whittaker mansion! But I congratulate you on the find, for it *is* a find. We must get it to the

ballistician, who has Exhibit A, and let him determine which, if either, came from our captured weapon. We know only one shot could have come from it.”

“Certainly. I’ll take charge of it. You get in touch with Miss Mowbray. I’ll continue with Miss Video’s room while I’m about it, and you go mix with the gang. The more I hear about them the less I like them unchaperoned. See you later.”

On either side the door each drew a long breath that being translated meant “I guess I gave him my *facts* fair enough. Conclusions? *No*.”

XX

Sydney had been wandering the house like one possessed. From her room where she stood inanimate motionless beside Neil's bed, to the East Room where she mechanically extended her hands to the fire Nadia had herself built on the enormous hearth, to the kitchens where she blindly prepared things for Neil's comfort, she made the rounds with frozen face and rigid body. The spirit was stricken—only the form of Sydney went on living and doing. Meeting far too many emotional crises within far too short a space of time had destroyed her receptivities; whether temporarily or permanently remained to be seen.

Nadia was in the East Room, smoking furiously, picking up and laying down bric-a-brac, books, pictures, a glass of water, with indiscriminate and hasty distraction. Seeing the ghost of Sydney pass through for the sixth time 184 her nerves were stung to remonstrance.

“For Christ's sake, what's the matter, Mrs. Crawford? One would think you were the only one in trouble around here. Is it as bad as all that with your husband? Can't he buck up?”

Sydney halted in her tracks and stood gazing straight through Nadia, through the walls, through the outer fog, for several seconds.

“He's worse,” she said in a dragging voice. “I don't understand it.”

“I'll come up with you.” Nadia's bomb of angry impatience burst in air and came softly down. “There may be something I can do.”

Again there was an appreciable interval before Sydney answered, her eyes distantly intent, as though, a creature of another world, she listened for echoes of this.

“You may come,” she murmured.

They went up together to the Crawfords’ room, passing in the lower hall a policeman sitting bolt upright in a straight-backed chair against the wall near the door. A high-low light was turned low above the mirror-table beside him. It was all the light for the hall and stairway. At the head of the stairs another policeman, equally immobile and disinterested, sat in a straight-backed chair against the wall. 185

“It feels like a hotel after 2 A.M., or a funeral parlor at midday,” Nadia cried at Sydney. “Let’s turn up the lights and dance on the graves—throw a celebration with horns and cymbals.”

But Sydney was deaf to her. And even Nadia’s bitter laughter died away when she had taken one look at Crawford, felt his pulse, and listened to his breathing. There was a horrid whitish edge of something, like dried foam at a tide-mark, along his upper lip. The lids of his eyes were neither up nor down, but remained fixed half across the pupils. His Adam’s apple shifted a little, spasmodically. Nadia swung on Sydney.

“You little damn fool,” she hissed. “What do you think you’re doing—playing with death? As if we hadn’t had enough of it about. Did that frightful idiot of a Dr. Giles go off duty?”

“What’s the matter?” Sydney asked stonily.

“Did you give him the sedative I gave you?”

“What?”

“I said, *did you give him the sedative I gave you?*”

“I did.”

“What else?”

“I don’t know. Some tea, I think. And bicarbonate. And—and water of course.”

“Is that all?”

“I don’t know. I tell you I don’t know. What are you driving at? Answer me! What do you mean?”

“Keep quiet.”

“Are you trying to make out I’ve—?”

“*Shut up*, or I’ll make you.”

Sydney Crawford’s eyes seemed to return at last from the cosmic universe. They contracted and shivered to points of horror. Everything about her, from her clinched hands to her vivid chalk-white face, put itself headlong into one word:

“*Murderer!*”

And Nadia Mdevani was looking all too ready to be one when Julian, standing in the door, interrupted them.

“Don’t tell me anything’s wrong,” he said with a thin sarcasm.

Poised against each other as the two women were, it took them both several breaths to withhold their momentum and divert it to new channels. 187
Nadia was the first to recover.

“We need a doctor, Mr. Prentice,” she said quietly. “And we need him soon.” She threw a glance in Crawford’s direction and, in a low voice, risked more: “I’ve seen a few poisons in my day, and this *is* a poison! Arsenic. You know how rapid that is.”

Sydney sprang toward Julian.

“Don’t go, Mr. Prentice! I tell you if you go—”

But Julian had fled; down the corridor, down the dim stairs, and out into the fog. They heard the door close loudly behind him. Sydney dropped her hands loosely, resignedly, at her sides. “That’s that,” she said quietly. “Not that it really matters. I am completely at your mercy, Miss Mdevani. You may think it makes a difference. It doesn’t. There are others now who care as little as Bertrand Whittaker cared.”

Nadia looked her up and down with cold contempt and a colder pity.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Crawford. Your time is not yet. Not *quite* yet.” She pushed back her shining ebony hair with her two hands. “It appears I must be the one to do it at that—the chosen of the Lord. For the mortification of the flesh.” She was speaking to herself, not to Sydney.

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Crawford shifted a little, and moaned.

“I am in pain,” he said. “Sydney.”

“Yes?” Sydney neither stirred, nor looked toward him.

“I am in pain.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Yes, something is wrong.”

Neil seemed to be considering that. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, and on the backs of his hands lying weakly on the coverlid. His dry lips thinned perceptibly. Then, on a breath, he only said again:

“Sydney.”

“Yes?”

“Sydney.”

“I said, what is it?”

“It’s up to you, Mrs. Crawford,” Nadia cried softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Sydney.” Crawford’s monotonous, sad repetition of her name was the tragic undertone in the room.

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“Be quick about it,” Nadia screamed in a whisper.

“I tell you I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sydney.”

“You know as well as I do what I mean.”

“Sydney.” His voice was weaker.

The effort by which Sydney moved her limbs and went to Neil’s side was painful to watch, like the first steps of a Frankenstein conception. She bent over him a little and laid her hand across his eyes.

“It’s all right, Neil. There is nothing wrong. I didn’t mean there was. It has been so hard for you. So bad I can’t remember how bad. If I remembered I’d die. Perhaps you are remembering. Don’t let it kill you, dear. For you and I have so much to do. We are going to go on from where we laid our story down—was it a year ago? I’m sure we can find the very page, paragraph and sentence where we left off.”

