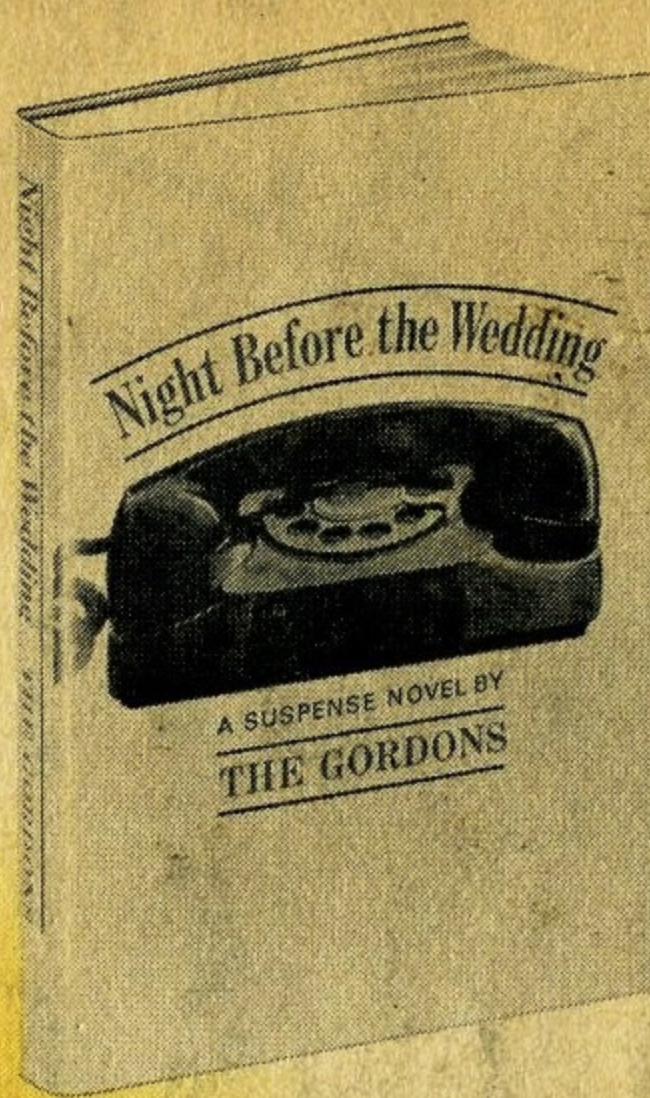


Night Before the Wedding

BY THE GORDONS



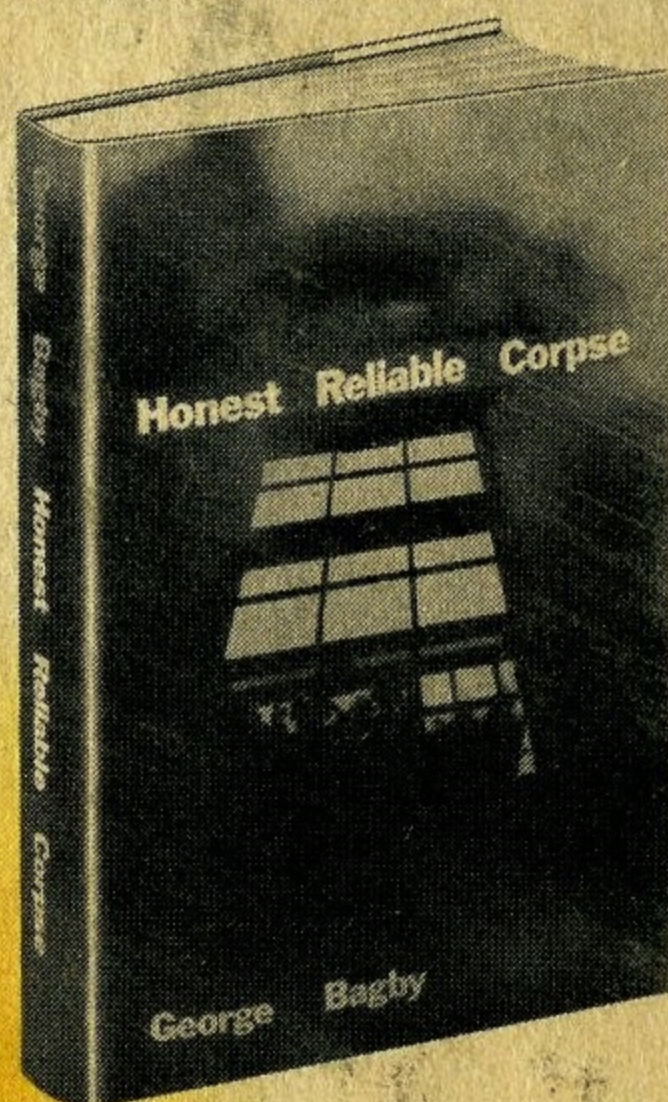
Maigret in Vichy

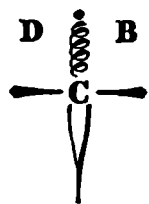
BY GEORGES SIMENON



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BY GEORGE BAGBY





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NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING

BY

THE GORDONS

It was very late . . . past midnight. The night watchman unlocked the building and watched as Gail Rodgers crossed the parking lot to her car. When she got in, he turned back into the building. Suddenly, Gail sensed a movement behind her. She started to turn . . . but someone pulled a paper sack down over her head. "Take it easy," a hollow voice whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you." But his hands tightened around her throat!

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Maigret taking the cure! The very thought is absurd! The head of the Paris C.I.D. couldn't possibly be in Vichy. But Maigret is in Vichy . . . and for one man, Maigret's presence will prove to be very serious, indeed! For that man just murdered his mistress—and Maigret is the best detective in all of France!

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A wealthy old dowager like Mrs. Willoughby Carpenter . . . thousands in jewelry and silver and antiques all around her apartment . . . many a crook would be delighted to kill for a chance at the Carpenter jackpot! But Mrs. Carpenter is murdered and not a spoon is out of place . . . only Mrs. Carpenter's companion is missing!

Doubleday & Company, Inc., Edition

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NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING

BY

THE GORDONS

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✠ ONE ✠

What could have kept Mitch? Usually he called when he was detained. He didn't like her to be alone at night in this turn-of-the-century building with all its groans and creaks, and some said, skeletons rattling about. Not that she was alone. Old Charlie, the night watchman, was somewhere around.

Exhausted, she rose from the typewriter and pulled out the last sheet of the deposition. She would assemble it in the morning. By now it was midnight, and Mitch had been gone an hour and a half. It was Lefty Morgan again, picked up for burglary. About ten thirty he had called from the jail. Could Mitch come right over? He was one of Mitch's best clients, a creep, a repulsive little weasel who spat in your face when he talked. She wished to high heaven Mitch would go into civil practice. He was too brilliant to spend his life with these crumb bums. Last night, when she had been curled up on the front seat of the car, her head in Mitch's lap, she had brought up the matter. For about the hundredth time, she thought. He had only laughed, and kissed and held her so hard that she still felt the happy ache.

She glanced at the desk. Really, she should straighten it up, but she resisted the temptation. It was such a delightful clutter, and she might as well admit it, she felt comfortable in clutter. She fumbled under the desk for her shoes, and muttered when she couldn't find one.

The phone startled her. A gravelly voice asked, "Miss Rogers?"

"Yes."

"Mitch in?"

“No, but I’m expecting—”

The phone banged in her ear. This was par for the course. Mitch’s clients, mostly, didn’t care to leave names, phone numbers or addresses.

She scribbled Mitch a note, asking him to call her when he returned. She stuck the note inside the frame of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who looked down on her desk with all the severity normally associated with the judicial process. “Good night, Holmese-y,” she said. From a vase, she took a lone rose. Mitch brought her one every morning, swiped from his apartment grounds.

At the door she listened intently. Good, she had remembered to switch off the electric typewriter.

The narrow, shadowy corridor gave her a boxed-in feeling. A weak bulb at the far end, by the elevator, provided the only light. Her heels beat out a hasty staccato on the old, worn linoleum floor. She passed a jewelry wholesale office (walk up one floor, save a fortune) then another wholesale office, one that sold pianos and demonstrated them all day to customers until sometimes she thought she would climb the wall.

The elevator was a long time in coming. Descending, it trembled like an old man. Charlie stood by the back door, that led to the parking lot. “How’re the grandchildren?” she asked.

He unlocked the door. “I’m telling you, they’re too well—and I got a sore shoulder to prove it.”

She laughed. “Good night, Charlie.”

“Take it easy, Miss Rogers. Drive carefully.”

She advanced head-on into the wind, toward her car, which stood alone at the far end of the lot. She wished she had a scarf. Her hair-do would be ruined. She tried not to breathe. Whirling eddies of dust and paper particles swirled about her. Overhead a helicopter, the one on the mail run, roared by, blotting out all other sound.

At the car, she turned to wave to Charlie. He always watched her at night when she crossed the parking lot. He signaled back, then disappeared into the building.

She slid behind the steering wheel, strapped the seat belt, and scooped about, getting comfortable. She fumbled around, key in hand, absently groping for the ignition slot, her mind on Mitch, wishing he had returned. Even when he was gone only an hour, she missed him.

Then her thoughts were shotgunned into fragments. A split second before it happened, she sensed the man's presence behind her. It could have been his soft, consciously subdued breathing but more likely it was the faint sound of his body in movement as he rose from the car floor. She turned about, not too quickly since she wasn't alarmed, thinking she was imagining things and it was the wind setting something astir.

She never got fully turned. With a lightning movement, he pulled a paper sack down over her head, and held it firmly about her neck. His hand tightened about her esophagus, throttling the scream that rose. She struggled, but the seat belt held her body tightly. Her flailing arms, too, were somehow pinned down.

She thought she was dying, that she was being choked to death. She realized she was in panic, something she had always said she would never tolerate. In a flash, she saw all of the horrible crimes committed recently in parking lots. The woman held at gun point, forced to drive into the hills, and there attacked. The woman killed when she resisted two men attempting to kidnap her.

"Take it easy," he whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you." His voice was low and had a hollow ring; and he spoke in a deadly monotone. His words sounded like a ritual being intoned.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he repeated. But the assurance was no assurance, a catch phrase devoid of feeling. "I'm not going to hurt you."

But he was. He was trying to kill her. She was sucking air in gulps. Her lungs burned and were about to burst. That was it, that was what he planned. He would shut off her breath until she was unconscious, then he would attack her. I've got to keep awake. I've got to. Oh, God, if I could only see, if there wasn't this stifling blackness.

"I'll crack you one if you don't cut that out."

Something inside her cried out to wait, to quit struggling.

"I've got a business proposition for you. A big deal."

She had to thrash about. She couldn't help herself. She had to keep breathing.

"I'll snap your neck if you don't cut it out." Then a second later, "That's better."

She was getting more air. Maybe if she played along, maybe then she could take him by surprise and break his hold.

She whispered, "I can't breathe."

He eased his grip. "Just take it easy and I'll let you go. Now, that's better."

Mitch, Mitch. If Mitch would only come along. . . .

He continued, "A man's paying me \$200,000 and I need somebody to pick it up for me. That's all there is to it. You pick up the money and I'll make it worth your while. About \$5,000 worth. How's that sound?"

"You've got to let me out of this," she said angrily.

He tightened his hold. She thought her eyes would pop out, felt the hotness in her cheeks, the hurt of her throat.

"Don't tell me I've got to do anything, you hear?" His anger broke through the flat monotony of his speech, but he quickly lapsed back into the cold sameness. "I could choke you to death. Take only a minute or two—and you wouldn't be here anymore. Your mom wouldn't either. One phone call from me—and with her bad ticker. . . . So you play it my way or there'll be a couple of new graves dug tomorrow."

One phone call. . . .

"I'll do it," she whispered. "I'll do it."

Oh, God, please, I'll do anything if he won't call mama.

She had been shocked into thinking again, and that was good. She never should have panicked. It was the sack. If he had stuck a gun in her back, that would have been different.

Maybe she had acceded too quickly. "You said \$5,000?"

"You take it out yourself from the \$200,000." His hand fondled her throat. "You've got nice, soft skin."

A new fright swept her. "Where do I get the money?"

"Nice, soft skin," he repeated, then added, "You drive home now like a good girl and when it's time to pick up the money I'll let you know. Okay?"

She nodded.

"One more thing." His voice tightened. "If you run to the cops, you stop by some church and arrange the funerals. I've got connections and I'll know." She heard the back car door open but he still held his hand to her throat. "I'm leaving you but you count to twenty before you take the sack off. I've got a gun on you—and it sees in the dark."

He dropped his voice low. "I hope you're still alive tomorrow. Miss Rogers. Nobody so pretty should be dead."

✠ TWO ✠

Hawk's long legs bore him swiftly across the parking lot of the Los Angeles police department toward a building of glass walls sitting one upon the other. At the rear entrance, Barney was waiting for him, Barney Carlson. "You must've been shot out of a cannon, to get here so fast."

"I feel like it," Hawk answered. He was big, broad-shouldered, and in his early thirties. He bore a scar over his left eye, a scrimmage-damaged right ear, a nose that was too pointed, and eyes so deep blue they looked dyed.

In the corridor, they passed the usual night flotsam: a couple of call girls, an arson suspect, two hippies, all in the tow of police officers.

Barney said, "She's no psycho. Seems honest. Works for a young criminal attorney, Frank Mitchell. Lives alone in an apartment. Mother's a heart case in a rest home. Might go any time. No other relatives. I ran the indices. No criminal, no credit."

Barney was thorough. Hawk liked that about him. He was too young and too short for the Heavy Squad, actually, but he was willing. If Hawk were to order him out alone to bring in the nation's worst killer, he would leave without a word. But as for debts and women, that was another matter. A collection agency had called Hawk only yesterday.

"What about the lawyer?" Hawk asked.

"Clean, too. Graduate of the the University of Southern California with honors. He's been practicing criminal law five years, and having a rough time making ends meet. Lives with an aunt on the northside. Has a reputation among attorneys for being a little on the sharp side."

They pushed through a door marked: THE HEAVY SQUAD. They hurried across a large, white-walled room, bare except for a dozen desks. At three, officers were working.

Barney continued, "She went straight home, then left the apart-

ment the back way. Seems there's a park behind the building. She took a garbage can out for an excuse, then crossed the park and got a taxi. I had her diagram the layout."

They passed through a secretary's cubicle, then entered Hawk's office, a small room as austere as the larger one outside, except for an aerial picture of desert country that hung behind Hawk's desk. The desk itself was modern and the top bare except for a water carafe and glass.

An officer half-leaning, half-sitting on a window sill looked up. He was the General, a lonely, odd character Hawk tolerated but failed to understand. Hawk had little patience with problem people. He knew he should have, and felt guilt when around them.

In a hard, straight-backed chair facing the desk, Gail Rogers sat. Turning at his sound, she glanced up apprehensively, as if sensing some new danger. He hesitated; he hadn't expected anyone quite so attractive. In his work, the women were a scraggly lot. She wasn't pretty, exactly; her features were too accented. She was tall and rangy yet feminine, and everything about her had character, her figure, her clothes, her face, especially the eyes. Great Scott, they were green! Wide-set and green. Lovely.

Barney said, "Miss Rogers, this is Lt. Hawkins."

Hawk nodded matter-of-factly and by habit took up position behind the desk. He didn't sit; he seldom did. He was too restless, too impatient.

"Thanks for letting us know right away. Miss Rogers," he said quietly. "Most people don't."

She didn't say anything; in fact, hadn't since he came into the room. Yet she had a warmth he could feel.

She was thinking that there was no point in telling him that she had first tried to call Mitch and that no one had answered. She was reliving those first awful moments of indecision, then the pell mell dash through the park where she had torn her hose and scraped her ankle. Now it was matted with blood and she tried to keep her legs as far back under the chair as possible.

Hawk added, "But you should have phoned. You may have been tailed here." It sounded like a reprimand but he hadn't meant it that way. He was considering the possibilities, the hazards.

She said quickly, "No, he couldn't've followed me through the park without my knowing it. I thought about phoning but I was

afraid he might have a tap on the line, and the neighbors next door, they hear everything I say, the walls are so thin."

She was studying him. Mitch had taught her that, to size people up. She liked his honest, straightforward manner, all business. If he were a physician, and she had a terminal disease, he would tell her she was going to die. He was that kind of person.

He asked about coffee, and she nodded. He gave Barney a dollar bill, and Barney left. Her roving eyes photographed the room—the desert scene on the wall with an X mark in red ink in the left foreground; his desk, surprisingly bare except for a lone dime on one corner and a water carafe on the other.

Hawk slouched comfortably on the edge of the desk. "You've been tapped for what's known as a go-between, Miss Rogers. It could be a kidnaping, blackmail, extortion, or a racket set-up. He's going to use you for a trial run. If no police show up for the pay-off, he'll figure he's safe.

He pulled down his tie, loosened his collar. "I know you're scared stiff. Anybody would be. I would be—anybody."

She took hold of her nerves, said steadily, "I thought I'd die when he put that sack over my head. I'm not easily scared, but. . . ."

The General put in, "We turned it over to the Lab. An ordinary grocery sack. No printing on it."

Hawk started to light her cigarette. "No, thanks." She managed a smile. "I'm perfectly capable."

He was amused. He never knew what to do about women's cigarettes. Some liked you to play the gentleman, others considered you antediluvian.

He continued, "Once you get the package, he'll probably have you open it, to see if the victim paid up in honest-to-goodness money or used paper strips. So up to that point the extortionist, blackmailer or whatever he is won't have to expose himself."

He noted her hands had tightened about each other. He talked in an even, businesslike way, hoping normality might ease the torment riding her. "You're the only link we've got to this operation, Miss Rogers. Nobody's reported it. Sometimes they don't. They think their wife or the kids may be murdered, or they themselves. Sometimes they're running rackets and would rather pay off than have the police poke their noses in."

He hesitated. "That about sums up the theoretical side. As for the practical, I know it's asking a lot but—"

She broke in. "Do I have a choice? He knows about my mother. It's touch and go with her. Any little shock could do it. We've always been very close."

She raised her voice in anger. "Besides I've been around so many criminals in my work, and you get to hating the scum, and even if my mother was all right I'd go through with it." She stopped abruptly, then added, "He said he had connections. He'd know if I went to the police."

Hawk shrugged. "Scare stuff. The same old routine. We get it every week. Any family besides your mother?"

She hesitated. Barney swooped in then with the coffee. "We hit it lucky at Gertie's. Fresh coffee. Just brewed. First in days."

"A week," Hawk said.

"No, no one else," she answered.

"Sugar, cream?" Hawk asked. She shook her head. He continued, "Your father?" She looked away. "He deserted us when I was a baby—and to hell with him, wherever he is."

Hawk glanced up sharply. She hurried on. "My mother worked as a market checker all her life, until she had this heart attack, to take care of me, to see that I had piano lessons and braces for my teeth and the works. No, she wasn't the martyr or the hero. She didn't even know she was making sacrifices. If my father were to walk through that door now I'd tell him to get out. I don't think much of fathers who come back 20 years later and expect to be loved. Do you?"

The question caught Hawk off base. Barney was staring in amusement. The General apparently had not heard. He was usually far away. Hawk cleared his throat. "I'm with you on that." He continued, "About this man's voice—"

She broke in. "Now that I think about it, it didn't sound natural. It was like he was trying to change it. You know, the way some people do when they answer the phone and don't want the other party to know they're home."

"Did it sound like he was using some kind of gadget to disguise his voice?"

"No, nothing like that. More like he'd changed his natural pitch—and his intonation. It was a dead voice. I can't describe it."

"You're doing all right," Hawk said. "Try to hook it up with someone you know, keeping in mind what you've told me about the pitch and all. This has to be someone who knows you, or if not, has checked you out. He didn't just pick a name out of the telephone directory. He's chosen you with a lot of thought because he has to have someone he thinks he can control and most important, trust. Don't forget, you could run away with the \$200,000. He knows you won't. And he thinks he can keep you tied to him by fear alone."

Barney broke in. "Hawk, what about the lawyer's clients?" He turned to Gail. "Maybe somebody liked your looks, heard you talking about your mother, and got ideas."

"Was anybody especially friendly?" Hawk asked. "You know, stop by for little chats, maybe did things for you?"

"Not those crumb burns," she said, "but I can get you a list of Mitch's clients. It could be one of them." She added, "One? It could be any of them."

Hawk continued, "I want you to draw up a list of every man you've known in the last two or three years. Every single one of them. And keep trying to place that voice. When we finish here, I want you to go into the next room and write down exactly what he said and what you said, nearly as you can remember it."

He asked then, "What do you do nights? Week-ends?"

"Not too much really. Nights I usually go to see mother after dinner, then two or three times a week I go back to the office. Mitch doesn't have anyone besides me. Thursday nights we try to go bowling and Saturdays to a movie or a game. Sunday mornings I go to church, and in the afternoon, when it's warm, Mitch and I go swimming, or if we can't we take a short drive. That's about it." She added, "Oh, my girl friend and I go to concerts occasionally, although the tickets are getting so high we can't afford it very often."

Hawk made a note. "Jot down, too, any restaurants where they know you—people at the beach—the bowling alley. Get the names down of everyone who knows you—even slightly."

He added, "One more thing. Don't tell anybody about this, your mother, your boy friend, anyone. Is that clear?"

Her body tightened. "I'll have to tell Mitch."

His eyes bore into hers. They're chameleon, he thought. Sympathetic one moment, hard the next. Now they were hard.

"You'll do no such thing. What are you trying to do, kill your

mother? If this gets out—and the chances of it getting out are in direct ratio to the number of people who know about it—the fellow who was choking you tonight will phone your mother.”

“You’re threatening me, the same as he did.”

He lowered his voice. “I’m not threatening you.”

“We don’t have any secrets from each other. We’re in love, engaged, and love is faith and—”

“I know the routine. Sure, you trust him but what if he forgets and tells someone? What if he’s cornered by this man and since he knows, he gives away the fact he knows. I’m protecting him as well as you and your mother.”

He grew confidential. Barney half smiled. Hawk was a great con man. He could talk a banker out of the bank. “I’ll be the heavy when this is over, Miss Rogers. I’ll tell him I forced you to keep quiet. Okay?”

Emphatically, she shook her head. “I don’t mean to be stubborn. But I—”

“We know what we’re doing. We’ve had experience in these cases. You’ve never come up against anything like this. You’ve got to trust a pro.”

“I’m trusting you with my life and my mother’s. That’s why I came to you. But my love for Mitch is outside of this matter entirely. Completely. Definitely.”

“Give me a day. That’s all I ask. One day.”

“I’ll think about it.” She smiled. “Why does everyone always say they’ll think about it when they’ve already made up their minds?”

Hawk turned about, ran his hands through his hair, saw the picture was askew and straightened it. She asked, “What’ll I do when he tells me to pick up the money?”

“Call us from a pay phone at this number.” He scribbled the number down. “It’s a direct line.”

“What if I can’t pick up the money when he says? I’ve got a wedding rehearsal tonight at 8:30.”

Hawk half shouted. “You’ve got a what?”

“A wedding rehearsal.”

“Well, you tell the happy couple you can’t make the scene. You—”

“I’m being married, Lieutenant. It’s *my own* rehearsal and I intend to be there.”

Barney grinned. For once, Hawk was speechless.

She paused to think. "I can't just call up everyone and say there won't be a rehearsal without giving an excuse, can I? They'll think we've split up."

She answered her own question. "I'll have to cancel. I can't do anything else—and it's going to be one awful scandal, but I know I've got to do whatever he tells me."

She was near hysteria, and his quick anger faded. She was in such a damn spot. "About your apartment, those thin walls. Keep your radio on soft. That'll blur anything you say over the phone, if you can't get out and have to call us from there. Now you'd better go back home the same way you came. Barney will take you." To Barney he said, "Better use the paneled pick-up."

He turned back to her. "The time may come when you'll want to run, when he tightens the screws until the threads scream. When that time comes, remember you're doing something for people, not just for yourself and your mother, but the same as if you were helping fight cancer. Remember that, will you? You're helping people."

She rose. "Thank you, Lieutenant—for everything."

She was leaving when he said, "We'll be within shouting distance, no matter where you are. We'll have an army hidden around you."

"So I've got nothing to worry about?"

He took a deep breath. "I wish to God I could say that."

She half whispered, "Thank you for being honest. I can't stand people who aren't."

When she was gone, he turned to Barney. "They go through hell. I don't know what you can say."

He added, "Get some men out there to follow her through the park. Stake out the apartment building and check everyone in it. The usual."

"You know what bugs me, Hawk?"

"What?"

"What if the fellow who's supposed to show up with the \$200,000 comes with a gun instead, to settle matters? He won't be expecting a go-between."

Hawk stared out of the window at the city lights, a million of them, spread out below. He said slowly, "There was this night in Ahn Khe. I sent 20 men to open up a stinking miserable trail through

a stinking, miserable jungle held by the Commies. We figured about half would get back."

He paused, remembering. "And nine did. The others, they were heroes. Dead heroes."

He shook his head. "There was no other way."

✠ THREE ✠

The General threw the paneled pick-up into reverse and gunned it with a twist of the wheel up over the curb and into a row of pink oleanders bordering the park. If anyone were watching, he would think the driver drunk. A half moon and myriad bright stars cast a soft glow over the street, a modest residential one long since bedded down for the night.

When the General stopped, Barney, who had been in the back with Miss Rogers, dropped to the ground and helped her down. By prearrangement, they said nothing. He waited until she disappeared down a narrow, gravelly path.

She wanted to run but controlled herself. That nice young officer—who had insisted she call him Barney—had cautioned her: Walk slowly, move quietly. That was impossible. Here in the wooded silence, every step she took was an explosion in her ears. From far off a mocking bird sang gaily. In the distance, tires screeched. To her right she heard the terrifying crack of a twig. That must be Barney. But he had said he would trail her. She stopped very still, heard a brush of movement dead to the right, perhaps ten feet away. The movement, too, halted. Barney had said to call out if she needed help. But to call out unless she were menaced might jeopardize her life. Her assailant, if he were around and heard, would know she had betrayed him.

Take one step after another. This is something I've got to do. The apartment can't be more than another hundred yards. One step at a time. . . .

The apartment. I've got to hurry, to get inside. Maybe the convalescent home has been trying to reach me. Maybe mamma needs me.

Mitch. I must talk with him.

The wedding rehearsal. I can't cancel it. Mama would know something had happened. She has always been hypersensitive to situations.

That movement to her right. It matched her steps, stopped a second after she did. It had to be Barney.

The plane. She recalled hearing it overhead when she had dropped from the truck. Now it was coming back, flying very low. It was a small craft. It had made a pass across the park and possibly the apartment building.

She wasn't far now. She heard the hoot owl that punched the time clock promptly at 11 every night in the pine outside her window. The other tenants complained they couldn't sleep, but she found it warmly comforting to awaken and hear him hooting away.

She hurried, unable any longer to restrain her steps. She saw the tall, rotund garbage cans clearly outlined in the moonlight. She saw a nearby shadow-shrouded tree trunk seem to move, a thick trunk that took shape as a hulking bear of a man—a man planted squarely in her path. With a sudden start, she braked her body. The same fear of that moment when the sack dropped over her head swept her. But she was mentally prepared now; she was anticipating terror. Still, her awareness didn't completely stifle the animal instinct to cry out, that she quickly brought under control. She stood her ground, waiting, hearing the owl hooting, then the plane coming back for another pass, flying very low, its muffled roar sweeping in and out of the night.

The man walked toward her. "That you, Gail?" he called. She sagged against a tree, and fought back the crazy, ridiculous tears. She didn't answer, didn't trust her voice.

"Whatcha doing out here this time of night?" He was Earl MacDonald, her next door neighbor, the one on the west side, a husky, happy-go-lucky fellow who along with his wife, Margie, drank too much, slept too little. He owned a small flower shop which Margie supported by clerking in a woman's wear establishment.

She forced herself to walk past him, and he fell in beside her. She said, "I couldn't sleep."

He was concerned. He took a paternal interest in her. He was always telling her what she should and shouldn't do, which coming from him was amusing but at the same time, endearing. "You

shouldn't be out here roaming around all by yourself. It's too dangerous. Didn't you read about that woman who got strangled sleeping in her patio? Say, Margie tried to get you tonight."

"I had to get out a deposition."

He stopped at the back door to his apartment. "Say, we been meaning to ask, we don't have to dress up Saturday, it isn't anything fancy, is it?"

"Just put on your shoes."

He laughed. She heard her phone ringing. "Night, Earl," she called, hurrying. She fumbled with the key, but couldn't get it in the lock. She was conscious Earl was watching. The phone grew more insistent. Her rangy black cat, Herman, jumped on the door, wanting to help.

She rushed through the apartment, and into the bedroom. She grabbed up the phone from the night stand. "Hello," she said, panting. "Hello, hello," she repeated frantically, then heard the click of the other party hanging up.

She continued crying insanelly, "Hello, hello."

✠ FOUR ✠

Barney walked around to the front of the apartment building with the weary posture of a man returning home from the night shift. He wore an old frayed sport shirt and wrinkled, soiled trousers. These he kept in a locker at headquarters for an occasion such as this. Only his tennis shoes seemed out of place.

He appeared to be talking to himself. "It's a big layout. Maybe 100 apartments. Two stories high and built in a 'U' shape around a swimming pool. The apartments all open on the pool. That's about it for now."

After considerable groping in the black recesses of shrubbery-bordered walks, he eventually located a door which bore the sign: OFFICE. He knocked, waited a few minutes, then knocked again, this time harder. He glanced at his watch. The time was 2:25. Shortly, the door opened the length of the guard chain to reveal an

old battle ax in a faded blue robe and a nasty mood. She clutched the robe tenaciously as if she feared someone might tear it from her. She stared belligerently.

"I'm a police officer," Barney began, and got no further. Anticipating her next move, he stuck his foot in the door, and poked his badge through the crack. "May I step inside a moment?" he asked, speaking low. He hoped to avoid waking anyone, although judging from her attitude, his chances were negligible.

"Couldn't it wait till morning?" she snorted.

"No, it couldn't." She released the guard chain with obvious reluctance. Inside, he wondered if he should clear out. She looked untrustworthy. "I must ask you to hold this in confidence."

"I'm no blabbermouth, if that's what you're driving at."

"No, ma'am, I could tell that the moment you opened up."

"Don't blarney me. Whatd'ya want?"

"We need a room where we can work. Some place where we won't be disturbed and no one will know we're around. I thought you might have a storage room."

"Whatd'ya want it for?"

"Sort of headquarters. We've got a case breaking in the neighborhood."

"Not in my place, you haven't," she yelled. "I won't have you snooping around, getting my tenants all riled up. I run a highly respectable—"

"I know you do, lady. Would I come here right out in the open and ask, if I wanted to snoop, as you call it?"

She snorted again, but dropped some of her belligerence. "Okay, okay. Go 'round to the back—. Here, I'll get the key and walk you back."

A bugging crew of two took over the storage room. They worked silently in the dark, feeling their way about. Earlier, while Gail was at headquarters, one had forced her bedroom window and planted a tiny radio sending device in the phone's mouthpiece. He could have entered by the kitchen door but Hawk had insisted on the window. If the criminal were running a surveillance, he would think the bug man a burglar. Previously, Hawk had asked her consent. He had informed her that the bug would be sufficiently powerful to pick up all sounds in the bedroom.

Now Barney drifted about. He checked the two men secreted in bushes near the kitchen door. He dropped in on the General sitting in the dark at a window on the second story of an old Spanish house directly across the street. From the window, the General watched her front door through binoculars, and also her car parked on the street near an intersection. Later, Barney talked with the fingerprint man who had slipped into the rear seat of the car, and learned the prints he had lifted were too smudged to prove identifiable.

Barney ended his check in a surveillance car parked in heavy shade under a native walnut. The two men on duty had an angle view of the apartment building. They slouched low, and whenever an occasional pedestrian happened along they disappeared from sight.

While sitting with them, Barney heard the plane cross over again. It was a Heavy Squad craft that carried in its belly a low-light-level television camera for night photography. The Air Force had developed it for use in spotting the Viet Cong. The camera's sensor device amplified moon and starlight to such an extent that a television screen in the cockpit revealed the ground below with a clarity often approaching that of daylight. With luck, they might catch the unknown criminal manning his own outpost.

He wondered how it would all end. He wished he could have consoled her when he helped her out of the truck. Like Hawk, he had been businesslike. There was no other approach. Hawk had said, "Never become involved emotionally. You're a surgeon cutting out a cancer. When you've got a life at stake, you need to think objectively." Hawk was right. He always was. Barney swore by him.

Yet Barney wished he could have said something that would have tempered the fear he had felt in her hand when he assisted her down. She wasn't much older than he, perhaps a couple of years. He liked everything about her, the way she stood up to Hawk, her refusal to compromise her love. What was it she had said? That love was faith. He liked that.

Hawk would have said, "Look, Barney, she's a woman in a case. One more victim. To save if we can. I hope to God we can. But if we can't we'll close the file and move on to the next. That's our business."



FIVE



She opened a can of chopped kidney for Herman. Vaguely, she heard him complain that he hadn't been fed since the previous morning. She cleaned the sink which didn't need it, and locked the kitchen door without knowing she had. The paralysis of fear held her mind riveted on the night's events. Over and over, she ran the scene in the car. Again and again, she heard his voice. Somewhere she had heard it before.

Without turning on the lights, she picked her way through the adjoining dining area and the living room beyond. Wedding and shower gifts were arranged in happy confusion on every table top and overflowed on the floor.

Was it possible that only the night before she and Mitch had spent hours planning where various things would go, the changes they would make in the apartment to absorb Mitch's few belongings? They had decided to live here as long as Gail's mother remained in the convalescent home.

She undressed in the dark, which she never had done before, and slipped into a baby doll gown. Moonlight shone through the old walnut trees outside, and the wind, which had slowed to a soft run, set a filigree work of shadows playing against the far wall. Her glance hopped here and there over the room in which her mother's presence was illumined everywhere. It was there in the photograph on the chintz-covered dressing table, eyes bright, the face strong and determined. It was in the tickets curiously framed nearby, tickets that were Gail's first to a circus, the time she had laughed until she fell through the seats and had been lifted back to safety without ever taking her eyes from the show. That was the year they had been so poor they had had hot dogs for Thanksgiving. To a child it had been an adventure.

Something hard struck the ground outside, and she tightened up. For a moment she scarcely breathed. Her reasoning told her that the sound probably could be explained as a normal one, that it didn't

necessarily portend danger. Now she realized that sounds would play an important and frightening part in her daily routine. Sounds that she would ordinarily discard without a thought would now alarm her, and she would be unable to rest until she had pegged their identity. Irrelevantly, she wondered how many sounds the ear received per minute and discarded as neither interesting nor affecting the person.

Eventually she placed that one outside. She remembered that her favorite squirrel had taken inventory this past week-end of the walnut tree. As fast as they dropped, he would harvest them.

With a struggle, she concentrated on the wedding rehearsal. She reached a decision, surprising since she thought only in fragments. She would let the rehearsal stand. She might not hear from her assailant for a week. If he did contact her at the last minute, she would have to leave the wedding party standing at the altar.

What if he set the time for the same hour as the wedding Saturday afternoon? Panic held her a moment before she threw it off. Then and there she determined to meet problems only as they arose.

The soft crunching on the ground outside the back door belonged definitely to a human. She rose on an elbow to hear feet surreptitiously moving up the steps and then stopping at the door itself. She was about to whisper into the hidden microphone when she realized that no one could reach the back door without being seen by the officers. But might they not wait until he had knocked before they apprehended him, perhaps wait until she answered the door, to assure themselves that this was the criminal and not a friend?

Moving cautiously, she swung her long tapered legs down, and her feet located the fuzzy red slippers Mitch had given her for Christmas. She was conscious of those tanned legs, of the baby doll gown, and cast about for a robe. There was no time, though, to search. The feet outside were turning about, uncertain of themselves. She tiptoed to the kitchen door, and with a pounding heart, listened.

The party outside heard her. "Gail?"

Delirious with relief, she pulled the door open to reveal Mitch, backlit by the moon. He was rubbing a hand over his mouth, the way he did when he was flustered. She fell into his arms, crying, "Mitch, Mitch."

He pressed her tightly. "Hey, what's wrong?"

With her arms still about him, he propelled her into the kitchen

and kicked the door shut. "Nothing," she whispered. "Nothing at all. I'm just so glad to see you."

"I've been calling you since one."

"I couldn't sleep. I took a walk."

"You're not sick?"

"I don't know. I mean. . . ." She hesitated, and knew guilt produced in the brief pause.

One day. Give me one day, Lt. Hawkins had asked.

But she had to tell Mitch; she couldn't wait a day. Still, she stalled.

"I must be anaemic. I get these spells when I'm anaemic."

"Something's happened."

She spread her hands in a gesture of frustration. "I don't know what's the matter with me. I guess I'm confused. Seems like everything's closing in on me—the wedding, so many things to attend to, Mother. Do you really think she can take it? That we should, I mean?"

He cupped her face in his hands and examined it in the moonlight. "She wants it, I want it, you're outvoted."

Her mother had decided herself on the wedding date when Gail told her they intended to wait until she recovered.

"You know," her mother said, "the trouble with being sick is that people lie so outrageously to you, right to your face. They tell you that you never looked so good and you'll outlive them all."

She looked Gail straight in the eye, the way she had when Gail was a child and she wanted to impress her with the importance of a matter. "Maybe I've got a little time left. Only God knows. But it isn't a lot of time, and I want to see you and Mitch married before I go. When I die I want to know he's with you. So now—that's settled. I don't want any argument."

She chuckled. "If you don't marry him, I'll disinherit you. After all, Herman is mine and I'll leave him to that boy across the street where he lives half the time."

Now Mitch held her tightly, and she struggled for breath. "Mitch, please."

She was her old self again. With Mitch here, she had no fears. All of a sudden, she was high.

He said, "You'd better get some sleep or you'll look like Frankenstein in a wedding gown."

"Frankenstein's monster," she corrected. "Not Frankenstein."

"All right—if you'd rather look like a monster."

She laughed. "How'd you make out with Lefty Morgan?"

"So-so. He'll never change. He loves burglary. Like some people get hooked on the horses."

As he was leaving, she said, "Mitch, don't forget to get a hair cut."

Once every two weeks she had told him that for the past two years. She had been only a week out of Woodbury College, when she heard that one Frank Mitchell, an attorney, needed a secretary. Halfway through the interview, he had laughed unexpectedly. She was annoyed, and he had apologized. "I was just thinking of a beautiful doll like you in a dump like this. It's just too much."

She hated herself for blushing, for liking his laughter, his abruptness. "It'd be a living," she said. She was growing a little desperate. This was her 23rd call. She had been everywhere, from a grocery wholesale firm to a construction company.

He had smiled then and she knew he'd offer her the job and that she'd take it. "What do they call you?"

"Rogers. Gail Rogers."

He shook his head. "I shall call you Shadrach. Fits the office better."

By a week later, he was one week behind in her pay and they had their first date. By the time the evening was over, she knew she was in love. Not that he was anything like her dream man. He was rough edged and outspoken, completely honest. She had never known anyone like him, who made no pretense of masking emotions or thoughts. She realized he surprised and shocked most people, since people in general want the soft statement, the polished manner. He was so doggedly natural, but he didn't know he was, and that was what was ingratiating. He wasn't making any campaign out of it. With her, he was as uninhibited in his gentleness as he was rough with those who wronged or attacked him. With her, he was always thoughtful, asking about her mother, who doted on him, even asking about Herman! He was always interested in what she was doing, and he listened. Most men didn't. They wanted to talk about themselves and their business. But aside from all that, he had an undertow of the strength that she felt when he merely walked by, an undertow that she sensed he barely had under control, that might shoot out fists any minute. His appearance, too, was outspoken, hair that had no

part and fell over his forehead, blue eyes that were too intense, a quick smile that never traveled far, nervous hands, an undecided walk, and with it all a strong physical attraction for a woman.

Now he started to close the door, then stepped back in. "You're sure you're all right, Shadrach?" Her thoughts flew back to the time she had asked him why he called her that. He had laughed. "You were so earnest that first day, and so beautiful. And Shadrach was the funniest, least apt name I could think of."

"Did you know," she had asked, "that Shadrach was one of three men in the Bible whom Nebuchadnezzar threw into a fiery furnace when they refused to worship an image of gold—and all three miraculously escaped unharmed?"

He hadn't known that, hadn't even known it was a Bible name, but that hadn't stopped him. Not even the night he proposed. "Shad," he had said, "fifty words a minute isn't bad. When you get up to sixty, I might consider marrying you."

They were at a basketball game, the Los Angeles Lakers versus the San Francisco Warriors. It was half time, and they were eating hot dogs and drinking root beer in a corridor outside the main auditorium, a couple on an island in a swirling mob.

"I've already passed 60," she said, "and I accept."

To her dying day she would remember the half-time score: Los Angeles, 58, San Francisco, 54.

Now he kissed her, then slipped out. She wandered into the living room, fell into an arm chair. She may have dozed; she wasn't certain. Anyway, the shattering ring of the phone brought her bolt upright. It was the gravelly voice of a few hours before. "I'll be over in a little while, Gail, and we'll make a night of it, what's left. You're my kind, Gail. Yes, sir, my kind. I know a woman when I see one."



Angela Simmons, aged twenty and better known as Watusi, whose very female figure, eggshell walk and tight skirts belied her crisp

efficiency and her skill in handling people, sat in her cubicle outside Hawk's office, talking madly over the phone. Hawk liked to boast she had the fastest tongue and typewriter in the West.

"It was a bore. Just a lot of old bags getting scragged at the bar."

She dropped her voice on first sight of Hawk, followed by Barney. "I've gotta hang up. The Presence has just arrived."

Hawk heard and grinned. She hurried around the desk to follow him into his office. "Good morning, sir," she said.

He turned, puzzled. "Sir?"

"Yes, sir. I read a book last night about how a career girl should act. She should show her boss respect and never, never call him by his first name."

Hawk turned to Barney. "Spread the word around that if anybody takes this girl out for a free lunch this week, he's fired.

Watusi retorted, "That's the kind of discrimination, sir, that causes the masses to rise up."

"Well, from the shortness of that skirt, you have risen. Now, what's on deck here?"

He thumbed through a sheath of memos. He felt good this morning. That was what three hours of sleep would do for a man. Back in New Mexico's Pecos valley, his father had an expression: "I feel so good I could climb a cactus with a wildcat under each arm."

The Pecos. When he had left home for the University of New Mexico, he had expected one day to join his father in running the old AH cattle ranch. But after graduating with honors in football, and little else, he had gone to Vietnam. In the ensuing years, drought and cattle disease had taken a heavy toll along the Pecos. When he had finished his Army service, his father, now nearing seventy, needed every dollar he could raise. So Hawk had pounced on the first steady check he could find. "Other fellows spend money on girls," he would tell his friends. "I spend mine on cows."

He adjusted the aerial photograph on the wall. He did that the first thing every morning. It was always askew. The picture showed his father's spread, and the red X marked where Hawk planned to build a home when he went back. Some day. Barney had once said, "Everybody in a big city's always going back home—some day." Few did, of course, and Hawk was enough of a realist to know he probably never would. But it was an illusory dream that carried a

man through the churning crowds and the acrid smog and the noise that incessantly hammered on the nerves. An X on an aerial photograph. A dream, a hope.

Watusi talked rapidly, checking notes. "Atlanta's placed a hold on Oscar Livingston. Samuels turned down your request to paint the office. The Lab wants you to call. Look magazine wants a spread. Quote—a new idea in police work, the Heavy Squad, to handle only crimes of violence and potential violence—unquote. They want pictures of you. A friend called, name of Jimmy Stone. Sounded about ten."

"Eleven."

"Wanted to know if you can umpire a Little League game tonight. He said the umpire they've got is a crook and should be run in. That's it so far."

Hawk looked up. "Tell Samuels we'll paint the office ourselves. Some week-end. A shocking pink. That'll get him stirred up. Set up a date with the Look guy. And tell Stone I'll try but I won't know whether I can make it until I'm there."

She started to leave. "Thanks, Watusi," he said, then turned to Barney. "What's with Rogers? You got set up at the apartment okay?"

Barney nodded. "Her boy friend stopped in at 3:12 and stayed seven minutes. We couldn't pull anything in over the bug since they stayed in the kitchen. He checked back into his apartment at 3:50."

Barney glanced at his notes. "At 3:55 she got a call from the subject but it only lasted 16 seconds. He gave her the old attack pitch. Said he was coming right over but he didn't show."

Hawk asked, "What about the camera plane?"

Barney shook his head. "I pulled it off shortly after three. We checked out everybody on the ground but they all proved negative."

He fell quiet as a Negro newspaper boy came in on the run, dropped a paper on Hawk's desk, picked up the dime, and darted back for the door.

"Hey, Baker!" Hawk called. Baker swung about on one foot. His eyes lighted up as if a button had been pressed. Hawk held his hand up in Indian greeting. "How." Baker returned the greeting.

When he was gone, Barney said, "We've got a moving surveil-

lance ready for her when she leaves this morning, which should be"—he checked his watch—"in seven minutes. Four cars. One ahead of her, one behind her, and two running along on parallel streets."

Hawk nodded. "Now the next thing, make a set-up for the wedding chapel. Some of these guys like the theatrical. This chapel's got four rehearsals on tonight. They start at 6:30 and allow one hour for each. Cover the first two as well as Rogers'. He may come in with another wedding party."

He paced restlessly, then stopped by the window. "They're out there somewhere," he said, indicating the city below. "The victim and the criminal. And we haven't the slightest clue to either." He turned back. "Put the pressure on all our informants. They've got to know something about a \$200,000 heist. You can't keep a trick this big a secret. See Fishface personally and tell him I said we aren't shelling out \$200 a month for him to sit on his patio. Throw a scare into him. Go as far as you want."

Watusi stepped in. "Dr. Barton's here."

"Who?"

"You know. The psychologist you've been asking for."

"Come in, Doc," Hawk called.

She came in rather hesitantly, the way people do the first day on a job. She was somewhere in her late twenties, perhaps a shade past thirty. The first impression she gave was that of a warm, vibrant, likable woman. She stood very straight, and was sure in her walk and movements. Her light brown hair tossed about her head in a most unscholarly manner.

"Sit down," Hawk said, "and welcome to the club."

Barney pulled out a chair, and she smiled. "Thank you."

"The name's Hawk. And this is Barney. Barney Carlson."

"Jenny," she said. "Jenny Barton."

"Yes," Hawk said. He picked up the folder containing her personnel file. "You'll hear it anyway, so I might as well tell you. I opposed you for this job. I had another party in mind. Dr. Raymond Hendricks of Berkeley."

She moistened her lips. "He's a brilliant man."

Hawk nodded, "Maybe you are, too—brilliant woman, that is."

He glanced at the file. Born in Winnetka, Illinois. Graduate of the University of Chicago with a doctorate in psychology. Was married

to John L. Barton, deceased—killed in an automobile accident seven months after their wedding. Worked for Pike and Crown, Chicago industrial consultants. Salary, \$13,000. Reason given for desiring police work: "I believe law enforcement would offer me wider experience than I have in my present employment."

That it would, Hawk thought. He wondered if that were the true reason. Her Heavy Squad salary would be considerably less—\$10,900.

He looked up. "I see you haven't had any experience in police work."

"Frankly, no."

He smiled. "That practically makes you an authority."

She took the thrust with admirable control. "I believe in my work, Lieutenant—to the extent that if I can't learn here under you, and if I can't help, well, then no power on earth could keep me here."

He said nothing. He was studying her, sizing her up. He had this habit of looking unseeingly at someone, while he was thinking.

"She's not a race horse, you know," Watusi said. She had materialized by his desk to place a teletype before him.

"Excuse me," he said. "I didn't mean—well, whatever it was I didn't mean. Dr. Barton, Miss Simmons. You'll find Watusi a very disruptive influence around here. We keep her only for decoration."

He turned back to Jenny. "We'll see what we can do with you although we don't have much time for training people. But it so happens that we have a case now you might help us on. A young woman name of Gail Rogers came in here early this morning. A man seized her in her car when she started home about midnight and threatened her and her mother with death if she didn't act as a go-between and pick up \$200,000 for him. We don't know who the victim is or whether it's extortion, kidnaping or just what."

He started for the door. "Come along. I want to show you something new we just got in. We can talk while we go. Come on, Barney."

She asked, "What kind of a woman is this Miss Rogers?"

He stood aside at the door. "What kind? Well, she's intelligent, got a mind of her own—"

"Stubborn," Barney put in. He grinned pointedly at Hawk.

Hawk let it pass. "She seems very capable, but then in these cases,

as you know, if the criminal plays it right, he can crack just about anyone. We all have our breaking point, no matter how tough cored we are."

"*We*, Lieutenant?" Jenny asked.

He shrugged. "It has happened. . . . The mind and body can take only so much exhaustion and torture, and with a woman, the fear of a sexual attack intensifies the whole rotten ordeal."

✠ SEVEN ✠

Hawk led the way down a long corridor, and Barney and Jenny hurried to keep up. Several officers passed and nodded respectfully. In each instance, Hawk knew their names. He never forgot one. He could meet a man once and then two years later meet him again and recall his name. Barney was always awed. He couldn't remember a name the next day.

"Have you got located yet?" Hawk asked her.

"I looked around some but haven't found what I want." She hastened to add, "And I'm not particular."

Hawk smiled. She didn't want him getting any wrong impressions. "If Barney can help, I know he'd like to. He's good at everything."

"I'd be honored," Barney said.

Hawk snorted. "Barney, tell me, where do you get that kind of dialogue?"

He pushed through a door marked: LABORATORY. "We just got the voiceprinter a couple weeks ago. Like so many things, it came out of the war. World War II, that is. The Army Signal Corps started work on it."

A precise, fussy little man approached them. Hawk ignored him. Prissy people bothered him. He had all kinds of patience with the poor souls who roamed in and out of his daily routine, mothers pleading for their no-good sons, the punch drunks whom life had kicked around, the slow of speech who found thinking difficult even in the simplest terms. But he couldn't brook these affected characters. "Actually," he continued, "they didn't get too far and it wasn't

until 1960 that a couple of scientists in the Bell laboratories really put the thing together."

He acknowledged the presence of the fussy little man. "You know Barney, of course, and this is Jenny Barton, our psychologist. Ed's on temporarily while our regular man's in Europe."

"Hames is the name," he said. "Ed Hames."

Hawk stopped before a drum cylinder, covered with electrically sensitized paper, that was revolving. A stylus was "writing" on it, producing a design that looked, to Hawk's way of thinking, like a map with a dozen lakes and inlets.

"This is the voiceprinter," Hawk said.

"A sound spectrograph," Ed Hames said smugly. "We are feeding it sound frequencies from a tape. The turning of the cylinder measures the speed of the talking, the up and down movement of the stylus records the frequency, and the heaviness or lightness of the mark made by the stylus registers the intensity. The human voice ranges from the neighborhood of 500 to 4,000 cycles but the human ear hears sounds from—"

Hawk cut in. "It makes a voiceprint and nobody's come up yet with two voice patterns that are the same. They're like fingerprints for identifying an individual."

"What if you disguise your voice?" Jenny asked.

"It doesn't matter. You get the same pattern. Like a fingerprint. Dillinger tried burning the tips of his fingers but it didn't do any good. The pattern remained."

Ed Hames said quickly, "No two people talk alike, and there's a good scientific explanation. Each individual has a different skull cavity, different muscle tightness, and in an adult, the vocal cavities, such as the larynx, throat, mouth and nasal passage, are fixed for life. If I whisper, the pattern is the same. If I speak in a falsetto voice, the pattern doesn't change. The ear may be fooled by a mimic but this machine never would be. As I started to say, audible cycles in general range from 15—"

"Put on the tape, please, Ed," Hawk said. To Jenny and Barney, he added, "When the criminal called Miss Rogers last night, we got our first evidence against him, his voiceprint. He never dreamed, of course, that he was identifying himself as definitely as if he had voluntarily given us his fingerprints."

While Ed Hames set the tape, Hawk continued, "He called for

two purposes. First, he wanted to keep her terrorized and off balance, and second, he wanted to worry her to the point where she couldn't sleep and hence would be too exhausted to think clearly. Now this is where you come in, Doc—"

"Jenny, please."

"This is where you come in. Maybe he had another reason that we don't see. Maybe you can find something here that we have missed."

The voice came over, very strong. The drum revolved slowly and the stylus drew a "map." "I'll be over in a little while, Gail, and we'll make a night of it, what's left. You're my kind, Gail. Yes, sir, my kind. I know a woman when I see one."

✠ EIGHT ✠

After his call, Gail dressed, as if that would be any protection, but she had a compulsion to act in some way. On analysis, she knew he wouldn't come. That is, if he were half intelligent. And yet a man ridden by desire might ignore the possibility of a trap. She sat up the few remaining hours, classifying the night noises. She had never imagined the world was such a pandemonium of sound, if one only listened.

Shortly after 6, the MacDonalds started shouting, and she thought, Oh, no, not today. Even on a normal morning, she grew edgy when they quarreled. If she had listened she could have heard what they were saying but she closed her mind. They were such good-hearted people; they would lend you their last dollar; they would run in ten times a day if you were ill.

The MacDonalds were an open book, but strangely she never heard a sound from the tenant on the east side. He was a Spaniard who taught Castillian Spanish at a nearby high school. He was about forty, quite short, always immaculately dressed, and very quiet and retiring. He nodded pleasantly when they met but had never engaged her in conversation. He had few telephone calls.

Shortly after gulping down some coffee—she couldn't eat breakfast—she rang up her mother.

"What's wrong, hon?" her mother asked, alarmed.

"Nothing. Now don't start imagining things. I just wanted to call you."

"You always wait 'til you get to the office."

That was the first Gail realized that if you deviate from the norm, people notice and sense trouble. "So this morning I don't. I've got a big day. Mitch goes to trial Monday with the Angus case, and there's a raft of papers to type up, and I'm getting my hair done at noon. I'll be by about 7."

"Please, hon, don't. Skip tonight."

"On my wedding rehearsal night, I'm going to see my mother. So there!" She tried laughing. "You'll just have to find time for me."

Before the mirror on the back of the hall closet door, she took quick inventory. Her eyes were lackluster and rested on dark pads. Her shoes matched her suit which was three years old. Yet it didn't look it, and that was good. It would be a long time before she would have money for another. She and Mitch were saving every dollar for a down payment on a small home. Both had spent their lives in apartments and hungered for digging and flowers and a patch of grass. For Christmas she had bought Mitch a lawn mower and he had given her a spading fork. Then aside from the down payment on the house, there would be the expense of the babies. She wasn't going to wait several years to have her children, the way some of her friends had.

She checked a potential run in her stocking and wondered if it would hold off one more day. Then she shook her head in perplexity. Here she was in grave danger, and her mother was, and she was bothered about a run. But that was life, your thoughts all in neat patterns, your habits fixed. Someone died, and you worried about what there was to eat, if the car would run, and was there sufficient money?

At the door, she paused to reconnoiter. She had locked the kitchen door, turned the burner off under the coffee, and invited Herman out. He had left considerably miffed. He usually slept the day on her bed. She didn't know how late she might be, though, or even if she would return. At least she wouldn't be home until after the rehearsal, and she prayed to God she would be then.

The front window was up a few inches, the way she usually left it. Now she closed and locked it. She hurried then through the apart-

ment, opening the bathroom and closet doors wide. When she returned she wanted to see inside them at a glance.

She eased the door open. Any other morning she would have sailed out, feeling the exhilaration of the morning air and the excitement of things to come. "I hate you," her best friend, Martha, had said. "You're one of these love-life people, and I just can't take them at 9 in the morning."

Herman had a German shepherd backed into a corner. The poor dog was trembling and at the same time trying to act like a dog. "Herman!" she called. "Now cut that out!" Herman sat down and pretended that all along he had had nothing more in mind than to take a bath.

Now she breathed easier. It was good to have Herman around. He restored a little normality.

At a movement close by, she whirled about. She hadn't heard Margie, and she should have, since Margie was full blown and a heavy walker. She looked a wreck. Bags underscored her eyes and the lids sagged. Her hair, ineptly silvered, looked as though she had gone through a wind tunnel backwards.

"Hey, don't tell me you been on a jag, too," Margie said, and added, "I was over last night looking for you."

Gail's gaze moved searchingly across the expanse of yard and swimming pool. "Gosh, I'm sorry. I had to work. Real late."

"I'll say. Two o'clock. Earl told me he caught you out by the garbage cans. Say, you two aren't having an affair, are you?" She laughed merrily. Whatever the quarrel had been about, she had forgotten it. How can two people scream and swear at each other one moment, then laugh and love the next? Gail could never do that. If she grew angry with someone, she crossed the party off her list. She was sure Mitch was the same. You couldn't work around a man for two years without knowing him thoroughly. And she didn't care what the love counselor in the newspaper had said about never knowing a man until you married him. Sometimes she thought newspapers should be abolished. The columnists made their livings by frightening people, planting all kinds of innuendos that led you to believe you had cancer, and forecasting wars all over the world, and printing terrible things about men you believed in. For ten cents a day, twenty-five cents on Sunday, you could get headaches cheaper than any people ever had in all history.

Now how had she gotten on that? It was amazing the irrelevancies your thoughts tolerated in time of stress.

She remembered to slow down when she reached the swimming pool. The Hendersons, a newly-wed couple who worked nights, were throwing a beach ball back and forth and shouting happily. She pictured Mitch and herself in a similar scene come Sunday, if only by then she had escaped the trap. For the first time, she saw herself for what she was, the prisoner of a man who would kill to gain his end, a prisoner in a moving cage.

That voice. It had sounded familiar. Or had it? She had to remember. She simply had to. During those interminable pre-dawn hours, after the criminal had called, she had feverishly ransacked her memory, pouring over all the photo albums, hunting for a faded snapshot, hunting, hunting. Maybe she hadn't delved far enough back. He could be someone she had known in high school.

On reaching the car, she glanced behind the front seat, then along the street. It had the usual early morning, bright sunshine look, with people scurrying about, most of them running a few minutes late, none conscious of the morning, their minds being too set on other matters. Behind her Margie climbed into a Volkswagen alongside Earl who stuck his head out and waved.

Once behind the wheel, she started by rote to fasten the seat belt, then remembered, and the shock was a club cracking the base of her neck. With her, remembrance could be as vivid as the original happening. Never again would she fasten a seat belt about her.

She took her time warming up the motor, studying the traffic ahead and in the rear view mirror. Then she eased the car out, bringing it to a halt almost immediately at a stop sign. Directly behind, a car left the curb and pulled up close to her bumper. The driver was young, swarthy and sturdy looking. Although he never glanced her way, she had the decided impression he was watching her.

When she started up, a car directly ahead swung unexpectedly into her lane, forcing her to put on the brakes. She jumped to the conclusion the two drivers were the Lieutenant's men, then immediately suffered doubts. One could be the voice, the other an accomplice.

Now she was certain. There are two and they are going to box me in.

The panic lasted only seconds before she took hold of herself with

a firm hand. At the next signal light, the voice of the night before—husky, sharp, threatening—pierced her hearing. It sounded as if he were behind her. Any minute he would be choking her. She looked wildly about.

“Gail,” the voice said sharply. “Gail,” he repeated, “look under your feet. Your feet, Gail. Your feet!”

The stop light changed to green. She continued sitting, then reached in the direction of the voice to pick up a walkie talkie on the floor at her feet. “That’s it,” the voice said, and commanded, “Put it in your purse. Go on, put it in your purse and get moving.”

Frantically, she glanced at the passing cars. From somewhere he was watching her. He might be in an office that overlooked the street; he might be on the sidewalk. He could be in the car next to her.

The driver behind honked in exasperation and at once others joined in. The street reverberated with the clamor of horns gone mad.

The voice continued, “You carry it all the time. You got that? Carry it all the time.”

As if hypnotized, she stared at the little instrument. Unconsciously, she nodded her head, to let him know she understood. “It’s got a beeper. When I want you, I’ll beep and you turn it on.”

“But, but—” she said, not realizing she had to press the “talk” button for him to hear.

He continued, “Now listen. You park your car at Fifth and Cranston at 10:15 sharp tonight. That’ll give you plenty of time for your rehearsal.”

The raucous blare of horns was deafening.

“You got that? Fifth and Cranston, 10:15 sharp. If you don’t show, they’ll be preaching over you Saturday—but it won’t be at your wedding.”



Afterwards, she had little remembrance of what she did. Somehow she drove to the office and into the parking lot—which had spaces

for 300 cars—and left hers in the usual place. She couldn't get out fast enough as the memory of a few hours ago was a knife thrust. She felt again the drop of the sack, the seat belt binding her as she lunged to break free.

Walking rapidly, she saw no one but heard voices of greeting far out on the periphery of her consciousness. She headed for an outside phone booth, then a red warning signal flashed in her mind. He might be following her; he would know she was calling the police.

She thought the old elevator would never make it. Then she was unlocking the office, and taking the typewriter cover off, to make it look as if she had started the day's business. Hurrying around the desk, she struck her hip on the corner. Now she was going out, taking long strides down the corridor, and pushing through another door. "May I use your phone?" she asked, fearing she looked wild. Her best friend, Martha, who was tall and had a nice reserve, nodded. "Something wrong?"

Gail was already dialing. "It's Mitch. One of his cases. He thinks our phone's tapped."

Martha said quietly, "Coffee's ready when you finish." She walked into the next room, to avoid hearing.

When Hawk answered, Gail said, "I've got to see you. He's contacted me. He set it up for tonight. Right after the rehearsal. I've got to see you."

Hawk set a date and time. The powder room on her floor. No one would suspect a rendezvous there. In one hour. . . .

Mitch was late, and she worried. Usually she could set her watch by his arrival. Nine-thirty on the dot.

She sharpened his pencils, tidied up his desk and filled the water carafe. Mitch. The thought of him, beginning their life together, was the dexadrine without which she could not endure the ordeal. Yet she kept thinking, what if I don't get the money tonight? What if I can't go to my own wedding? What if there is no honeymoon? By then I might be dead, and mother, and Mitch. . . .

Quit, Gail, quit thinking that way. You're obsessed with death. Your mind is like a cat worrying a mouse.

On the first ring, she picked up the phone. Suitcase Sullivan, the bail bondsman, was calling. He was 75, and even with his white hair, looked like a fugitive running from the law. He had associated too

long with criminals; he had assumed their mannerisms. She had never known his first name. No one called him anything but Suitcase. He had started business in a cubbyhole equipped with a telephone and little else, and in the beginning, had carried his papers around with him in an old beaten-up brown suitcase. The first day out someone had called him Suitcase, and the name had stuck. He liked it, since it set him apart from his competitors, the same as his derby did. "I'm not much to look at," he had once commented, "and no one noticed me until I got this monicker and started wearing a derby. Now I am somebody."

Now he said, "Tell your boss I posted bond for Lefty and he's out. It's nice doing business with an honest criminal. They never run out on you. But these amateurs. . . ."

He chuckled. "Not that I wouldn't post bond for you, Miss Rogers. Any time. You let me know."

That was his little joke, and for the hundredth time, she laughed.

Or was it such a joke? She might need bond. Under certain circumstances she might kill. She had never thought she could, yet she wondered what she would do if the criminal attempted to attack her, or to murder her, once she had collected the \$200,000. He had erred if he thought she would be too weak or too paralyzed to resist.

She took other calls. A father asking to bring in his 18-year-old son, charged with a statutory crime; the killer of a gas station attendant hoping to talk with Mitch about surrendering (he left no number); the wife of a bank teller wanted by the FBI for embezzlement, who had refused to divulge her husband's whereabouts to FBI agents; the mother of a 24-year-old daughter held for shoplifting.

So it went every day, a sordid flotsam. The youngsters who had played with fire once too often. The phlegmatic, uncaring hold-up men and killers. The belligerent ones, the whimpering ones. People sorry and repentant; people unredeemable and angry because they had been caught. And invariably, in Mitch's case, clients with little money but expecting miracles. The more affluent ones went to the established lawyers, the ones with reputations for getting acquittals, the ones with impressive clothes and offices who could ask for a \$1,000 retainer with the attitude of 'don't bother me if you don't have it.'

Day before yesterday she had pleaded with Mitch to give up crim-

inal law. "These creeps, how can you defend them? You know they're guilty. You're playing games with the courts, and it isn't like you."

"Everybody's got a right to a defense," he had answered. "If guys like me weren't around to help them, they'd go up for longer terms than they should. And with many of the kids it's just a one-time mistake. I'm all that stands between them and the harshness of the law."

He had been so earnest. "I keep saying to myself, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' And that goes for all of us. If we'd been born into a different family, a different neighborhood—"

She broke in, "I don't go along with this poppycock that we're what we are because of what happened to us. Most people make things happen to them, no matter how poor or downbeaten they are. Well, look at you. Your father, a day laborer; your mother a sorter in a laundry. You didn't sit around down there in the slums and say, I haven't got a chance. You washed windows, worked on a road gang. . . ."

She was getting riled up. If only she could keep her short-fused anger out of the discussion.

Mitch said tartly, "If I were a big success, you wouldn't mind, would you?"

"That's not the point, and you know it, Frank Mitchell. I'd love you whether or not you had a nickel."

"But I wouldn't like me. Can't you understand, Shadrach? I'd hate myself if I gave this up and went into civil practice." He shuddered. "Why, I might wind up as a title attorney in a bank."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, if you like the work. But I'd go mad the first week. I want to be in there swinging."

He walked about, hitting a fist into the cup of one hand. "Give me a chance, Gail, and you'll see. I'm going to be up there with Earl Rogers and all the great criminal attorneys. You'll read about me."

"I don't want to read about you. I know you. Oh, Mitch, why do we get so carried away? I didn't mean to say what I did. I worship you, Mitch—and I will no matter what you are or what happens."

He grinned. "Let's wait until we're married to quarrel. Then we can get up in the morning all fresh and have at it."

She threw her note pad at him, and caught him on the cheek. "You'd better get a good attorney," he said. "This is a plain case of assault and battery."

She put her arms about him. "I've got one, the best in the world."

She believed that, and yet she couldn't understand his code of ethics. She couldn't rejoice when a character went free because of legal technicalities. She didn't like it when Mitch one day said, "They ought to see me before they pull these jobs, not afterwards. I could tell them how to do it without getting caught. It's simple for a lawyer. He knows the angles, what to do and not to do. These people are all amateurs. That's why they're in here."

When Mitch finally arrived, he gave her an absent-minded peck and motioned her into his office. He hadn't shaved and his beard stood out black. She had the feeling that he hadn't even seen her, that he was just motioning to a stenographer's notebook and pencil. More and more these days, he showed up totally immersed in a case. And this morning, he hadn't greeted Holmesey.

He had bought the picture at the Goodwill store for five dollars, the five dollars he had intended to apply on an attaché case. He couldn't afford such extravagance because he hadn't had a cash case in a month, but neither could he resist Holmesey. And every morning after that with unfailing ritual, he had bowed solemnly as befitted the venerable justice, and greeted him. Usually it was, "Good morning, your honor," and on rare occasions, "Oh, come off it, Holmesey. It's a beautiful morning." Then she knew it would be a fun day.

Now Mitch was saying, "Get me Long at the City Attorney's." He took an electric razor from the top right-hand desk drawer.

"Can it wait, Mitch? I've got to talk with you and I haven't much time. I should have last night but my nerves were shot, and I wasn't thinking straight, and the police had threatened me if I told you, and they had a mike hidden in the telephone that picked up everything."

He sank slowly into the swivel chair. "What on God's green earth are you talking about?"

"They didn't want me to tell you."

"What didn't they want you to tell me?"

"This man, he put a sack over my head, and he half strangled me, and—"

Mitch came to his feet. "Strangled you? Somebody tried to strangle you?"

"He wants me to pick up \$200,000 for him, and this morning . . . it doesn't make sense, does it, the way I'm telling it?"

"Gail, listen, who tried to strangle you?"

"I'll start at the beginning," she said, quieting. "It was ten after twelve when I left the office last night. I remember looking, and. . . ."

Telling the story calmed her. Now someone knew it besides the police, someone who loved her, would protect her. She ended, "I've got a date for tonight, to meet someone and get the money. He said to be at Fifth and Cranston at 10:15. That doesn't give me much time to get from the church but if we quit on the dot of 9:30. . . ." She asked then, "Was it all right going to the police? I just couldn't think straight. The sack about my head. . . ."

He was walking about, thinking, drumming the desk. "You didn't have any choice. You couldn't cope with this man alone. Nobody could. He has the deck stacked. He can watch you but you can't him. He can take you by surprise. He makes the moves and you have to follow. I can't imagine anybody picking you for this, except you're so capable and all, but still . . . You haven't any idea? . . . The voice, you've never heard it?"

She sagged into a chair. "Sometimes I get to thinking I have but it won't come. It just won't come."

"You couldn't be sure, could you, even if you do think you recognize it? Nobody could be sure. You could talk yourself into something like that, the more you think about it. But, well, let's get up a list of our clients. I don't know why the Lieutenant thinks it's one of them. You've been around hundreds of men, here, there and everywhere. It could be any one of them. It could be someone you never even talked to. You attracted him and he learned about your mother. These guys go around looking for levers, so they've got a club over you and you can't squeeze out."

She was touched by his concern. He continued, "I don't know how I'll manage. I could hide in the trunk or follow your car. I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

"You can't, Mitch. Don't you see, this character might catch sight of you, and he threatened if I told anyone he'd. . . ."

"I won't let you go alone. You don't think I'd just sit here while

you. . . . I've got to think. I've handled all kinds of cases but when it hits home. . . . I'll be there. I don't know how—but I'll be there."

✻ TEN ✻

Hawk asked right off, "Did you talk with Frank Mitchell?"

Gail nodded. "I had to." She smiled a little. "Surely, you've been in love, Lieutenant."

"I understand how you feel but—"

"You couldn't suspect Mr. Mitchell?"

The three—Gail, Jenny Barton and Hawk—stood by a window in a cubicle called the women's lounge. Hawk had locked the door. During the night hours, he had debated where to meet her after she had talked again with the criminal. Only so much could be said over a phone or by radio contact, and moreover, he needed to study her reactions. Her office was definitely out. The criminal could saunter in at any moment under the guise of being a client. Hawk had considered talking with her somewhere outside the building but she had said the night before she took no coffee break. If the criminal had watched her these preceding days, he would know that, and her habit patterns in general. And even if Hawk could have met her outside, he had no idea where, with any degree of safety, since they would be on public display in a restaurant, a park, a moving taxi and like places. This was always the grave problem in this type of case, where to meet the informant or victim. No matter what rendezvous you chose, you ran certain hazards. In the end he had fallen back on one of the oldest of a detective's "hideouts," the powder room. The criminal could not very well loiter in the corridor on a shadow job without drawing attention. However, to guard against that possibility, Hawk had assigned Barney to watch the corridor. Hawk himself would choose when he and Jenny would enter the powder room. Their chance of discovery would come when they left and they would depend on Barney to warn them if he had reason to suspect the door was under observation.

Spread out below them was the parking lot for the office building.

Hawk could see her car in the same spot it had been less than 10 hours before when the sack fell over her head. An earthquake-like rumble came through the walls from the elevator shaft which adjoined the rest room, and from the background came the faint theme of a Beethoven concerto, banged out by the high school fellow employed in the walk-up piano shop. Over and over he played the same number.

Hawk said, "It's not that we suspect Mr. Mitchell anymore than anyone else. But if he tells one other person, and that party tells another, then this criminal may take care of you or your mother very quickly. And to put it bluntly, I don't like other people advising you. It could lead to our working at cross purposes."

He asked then, "What was Mr. Mitchell's reaction?"

"That I did the right thing in going to the police, that I should follow your orders implicitly. That's not what you expected him to say, is it, Lieutenant?" She added, "He wants to follow me tonight, to see that nothing happens."

"You tell him for me," Hawk said, "that if he shows up, I'll arrest him for obstructing a law officer in the performance of his duty. Is that clear?"

"You're not exactly the inarticulate type, Lieutenant. I thought it was a perfectly normal reaction, to want to be with someone you love in a time of crisis."

"Of course," Jenny said. "We understand that, don't we, Lieutenant?"

Hawk ignored her. "In my job, if you don't look squarely at people and situations, someone ends up with a slug in him."

There followed a moment of highly charged silence, then Hawk asked, "May I see the walkie talkie, please?"

Taking it from her purse, she handed it over. He examined it with considerable interest. "It's a very sophisticated job. One of the latest. Doesn't need much antenna."

He turned it over. "If I could get into it, I could tell the channel he's using by looking at the crystal, but he's sealed it with some kind of wax, and he'll know someone's been into it. He might ask to see it if he contacts you in person again. He might figure you went to the police and they examined it. You know how to use it, do you?"

She shook her head, and he continued, "It's got a beeper, and he can activate it and call you. When he does. turn the speaker on here

and you can receive. You press this button to talk. So you don't need to worry about him hearing anything except when you press the button.

"We've got a trick up our sleeves, too," he added. He took a small electronic device from his pocket and set it on the counter beside the walkie talkie. "Keep this in sending position, like it is now, and a few inches from the walkie talkie. It'll rebroadcast the instructions directly to us."

The elevator was descending, and the roar filled the lounge. When the sound had died a little, he said, "We'll get a mobile unit into the area tonight and they'll try to locate the channel he's using. About all they can do, though, is to switch from one civilian channel to another—there are 23—and hope to receive him when he's talking. If he doesn't say much, their chances aren't too good. Am I throwing too much at you too fast?"

"I think I understand—although I'm not very good at this sort of thing."

"I'm not either. I'm just repeating what I've heard."

She asked, "Can't other people hear him—hear us?"

"It's possible but not likely. I doubt if he's using a crowded channel and he's probably got a transmitter that will send only a short distance. Someone might accidentally be receiving in the area on the same channel. But it wouldn't matter much if someone did listen in. He wouldn't make sense to anyone who didn't know the set up."

Hawk awoke to the fact he was staring at her. He hadn't meant to. But she fascinated him. She was composed, on the surface, at least, and fairly sensible about the whole awful happening. She was too fine a person to be mixed up in anything as cruel and sordid as this. Yet thousands of individuals across the country would be caught up in extortions, blackmail plots, and similar vicious schemes this year, victims who would awaken one day to find they had been set upon without warning. People who never before had brushed with crime.

"I must be honest," he went on. "I've got to warn you that you'll be running a certain risk in carrying our radio device. If he should seize you somewhere, and search your purse and find it, he might hurt you before we could reach you."

The blood drained from her face. Jenny said, "But surely, Lieutenant, the chances are all against that."

Gail said, "It's all right, Dr. Barton. I want to know."

"Play it one step at a time," Jenny said. "One step. It helps that way."

They fell silent as the elevator rumble grew louder. The cage stopped in the shaft that adjoined the room, and then continued its ascent.

Hawk said, "We'll keep you under surveillance tonight as closely as we can and still maintain cover. We'll have a fairly elaborate set-up at Fifth and Cranston, but there's always a possibility this address is just a trial run, to see if the police are on to him. So if he gets you there and then names another spot, stall as much as you possibly can to give us time to slip out and get set up in the new spot. Drive slowly but not slow enough to tip him off. In other words, don't do anything a girl wouldn't normally do."

Gail nodded. "I can flood the carburetor. All women are supposed to do that."

Hawk smiled. "Great. You get the idea." He handed her a pair of white gloves in a cellophane envelope. "I want you to wear these, and when the victim turns over the money, be sure to touch his hands. They are impregnated with a fluorescent powder that is invisible except under ultraviolet light."

Curiously, she inspected them. They looked exactly like ordinary, stretch-type gloves. Jenny said, "It might help Miss Rogers, if you would try to get him to talking. He may say something quite innocuous that would give him away. At least, we may learn the kind of man he is, his thought patterns, maybe something about his habits."

Hawk broke in. "Keep trying to identify his voice. It may come to you in the dead of night, or sometime when you're not even thinking about it."

"What age man would you say he is, judging from his voice?" Jenny asked.

"He's not young. Not real young. And he's not old. He could be, well, thirty-five. He might be fifty. He uses good English. I haven't caught a grammatical mistake. He knows, too, I've got a wedding rehearsal set for tonight and that I'm going to be married Saturday."

"Has that been in the newspapers?" Hawk asked.

"Just our suburban paper. Not the downtown ones." She added slowly, "When he talks, I get the same feeling I had as a child when I ran my fingernail over a blackboard. I get butterflies thinking about it."

"You'll do fine," Jenny said. "And don't worry about being afraid. Fear is an ally as well as an enemy, Miss Rogers. It can keep you tense and alert—keep you from falling into a false sense of security. Don't be afraid of it. Accept it for what it is. But don't let it run you."

Hawk gazed thoughtfully at Jenny. She continued, "He's going to do everything he can to break you. No one but a sadist would think up the paper sack. Since he can't bend you to his will physically—that is, with a gun to your back—he has to do it mentally."

Hawk turned toward Gail. "Dr. Barton will tell me after we leave here that I did more to build up fear in you than the criminal. But if I'm to help you, I've got to explore every possibility."

He paused, thinking. "The moment you meet the man, to pick up the money, I want you to tell him at once that you're a go-between and not the party threatening him. You've got to get it across, make him believe it. It may not be easy."

He walked about. "He may come intending to take matters in his own hands. For all he knows, you are the criminal, and he may come with a gun instead of the money. The fact he hasn't reported this crime to the authorities may indicate that it is a racket, something outside the law, and he may have decided to let the extortionist—or whatever he is—have a bullet instead of the \$200,000. In fact, maybe that's what the extortionist figures—and that's why you're the go-between."

He added quickly, "It may not be anything like this at all, but it is a possibility we must consider."

Gail asked, "Will you loan me a gun?"

"A gun, Miss Rogers? You know guns, do you? You've used them?"

She shook her head. "In an emergency, I think I am capable of pulling a trigger."

"No," Hawk said, "it's too risky. In a crisis, you might shoot yourself or one of us. It's hazardous enough when you know weapons."

"Then I'll have to buy one," she said. "I'll ask Mitch to get me one."

"I wouldn't advise it." His gaze held hers. "Believe me, we know what we're doing. We've been through this type of crime before. We have the experience and the study of military strategy in other

cases across the nation. And that is exactly what it comes down to, military strategy. When you leave for your appointment tonight, we'll have an army of men deployed. We'll have the entire set-up sketched out on charts and maps. We'll know exactly every step we are going to take to meet every possible eventuality. No matter how clever this criminal thinks he is, we'll have a counter chess move. So when I tell you I don't want you to carry a weapon, I'm not doing it because of a personal whim."

She said flatly, "I'll talk to Mitch about it."

By agreement, they left separately, Hawk first. Outside, he nearly collided with two women. He nodded pleasantly, just as though he were not emerging from the women's powder room. One said, "Well, I never!" Outraged, she turned to her friend, "See! I told you so. I knew I heard a man in there."

✠ ELEVEN ✠

Back at her desk, she was too unnerved to concentrate on ANSWER OF DEFENDANT, JERRY ANGUS, TO INTERROGATORIES PROPOUNDED BY PLAINTIFFS. She was ever conscious of the walkie talkie in her purse.

She had no desire to open the box of candy she had found on her desk. The candy indicated Louie Ogden was in Mitch's office. He was one of Mitch's oldest clients, charged for the third time with breaking and entering. Nor had she scratched an answer to a note Mitch had placed in her typewriter along with a newspaper story. The story said that \$27 would send a boy to camp. Mitch had written, "Is this okay with you?" They would never get together a down payment on a house if Mitch continued to give to every cause that came along. This, though, was a must. He himself had never gone to camp. "I'll never want anything again in all my life as much as I wanted to go to a camp," he had once told her. "We were a wild bunch of half-hungry, ragged kids playing on streets so hot they burned our feet, and a forest sounded like heaven. But I never made it. The Salvation Army and the other outfits never had enough

money for all of us. So every time we send a youngster to camp, he'll be part of me going."