Neil smiled. It was the smile of a blind person, sweet and helpless. He moved a little nearer Sydney, and lay perfectly still. How long the three in the room remained speechless and motionless it would have been hard to say. It was Belknap who disturbed two of them; the third was beyond all further disturbance.

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XXI

“What have we here—a séance?” Belknap asked from the door.

Nadia quivered and shrank back against the wall as she turned to face Belknap. Her hands, with spread fingers, formed a spidery white pattern against the room’s daring modernistic wall-paper of black shot with gold. Her eyes wavered, and Belknap saw them consider the open window leading to the roof of the porte-cochère.

“Mr. Belknap!” she breathed.

“Your humble servant.” Belknap closed the door, turned its key and pocketed the key, and crossed to the bed.

“What’s ailing our friend Crawford?”

He thrust Sydney Crawford aside with an arm that would have brooked no interference had there been any. He looked down at Crawford; then 192 bent over him; and then, quickly, felt for the heart. His face darkened.

“This man is dead,” he said, straightening and turning toward Nadia Mdevani.

“Thank God!” Sydney cried, and Belknap swung to her.

“Another Strange Death of President Harding, is that it?”

“That’s for you to say, Mr. Detective,” Sydney answered with unexpected fire. “But this is the second time today you have accused me of murder; and I

should have thought, unless you can make your point better than you made it this morning, you might exercise a greater professional restraint.”

By a blazing light in Sydney’s transparent face it was clear things no longer mattered a tinker’s dam: life, death, love, hatred were all one to her, which was nothing. Belknap regarded her with merciless, puckered eyes, and turned again to her husband. He touched a light forefinger to the powder on Crawford’s corroded lips.

“Poison is my guess,” he said. “We’ll find out where it came from soon enough. You’ve run it too close, Miss Mdevani. I shall have to examine the remainder of that sleeping drug you so kindly offered. *If* it’s still in your possession. Hmmm! No you don’t, lady—stand where you are.”

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“I’m sorry to have frightened you,” Nadia drew back and spoke with slow venom. “I merely thought to assist you. You’ll find it in the middle compartment of my handbag.” With her eyes she indicated the bag on the dresser. “Are you—alone?” she added.

“Quite alone, Miss Mdevani. But not for long I assure you.” Belknap went to the telephone: (“Operator, give me 40. Thanks. Police Headquarters? Give me Sergeant Stebbins. Oh, that you, Stebbins? You’d better come up. Your catch has gone the way of all flesh—which, in this house, means he has been murdered. But I have a good substitute. So come along and help me. Right.”) He hung up.

“Where is Mr. Berry?” Nadia asked.

“Doing research work.”

“I should like to see him, if I may.”

“You should? Why? My opinion is that I make a better father confessor.”

“I’m sure of it. I prefer a layman that’s all—as safer in the long run.”

How he admired her Custer stand. He knew, if she didn’t, that she was literally at the end of her rope. He hadn’t a doubt in his mind that her

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bag contained the poison. This poisoning business was always such a risky affair. He felt convinced that in the excitement she had neglected to exchange the contents of the bottle. Yet she was boldly facing it out to the last ditch. It was proving a gallant fight, if a criminal's fight can be called gallant. And, admiring her, he wanted her more than ever. His eyes absorbed her as she stood there slim and taut, outlined in the light that, being shielded from Crawford, fell directly upon her. She wore a clinging dress of bitter-sweet red. It shaped her narrow hips, her lovely forward drooping shoulders. There were slippers to match the dress; coral in her ears; a half dozen barbaric coral bracelets high on her arm; a large bloodstone ring on her index finger. She seemed not so much savage as heathen, a descendant of Attila. It was a thousand pities, Belknap thought, to have her broken in this sordid fashion: law courts, disgrace, and, short of death, a prison. How much more fun to break her himself, in a man's way. But it was too late now. The cards were stacked against her, and he didn't need her enough to follow her lead to Hell. He drew a breath and relinquished her. 195

"That's quite possible. Safety is not a term you and I have conjured with."

"Hardly. We have never pretended to be anything but dangerous to each other. And this was scarcely the moment to have drawn in our horns. But that shouldn't destroy our relationship, should it? For I believe it was you who first made a claim to courage. You put it rather neatly, I remember, calling it the coin of our realm."

Again her irony, and he flushed.

"I was flattered, my dear, when you challenged me to catch you at one murder." (God, he thought to himself, what kind of a grip has this woman got on me that I should stand here arguing, with a corpse on the bed between us!) "I have ceased to be flattered. Four is far too simple a problem; particularly when you let yourself be tripped up in the fourth act." Belknap was opening her bag. He held up the little red bottle for reflections. "Your stop-light," he said with his cruel, side-wise smile.

"Your play on words, sir, is one of the most delightful things about you. I see it doesn't fail you under trying circumstances." Nadia's color was up. She was positively enjoying this linguistic sword play. Belknap hated 196

himself for having let himself be snared into it. She was playing for time. Exactly what good it would do her he failed to see. But the furtive half-eye she gave to the door, the furtive half-ear she gave to what might be happening outside, meant she was biding an opportunity. And something was at last happening outside. Suddenly the door of the lower hall was opened and closed repeatedly and vehemently. There were loud voices, and someone in a querulous rage was insistently keeping the upper hand. There was a scuffle on the stairs. Belknap went to the door, and paused with the key in his hand. He looked quickly at Sydney's quiescent figure lying curled up at Crawford's feet—she had fallen into a deep sleep, or perhaps a faint, at some moment of the conversation; how little attention had been paid her!—and then back at Nadia.

“Quick, dearest,” he whispered, “go by the window! Forgive me, it's the best I can do.” He was surprised at his own words. But her shuddering tremor at the approach of the others had been the last straw. He couldn't go with her but he could let her off. 197

“Thank you,” she answered gently. “I am not running away. I have never run even when guilty. Is it likely I should try it now?”

Without replying, and with an angry twist of his arm, he turned the key in the lock and flung the door wide.

“Come in, Stebbins. You too, Berry. I want one of you. And Miss Mdevani, I understand, wants the other.”

“I do, Mr. Berry.” Nadia stepped forward and stood near him. “I hereby place myself wholly in your charge. Whether I am guilty or innocent of all of which I am accused has yet to be determined. Until it is determined I am confident you will extend me fair play. Mr. Belknap, I regret to say, is now as assured of my guilt as he recently claimed to be of my innocence. Such variable winds cannot fail but be ill winds for one in my delicate position.”