She jumped when the phone rang. Helen Hanover, an ex-party girl with a long record of convictions for soliciting asked for Mitch. Gail resented Miss Hanover on grounds which admittedly had no justification. She looked so darned wholesome, for one thing—milk-fed face, friendly as a St. Bernard's wagging tail. And, too, she was always calling Mitch for advice—and not just legal advice. Mitch said he had to help her, that she was struggling to earn a living by operating a small concession at the beach, and if she didn't succeed she would probably return to her former profession.

Damn Beethoven. That eternal piano plunking. She didn't believe she could last the day out. Well, she could be nervous at the rehearsal, thank goodness, and no one would think it odd.

She strained to hear Louie Ogden. She could hear Mitch distinctly as he briefed Ogden for trial. Mitch had good diction and a voice that projected.

"Wear a dark, conservative suit, a cheap one," he was saying. "Well, buy one if you don't have a cheap one . . . a dark tie. . . . Look like you're going to a funeral. . . . No, no jewelry, not even a ring. Juries don't like jewelry. . . . Give straightforward answers. Don't try to be clever. . . . Now look here, you mustn't let the prosecution get you mad. They'll try but just keep your head. Now what about a wife—you got one? . . . Okay, a mother would be even better. Bring her in and seat her on the front row. . . . Look, she is an *old* mother, isn't she? You're not going to ring in somebody who looks like a Las Vegas shill? . . . Yes, the same. A dark outfit. . . . Well, tell her to pick up something at the Goodwill."

Gail looked up at Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. "Holmesey, old boy," she muttered, "did you ever do anything like that?"

A few minutes later, Mitch and Louie Ogden emerged. Ogden was stocky, in his thirties, with a 50-year-old paunch, receding hair, and a machine-stamped grin. Suddenly she remembered the walkie talkie, and sat with a cold body, fearing that any second a beep would come from her purse.

"Thanks for the candy," she said, thinking, I wish to heaven you'd keep your candy and your paws off me. Mitch said he came from a good family, was an Ohio State graduate, and had resorted to break-

ing and entering the first time because his wife and three children were slowly starving to death.

She never quite knew how much of his clients' stories Mitch actually believed, and how much he sold himself on, just to shore up his confidence before a jury. He had to know the angles, to work for these characters. He had to be sharp; he had to be realistic and objective. Yet so much of his fast, brusque talk concealed his empathy for the people around him. Constantly, he walked in the shoes of the other fellow. She alone, of all people, knew this. Sometimes, it seemed, he went far out of his way to conceal the inside Frank Mitchell. It was as if sentiment of any kind, except with her, embarrassed him. In a man's world, such as the courts were primarily, it was something that should be hidden, something that denied masculinity.

When she could, she turned away from Louie Ogden and sat with her fingers on the typewriter. She wished to concentrate on his voice, to file it away. He talked deep in his throat, the same as the criminal, but his pronunciation was more slurred.

When he was gone, Mitch said jubilantly, "We got a \$300 retainer." Mitch always used "we," as if she were a law partner. "That makes up for that case I blew last week."

An eighteen-year-old girl had come in, a fawn about to run at the slightest noise. She wanted a divorce. She believed her husband no longer loved her, since he had stopped opening car doors for her, didn't carry in the groceries, or light her cigarettes. Mitch had talked her into returning home, even though he needed the fee. "I can't botch up somebody's life for a lousy couple hundred bucks."

Afterwards he said, "You can see where I stand on this marriage business. You can carry your own groceries in."

Now he said, "Come on in, darling." He indicated his office. "I want a report."

Sentence by sentence, she recalled Hawk's and Jenny Barton's conversation, and her own. The phone rang constantly at her desk, and Beethoven played with only an occasional pause.

"Lt. Hawkins is upset because I told you." She talked rapidly. "He said he didn't like the idea of somebody else advising me—that we might work at cross purposes. I told him I wasn't keeping anything from you—and I thought it was only normal that you'd want to be near me tonight. He said he'd arrest you if you followed me."

Mitch knotted his eyes. "Threats. They're always threatening you. Don't let him worry you, Shad. You've got enough to worry about."

She continued, "He said you might get killed. I don't know, Mitch, he may have a point. He may be right. I don't see how you can help me—and you'd only be—and I'd never get over it if—"

"What does he think I'm going to do? Get caught in cross fire? Doesn't he think I've got any sense?"

"I want you to get me a gun, Mitch."

"A gun? But the police—"

"Someone could kill me before they could move. You know that."

He took a deep breath. "No, Shad, you don't know anything about guns. You could shoot yourself."

"That's what he said, but I ought to have one, just in case. . . ."

"I've got one that I'll carry. So you won't need one."

"You've got a gun? I didn't know that."

"A Smith and Wesson .38. I bought it when a witness threatened to kill me. It's never been fired."

She said slowly, "I hadn't thought about the man bringing the money tonight thinking I might be the criminal. I just stood there in shock when Lt. Hawkins went into it."

"God, Gail, I don't know whether you should go through with it."

"I've got to." She went into his arms. "Oh, Mitch, I'm scared."

He pressed her hard against him. "It'll be over soon."

"You think so, Mitch—that it'll be over tonight?"

"Soon as you get the money, he'll want it. He's not going to fool around."



TWELVE



The roar of gunfire bounded off the high brick walls of the big, barren courtyard. A man in full armor, looking as though he had walked out of the bastions of a medieval walled city, advanced slowly into a steady flow of bullets.

Facing him was an older man with a Thompson submachine gun who pulled the trigger in spasmodic blasts. Occasionally he swung about to fire at a tank that rumbled abreast of the man in the armor, and at a tall four-foot-wide wall of steel that rolled toward him on coasters. Crouched behind the wall was a man who pushed it along.

At last the Tommy gun spent itself, and the man dropped the weapon, and threw up his hands in surrender.

Some distance away from the practice run, Hawk turned to Roberts of *Look* magazine. "How's that for taking a killer without firing a shot?"

Roberts smiled. He was the clean-cut, analytical type. "I'd prefer to fight a typewriter."

The acrid smell of gunsmoke hung in the hot air, a thin yellowish trace above their heads. Hawk said, "This is what I meant when I said we were running a military operation. We buy a lot of equipment and scientific gadgets from the Army when they dump surplus and used materiel."

They walked out of the courtyard and crossed the street. Roberts said, "I can't figure how you got the money."

Hawk shook his head. "Well, we started campaigning back in '68, and kept talking about crime being an all-out war, and it finally got through to the powers-that-be, and eventually they said okay, that we could have all the money we needed for a new squad, the Heavy Squad, but only if we got results. It's experimental and if it doesn't work out, I'm through. Fini. Kaput."

He added, "I want to make it clear that we're not the only ones experimenting. We got the idea of that moving shield of steel from Tokyo and the man in armor from Detroit. However, I think we're the only squad that has the whole works—and I don't think anybody has a low-light-level television camera mounted in a plane. That camera can see better than a cat in the dark."

Roberts climbed into the squad car. "That just about wraps it up, except for a few quotes from you about what your goal is, what you're trying to do with the Heavy Squad. That type of thing."

Hawk started the motor. "I don't talk so well. It's not my business. But you might say we're trying to put together two opposites. We've got the fire power of an army unit, as you've just seen, and we've got the best marksmen anywhere, and all of that."

Glancing back, he pulled away from the curb. "But we want to go

beyond that. We want to employ the latest in scientific equipment. For instance, we just got a voiceprinter. And we want to experiment with the psychological side. So we hired ourselves a psychologist. She's going to be our think machine. We want to try to understand the criminal mind, what motivates him, see if we can't out-think and out-talk him rather than gun him down. So that the next time we corner a scared youngster with a gun we won't have to kill him."

A driver honked angrily on his right. Hawk pulled back into his own lane. "We're not fooling ourselves," he added. "Nothing will stop a crazed killer—but if it pays off once in a while, we'll feel good about it."

He paused to give Roberts a chance to catch up in his notes. "So we got a contradiction—a lot of fire power and heavy equipment on one hand and science and psychology on the other. Whether we have the judgment to use them remains to be seen. That's why the FBI and some police organizations are so great. They know when and how to move. In the final analysis, of course, that's what police work comes down to—judgment. It's the same as in any business. You've got to have brain power, or all the fire power and science in the world aren't going to do you much good."

Hawk pushed through the door into the squad room. His glance skimmed over a big, young blonde sitting on the long, low wooden bench where people waited. She looked as though she had been dressed by an awning company and her perfume projected. She was eighteen, perhaps nineteen, but her hard little eyes said she had been around.

He crossed to his office. As usual, Watusi was on the phone. "They sent me up to the credit office, and this man asked me how much money I had in the bank, and I told him I didn't know, that I hadn't shook it recently. I gotta go. The wrecking crew's arrived."

She followed Hawk into his office. "Who's the girl out there?" he asked.

"She's Barney's friend."

"Get him in here."

She picked up the phone. "Put Barney Carlson on the loud-speaker. Lt. Hawkins wants him."

"Set up a date with Frank Mitchell," Hawk continued. "He's a

lawyer with offices in the Law building. I'll see him any time he can make it—but not in his office."

He glanced over the memos: Eberhard had checked out the bowling alley where Rogers and Frank Mitchell usually went Thursday nights, and two restaurants where they were well known. The results: Negative to date but Eberhard had some leads he was working.

Hawk glanced up. "What have you got?" he asked Watusi.

"The D.A. called. Says there's not sufficient evidence in the Easton case and he's dropping it. New York's granted extradition in the Carmichael matter. And if I don't get a raise, I'm going to make pin-up girl in the post office."

"Have I ever let you down?"

"Yes."

"That answers your question then, doesn't it?"

She quit the brittle approach. "Hawk, you will follow through on it, won't you?"

"Sure, Watusi. This afternoon. You'll get it. And Watusi. . . ."

"Yes, Hawk."

"Be careful whom you try that sexy approach on. Some men don't go for it."

Her eyes laughed, then Barney entered and she left.

Hawk said, "I can't figure how the criminal planted the walkie talkie in Rogers' car if you had someone watching the car all night."

Barney shifted uneasily. Hawk asked bluntly, "Who was on the car?"

"I'm not sure, Hawk."

"The General?"

"I don't know for sure."

"Send him in. And Barney—don't lie to me."

Hawk sat drumming the desk. The General was in charge of equipment, and invaluable. He could maneuver a tank as if it were a Volkswagen. He was an expert marksman. On the rifle range, he averaged 98. He was expert, too, in keeping the equipment organized and in spit-polish shape. Yet he was an oddball. He was a loner, almost never talked except when addressed directly. He had never married, and as far as anyone knew, had no relatives. He went to his rooming house from work, read the papers, and then slept. He never varied the routine.

A few minutes later, Barney returned with the General. From the

looks on their faces, it was evident Barney had briefed the General.

"You were on the car?" Hawk asked.

"Yes, Lieutenant. The car and Rogers' front door. They were in the same line of vision." He spoke with fear and his eyes were hurt things that barely moved. His Korean war wounds were all mental.

Barney said, "He was watching through binoculars from a house across the street."

"Sit down," Hawk told the older man.

"Yes, Lieutenant." He sat awkwardly and ill at ease.

"Barney has told you that the subject placed a two-way radio job in her car."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Hawk's the name and you know it. Did you drop off to sleep?"

"No, sir. I was awake all night. I swear it."

"This man had to come down the sidewalk or cross the street to her car. He had to open the door. Even if he were on the far side, you should have seen him. He had to take a few seconds to place the walkie talkie. Then he had to close the door, and leave by the sidewalk or street. And all this time, what were you doing, if you weren't sleeping?"

The General swallowed hard. For a moment he couldn't talk, then he said, "Before God, Hawk, I never took my eyes off that car or the front door."

"That's all." Hawk was unconvinced.

When he was gone, Barney said, "Her car was parked near a street intersection by a stop sign. Some other car could've pulled alongside long enough to blot out the General's vision and give the subject time to get the walkie talkie in."

"Is he drinking?"

"I've never seen him touch the stuff."

Watusi placed a note before Hawk: "Frank Mitchel, 1:30 P.M., courthouse roof. He goes into court at 2 P.M."

Baker came running in with the newspaper, picked up his dime. "How," said Hawk, raising his hand Indian fashion. "How," answered Baker.

"Say," said Hawk, "how about a car wash? How much today?"

"Six bits."

"You robber! Last week it was 50 cents."

"It's hotter today."

"Tell you what, I'll toss you for it. Heads, I get it free, tails you get the six bits plus we go to lunch together next week."

"Okay."

Hawk tossed. "Tails," he announced. "You win." Baker's face lit the room.

Watusi said as he disappeared, "You cheated. It was heads."

"Really? Looked like tails to me."

Barney continued. "You know, the criminal could have planted the radio in her car before he pulled the sack over her head."

Hawk nodded. "You've got a sharp, analytical mind behind that innocent face." He paused. "I hate to lose you, Barney, I hate to see you wreck a great career."

Barney swung about stupefied. "What're you trying to tell me?"

Hawk buttoned his collar and tightened his tie preparatory to going out. "It's your personal business if you want to pick up tramps like that one out there but it's my business when I get calls from collection agencies. The next one I get—"

"There won't be a next one. I swear it, Hawk. I'm not going to buy anything even if my shoes fall off. And the girl, she's had a rough time. She needs help. She's really a wonderful person."

In the doorway, Hawk said, "Yeah. Well, take care the cannibals don't eat the missionary." His eyes fixed hard on Barney. "She's got a figure, all right, but I bet that's all she's got. When you're a few years older, you'll want a girl with some brains, who has something to talk about, a girl you're proud to show off. I don't know why I'm talking like this. It's none of my business—except," he added with metal in his voice, "if I ever catch another one of your 'wonderful persons' in this office, you both go out—permanently."

He turned on his heel and almost collided with Jenny. She wore a simple white dress that revealed no body lines but subtly suggested them. The man who married her, Hawk thought, would find himself with a complete woman.

"Hello, Doc," he said.

"Jenny," she corrected with annoyance. "Please call me Jenny." He nodded, walked on.

Barney gave his head a little wag by way of clearing his mental decks, and when Hawk was out of earshot, said, "He doesn't mean it when he blows like that."

"You're terribly fond of him, aren't you?"

Barney nodded. "He'll back you every foot of the way when you're in a jam. Not many will."

As they joined Hawk in the outer office, Watusi swiveled around from her typewriter. "Where're you going, Hawk—in case Elizabeth Taylor calls?"

Hawk grinned. "You're as bad as a wife. We'll have to call in." To Jenny, he said, "We're on our way to talk with some ex-convicts. Soon as you get some experience in dealing with cons, we'll take you along."

At the door, he added, "Say, they've got a hot interrogation going in Room B. Might give you an insight into how prisoners think and behave."

She said quietly, "I was brought up by prisoners, Lieutenant. For 18 years my home was the Illinois penitentiary at Joliet. My father was the warden."

For a second Hawk froze. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to make it on my own."

He thought that over for a moment, then called, "You coming, Barney?"

✠ THIRTEEN ✠

Their first call was at a sprawling, ramshackle iron works in the heart of the city, a business relic dating from the days when the ironmonger was an important man in the community, and presently revived by people wanting antique-looking lamps, balustrades and gates.

They made their way along a path lined with junk iron toward a small shed. A massive man, stripped to the waist, with a hair-matted torso, pounded an iron grill with short, sure strokes of a hammer. At one side, an acetylene torch played shadows about the shack.

Hawk yelled, "Hey, there."

The man turned to reveal a face gnarled by time and dissipation. He could have been in his early fifties. He was probably not as old as he appeared, Hawk thought. "You Jenkins?" he called out.

Jenkins looked them up and down. He continued holding the hammer. "Could be," he answered sullenly.

"We're bail bondsmen," Hawk said. "We're looking for Blackie Henderson."

Jenkins advanced slowly toward them, hammer in hand. "Get out of here."

Hawk backed up. "He told us you were his best friend—at Leavenworth."

Jenkins stopped, the hammer still in mid air. "I remember every guy there, like it was yesterday—and there wasn't any Blackie Henderson."

Again he started toward them. "Now walk—walk straight through that door."

Hawk turned, shrugging, and he and Barney left. Once in their car, a half block down the street, Hawk took a pocket recorder from inside his coat and carefully set it to play back. Jenkins' words came over clearly. "I remember every guy. . . ."

Hawk patted the little recorder and returned it to his coat. "I goofed once. Forgot to turn it on. Almost cost me my job."

Barney said, "What do you think, Hawk? Shouldn't we make up another cover story? Bail bondsmen aren't very popular."

"So what? We're getting their voices down. Who's next?"

Barney referred to the list of Frank Mitchell's clients. "The Monkey Man. Assault with deadly weapon at 17, extortion with threat to kill at 18, armed robbery at 19. Acquitted on all charges except the armed robbery. Served two years, seven months. Mitchell represented him."

They took the Harbor freeway for several miles and turned off into the industrial district. They parked near a graveyard for old business signs, acres of enormous electrical and neon monstrosities. At an unpainted office, falling apart and little bigger than a child's playhouse, they asked for Dutch Johnson. Following directions, they picked their way through a maze of twisted metal and glass tubes. He proved a sullen, mean-looking, pole-thin character in his mid-twenties with a spider monkey riding on his left shoulder.

Hawk asked, "Dutch Johnson?"

He stared suspiciously. Nobody would be wanting him for any reason other than one that boded ill. "Yeah," he answered finally. He turned to the frightened, chattering monkey. "It's all right, baby."

Hawk repeated his routine, that they were looking for Blackie Henderson.

"Skip bond?" Dutch asked.

"Forty grand. Know where he is?"

"Reckon not." With that, he started work again.

Hawk needled him. "You wouldn't tell us if you did."

"Not bulls."

"I said we were—"

"Cops. You smell. Skunks and cops. You got a stink."

"You don't smell so good yourself," Hawk said. "Come on, Barney."

Once outside, Barney said, "It's just something, well, sort of on paper, isn't it, until you get out among these hoods? Then you get to thinking about what one might do to Miss Rogers."

"The worst part," Hawk said, "is that you don't know how he's thinking. Does he mean it when he says he'll kill her and her mother, or is he faking? Is it strictly business with him or does he want to get his hands on her when he's got the money? Is he hot tempered or will he use some reason if she makes a mistake? Is he the brooding kind or a cold, clever operator? If we knew his temperament, we'd know what to expect."

Their next call was at a carpet store, one that advertised an acre of carpets. Absently, while Hawk was taking a reckoning, Barney picked up the corner of a large red-and-gold rug. A pleasant-looking, bushy-haired salesman hurried over. "Good morning," he said in a patronizing voice, "have you been helped?"

"We're looking for Nick Webster," Barney told him.

The salesman smiled. "You've found him." He was in his late forties, quite distinguished looking, with keen, piercing blue eyes that were the focus of attention in a well-structured, oval face. Mitchell had successfully defended him in a blackmail case in which a Beverly Hills financier had been beaten.

Hawk took the lead. "I believe we have a mutual friend, Blackie Henderson."

"Henderson?" He shook his head. "I don't place the gentleman. Is he one of our customers?"

"No," Hawk said slowly, "one of Leavenworth's. Or was."

Webster's fixed smile disappeared. He dropped his voice. "I don't recall him. There were so many. Please, you won't say anything

here, will you? They don't know—I mean about me. I haven't a mark against me since—since I got out."

"What about the blackmail charge?"

"Oh, that. It was nothing. I was acquitted." He turned to Barney, his salesmanship smile in place. "We've got a terrific buy on that carpet. Seven ninety-five a yard, laid. Includes the pad."

✠ FOURTEEN ✠

She paused in her typing every time the old, worn floor in the corridor outside creaked, then continued when the footsteps drifted on. Now she yanked the copy out of the typewriter, wadded it up, and pushed it with a vengeance deep down into the wastebasket. That was the third time she had tried to type page 2 of "Defendant's Answer." She reached for a cigarette, found the package empty, and muttered.

Suitcase Sullivan, the bail bondsman, glided in. He never seemed to walk. "Top of the morning to you, Gail," he said, pushing the derby back. "You get prettier every day. If I were 50 years younger. . . ."

She smiled. "Why let 50 years get in the way?"

He chuckled and walked into Mitch's office. He never knocked, and no one ever took umbrage. They expected it of Suitcase. He was a far sharper operator, she thought, than most people realized.

When he was gone, Mitch wandered out. "You'd never know he's got arthritis." Mitch would notice. He always did. She herself hadn't known. "Must be in considerable pain. But he never says anything."

He turned to her. "You all right?"

The concern in his voice was a tranquilizer. "Got a cigarette?" she asked. He lighted one of his and gave it to her. She said, "Now get it off your mind. You've got enough to think about."

He saw the stack of legal-sized pages she was copying. "Why don't you send them out?"

She shook her head. "If I did, you'd dock me."

He laughed, then turned sober again. "Don't try to fight it, Shad-

rach." He bent over to kiss her but broke off when a woman's short, quick footsteps approached down the corridor. Just in time, he slipped back into his office, avoiding Martha.

"How're you doing?" Martha asked.

"Okay."

"Keep breathing and you'll make it. They always do." She covered her ears at the first ping of Beethoven. "Some public-spirited citizen should shoot that kid." Martha eyed her thoughtfully, as though on the brink of a decision. She said abruptly, "I'm worried about you."

"Me?" It's showing, she thought, and I can't help it.

"Who else?"

"Why, for gosh sakes?"

"Look, doll, it still isn't too late." Martha got it out rapidly. "If you think you've made a mistake—if you want to call it off—"

"Oh, no! No! It isn't that—I mean—" She was totally unprepared for this reaction and her shock stunted processes could not come up with an answer.

Impulsively, Martha hugged her tightly, briefly. At the door, she said, "Well, that's old Martha for you. Opens her big mouth and leaps in with both feet. Forget it, doll." But the puzzled look in her eyes spoke louder than her words. "Ciao," she added, and was gone.

Tonight she would get Martha to one side and confide in her. After all, Martha was her dearest friend. At the age of eight, hadn't they taken a blood oath after reading a Dumas novel? Gail smiled. She still had the scar on her left wrist. At 10 they decided they would marry the same day and have babies the same day. In high school they double dated, and then there had been a separation of four years when Martha went to Brigham Young university. But afterwards they had resumed as if there had been no absence. Gail had gotten Martha her job down the hall, with a firm of income tax accountants.

Not until Gail started dating Mitch had there been any serious differences. Martha liked Mitch, all right, for a casual acquaintance but—. "He's too rough around the edges . . . doesn't have your background . . . wouldn't know Mozart from Mickey Mantle . . . too stubborn . . . you don't know anything about him except what he's told you . . . you can do better . . . it's love by proxim-

ity . . . you're together all day with an attractive man—sure, he's attractive, I never said he wasn't—and the old hormone business goes to work."

Gail had said, "But don't you see, it's really love if I can stay cooped up with someone all day—and then can hardly wait to see him nights."

Once she and Mitch became engaged, Martha had never said another word. She was happy and excited for Gail, and if she were only pretending, she was a good actress. . . .

Scarcely had she swung back to the typewriter when the door knob turned. Stealthily, she thought, but then that was because she was acutely aware of every scratch of noise. Any other time it would have been only a door opening slowly. Nevertheless, she turned quickly to find the Monkey Man padding toward her in tennis shoes. On his right shoulder, the little monkey rode silently, his tiny eyes darting about furtively, like his master's. Hurriedly she checked her memory for the man's name.

A year ago Mitch had successfully defended him on a statutory charge, and about six months ago, he had been in briefly to ask Mitch a routine question. Afterwards, Mitch had said, "That monkey's the only friend he has in the world. He doesn't feel secure unless he's with him, and you know, he hasn't been in trouble since he got him. We've all got to have something to hang on to."

"Mitch," the Monkey Man said.

"He's on the phone now. I don't think he'll be long."

Dutch Johnson. That was his name.

He eased himself down into a hard-backed chair, and proceeded to take inventory of her. She was more embarrassed than angry. In this situation, she never knew quite what to do. Should she pretend she didn't notice? Should she joke about it, and possibly spread confusion in the ranks of the enemy?

She asked, "What's his name?" She indicated the monkey.

"Baby." He stroked the little creature who responded by placing a paw on the rough cheek.

"What kind is he?"

The man shrugged, and she realized the uselessness of trying to engage him in conversation. From the few words he had spoken, he

sounded nothing like the criminal. She admitted to herself, though, that even if he had, she would have stricken him from the list. Psychologically, she found it impossible to separate her assailant's voice from the image she had formed of him, and that image bore little resemblance to the Monkey Man. She pictured her assailant as middle-aged, a little on the heavy side, gruff, with a low mentality. He had dark hair, a low forehead, and a heavy beard.

Now how could the mind have formed such an image? From bits and tatters remembered from movies and books and associations with similar voices in the past? It was utterly ridiculous, an image based on the kind of mental scraps that feed nightmares.

If the Monkey Man continued to paw her with his eyes another minute, she would hurl a paperweight at him. The thought kept recurring, what if this is the criminal, what if he's come to determine how I'm standing up under his torture, what if he's undressing me in his mind at this very moment?

I'll pick up the money tonight, and then what? Will he be waiting somewhere nearby to take it from me? Perhaps meet me in a dark park? I couldn't go through with it. I'd panic.

Come on, Gail, cool it. You're building up a good case of hysteria. You've got to keep control for tonight, complete control. One step at a time. Don't look ahead. Don't conjecture. You're not a child walking through a graveyard. You're an adult, mature woman. Remember how you've always prided yourself that you could handle any situation? If you're going to pieces, wait until this is over, and then let go, and have a ball breaking down.

When the phone light flashed off, she spoke into the inter-com. "Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Johnson is here—with his monkey." She added the last by way of identification. Mitch said to send him in.

He turned about at Mitch's door and subjected her to one last scanning. She shuddered. He's probably done that every time he's been in here, and I've never noticed.

Please, Mitch, get into civil practice. I don't know how long I can take the evil and the depravity, the beatings and killings.

She flipped the inter-com. "Mitch, I'm on my way to get my hair done—unless you need me."

He said he didn't. Then she thought of him alone with the Monkey Man. She whispered, "Will you be all right? You know what I mean."

She never left Mitch alone with anyone she considered dangerous. "No, I won't be needing you, Miss Rogers," he said.

"Mitch," she added, "don't forget to get a haircut."

She forced her paralyzed muscles to stand her up. She checked herself in a compact mirror. The moisture stood out, heavy on her forehead.

✻ FIFTEEN ✻

From the promenade deck atop the courthouse, Hawk looked down upon the new heart of Los Angeles. The beautiful, rounded Music Center dominated the long, impressive Mall with its high rise buildings and two theaters, and beyond this, everywhere, stretched the seemingly endless city. On the dot of 1:30, Mitch appeared, and seeing Hawk, walked slowly toward him, a mastiff sizing up another. "Lt. Hawkins?" he asked, and Hawk nodded. They shook hands only sufficiently to satisfy the amenities.

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice," Hawk said, feeling his way. "You know, of course, what it's all about, and before we go into it, I want to assure you that our primary consideration is for the safety of Miss Rogers—"

Mitch held up a hand. "Look, I've heard the record before. Let's get down to the matter at issue. You don't want me around. You want to play papa, and for me to run home like a good little boy."

Only a roar of traffic below, muted and melded by space, could be heard. Then Hawk said slowly, "That's about it."

Mitch held his temper. "Let me ask you one question. If she were your fiancée, would you sit around wagging your toes tonight?"

Hawk took a deep breath. "If her life depended upon it, yes, I think I could. It's one thing to risk your own life, but to risk somebody else's. . . ."

Mitch's voice was edged with emotion. "Then why don't you do some hard thinking about getting her out of this—*before* tonight?"

"I'm a detective, not a magician," Hawk shot back. "I suppose you have some suggestions?"

"You could send someone in her place."

"Sure—but when the criminal discovers the deception, what then?"

"How could he, if you sent a policewoman?"

"He knows Miss Rogers. He didn't pick a stranger."

Mitch's lips were a thin white line. "She can't go. I don't care what you do, she's not going. Look," he added, "I'm not a lawyer pleading a case. I'm a guy desperately in love with a girl. Put yourself in my place."

"Okay, she's not going. Do you think the criminal will leave her alone?"

"You could put a 'round-the-clock guard on her—till this mess clears up."

Hawk shook his head. "We don't have the manpower to protect everyone in danger. No police force on earth does. And even if we did, it's tough keeping a person from getting shot. Not a week goes by that you don't read about a key witness being gunned down somewhere, right under the noses of the authorities."

He paused and some of the hardness left his voice. "What would you have us do—if we did have the manpower? Make a prisoner out of her, put her in a room with an armed guard at her door, and the same with her mother, for months, years possibly, until we caught the criminal?"

Mitch's face was that of a man in torment. "All right, if you can't, I can. I'll take care of her."

Hawk was perspiring, not entirely from the heat. "You remember the Amy Knobec case? The housewife whom her attacker didn't quite kill? She recovered, but she has moments when she wishes she hadn't. That was five year ago, she has moved twenty times to a dozen different cities, and she still gets threatening letters from her attacker. He follows her, a nameless terror."

Mitch wheeled around. "So that's why she's determined to go through with it! You've been telling her horror stories."

Hawk's voice rose above Mitch's. "I did not tell her. She told me. I didn't *ask* her to come to the police in the first place. I didn't *ask* her to go through with it. It was her decision. You go talk to her."

"I can't let her go alone," Mitch said, torn apart. "What kind of a man would I be if I let her go by herself to God knows where? I'm going to be there." His voice rose. "For heaven's sake, can't you

understand? We're going to be married Saturday. She's the one and only thing in all my life I've loved or who's loved me. I came out of East Los Angeles. I never even had a dog . . . and my folks were only shadows going back and forth to work and falling into bed when they got home."

Hawk said quietly, "If the criminal spots you, he'll figure you're one of us, that she's gone to the police. It takes only a phone call to her mother or a shot from a passing car while she's driving."

Mitch said tersely, "I've had a lot of experience with hoodlums. I can handle it."

"Okay. It's *her* life. By the way, where's her father?"

Mitch shot him a sharp glance. "She doesn't know. She hasn't heard from him in years."

"I asked you, do you know?"

"Now just a minute, Lieutenant, that's an old trick—to try to rattle the witness with a question from left field. Remember, I'm the lawyer, you're the detective."

"I wish to God I could bank on that—tonight. . . . You know, you haven't changed one bit, Mitchell. Just as bull-headed and high handed as the first time we locked horns."

Mitch looked perplexed. "You don't remember, do you?" Hawk continued. "Well, I do. Because I was just getting started, and it hurt. I was the arresting officer in a stolen car case. It was open and shut until I was on the witness stand and you got your turn at me. You made it sound like I was on trial, not the car thief, and got an acquittal for him. But not for me."

He started away, turned back. "I didn't stand up well to you that time. I was young, inexperienced. But I've hardened considerably since then. Considerably."

He walked away without a good-bye.



Mitch liked the freeways. On them he felt he could drive as fast as he wanted.

"Please," Gail said, "I'm so jittery anyway."

He slowed down to 60. "It's good for the motor. Gets the carbon out."

She tried laughing. It was good sitting close to him with the warm evening air lapping softly over her, intensifying the fragrance of the gardenia he had bought for her from the eager, tattered boy on the corner.

"You didn't get a haircut," she said sternly. "I'm not marrying a hippie. If you show up for the wedding without one, I'm going to pack you off to a barber shop, and tell the guests over the loud-speaker, 'Sorry, folks, but there'll be a slight delay while the bridegroom gets a haircut.'"

They both laughed, and for a moment she escaped reality. It was the old world with Mitch and little ecstasies and little problems. She had lived it as if it would go on that way forever, only to learn that catastrophe could strike so quickly. Her mother had never even had a heart murmur, and now this. In some ways the unexpected was more shattering than disasters anticipated. If one knew a hurricane was approaching, he could batten down a few mental hatches.

Mitch told her about his conversation with Hawk, and she sensed his simmering anger. He never exploded. As her mother would say, he merely stewed. "I know he's got a job to do, and it's a rough one. I wouldn't want it. But I don't have to take orders from him if I don't think he's right."

"Of course not," she agreed.

"He asked if I knew where your father was, and I asked him how in hell would I know."

She said with alarm, "You don't think he knows something we don't?"

"He was fishing. It's an old trick."

"If he should come to the wedding—but he wouldn't, after all these years."

"Fathers have."

"I won't have him there." Mitch reacted by speeding up.

Her mother was nineteen at the time she married Lt. Harold Rogers, just back from World War II. He was a salesman in San Diego, and had visions of setting the world on fire. But nothing he tried turned to money. Half the time they were hungry, and then Gail was born. The day he left, when she was a year old, the finance

people repossessed the car, and other men came to haul away the furniture. They had nothing to eat in the house except some bread, an enormous bottle of jam that had been given them, and a half quart of milk.

He simply disappeared. A couple of days later there came a note saying they would be better off without him. That was the last they ever heard from him. Her mother got help from a city agency, then a job as a switchboard operator in a hotel. She saved her money, and went to school to learn to be a grocery checker.

She was still in love with him. "He was a wonderful man, your father, but he couldn't accept failure or responsibility. He was too young. Not in years but in maturity. I always thought that sometime he would come back."

Mitch knew Gail's feeling toward him, not one of hatred but rather resentment that he would walk away from them. Mitch quickly changed the subject to the Monkey Man. "He's either up to something or in trouble already. Wanted to know if I would find out why Lt. Hawkins had been around. Wanted to know if Suitcase would post bond for him if anything developed."

Mitch left the freeway at Woodman and shortly afterwards pulled up before a sprawling, low Spanish-type building set back a considerable distance from the street, with a winding flagstone sidewalk leading to a heavy oak door. The scene was one of peace and quiet. A bougainvillea bloomed in magenta profusion across the roof line on one side, and native walnuts and acacias sheltered the whole from the sun.

"I won't stay long," she said, leaving. He told her to take her time, that he would be briefing a case.

The first thing her mother asked, of course, was, "Where's Mitch?"

"I knew you wouldn't settle for second best," Gail answered with feigned cheerfulness. "He's outside. The doctor doesn't think you should have both of us at the same time."

"The doctor? Phooey! I'm going to fire that man. He's keeping me a prisoner here. I think he gets a rake-off from this place."

Gail laughed. Her mother hadn't been this lively in weeks. She lay immobile and relaxed, in a half sitting position. Her body, that only a few months ago had been so strong, was frail now but a little of the old zest was coming back into her dark brown eyes, and the warm,

little smile was returning. Gail could see her still at Gelson's checking counter in Encino, always with something to say after she had rung up the grocery purchases. Gail remembered the time she had proudly taken some teen-age friends by and pointed out her mother. "Like I was something in the zoo," her mother had remarked later.

Now Gail looked about for a place to put the mums she had brought. "I fed them hormones like you said—and look. We've never had such big ones."

"Don't over feed them," her mother warned.

"The MacDonaldis send you their love and Dr. Espinosa stopped me to ask about you. It's the first time he's ever said more than good morning. He seems very nice and when he found out I spoke Spanish he really warmed up."

"What's wrong, hon?"

Gail stiffened. "Wrong?"

Her mother nodded. "I've never heard you talk so fast, and you're sitting on the edge of the chair, and you've never done that before. You've got your hands clenched, and you lost a lot of sleep last night, and you almost knocked over that little table when you came in."

Gail sat back in the chair and spread out her hands. "Honest, mama, you should've been a detective. I'm getting married, remember?"

Her mother chuckled. She was her old self. "I hope you get to the altar before a sanitarium. . . . I had a phone call today from a man who said he was an old friend of yours."

Gail came erect. "Who?"

"He didn't give me his name. Said it wouldn't mean anything. Said he had never met me but he knew you well and wanted to let me know everyone was thinking about me. I thought it was real nice of him. You don't know who it was?"

Gail moistened her lips and steadied her voice. "Someone around the building, I suppose."

"He had an odd voice. I can't describe it."

"Well, I'll probably learn who it was."

They talked another few minutes, and then Gail left. She kissed her mother lightly, they held hands a moment, and her mother said, "God be with you, hon."

Afterwards, Mitch drove her to her apartment, and waited outside while she went in to change. She had just pulled off her dress when the beeper sounded. She froze a moment, then shaking, grabbed the walkie talkie out of her purse, pushed the "talk" button, and exploded, "You called my mother! You said you wouldn't if I went along. If you call her again, if you do. . . ."

When her voice went out of control, she lifted her finger from the button. "She's got a nice corner room. Real handy." His voice turned sharp. "Fifth and Cranston. Ten fifteen."

He broke off. Only faint static crackled out of the walkie talkie. Still clenching it, she sank to the bed, and dropped her head on the pillow. Herman wandered in from the kitchen where he had finished his dinner, hopped up, and walked over to lick her on the cheek. His fish smell brought her out of shock. She rubbed his ears, and heard him purr. When she stepped into her skirt, and pulled it up about her narrow hips, her hands were steady.



SEVENTEEN



Never had Hawk seen his men so intent. Usually there was some scraping of chairs, idle coughing, and glancing about in boredom. This, though, was the first major case the Heavy Squad had handled since it had been formed as an experimental unit. If they failed, no one would hold it against them, since no single case could be used as a criterion for testing a squad. Nevertheless, if they should close the case successfully, they knew the higher ups would be impressed.

"We washed out on the voiceprints," Hawk said. "We taped 29 of Frank Mitchell's clients, and Mitchell himself, and none matched the voiceprint of the subject."

The time was 6 P.M. Outside the flickering-on of lights, rather than twilight itself, was announcing the approach of night. Few in a big city ever noted or enjoyed the transitional period.

"That doesn't necessarily clear them," he continued. "Any one of them could have an accomplice who is talking with Rogers."

He stepped to an aerial map of the Fifth and Cranston area.

"Rogers will park at this point and wait for instructions from the subject. We will have five mobile units stationed at these points." He indicated with a yardstick. "In addition we will have five men on foot, and two in the television camera plane."

A detective in the back spoke up. "If I was that guy, and saw a plane circling around, I'd get out of there."

Hawk nodded. "We've called for only one pass. If the operation drags out, we'll call for another. Your point's well taken."

He turned back to the map. "We'll place a mobile interceptor unit here"—he indicated—"that will attempt to determine the civilian channel the criminal is using, and try to pick up a directional find on him. But if he keeps moving, there's little chance of locating him."

Watusi entered and placed a memo before him. Glancing at it, he said, "The advance unit working Fifth and Cranston reports nothing unusual, no suspicious characters loitering about. As you know, we don't expect the pay-off to take place in that area. If the subject runs true to pattern, he'll instruct Rogers to proceed to a spot some distance away. He may ask her to drive; he might even want her to proceed on foot, and that's why we've got five men grounded."

They all knew it was difficult for a mobile unit to run a surveillance on a party walking. Either the car had to crawl, or drive by and turn around and come back, or drive by and wait. Any one of the three procedures could arouse the suspicion of a smart criminal.

Hawk continued, "We haven't been able to dissuade the informant's fiancé, Frank Mitchell, from going to the scene. We have pictures of him." He gave photos of Barney to pass out. "If he gets in your way, pick him up, bring him in, and hold him until we're finished."

An officer toward the front asked, "Won't all hell break loose tomorrow—if we pick up an innocent party we know is innocent?"

Hawk nodded. "I'll take the responsibility. Now, about the informant. She's sensible and smart and has guts. Dr. Barton assures me she's not going to crack up. That is, she isn't going to panic and run unless she's assaulted."

"What about Mitchell?" someone asked. "Is he armed?"

"We don't know. We have to go on the assumption he is."

He tried rubbing some of the weariness out of his eyes. He had had too long a day. He knew it, and knew he should not be starting

this operation with such a load of fatigue. Any man this exhausted would be mistake prone.

He said, "We have three goals tonight. Our primary objective, above everything else, will be to keep Rogers alive. We should be able to maintain a protective shield about her at all times unless the criminal sets up a meeting in a spot we can't watch. We have already taken into account the possibility the victim—the party coming with the money—may attempt to kill her rather than pay off. But even if he should come with that in mind, we can protect her to a certain extent provided we can keep her in sight."

Someone asked, "What if we can't? What then?"

Hawk shifted uneasily. "We could pull her in. One of us could get to her and stop her. But that would be telling the criminal that she has reported the matter to the police, and we can't risk the consequences."

He waited a moment. "Now if the criminal instructs Rogers to hand the \$200,000 over to him tonight—after the pay-off—we will move in to apprehend him, and wind this up. But whether he does or not, we will intercept the victim, after he has made the pay-off, for questioning. As you know, we still don't have any idea who the victim is—or the type of crime."

He nodded in dismissal. "That's about it—except move carefully, don't let the subject see you, think a second before you fire—if you have to—and keep this girl under cover as if she were your sweetheart."

Jenny followed Hawk into his office. She knew she had no business putting sound to her thoughts. It was bad politics, and she was desperately anxious to make good on this job. Ever since her teen years she had wanted to work with criminals, to determine if there were not more to be done psychologically in changing the thinking of people who were crime prone.

Now, though, regardless of the consequences, the words had to come out. "I've been in this job only 10 hours, and I haven't had any experience in police work. I know I'm out of order but something's bothering me—and I'm the kind that has to out with it."

She waited for encouragement, but he only stared out of eyes that had turned cold. She continued, "The others have implicit faith in

your judgment—I'm sure they're right—but, about the criminal gunning Miss Rogers down if he thinks she's gone to the police. Isn't it true that most big money crimes are committed by fairly intelligent people who abhor violence?"

"I'm sure you're sure of the statistics," was Hawk's noncommittal response.

Jenny colored. "Certainly, we don't know he's a killer. Naturally, he would say so and threaten her, in order to control her by fear. He may be a mild-mannered man who would never think of turning to murder."

"And so?"

"Suppose the pay-off is set for a place where you can't watch over her. Wouldn't it be better to stop her and take a chance? You could put a 24-hour guard around her and wait to see if the man makes a move."

Impatiently, Hawk waited for her to finish. "You *are* out of order," he said cryptically, then suddenly sagged. He took a deep breath to let the tension out. "Sorry," he continued softly, "but this has really got me. You are always free to make suggestions, of course. And you may be right. I may be calling the wrong plays. But police work's like a ball game—some hits, a few errors. A young officer yells to someone in the dark to surrender—someone he has come upon robbing a store—and he gets a bullet in answer. He lets go with a shot and kills a punk kid. Did the officer have a right to fire that shot? He had only a few seconds to make a decision—and you can understand a mistake committed under pressure—but when you've got hours. . . . You think afterwards, what was I doing all of that time? Why couldn't I have foreseen what was going to happen? Why, why, why?"

He unclenched his fists. "Don't think I don't know what the consequences may be. Don't think I won't have to live with it."

He drew himself up. "The decision stands. We play it tonight the way the criminal wants it."

✻ EIGHTEEN ✻

They skirted the picturesque little settlement of Portuguese Bend, set in rolling, fresh-smelling country, and then drove along the ocean with moonlit, thundering white surf rolling toward them.

Gail said little, her mind playing a dangerous game, projecting a quick succession of film shots—fast cuts of all the possible turns the hours ahead might bring. Mitch, too, had thoughts in tow, but he noticed her silence when they turned away from the ocean and passed through a brilliantly-lit residential area of Spanish and Mediterranean-type homes. “You all right?” he inquired gently. He had asked the question a dozen times within the last few hours.

She kissed him with her eyes. “Fine, except I feel like an elephant had fallen on me.” She snuggled closer, and drew reassurance from the press of their bodies. Tonight was to have been a memorable one, her wedding rehearsal, a night to file away. Now the rehearsal was only something to walk through, a prelude in which to count the minutes before blast off.

“Shouldn’t you take a tranquilizer?” he asked.

He had offered her one at the office and she had refused. “I don’t want my reflexes slowed down.”

High above them rose the Wayfarer’s Chapel, a church of all glass, the walls and the roof. From its knoll, it commended a view of the tree-dotted country-side and a vast expanse of ocean with a white craft bobbing about in the moonlight, and in the distance, a freighter outbound from the nearby harbor of San Pedro.

Mitch shot the car up the winding, paved road and into the parking lot. He braked it at the last possible second, and she thought her neck would snap. He was thoughtful about most things but never remembered to ease on the brakes.

He handed her the keys, and their fingers met briefly. They walked a few hundred yards into a small, milling group, the remnants of the 7:30 rehearsal. The girls were chattering away, and their

dates were laughing and shouting. Mitch took her arm to guide her, and his hand on her bare elbow was cold.

Waiting inside was Dr. Jenny Barton, looking smart in a simple white dress set off by a sparkling blue rhinestone necklace and long blue earrings. "I must see you," she whispered. "We have about five minutes."

Martha approached hesitantly, and Gail said, "This is my Aunt Jenny from Chicago, Jenny Barton." She excused herself, and accompanied by Jenny made her way down a tunnel-like stairway to a small dressing room.

"I'm glad you're here," Gail said, and meant it. She liked this warm, soft-voiced woman who at the moment seemed excessively nervous.

"Thank you. I'll hurry because you haven't much time. I need your help. I know that when Lt. Hawkins advised you not to tell your fiancé about this, that it hurt you and it hurt him. So when the Lieutenant asked him to keep out of this tonight, naturally your fiancé didn't appreciate the suggestion."

"He certainly didn't," Gail put in, on guard.

"But when I heard about it, I felt that this personal conflict—this wrong approach—shouldn't be allowed to—"

Gail interrupted. "Did Lt. Hawkins ask you to talk with me?"

"He knows about it—but it was my idea. I want you to consider something. Your fiancé could be mistaken for the criminal in the dark. It's conceivable that he might be killed. In these instances, it always seems that it's the innocent person trying to help out who gets hurt. I know that he loves you deeply and wants to show it by protecting you but looking at it realistically, he can't do anything for you that we can't. He is needlessly risking his life."

She talked along much as Gail's mother would have, quietly but intently. If she used psychology, it was the grass roots kind.

"That's about it," she ended. "I just wanted you to think about it."

Martha tapped on the door and called, "It's time. Everybody's here."

Gail said they would be right up, and Martha left. Gail turned to Jenny. "I took a call at the apartment before coming here—"

"I know."

"It didn't sound like the same voice. He called me Gail when he

talked to me before but tonight it was Miss Rogers. I hadn't thought much about it but there could be two, couldn't there?"

"Or more. It's a lot of money."

Gail said, "I must run."

Upstairs she hurried to the back of the chapel where the bridesmaids were waiting. Already the ushers had been briefed about seating relatives and old friends. There was much talk. Most of the bridesmaids and the ushers had their dates along. Then she saw Barney Carlson. He said, "Hi, Gail." She was a second slow in coming up with his name. "Hello, Barney," she answered, just as profusely.

The wedding co-ordinator, who was a handsome, buxom woman in her early fifties, explained briefly the ground rules, as Mitch called them. The bride and her bridesmaids would begin the procession to the altar on cue from her. The music had been tape recorded, and hence, there would be no organist.

She asked the bridegroom and his best man to step inside the room to the right of the altar. Mitch continued staring blankly in the direction of the ocean. "Mitch!" Gail whispered. "Wake up." He came vaguely aware and walked slowly away.

"What a honeymoon you're going to have," Martha said. "He'll probably take along the Law Journal and you know who'll get priority."

Gail remembered to smile. Somehow she had to get Mitch interested in subjects other than law, in people other than attorneys. Take his best man. Mitch knew him only casually, a bare acquaintance from his University of Southern California days. That was the trouble. Mitch had no close friends. He had never taken the time to develop any.

The tape began playing, the co-ordinator signaled her, and the procession started. They arrived at the altar without a misstep. (Rehearsals always go smoothly, Gail thought; the missteps come at the wedding.) Mitch and his best man walked in from the side, and the minister, who had known her since she was 10, took his place. Mitch was obviously uncomfortable. He had never gone to church. As a boy, he had felt he wouldn't be accepted in his shabby clothes, and in college, he never thought he had the time.

Once he stepped beside her, she experienced a warm, happy surge that quickly vanished. She whispered, "I want you to do something for me, Mitch. For me, and no one else."

The minister explained that he would offer a few remarks before reading the ceremony proper.

She whispered, "I want you to go directly to my apartment. I want you there when I come home. I want you to do this because I love you so very much."

The minister said sotto voce, "If I could have your attention for a minute."

Mitch said, "I can't. Don't ask me. I've got to be with you."

She squeezed his hand. "Please don't say no. Please, Mitch."

The minister broke in. "I must have your attention."

She looked penitent, and the minister smiled. In all of his years, he had never had a couple argue while he was explaining his procedure.

"Now," he said, "we won't go through with the actual ceremony but I'm sure you know that when I ask, 'Do you take this man for your lawful wedded husband?', you say, 'I do!'"

He looked at Gail as if she might come up with the wrong answer. He turned to Mitch. "And when I ask, 'Do you take this woman.' . . ." A few days before, Mitch had said he was going to answer, "I so stipulate." And it would just be like him to use legal jargon!

Behind her, Gail heard Martha say, "When he gets around to that part about if you've got any objections to come up with them now or forever hold your peace, I'm going to object. I've always wanted to see what would happen if someone objected."

It was then Gail remembered she hadn't told Martha. She wished she had. She would tomorrow.

She glanced at her watch. Nine twenty. "I've got to be going. I've—I've got an appointment."

The minister smiled. "Gail, you're the same kid I used to know. Always in a hurry. I hope you can stick around long enough Saturday. . . ."

She didn't hear him. To everyone's bafflement, she was hurrying down the aisle. She needed the good part of an hour to reach Fifth and Cranston. She couldn't be late. If she got caught in traffic. . . .

✠ NINETEEN ✠

At Fifth and Cranston she parked on the northwest corner, a short distance back from the intersection. Since the criminal had specified no particular spot, she pulled into a space where a "No Parking" sign squatted in dead center. She edged the sign out of the way with the bumper. Hawk's men had placed it there, to assure her a place. "In the movies," Hawk had said, "there's always a parking space waiting but in real life you show up and find none."

When she parked, a light went off in the basement apartment to her right. She watched breathlessly, expecting someone to emerge. Then she took reconnaissance of the dark, tree-lined street which was bordered with drab, aging apartment houses badly in need of paint and fresh curtains. As far as she could see, no one, not even a dog, moved. She herself was hidden in a patch of blackness beneath tall, spreading elms that seemed to whistle in the night breeze like frightened youngsters.

She discovered she was sitting straight backed, her hands gripping the wheel. Take a deep breath, she told herself. Let it out slowly, evenly. And now another. Opening her purse, she placed it on the seat beside her, and checked the two radios.

Mama. I wish I could've told mama. I've never kept anything from her before. And Mitch. I hope he didn't come. Please, God, don't let anything happen to him. And Herman. Now wasn't that ridiculous, thinking of a cat? But she loved Herman, and Mitch knew it, and even though he detested cats, he would take care of Herman if anything went wrong.

She sorted out the noises: the Mamas and Papas singing faintly, guns cracking in the distance from a television set, a phone ringing briefly, a wife shouting to her husband, a child crying somewhere, a barely audible symphony, the thunder of a big jet, a dog barking (there was always a dog barking, no matter where you went in this world). Every sound seemed muted, far away. In her own vortex, there was only silence.

She noted the shift lever was in reverse gear, and moved it to neutral. Now she could start the car a second faster. That was silly. Why would she want to start the car a second faster?

She lit a cigarette, then blew out the match quickly. How, though, could a moment of flame matter, even if it did light up her face? It couldn't. It was just that everything she did she analyzed.

She heard him before she saw him, and jerkily rubbed out the cigarette in the ash tray. His steps were heavy and slow. He came into view only a few feet from her as a middle-aged, heavy-set man. He saw her, too, and slowed, then stopped. He took a cigar from an inside coat pocket and lit it. As he did, he stooped slightly to get a full view of her face, and their eyes met and held. . . .

In the basement apartment, sitting in the dark, Hawk reported into a microphone, "Man approaching on sidewalk . . . walking very slowly . . . now coming into view . . . he's stopping to light a cigar . . . he's looking toward Rogers' car . . . dark featured, middle-aged, overweight, wearing dark sport clothes . . . he's puffing cigar, stalling . . . all units, prepare to move . . . he's continuing down sidewalk . . . no contact made with informant . . . unit six, run tail job and check him out . . . that's all."

He checked the radium dial of his watch. "Ten thirty," he whispered to Barney. "They always let you sit a while. Nothing cracks you up like sitting waiting."

The radio in front of him came alive. "We lost Frank Mitchell on a dark street. He made us and disappeared into a back yard. We're still working the neighborhood but it doesn't look good."

Hawk groaned. He couldn't, though, hold it against his men. Most anyone could beat a tail job in a lonely neighborhood at night. . . .

A motorcycle with a bearded rider roared by, then slowed at the corner behind her, circled, and came to a stop. In the rear view mirror she saw him under a street light, one foot on the curb. For an interminable time, he appeared to be casting about. He looked nothing like her mental picture of the assailant. He had hair to his shoulders and wore a cap with a visor. His dark trousers fitted tightly, as did a zippered-up black leather jacket.

Everyone was suspect. She studied everyone for a tell-tale clue.

Not until now had she ever *looked* at strangers. In a big city, one didn't *see* people unless one was concerned about them or afraid of them.

He revved up the motor and with an exploding exhaust, bore down upon her. Quickly she rolled up the window, leaving two inches at the top. He came alongside and stared expectantly. "Hey, doll, want to go for a ride?" he yelled. When she shook her head, he barreled off.

She ordered her pounding heart to slow down. She had difficulty holding the cigarette steady before the flame. At that very moment the walkie talkie came to life, and she dropped the burning match. Frantically she scuffed a foot over it.

The flat, down beat tone was gone. In its place was anxiety. "You ready, Gail?"

"Yes."

"Here's what you do. You go to First and Center, park on Center and get out. You walk south and at the first alley on your right, you go down it a little way. A man will meet you with the money. Don't talk to him. You hear that? Don't say one word. You make one mistake—just one. . . ."

She pushed the button to "talk." "Wait! Wait! I don't know where First and Center is."

His voice was harsh. "Don't fool around with me, Gail. Just get your fanny moving."

"I don't know. Honest. Wait! What do I do with the money. . . ." She realized with a shock that she hadn't pushed the talk button. When she did, he was gone.

In her haste to get a city map, she spilled out half the contents of the glove compartment. She fumbled for the magnetic flashlight under the dashboard, knocked it to the floor. When she did locate it, she discovered the batteries were dead. She talked to herself. "Matches, matches." She located an extra packet in her purse, spread out the map, and by the time she had struck seven or eight matches, she pinpointed First and Center.

She flung the map aside, turned the ignition key to start the car, put on too much gas, and her head jerked backward with a snap of vertebrae as the car lurched into the street.

Then for the first time, she remembered the Lieutenant's instruc-

tions. *Stall, stall.* How could she forget anything so important. At the intersection, she braked to a sudden, lurching stop without using the clutch. The motor died.

She waited as long as she dared. "Flood, you've got to flood." She pumped the gas lever hard, then turned the starter key. The engine started to take hold, then coughed and died. She repeated the process until she smelled the sharp odor of gasoline.

The beep brought her up sharply. "What's the matter? Get moving. You want to be dead?"

She drove slowly then, her will power a lodestone to her compulsion for reckless speed.

She heard his voice again. "Step on it, Gail. Get moving! Faster! Faster!" He had the laugh of a madman in a moment of triumph.

The motorcyclist roared by, headed in the same direction, and kept his hand pressed on a horn which emitted a wild calliope sound that she immediately identified. It was the siren cry of the S.S. storm troopers. . . .

Barney spoke rapidly into the mike, "First and Center. Repeat, she has just received instructions to proceed to First and Center. Pay-off will be made in alley directly south of Center on right hand as you approach from First. Plan X in effect. Repeat, Plan X in effect. Control now moving."

Hawk said, "That's the wholesale district. It's a graveyard this time of night."

✠ TWENTY ✠

Barney lay prone on the rough tar paper roof of a three-story brick building, and studied the narrow, dirty alley far below him through a beat-up pair of binoculars. Beside him was a .30-.30 rifle that he had placed exactly right for his hand to reach. A few feet away stretched the General, using binoculars to cover the darkened windows of a deserted building across the alley, one that rose two stories higher.

Barney whispered into a button mike, "I've got the pay-off site within rifle range. The alley's extremely narrow and dark, but we've got enough light to see anybody moving around."

He paused, took a deep breath, then continued, "The alley's lined with the usual trash cans. One has rolled to center and blocks the way but if we can see it from up here I'm sure Rogers won't fall over it. It's about 30 feet in from the street."

Slowly he ran the binoculars along the alley, searching for a man with a package. The victim should have been in position by now, awaiting Rogers. "We haven't been able to locate the victim. There's a recess on the north side about 20 feet in from the street. He could be there, or behind some door. I've got one in sight that's been boarded up and looks like it's ajar."

After signing off, he moved his magnified vision over nearby streets that were within his scope. He spotted no mobile units, no officers on foot. He had a crazy feeling everyone had gone home.

He fixed the binoculars on that exact spot where she would enter the alley, and waited. He felt for her. Even he, himself, with all his experience, would be afraid. Anyone with any sense would. And a sensitive girl. . . .

He touched the rifle by way of reassurance. Hawk had given him a tough assignment. He was an expert marksman. If anything went wrong, however, he'd have to be better than expert. He'd have to be perfect.

Eberhard, a tall, wiry, 28-year-old detective whom Hawkins had drafted from Homicide, moved like a fugitive along the street paralleling the alley. Under various pretexts—lighting a cigarette, tying a shoe, searching for something lost—he examined one door after another. He was satisfied with the fourth. It was old and weather-beaten, and the jamb around it was rotted. After determining the street was deserted, he took from an inside coat pocket a chisel-like tool, and half pried, half dug the lock out. He was experienced, his fingers moved swiftly, and he had tremendous power in his right arm. Without any trouble, the door sprung open.

Once again he searched the street. It was too quiet. Someone should be moving about. He exercised his fingers a moment, moved stealthily inside, and found himself in a wholesale furniture establishment. Hundreds of chairs and sofas of every description stretched as

far as his light reached. He remembered then two things: he must play the flashlight low, and to do that he had to crouch, and the second, he must get the name of the firm, so that tomorrow he could inform the owners he had broken into their place.

He advanced tediously toward the rear. He moved as if he were in a battle area, hiding behind one sofa, picking out another, and then darting for it. He knew it was possible that either the criminal or the pay-off man might be hiding inside here, waiting for Rogers to appear in the alley.

He paused frequently to listen, and heard nothing, and that in itself bothered him. Most old buildings creaked or groaned. Eventually he reached a bolted back door. The bolt, the hinge and the fastener were rusty, which meant he might set off an explosive scraping of metal on metal if he tried to open the door a crack. Beside the door were two small windows, so dirty he could scarcely see through them, and so dust-covered he would leave perfect prints wherever his fingers touched. With a handkerchief he cleaned the windows the best he could, conscious the while that someone hidden in the alley might see the handkerchief moving about.

When he finished, he was surprised by the length of view he had of the alley. The pay off, of course, might take place beyond his range, but his primary purpose was not to watch the exchange but rather to stand by as close as he could to the informant. If she indicated she was in grave danger, Barney would see the signal—an up-raised white-gloved hand—report to Control, and Control would advise him. He could be at her side within a minute—provided the rusty bolt offered no resistance. . . .

She drove slowly down a long, dark concrete-and-brick canyon whose ancient sheer sides looked as if a good sonic boom would level the whole. Here and there windows were boarded up, another century's fire escapes hung at crazy angles, bricks had fallen from corners, and sheets of plaster had slipped off. She parked alongside a large plate glass window, painted black, with two words in white still barely visible after years of weathering, **WHOLESALE PLUMBING**.

She had a mental check list she now scanned. She set the brakes, snapped shut the purse, and hung it over her left shoulder.

She took the white gloves Lt. Hawkins had given her from a cello-

phane bag in the glove compartment, and pulled them on. They fitted snugly.

Something seemed out of place, something that disturbed her. Then she realized what it was. It was the immediate quiet. No dogs barked, no music played, no boys shouted. It was as if she had driven into a ghost town. It seemed the people had closed the doors one day and walked off, never to return.

Then unexpectedly the silence was assaulted by the roar of a small aircraft over the brick and concrete canyon. It flew a dead course with the street below. A minute later, the quiet had slipped back in.

On stepping out of the car, she left the door slightly ajar, in case she returned in a hurry. She glanced backwards, then across the street. She had been advised not to do that, to keep her eyes straight ahead, but she couldn't resist.

Although it was darker at the half-way point of the block, she could make out the alley. She walked with a sureness she did not feel but a sureness she was stubbornly determined to maintain. She intended to stand up to whatever lay beyond or whoever waited there, to refuse to let the course of the night intimidate her. Her legs trembled, her breathing was heavy, but none of that mattered. She had concluded a pact with her strong will: that while she knew she had to walk with fear, she would consider this fear a child to discipline.

Unexpectedly a derelict emerged from the shadows a few doors ahead and wobbled toward her. She veered to the right and hugged the building side. He weaved more like a fighter who had taken too many blows than a drunk. He had his coat collar turned up, a battered old hat pulled low. His shabby coat hung open and swung; his trousers were too big and belted so tightly they gathered at the midriff. He looked as though he smelled. They passed, and although she had seen nothing to substantiate recognition, she identified him as Lt. Hawkins. No one ever totally conceals himself, she thought. Scarcely was he gone when a paneled pick-up delivery truck rolled past. She recognized it as the one she had ridden in from headquarters to the park.

At the alley, despite her will and resolutions, her tired body balked. She stared into what at first was pitch blackness. Then her eyes began to distinguish objects, and the alley was worse than she had imagined it would be. It was littered with papers, had a strong

odor of decay, and doors that looked as if they had been bought at a junk yard and nailed up helter skelter. She saw a movement, something dart across her path, something not as big as a cat.

She straightened, took a deep breath, and walked grimly ahead. . . .

At the intersection, Hawk turned left, and continued to walk unsteadily. When the paneled pick-up approached, he leaned against a utility pole, and took furtive reckoning of the buildings across the way and up and down the street. When the pick-up—their moving Control—slowed to a halt even with him, he climbed in beside the driver. A hand protruded from behind to hand him a microphone. A low, constant hum emanated from the back. It sounded like a beehive. A detective sat before a panel board. "Three in. . . . Five in. . . . Come in three, hold it five. . . ." This was the nerve center of the operation.

Hawk heard Barney's voice. "Informant continues to stand at alley approach. We've got excellent view of her. White gloves stand out prominently. No sign yet of victim."

Hawk said into the mike, "What about you, Eberhard?"

"I can't see her."

Hawk asked, "Watusi?"

"We're ready," she answered.

Hawk warned, "Don't overdo it."

"Unit 12," he continued, "wait until Watusi and Belton pass alley, then drive by very slowly. Units 14—15—16 and 17, prepare to move in on command."

Barney came in very low, "Informant starting down alley." . . .

She passed a doorway on her right, then on her left. She nudged the trash can aside with a foot, and it rolled with a clamor that swept the narrow abyss. She stopped, appalled more by the fear she might have scared away the man than by the clatter.

After that she was more cautious. She tried to lighten footsteps that were loud in her hearing. By now she could see quite clearly, and she searched out every doorway, a telephone pole, the recesses in the sooty, brick walls, the grimy windows, the blotches between the rotund trash cans.

He caught her unawares. Her hearing picked up the twist of a

foot on gravel, and she whirled about. He stood motionless, only his nervous, shifty eyes moving. He was short, not more than five feet seven, and his cranium bones protruded. He looked as if he had run scared most of his life, and he was never more scared than now. She felt it, but later, in remembering, she wouldn't be able to analyze exactly how she knew it. Nor would she be able to explain why his fear fueled hers, except possibly she thought the hand in his right coat pocket might be triggered by the turmoil inside him.

His tongue was slightly muddled. "You come for this?" That was the first she had noticed the package he carried, a parcel about a foot square.

She nodded and stepped toward him. "I'm a go-between," she said in a low voice, and repeated, "A go-between." She emphasized the word but sensed he hadn't comprehended.

With a quick, little movement, he withdrew the package. "I didn't figure on a woman. It wasn't a woman's voice."

He still kept his hand inside his coat pocket. At the alley's end, a young couple came into view. They paused a second, the girl kissed the boy on the cheek, and it appeared he darted a glance Gail's way. No sooner had they disappeared than an old, dilapidated car with a bashed-in rear rolled slowly by.

She raised her voice. "I'm just the go-between. I don't know anything about this. Don't you hear me? I'm a go-between."

At last she thought he understood. She added, "Why else would I be down in this neighborhood if I hadn't come for the money?"

Somewhere behind her there was a very slight movement. It could have been that of a rat, or another animal, but for some inexplicable reason she thought it was that of a human body shifting position. She tensed and waited, trying to pick up the sound again. Apparently he hadn't heard it.

She said with mounting desperation, "Give it to me, please. He said he'd kill me if anything went wrong."

She thought to add, "It's two hundred thousand."

The fact she knew the amount convinced him. Without another word, he handed the package to her. She remembered in time to brush his hands with her gloves. It was an awkward movement but he didn't notice. He blocked her way for a moment, as if he might be reconsidering, then stepped aside.

She half ran toward the street. In her flight, she kicked the trash

can again, and the clamor was deafening. Now every door was a threat, every dark recess. Under her left arm, she clutched the two hundred thousand dollars, and the package burned hotly through the thin suit.

On leaving the alley, she took a deep breath. With the stench gone, the clean air revived her. Slowing to a walk, she headed for the car. No one was about as far as she could see, and she wished someone were, even a legitimate stranger. She needed the reassurance that the sight of a human being would provide.

Sliding behind the wheel, she felt the tonic of relief. Not only had she escaped the alley but the mental tortures that had accompanied her as she walked that alley, despite all the logic she had brought to bear. It was over, behind her, and the next step might be simpler, that of handing over the \$200,000.

Sitting at the wheel, she was aware she still held the parcel. On impulse she placed it on the floor beneath her legs, where she had found the walkie talkie ages ago. It couldn't have been just this morning. What time was it? She held her watch close but couldn't see the hands. Including the time in the car, she couldn't have spent more than twenty minutes. That would make it around 11:20.

The dreaded sound of the beep startled her. Would she ever be free of its hold? His voice came over muted but excited. "You did all right, Gail. Now get out of here fast—go home and don't stop anywhere. You hear me? Nowhere."

Gail pushed the "talk" button. "But all this money—I can't take it home. I just can't. I want to give it to you. Right now. Where can I meet you?"

His voice changed. Once more he was threatening. "You heard me. Get going."

He broke off. She tried to get him back but he was gone. "Oh, God," she murmured. The matter was not ended. She would sit at home with the \$200,000 until he called. He would torture her, worry her, break her.

She started the motor, and swung the car around in a U turn, heading back the way she had come. She had one wild, crazy idea. What if they took the \$200,000 on their one-day honeymoon, and spent and spent? How much could you spend in 24 hours? She pushed on the accelerator in a mad burst of speed. She was laughing

insanely. She could drive as fast as she wanted, and the police wouldn't dare give her a ticket.

Break her? Never.



TWENTY-ONE



Barney said into the mike, "The pay-off man's following Rogers. He's leaving the alley . . . stopping at the street . . . staring after her . . . continuing to stare . . . starting toward her car. No, he's changed his mind . . . turning right, in the opposite direction. He's passed out of my range of view."

Seated next to the driver in the pick-up, Hawk said into the mike, "We've got him in view. He's walking very slowly, staying close to the building side. . . ."

"All units, all units," he added hurriedly. "Subject has just contacted Rogers and ordered her to return home. Repeat, criminal has contacted informant and ordered her to return home. She's turning car about . . . heading north. Units 14, 15 and 16 will maintain loose tail."

He instructed the pick-up driver to follow the victim. "Take it slow and easy. Park every time you get too close."

He switched to the mike, "The victim is heading south on Weston . . . still proceeding very slowly . . . doesn't appear to be frightened. Barney, get back to your unit and let the General maintain the watch on the alley."

His voice rose. "Victim's getting into a 1967 red Buick sedan with right rear fender damaged. Units 12 and 17 maintain close surveillance. Don't lose him. We'll follow you and order a pick up as soon as we get clear of this area."

They dared not move in on him too soon. The criminal might be running his own surveillance for some reason they could not guess.

Unit 14 reported in. "Rogers heading for Hollywood freeway. Proceeding at moderate speed. No one tailing her as far as we can make out."

"Play it loose," Hawk advised. "Don't let anybody make you."

The victim now turned right into Olympic boulevard. Heading west, he drove with extraordinary caution. He signaled with his hand as well as his rear lights, and held on to the steering wheel as if it were a creature about to escape.

Unit 14 checked in. "Rogers on Hollywood freeway."

The victim pulled up to a stop light. Behind him the squad cars moved up one by one. Not another car was in sight. When the light changed, Hawk said, "Okay, Unit 12, pull him over to the curb."

Unit 12 shot forward alongside him with a detective shouting, "Police officers! Pull over!"

The victim stalled his motor and there the car sat, in the middle of the street. Hawk groaned. The starter whirred unsuccessfully. Two officers jumped out and pushed the car alongside the curb.

As Hawk hurried to the driver's side, the victim slid out and turned to face him. He had sandy hair, washed out eyebrows, and a tic in his left eye. He looked as though the tic were activated by a time bomb about to go off inside him.

Hawk said, "Hold it, mister. We're police officers. Let's have your driver's license."

He fumbled in his left hip pocket for his wallet. His hands shook so that he had trouble removing the license.

Samuel K. Bronson, Hawk read. He said, "We'd like to ask you a few questions—at headquarters."

Bronson glanced wildly about. "You got a warrant?"

"We're not arresting you," Hawk said. "We want to help you. We want to know what went on tonight . . . who's threatening you and why."

Barney hurried up and Hawk said, "You drive, Barney. Give this officer your keys, Mr. Bronson."

Bronson trembled visibly and repeated, "You got a warrant?"

"I'm telling you again," Hawk said firmly, "we're not arresting you. You're coming voluntarily with us—because we want to help you get your \$200,000 back."

"Two hundred—you guys must be nuts."

"It's possible," Hawk said, studying him. He had to be involved in a racket, to be acting in this fashion. He had just paid over \$200,000; someone had probably threatened him with death to get that large a sum; and yet he wanted no part of the police.

"Now give us your keys," Hawk insisted. When Bronson hesitated, Hawk took them. "Get in on the other side."

Bronson shouted, "You've got to have a warrant."

Hawk smiled. "Not when you insist on coming with us." . . .

In Hawk's office, Bronson slumped in the straightback chair, as if he could disappear if he tried hard enough. He loosened his tie. "You guys are out of your mind. Where would I get that kind of dough? Two hundred thousand smackers! Like I told you, I was out for a walk. I never even saw a woman. You guys have made one awful mistake."

The General leaned against the window, and Jenny sat well in the back, behind Bronson. Hawk, still in his derelict clothes, stood behind the desk. He said wearily, "We watched you make the pay-off. I followed you. Now why are you covering for a scoundrel who guns you for two hundred grand? Are you scared he'll kill you?"

He paused to note Bronson's reaction. Bronson only squirmed. Hawk continued, "If you are, you'd better get us in on it—because nobody can handle dynamite like this by himself."

Bronson doubled up. "I'm a sick man. I got ulcers. I want to go home."

"Just as soon as you tell us about this. How'd he contact you? By phone? By mail? Do you know him?"

Bronson groaned. Hawk said, "I should warn you, if you don't tell us, you may be guilty of concealing a crime."

Bronson looked up pathetically. "Concealing a crime? You're trying to scare me. You're—"

Hawk broke in. "You're in some kind of a racket—or you wouldn't be covering for the criminal."

Bronson straightened up. "No, no," he said excitedly, "You're framing me. I want to see a lawyer."

"Go ahead, call one." Hawk indicated the phone. Bronson shuddered and shook his head. Hawk continued, "We'll find out. You might as well tell us. Narcotics?"

Hawk watched him closely, searching for a reaction that would prove telltale. Bronson gasped. "Don't say that—not even in joke."

"Gambling?" Hawk paused. "You're in with a bunch of Las Vegas racketeers."

Bronson looked up, squinting. "Please, I've got to go home. I get these jittery spells and the doctor says I might go anytime." He took a bottle of pills from a sagging coat pocket. "Some water . . . ?"

Hawk took the bottle away from him. "What kind of pills?"

"For my nerves."

Hawk handed the bottle to the General. "Take these to the Lab and ask for a quick run." He turned back to Bronson. "We don't want you committing suicide."

Bronson came to his feet. "Suicide!" He collapsed back into the chair. "I think I'm going to die. I want to see a priest."

Hawk said to Jenny. "Get Father O'Hara at St. Augustine. Too bad to get him out of bed—but ask him as a favor to me to come over and administer the last rites."

Bronson screamed, "Last rites! I don't want to see any Father. I'm not going to—you don't think—you think I'm—"

Barney burst in. "I've got the run-down." He referred to notes. "Samuel Kansas Bronson. Cement sub-contractor. No criminal record. Excellent credit. Lives with a younger sister, Peggy Bronson, in Tarzana. Works for Joseph Z. McNulty, millionaire contractor, president of JZM Construction Company."

Bronson brightened. "I told you guys I was okay." He got quickly to his feet. "Now I'm going."

"Sit down," Hawk said firmly.

"Hold out your hands," Barney said. Obeying, Bronson shot him a quizzical look. Barney turned an ultraviolet light on Bronson's hands and blue spots stood out prominently. Bronson stared in amazement.

Hawk said, "We put a fluorescent substance on the girl's gloves. When she took the money from you, some of it came off."

Bronson was livid. "You guys put it on me. I remember. You touched me when you took the pill bottle."

Jenny returned from calling Father O'Hara. "May I ask Mr. Bronson a question?" Hawk nodded. She spoke softly. "Is Mr. McNulty a millionaire—as the credit report states?"

Bronson continued staring at his hands. "I guess so."

"What kind of contracting does he do?"

"Subdivisions. Just finished Winston Park."

Her voice was lulling. "It was a big development, wasn't it? I seem to remember reading—"

"Seven hundred and forty-eight homes. Biggest job he's done." Bronson relaxed.

"And you handled all the concrete work?"

"Yes, ma'am. Every cubic foot."

"Do you see each other socially?"

"Socially. I dunno. We have a few drinks, play some golf, his wife has me over for dinner. . . ."

"Does he have any children?"

Bronson became wary. "Yes. Two girls and a boy. But I don't see—"

Jenny raised her voice. "And someone threatened to kill them if the money wasn't forthcoming? And since you work for Mr. McNulty, you couldn't refuse to make the pay-off when he asked you. He's the victim, isn't he, Mr. Bronson? Not you. You're only a go-between, like the woman you met."

His mouth dropped open, and Hawk, smiling, got the reaction he had been waiting for. Bronson said desperately, "No, no, Mr. McNulty didn't have anything to do with it." He caught his error. "I mean—you've got me all mixed up. Like I told you, I never met any woman in an alley. I didn't hand over a plugged nickel to anyone. I was minding my own business. . . ."

Hawk started for the door. "I know. You drove to the wholesale district to take a walk down a smelly alley. Thank you, Mr. Bronson." To the General he said, "See that he gets home okay."

Hawk held the door for Jenny. In the cubicle outside, he whispered, "Not bad, Doc."

She smiled. "Why, thank you, Lieutenant."

He turned to Watusi. "Get Father O'Hara, if he hasn't left, and tell him the patient lived in spite of everything we could do. Give the General a memo: Put a tight tail on Bronson and catch any phone calls he makes. Pick him up in 30 minutes and bring him to Joseph McNulty's. And Watusi—that was a great love scene you played. You can't tell me you haven't had experience."

Watusi turned a pinkish glow.

On his way through the squad room, an officer surveyed Hawk's clothes, grinned, and handed him a dime. "Get yourself a cup of coffee, my man—and don't squander it on booze."



TWENTY-TWO



The light was on in her apartment, just as she had left it, also the porch light. She tried her apartment door, then tapped gently, and called out softly, "Mitch!" She had thought he would be waiting, and her happy anticipation dropped with a thud. Fumbling in her purse, she found the key but couldn't fit it into the lock. She was struggling with it when a long, husky arm slipped inside hers and took it. Whirling about, she stood trembling before Earl MacDonald whose dark eyes held the luster of a few drinks too many.

"What're you jittery about?" he asked, fitting the key and opening the door with one hand. In the other he held a small bouquet of red roses.

Her voice wavered. "You sneaked up on me!"

He put the key back in her hand, which he held. He always did when he had passed his drink quota. He checked his watch. "Twelve ten. Must be true what they say about career girls."

"I had to work. What excuse have you got?"

"Margie let me out to see the fights. Say, maybe we go together next time. Margie hates 'em. I see you're parking your car on the street."

She tried to withdraw her hand since he surely must feel the tremble. "I was too bushed to open the garage door."

What else, she wondered, had he noticed?

"I know just how you feel." Freeing her hand, he pushed the roses toward her. "Here, take these. Margie'll be asleep. I'll bring home some more tomorrow."

"No," she protested. "Give them to Margie."

"You take 'em." His tone held the quick, unexpected defiance of the inebriated.

"Thank you. Night now." She slipped inside, and with immense relief, fell into the nearest chair, dropped the package and roses to the floor, kicked off her shoes, and sat sprawled on her tail bone. She wanted alternately to laugh and cry. A cup of coffee would cure

have to be emphatically out of style; but Mrs. Carpenter never came out her door that she didn't look smart and, in some mysterious fashion you mustn't ask me to explain, curiously with it. The lady obviously had someone who built clothes specially for her and built them with a skill that made her look as though she belonged in these times, not as though she had miraculously survived into these times out of an earlier era or as though she were making herself ridiculous by trying to pretend that she was not over twenty-one but under.

Everything she wore showed these evidences of being the product of a dressmaking genius, and she wore a great many things. I can't tell you just how many weeks of doorholding it took, but it was many before she came through wearing a dress or a suit I'd seen her wearing previously. She did repeat on fur coats, because in all the time I knew her I saw only five of those, and even by the end of the first week I'd held the door for her more than five times.

Whether without Geneva Washington our friendship would ever have ripened beyond these amenities at the street door I don't know. I don't think she would have made any moves toward anything more, and I know I would have had no thought but to dodge and resist any such moves. Sharing a pot of decaffeinated coffee down by the old boob tube? It's not the way Bagby spends his evenings.

But then there was Geneva. The first time I saw her I narrowly missed losing control of the door. To the last she never came before me as anything but a fresh astonishment, and it wasn't only that she was so startling a change from her string of predecessors. They had been many and various, Mrs. Carpenter's maid-companions. Narrow and wide, short and tall, round and angular, misshapen and shapeless, they had run the gamut from frump to horror.

I could well understand why Mrs. Carpenter had the quick turnover on them. If at any time I'd been forced to look at one of them for longer than it took her to shepherd Mrs. Carpenter past me at the door, the ordeal would have driven me straight up the wall. Anything that wasn't painful to look at, even anything that didn't have a lugubrious look would have come as a surprise after Mrs. Carpenter's haunt parade.

Coming after them, a girl who had anything at all would have looked good. But then there was Geneva, and when I describe her, you won't believe me. I never quite believed myself.

If Trojan Paris had ever seen Geneva, he would have stormed up to Olympus yelling "apple back." He would know that he'd been cheated when he was handed Helen of Troy. Helen could only have been second best. Geneva was the most.

What was more, she did it without even trying. You know those movies in which Hollywood's most glamorous dish goes through half a film in the wrong hairdo and the wrong clothes and the wrong everything so that she looks like the girl nobody sees until the one touch of love comes along and by its magic she's transformed into the thing you see on the billboards. Geneva gave every appearance of being gotten up for the first half of one of those movies, but in her case it made no difference. The girl had it in every way there is for it to be had, and it never mattered what she did to herself. It still showed up. No matter how shapeless her clothes, her shape came through. She was obviously doing her best to look like a frump or even like a horror, but she wasn't even getting to first base with it. She was Geneva. She was beautiful. She was sexy. She was wildly desirable. She couldn't be anything else.