“Cool and tricky!” thought Berry, putting the room to a quizzical scrutiny. “What a perfectly worded appeal. No male could resist it.” Aloud he said, “I promise you will receive every consideration justified by the circumstances.” And, to Belknap, “I see we *did* leave them too long 198

alone. The tally mounts! But I take it we have reached the end of the trail. My congratulations. I *thought* you would come across, and I'm sincerely glad—"

The disturbance on the stairs had moved up and now suddenly intruded itself. Julian Prentice proved to be at its center—pale, disheveled, his tie twisted, his hair up-ended, Julian struggled feverishly with a veritable regiment of cops. His captors were so intent on their prize and on his retention that it would have taken a dozen murders to have shaken their concentration; such is the Force's strength of character! In spite of everything, even his own nature, Belknap had to smile.

"Who's this you've got? I figured the least you could be doing was bringing in Milton Dorn. What's Prentice been at to so rouse your righteous wrath?"

"Tryin' to escape, sir. Ran his car right off'n the premises. We did have a chase, sir! He was doin' seventy in the fog. It was as good as suicide, sir."

"A verdict of suicide would be a relief. Come, come, boys, hands off. 199 Can't you see you're bothering him? Where were you heading, Prentice, for Times Square?"

Julian, standing free at last, shifted his gaze distractedly from the vibrant, defiant figure of Nadia Mdevani, to Silas Berry standing like an off-stage critic, to Ordway Belknap who looked a general with the puppets at his disposal, to Sydney Crawford lying crumpled and desperately pathetic across the feet of the still form on the bed, and suddenly he trembled uncontrollably from head to foot.

"Where is Joel?" he cried in a high, piercing voice that froze the room.

XXII

From this moment Thorngate, house and grounds, was pandemonium let loose.

It was clear that the first thing to be done, when it became certain that Joel Lacey was really among the missing, and had last been seen sleeping on the library couch, was to institute a searching party. Because of the numberless recruits, three groups were formed—two taking the great outdoors and one the sliding panels and the secret attics. The way the police, Belknap groaned, came scurrying out of corners, like the Hamlin rats to the piper's pipe, at news of a safe and sane hunt, when there was never one of them underfoot when he was needed to block a murder, made one positively ill. Not that the hunt wasn't important. But the bare chances of *finding* Joel Lacey, much less finding her alive, seemed so slight in view of the thoroughness of the earlier crimes.

In the midst of it all, behind and before, to right and to left, came 201 Julian. Julian joined first one searching party, then another, urging, beseeching, cursing, cajoling, diving into a closet or under a bush as the case might be. Julian was every which way. Julian was at sixes and sevens. Julian had gone berserk. Losing Joel, Julian seemed to have lost whatever of value he had recently possessed: his boyish philosophy, such as it was; his sense of humor, which hadn't been bad; his kindly, inconsequential wit which had served rather to balance the household during the late unpleasantness. These had vanished in thin air. Instead here was a frantic, unreasonable, hysterical, bothersome young man who dogged everyone's footsteps like a spoilt child, stubbornly refused to remain even passably steady, and flung wild and outrageous accusations about like so much confetti. No one escaped his fury

or his suspicions. Even his idol Berry took a raking over the coals that under normal conditions would have been unpardonable. But when Julian burst into tears at the end of his peroration Berry let that be the end of it.

Julian said no one was *trying* to find Joel; he said Nadia Mdevani had cremated Joel in the furnaces and they must sift the ashes for her bones; he said Milton Dorn was murdering her by unspeakable degrees 202 in some god-forsaken hole-in-the-wall where her screams would never be heard; that Belknap, Berry, and Stebbins had whisked her off to some Inquisitorial chamber where their minions were torturing a statement from her. He said the whole investigation from A to Z had been stupidly handled (he said it very loud and clear, and embellished it with bad words); that a lot of helpless and innocent people had been kept in a house which had a chronic disposition to murder, where they had been nipped off one by one like sheep by wolves; that Thorngate was proving no better than an Island of Dr. Moreau, only worse, because it was human beings instead of rabbits being experimented with; he said—

But this was going one further than the harassed Belknap could quite tolerate. He thrust Julian gently but firmly from the East Room into the hall, saying, as he closed the door on him:

“Go along, Prentice. I’m sorry. We’re doing all we can, and the best possible. I have even got in touch with Headquarters again and have asked them to send an extra man or two. I admit things are pretty damn thick, but you 203 aren’t thinning them out. So beat it.”

And Belknap turned back to continue, with Berry and Stebbins, the heated interrogation of Nadia Mdevani by which they hoped to run her to earth by her own admission, and so, clearing the decks of legal red-tape, hasten and simplify her path that led but to the grave as best you looked at it. For, admitted or not admitted, denial could no longer stand against a sealed order to kill Blake, a gun left lying on the scene of Whittaker’s murder, and a poisoned sleeping drug administered to Crawford. This last, in a brief preliminary test, Belknap had proved to be arsenous oxide; anyway arsenic in one of its forms.

They had of necessity quickly abandoned all attempts on Sydney Crawford.

Not that she stood above suspicion, hardly that (Stebbins had even taken it upon himself to arrest her willy-nilly), but Sydney, passing from one phase of excessive shock to another, was now wandering the house like a modern Ophelia, modern in that nothing she said bore the least resemblance to her predecessor's soliloquy. She said cruel, bitter, terrible things to the walls and the ceilings in a hard, glinting voice: "I'll call up Victor and tell him his Daddy's dead. He'll remember it for life if he's fetched out of bed to be told." "The place to stab a man with a paper knife is between the fourth and fifth vertebræ, I mean ribs. I've found *that* out." "Well, Romany, if it's true that the first two of a triangle to die make the couple in Heaven, *you* should worry now. You've got him." Until she changed her tune a little there was no use bothering with her, for questioning or pressure brought to bear might push her beyond this ragged edge of insanity. 204