Mrs. Carpenter never had bothered to introduce me to any of the others, and maybe the first ten times I held the door for her and Geneva she didn't think to introduce me to this paragon either, but Mrs. Carpenter wasn't blind and Mrs. Carpenter was no fool. She had to know what she had there, and she couldn't be unaware of what it was doing to me. You don't go through a door past the man who's holding it for you day after day without sooner or later noticing that he's panting and that his tongue is hanging out.

So when eventually she did introduce me, I thought it was because I had by then become so abjectly pathetic a spectacle that she had found it in her heart to pity me.

"This is Mr. Bagby, Geneva," she said. "He's our neighbor in the apartment above us." Then she turned to me. "Miss Washington, my companion," she said.

I found some words I hoped might suggest the measure of my

delight. Miss Washington found for me an icy "how do you do," and a look that just passed over me without ever touching. It didn't even leave me the hope that she had taken note of me as someone from whom she could one day borrow a cup of sugar.

We met several times that way. I got to the place where I didn't even run down to the corner to pick up a newspaper without first brushing my hair and brooding a while about my choice of tie or turtleneck, but all to no effect. So far as Geneva was concerned, I was beginning to think that even if I were a turtle in a peopleneck sweater, she would still take no notice of me.

I guess it was all of a week or a bit more that we hung at that stage. Then Mrs. Carpenter gave it a nudge. She sent me a note. It explained that she had been both remiss and dilatory. When I first moved into the house, she should have asked me down for drinks as a gesture of welcome to a new neighbor. As I may have observed, however, she had, ever since I first moved in, been having a protracted period of companion trouble. The women in her employ had been an unbroken succession of disasters, each more depressing than the one before.

"I felt it would be neither courtesy nor kindness," she wrote, "to ask anyone to come and drink under the eye of one of those Gorgons. That they were rapidly turning me to stone was my own private tragedy. I was not asking anyone to share it. Now, however, that I have Geneva, would you come this afternoon at five? If you cannot today, then set any afternoon at your convenience. This time of year we're always back from our walk well before five. It's so much pleasanter to get it in before the sun is down, so any day that suits you."

Five of that same day suited me fine. I went downstairs with my hopes running high. Geneva, after all, was a companion. Would she not, over drinks, be professionally obligated to be companionable? I was no more than in the door, however, before the question answered itself. Geneva Washington was Mrs. Carpenter's companion. She wasn't mine.

She opened the door for me. When I extended my hand, she made a good try at not seeing it. I left it out there waiting, determined that the girl was going to recognize something. If it couldn't be my

friendliness, it would at least be my embarrassment. She did notice and after a too obvious stage-wait she finally did take my hand. She pumped it vigorously just once and then disengaged herself from it. She didn't just let go of my hand or pull hers away. It was more as though she had grasped my hand firmly and thrown it back at me. I felt as though we might have been playing a game of catch with that hand of mine and that she had immediately tired of the entertainment.

We were in the small entrance hall of the apartment. Beyond it through broad double doors that stood ajar lay the living room and there, uncompromisingly straight backed in her *Louis Seize* chair, my hostess was waiting for me. Her room was like herself. The whole of the house could once have been like that before it had so far fallen from its grand estate that it opened its doors to the likes of me and the other tenants.

It was all grace and delicacy and understated grandeur in its French antique furniture, its Aubusson rug, its palatial appointments, and its pale damask draperies that completely covered the windows. You could forget that outside lay only our Manhattan street with the cars parked along the curb and not the gardens and fountains of Versailles.

Even while I was busy greeting my hostess and making the proper responses to her gracious words of welcome, I was aware that Mrs. Carpenter and I were alone. Geneva had not accompanied me in from the little hall. She had disappeared.

Mrs. Carpenter asked me to sit down. She called my attention to the vermeil cup that held the cigarettes. I passed them to her, and she took one. When I had both our cigarettes lighted, she twinkled at me.

"Don't begin regretting that you came, Mr. Bagby," she said. "You shan't be stuck with me. Geneva will be out directly. It's not possible that she'll be taking more than a minute or two."

I worked at the required lies, and even while she was thanking me and commending my politeness, she laughed at me.

"I'm a foolish woman," she said, "but not yet that foolish. Geneva

is an incredibly beautiful child. I was beautiful myself once, but never more than credibly so, never like this girl. Has anyone ever been?"

So we waited for Geneva and we made conversation. In the classic manner Mrs. Carpenter manipulated me into talking about myself. I could imagine her learning that at her mother's knee. "If you want to hold a gentleman's interest, my child, you must induce him to talk about himself. You must never expect him to be interested in what you think. He is interested only in your being interested in what he thinks. Admire him and he will find you admirable. Admire his intelligence and he will find you admirably intelligent. Advance one idea of your own and immediately you become the silly goose who entertains the delusion that she can think."

It doesn't matter if you know what one of these old-time belles is doing or even if you are fully aware of how she is doing it, the response is automatic. You can't possibly fail to expand under the treatment. I told her I was a writer and that I wrote about crime. I explained that I did my work in close collaboration with my friend, Inspector Schmidt, and that, since Schmitty was New York's Chief of Homicide, the crimes of which I wrote were those that fell within the inspector's sphere. They were murders.

"How exciting," she said, and suggested that I fix myself a drink. "I think you'll find everything you need."

I had already noticed the commode with the marquetry front and the array of potables and crystal on its marble top. So far as I could see, it held everything anyone could ever need. There was no telling about brands since everything had been poured off into cut crystal decanters and was identified only by the silver bottle tags which told you no more than which was Scotch and which sherry, which was gin and which vodka.

"What may I fix for you?" I asked.

"Oh, would you? I have been looking forward to it. Drinks always taste so much better when they are done by a gentleman. Would you give me a sherry, please?"

"Certainly, but there isn't much a gentleman can do with that."

"Oh, no," she said. "You must have whatever you like. The whisky or the cognac. You'll find either all right. I don't trust my own judgment. I just reorder what Mr. Carpenter used to put in."

I assured her that I would do very well and explained that I couldn't lay claim to bringing anything special to simply pouring sherry into a glass.

"But you will," she said. "I know you will. It is different when a gentleman does it. There's a mystique to it."

I poured her sherry and hoped I was putting enough mystique into it. I aimed at about five to one. For myself I tried the Scotch.

Mrs. Carpenter took a sip. "Delicious," she said. "I knew it would be."

I sampled my Scotch. I should have known. It was a whisky that made me feel callow and presumptuous. No man not in a position to filter that beautiful liquid through a perfectly kept white mustache could ever think himself worthy of it.

On a table at Mrs. Carpenter's elbow a crystal bowl of fresh caviar stood in a larger bowl of cracked ice. She spooned a mound of it on to a square of toast. That was for me. She followed it by fixing a bit for herself.

"That girl," she grumbled. "That impossible girl."

"I'm afraid she's taken a dislike to me," I said.

"Nonsense. On the contrary, she's in her room making herself pretty, which is no more than proper, but if she had done it when I urged her to, she'd have had more than enough time. Urged her to? I commanded her, and she ignored me. So now when she should be out here, now she goes to do it, and she's taking a ridiculously long time for it, too. It's not as though she were a woman who must spend despairing hours before her mirror, trying this and trying that in the desperate hope of finding something that might help a little. Almost anything this girl would do—it would take no more than a touch really—and she's radiant. And that's not the most ridiculous part of it. I've seen the clothes she has, one thing grimmer than the next. Since with her looks she really needs no doing and since she hasn't a thing out there to do with, what can she possibly be spending all this time on?"

"Steeling herself to the point where she can stand being in the same room with me, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "Unhappily, the conclusion seems inescapable."

"Ridiculous. She's an intelligent girl."

"It could be an allergy," I suggested.

"We've met you in the hall dozens of times and she's never even so much as sneezed."

"I noticed that," I said, "but I've also noticed that she has never even so much as smiled."

"Yes. She's a strange girl."

Mrs. Carpenter plied me with more caviar. She kept a watchful eye on the level of the whisky in my glass, ready to urge me to replenish it the minute it would drop low. She deftly steered the conversation back to me and to murder. She suggested that I must be a great help to the inspector in his work.

"Such wonderful luck for a police officer," she said, "to be able to turn to a man like you, a man of education, of culture, of experience."

I told her about Schmitty and assured her that it was only because he was a patient man that he ever put up with me.

"He doesn't turn to me," I said. "He can't. I'm always lagging too far behind. The inspector is a genius. He's brilliant. In his field I'm afraid I'm not even bright."

She liked what she insisted on calling my modesty and my generosity. She thought it charming of me to speak so glowingly of my friend.

"You must bring him to see me," she said. "You must do it very soon. I should like that."

I could imagine nothing less probable. Schmitty, for one thing, dislikes antique French furniture. He doesn't trust it. He's always expecting it to collapse under him. I didn't tell her that. I said nothing. I didn't have to. She was looking at her watch.

"But really," she said, obviously rising to a full boil. "That girl. This is really too much."

She snatched a little vermeil bell up from the table beside her and rang it. Geneva came into the room.

"You wanted me, Mrs. Carpenter?" she asked.

The girl looked exactly as she had when she opened the door to me. If she'd been spending the intervening time before her mirror, it could only have been to study out some possibility of making herself, against every force of nature, look even more forbidding.

Mrs. Carpenter, prepared even before seeing the girl to be waspish, now exploded in exasperation.

"You thought perhaps I was tuning up to play JINGLE BELLS?" she snapped.

"I thought you wanted me, Mrs. Carpenter."

"Clever of you, my girl. Most clever, but why didn't you think of obliging me?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Carpenter. I did come the very moment you rang. Now what can I do for you?"

"You can stop fencing with me. You undertook to be my companion. Since when do I have to ring to let you know I want you with me? Shutting yourself up alone in your room is certainly not companionable. Or could I have been mistaken? Perhaps you are not a companion?"

"When you have company, Mrs. Carpenter, surely you don't need me then."

"I'll be the judge of when I need you, Geneva. Now you will sit down and you will tell Mr. Bagby what you will have to drink. You will serve Mr. Bagby the caviar. You will allow me the pleasure of a civilized hour."

For just a moment they were quite still, glaring at each other while the tension between them built to what would have to be a breaking point. When I say breaking point, I mean I was expecting that they would be grabbing things up and letting fly at each other. I felt I was only a moment away from being caught in the middle of a cloud of flying Sevres and Baccarat.

But it didn't happen. Geneva Washington gave way. She smiled. She went to the table and took a cigarette. Turning to me, she waited for me to light it.

"I'd like a martini on the rocks, Mr. Bagby," she said. "Dry, please, and, please, nothing Dickensian."

Just as suddenly as the babe had yielded, just so suddenly Mrs. Carpenter became the relaxed and gracious hostess. She laughed.

"What does nothing Dickensian mean?" she asked. "I haven't been keeping up."

"Charles Dickens," Geneva said.

"I know. THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP. I know he's out of fashion. People say things like a man would have to have a heart of stone to read of the death of Little Nell and not laugh. I like THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP. I cried over the death of Little Nell. I think it's a pity that there are no books today that make me cry, but what has any of that to do with your martini, my dear?"

"Just a straight martini," I explained. "No olive or twist of lemon."

Mrs. Carpenter winced at the pun. You could always count on the old girl for doing the correct thing, but she enjoyed it, nonetheless. She let me pour her another sherry, and she made certain that I replenished my beautiful Scotch. Geneva, now that she had accepted defeat, set herself to accept it gracefully. She complimented me on the martini and she agreed with Mrs. Carpenter that drinks never tasted quite good enough unless they were made by a gentleman.

"You can make my martinis any time, Mr. Bagby," she said.

I told her that she could spoon me my caviar any time, and we had a delightfully cozy interval while Mrs. Carpenter was steering the conversation back to where her training told her it belonged. Subtly she enlisted Geneva's cooperation in the project of inducing me to talk about myself.

"Mr. Bagby is a writer," she said. "He writes about homicide. Of course, he's modest about it, but he helps the police, specifically the Chief of Homicide." She turned to me. "It's Inspector Schmidt, isn't it?"

I said it was.

"He's going to bring the inspector around to have drinks with us one day soon. Isn't that lovely? We shan't be dull, my dear."

Geneva spilled her martini into her lap. Mopping at it frantically in an effort to catch the spilled gin before it could run down off her skirt and dribble on the rug, she hit the caviar spoon with her elbow.

It went flipping out of the bowl and fell to the rug she'd been trying to save, scattering big, gray pearls of the roe all around it.

"Oh," she wailed. "I am a clumsy fool."

"It doesn't matter, my dear," Mrs. Carpenter told her. "According to its history, it was soaked with blood during the Terror and that washed out. Actually if we get the caviar up without anyone stepping on it and crushing the grains, I don't think it will even stain."

I got down on my knees alongside Geneva and together we picked the scattered gray grains off the rug. Mrs. Carpenter was quite right. Gathered up quickly while they were still chilled from the iced bowl, the undamaged grains left no mark on the tight weave of the Aubusson. It struck me that this might well be the ultimate mark of affluence, for a woman to have such sure expertise in the effects of spilled caviar.

Taking with her the spoon and what we'd gathered up from the floor, Geneva went out to the kitchen for a fresh spoon. Mrs. Carpenter waited till she was out of the room.

"Oh, dear," she whispered, as soon as the girl was gone. "That was too bad. I had just begun to think that things might go well. I must find a way to do something for that child."

"Why? What's wrong with her?"

"She's a treasure. I'm terrified of losing her, but I don't see how I can keep her. It's impossible for her to go on indefinitely the way she's been doing. It's unnatural. She has nothing."

Nothing seemed to be the wrong word to use of Geneva who was most arrestingly the babe who had everything. I was about to embark on a catalogue of all the things Geneva had, but Mrs. Carpenter's elbow in my ribs warned me that Geneva was returning with the fresh spoon. It was time for a change of subject.

"There's a martini that needs rebuilding," I said. "Just as it was, Miss Washington?"

"Don't you think I shouldn't have any more till I've learned how to get it up to my mouth successfully?" she said.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Carpenter told her. "How will you learn unless you practice? And if you think I will permit you to go back to your

room and shut yourself away while you try it with your toothbrush glass, forget it. Now where were we?"

"Down on the rug picking up spilled caviar," Geneva said.

"Not that," Mrs. Carpenter decreed. "We were talking about Mr. Bagby bringing Inspector Schmidt around for drinks, and they were going to tell us all about their exciting murders."

Geneva shuddered. "Mrs. Carpenter, please," she said. "Could we talk about something else? I hate violence. I'm terrified of it. I'm sorry. It's the way I am. I'm one of those people. The world, life, reality, it's all too much for me. I can't live with it. Maybe I oughtn't say this, but haven't you thought it strange that I should take this job? I love it here. It's everything I want. Don't misunderstand me, but I know it isn't natural for me to want no more than this. I'm young. I'm healthy. I'm not ugly. You'd expect me to want to be out in the world like other girls, having fun, going out with men, doing all the normal, gay things; but I don't. I just want to be here with you, dear, dear Mrs. Carpenter. Please."

Mrs. Carpenter took the girl in her arms. It seemed a pity that I couldn't have been the one to do it.

"One dry and unafrightening martini coming up," I said.

Everybody laughed. Geneva took a sip of her fresh drink and spooned me up some more caviar.

 II 

After that only moderately successful cocktail party I did get to see some more of Geneva. Our little door-holding ceremonies continued as before, but, in addition, on a couple of occasions I had a few minutes with the girl alone. Once it was when she was on her way out to do the marketing and the other time when I met her on the street. That time she was on her way home from marketing.

She was always pleasant enough but, despite my best efforts, we made no progress. The chief difficulty seemed to be that both times she was in a hurry. Mrs. Carpenter was alone, and Geneva didn't like leaving her alone.

"She's marvelous," she said, "but she is so old, and she's hardly well. She oughtn't ever be alone, not even for a little while."

Talk never goes well when two people are racing along a street. Conversation works better when it's done at a saunter.

"It's not that bad," I argued, galloping along beside her and trying to persuade her to slow down a bit. "Before you came there were many days when she was between companions. She managed beautifully alone."

It was the wrong thing to say. As though spurred with fresh terror at the thought of the risks that had been run before she first came to Mrs. Carpenter, she scooted along at an even faster clip.

"But she shouldn't have," she gasped.

That was our first meeting *à deux*. It wasn't until I was back in my own place and Opal came in to give me my daily hour of tidying up, that it occurred to me that Mrs. Carpenter had not been alone. Opal was the jewel shared among four of us in the building. She came to Mrs. Carpenter for a couple of hours a day, to me for an hour, and to two of the other people for an hour each. I knew her routine. She always started at the bottom and worked up. It was first Mrs. Car-

penter, then me, and then the others. So if Opal was now in my kitchenette loading my stacked breakfast dishes into the dishwasher, then for two hours back she should have been downstairs doing for Mrs. Carpenter.

I asked her.

Yes. She had just come from there.

"It's been quite a change," I remarked.

Opal sniffed.

"It's much better for Mrs. Carpenter having someone young and pleasant around her," I persisted.

Opal sniffed again. This time the sniff hovered around the dimensions of a snort.

"Young and pretty and devoted," I said.

"Yeah. She's young."

Opal granted me that much, but even then it was grudging.

I let it rest. It was obvious that Opal, for one, was not charmed by Geneva Washington. Even what little I was saying of the girl was putting Opal into a bad temper. You have to watch yourself with jewels. You never tamper with their precarious good will.

When I had my second encounter with Geneva alone, however, I was prepared. She was in the same tearing hurry. She had to get her errands done and return to Mrs. Carpenter. Mrs. Carpenter was alone and it was all wrong.

"Opal didn't come in today? Don't tell me I'm going to have to make my own bed."

A pretty flush came up into her cheeks. For a moment she was at a loss, but she made a quick recovery.

"Opal," she said, and her scorn of the jewel was at least the equal of the jewel's scorn of her. "Whatever good could Opal be if Mrs. Carpenter were taken suddenly ill? Opal, now really."

And there she was putting on another of those fresh bursts of speed, as though the thought of all the wrong things competent Opal might think to do for a suddenly ailing Mrs. Carpenter had awakened in her a new assortment of fears.

Now Opal was a sensible woman. She took care of a ne'er-do-well husband. She'd raised a brood of kids with great success. She had

nursed her own old mother through the old lady's declining years. She was level-headed, experienced, and unflappable; and if she had anything in her nature you could call vanity, it was the pride she took in her ability to cope with anything that came along, whether it was routine or emergency.

"You're underestimating Opal," I said. "She's a tower of strength."

"She's clean," Geneva said, "and she doesn't break things. I'm happier when I'm with Mrs. Carpenter myself."

If she was going to get back home any faster, she was going to need roller skates.

That was the last time I saw Geneva alone. After that meeting, it was only when I would run into her on her outings with Mrs. Carpenter. It was about a week later that Opal brought me the news. She came to me early that day and she was breathless and even more briskly efficient than usual.

She hoped I wouldn't mind if she gave me less than my hour that day. She would do only what was imperative and she would keep track of just how much time she gave me. She was going to make the same arrangement with the people upstairs. She had to be through early.

"Tomorrow," she said, "I'll fix it at home to stay longer. Today it's the only way I can manage."

"Trouble, Opal?"

I had to follow her around as she worked. She was taking no time for chatter.

"Mrs. Carpenter," she said, as she stripped my bed. "I have to take her for her walk this afternoon."

"Something wrong with Geneva?"

Opal put such muscular vehemence into shaking out a fresh sheet that the thing cracked like a whip.

"Her," she growled. "I knew from the first what she was."

"What happened?"

"Can't leave Mrs. Carpenter alone for a minute. Can't leave her alone not even with me. So devoted she's a big, fat pain in the you-know-where. So now look what she's gone and done."

By following Opal from task to task in the short time she gave me

that day, I finally worked past her anger and indignation and got her down to the simple facts. They couldn't have been simpler. They also couldn't have been more peculiar.

Geneva Washington was gone. Just like that, without notice, without a word of warning, without cause or reason, she was just gone. It had happened the evening before. Geneva had been fixing dinner. Mrs. Carpenter and the girl were almost ready to sit down to it. Geneva was doing the last few things. She was about to fix a salad when she discovered that in her hurried marketing she had forgotten the bibb lettuce. The markets hadn't yet closed, and she had just run out to pick up a couple of heads of bibb and that was it. She hadn't returned.

"Not all night?" I asked.

"Not all night and not all morning. She's gone. It's the way they do."

"That's ridiculous, Opal. It's not the way anybody does. She's had an accident. Has Mrs. Carpenter phoned the police?"

"What for? The witch didn't take anything."

"But she must have had an accident. The police would check the hospitals."

"She didn't have no accident," Opal told me. "It's not the first time one of them's done Mrs. Carpenter that way, and this one was crazy from the first. The first time I saw her, I knew she wasn't going to stay. Every day I came in there and she hadn't gone yet, I was surprised. You had to expect it. Her kind, it's a wonder she stayed as long as she did."

"What kind is her kind, Opal?"

"How would I know? Maybe she's an acidhead. Maybe she's one of them speedfreaks. I don't know what she is except that it's something kooky. God knows what she wanted with Mrs. Carpenter, but whatever it was, she didn't find it. So she just ups and goes. That's the way they are, Mr. Bagby, no sense of responsibility, no heart, no head, no nothing. Mrs. Carpenter's well rid of that one."

Leaving Opal to do what she felt was essential, I went downstairs to see Mrs. Carpenter. I found her calm. She was distressed but not as much as I'd expected she would be. Although she shared neither

Opal's opinion of Geneva Washington nor Opal's guesses at why Geneva had gone, she was no more inclined to go along with my estimate of the situation.

The simple facts were as Opal had reported them. Geneva had gone out to pick up the forgotten lettuce and she had not returned.

"I am a little disappointed in her," Mrs. Carpenter sighed, "but I should be used to that. Whenever a person seems perfect, with time you learn that there is some flaw. It might be a very small flaw, but there always is something." With a crisp little gesture of dismissal she thrust the subject aside. "But I'm keeping you standing," she said, "and I haven't even offered you a drink."

"I didn't come down for a drink, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "I wanted to ask if there isn't something I could do for you."

She patted my hand. "Dear of you," she said, "most dear of you, but nonetheless you can ask over a drink. It's the whisky you like, isn't it? Or would you prefer something else this time of day?"

I told her the whisky would be fine and asked her if I couldn't get it. She wouldn't allow that, but she did let me help her. She needed help. She was navigating around the apartment by reaching from one piece of furniture to the next and holding on, but it made no difference. It was not suitable that a gentleman should not be waited on.

She brought out the glasses and the Scotch and the sherry. She let me pour out while she was tipping some macadamia nuts into a *blanc de chine* bowl. The only reason for allowing me to pour was, of course, because drinks always taste better when a gentleman does them. It was only after we had settled down and she was satisfied that I had everything I needed that I could switch her over to saying anything more about Geneva.

"I don't pretend to understand the girl," she said, "but I should have allowed her to do as she pleased. Even though it was for her own good and I do know better than she possibly can what is for her own good, I shouldn't have pressed it. Young people never like that."

"Then there had been difficulties?" I asked.

"There were difficulties from the first. If I had consented to it, she would have never set foot outside this apartment. Nor would I for

that matter. Even my walks, even when I explained to her that the walks are necessary, that it is only because I persist in walking, make myself keep on walking, that I am able to walk at all, even then she wanted me to do my walking right here at home. She wanted to walk me around and around in the apartment, walk me from room to room."

I thought I understood. "The same trouble as you had with many of the others," I said. "They didn't want to walk."

She thought about it for a moment. "No," she said. "Not quite like. The others were lazy. They wanted to sit all the time. When we did walk, they creaked and groaned and dragged every step of the way. Geneva isn't like that. She's energetic. She's alive. She would have walked me around these rooms inexhaustibly. Of course, I couldn't agree to that. It would have driven us both mad."

I found it hard to believe. Geneva had struck me as more than a little strange, but irrational to this extent did seem too much.

"You can hardly blame yourself for refusing to hold still for anything as insane as that," I said.

Insisting on her walks, however, wasn't what Mrs. Carpenter was regretting. She had taken her stand; and once that had been settled between them, there had been no more trouble about it.

"Geneva never brought it up again," she said. "Day after day she would look out at the weather and suggest that it looked changeable. Didn't I think it would be wiser not to go out and risk being caught in the rain? Just in the uncertain weather couldn't we stay home and take our exercise indoors? Of course, I always did insist on going out, and it was all right. She would try, but once I had given her a firm no, she always took it in good part."

"But yesterday there was something special?" I asked.

"Nothing we hadn't been having day after day. There was always the trouble about the marketing. I suppose yesterday she just boiled over. She decided to teach me a lesson."

I didn't understand. Mrs. Carpenter insisted that I pour myself another Scotch. Once she was satisfied that I'd done right by myself, she explained. Geneva was a strange girl. There was something very wrong and unhealthy about her.

"There was that outburst the afternoon you were here, Mr. Bagby. She didn't want any of the things a girl should want. She just wanted to be here with me, shut away from all the fun and all the excitement of life. She wanted to bury herself."

"A religious girl," I said, thinking aloud, "could have gone into a convent. Not being religious, she wanted to make this her convent."

Mrs. Carpenter nodded vigorously. "Yes, Mr. Bagby," she agreed. "And so well put. It takes a gentleman's intelligence and a gentleman's knowledge of the world to see through to the core of things. I sensed it, of course, but never with your clarity." She sighed. "But I must confess," she added, "it probably would have made no difference. Clarity wouldn't have changed me. I would have meddled despite it."

"Meddled?" I asked. "In what way, Mrs. Carpenter?"

"In the way you yourself saw. That afternoon when I forced her to come in and join us. I thought I knew best. The child is shy, I thought. She doesn't recognize her potential. She needs taking out of herself. Oh, don't let me make myself appear unselfish. I was thinking of myself."

She explained that. After her dreary parade of impossible companions, Geneva, even with her peculiarities, had been a joy. Mrs. Carpenter had been resolved to do everything to win the girl's affection. She would make every effort for the girl's happiness, and all this, she said, because she wanted to keep Geneva Washington. She didn't want to lose the girl.

"I knew," she said, "that if I let her go on the way she thought she wanted, she was going to make such a dreary thing of it for herself that very soon she would have to give up on it and leave me. It seemed to me that the only way I could keep her would be by trying to bring into her life some of the pleasures she was trying to shut out. I thought I could leaven the lump for her, make her work with me not merely a refuge but something of a pleasure. I hoped it could be enough a pleasure so that she would stay with me. I pushed too hard."

"I came to cocktails so Geneva could have some diversion?" I said.

Mrs. Carpenter laughed softly. "I'm not even going to ask you if

you mind," she said. "I saw by the way you always looked at Geneva that you wouldn't mind. I could see that it would give you pleasure, Mr. Bagby, and I was happy to give you pleasure. You can't mind that it didn't happen to be my prime purpose."

"Of course. If I mind anything, it is that it didn't work. She didn't want it. I can hardly help minding that."

"It wasn't you, Mr. Bagby. She didn't want anyone. There was all the difficulty about the marketing."

For a moment I thought Mrs. Carpenter had taken to wandering. I thought she was going to tell me what I'd already had from Geneva herself, that the girl was reluctant to leave her alone even with Opal and even for a few minutes.

Mrs. Carpenter, however, was right on the beam. She presented the girl's reluctance to go out of the house and leave her in a light that was at once more reasonable and less rational. It was yet another manifestation of the girl's strange urge toward withdrawal.

"If she could have had her way," Mrs. Carpenter said, "she would never have set foot outside this apartment, not for my walks and not to do the marketing. She wanted to do it all by telephone. It was only on my insistence that she went out even to buy the food."

Mrs. Carpenter gave me the full rundown on the struggles they'd had over that. There are parts of town where marketing by phone would be difficult if not impossible. This didn't happen to be true of our neighborhood. We happen to have in the vicinity, in addition to the ubiquitous supermarkets, a good assortment of old-fashioned little places which survive on the basis of the service they give. They take phone orders. They run charge accounts. They make prompt deliveries, and what they send out is uniformly of such good quality that even the hardest-to-please housewife could never select better for herself.

Mrs. Carpenter was not unaware of these possibilities. She had, in fact, been well established with all these tradesmen, and all her marketing had for a considerable time been done by telephone order. All through the time she had been suffering under the string of incompetents who had preceded Geneva in her employ it had been necessary to market by phone.

“There wasn’t one of them I could have sent out for anything,” she said. “They were too stupid. They would have brought back all the wrong things. I much preferred to eat what the tradesmen selected for me than to have touched anything they would have picked out.”

When she had first taken Geneva on, therefore, they had continued as before. After only a day or two of it, however, she had begun to be concerned about the unnatural sort of life the girl was leading. She began worrying lest the young woman would not be able to endure such seclusion for long, even if it was self-imposed.

“I became more and more convinced that whatever Geneva thought she wanted, I knew better,” she said. “Going on the way she was, she would either tire of it and leave me or else she would go quite mad and I would have to let her go. I was determined to take the girl out of herself.”

Actually Geneva’s peculiarities could not have been better suited to Mrs. Carpenter’s needs. The girl wanted no time off. She said she had no place to go. She had no friends. She knew nobody in the city and she had no wish to make friends.

“It was perfect,” Mrs. Carpenter said, “but it was also peculiar. I couldn’t believe it would last.”

She tried several approaches, all designed to arrange something for the girl that would make for a less confined life. She suggested that of an evening, when she was settled in her bed with a book and would be needing nothing, Geneva might go out to a local movie or even downtown to a theater or concert. Geneva would have none of it. She wanted only to stay home, looking at TV or settled in with a book of her own.

“I couldn’t push her out of the house,” Mrs. Carpenter said. “Whether it was only because I was worried for her sake or if being uninterruptedly in the company of one person night and day began to get on *my* nerves, I don’t know. In any case, I hit on the marketing. That was an area where I could be insistent.”

Mrs. Carpenter laid her ground carefully. She took to complaining about the food. Looking at the salmon, she pretended a suspicion that the fish man was thawing out frozen salmon and sending it to them for fresh. She didn’t like the look of the fruit and vegetables.

She complained of the quality of meat and poultry. She accused all the tradesmen of sending short weight and of padding their bills.

"Of course, I was slandering all those good people," she told me. "They never sent anything that was less than perfect and their bills could not be more honest. Geneva's no fool. She knew all along that I was complaining without cause, but I thought that would be all right. People expect it of old women. They are astonished if we're not crotchety and unreasonable. Geneva did try to show me that everything was as good as it could be and that all the transactions were honest, but I just went on playing the stubborn old crank. She had to give in. That way I forced her to go out every day and do the marketing. I was certain that at least this small change she had to have. It was for her own good, and her good was my good."

That brought us to the forgotten lettuce. Geneva wanted to phone and have it sent over. Mrs. Carpenter insisted it wouldn't be fit to eat unless Geneva went out and selected it. Geneva argued that going out would hold up the dinner preparations and that also it was a time when she couldn't possibly go out. There wasn't even Opal around to be with Mrs. Carpenter while Geneva was gone. If she went, she would have to leave things cooking. That was too dangerous. Something could boil over. There might be escaping gas or a fire. She wouldn't go.

"We had a scene," Mrs. Carpenter continued. "I told her I was not incompetent. I told her I would be mistress in my own house. I told her that if she telephoned for the lettuce, I would not eat the salad. I suppose I worked myself up into something of a tantrum. She went."

Although she put it all as play-acting in Geneva's interest, I sensed that not all of it had been an act. Even though she was only quoting herself to me, when she spoke of being mistress in her own house, a ring of something genuine sounded in her words.

"I thought I had to take a stand," she explained. "If given her own way, that girl would have made a prisoner of herself and a prisoner of me, as well. There was the difficulty we had about the doctor, for instance. Have I told you about that?"

She hadn't, but she did.

This was another episode, and it had come up that same day, only

hours before the lettuce fracas. It was the time for one of Mrs. Carpenter's regular visits to the doctor, her first since she had hired Geneva.

"When I told her we would be going to the doctor, she asked me where he had his office. When I told her Fifth Avenue in the Seventies, I thought the child was really going mad. She said it was impossible. It was insane. She wanted to know what sort of a quack he might be, expecting me to make the trip to and from his office. The man should be making house calls for a patient like me, she insisted. She was all for phoning him and telling him I couldn't possibly make it to his office. He must come and see me here. When I told her he would just laugh at her, she said I would have to change doctors. I would have to find a proper doctor who would have a proper concern for my condition and not expect me to come to his office. Of course, I'd have none of that. I made her take me, but she didn't like it. I suppose that started it. Then the lettuce made it two defeats all in one day. She decided she'd give me a fright. She'd just go out and not come back. She'd stay away for a while."

"How long a while?" I asked. This seemed a highly improbable assumption. "The whole night? It's already well into the next day, and she's not back yet."

"She'll be back. She left all her things, not that they're anything much. The child has practically nothing to wear, and of what she has there isn't a thing that isn't grim."

"How can she come back? How will she ever explain?"

Mrs. Carpenter smiled. "It will be interesting to hear what she says. I can't imagine what it will be, but the girl's no fool. She'll find something to say and, whatever it is, I shan't question it. I'll just accept it. You see, Mr. Bagby, she has taught me my lesson. When she comes back, I'll not be pushing her any more. She will do the marketing as she likes. She'll lock herself up here as much as she likes. Maybe she can take it; but if she can't, I'll have her for at least as long as it lasts. She's taught me that there's nothing I can do but let her have her way, that and hope that she knows what's good for her."

"Her way?" I asked. "Taking your walks inside these four walls, pacing the floor of this apartment? Finding a doctor who'll come here on house calls and not expect you to come to his office?"

"No. What's necessary is, of course, necessary; but hereafter it will be that and no more. What I must have, she will concede to me. I expect she'll be reasonable to that extent. She will settle for my dropping all the things I have been pressing not for my own sake but for hers."

"Have you thought that you might be all wrong about this?" I asked. "Something could have happened to her that prevented her returning."

"In that case she would have telephoned me or sent a message."

"Perhaps she can't," I said. "Let's say she's unconscious."

I didn't want to make it too rough on the old girl. "Unconscious" would do. I didn't have to say "dead."

"I would have been informed. She carries identification."

"Are you listed as the person to be informed?"

"Naturally. She knows nobody else in the city. Who else would there be to inform?"

"Are you assuming that, or did you see her identification?"

"I've seen it."

"You know she had it on her when she went out for the lettuce?"

"She took her purse. She carries it in her purse."

"Always changes it from purse to purse."

"She has only the one purse, the one she took with her. I told you she has practically nothing. I've never seen a woman with less, not to speak of a young woman and one with looks like hers."

"Have you checked on whether she ever got to the vegetable market?" I asked.

She said she had. She'd already been on the telephone to do her ordering for the day. All the tradesmen had been surprised by having her revert to phone ordering. They had all asked about Geneva.

"I don't like tradespeople knowing my business," she said. "I just told them Geneva had gone away for a bit. The vegetable man said it was funny she hadn't said anything about going away when she

had been in yesterday morning. Those were his words—'yesterday morning'—he said nothing of her having returned for lettuce in the evening."

I thought the man should be asked specifically when he had last seen Geneva Washington, and I told her as much. I told her that it would be wise for her to report the girl as a missing person.

She laughed at me. She'd had experience with companions, too much experience. It wasn't the first time one of them had walked out on her in just this fashion. They go off in a temper. They're gone maybe a day or two or even as long as a week. Then they call and ask if they can come and pick up their things.

"They've thought better of it," she said. "When they come for their things, they try to sound me out on whether I would consider having them back. I never take them back, but Geneva is different. I shall take her back. If she doesn't come for her things herself, if she sends someone, I'll refuse to give them anything. I'll insist on her coming herself because I mean to try to persuade her to come back."

"Whom can she send? She knows nobody in town."

"That's why I expect she'll come herself. Hard as it may be for her to face me, she'll have to come herself."

"Meanwhile are you trying to get another girl?"

"No. I want Geneva back."

"How long do you propose to wait for her?"

"As long as I can. Opal is arranging to give me time in the afternoons. She will go for my walks with me. I can manage the rest."

"Be here alone all night, every night?"

"I was alone last night and I managed. I can manage another night or two. She'll be back. She's fond of me. I know she is. It was just a clash of wills, and I shan't oppose her again. She'll be back."

"Your meals, Mrs. Carpenter?"

"I can boil an egg, Mr. Bagby. Do you know the French bakery down on the avenue? They do all manner of wickedly delicious things like *quiches* and *crepes farcis* which they will send in frozen. I can manage very well. If you would care to come to dinner tonight, I'll promise you an excellent meal. You'll see how well I manage."

"I have a better idea," I said. "Tonight I'm taking you out to dinner."

"Oh, but that's not necessary," she protested.

"I never do what's necessary," I told her. "I do only what I like. May I pick you up at seven?"

"You may."

She needed no more coaxing than that. Going off and using the Police Department connections I have through being a friend of Inspector Schmidt's, I did make the standard inquiries about Geneva Washington. I arranged that Mrs. Carpenter wasn't to be alarmed or disturbed. I asked only for a check of hospitals and morgue.

A woman is hit by a truck. Her bag flies out of her hand. Some ghoul grabs it and runs while better citizens are occupied with seeing to the injured woman. She is unconscious or dead. Her identification has vanished. It can happen that way.

It was one possibility. Another was that the girl had an accident. She's not in coma, but she insists that Mrs. Carpenter not be informed. If she is fond of the old lady and recognizes that the old lady is fond of her, she might prefer that Mrs. Carpenter be angry rather than frightened and worried. In the light of Geneva's exaggerated concern over Mrs. Carpenter's health, this seemed not at all unlikely. She had shown every other inclination toward over-coddling her employer, as, for example, wanting for Mrs. Carpenter a doctor who would come out on house calls even when it was only a routine checkup and no emergency.

The boys took it on for me and came up with nothing. Geneva hadn't been admitted to any hospital in the city, and no patient had come in who even remotely answered her description. The police were inclined to agree with Mrs. Carpenter. Missing Persons all too frequently has calls from aroused employers reporting maids who have walked out on them without warning.

"It's a thing these babes do," the boys told me. "One like you say she is, she had a fight with the boy friend. She decides to disappear for a while just to give him a hard time. He finds her. She goes out for the lettuce and he's waiting for her outside. They kiss and make

up, and she goes off with him, forgetting all about the old lady. She won't remember again till she needs a change of panties for herself. Then she'll remember to go back and get her stuff. It's a thing these babes do."

When Opal had finished her day in the building and was ready to go home, she took a moment to run up and speak to me. I told you Opal was a jewel. She'd taken Mrs. Carpenter for the old lady's walk; and, when they returned, Mrs. Carpenter had asked her to stay on a little longer to help her dress.

"She's sitting down there all ready and waiting for seven o'clock, Mr. Bagby. She's wearing her pearls and a black velvet dinner gown I never seen out of the closet before. I just thought you ought to know and not wear the tweed jacket with the leather patches on the elbows."

"Black tie, Opal?"

"Your tuxedo, Mr. Bagby, and please with a tie, not one of them white turtlenecks. She's an old-fashioned lady, Mrs. Carpenter, and she's made herself look awfully nice for you, Mr. Bagby."

 III 

Long before I was through dining Mrs. Carpenter that evening I had reason to regret it. The lady seemed to be at her silliest and most trying. She kept preening herself ridiculously, and the way she flirted with me was so blatant that waiters preserved a decorous sobriety only by mercilessly chewing their lips. Everywhere I looked, I was confronted by people tittering behind their hands; and when any eye met mine, I could read in it nothing but contempt and possibly a shade of pity.

Everyone who saw us that evening must have had me ticketed as the silly old babe's gigolo. If I could have addressed her as "grandma" or "auntie" I might have induced some of our audience into believing I was a relative doing his good deed. Since I had to call her Mrs. Carpenter, I worked at looking like her attorney or possibly a man who handled her investments for her. I can't pretend that I brought it off even for a moment. I know I looked like a fool. I'm very much afraid I looked like a heel as well.

She enjoyed her dinner, and I got through mine somehow. When at the end of what had come to seem an unbearably long evening, I finally brought her home, I found that I couldn't just see her into her apartment and take off. She was insistent that I come in with her for a nightcap. I tried to refuse. I asked if I might have a rain check, but she would have it no other way. I had to come in.

I went and I even managed to keep a smile going. As I saw it, she was having a bad moment. By daylight she had been brave enough about spending another night alone in the apartment, but now she could be lonely and frightened.

I had a cognac and she a creme de menthe, and she seemed neither frightened nor lonely. She was painfully arch. Her flirtatiousness grew to alarming proportions. It was too ridiculous to believe that in

the words of her own generation she had carnal designs on me, but it seemed all but impossible to put any other construction on her behavior. Eventually, however, and only after I had announced firmly that now I must go, she broke down and told me what she required of me.

She couldn't manage the catch on her pearls. Unless I opened it for her, she would have to sleep the night in her necklace. I did the pearls and after that it was her dress. It had a back zipper which she couldn't reach. I could see her problem. Her request, if not for the extremes of flirtatiousness she brought to her making of it, would have seemed not unreasonable.

There was nothing for it, however, but to do as she asked. I couldn't leave her to bed down for the night in all that black velvet. With some trepidation I attacked the zipper, but it was all right. As soon as I had it down some eight or ten inches, she reached around and showed me that I now had it within easy reach for her. She could manage the rest for herself. I was free.

When, at an hour in the morning far earlier than any civilized person uses the telephone, mine rang, I assumed it would be Inspector Schmidt. The inspector's work, of course, follows no set time table. He is likely to be up and doing at any hour at all. When something comes up he thinks might make a story for me, he calls me, whatever the hour, to tell me to jump into my pants and come out to meet him.

Assuming it was the inspector, therefore, I picked up the phone prepared to do my part in our customary exchange of friendly discourtesies. I was brought up short by a woman's voice, particularly since I recognized both the voice and the diction. Only women of Mrs. Carpenter's generation speak as she did, and even among them it is only the few. If this was a courtesy call of thanks for the dinner, she'd chosen an unconscionable hour for it.

But it wasn't a courtesy call. She apologized for disturbing me. She knew how early it was. She was certain I would regret ever having shown her a kindness. She hated to bother me with her troubles, but she knew no one else who had my experience with crime, and she did need advice.

"I could call the police," she said, "and I expect I shall have to call them in the end, but I couldn't be more upset. If I could talk to you before I did anything, if I could have your advice, it would make me feel ever so much better."

"Certainly, Mrs. Carpenter. Are you all right, Mrs. Carpenter?"

She sounded all right. Her voice was strong and calm and resolute. There was none of the archness in it. She sounded neither ill nor frightened; and despite her saying that she couldn't be more upset, she didn't sound hysterical or even tremulous. She sounded as though she were completely in command, both of the situation and of herself.

"I am quite all right," she said.

"Good. Then tell me what's troubling you."

"I can't over the telephone. Would it be an awful nuisance for you to come down?"

"You'll have to give me a couple of moments," I said. "I'm not dressed."

A small cry of dismay did escape her then. Quickly she tried to cover it over with a show of concern for me. She should have waited before calling me. She had disturbed me. It was a good effort but somehow unconvincing.

"You're alone, Mrs. Carpenter?" I asked.

"Yes. Opal won't be in for hours."

I couldn't help getting the picture. Something had happened during the night. It was something she thought she'd have to take to the police. I could imagine that she had waited before calling me. She hadn't been able to hold out long enough to make it any sort of decent hour. Her nerves wouldn't stretch that far, and now she was going to have to stretch them a little more. She was frightened and not admitting it.

"Could you manage it to the elevator and come up here?" I asked. "I'll leave the door off the latch for you. You can sit in my living room, and while I'm making myself decent, we can talk from room to room."

"No," she said. "I can wait. You take your time, Mr. Bagby. At your earliest convenience will do. I'll be here." Her voice broke

slightly as she made a rare dip into self pity. "I can't go anywhere," she said.

It occurred to me that she mightn't be dressed either. It even came to my mind that she might be wanting me to help her with another back zipper, but I quickly put that notion away. That wouldn't be a problem she would at any time have to take to the police.

"You'll take me without a shave?" I asked.

She rose to it. She gave me a small laugh. "Just this once, Mr. Bagby," she said. "Do come down as quickly as you can, beard and all."

I wasn't even a minute, only long enough to climb into slacks and shrug into a shirt. I buttoned the shirt while I was galloping down the stairs. I rang Mrs. Carpenter's door bell and had to wait a moment before I heard her work the lock. That was okay. Even if she was right inside the door waiting for me and didn't have to work her way across anything, grabbing on to furniture for support as she went, she would be taking that moment for checking on me through the peephole.

I heard the click of the lock, and I opened the door. I was wrong about her not being dressed. She was all ready for the day, fully clothed, hair done, face on, the works. Something, however, had been added. Clutched in both her hands she had a .45. It's a lot of revolver for any female less hefty than a Russian Olympic shotputter. For old Mrs. Carpenter it was more than she could bring up into firing position even when she was using both hands.

"Mr. Bagby," she said. "Come in. Do. And take this thing. I think it's what has me the most frightened. I've always thought I could handle it if there were a need. I've discovered I can't."

I let her put the .45 into my hand while I was shutting the door, but my mind wasn't on it. I was too much occupied with a faint reek that hung in the air. It was only just perceptible, but it didn't have to be any stronger. I was recognizing it and with complete certainty. It was chloroform.

I took her arm and helped her to a chair. I checked the revolver. It was carrying a full load.

"Where did you get the cannon?" I asked.

"It was Will's, Mr. Carpenter's. It was always rather heavy for me but once I could manage it. I haven't the strength in my hands I used to have."

"What's happened?"

"Oscar," she said. "I've always liked Oscar. Now I'm afraid he's a thief."

"Who's Oscar?"

"You know him. The janitor and handyman. Oscar."

I knew Oscar. "That Oscar, Mrs. Carpenter?" I said. "Oh, no. I'd trust him with anything. He's as solid a man as you could ask for. We're lucky to have him."

I was thinking fast. It's a crazily dangerous thing to do, but I've known people to do it. They take it instead of sleeping pills. They get nerved up and can't sleep. A few drops of chloroform on a handkerchief and they lay it on the pillow. That had to be it. She was still fuzzy with it and having delusions.

"I'll make you some coffee," I said.

"I've already made it," she told me. "If you wouldn't mind pouring it out. Suddenly I feel rather weak. It's the reaction. I was holding on to myself till I could get you down here. I would like a cup of coffee. You have some too, Mr. Bagby."

I went on to her kitchen. This was a lot of old babe. She hadn't only made the coffee. She'd set up a complete tray for two and it was Spode, no less. Cups and saucers, cream pitcher with cream in it, filled sugar bowl, jug of marmalade, toast wrapped in a linen tea napkin, the necessary silver. All I had to do was move the coffee pot to the tray and carry the whole works in. She had obviously been up an hour or more, getting herself dressed and ready, fixing this breakfast for two, figuring how she was going to get me downstairs to share it with her.

Coming back to her with the coffee tray, I was bristling with wariness. She told me where to set it down and she asked me to do the pouring out.

"I'll be all right soon," she said. "My hands are trembling, and just now I can't control them."

"It'll help you pull yourself together if you tell me what happened," I said. "And I do have to know."

"Yes," she sighed. "Oscar broke in here during the night while I was asleep. He's a thief."

"You saw him?"

"No, of course not. I was asleep. I'd taken my sleeping pill, as I do every night. With it I sleep soundly. He would have to have been noisy to wake me, and evidently he wasn't noisy. He stayed away from my room. I didn't wake. I didn't know a thing."

"Then how do you know it was Oscar?"

"I don't want to think it any more than you do, but it could be no one else. No one else could have fixed it to get in."

"What are you missing?"

"Nothing."

"You had a thief and he took nothing?"

"He found nothing he could take. I never keep money around, never more than a few dollars. I do everything by check, and anyhow he never came into my room."

We weren't in her bedroom but even out where we were I could see plenty that was a standing denial of her statement that there was nothing that a thief could have found to take. There was the vermiel bell and the vermiel cup that held her cigarettes. There were all manner of other ornaments in the fabulously costly silver gilt. There was the silver.

I said nothing, but she followed my gaze.

"Yes," she said. "It is surprising, I know, but I suppose he was after money, not things. I can't believe Oscar is a professional. I don't think he's the sort of man who makes a habit of stealing. It's likely he's never done this before. If he took things, I suppose he wouldn't know where he could go to dispose of them with any degree of safety."

I tried another approach. "You said you took your sleeping pill. You slept soundly. You saw no one. Nothing woke you."

"One seconal," she said. "Without it I don't sleep at all. With it I sleep like a baby. It's all I need."

"Good," I said. "Then why the chloroform, Mrs. Carpenter?"

She looked genuinely startled. I was watching her closely, expecting she would put on an act, but it didn't look like an act. The question did astonish her.

I sniffed the air. She sniffed with me. Her look of astonishment gave way before one of uncertainty and panic.

"Chloroform?" she whispered. "Is that the odor? Chloroform?"

"Faint, Mrs. Carpenter, but unmistakable. What have you been thinking it was?"

"I didn't know," she said. "I didn't think. I assumed it was something the air conditioning was bringing in from outside, something perhaps that had been used to clean the halls or polish the brass of the stair rail. There was a time when soap smelled like soap and polish smelled like polish, but they've been changing everything. Horribly perfumed detergents, strange new chemicals. I keep asking Opal to find something scentless she can use for the kitchen and bathroom floors, so that I won't have to make the choice between having dirty floors and feeling as though I had filled my home with harlots."

"Even the little that's hanging in the air is fading fast now," I said. "Was it stronger when you woke?"

"Much stronger." She had gone white-lipped. Visibly she was taking a grip on herself. "It's stronger in my bedroom than it ever was in any other part of the apartment. I've been stupid, Mr. Bagby, and small wonder. He was in my room. He chloroformed me. That's why I woke feeling not at all myself. That numb, thick-headed feeling and the slight headache. That was the chloroform. Just burglary was enough, Mr. Bagby. Even that I found it hard to believe of Oscar, but this makes it too horrible. This is terrifying."

I went out to her bedroom. Even with the chloroform, this was a disciplined old babe. She had made her bed. She had the room in perfect order. I could read her thinking. If she was going to have Bagby down and if she was going to have the police in, none of these chores which ordinarily would be left for Opal could be left undone. She was not the woman to permit strange men to see either herself or her things in disarray. She was right. The smell of chloroform was stronger in her bedroom.

I came out and poured us second cups of coffee. "You say it's Oscar because no one else could get in," I reminded her. "How did he get in?"

"By the window. He came in through this room. He came in by the window behind you."

I was for the moment relieved. I liked Oscar. She had been reluctant to believe it of him. I was more reluctant.

"This is the ground floor, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "Hasn't it occurred to you that anyone anytime could come in just off the street? Climbing in a street-level window is no trick at all. This place of yours is burglar-prone. No apartment could be more burglar-prone."

I'd turned to look at the window she indicated; but, of course, I was seeing nothing. She had the damask draperies that completely concealed the window and its view of the street and the parked cars.

"Not past the bronze grilles, Mr. Bagby," she reminded me. "There are heavy bronze grilles on all my windows just like the one over the glass on the front door. Haven't you ever noticed as you go by outside? That's why I keep my windows so heavily shrouded. It would be like living in a prison if I had to look at those grilles all the time."

"How did Oscar get past the grille?" I asked.

She suggested that I examine the window. I went to it and pushed back the drapery. The window was shut and locked, but through it I could see the bronze grille. It was hanging unfastened. It wasn't swung wide open, but I could see that it wasn't secured. On the windowsill lay three long bronze screws about as thick as my little finger. I took one thing at a time.

"The window," I told her, "is shut and locked."

She was aware of that. When she had come out to the living room in the morning, she had seen at once that something was amiss. The drapery on that one window had been drawn back. The window stood wide open and the grille outside was hanging ajar.

"I pulled it back shut," she said, "but I didn't know how to fasten it, and even if I had known, I didn't have the tools. I did what I could. I pulled the grille back shut, and I drew the window down. I could lock the window, and that I did. It was a matter of securing what I could."

I unlocked the window and pushed it all the way up to examine the grille. It was, as she said, the same heavy, ornamental bronze as covered the glass of the front door. The setup should have been completely secure. It was hinged at one side. The hinges were solidly bolted into the stone of the house wall, and the hinges were under a heavy bronze covering that made it impossible for anyone to get at them from the street. At the other side there was a heavy, bronze bar also securely bolted into the stone. The grille closed snugly against this bar with screw holes in the grille meeting screw holes in the bar. If the screws that lay on the windowsill were in place, they would hold the grille solidly to the bronze bar and the stone. Like the hinges, the screw holes also could not in any way be reached from the street. With the screws lying on the windowsill, however, the grille, of course, was unsecured, free to swing on its hinges.

While I was examining the window situation, Mrs. Carpenter went on talking. Immediately on seeing the window she knew she'd had a burglar. Almost at a glance she determined that nothing had been touched in the living room. There was no disorder and all the pieces of vermeil and silver were in their accustomed places. She returned to her bedroom and checked her jewelry. What she had worn the evening before she had left on top of her dressing table, expecting to put it away in the morning. It had all been there, lying on the dressing table just as she had left it. Doing a thorough job, she looked for the rest of her jewelry. It was all there. Nothing had been taken. So far as she could know, nothing had even been touched.

"It all seemed incomprehensible, even nightmarish," she said. "I didn't begin to understand it until I'd been through the rest of the apartment and I looked into Geneva's room. He had been in there. No question of that."

As I've already told you, I'd been into Mrs. Carpenter's room. The police were not going to be happy about the way she had been busy-ing herself that morning. Pulling the grille shut and closing and locking the window were understandable. As she said, she had secured the place as best she could. Even drawing the drapery back across the window I could explain. It could have been habit. It could have been a nervous reflex. It could have been an effort to shut out the

terrifying reminder any sight of the window would have been for her.

She hadn't, however, stopped with that. She'd made her bed and tidied up her whole room. She'd put away her jewelry and not left it laid out as it had been for the burglar. If her visitor had left anything behind that could have been useful to the police, Mrs. Carpenter had almost certainly obliterated it.

I had my fingers crossed while I asked my next question.

"Her room torn up?"

"Closet door standing open. Her clothes are off the hangers and dropped to the closet floor. All the drawers are pulled out of the chests and dumped on the floor. Everything's been turned out, but nothing's been taken."

I groaned. "You've put it all back in order," I said. "You've neated everything up."

She glared at me. I was being offensive.

"Do you take me for an imbecile, Mr. Bagby?" she huffed. "Why would I do that? The police will want to see it exactly as I found it. There may be fingerprints. I just looked at it and shut the door on it. I touched nothing."

I wanted to know how she could know that nothing had been taken from Geneva's room. I could well imagine that some of those times when she'd forced the girl to go out for the marketing she had done a complete job of examining Geneva's things. It was in character. She would be that prying, but I had a mental picture of a closet with everything dumped on its floor and of drawers turned over, leaving their contents heaped on the bedroom floor. Even if Mrs. Carpenter had a mental inventory of every last button the girl had in that room, it still didn't seem possible for her to know it was all there unless she had at least picked the piles over to add things up. I held back on the question. It could wait until she'd cooled down a bit. My earlier question had irritated her.

"All right if I have a look?" I asked instead.

"I should appreciate it if you would," she answered. There was still a slight touch of frost on her tone.

As soon as I'd opened the door on the second bedroom and looked inside, I was glad I'd held off on my question. The picture I'd formed for myself of contents of dumped drawers lying in disordered heaps could hardly have been more off the mark. The room and the things in it were exactly as Mrs. Carpenter had described them; but the things, even taken all together, were so few that they made only a sparse scattering on the floors of bedroom and closet. Without touching anything Mrs. Carpenter could easily have checked over the whole lot and accounted for everything. When I returned to her, Mrs. Carpenter welcomed me back with a small harpoon.

"I hope you didn't touch anything in there," she said.

"Nothing. I suggest we have the police right now."

"In a moment," she said, "but first I'd like you to advise me. I do hate telling them about Oscar, but I suppose I must."

"I would most strongly suggest that you don't, Mrs. Carpenter," I told her. "Your suspicions may be quite unfounded. I'm inclined to think they are unfounded. You'll be far happier if you just let the police draw their own conclusions from what they see here and what you can tell them. By that I mean you tell them only what you know as fact, nothing that you conjecture."

"Don't you think they should be told that Oscar has the key that opens all our apartment doors?" she asked.

"It's common practice. The janitor or superintendent of any building must have the keys. In case of fire or flooding or a gas leak when one of us isn't at home, he must have access to the apartments. That's routine for the police. They'll check on everyone who might have access to the apartment. No need for you to tell them."

"Very well," she said. "Would you call them for me then, Mr. Bagby? And I am grateful. I hated to accuse Oscar, but I felt I couldn't withhold the information. It's a great relief to know the police will have it and without my volunteering it."

I called the local precinct for her. They got right on it, but in the few moments I still had alone with her, I worked at getting her straightened around on her thinking about poor Oscar. I knew the man and I was ready to take my oath that he was above suspicion,

but I'd already taken that tack with Mrs. Carpenter, accomplishing nothing. I thought I could do better if I simply sorted out the available facts for her.

Oscar, I told her, could not get that grille open from the outside any more than anyone else. The removal of those screws could be done only from inside the apartment. She had recognized that. Oscar had his master key. Getting in would be no trick for Oscar. Oscar also knew just how the grille fastenings worked, and he had the tools for coping with them. Regularly once a fortnight, when she had the window cleaner, Oscar came in and unfastened all the grilles so the man could get at the windows to wash them on the outside. Oscar also went around after the man each time and made the grilles secure again.

"All he had to do was leave the screws out of that one," she said. "With the draperies drawn all the time, nobody would see them on the windowsill. Nobody would know there was anything amiss."

"When did you last have the window cleaner?"

"Monday of last week."

I did a quick sum on the days. "That's been nine days," I said. "Eight yesterday. Wouldn't Opal have known? Doesn't she pull back the draperies to dust windowsills and windowframes?"

"Every day," Mrs. Carpenter answered. "You know Opal."

I knew Opal. She was always finding things to clean I'd never have known could need cleaning. It was inconceivable that Opal for even one day in soot-burdened New York would have neglected the dusting of a windowsill.

"Then when she was in here cleaning yesterday, not to speak of all the other days since you had the window cleaner, she couldn't have missed seeing those three great bronze brutes sitting on the windowsill."

That had Mrs. Carpenter stopped but only for a moment.

"He could have come in and removed the screws anytime," she said. "Yesterday afternoon. Opal cleaned in the morning. She came back later to take me for my walk. He has his key. While we were out, he slipped in here for a moment and unscrewed that grille. You're right, of course. That's when he did it. Opal came back with

me, but only to help me dress. She had finished all the cleaning in the morning.”

“But why, Mrs. Carpenter?” I protested.

“So he could return last night and come in the window,” she said.

“Doing it the hard way? He still had his master key. Why all this risky nonsense when he could have just unlocked the door last night and walked in?”

“Very likely,” she said, “that’s the way he did do it. He came in by the door and left by the door, but he pushed back the drapes, raised the window, and swung the grille open to make it look as though it were someone from the outside, someone who couldn’t come in the easier way with the key. If he hadn’t left any indication of how the burglar got in, everything would have pointed straight at him. He has the key.”

“One moment,” I said. “What good could it do him? He would make it look as though someone came in from the outside but by a means of access that could be set up only from the inside.”

She sighed. “You think he’s a good man,” she said. “I always thought he was a good man, but I never thought he was particularly clever. Do you, Mr. Bagby? Do you think Oscar is particularly clever?”

Oscar is no genius. I had to admit that, but this seemed rather too stupid. The man was no idiot either. She argued that he didn’t have to be an idiot.

“Don’t you see?” she said. “It’s the crime that’s idiotic. This may be the first time he ever tried anything like this. Certainly whether it was Oscar or someone else, and I don’t see how it could be anyone else, he was inexperienced. He made mistakes. He made nothing but mistakes. An experienced thief would have taken the vermeil and the silver. He would have taken the jewelry. This was a thief who had no way of getting rid of anything he stole. He was looking for nothing but money, and he touched nothing but money.”

“He didn’t touch your money either,” I reminded her.

“My money?” she said. “The only money I ever have here is a little change I keep on hand. It’s for tipping delivery boys. I do everything else by check. Whenever I am in the bank I pick up ten dollars in

silver. I shall be going to the bank soon again. What I had in the house last night was less than two dollars in quarters and dimes. I can well imagine him looking at that and leaving it in disgust."

She was saying the last of that when the bell rang. She finished it while I was going to the door. The detective who came over from precinct was Joe Simmons. I knew Joe, as I knew all the boys over at the station house. At times when I'm working with Inspector Schmidt we drop by there all the time. I am, after all, the next thing to being on the force.

Joe's a good man. Mrs. Carpenter asked if I would give him the story. Then if he had any questions, she would be happy to answer them; but since I knew as much of what happened as she did, it would be easier if I did the talking.

It suited me. I wanted Joe to have the thing straight, just the simplest factual account of the whole affair. He heard me out. He looked at the window and the grille. He looked at Geneva's room. He asked Mrs. Carpenter to bring out the jewelry she had worn the night before and show him how it had been lying on the dressing table top.

"Right," he said. "He wasn't messing with anything but cash. He was somebody who knew quite a lot about you, Mrs. Carpenter. He knew that the few coins you had in your purse would be all you would have around the apartment. If you had no more than those quarters and dimes there, you'd have no more anywhere else around the place. He knew it was no use looking."

"But how could anyone know that?" I asked.

"Someone who knows Mrs. Carpenter well enough to know she never keeps anything around but the bit of tipping money," Joe said. "He was going to ransack her companion's room, and he was taking no chances on Mrs. Carpenter waking and hearing him. He took care of that with the chloroform."

"Once he had Mrs. Carpenter chloroformed," I said, "he could have worked in her room slowly and carefully. We don't know that he didn't ransack her things."

"He did," Mrs. Carpenter said. "I think he did. I think he came into the apartment expecting to find money in Geneva's room. If he

knew she wasn't here last night, he thought he could rob her and never have to go near me. It was only when he was disappointed in there that he decided to come into my room. It was a risk he hadn't been planning on taking, but he decided to take it rather than come away empty-handed. He chloroformed me and then he was disappointed in my room as he had been in Geneva's. He was so disgusted that he didn't even take the little change I did have. He ended up leaving empty-handed and in disgust."

The question had to come. Joe wanted to know who had keys to the apartment.

"You have a super here," he said. "He'll have a master key?"

She gave him Oscar, but except for a small look of triumph she tossed at me, she left it at telling him there was a janitor and he did have a master key.

"Okay," Joe said. "We'll talk to him. Anyone else?"

"Nobody," Mrs. Carpenter said.

I could read that as only the silliest sort of lie. It seemed to me that malice had taken over. She wanted to keep the focus exclusively on poor Oscar. It wasn't that I was eager to toss Joe either Opal or Geneva, but I couldn't go along on playing games with the police.

"You're not thinking, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "What about Opal?"

"Opal's never had a key."

"She has my key."

"Obviously, Mr. Bagby. When Opal goes up to clean your apartment, you are likely to be out. Unless she has your key, she can't get in. She's never needed my key. I'm always here."

"I'm sorry. What about Geneva?"

In Opal's case I'd been making an assumption. I knew Geneva had a key. I'd seen her use it.

"Of course, Geneva has a key," Mrs. Carpenter said. "Are you supposing the child stole in here last night and chloroformed me just so that she could rob herself? Really, Mr. Bagby."

 IV 

She had me there; but Joe, maybe because he had never seen Geneva, wasn't so easily put down. He began shooting the questions. Had it been the girl's night out? Mrs. Carpenter explained that Geneva had no night out. She'd never asked for one. Under Joe's questioning the old lady gave him the whole picture on Geneva Washington. You already know all that. We can skip it here.

I'll just give you what was new to me. She had been paying Geneva a hundred and twenty-five a week. Like everyone else Geneva received her pay in a check. She had been with Mrs. Carpenter through three pay days. She'd had three checks.

"She walked out of here the night before last in a huff and she didn't come back," Joe said, "but you didn't know she wasn't coming back. You expected her back. I have that right, haven't I?"

"She left in a temper, but I was expecting her back with the lettuce. All I knew was that she was going out for the lettuce."

"So, of course, she just went as she was. She didn't pack a bag. She didn't take anything with her."

"She took her purse. What else would she take?"

"To go for lettuce," Joe said, "nothing else. So except for what she stood up in when she walked out of here, what I can see in her room was all she had to wear."

"I know it's incredible for a beautiful young woman," Mrs. Carpenter said. "She's a really lovely child, but she doesn't have the first bit of vanity. I expected she'd go on a shopping spree with her first check. No woman in the world gets along that way on only the barest grim essentials, but as far as I know, she didn't buy a thing. I do know. What you see in her room is all she has. She brought that with her and she bought nothing."

"She bought nothing," Joe summed up. "She never went out. She

had a hundred and twenty-five a week here, a hundred and twenty-five and her keep. If she wasn't spending it on anything, it has been piling up."

Joe was building something, and long before he had filled in the last details for Mrs. Carpenter, I was catching the whole picture and, however regretfully, I found myself swinging around toward Mrs. Carpenter's views on Oscar.

"A man with a key to your door," Joe said. "A man who knows quite a bit about you. Maybe even a man who so obviously knows about you and how you do with money that when we get around to questioning him he can claim he'd never come in here even if he was a crook. He'll say it would have to be someone who never knew Mrs. Carpenter kept no cash money around."

He filled the whole thing in for her. This someone would have been watching. He would know that Geneva wasn't in the apartment. He would have known that three pay days had rolled around for Geneva and she hadn't gone anywhere or spent any part of her earnings.

"Maybe he went away empty-handed," Joe said, "and maybe he didn't. Maybe he got what he came for. Three hundred and seventy-five bucks or a good part of it he might have found in the girl's room. On the other hand, there's also the girl. She had her key with her when she went out of here, didn't she?"

"She kept it in her purse," Mrs. Carpenter said. "She took her purse with her. I assumed her money would also have been in her purse."

"Three hundred and seventy-five just for a little lettuce?"

"She would charge the lettuce," Mrs. Carpenter said.

I stuck my oar in. "No reason to think she kept the cash on her or in her room," I said. "How do we know she wasn't banking the money or paying off debts? Those are still alternatives to spending."

Joe grinned. "So long since I saw any money that doesn't go whizzing right out for a payment on the house or a payment on the car or oil for the heater or shoes for the kids, or the groceries," he said, "I was clean forgetting that people bank money, too. But how could

she bank it if she never went out at all? How could she pay off on a debt?"

"How could she cash the checks if she never went out at all?" I countered.

"When she went out to market she could have cashed her checks," Joe reminded me.

"She could also have bowled them into the bank then," I said. "Or she could have been making mail deposits."

"Right," Joe agreed. "It's just one theory. If someone saw her cashing checks and no evidences of spending, he could have thought there'd be the haul in here among her things." He turned back to Mrs. Carpenter. "This girl?" he asked. "Where did you get her? Through an agency?"

"No. I advertised in the *Times*. I'd tried all the agencies and I couldn't make myself face even an interview with another of the freaks they kept sending me. I tried the *Times*."

"She answered your *Times* ad. Did she have references?"

"Obviously, young man. I wouldn't have considered her without."

"Did you check them?"

"She had one letter, the most enthusiastic reference I've ever seen—honest, reliable, wonderfully competent, able to take over in any emergency, cheerful about working under difficulties, wonderful personality, a joy to have around. It was so glowing, I found it difficult to believe."

"Uhuh," Joe said. "I've got a good wife. No kicks. But even her, I couldn't give her a reference like that. You did check it?"

"I was so charmed with her on sight that I was tempted to try her out without bothering to check at all, but it all seemed to be too good to be true. I telephoned the woman."

"She backed her letter up?"

"She said it was every word true. She said she supposed that in writing it she should have explained why Geneva was no longer with her. She had employed Geneva as a companion to her mother who had been very old and very ill. Geneva had remained with the old lady till the poor old thing died, and this woman said it had been a cruel and difficult year made bearable for herself only by Geneva and

that, in looking back to it, she had the one comfort that in finding Geneva she had at the end been able to give her mother decent comfort and pleasant days. Obviously, from what she said, she'd had the experience I'd just been through, a succession of impossible witches. Geneva, she said, was an angel. She asked me to give Geneva her love. She sent the girl all manner of fond messages."

"And it was working out?" Joe asked.

"I soon found it wasn't all that perfect," Mrs. Carpenter said. "Geneva is self-willed. She tends to think she knows better what is good for me and what isn't than I do. In this earlier job of hers I can see how these faults would not have shown up. Maybe it was on that earlier job she developed the habits of mind which caused our little difficulties here. Taking care of a very old woman, she probably had to make all the decisions. Doing that could very well have developed in her this strain of peremptory bossiness that didn't go so well with me."

I was thinking, as I listened to her, that the differences between a very old woman and herself could possibly be evident to her. They wouldn't be evident to anyone else. That, however, was not to the point. What did matter was that Mrs. Carpenter was perfectly satisfied that Geneva Washington was exactly as represented. Even this worst thing she'd done, walking out without warning and leaving Mrs. Carpenter to stew over whether the girl would be coming back or not, was only the result of their clash of wills. The girl had, in fact, been so satisfactory that, as Mrs. Carpenter had told me at the very first, Geneva when she returned would be given much more her own way. Mrs. Carpenter was ready to capitulate to that extent. She was not going to permit Geneva to determine what Mrs. Carpenter must do for Mrs. Carpenter's own good, but she was withdrawing from her efforts to determine what Geneva must do for Geneva's own good. When the girl returned, Mrs. Carpenter would offer her true equality. Each would permit the other to go to Hell in a handbasket of her own choosing.

"The girl said she knew no one," I observed. "She had no friends. She wanted no time off. She had no place to go. The woman who gave her the reference certainly sounds like a friend."

"A former employer who had nothing but the friendliest feelings toward the child," Mrs. Carpenter said. "That's not quite the same thing as a friend, certainly not the crony she might go to a film with or spend more than the smallest snippet of free time with. Also the woman is not in the city. Before she came to me, Geneva had never worked in New York."

There can be no criticism of Joe Simmons. He gave it the full treatment, possibly even more than it seemed to warrant. You have to recognize the fact of police life in a big city. Burglary is an all too common crime. The police do what they can, but burglaries come at them on a frequency rate that simply doesn't permit them to give much time to any one case.

The department is forced to set up priorities, and the priorities are based on two factors. One factor, of course, is the size of the loss. The theft of half a million in jewels out of a hotel penthouse must get more police attention than the loss of a small-screen TV out of a tenement flat. You can argue that the babe in the hotel penthouse suffers less from her loss than the poor person who loses the TV set even before it's been all paid up, but that unfortunately is the way of the world, and it is not all injustice.

Lacking the time and the manpower to run every burglary into the ground, you can go a longer way toward upholding the law by catching up with the organized big operator than you ever will by reducing by one little punk the great army of small-time crooks.

On the basis of size of loss, obviously Mrs. Carpenter's burglary had no priority at all. She'd lost nothing. The only reason why Joe could justifiably spend even the time he did on her burglary was the priority it derived from the factor other than loss. It was not merely the attempted crime against property. We also had the crime against her person. Only the chloroform gave this burglary importance. A burglar who carries and uses chloroform is obviously a more dangerous criminal than your simple sneak thief. To put him out of circulation is more important than eliminating even some considerable number of those timid thieves who commit crimes only against property and who carry no threat of doing anyone bodily harm.

So Joe worked on Opal, and he worked on Oscar. Before he left the building he came up to my place and told me where the thing stood.

"You'll be getting a new key for your downstairs door," Joe told me. "I'm sure it was no key job, but there is the companion chick on the loose and she has keys, so it's just plain common sense. Maybe the old lady's right and this girl has just gone off to sulk while the old babe learns a lesson, but that's not the way the odds run. I figure the girl went out for the lettuce. She was mad. On her way to the store some guy gave her the eye, and she was just in the mood for it. She was ripe for a little fun, and it would serve the old crank right having to wait for her dinner. She lets him take her to a bar and one thing leads to another."

Letting one item in his thinking lead to another, he made quite a story of it. He explored the possibilities. Even though Mrs. Carpenter had scouted any suggestion that Geneva could be working with the burglar, giving him her keys and briefing him on the geography of the apartment, Joe was still insisting that there was just enough possibility that Geneva's keys had been used and might be used again to make it wise to do the changes on the locks.

Mrs. Carpenter had offered powerful arguments in Geneva's favor, and I was backing all her arguments up. She was convinced, as was I, that Geneva just wasn't the type. Joe took little stock in that.

"The old babe tells me the kid's a dish," he said. "I wouldn't pay any attention to that. What women look at I don't know. All I know is it's not what we look at. I remember before I was married. Mom was always looking for girls for me, trying to get me settled down. What did she come up with? Dogs every one of them, but my grandmother got into the act, too, and hers were worse, pure bred English bulldogs. So what an old lady calls a dish and what anyone with the other kind of hormones will call a dish is maybe not at all the same thing, but I've had it from you, too, and I've seen some of the stuff you go for." He paused a moment looking wistful. "It makes a cat wish maybe he could be a bachelor again just for one night," he said.

I assured him that Geneva was indeed a dish, but that being a dish wasn't the whole story. There was also a question of character. He poohpoohed character.

"That's just the type," he said. "It's the quiet, well-behaved, shy ones. Put them in company and they're afraid of their shadow. Get them with a stranger, off where nobody knows them, and they're the ones to go whee. They have to break out sometime."

"Nonsense," I said. "With all the stories you hear these days, what girl is going to let some strange man pick her up in the street? The girl's no fool, and everyone knows how dangerous that is."

"Come around some time and take a look at our police blotter," Joe told me. "We get it every day. 'He was so nice and so polite, such a gentleman, how could I ever think he was going to beat up on me and rob me?' And that's only some of them. The ones that get racked up never get to tell us how surprised they were."

Of all the arguments in Geneva's favor Joe had from Mrs. Carpenter and me, there was only the one he found convincing. Nobody had known better than Geneva that a burglar interested only in cash would be wasting his time in the Carpenter apartment.

"The girl knew there was never more than the tipping change around. The girl also knew even the tipping change was running low. They were only a day or two away from going to the bank to pick up a fresh ten bucks worth."

The way he was adding it up, Joe was certain that, whether or not it had anything to do with Mrs. Carpenter's peculiar burglary, Geneva Washington was off somewhere with a man.

"She doesn't have to be in on anything with him," he explained. "Suppose he swiped her keys and did the job on his own. It's a possibility. He knows she's been working for a rich old babe. He knows that with the chick shackled up with him, the old lady will be alone in the apartment. He doesn't know that Mrs. Carpenter keeps no cash around the house."

I suppose it was vanity that made me boggle at the thought of Geneva being off with a man. You've made your play for the world's most delectable girl. She finds you depressingly resistable. A cop

who's never seen her suggests that she'll walk out of the house and pick up with some passing character who's given her the eye. Try that for size, brother. See what it does to your self-esteem? Despite such feelings, however, I did have to concede that the situation had possibilities it would be foolhardy to ignore.

"He chloroforms Mrs. Carpenter," Joe said. "He messes up the girl's room but the rest of the apartment he ransacks carefully. That could make sense if he's the chick's boy friend and he doesn't want her guessing that he was the one who did the job. He makes it seem that it had to be someone who doesn't know her and who would figure she had three weeks' pay stashed away in her room."

"Or else," I suggested, "we're wrong about him going away empty handed. He picked her up. She has no money with her. He asks her what makes. Doesn't she get paid on this job of hers? She tells him she does get paid but she was just running down to the store for some lettuce. She didn't take her money with her. Maybe without knowing what she was doing, she told him all about herself and Mrs. Carpenter. In that case he knew there would be no money except in Geneva's room. He never touched anything in Mrs. Carpenter's room or in the rest of the apartment."

"That's why I said change the locks," Joe said. "Any time there are keys on the loose, it's smart to change locks. That's basic horse sense. If the chick ever comes back and we can get her to tell us who she's been with, we can look the guy over and maybe go some place with the thing, particularly if she did have the money in the room and she's lost it."

I harked back to what he'd said when he first came upstairs.

"In the light of all this," I asked, "what makes you say you don't think it was a key job?"

He explained that, although it was a good enough possibility to necessitate the change of lock cylinders, it was not what seemed to him the most likely possibility.

"There's the window," he said.

"Cover-up," I told him. "Someone who has a key fixes it that way to make it look as though the job had been done by someone who didn't have a key."

Joe picked that apart. I had some preconceived notions that worked strongly against my going along with him on what he was calling the most likely possibility, but he came up with the logic that knocked all my preconceptions down. First of all, he had questioned Oscar. He was as convinced as I was that Mrs. Carpenter's suspicions of our janitor were not worth consideration.

"He's not stupid," he said. "The window gives him no cover-up, and he didn't need it. He had every opportunity to go through that apartment any afternoon while Mrs. Carpenter was out for her walk and he could have done it during the time before the Geneva babe came when Mrs. Carpenter was hiring and firing companions about one a day. You've got people zipping in and out of a place like that, it's a good time to pull a job. Suspicion gets spread around so wide, nobody ever knows where to put it. Why does he wait to do it now and why at night when Mrs. Carpenter is in there? It's doing it the hard way, going to a lot of trouble to put himself to a risk he doesn't have to take. The best possibility on this thing is just ordinary carelessness. The last time he was fastening up after the window cleaner, he missed the one window and he left the screws sitting on the windowsill."

That, of course, was where my preconceptions came in. I gave him the full rundown on Oscar, how methodical and reliable the man was and the accompanying rundown on Opal, that jewel of a cleaning woman.

He'd already heard all that. He'd heard it from Oscar and Opal. He was believing none of it.

"It's just because they are so good and so reliable and they take all this pride in doing their jobs right that they'll never admit to even one moment of carelessness," he said. "He didn't skip the window deliberately. He missed it. He was going around the apartment, fastening them all up. Something interrupted him. When he came back to it, he didn't pick up where he'd left off. He forgot just how many he'd done and how many he had left to do. He missed one. He swears he didn't, and he's not really lying about it. He just can't believe it of himself."

I broke in on that. What he was saying about Oscar did make

sense but only because he was considering Oscar alone. He was leaving Opal out of the picture.

"It's been more than a week," I said, "and Opal's cleaned that apartment every day. She didn't let all that time go by without dusting the windowsill, not Opal."

He laughed. "She swears she dusted it every day," he said. "She swears those screws weren't sitting on the windowsill yesterday morning. Obviously she's lying."

"I know Opal. She's been working for me ever since I've had this place. She wouldn't lie to save her life."

"I know the type," Joe told me. "They won't lie to save their lives, but they'll lie any time to save their pride. She keeps that apartment clean. Two hours a day, five days a week she's in there. She cleans. She scrubs. She does the old lady's laundry, and she does the pressing. Nobody can do all that on just two hours a day. It's impossible. She has to be cutting a corner or two somewhere. The windows are all covered up with the drapes all the time. The only time anybody ever sees the windowsill is when the windows are being washed. The windows are never opened. These apartments are airconditioned. The windowsills are corners she can cut. She hates neglecting them but there's only so much anybody can do in two hours. She's been skipping them and she'll die before she'll ever admit it."

I still had to be convinced. "I don't know how she does it," I said. "I have her only an hour a day five days a week, and yesterday she had to give Mrs. Carpenter extra time because there was nobody to take the old lady out for her walk. So yesterday she whipped through here in fifteen minutes, and she hasn't been in here yet today. Does this place look as though she cut any corners even yesterday? She's a whizz."