No danger of insanity in Nadia Mdevani's case! But apparently no danger either of obtaining any satisfaction from her. Wanting a confession from her was one thing—obtaining even a modicum of it was another. Nadia sat limply, almost unconcernedly, in a deep chair before the East Room fire, and, never lifting her eyes from a bemused contemplation of the flames, refused to yield a hair's breadth of vantage to her tormentors. The ground they covered with her was the old ground covered in the morning, but, though her three examiners bore the same names that they had then born, they were three men of different attitude and temper. Each blaming himself secretly for an earlier male to female softness, that had perhaps been responsible for the extra hot water they were now in, was now out for blood in earnest, beauty or no beauty. It angered them that she seemed not to notice a difference. Quite as collected, equally as cool, as during the morning's session on the stand, she shed their individual and concerted attacks. 205

Yes, she had received the order regarding Colonel Blake. No, she could not say when, or from whom. That was for them to find out—if they could. Yes, she had taken it to Mr. Belknap. Why? She didn't exactly know; an impulse. Perhaps a wily way to further the intimacy between them! Here she threw a little whimsical smile in Belknap's direction. If he saw it he gave no sign. She said she intended telling him she had not obeyed orders—even though Blake lay dead at that moment on the library floor. She had intended asking his protection, such protection as a man of law and justice, power and

respect, can give a woman of doubtful antecedents. The sarcasm, if there was any, was ever so slight.

What *had* she been doing during the hours before consulting with Mr. Belknap? Oh-my-God, her weary tone of telling and retelling implied, what a twice and thrice told tale to repeat. She had gone to her room and been restless. Naturally; no one else had claimed to be anything *but* restless last night, and she wouldn't profess to be any exception to the rule. She had read a little, and then done a bit of reconnoitering— Oh well, *call* it prowling. What difference did it make? She had been made aware, putting the two of his absence from his own room and the two of his voice in Romany's together, that Bertrand Whittaker was paying a visit. And that couldn't be said to have made her any the less upset. Not that she would have called him one of your story-book lovers; but this evening she needed him to be his own best friend with her in his own behalf. Her new distrust of him, a blend of anger, disrespect and fear, rising from his cat-and-mouse play with his Diary, was running her blood up close to killing heat. Romany was rather a last straw. She had returned to her room for her Colt, to find it had disappeared from the dresser; and had gone on down for a drink to restore her equilibrium. Again her smile. It was then she had remarked the gnawing of a rat in the wainscoting—a persistent rat, Mr. Belknap; a purposeful rat; one intent on going places. She had left him working his way through, and had gone for a long cooling-off stroll, down to the water and back. What a night! What a moon!

Stepping back over the low sills into the library, and crossing the dark room to the door dimly blocked in by the hall light, her foot had encountered something soft and humpy. By that seventh sense that comes to one's aid at such moments she knew it for a body. She had her own pocket flash. Turning it up she discovered Blake. The message she had received was illumined in red letters. She was on the point of destroying it when Belknap occurred to her mischievous mind! It was Mrs. Crawford who had interrupted their exciting tête-à-tête.

Romany? The first she had seen of Romany last night was this morning when, with the others, she had seen her dead. No, it wasn't Romany she would have killed under the spur of jealousy—if they wanted to name it

jealousy—but Whittaker. *Another* reason for killing Whittaker, whom she hadn't killed. Not even in his case was she guilty, much as she had intended being. Someone had been ahead of her. Someone who had planted her gun with one shot fired from it—and in using another gun had had the misfortune to have to fire twice in order to get the victim cold. 208

The three men exchanged glances of unmistakable surprise and shock. This was new testimony on Nadia's part, though not altogether fresh, and an entirely new explanation of it. But Nadia never showed by as much as a shifted finger that she realized the importance of what she had just let fall.

"Two shots!" Berry said.

"I said two shots."

"You agree with Prentice?"

"I do."

"Why haven't you said so before?"

"I had my reasons."

"You knew something?"

"If you care to put it that way."

"You suspected and were afraid?"

"I suspected. I was not afraid."

"Your explanation of the two shots—whether true or false—is amazingly clever." Belknap was deeply respectful.

"Thank you."

Stebbins interrupted angrily.

"And what about your amatol turning out to be arsenic. Got as clever a 209

way out of that, lady?”

“I don’t need it—and wouldn’t take it if I did. It’s self-explanatory. Oh, you detectives!” Nadia threw back her head and laughed suddenly, weakly, brokenly. “If you want to send me to eternity for Crawford’s murder you are welcome to do it that I may have the last laugh on you with the Devil in Hell. He’d understand.”

She covered her face with her hands. It was impossible to be certain whether she was laughing still, or crying.

“Get out of here, you two,” Berry said quietly to Belknap and Stebbins. “I want a word with Miss Mdevani alone.” He herded them unceremoniously toward the door.

“We’ve got under her skin,” he added under his breath. “I think with an extra hint or two that I have the means to convey (remember she’s not new to me) we’ll have her where we want her in half a jiffy.”

He shut the door carefully and returned to Nadia.

XXIII

It was a defeated Nadia Mdevani who emerged from what proved to be a prolonged interview with Lieutenant Berry. If, before it, she looked worn and troubled, her will had at least remained indomitable. If her voice had flagged, her eyes lost their challenge, yet she had always managed to convey an impression of impregnable right shall be might. Now she had yielded everything, to all appearances, and came carrying her weapon by the blade and laid across her forearm for the victor to accept the hilt. Her face was haggard; her unquenchable color quenched; her feet scarcely lifted; she twisted her clasped hands together as though they were manacled. When she spoke it was in a voice not her own, a voice in which despair had even surpassed weariness.

“Very well, Mr. Berry,” she said. “I understand perfectly. I shall make 211 no attempt to escape, I swear. I am not the kind. When I am beaten in fair play I am as willing to dance to the music as I am when I win and the tune is gayer. I only ask one favor before I go with you. May I have a few words with Mr. Belknap in private? That is, if he will condescend to have a few words with me. He may even put me to the indignity of a search for concealed firearms if he so desires.” There was a flicker of the old Nadia as she looked up at Belknap on the last words.

Belknap and Berry exchanged glances, and there was a faint nod of acquiescence on Berry’s part. It didn’t escape Nadia. She smiled dimly.

“Thank you, Mr. Berry. I will not transgress your orders, on my honor.” With a little characteristic shrug of a shoulder she motioned Belknap to follow her. She led him into the library, and, closing the door, leaned against it as though

she had reached the farthestmost limit of endurance. Her drooping figure, her shattered face, so pierced Belknap with their utter resignation that before he could trust himself to speech she had spoken.