"That she is," Joe said. "But look at your place and look at that place downstairs. Does she do your laundry?"

"No. It goes out."

"Right. You have one bedroom and one bath. Downstairs it's two bedrooms and two baths. More rooms to clean. You don't have stuff all over the place like there is downstairs. You have a table with nothing on it. She runs a dustcloth over it, and that's it. Downstairs

she wants to dust the top of anything, she's got a dozen little things she has to lift off and put to one side and more than half of them are things you've got to be careful with, china and glass that'll break just from your looking at it. All that has to be moved aside and moved back into place. All that has to be kept clean. Polishing the silver alone; and, brother, it sure is polished. Even cutting corners like those windowsills nobody ever sees, it's a miracle the way she keeps the place for the old lady. This Opal babe is every bit as good as you and Mrs. Carpenter think she is. She's a whizz, but she's not as good as she'd like to be. Nobody could ever be that good, but she'll die before she admits it."

So that was his most likely possibility. Oscar had missed the one window. Opal, to her secret shame, had out of necessity been cutting corners. A passing sneak thief walked along testing the grilles, looking for a loose one. He came on one that swung open under his hand.

"Everybody down there agrees," he said, "that no one ever bothered about any window locks. There was no need to. The windows were barred. No trouble at all pushing the window up and climbing in. The guy looks around. Plush room with the old lady asleep in it. Plain room with nobody sleeping in it. Where's the money likely to be? In the old lady's room. He gives her a whiff of chloroform and goes through her room carefully. He finds no dough. He looks everywhere else carefully. No dough. He ends up in the companion's room. By then he's mad and he doesn't bother to work carefully. He's also in a hurry by then. It's getting on to morning. He has to get out of there. So there he does the quick search."

I sighed. "It's too bad," I said. "Of course, Oscar will never miss a window again, and Opal will find some other corner to cut. She'll be checking those windows every day and so will Mrs. Carpenter, but this will shake the old lady. She's never going to feel secure again."

"Yeah," Joe sighed with me. "It's sad. You never think what it's got to be like, being old like her. You can say she's got it good. She's still on her feet. She's loaded; and, if she isn't, all she has to do is sell a couple of the things she's got down there. A few pieces of the jewelry, one or two of those gold cups and things she has sitting all over

the place. She's got so much of it, she can let a couple of those things go and you'd never even see they were gone. Just one or two of those things would bring in enough bread to keep her like a queen the rest of her life. So what good is it? She has to live down there and never see the light of day because she can't see it without looking through bars like in a prison. It's enough to drive a person nuts."

"I suppose she likes the apartment," I said.

"She hates it," Joe told me. "I made two suggestions. One was changing the locks. The other was she should move some place to an upstairs apartment where she wouldn't have to have bars on her windows and where she wouldn't have to be worried all the time about are the bars fastened up right. You know what she told me?"

"I will thank you not to meddle in my affairs, young man," I said.

"That I expected," Joe said, "but no. She broke down and cried. She hates the barred windows. She hates keeping the drapes closed all the time, but she has no choice. She can't do stairs. With her arthritis it's rough enough doing the curbs when she goes out for her walk. Stairs are out."

"Nonsense," I said. "There's the elevator. I don't use it, being just the one flight up, but it's there."

"I used it," Joe said. "A tiny, self-service job, and it creaks. I was sure I was going to get stuck between floors. When I go out of here, I'm walking down."

"It's never gotten stuck," I said, "and she could move into one of the big houses with regular elevators and elevator boys, the lot."

"Not her. Claustrophobia. She's never been in an elevator in her life, and it's too late for her to start now."

"Oh," I said.

I was remembering the way the day had begun, when she called and I suggested that she come upstairs to my place. I was remembering the way she sounded then, terrified, pulled out to the very edge of her nerves. I had to admire her steel. Torn between her terror of the elevator and her terror of being even a moment longer alone in the apartment with its unbarred window, she had found the strength to tell me to take my time. She would be there. She had nowhere to go.



Oscar came up to give me my key for the new lock on the front door. He was in bad shape. He might have gone to pieces completely if he hadn't had his indignation to hold him up. Happily he had taken most of the questioning as nothing more than police routine. The way he talked about it, he was even more eager than any policeman possibly could be to lay his hands on the stinking skunk who had invaded Mrs. Carpenter's apartment.

She was a wonderful old lady. She had her crotchets and quirks, but which of us hasn't?

"She has guts, Mrs. Carpenter," Oscar said, "and she's a lady. She's always a lady and that's more than I can say for most nowadays."

It evidently hadn't even for a moment occurred to him that he could have been under suspicion. That anyone might have thought he could be the man who sneaked into Mrs. Carpenter's apartment and chloroformed her to ransack the place was beyond the range of his imagination. What had him shaken was the line of questioning Joe Simmons had hammered at him.

That he could have been suspected of being careless with Mrs. Carpenter's window grilles was a shattering shock to the man. That in the face of his denials and protestations plus Opal's supportive testimony such suspicion had persisted was an affront that had him almost completely out of control. The one thing in the building to which he had always given his most special vigilance was the security of Mrs. Carpenter's windows.

"I don't know when I was careless about anything here in the house," he said, "but maybe I was sometimes about something but never about Mrs. Carpenter's windows."

"You've never been careless about anything, Oscar," I told him. "It's just that in a thing like this the police have to test everything

out. If there was a simple answer, they wouldn't have to go digging around for a way to explain that window."

"It's simple enough," Oscar growled. "They better go find that girl. She's a good girl, and I don't care how aggravating Mrs. Carpenter was, that girl didn't go walking out on her the way people are saying she done. She wouldn't do a thing like that. It's as plain as the nose on your face. She went out and she didn't come back. What does that mean?"

"What does it mean, Oscar?"

"It means she met up with foul play. Somebody mugged her and killed her. It happens every day, all over the city, all of the time. He got her purse and so he got her keys. Maybe she had identification in her purse, so he knew where to go and maybe he's been watching, figuring all along Mrs. Carpenter would be a good one to rob. They do that too. They call it casing the joint."

"So why the window if he had the keys?" I asked.

"On account of me the window," Oscar said. "That's why the window. You can't get the screws out from outside, not with a full set of burglar tools you can't; but from inside it's easy. Any kid could do it with nothing but a pocketknife. He came in with the keys; but when he wanted out, he couldn't go that way. I was in the hall."

"During the night?"

"You call it night. I call it morning. You know the marble floor in the downstairs hall and the marble stairs up to here? Ever walked on them when they was wet or slippery?"

I hadn't, but I thought he was wandering. He wasn't. He was right to the point. Marble is slippery when wet but marble floors and stairs have to be wet once a day. They need daily washing if they are to be kept clean.

If at any time during the standard working day Oscar were to wash the marble floor or the marble treads of our handsome staircase, he would have no way of barring them to the tenants' use until they dried and were no longer hazardous. It was a problem; and Oscar, being Oscar, had his own solution for it. Every morning, well before daybreak, he was out in the lower hall, scrubbing the marble floor and washing down the stairs.

"That way," he said, "they're dry before anyone comes down in the morning. It's still dark when I start on them, and the sun's up before I'm through."

I jumped at that. "Then you saw someone?" I asked. "You heard something?"

He had been looking unhappy before the question. Now he was freshly flooded with a new wave of bitterness.

"If I saw someone or heard something," he wailed, "you think I would just have let it pass? What do you take me for?"

It was just something that stood to reason. The burglar, ready to pull out before daybreak, heard Oscar outside Mrs. Carpenter's apartment door with his pail and his scrubbing brush. Oscar always did his best to be quiet at his work but an iron pail on a stone floor isn't a quiet thing. Naturally the burglar couldn't make his exit past that. Oscar was guessing that the man waited, thinking the work in the hall would be quickly done.

"Like most janitors, they do it," Oscar said.

Since it had been Oscar doing it and since Oscar did his work properly, it wasn't quickly done, and the burglar came to recognize that full daylight would trap him before he could leave the apartment by the way he had come. He went by the window.

Everybody had a theory. Opal didn't get to me till afternoon. What with the time the police had wasted for Opal and what with Mrs. Carpenter having to have her walk right after the police left her, most of Opal's day had gone.

"I couldn't do like yesterday," Opal explained, "come to you and upstairs and then go back later to take her for her walk because Mrs. Carpenter, she had other plans for this afternoon. She had to have her walk right after that there detective was gone or she wouldn't get it in at all."

If Oscar had come away from his interrogation at the hands of Joe Simmons in a resentful mood, Opal had come out of hers with a general contempt for the male mind and a specific contempt for police mentality.

"Windowsill not touched for more than a week," she stormed. "Where does he think he is? Out in the country somewheres without

no dust or no soot or no nothing? He's never even heard of air pollution maybe. You know how it is here, Mr. Bagby. Even with the windows never open and using only the air conditioning, it comes in. There's no keeping it out. It leaks in around the edges of the windows. Of course, there was soot and dust on her windowsill with that window wide open for God knows how long last night, but even with the window always shut and nothing for air but the air conditioners like always, that windowsill not touched for more than a week, you'd have soot on it so high you'd need to shovel it off. Anybody but a man would know that, just like anybody but a man would know that just because a girl is good looking don't have to mean she's a good girl."

"Geneva?"

"Who else?"

So then I had Opal's theory. There hadn't been any burglar. There had been nobody but Geneva. Geneva never fooled Opal. Opal knew Geneva's kind. It was just like a movie Opal remembered seeing. She would never forget it. She kept repeating that over and over. She remembered it like it was yesterday. The movie was called *Kind Lady*, and if that didn't describe poor, dear Mrs. Carpenter, what did?

Opal ran through the whole *Kind Lady* plot for me. She told me how these evil people moved in on the poor, old thing and started right out to get her in their power, working on her till they had her just where they wanted her and she couldn't call her soul her own.

That, Opal explained, was what Geneva was up to. There had been a girl in the movie, and Opal remembered her, too. A pretty girl, she acted as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"This here one too," Opal said. "Like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and if you want to know, Mr. Bagby, it wouldn't. She's that cold. In her mouth, she takes a drink of water, it's an ice cube when she gets it swallowed."

Opal had the whole scenario. It was just as Mrs. Carpenter said. Geneva had gone off to show Mrs. Carpenter that Mrs. Carpenter couldn't get along without Geneva.

“But just leaving poor Mrs. Carpenter alone,” Opal explained, “that wasn’t enough. She has to scare her and good. She came in last night after Mrs. Carpenter was asleep. She gave Mrs. Carpenter that chloroform. Then she messed up her own room. That was to make it look like it couldn’t have been her. Then she took the screws out of the window and just went away. Now she’ll come back, and it’ll be Mrs. Carpenter ain’t safe without her. Mrs. Carpenter must do just like Geneva says. She mustn’t ever make Geneva mad. Mrs. Carpenter knows what can happen to her if Geneva isn’t there.”

It was ingenious even if movie inspired, but it had even more ingenious ramifications. Opal filled me in on all of them. The opening of the window grille, as Opal saw it, had been a particularly subtle and vicious bit. I might think that part of it had been just to make it look as though the visitor hadn’t had the keys, but there was far more to it than that.

“That she done for Oscar and for me,” Opal announced. “It was to make us look bad. Mrs. Carpenter can’t be thinking that maybe she don’t need Geneva. She can get me to give her more time, take her on her walk and all. She can call Oscar if she needs something and I ain’t around. That Geneva’ll come back and she’ll rub it in on Mrs. Carpenter. Mark my words, Mr. Bagby. I know that one. She’ll be telling Mrs. Carpenter there’s nobody Mrs. Carpenter can depend on but her. Oscar’s no good. He leaves that window so anybody can come in during the night. I’m no good. A whole week and more, and I don’t even dust a windowsill. It’s just the kind of trick they played on the old lady in the movie. It’s the same thing all over again, but if she works it on Mrs. Carpenter, mark my words, it’s going to be over Opal’s dead body. I’m on to her. That miss don’t pull no wool over Opal’s eyes. Not for a minute, she don’t.”

I left Opal to her cleaning and got myself out of the apartment. It seemed by far the wisest thing I could do. I wasn’t even tempted to tell her that her hypotheses were so far out that they had even over-leaped the left-field bleachers. Call it cowardice if you like, but I had only the one thought.

This was no time for any man to confront Opal with even the smallest measure of disagreement. She was filled with a raging mis-

anthropy and she was also in the process of revising her work schedule so that she could give Mrs. Carpenter a larger portion of her work day. Since her rage against my sex had as its special focus those members of my sex who are engaged in police work, I didn't dare let myself forget that I wasn't merely another despised male. Through my association with Inspector Schmidt, I am at least a quasi-cop. I could only hope that in her schedule revisions she wouldn't revise me right out. I was not going to ruffle her by either word or gesture.

The last person I expected I would encounter when I went down the avenue was Mrs. Carpenter. Opal had already had the lady out for her daily walk, and although I could well imagine this would be a day when the old lady might welcome any opportunity to be out of her apartment with its disquieting memories of the night before, I assumed that she would have had no choice. With Geneva gone and Opal busy with taking care of me, Mrs. Carpenter would be without a supporting arm for any venture abroad.

So seeing her at all was a surprise. Seeing her as she was I found staggering. The picture of her I was carrying in my mind that afternoon was, of course, a special one, colored by what I'd had from Joe Simmons, Oscar, and Opal. Joe had seen her in tears. Oscar proclaimed her a great lady who under all circumstances would never be anything but a lady. Opal tabbed her for a victim type but still inflexibly a lady, however mistakenly kind.

The Mrs. Carpenter I saw on the avenue was not in tears, and to look at her, one would never think that anyone under any circumstances could have called her a lady, kind or otherwise. She was the perfect picture of the ancient harridan, the superannuated courtesan who had outlived the potential but neither the impulses nor the tricks. If the way she flirted with me at dinner had been absurd, she was now walking with another man, and the performance she was putting on with him was spectacular.

He was a young man. No boy, but certainly not yet out of his thirties. He was tall. He was broad of shoulder and lean of waist and flank. He had that look you see on the men in the ads, both super-masculine and supercorrect. It is the look of the Beautiful People, male division, the look that suggests that he is sufficiently male to put

out a body odor and sufficiently knowing to choose the deodorant that will be just right for eliminating it.

He was handsome and all too evidently aware of it. I've known men who have the looks and take them in their stride. I've also known men who do betray varying degrees of personal vanity, but there is another breed and in them at very first sight you can detect the difference. They are not merely conscious of their male beauty or even simply vain about it. They are professionally preoccupied with it. Actors of the matinee-idol type. Crooners of the vintage that had not yet taken up the fashion of being unkempt or epicene or both. Gigolos. Authors who give more of their time to appearing before women's clubs than they do to writing. The politician whose link to statesmanship is his TV makeup man. Fashionable gynecologists.

He couldn't have been more correctly or more discreetly dressed, but the clothes were like his person, possessed of that extra edge of perfection that passed beyond anything that could be natural. They also had that touch of professionalism. Creased trousers, shined shoes, a coat that hangs well, the immaculately white shirt, a perfectly knotted tie, you'll see those on men all over town; but I can only say that in his case all these things had a special something. You can see a hundred pairs of neatly creased trousers, but it's only the hundred and first that strikes you as being the very model of what trouser creases should be. You could never put your finger on the difference, but it does strike you. This isn't a shoe shine. It's *the* shoe shine. It's *the* white shirt, *the* uncreased sleeve, *the* rolled lapel.

Even the attache case he was carrying had it. I've seen attache cases that could be suspected of carrying chicken legs and apples for their owners park-bench lunches. Just to see his attache case was to think it could contain nothing but the draft of the contracts for some multi-million-dollar deal or the *aide memoire* on which will hang the fate of nations.

He was hatless, but not even that marred the picture. His hair was too beautiful. No man could be expected to cover such hair any more than he could ever allow his lips even for a moment to drop out of a smile and conceal such magnificent teeth.

That Mrs. Carpenter, walking along on the arm of anything so magnificent, should have gone dizzy with delight or that she should have been betraying her excitement by twittering and fluttering might have been expected, but I could never have imagined that even at her silliest she might have descended to cuddling. Even in private it seemed inconceivable. This was right out in the public street.

She was cuddling. I could find no other word for it. Granted that she couldn't walk without someone's arm for support. I had, however, seen her walk with Geneva and with her earlier companions, and the evening before she had walked with me. She required only a little support. What she needed mostly was steadying. Her hand rested on your arm would do it. Up and down at the curbs she did need a little more but nothing like what she was taking from Wonderboy.

They were making a spectacle of themselves. He had his arm around her, holding her close, and she was pressing up against him in a manner that would have been shameless if it hadn't been so ludicrous. You'll see young lovers walk that way. The young lovers do it because it isn't walking they're interested in. It's body contact.

They were a good half block away when I spotted them coming toward me. I was making for the bank, and I had only just enough time to be in there before the doors would be closed. I dodged the encounter. Turning off into the side street before they reached me, I went into the bank by the side entrance instead of through the main door on the avenue.

I had every possible reason for this evasive action. I did want to make the bank and unless I could go right by Mrs. Carpenter and her Greek God with no more than the tip of my hat, I'd have the bank's doors shut in my face. I was quite certain I couldn't get by her with only that. I had too vivid a memory of the way she had flirted with me the night before. I had no wish to learn how she would perform with two men at her disposal.

It seemed to me that she was putting on the show of shows, and I certainly had no wish to be drawn into the act. She could just go on

making a spectacle of herself with Body Beautiful. He might be enjoying it. There was no need for letting her make a spectacle of me as well. She'd already had a shot at that the night before.

As I went into the bank, I was remembering that Opal had said something about having to take Mrs. Carpenter for her walk early since Mrs. Carpenter had other plans for the afternoon and that if the walk had waited until after Opal had done my place up, it would have had to be canceled altogether because then it would have been too late.

Now I knew what Mrs. Carpenter's other plans had been. I was amused. It was so much in pattern. Despite all her good resolutions about mending her ways and being less dictatorial in the future, she was already back to her old tricks. She had made arrangements for a walk today. She had enlisted this young man for it, but would she tell Opal? Oh, no. It was not for Opal to know that other arrangements were possible. Opal must hold herself available for Mrs. Carpenter's pleasure whether she was needed or not. It seemed to me that it was with just such little acts of deviousness that the Mrs. Carpenters carry on, hungrily clinging to at least a semblance of power.

I was calling it all to the good. I had been fighting off the thought of what I'd felt I was going to have to do. After the scare the poor old thing had been through and after the way she had turned to me when she was in need of help, I couldn't have had the face, knowing she was alone, not to have called around and asked her if there was anything I could do for her. I had been thinking that I could hardly escape asking her to dine with me again. I had been working at inventing previous engagements of the most pressing nature, and I had known I would make no use of my inventions. I'd been certain that by evening I was going to suck myself in. I couldn't have looked myself in the face otherwise.

By the time I had pulled away from Opal to go to the bank, I had been down to hoping the phone would ring and that it would be Inspector Schmidt to tell me that the whole city had been bloodied by a Manhattan massacre and that he wanted me to join him at once in his investigation of this horror because it was the biggest story he'd ever had for me.

I didn't need it any more. Now that I'd seen Mrs. Carpenter with Glamor Boy, I was going to be well able to cope with my better nature entirely on my own. I didn't have to give her another thought. My conscience would be leaving me alone. Its teeth had been drawn. The lady was having herself a big day. She would be needing neither my company nor my solicitude. She had no further need for being taken out of herself. She was already out, way out. The posture assumed by her and her young man in their walking could be characterized only as perpendicular bundling. If she was lonely or frightened she could keep Pretty Boy around for the evening, and when he left her, she would certainly be ready for a rest. There'd be no reason for me to go near her any more that day. It would be cruel to disturb her.

My business in the bank didn't keep me there long. It was nothing complicated, just the usual. I deposited a couple of checks and drew out a little cash I needed to go along on. I had pulled it so fine on closing time, however, that even the few moments it took for those simple transactions carried me past three o'clock.

When I was ready to leave, the main entrance on the avenue side had already been locked and I was shunted back to that side-street entrance I had used for coming in. They had a bank guard on the door there. He was holding it against late-comers and unlocking for departing customers. He let me out and locked up again after me.

A black Cadillac, complete with uniformed driver, was parked at the curb. I had noticed it on my way in. Those Caddies are by no means as ubiquitous as the New York taxi cab, but you do see them around town. You are most aware of them at theater time, but they aren't too unusual otherwise. There are a couple of fleets of them operating in town. You hire them by the hour or by the day or week.

As I turned toward the avenue, the driver accosted me. He wanted to know if there were any people still left in the bank.

"The bank people are all still in there," I told him, "and quite a few customers. Once it hits three o'clock they won't let you in any more, but if you've made it inside the door before three, they don't toss you out till you've finished your business even if it does keep them overtime."

The driver relaxed. "Sure," he said. "That's all right then. People sometimes they go places where there's more than one door and they forget which they went in. They go out the wrong door, and then there's hell to pay because you're not there waiting for them."

"Lots of people still in there," I assured him, and went on my way.

I could have gone home and put in a couple of hours at the typewriter, but I remembered that Opal was there doing up the apartment. She would be giving me at least my full hour that day, and there was still a good part of it to go. I had some errands that needed doing and decided they would be just as well done then. At the end of the afternoon I stopped in at the club for a drink. In the members' bar there were some men trying to whip together a bridge game. They were hanging on the bar laying ambushes for the fourth they were still needing. They caught me.

So it was a relaxed evening at the club in good company. Even if the evening hadn't shown me a pleasant little profit, I would have called it time well spent. It was about midnight when the losers gave up on trying to pull even, and by then I wanted some air. I walked home, coming into the house shortly before one. The first thought I had of Mrs. Carpenter was when I brought out my key for the downstairs door. The bright gleam of the new key under the street light reminded me. I took a couple of moments before I went in. I walked back past Mrs. Carpenter's windows, pulling at the bronze grilles that protected them. They were all solidly fastened. I couldn't even rattle them, much less swing one open.

It was no more than one might have expected. Certainly Oscar had run a check on the lot of them. If that had been the way Mrs. Carpenter's burglar had come in, there was this much I could guarantee for all time hence forward. Nobody would ever come in by one of those windows again, not so long as Oscar was on the job.

I went up to my own place and settled in for the night. I had a peaceful night, and with no disturbances in the morning I did get to the typewriter. It was midmorning by the time Opal broke in on me. I hadn't been expecting her that early, and the ringing of my doorbell was so prolonged and peremptory that I rose to answer it, won-

another. He had an overwhelming compulsion to run, or fall flat, anything to escape this direct gun fire. Instead he commanded his body to stand immobile. He said over a loudspeaker built into the armor, "Come on out and bring the money with you. Hold it over your head with both hands and you won't get hurt."

By way of answer, he heard the crack of another bullet. The shot struck a floodlight and ricocheted off the bullet proof glass. Hawk continued, "You haven't got a chance. Not a chance. And if you make a break for it, we'll drop you before you get started. Don't force us to kill you. You've got too much to live for."

Sometimes you could talk them out of it. Sometimes you couldn't. Eighteen times he had talked men into surrendering. Six times he hadn't. He had forgotten the eighteen. He remembered the six.

"We've got a gun on you from every window in this place. And a machine gun outside on the door."

He hadn't cared when he entered the building what the criminal's choice would be. Any man who would try to blow a woman to pieces should die. Something, though, had happened during the walk across this expanse. He was no executioner. That was up to a judge and jury. He was an officer sworn to protect life. Any life, no matter how reprehensible it might be. If it could be protected.

"Take your time. Think it over. Think it over carefully. Dead, you're nothing. Alive, you've got a chance again some day. Don't make us kill. . . ."

Slowly, a figure walked out of the office. He held the package high over his head, and it was shaking. "Don't," he mumbled. "Don't."

The case was ended, solved. Now it would become a court issue. The State of California versus Joseph Z. McNulty.



THIRTY-FOUR



In the small interrogation room, McNulty was caught up in a paroxysm of rage. He was sweating, screaming, cursing. His face was that of a mad dog at bay.

"You rats!" he shouted. Two officers took position behind him, ready to grab him if he moved on Hawk who stood a few feet away, behind a desk. The room was brilliantly lighted, and the bounce of light off the barren white plaster walls intensified the glare.

Hawk let him run down, then said calmly, "I've sent for a doctor. I'm not going to have you dying of a heart attack on me."

"You no-good, stinking, double crossing finks," McNulty shrieked.

The voiceprints had only confirmed a suspicion that had begun working itself around a few hours before in Hawk's mind. The extortionist had known the approximate time, 4:30 A.M., that Hawk had phoned Rogers. Among the people on the squad, Barney, Jenny and the General alone had known. Among outsiders were Frank Mitchell, whom Gail had told, and McNulty, who would assume, after he had informed Hawk he had sent a gunman to kill her, that Hawk would warn her. Voiceprints had cleared all except McNulty whom Hawk had failed to tape at the offset since he was the "victim." Hawk's last trip to talk with McNulty had been for the sole purpose of recording his voice. And McNulty's voiceprint had matched the extortionist's.

Before Hawk went to the McNulty home, though, suspicion had begun to take root when Jenny analyzed the extortionist's speech. He was fond of saying, "You got that?" McNulty used similar construction, "You understand?"

Now Hawk yelled, "McNulty!"

Slowly McNulty emerged from his rage. His stunned eyes reflected his struggle to grasp a situation that seemed beyond his comprehension. When Hawk had his attention, he said quietly, "Take it easy. Your heart can stand only so much." He shrugged. "Maybe I shouldn't care." But he did.

He forced the weariness from his voice. "I want to advise you of your constitutional rights. You don't have to tell us anything, and anything you do tell us may be used against you. Do you understand that?"

McNulty only stared, Hawk continued, "You can place a phone call. To your lawyer, if you want to. I should add that we're taping everything said in this room. By you, by us."

Barney burst in and hurried over to Hawk. He whispered, "She's regained consciousness and asked for her fiancé. I called him and he's on his way over. The doctors say she's badly bruised and has

suffered a concussion—but no broken bones and as far as they can determine, no internal injuries.”

Hawk whispered back, “I forgot about her mother. Call the rest home, and tell them to isolate her from all news. Tell them if she’s got a radio to get it out of there fast, under some pretext.”

Barney nodded and left. Hawk caught and held McNulty’s gaze. “A phoney extortion. But why, McNulty? What was your angle?”

McNulty’s lips tightened. “I said I’d kill her—and I will. There’ll come a day. . . .” He spoke the words as if he were taking an oath.

“Where’d you know her?” Hawk asked. His answer was a defiant stare. Hawk continued, “Did she work for you once? Was she a neighbor? Did you have business with her?”

McNulty continued to glare. (Subsequent investigation developed that Gail Rogers two years previously, before going to work for Frank Mitchell, had applied for a secretarial job with the JZM Construction company, and had been interviewed by McNulty. She had filled out an employment form that required numerous references, including bank and church. She had impressed him, and he had kept her in mind as a future possibility, and remembered her when he plotted his extortion scheme. He had then checked out her references. She didn’t remember him. He was one of 23 employers she had seen in a one-week period.)

McNulty said, “The no-good, little. . . . She lied to me. She told me—”

Hawk interrupted. “—that she had broken with the police? I told you that. Remember? I said she was going alone to the pay-off, and when I heard you telling her you were glad she’d broken with the police, I knew you were the extortionist.”

Even without the voiceprint Hawk would have known. McNulty had swallowed the “plant,” one of the oldest tricks in the detective business.

Hawk loosened his tie. “You’re in big trouble financially, aren’t you, McNulty? You’re in the hole for better than a million dollars.”

Hawk noted the wary look. He had struck the raw nerve he was probing for. “They were closing in on you—your creditors. Closing in on all sides. They were going to throw you into bankruptcy. Your home was going, your fine cars. Your wife and children were in for some rough days.”

McNulty flared up again. “Those heels in Washington—with

their tight money. They ruined me. Me—and thousands of others.”

Hawk continued, “You had this \$200,000 in stocks, and you got to figuring, how can I keep it out of the hands of the creditors, out of bankruptcy court? You said to yourself, I can’t hide it. They’ll hire detectives. They’ll trace it down to a bank—England, Switzerland, any place. And if I bury it they’ll want to know what became of it and they can put me in prison for concealing assets.”

McNulty yelled, “You’re crazy, crazy. You’re framing me, you stinking, stupid cop!”

Hawk ignored him. “But if you paid it out in an extortion plot, that would explain everything—if it was done right. So you got Sam Bronson to deliver the money, just in case you needed someone to swear later it had been paid over. And then in case anyone was skeptical, you got Gail Rogers, who would swear she had picked it up, counted it, and handed it over to the extortionist.”

Unknowingly, the banker—Ed Carson—had tipped Hawk off in reporting McNulty’s financial condition. The bank and the book, “A Study In Extortion,” which set forth other cases in which the “victim” and the extortionist had been one and the same.

“It all seemed so simple,” Hawk continued, “so airtight, just like most crimes do to people when they’re plotting them. But once you had it underway, it began snowballing and suddenly it got out of hand.”

Hawk untied the package and rifled through the neat bundles of \$100 bills. He picked up one and stared at old Ben Franklin. “For this you tried to kill a wonderful girl who’d never done you any harm.” He clenched his hands, and some of the bills floated to the floor.

“Is she dead?” McNulty asked.

“What do you care?” Hawk retorted. He nodded to the General. “Count this and give him a receipt.” Yet he continued thumbing through the money. He was thinking that McNulty could not be charged with extortion. A man could not extort money from himself. No, he would be charged with a more serious crime, attempted murder. He had timed the car blow-up to the second. If she hadn’t stumbled in running for it, if Hawk hadn’t called to her, if there hadn’t been that delay of a few seconds, she would have perished in the explosion.

Suddenly McNulty sagged. “I want to call my wife.”

Hawk indicated the phone on the desk. “Nancy,” McNulty

began, his voice shaking. "Nancy, something's happened. . . . No, no, I haven't been in an accident. Well, maybe it was kind of an accident."

Hawk left, hearing him asking her to phone his attorney. Outside in the squad room, Barney informed him McNulty's oldest daughter, June, was waiting. "How does she know about it?" Hawk asked.

"It's all over television and the radio," Barney answered. "I sure feel sorry for her, Hawk. Her own father. She looks so sensitive . . . delicate. . . ."

"Great Scott, Barney, when are you going to quit sympathizing with people?" Hawk shook his head, then muttered, "Never, I hope."

He walked over to the long bench where she sat like a waif. She rose and stood very straight. She had been crying but her voice was steady. "May I see my father?"

He was about to refuse her. It was against the rules. Then he nodded. She was starting away with Barney when Hawk called to her, and she turned. Lord, she was a lovely girl. What got into people anyway? Here was McNulty with a wonderful family, on top of the world. What did it matter whether he had wealth?

Hawk was about to ask if she had known all along. She would tell him yes. He would ask then how she had known? And she would tell him she had overheard her father one night in his den threatening Rogers, or something like that. Then Hawk would be obligated to drag her into it.

Barney asked, "You want to talk with her, Hawk?"

Hawk shook his head and walked on. . . .

Jenny was waiting in his office. His eyes saw her but his mind was still struggling to assimilate all that had been thrown at it these last 48 hours.

She offered some comment on the case, and when he didn't answer, asked unexpectedly, "Should I start looking for another job?"

Hawk came to. "Now what kind of talk is that?"

"You've never said. . . ."

He broke into a smile. "You're a psychologist. Remember, Doc?"

"Jenny," she said. "It's Jenny."

"Sure, sure. But as a psychologist you're supposed to understand me—without my putting everything into words. Right?"

Jenny smiled and sighed. It had been years since she had felt this good. "Right."

He hesitated, looked her over, then said, "Say, how about a hamburger at Little Joe's—Jenny?"

She nodded.



THIRTY-FIVE



Any second the "Wedding March" would begin. At the back of the church, Gail leaned against the desk where the guests had signed. She knew she looked a wreck, more like a Dalmatian than a bride, being spotted with bruises. She had an adhesive strip across one cheek, a badly cut ear, and an eye slightly closed. . . .

Two hours after she had been carried into the hospital, she was walking about in her room. The doctor was gone, and the nurse was somewhere down the corridor, never dreaming but that her charge was sleeping.

Furtively, she had slipped out of bed to determine what parts were still movable. At least she could stand up, and despite a fierce headache and more hurts than she could catalogue, she felt exultantly good. It was all over. Now she would pick up her simple life again and its moments of little ecstasies. It took a walk in death's neighborhood to set values in their proper perspective. Never again, she swore, would she let the trivia of mere living, with its problems self-magnified out of all proportion, get the best of her.

When Mitch entered, she was still on her feet. She was in one of those ghastly hospital smocks that tie in the back, and wouldn't have had him catch her in that for anything.

"What're you doing out of bed?" he asked.

"I'm testing. Why, Frank Mitchell," she added, "you're crying."

"I am *not*: Confounded smog." He picked her up as though she were a piece of fine china, kissed her the same way, and lifted her over to the bed. She didn't want to be treated like fine china and told him so.

She sensed what he was about to say and beat him to it. "We most definitely are not postponing the wedding. Not even if I have to crawl up the aisle. We're out \$16 for rental for your suit, \$50 for the flowers, \$15 for my permanent, \$100 for the chapel, and at least another \$100 for other things. We may never again be able to afford a wedding."

She tried smiling but smiling hurt. "Mitch, you do a lot of thinking when you're mixed up in something like this. You get to thinking, now if I die, would I want someone who loves me to think. . . ." Her tongue wasn't working too well.

"Don't talk. Let me do the talking."

"My talking equipment's all right," she informed him. "Well, I got to thinking—and Mitch, I don't want you to leave criminal practice. We should do what we want, each of us, without insisting the other do this or that. You'll be a great criminal attorney and I'll be proud. . . . What'd I say? What's so funny?"

He quit chuckling. "You're not the only one who's been thinking. You know that big deal? It's a junior partnership with a firm of corporation attorneys, Lloyd, Robbins and Sloane."

She shook her head, and that hurt worse than smiling. "No, Mitch, I won't let you. I was wrong. Dead wrong."

"We'll see." His eyes lighted up. "I think I'm going to get Lefty Morgan off. I've dug up a surprise witness. . . ." He trailed off. He was standing before the jury, delivering the closing argument. He came to then, and said, "Now get some sleep." . . .

Now the wedding march began, and Martha handed her the crutches. Here she went, for better or worse.

She wanted to laugh hysterically. It couldn't be for worse.

MAIGRET IN VICHY

BY

GEORGES SIMENON

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“Do you know them?” Madame Maigret asked in an undertone, observing that her husband was looking back over his shoulder at the couple who had just gone past.

The man, too, had turned his head and was smiling. He seemed hesitant, as though considering retracing his steps to shake the Chief Superintendent by the hand.

“No, I don’t think so. . . . I don’t know. . . .”

He was a squat little man. His wife, too, was small and plump, though perhaps an inch or so taller. Why was it Maigret had the impression that she was a Belgian? Because of her fair skin, her hair that was almost buttercup yellow, her protuberant blue eyes?

This was their fifth or sixth encounter. The first time, the man had stopped dead, beaming in delighted surprise. He had stood there uncertainly, as if about to speak, while the Chief Superintendent, frowning, searched his memory in vain.

There was certainly something familiar about that face and figure, but what the devil was it? Where had he last seen this cheerful little man, with the wife who looked as though she were made of brightly colored marzipan?

"I really can't think. . . ."

It did not much matter. Besides, everybody here was different from the people one met in everyday life. Any minute, now, there would be a burst of music. On the bandstand, with its slender columns and ornate canopy, the uniformed bandsmen, their eyes fixed on the conductor, sat waiting to raise the brass instruments to their lips. This presumably was the Municipal Band, made up of firemen and other Council workers. Their uniform was splendid, with scarlet tabs, white sashes, and enough gold braid and embroidery to satisfy a South American General.

Hundreds—thousands, it seemed to him—of iron chairs done up with yellow paint were set out in concentric circles around the bandstand, and nearly all were occupied by silent, waiting men and women with solemn faces.

In a minute or two, at nine o'clock, amid the great trees of the park, the concert would begin. After an oppressively hot day, the evening air seemed almost cool, and a light breeze rustled the leaves. Here and there, lamp standards surmounted by milky globes lightened the dark foliage with patches of paler green.

"Do you want to sit?"

There were still a few empty chairs, but they did not avail themselves of them. This evening, as always, they preferred to walk about in a leisurely way. Other couples, like themselves, came and went, half listening to the music, but there was also a number of solitary men and women, almost all elderly.

Nothing seemed quite real somehow. The white casino, plastered with the ornate moldings so much in vogue at the turn of the century, was floodlit. Except for the occasional blare of a motor horn in Rue Georges-Clemenceau, one could almost believe that here time stood still.

"There she is . . ." whispered Madame Maigret, pointing with her chin.

It had become a sort of game. She had got into the habit of following her husband's glance, watching for any glimmer of surprise or interest.

What else was there for them to do with their time? They walked,

or rather strolled, about the streets. From time to time they paused, not because they were out of breath, but to look more closely at the play of light on a tree, a house, or a face.

They felt as though they had been in Vichy since the dawn of time, although, in fact, this was only their fifth day. Already they had established a routine, to which they adhered rigorously, as though it really mattered, and their days were given up to a succession of rituals, which they performed with the utmost solemnity.

How seriously, in fact, did Maigret take it all? His wife sometimes wondered, stealing a covert glance at him, trying to read his mind. He was not the man he was in Paris. His walk was less brisk, his features were less drawn. He went about most of the time smiling but abstracted. His expression suggested a degree of satisfaction, certainly, but also, perhaps, a touch of sardonic self-mockery.

"She's wearing her white shawl."

Each new day found them in the same place at the same hour, in one of the shaded park walks, beside the Allier, on a boulevard lined with plane trees, or in a crowded or a deserted side street, and, because of this, they had come to recognize, here and there, a face or a figure, and these were already getting to be part of their world.

Was it not the case that everyone here was going through the same motions at the same time every hour of the day, and not just at the mineral springs, where they all forgathered for the hallowed glass of water?

Maigret's eyes rested on a figure in the crowd, and sharpened. His wife followed his glance.

"Is she a widow, do you think?"

They might well have christened her "the lady in mauve," or rather "the lady in lilac," because that was the color she always wore. Tonight she must have arrived late, because she was sitting in one of the back rows.

The previous evening, at about eight o'clock, the Maigrets had come upon her unexpectedly as they were walking past the bandstand. There was still an hour to go before the concert. The little yellow chairs were so neatly arranged in concentric rings that they might have been circles drawn with a compass. All the chairs were

vacant except one, in the front row, where the lady in lilac was sitting. There was something pathetic about her. She did not attempt to read by the light of the nearby lamp. She was not knitting. She was not doing anything. She did not seem in the least restless. She sat motionless, very upright, with her hands lying flat in her lap, looking straight in front of her, like a public figure avoiding the stares of the crowd.

She could have come straight out of a picture book. Unlike most of the women here, who went about bareheaded, she wore a white hat. The filmy shawl draped over her shoulders was white too. Her dress was of that distinctive lilac color that she seemed so much attached to.

She had an unusually long, narrow face and thin lips.

"She must be an old maid, don't you think?"

Maigret was unwilling to commit himself. He was not conducting an inquiry or following a trail. Here he was under no obligation to study people's faces, hoping that they would reveal the truth about themselves.

All the same, every now and then he caught himself doing it. He could not help it. It had become second nature. For no reason at all, he would find himself taking an interest in someone in the crowd, trying to guess his occupation, his domestic circumstances, the kind of life he led when he was not taking the waters.

It was by no means easy. After the first few days, sometimes after the first few hours, everyone seemed to become assimilated. Almost all wore the same expression of slightly vacant serenity, except those who were seriously ill, and who stood out from the rest by virtue of their deformities, their painful movements, and, still more, the unmistakable look in their eyes of pain tempered with hope.

The lady in lilac was one of what might be described as Maigret's circle of intimates, one of those who had attracted his attention and intrigued him from the first.

It was hard to guess her age. She might be forty-five or fifty-five. Time had not imprinted any telltale lines on her face.