“The Chamber of Horrors,” she murmured with a dim twitch at the corners of her sad mouth. “Do you object to seeing me here? It is here we truly 212 met for the first time. Do you remember last night, the things we said, and the things we left unsaid? Don’t let’s leave anything unsaid tonight. Oh, I’m sorry to be so pathetic and so obvious.” She half lifted her eyes to him and let them fall away, but he had a glimpse of the pride in them struggling to master an emotion he dared not name.

“Don’t apologize,” he said roughly. “What did he do to you? I’ll kill the bastard.”

“Oh, my dear, what didn’t he do! But never mind that. I don’t have to tell you about it, you can see for yourself what I have come to. I am ashamed. I had so fully intended to go down, if I had to go down, with flags up—denying, denying, denying—and here I am, not only confessed to murders, but confessed to murders I never committed. What irony, what bitter irony!”

“You confessed?” he cried softly, and taking her two arms in his two hands he drew her unresistingly forward into the room. He drew her to the light where he could see her face. “Nadia, tell me that is not true.”

“It is true. There comes a time in these affairs when it is easier to admit than to deny, or rather, when one becomes careless and callous of the 213 consequences of guilt. Will someone stop that damned youngster breaking his heart out there! I *can’t* tell him where his girl-friend is because I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know,” she screamed; but the scream, from sheer exhaustion, scarcely rose above a whisper.

“Hush, dear! Don’t let him worry you. He has lost his head too dreadfully. And you mustn’t confess, you *mustn’t*, do you hear? Even if you killed the lot, don’t admit it—*ever*.”

“What else can I do? You have me on so many counts. There’s no use standing up against circumstantial evidence forever—even if it’s planted

evidence, as this happens to be. I could never prove it. And the way I feel now the sooner things are over the better. I'm tired, tired out. I'm rapidly joining that Mrs. Crawford in her state of detachment and disenchantment. How beautifully she's behaving now, not a trace of agony or hysteria; not because she's thought it out, it isn't philosophy with her, but because she's died and remained alive. It leaves one with a jolly nonchalance. Well, short of one barb that persists in hurting me like Hell, I promise you I can go to 214 the chair without a flicker." His hands still held her and had unwittingly tightened on her arms. She looked down at them. "You're hurting me rather," she said gently.

"I'm sorry." He relaxed his hold but did not release her. "Tell me, what is the pain?" He knew, but he wanted to hear. They both trembled.

"I can't say it."

"Yes, you can. There should be nothing left, as you say, that you and I cannot say to each other. We have been through too much, we have seen too much, ever to let pride interfere between us again. And you can depend upon me to the end of creation. I'll never let them distress you—never, never, never."

"As if I hadn't been distressed!"

"I know. And I have been one of the worst. I'm sorry, so terribly sorry."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"You know." She lifted her eyes, steadily at last, to meet his, and he saw their depths below depths of suffering.

"Tell me," he insisted.

"I love you."

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"Say it again."

"I love you."

Suddenly they clung together. And all the time his mind whirled against itself. How in God's name, at his time of life, could any woman be doing this to him! Perhaps even now she was tricking him for a way out for herself. But he felt her shivering against him, felt her lips, and knew that was not true. For, together with her love for him, he felt an overwhelming despair in her that frightened him—as though she fully intended to go through with her mad confession. It was mad to have admitted anything! It was going to make his efforts to save her almost hopeless.

“We mustn't,” he said huskily, trying to hold her off and only holding her closer. “We have other things to think of. It's desperate. They're waiting for us. In the first place you must retract whatever you have said, and we'll try to clear you in the courts. Failing that, we'll make a get-away—Timbuctu or the Gold Coast, it makes no difference to me. I'm as tired of the game as you are.”

“No—no—no,” she protested. “I won't let you do that, ever. Oh, my dear, I didn't mean to tell you how much I cared. Truly I didn't. I only meant to say good-bye to you. I couldn't deny myself that. I don't understand how this other happened. I suppose because we both cared. I hadn't an idea you did. You have been considerate in some ways, yes, but not really kind. But now I see what it's been for you. You have been fighting it too, as I have. How cruel to know at the very moment of separation. For it is good-bye. It can't be anything else, for either of us. Please, no—don't, don't, don't kiss me. I can't bear it.” 216

“Be still. We are going to get you off, dear heart. You must be brave, that's all; and help me.”

“No. I am not going to let you *try* to get me off. We have you to think of now. Not me any longer. I am beyond being worried about. I never expected to escape the fruits of my sins as long as I have. That I happen to die innocent is a queer twist of fate, nothing more. I would have died really guilty of something within a month—a year. Who knows? And I've put up a good battle, as battles go in this world. I have just got around to surrender. 217 I'm through. So it's fare thee well, dear, forever and ever, instead of—of ‘they lived—.’” Her voice broke.

“*Stop* it!” He shook her fiercely. “Pull yourself together, Nadia. For God’s sake, don’t stand here talking sentimental nonsense. What we have to do is *plan*. The enemy is outside that door; can’t you realize that? We’ll have to have every ounce of our wits about us to fend them off. What did you admit? Tell me that.”

“Everything. Every murder. What was the point of haggling over an extra one or two. And, what’s more, I’m sticking to it, darling.” She drew a deep breath. “It’s the only solution. Believe me, it is. Nothing in the wide world, including death twenty times over, could make me let you undertake your wild scheme for us. My dear, you are a great man, a strong one, an esteemed one. I am a wretched little criminal—clever, yes, but wretched all the same. Do you think loving you, worshiping you as I do, I could dream of letting you face downright ruin for my sake? It isn’t to be thought of.”

Nadia stood back and lifted her face to his. Her eyes were wide open, lucid, adoring, and, to him, the mirrors of love and integrity. Then, as she gazed at him, the tears, the first he had ever seen her shed, and he had thought her incapable of tears, welled up and fell quietly across her cheeks. 218

“I love you, don’t you understand that? Don’t you understand what love means? I couldn’t let you hurt yourself for me. The very fact of my love for you makes it absolutely imperative I never retract a word I have said to them. For my confession puts me out of harm’s way and so puts temptation out of yours.” Her little smile came, tender now.

Belknap walked away from her and back, restlessly.

“Nadia,” he said slowly, “I have things to say to you I never intended saying. But I see I must be honest with you to bring you to your senses. You have got to be shocked into fighting if we are going to save ourselves for each other. Which is all that’s left that matters—our having each other— isn’t it?”

“It is,” she whispered breathlessly, a hand at her throat.

“Then you will understand and forgive, for that reason, and for another, almost as important, that you are no better than I am. We are birds of a feather and can properly appreciate each other,” he added with a grim 219

laugh.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we are equally criminals, Nadia. In this case I happen to be the worse one of the two. I’ve killed five people (that is, if Joel Lacey is dead yet) since four o’clock this morning. Rather a record, isn’t it? Do you know, there have been times when I was sure you guessed, *more* than guessed. And on top of it I have made you confess to the whole show, which was also plotted. *I* planted that circumstantial evidence upon you, dear. Couldn’t you see? I was intent on beating you at your own game. God, what a beautiful job I made of it! One of my best. And now to have it busted up by a slip of a woman. Not that it isn’t worth it,— Nadia, don’t *look* at me like that. You’re *not* looking at me. What *are* you—”

The dining-room door behind Belknap had stood ajar by the shadow of an inch. It was now thrown open and Stebbins and Berry advanced on Belknap.

“Hands up!” Stebbins thundered.

“It’s hands up, Belknap,” Berry said. “Thank you, Miss Mdevani. That was splendidly done. You acted—”

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Berry should have saved his congratulations. As Belknap raised his hands he drew his pistol from his shoulder holster, and, though he would never have had the extra second to swing on his captors, he did have the split fraction of a second to fire straight before him. The shot of his 38 calibre police revolver was deafening. Nadia, shot directly through the breast, put her two hands where the bullet had entered, and without a sound fell in an uneven heap at Belknap’s feet.

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XXIV

*He knocked the pistol out of his hand, small room was there to strive
‘’Twas only by favor of mine,’ quoth he, ‘ye rode so long alive.’*

The game was up. Almost on the instant that the shot was fired Berry struck down Belknap’s hand and twisted the gun from him. There was no flicker of resistance on Belknap’s part. Nor would there have been the chance of any if Stebbins had had his way. For the Sergeant was a prey to impulsive rages and quick on the trigger. If Berry, in tackling Belknap, had not had a strong arm for Stebbins, Belknap would have joined Nadia Mdevani in the dust.

“No!” Berry cried sharply. “Not that way. Shooting’s too good for him. And we want the dope.”

Stebbins, like copper wire, cooled off as rapidly as he had heated.

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“I’m sorry,” he growled. “It’s just that it’s rank cold-blooded murder to shoot a lady down like that.”

Berry had to laugh.

“Not his first one, Sergeant; you should be used to ’em. Come on, lend a hand.”

They bound Belknap, securely. No more playing with fire. And a swift body-search from head to foot revealed several damning articles of trade: Whittaker’s Diary in an inner pocket; several varieties of poison in neatly labeled pill-boxes; a pair of suède gloves; a very exquisite six-inch dagger

with an inlaid handle of silver and lapis; a kit for the designing and manufacture of keys; a veritable armory of revolvers, six; a cunningly contrived combination tool that in its various transformations became a screw-driver, a hammer, an auger and bit, a saw, and God knows what else.

“By the way,” Berry shouted suddenly, as he was arranging the articles in an orderly row on the divan table, “where’s Joel Lacey?”

“Oh yes, of course,” Belknap murmured quietly, coolly, and as if to reprimand Berry for his raised voice. “You *would* want to know. Well, 223 dead or alive, you’ll find her in that strong-box over yonder. Top left-hand drawer, so to speak! If you ever knew the combination it isn’t the same now. I changed it.”

“To what?” Berry cried desperately from where he already stood beside the great door of Whittaker’s wall-safe. “Quick!”

“9031.”

Berry fumbled stupidly with the locks. The terrible speed of events during the past few hours, together with the excited, thrilling knowledge of his own scoop (it had been his idea to put Nadia up to her piece of acting, which he had to admit had been beautifully done on her part) had reduced the still ingenuous Berry to a trembling, weakened condition of hand and eye. Stebbins, whose emotional flights limited themselves to rage and suspicion, took the job from him. Under his stolid fingers the blocks fell quickly, expertly into place. And, on the final number, the heavy door sprang. The two men slowly swung it back.

Joel was there. She lay in a tumbled, cramped heap among a litter of papers on the safe bottom. There was no least sign of life—and there was an 224 odor of chloroform. From her attitude it appeared unlikely she had ever regained consciousness since being thrown into the airtight compartment. They lifted her to the couch. Belknap kept his eyes averted.

Julian chose this particular moment to appear. He was shouting something about the doors of the wine cellars being locked and no keys to be found—He stopped, looked, and, in another flash, was on his knees beside Joel, his

arms around her, calling her name. It took Berry every ounce of extra strength to tear Julian free and fling him away on the floor.

“*Keep off*, you fool. Give the child air. She is dying for lack of air—just that.”

Berry, with Stebbins’ clumsy help, rendered such first aid as one gives the drowning. Julian hovered near them muttering a frantic rigmarole of endearments for Joel, and ugly curses for humanity in general, Berry in particular. Two policemen, large and unresponsive, kept a firm guard on Belknap who sat stone-motionless, apparently absorbed in his bound hands lying limply before him on the table. He remained breathlessly still, until at last—it seemed forever—Joel, almost invisibly at first, and then 225 visibly, drew a breath, stirred, and faintly stiffened with renewed life as a Japanese pulp flower opens to water. Then, in unison with her, Belknap too breathed, stirred, shifted his position. Berry saw, and as he quietly lifted Joel into Julian’s arms, felt a pang of sympathy for the great man he had so long admired and envied. How are the mighty fallen. But he had only to look at Joel’s face, and Julian’s, to lose every iota of it.

“Here, boy, carry her upstairs. Wrap her up good and warm; and give her some hot brandy, if you can find any. She’ll be as right as rain in no time, mark my words for it. And, what’s more, it’s going to be plain sailing for you two from now on. Remember that, and don’t worry.” He tapped the Diary with a meaning forefinger. “It’s a closed book; you know what I mean. Easy there, don’t fall.” He turned to question Belknap.

“Now come across, Belknap. *Talk*. Or shall we run you up to town for that? Room 27 at Headquarters is a fine place to talk. As you should know.”

Belknap, examining his folded hands with meticulous interest, spoke sidewise through a lifted corner of his mouth.

“Can the rough stuff, Berry. It won’t get you anywhere with me, as *you* 226 should know. What’s eating you? Curiosity? Yes, I killed ’em. Do I *have* to say it? Oh, don’t let it worry your poor weak intellect that you haven’t the right man. You have. How many did I murder? I lost count. You add ’em up. And don’t for God’s sake ask me why. Why the Hell! Look in that rotten little Diary there. It’ll tell you why and then some. *One* of us had

to wipe out the litter before it hatched; to make his world safe—for crime. I got in my licks first, that's all." Belknap would have made a waving gesture with his right hand but was checked by its anchorage to his left. "Let's clear out of this," he cried. "I expect you're champing at the bit to drag me at your chariot wheels through the streets of Rome. Well, do it and be damned. Only get it over." Belknap's eyes, a little sunken in their heavily shadowed sockets, gleamed feverishly. The lines in his face had deepened. He looked his age. "When, may I ask, did *you* catch the cat out of my bag? I hadn't a notion I'd let it out. Thought I had it pretty well sewed in. Like the Little Red Hen you must have left a stone in its place. Or *she* did, the vixen. I should have marked the extra weight. *Christ*, the mess I've made of the perfect crime; all in my best tradition. And I had it on toast but for playing with fire. The utter fool I was to take her into my game when I already had her so neatly fitted to my boots. Just as I fitted Violet Mowbray to Blake's, and Durgin to Allan Galt's, and Thane to— Take her away," he shouted suddenly, hoarsely, half rising to his feet. "In God's name why leave the carrion about! Get her false face to Hell out of here or I'll—"

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Berry came close to Belknap. His face was white. He gripped the sides of the table between them till the knuckles of his hands shone; and in a level, hard voice spoke into Belknap's eyes and teeth.

"Keep quiet, and listen to me for a change! You'll take a page from *my* book now. I'm not a proud man, or a boastful one, Ordway Belknap, one-time Judge, and *one-time* detective, but this here is a haul of mine, and you know it. For once in a lifetime *I* had a hunch. From the crack of the whip this morning I had you on the list. As a *guest* in this house last night. Don't you see what a difference that makes in the point of view? You came here too early for safety, my boy, and you're leaving here too late. It may be true I didn't downright suspect you until Mdevani and Lacey caught onto something at sight of your black number on the wall. But then it took a psychologist (and that's my strong point) to figure why they were keeping their mouths shut. One was scared of her life of you; and the other cared about you. Right? After that I found the extra bullet. And I knew right then, as well as you did, that neither would fit the Mdevani weapon. We'll prove tomorrow, when it won't matter a hoot, that they both fit this little gun of yours." Berry picked up Belknap's 22 and dropped it again with a clatter that

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echoed in the tense stillness of the listening room. Berry was decidedly working himself into a heat. “Then Lacey remembered the Mowbray name—and I saw why the poor little actress had to be bumped off. She was the only one of your morning’s bag I had to find your motive for. Blake had to go because he was so much a part of your most recent legal crime. Yours and the Judge’s.”

“Bit off there,” Belknap hissed, his face dark and threatening, close to Berry’s. “I can’t have you *imputing* motives. I collided with him in the dark last night. He knew what we both were after—and that *I* got it. So I got him.” 229

“Aha! That’s the way the wind blew, is it? And after that you strangled the baby doll—”

“Before, as it happens.”

“Well, *before*. A Hell of a lot of difference it makes when you did it. Too bad I had to come barging in just about then, before you’d finished off your Damon and Pythias friend. Guess Whittaker threw his dice so you’d play the villain’s part all along. He had it in for you, to my way of thinking. Clever idea your wall-hole and the planted gun. But a bit out of the reckoning that your first shot missed. However, I’d have got you anyway, one shot or two. The holes, by the way, reminded your girl-friend that she’d once interrupted your investigation in this room at an embarrassing moment. *She* lit the Murad, I understand. Miss Lacey was also reminded that you mysteriously emerged from no man’s land when she was here in the night. Whereupon it ceased to be no man’s land. And don’t think I missed the little by-play when you tried to convince Miss Mdevani she hadn’t done what she knew she did—put that carnation in your buttonhole. She was too keen to try that kind of trick on. I don’t know when you made up your mind to lay the whole pack of crimes at her door. But I suppose you rifled her room of her gun and handkerchief for the express purpose. Damn lucky for you she came across with the Blake order for you to sprinkle about. *And* the drug for Crawford, for you to exchange *en passant*. God, you’re a beast. Worse than they come. Why Crawford? Just because it clinched the case against her? His death to insure hers? And all the time making eyes at the woman you were playing for a sucker. Well, don’t ever kid yourself you succeeded in putting it 230

over on her. She was watching you cut your own throat. Only wasn't helping give you away until she had to. Until it was your life or hers. But with you determined to make it hers she still had enough guts left to outplay you. For she *has* outplayed you. Dead as she lies on that floor, God rest her soul, she's better off than you are. No, Dorn was your best bet for a double if you had to have one. You should have stuck to someone who couldn't defend himself."

"Defend himself!" Belknap laughed ferociously, breathing hard. "Dorn defend himself! It is to laugh! About as much chance of his coming back to—" 231

And Milton Dorn came back. Above the strained, ugly, mounting voices of the two men pitched against each other came the crash of the window-doors to the terrace, burst forcefully open. On the sill, exaggerated and unattached against the swirling mist, stood two of Stebbins' uniformed guards with a sagging body slung between them from the knees and armpits: like some strange inhabitants of Davy Jones' locker bringing back to earth a victim too horrible for even the sea to swallow.

"Sorry," growled one of them apologetically, dimly conscious of the startled horror in the silenced room, "we found this in the old well down back. Thought you might need it, Sergeant. So we brought it along up."

The man's recourse to the neuter in referring to his burden all too vividly indicated its lifelessness. Not that it could have possibly been otherwise. Its face was crushed out of human shape. The head fell back and off to the side, loosely, as though the neck were broken. The covering of one leg was savagely torn and the flesh from thigh to knee bared to the bone. The clothing was stiff and ungainly with congealed blood. 232

"Speak of the Devil!" Belknap whispered.

"Dorn, I take it," Berry said with super-gentleness. He forced an odd laugh. "Say, you boys, next time you make a visit with that kind of visiting card, come to the front door—and ring. I don't like stage entrances. Another of yours?" he asked, turning to look at Belknap, through narrowed eyes, as no man looks at a man.

Belknap smiled.

“How *did* you guess it, Lieutenant? Yes, number one. I had to scotch him on the spot last night when he was trying to slip from under. Couldn’t take any chances on how much he knew. Talk about your blind witnesses! None of ’em even saw me take my little trip to fetch something from my car last night. Went out on Dorn’s heels, too.”

“That’ll do from you,” Berry said. “Not another word. We’ve had enough. Take him to Glory for me, men. Sergeant,” he added to the stupefied Stebbins, “will you give them a ring in town and say we’re on our way—with the goods. *Broadcast* it. Tell them to be ready with the racks and 233 boiling oil. And clean up this mess as best you can when my back’s turned. Run the bodies down to the morgue in the morning. There’ll be autopsies, I suppose, though God knows they aren’t needed. Come along, you,” he said, as Belknap rose unsteadily to his feet.

But Belknap, with a quick, vicious movement of his bear-like shoulders, thrust his jailors aside, and bent over the motionless, shrunken form of Nadia Mdevani. Even, bending down and using his two hands as one, he turned her face uppermost. It was an exquisite and clear-cut face, very quiet, very perfect, like a medallion or cameo face. And as devoid of expression. Suddenly Belknap straightened, threw back his head, and laughed wildly, breaking into a snatch of song:

“*She was my woman,
But she done me wrong.*”

“Shut up, Belknap,” Berry shouted. “Don’t go playing the sentimental fool so late in the day. I guess *she* could have sung that song as it should be sung. And meant it.” Pushing Belknap roughly toward the hall door, Berry turned back to give his final orders. “By the way, Sergeant, I believe there are 234 a few left-overs straying about the house. I wouldn’t care to sleep here myself and it’s likely they wouldn’t. You’d better round ’em up and take ’em places. There’s that John, and the girl named Lily, I believe. And of course Mr. Prentice and Miss Lacey and Mrs. Crawford—”

“You are most thoughtful, Lieutenant Berry.” Sydney Crawford, in hat and

cloak, descended the stairs toward them. “But don’t have me on your mind. I’m just leaving—and I have my car.” She was about to pass them, and paused. “Thank you, Mr. Belknap,” she said, stiffly, her glazed eyes rigidly avoiding him, “for a thrilling week-end. And for my precious life which it is a joy to be able to dispose of as I please. Goodnight.”

Berry forever after wished he had obeyed his immediate impulse to detain her. It might have made the difference between another life and death. For, three days later, her body came ashore above Greenwich. It was the only death directly connected with that memorable week-end at Thorngate that was entered on the records as suicide.

But Berry, although it was with a strong feeling of apprehension and pity that he watched her go toward the garage, escorted by a kindly and gallant policeman, was more than anxious to reach town and deliver up his capture. He drew on his gauntlet driving gloves, accepted a light for his fag from the respectful hand of Sergeant Stebbins, slipped behind the wheel of his old Stutz, and circled out of the Thorngate drive cold on the stroke of midnight.

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The following entry from the Diary of Judge Bertrand Whittaker, was incorporated verbatim in Berry’s written report of the preceding case given next day to Berry’s friend and chief, Inspector Thomas O’Donnell, of the New York Detective Bureau:

April 29th ’31—Ran into O. B. at the club just now. Saw him before he saw me. And the very look of him gave me the inspiration I’ve been praying for. What with revising my will yesterday, and buying that little gun this morning, I haven’t been in too good a humor. Not that I mind dying— Oh, I’ve said it too often. Too many denials make an affirmative! No, but death is the least part of it. It’s the wait, and the pain. God, the pain! It took me three shots of morphine to pull me through a spell last night. And, as I’ve also said before, the way around the wait and the pain is suicide. But a tame route. And unsavory. Certainly without thrill. I want thrill. I love it in my fashion as much as B. ever did. I simply haven’t his genius for devising it. How he has devised excitement for the two of us! When he deserted the Bench for the sole purpose of entering

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into a destroying pact with me, he the detective and I the judge, I couldn't have foreseen in my wildest moments how positively dangerous and evil he was going to make our lives and our relations to each other. We've gone so far with our false witnessing and our false condemning that we are becoming terrified of each other and of our too great knowledge of sin. It's the only way I can explain the ugly reserves and distrusts that have lately been thrusting between us. I've been sorry. It's spoiled the play. But I hardly wonder. Our two last cases, particularly the Stanton-Mowbray-Blake, skimmed too close to destruction to be altogether pleasant. 237 Perhaps it was the thought of the guillotines we hold over each other's necks, together with a glimpse of his too handsome wicked face (proximity to him has always had the power to rouse in me such black magic as I possess), that drove the dart of my new scheme between my cerebrum and cerebellum.

I have kept a fairly accurate record of our twenty-odd cases since B. and I went into partnership. Eleven of them led to executions—that is, in each, a man or woman paid with death for a crime they never committed. Yet, of those eleven, eight *confessed*. The most diabolical thing about B.'s power is that he can subtly instil his victims with the exhausted and driven conclusion that to admit is the most painless way out. In some instances I even think his hypnotic force is so great that the person actually *believes* himself guilty. Anyway a judge can certainly do no less than impose the death penalty on a confessed murderer, can he now?

The publication, or threatened publication, of these Arabian Nights' entertainments—together with odds and ends of undiscovered murders committed by various friends and relatives—should not only make 238 good sensational reading, but should bring about an upheaval that might quite conceivably be climaxed by my own murder. *That's* my fresh idea of an escape expressed in so many words! And however you look at it, it's such a gay, pleasant, bad game—and so worthy of my associations with B.

And the Devil said to Mr. Legree,
“I like your style, so wicked and free
Come sit and share my throne with me—”

Yes, I'm all for trying it. And I even dropped B. a hint of something in the wind as I passed him by. I think he took alarm. I'll give him a ring, in a few days, when my plans have matured. It'll take a bit of planning. There's the rounding up of half a dozen spicy criminals. Nadia Mdevani is number one.

My mind's whirling with ideas! I can begin to see so many little twists I can give the affair—ironic, comic, naughty. An especially nice one for B. himself. It's going to be jolly interesting. And a good death knell to set the wild echoes flying!

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