She gave the impression of a woman accustomed to silence, like a nun, used to solitude, even perhaps enjoying it. Whether walking or, as at present, sitting, she totally ignored the people around her. No

doubt it would have surprised her to know that Chief Superintendent Maigret, not as a matter of professional duty but simply for his own satisfaction, was studying her, in the hope of finding out what she was really like.

"She's never lived with a man, I'd say," he replied, as the opening burst of music came from the bandstand.

"Nor with children. Perhaps with someone very old, though. She might, perhaps, have had an aged mother to look after."

If so, she was unlikely to have been a good nurse, since she appeared unbending and unsociable. If she failed to see the people around her, it was because she did not look at them. She looked inward. She looked within herself, seeing no one but herself, deriving, no doubt, some secret satisfaction from this self-absorption.

"Shall we go?"

They had not come to listen to the music. They had simply got into the habit of walking past the bandstand at this time of the evening. Besides, it was not every night that there was a concert. Some evenings it was virtually deserted on this side of the park. They strolled across the park, turning right into the colonnade which ran beside a street brilliant with neon signs. They could see hotels, restaurants, shops, a cinema. They had not yet been to the cinema. It did not fit in with their timetable.

There were other people taking a walk like themselves, at more or less the same leisurely pace, some coming, some going. A few had cut short their walk to go to the casino theater. They were late, and could be seen hurrying in, one or two here and there in evening dress.

Every one of these people lived quite a different life somewhere else, in a district of Paris, in some little provincial town, in Brussels, Amsterdam, Rome, or Philadelphia.

Each was a part of some predetermined social order, with its own rules, taboos, and passwords. Some were rich, others poor. Some were so ill that the treatment could do no more than give them a little extra time; others felt that, after taking the cure, they could forget about their health for the rest of the year.

This place was kind of a melting pot. Maigret's own case was typical. It had all started one evening when they were dining with

the Pardons. Madame Pardon had served *canard au sang*, a dish that she made to perfection, and which the Chief Superintendent particularly relished.

"Is there anything wrong with it?" she had asked anxiously, seeing that Maigret had barely tasted it.

Surprised, Pardon had turned to his guest and subjected him to a searching look. Then, sounding really worried, he had asked:

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"Just a twinge . . . It's nothing. . . ."

The doctor, however, had not failed to notice his friend's unwonted pallor, and the beads of perspiration on his forehead.

The subject was not mentioned again during dinner. The Chief Superintendent had scarcely touched his wine, and when, over coffee, he was offered a glass of old Armagnac, he had waved it away:

"Not tonight, if you don't mind."

It was not until some time later that Doctor Pardon had said quietly:

"Let's go into my consulting room, shall we?"

Maigret had agreed reluctantly. He had known for some time that this was bound to happen, but he had kept putting it off from one day to the next. Doctor Pardon's consulting room was small and by no means luxurious. His stethoscope lay on the desk amid a litter of bottles, jars, and papers, and the couch on which he examined his patients sagged in the middle, as though the last one had left the imprint of his body on it.

"What seems to be the trouble, Maigret?"

"I don't know. It's my age, I daresay."

"How old are you? Fifty-two?"

"Fifty-three. . . . I've had a lot on my hands lately. Work . . . Worry . . . No sensational cases . . . Nothing exciting . . . Just the opposite . . . On the one hand, a flood of paperwork arising out of the reorganization at the Law Courts. . . . On the other, an epidemic of assaults on young girls and women living alone. . . . The press howling for blood, and I haven't the staff to put on full-scale patrols without disrupting my whole department. . . ."

"Do you suffer from indigestion?"

"I do occasionally have stomach cramps . . . pains . . . as I did tonight . . . or rather a kind of constriction in the chest and abdomen. . . . I feel leaden . . . tired."

"Would you mind if I had a look at you?"

His wife, in the next room, must have guessed, Madame Pardon too, and this bothered Maigret. He had a horror of anything to do with illness.

As he stripped off his tie, jacket, shirt, and undershirt, he recalled something he had said when he was still in his teens: "I'd rather die young than live the life of an invalid, all pills and potions and diets, and being made to do this and not being allowed to do that."

In his vocabulary, being an invalid meant listening to one's heart, worrying about one's stomach, liver, and kidneys, and, at more or less regular intervals, exposing one's naked body to a doctor.

He no longer talked glibly of dying young, but he still did not feel ready to enter the invalid state.

"My trousers too?"

"Just pull them down a little."

Pardon took his blood pressure, listened to his chest, felt his diaphragm and stomach, pressing here and there with a finger.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. . . . A little tenderness there, I think. . . . No . . . lower down. . . ."

Well, here he was, behaving just like anyone else, apprehensive, ashamed of his own cowardice, afraid to look his old friend in the face. Awkwardly, he began putting on his clothes again. When Pardon spoke, there was no change in his voice:

"When did you last take a holiday?"

"Last year I managed to get away for a week, then I was recalled because . . ."

"What about the year before last?"

"I couldn't leave Paris."

"Considering the life you lead, you ought to be in very much worse shape than you are."

"What about my liver?"

"It has stood up valiantly, considering the way you've treated it.

. . . Admittedly, it's slightly enlarged, but it's in excellent working order."

"What's wrong, then?"

"There's nothing precisely wrong. . . . A little of everything. . . . You're overtired, there's no doubt about that, and it will take more than a week's holiday to put that right. . . . How do you feel when you wake up in the morning?"

"Like a bear with a sore head."

Pardon laughed.

"Do you sleep well?"

"According to my wife, I thrash about in bed, and occasionally talk in my sleep."

"I see you're not smoking."

"I'm trying to cut down on it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. . . . I'm trying to cut down on drink, too."

"Sit down, won't you?"

Pardon sat in the chair behind his desk. Here, in his consulting room, he was very much the medical man, quite different from the host entertaining in his drawing room or dining room.

"Just you listen to me. You're not ill. As a matter of fact, considering your age and the life you lead, you're quite remarkably fit. I'll thank you to get that into your head once and for all. Stop fretting about every little twinge and odd pain here and there, and don't start worrying every time you go up a flight of stairs. . . ."

"How did you know?"

"Tell me, when you're questioning a suspect, how do *you* know?"

They were both smiling.

"Here we are in June. Paris is sweltering. You'll oblige me by taking a holiday at once, if possible leaving no forwarding address. . . . At any rate, I'm sure you'll have the good sense not to call up the Quai des Orfèvres every day. . . ."

"I daresay it could be managed," Maigret said, not very graciously. "There's our cottage at Meung-sur-Loire. . . ."

"You'll have plenty of time to enjoy that when you retire. . . ."

This year, I have other plans for you. . . . Do you know Vichy at all?"

"I've never set foot in the place, in spite of the fact that I was born within forty miles of it, near Moulins. . . . But in those days, of course, not everyone owned a car. . . ."

"That reminds me, has your wife passed her test?"

"We've actually got as far as buying a small car."

"I don't think you could do better than take the waters at Vichy. It will do you a world of good. . . . A thorough clean-out of the system. . . ."

When he saw the look on the Chief Superintendent's face, he almost burst out laughing.

"You want me to take the cure?"

"It will only mean drinking a few pints of water every day. . . . I don't suppose the specialist will insist on your having all the trimmings: mud baths, mineral baths, vibro-massage, and all that nonsense. There's nothing seriously wrong with you. Three weeks of rest and regular exercise, no worry . . ."

"No beer, no wine, nothing to eat but rabbit's food . . ."

"You've had a good many years of eating and drinking whatever you fancied, haven't you?"

"That's true," he had to admit.

"And you have many more ahead, even if you do have to be a little more moderate in the future. . . . Are we agreed, then?"

Maigret got to his feet and, much to his own astonishment, heard himself saying, just as though he were any other patient of Pardon's:

"Agreed."

"When will you go?"

"In a day or two, a week at the outside. Just long enough to catch up on my paper work."

"I'll have to hand you over to a man on the spot who will be able to tell you more than I can. . . . I could name half a dozen. Let me think. . . . There's Rian, a decent young fellow, not too full of himself. . . . I'll give you his address and telephone number. And I'll drop him a line tomorrow, to put him in the picture. . . ."

"I'm much obliged, Pardon."

"I wasn't too rough with you, I hope?"

"You couldn't have been more gentle."

Returning to the drawing room, he smiled at his wife, a reassuring smile. But nothing was said, illness not being considered a suitable topic for after-dinner conversation at the Pardons'.

It was not until they reached Rue Popincourt, walking arm in arm, that Maigret remarked casually, as though it were a matter of no importance:

"We're going to Vichy for our holiday."

"Will you be taking the cure?"

"I suppose I might as well while I'm there!" he said wryly. "There's nothing wrong with me. In fact, I gather I'm exceptionally healthy, which is why I'm being packed off to take the waters, I daresay!"

That evening at the Pardons' had not really been the start of it. He had for some time been obsessed by the strange notion that everybody was younger than he was, from the Chief Commissioner and the examining magistrates to the prisoners brought in for questioning. And now there was Doctor Rian, fair-haired and affable, and well on the right side of forty.

A kid, in other words, at any rate a young man, but none the less sober and self-assured for all that. And this was the man who was to be the arbiter of his, Chief Superintendent Maigret's fate. Well, more or less. . . .

Maigret was irritated and at the same time apprehensive, for he certainly did not feel old, nor even middle-aged.

For all his youth, Doctor Rian lived in an elegant red-brick house in Boulevard des Etats-Unis. Maybe it was rather too Edwardian in style, but it had a certain grandeur, with its marble staircase, its handsome carpets, its highly polished furniture. There was even a maid in a lace-trimmed cap.

"I presume your parents are dead? What did your father die of?"

The doctor carefully wrote down his answers on a memo pad, in a neat, clerical hand.

"And your mother? . . . Any brothers? . . . Sisters? . . . Childhood ailments? . . . Measles? . . . Chicken pox? . . ."

Chicken pox no, measles yes, when he was very small and his mother was still living. It was, in fact, his warmest and most vivid memory of his mother, who died very shortly afterward.

"How about games and sport? . . . Have you ever had an accident? . . . Are you subject to sore throats? . . . You're a heavy smoker, I take it? . . ."

The young doctor smiled, with a touch of mischief, by way of showing Maigret that he knew him by repute.

"No one could say that you lead a sedentary life, exactly."

"It varies. Sometimes I don't set foot outside my office for two or three weeks at a time, and then, all of a sudden, I'm running around all over the place for days on end."

"Regular meals?"

"No."

"Do you watch your diet?"

He was forced to admit that he liked rich food, especially highly seasoned stews and sauces.

"Not just a gourmet, in fact, but a hearty eater?"

"You could say so, yes."

"What about wine? A half-bottle, a bottle a day?"

"Yes . . . No . . . More . . . As a rule I don't have more than two or three glasses with my dinner. . . . Occasionally I have a beer sent up to the office from the brasserie nearby."

"Spirits?"

"I quite often have an apéritif with a colleague."

In the Brasserie Dauphine. It wasn't the drink itself but the club-like atmosphere, the cooking smells, the aroma of aniseed and Calvados, with which, by this time, the very walls were impregnated. Why should he feel ashamed, all of a sudden, in the presence of this neat, well-set-up young man in his luxurious consulting room?

"In other words, you don't drink to excess?"

He had no wish to conceal anything.

"It depends on what you mean by excess. I'm not adverse to a

glass or two of sloe gin after dinner. My sister-in-law sends it from Alsace. . . . And then often, when I'm working on a case, I'm in and out of cafés and bars a great deal. . . . How shall I put it? If, at the start of a case, I happen to be in a bistro where Vouvray is a specialty, as likely as not I'll go on drinking Vouvray right through to the end."

"How much in a day?"

It reminded him of his boyhood, the confessional in the village church, smelling of mildew and the curé's snuff.

"A lot?"

"It would seem a lot to you, I daresay."

"For how long at a stretch?"

"Anything from three to ten days, sometimes even longer. It's a matter of chance. . . ."

There were no reproaches, no penances, but he had a pretty shrewd idea what the doctor thought of him, as he sat, elbows on his handsome mahogany desk, with the sun shining on his fair hair.

"No severe indigestion? No heartburn or giddiness?"

Giddiness, yes. Nothing serious. From time to time, especially of late, the ground seemed to tilt slightly, and everything about him appeared a little unreal. He felt off balance, unsteady on his feet.

It was not bad enough to cause him any serious anxiety, but it was an unpleasant sensation. Fortunately, it never lasted more than a couple of minutes. On one occasion, he had just left the Law Courts and was about to cross the road. He had waited until it was over, before venturing to step off the pavement.

"I see . . . I see."

What did he see? That he was a sick man? That he smoked heavily and drank too much? That it was high time, at his age, that he learned to watch his diet?

Maigret was not letting it get him down. He smiled in the way his wife had grown used to, since they had come to Vichy. It was a self-mocking smile, if a little morose.

"Come with me, please."

This time he was given the full treatment. He was made to climb

up and down a ladder repeatedly for three full minutes. He had his blood pressure taken lying down, sitting up, and standing. Then he was X-rayed.

“Breathe in . . . Deeper . . . Hold it . . . Breathe out . . . In . . . Hold it . . . Out . . .”

It was comical yet somehow distressing, dramatic and at the same time slightly dotty. He had, perhaps, thirty years of life still to look forward to, and yet any minute now he might be tactfully informed that his life as a healthy, active man was over, and that henceforth he would be reduced to the status of an invalid.

They had been all through this experience, all the people one saw in the park, under the spreading trees, at the mineral springs, on the lake shore. Even the members of the Sporting Club across the river, whom one could watch sunbathing, or playing tennis or bowls in the shade, had been through it.

“Mademoiselle Jeanne.”

“Yes, sir.”

The receptionist knew what was wanted. It was all part of a familiar routine. Soon the Maigrets would be following a routine of their own.

First, the little needle or the prick on the finger tip, then the glass slides and phials for the blood smears.

“Relax. . . . Clench your fist.”

He felt the prick of a needle in the crook of his elbow.

“Right, that will do.”

He had had blood samples taken before, but this time, it seemed to him, there was something portentous about it.

“Thank you. You can get dressed now.”

A few minutes later they were back in the consulting room, with its walls lined with books and bound volumes of medical journals.

“I don’t think any very drastic treatment is needed in your case. Come and see me again at this time the day after tomorrow. By then I shall have the results of the tests. Meanwhile, I’m going to put you on a diet. I presume you’re staying in a hotel? Here is a diet sheet. All you have to do is to hand it to the headwaiter. He’ll attend to it.”

It was a card with forbidden foods printed in one column and permitted ones in the other. It even went so far as to list sample menus on the back.

"I don't know if you are aware of the different chemical properties of the various springs. There is an excellent little handbook on the subject, written by one of my colleagues, but it may be out of print. For a start, I want you to alternate between two springs, Chomel and Grande Grille. You'll find them both in the park."

Both men looked equally solemn. Maigret felt not the least inclination, as he watched the doctor scribbling notes on his pad, to shrug the whole thing off, or indulge in a little secret smile.

"Do you usually have an early breakfast? I see. . . . Is your wife here with you? . . . In that case, I don't want to send you halfway across town on an empty stomach. Let's see. You'd better start at about ten thirty in the morning at the Grande Grille. There are plenty of chairs, so you won't have to stand about, and if it rains there's a huge glass enclosure for shelter. . . . I want you to have three half-pints of water at half-hourly intervals, and it should be drunk as hot as you can take it.

"I want you to repeat the process in the afternoons at about five, at the Chomel spring.

"Don't worry if you feel a bit languid the first day. It's a purely temporary side effect of the treatment. . . . Anyway, I shall be seeing you. . . ."

Those early days, before his initiation into the mysteries of each individual spring, seemed very far away now. Now, as for thousands of others, as for tens of thousands of others, with whom he rubbed shoulders every hour of the day, the cure had become a part of his life.

Just as in the evening, when there was a concert, every one of the little yellow chairs around the bandstand was occupied, so, at certain times of day, there was not a chair to be had, so great was the crowd gathered around the springs, all waiting for a second, third, or fourth glass of the waters.

Like everyone else, they had brought measuring glasses, Madame Maigret having insisted on getting one for herself.

"But *you're* not taking the waters!"

"Why shouldn't I? Where's the harm? It says in one of the pamphlets that the waters are slimming. . . ."

Each glass had its own case of plaited straw, and Madame Maigret carried both of theirs slung over one shoulder like binoculars at a race meeting.

They had never walked so much in their lives. Their hotel was in the France district, a quiet part of the town near the Célestins spring. They were out and about by nine every morning, when, apart from the delivery man, they had the streets almost to themselves.

A few minutes' walk from their hotel there was a children's playground with a wading pool, swings, play apparatus of all sorts, even a puppet theater, more elaborate than the one in the Champs-Élysées.

"Your tickets, sir?"

They had bought two one-franc tickets, and strolled among the trees, watching the half-naked children at play. Next day they had come again.

"We sell books of twenty tickets at a reduced rate."

They were reluctant to commit themselves so far ahead. They had come upon the playground by chance and, for want of anything better to do, had fallen into the habit of returning there every day at the same hour.

Regularly, they went on from there to the bowling club, where they would watch two or three games being played, with Maigret attentively following every throw, especially those of the tall, thin, one-armed man, always to be found under the same tree, who was, in spite of his disability, the finest player of all. Another regular player was a dignified old gentleman with pink cheeks, snow-white hair, and a southern accent, always addressed by his companions as "Senator."

It was not far from there to the lifeguards' station and the beach, with buoys bobbing in the water to mark the limits of the bathing area. Here, too, they would find the same familiar faces under the same familiar beach umbrellas.

"You're not bored, are you?" she had asked him on their second day.

"Why on earth should I be?" he had retorted in surprise.

For indeed he was not bored. Little by little his habits, his tempo of living, were changing. For instance, he caught himself filling his pipe on the Pont de Bellerive and realized, to his amazement, that he always smoked a pipe just at this time and place. There was also the Yacht Club pipe, which he smoked while watching the young people skimming over the water on skis.

"It's a dangerous sport, wouldn't you say?"

"In what way?"

Finally the park, the attendant filling their glasses from the spring, the two of them drinking the water in little sips. It was hot and salty. The water from the Chomel spring tasted strongly of sulphur, and after drinking it Maigret could hardly wait to light his pipe.

It amazed Madame Maigret that he should take it all so calmly. It was most unlike him to be so docile. It quite worried her at times, until it dawned on her that he was amusing himself by playing at detection. Almost in spite of himself he watched people, classifying them, taking note of everything about them, down to the smallest detail. He had, for instance, already discovered which of their fellow guests in the Hôtel de la Bérézina—more a family pension than a hotel—had liver trouble and which diabetes, simply by observing what they had to eat.

What was this one's life history? What did that one do for a living? These were his preoccupations, in which he sometimes invited his wife to share.

Especially intriguing to them were the couple whom they called "the happy pair," the dumpy little man who seemed always on the verge of coming up to shake his hand, and his diminutive wife who looked like something out of a confectioner's shop. What was their station in life? They seemed to recognize the Chief Superintendent, but was this not perhaps merely because they had seen his picture in the papers?

Not many people here did, in fact, recognize him, many fewer than in Paris. Admittedly, his wife had insisted on buying him a light mohair jacket, almost white in fact, of the kind that elderly men used to wear when he was a boy. But even allowing for this, it would

probably not have occurred to most people that the head of the Paris C.I.D. could be here, in Vichy. When anyone peered at him with a puzzled frown, or turned back to look at him, he felt sure that they were thinking:

“Good heavens! That might almost be Maigret!”

But they did not think that it *was* Maigret. And no wonder. He scarcely recognized himself!

Another person who intrigued them was the lady in lilac. She too was taking the waters, but only at the Grande Grille, where she could be seen every morning. She always sat a little removed from the crowd, near the newspaper stand. She never drank more than a mouthful of the water. Afterward, with her usual air of remote dignity, she would rinse out her glass, and put it away carefully in its straw case.

There were usually one or two people in the crowd who seemed to know her well enough to greet her. The Maigrets never saw her in the afternoon. Was she perhaps undergoing hydrotherapy? Or had she been ordered by her doctor to take an afternoon rest?

Doctor Rian had said:

“E.R.S., perfect. Average sed rate: 6 mm. per hour. . . . Cholesterol, a little on the high side, but well within the normal range. . . . Urea normal. . . . You’re a bit low on iron, but there’s no cause for anxiety. . . . No need to worry about uric acid, either . . . just keep off game, shellfish, and variety meats. As to your blood count, it could scarcely be better, with 98 per cent hemoglobin.

“There’s nothing wrong with you that a thorough clean-out won’t cure. . . . Any headaches or unusual fatigue? . . . Right, then, we’ll keep on with the same treatment and diet for the next few days. . . . Come and see me again on Saturday.”

There was an open-air band concert that night. They did not see the lady in lilac leave, because, as usual, they themselves left early, well before the end. The Hôtel de la Bérézina, in the France district of the town, gleamed with fresh paint, and its double doors were flanked on either side by flowering shrubs in urns. The Maigrets enjoyed walking back to it through the deserted streets.

They slept in a brass bed, and all the furniture in their room was in the style of the early 1900s—like the bath, which was raised on legs, and had old-fashioned gooseneck taps.

The hotel was well kept and very quiet, except when the Gagnaire boys, who had rooms on the first floor, were let loose in the garden to play at cowboys and Indians.

Everyone was asleep.

Was it the fifth day? Or the sixth? Of the two, it was Madame Maigret who was the more confused, waking up as she did every morning to the realization that she need not get up to make the coffee. Their breakfast was brought in on a tray at seven o'clock, coffee and fresh croissants, and the *Journal de Clermont-Ferrand*, which devoted two pages to news and features about life in Vichy.

Maigret had got into the habit of reading the paper from cover to cover, so that by now there was precious little he did not know about local affairs. He even read the obituaries and the small ads.

"Desirable residence, in excellent repair. Three rooms, bathroom, all mod. cons. Uninterrupted view . . ."

"Are you thinking of buying a house?"

"No, but this is interesting. I can't help wondering who will buy it. A family coming regularly for the cure, who won't live in it for more than a month each year? An elderly couple from Paris who want to retire here? Or . . ."

They got dressed, taking turns in the bathroom, and went down the staircase, with its red carpet held in place by triangular brass clips. The proprietor was there in the hall, always ready with a friendly greeting. He was not a local man, as was obvious from his accent, but came from Montélimar.

They nibbled the hours away. The children's playground . . . The bowling greens . . .

"I see, by the way, that Wednesdays and Saturdays are market days. It's a big market. We might go and have a look around. . . ."

They had always been attracted to markets, their stalls laden with sides of beef, fish, and live lobsters, and their all-pervading smell of fresh fruit and vegetables.

"Well, Rian did advise me to walk four miles a day," he remarked with heavy irony, adding:

"Little does he know that, on the average, we cover the best part of twelve!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Work it out. We spend at least five hours a day walking. . . . We may not be striding out like a couple of athletes, but all the same we can't be doing much less than three miles an hour."

"I'd never have thought it!"

The glass of water. Sitting on one of the yellow chairs, reading the papers that had just come from Paris. Lunch in the white dining room, where the only touch of color was an opened bottle of wine on a table here and there, labeled with the name of the resident who had ordered it. There was no wine on the Maignets' table.

"Did he say no wine?"

"Not in so many words. But while I'm about it . . ."

She could not get over the fact that, while scrupulously keeping to his diet, he was, at the same time, perfectly good-tempered about it.

They permitted themselves a short rest after lunch, before setting off again, this time for the opposite end of the town. Here, where most of the shops were, the pavements were so crowded that they were seldom able to walk abreast.

"Was there ever a town with so many osteopaths and chiropractors?"

"It's no wonder, if everyone walks as much as we do!"

That evening the bandstand in the park was deserted. Instead, there was a concert in the gardens of the Grand Casino. Here, in place of the brass band, a string orchestra played. The music was of a more serious kind, matched by the expressions on the faces of the audience.

They did not see the lady in lilac. They had not seen her in the park either, though they had caught a glimpse of "the happy pair," who tonight were more formally dressed than usual, and seemed to be going to the casino theater, where a light comedy was playing.

The brass bedstead. It was astonishing how quickly the days went by, even when one was doing absolutely nothing. Croissants, coffee, cubes of sugar in greaseproof wrappings, the *Journal de Clermont-Ferrand*.

Maigret, in pajamas, was sitting in an armchair next to the window, smoking his first pipe of the day. His coffee cup was still half full. He enjoyed lingering over it as long as possible.

His sudden exclamation brought Madame Maigret from the bathroom, in a blue flower-printed dressing gown, with her toothbrush still in her hand.

“What’s the matter?”

“Look at this.”

There, on the first page devoted to Vichy, was a photograph, a photograph of the lady in lilac. It was not a very recent one. She looked several years younger in it and, for the occasion, had managed to produce a tight-lipped semblance of a smile.

“What’s happened to her?”

“She’s been murdered.”

“Last night?”

“If it had happened last night, it wouldn’t be in this morning’s paper. No, it was the night before.”

“But we saw her at the band concert.”

“Yes, at nine o’clock. . . . She lived only a couple of streets from here, Rue du Bourbonnais. . . . I had a feeling that we were almost neighbors. . . . She went home. . . . She had time to take off her shawl and hat and go into the sitting room, which leads off to the left from the hall. . . .”

“How was she killed?”

“She was strangled. Yesterday morning, the lodgers were surprised not to hear her moving about downstairs as usual.”

“She wasn’t just here for the cure, then?”

“No, she lived in Vichy. . . . She owned the house, and let furnished rooms on the upper floor. . . .”

Maigret was still in his armchair, and his wife well knew just how much self-control was needed to keep him there.

“Was it a sex maniac?”

“The place was ransacked from top to bottom, but nothing seems to have been taken. . . . In one of the drawers that had been broken into, they found jewelry and quite a lot of money. . . .”

“She wasn’t . . . ?”

“No.”

He stared out of the window in silence.

“Who’s in charge of the case, do you know?”

“Of course I don’t! How could I?”

“The Chief C.I.D. Officer at Clermont-Ferrand is Lecoeur, who used to work under me. . . . He’s here. . . . Naturally, he has no idea that I’m here too. . . .”

“Will you be going to see him?”

To this he made no immediate answer.



It was five minutes to nine, and Maigret had not yet answered his wife's question. It seemed as though he had put himself on his honor to behave exactly as he would have done any other morning, to adhere, without the smallest deviation, to their established Vichy routine.

He had read the paper from beginning to end, while finishing his coffee. He had shaved and bathed, as usual, listening meanwhile to the news on the radio. At five minutes to nine he was ready, and together they went down the staircase, with its red carpet held in place by the triangular brass clips.

The proprietor, in white coat and chef's hat, was waiting for them below.

"Well, Monsieur Maigret, you can't say we don't look after you in Vichy, even to the extent of handing you a splendid murder on a platter. . . ."

He managed to force a noncommittal smile.

"You will be attending to it, I trust?"

"This is not Paris. I have no authority here. . . ."

Madame Maigret was watching him. She thought he was unaware of this, but she was wrong. When they came to Rue d'Auvergne, he

composed his features in an expression of guileless innocence and, instead of going down it toward the Allier and the children's playground, turned right.

Admittedly, they did occasionally take a different route, but, up to now, only on the way back. Her husband's unerring sense of direction never failed to astonish Madame Maigret. He never looked at a map, and would wander off, apparently at random, into a maze of little side streets. Often, just when it seemed to Madame Maigret that they must be lost, she would suddenly realize, with a start, that there in front of them was the door of their hotel, flanked on either side by the flowering shrubs in their green-painted urns.

On this occasion, he turned right again, and then again, until they came to a house where a small crowd was gathered, hoping to catch a glimpse inside.

There was a twinkle in Madame Maigret's eye. The Chief Superintendent, after a moment's hesitation, crossed the road, stopped, gave his pipe a sharp tap against his heel to knock out the ash, and then slowly filled it with fresh tobacco. At times like these, he seemed to her just a great baby, and a wave of tenderness swept over her.

He was having a struggle with himself. At last, trying to look as though he had no idea where he was, he joined the group of spectators, and stood gaping like the rest at the house across the street, where a policeman was standing guard and, nearby, a car was parked.

It was an attractive house, like most of the others in the street. It had recently had a fresh coat of warm-white paint, and the shutters and balcony were almond green.

On a marble plaque, in Gothic lettering, was inscribed the name:
Les Iris.

Madame Maigret had been following every move in this little private drama, from his decision not to call at the Police Station to his present determination *not* to cross the road, make himself known to the policeman on duty, and gain admission to the house.

There was no cloud in the sky. The air was fresh, clear, invigorating, here in this clean little street. A few doors along, a woman, standing at her window shaking the dust out of her rugs, looked with disapproval at the people down below. But had she not herself been

among the first, yesterday, when the murder was discovered and the police arrived in force, to join with her neighbors in gaping at a house that she had seen every day of her life for years?

Someone in the crowd remarked:

"They say it was a *crime passionel*."

This suggestion was received with derision:

"Oh, come! She can't have been a day under fifty."

A face could be dimly seen at one of the upstairs windows, a pointed nose, dark hair, and from time to time, behind it, the shadowy figure of a youngish man.

The door was painted white. A milk cart was moving slowly along the street, leaving bottles on doorsteps behind it. The milkman, with a bottle of milk in his hand, went up to the white door. The policeman spoke to him, no doubt telling him that there was no point in leaving it, but the milkman shrugged and left the bottle just the same.

Wasn't anyone going to notice that Maigret . . . ? He couldn't hang about here indefinitely. . . .

He was just about to move off when there appeared in the doorway a tall young man with an unruly mop of hair. He crossed the road, making straight for the Chief Superintendent.

"The Divisional Superintendent would very much like to see you, sir."

His wife, repressing a smile, asked:

"Where shall I wait for you?"

"At the usual place, the spring. . . ."

Had they seen and recognized him from the window? With dignity, he crossed the road, assuming a grumpy expression to hide his gratification. It was cool in the entrance. There was a hatrack on the right, with two hats hanging from its branches. He added his own, a straw hat which his wife had made him buy at the same time as the mohair jacket, and in which he felt slightly foolish.

"Come on in, Chief."

A voice full of warm pleasure, a face and figure Maigret instantly recognized.

"Lecoeur!"

They had not met for fifteen years, not since the days when Désiré

Lecoeur had been an inspector on Maigret's staff at the Quai des Orfèvres.

"Oh, yes, Chief, here I am, longer in the tooth, wider in girth, and higher up the ladder. Here I am, as I say, Divisional Superintendent at Clermont-Ferrand, which is why I'm stuck with this ghastly business. . . . Come on in."

He led him into a little parlor painted a bluish-gray, and sat at a table covered with papers, which he was using as an improvised desk.

Maigret lowered himself cautiously into a fragile, reproduction Louis XVI chair. Lecoeur must have noticed his puzzled expression, because he said at once:

"I daresay you're wondering how I knew you were here. In the first place, Moinet—you haven't met him, he's the head of the Vichy police—noticed the name on your registration form. . . . Naturally, he didn't want to intrude, but his men have seen you out and about every day. It seems, in fact, that the fellows doing duty on the beach have been laying bets as to when you would make up your mind to try your hand at bowls. Your interest in the game, according to them, was visibly growing, day by day. So much so that . . ."

"Have you been here since yesterday?"

"Yes, of course, with two of my men from Clermont-Ferrand. One of them is the young fellow, Dicelle, whom I sent out to fetch you when I saw you out there in the street. I was reluctant to send you a message at your hotel. I reckoned you were here for the cure, not for the purpose of giving us a helping hand. Besides, I knew that, in the end, if you were interested, you would . . ."

By now, Maigret really was looking grumpy.

"A sex maniac?" he mumbled.

"No, that's one thing we can say for sure."

"A jealous lover?"

"Unlikely. Mind you, I could be wrong. I've been at it for twenty-four hours, but I'm not much wiser than when I got here yesterday morning."

Referring from time to time to the papers on his desk, he went on:

"The murdered woman's name was Hélène Lange. She was forty-eight years old, born at Marsilly, about ten miles from La Rochelle.

I telephoned the town hall at Marsilly and was told that her mother, who was widowed very young, had for many years kept a small dry goods store in the Place de l'Eglise.

"There were two daughters. Hélène, the elder, took a course in shorthand and typing at La Rochelle. After that she worked for a time in a shipping office, and later went to Paris, after which nothing more was heard of her.

"No request for a copy of her birth certificate was ever received, from which one must infer that she never married, besides which her identity card is made out in her maiden name.

"There was a sister, six or seven years younger, who also began her working life in La Rochelle, as a manicurist.

"Like her elder sister, she subsequently migrated to Paris, but returned home about ten years ago.

"She must have had substantial savings, because she bought a hair-dressing establishment in the Place des Armes, which she still owns. I tried to get her on the phone but was told by the assistant in charge that she was on holiday in Majorca. I cabled to her hotel, asking her to return immediately, and she should be here sometime today.

"This sister—her name is Francine—is also unmarried. . . . The mother has been dead eight years. . . . There's no other family, as far as anyone knows."

Quite unwittingly, Maigret had slipped back into his familiar professional role. To all appearances, he was in charge of the case, and Lecoeur was a subordinate reporting to him in his office.

But there was no pipe rack for him to fidget with as he listened, no sturdy armchair for him to lean back in, and no view of the Seine from the window.

As Lecoeur talked, Maigret was struck by one or two unusual features of this little parlor, which had obviously been used as a living room, in particular the fact that there were no photographs of anyone but Hélène Lange herself. There she was on a little bow-fronted chest, aged about six, in a dress that was too long for her, with tight braids hanging down on either side of her face.

A large photograph, obviously taken by a skilled photographer,

hung on the wall. In this she was older, about twenty, and her pose was romantic, her expression ethereal.

A third photograph showed her on a beach, wearing not a bathing suit but a white dress, the wide skirt of which, blown to one side by the breeze, streamed out like a flag, and holding in both hands a light, wide-brimmed hat.

"Do you know how and when the murder was committed?"

"We're having difficulty in finding out what exactly did happen that evening. . . . We've been working on it since yesterday morning, but we haven't made much headway.

"The night before last—Monday night, that is—Hélène Lange had supper alone in her kitchen. She washed up—or at any rate we didn't find any dirty dishes in the sink—got dressed, switched off all the lights, and went out. If you want to know, she ate two boiled eggs. She wore a mauve dress, a white woolen shawl, and a hat, also white. . . ."

Maigret, after an internal struggle, couldn't in the end resist saying:

"I know."

"Have you been making inquiries, then?"

"No, but I saw her on Monday evening, sitting near the bandstand, listening to the concert."

"Do you know what time she left?"

"She was still there just before half past nine, when my wife and I went for our walk, as we do every evening."

"Was she alone?"

"She was always alone."

Lecoeur made no attempt to hide his astonishment.

"So you'd noticed her on other occasions?"

Maigret, now looking much more good-humored, nodded.

"What was it about her?"

"Nothing in particular. One spends one's time here just walking about, and, almost unconsciously, one registers a face here and there in the crowd. You know how it is . . . one is always running into the same people in the same places at certain times of day. . . ."

"Have you any ideas?"

"What about?"

"What sort of woman she was."

"She was no ordinary woman, I'm sure of that, but that's all I can say."

"Well, to proceed . . . Two of the three bedrooms on the upper floor are let, the largest to the Maleskis, a couple from Grenoble. He's an engineer. They were out at the cinema. They left the house a few minutes after Mademoiselle Lange and didn't get back till half past eleven. All the shutters were closed as usual, but they could see through the slats that the lights were still on downstairs. When they got inside, they noticed strips of light under the doors of Mademoiselle Lange's living room and bedroom. That's the room on the right. . . ."

"Did they hear anything?"

"Maleski heard nothing, but his wife said, with some hesitation, that she thought she had heard a murmur of voices. . . . They went straight up to bed, and slept undisturbed until morning. . . ."

"The other lodger is a Madame Vireveau, a widow from Paris, Rue Lamarck. She's rather an overbearing woman, aged about sixty. She comes to Vichy every year to lose weight. . . . This is the first time she's taken a room in Mademoiselle Lange's house. In former years she always stayed at a hotel.

"She's seen better days, apparently. Her husband was a rich man, but extravagant, and when he died she found herself in financial difficulties. . . . To put it briefly, she's loaded with imitation jewelry, and she booms like a dowager in a bad play. . . . She left the house at nine. She saw no one, and claims that, when she went out, the house was in total darkness."

"Do the lodgers have their own keys?"

"Yes. Madame Vireveau spent the evening at the Carlton Bridge Club, and left just before midnight. She hasn't a car. The Maleskis have a mini, but they seldom use it in Vichy. Most of the time it's left in a garage nearby. . . ."

"Were the lights still on?"

"I'm coming to that, Chief. Naturally, I saw the old girl only after the crime had been discovered, and by then the whole street was in a turmoil. . . . Maybe all that fancy jewelry goes with a vivid

imagination . . . I really can't say. . . . Anyway, according to her story, she almost bumped into a man as she turned the corner, the corner of Boulevard de LaSalle and Rue du Bourbonnais, that is. He couldn't possibly have seen her coming, and she swears that he was visibly startled, and shielded his face with his hand to avoid being recognized."

"Did she, in fact, recognize him?"

"No, but she swears nevertheless that she would recognize him if she saw him again face to face. He was very tall and heavily built—with a great bulging chest like a gorilla, she says. He was hunched up and walking fast. He gave her a real fright, she says, but all the same she turned back to watch him striding away toward the center of town."

"Had she any idea of his age?"

"Not young . . . Not old, either . . . Very heavily built . . . Frightening. . . . She almost ran the rest of the way. She didn't feel safe until her key was in the lock. . . ."

"Were the lights still showing on the ground floor?"

"That's just it, they weren't, that is, if one can take her word for it. She didn't hear a thing. She went up to bed, so shaken that she had to take a teaspoonful of peppermint essence on a lump of sugar."

"Who discovered the body?"

"All in good time, Chief. Mademoiselle Lange, while quite willing to let her rooms to respectable people, was not prepared to serve meals. No cooking was allowed. She wouldn't even let them have an alcohol stove for a cup of morning coffee.

"Yesterday morning, at about eight, Madame Maleski came downstairs with her thermos flask, as she always did, to get it filled and buy some croissants at a nearby coffee bar. She didn't notice anything amiss, then or when she got back. What did surprise her, though, was the absolute quiet downstairs, especially the second time, because Mademoiselle Lange was an early riser and could usually be heard moving about from one room to another.

"'Perhaps she's not well,' she remarked to her husband over breakfast.

"Because it seems that the landlady often complained of poor

health. At nine o'clock—Madame Vireveau was still in her room—the Maleskis went downstairs, where they found Charlotte looking worried. . . .”

“Charlotte?”

“The girl who comes in every morning from nine to twelve to clean the rooms. She bicycles in from a village about ten miles away. She’s a bit simple.

“‘All the doors are locked,’ she said to the Maleskis.

“Usually she arrived to find all the doors and windows on the ground floor wide open; Mademoiselle Lange was a great one for fresh air.”

“‘Haven’t you got a key?’

“‘No, if she’s not in, I might as well go home.’

“Maleski tried to open the door with the key of his room, but it didn’t fit, so in the end he went to the coffee bar where his wife gets their breakfast, and called the police from there.

“And that’s about all. An inspector from Vichy Police Headquarters arrived within minutes with a locksmith. The key to the living-room door was missing, and the kitchen and bedroom doors were locked from inside, with the keys in the locks.

“They found Hélène Lange here, in this room. She was lying stretched out, or rather doubled up, on the edge of the carpet, here in this exact spot. She had been strangled. . . . It wasn’t a pretty sight. . . .

“She was still wearing her mauve dress, but she had taken off her hat and shawl, which were both found hanging on the hatrack in the hall. All the drawers were open, and there were papers and cardboard boxes scattered all over the floor.”

“Had she been assaulted?”

“No, nothing of that sort was even attempted. And as far as we know, nothing was stolen. The report in this morning’s *Journal* is reasonable accurate. . . . In one of the drawers we found five hundred franc notes. . . . The assailant had been through the dead woman’s handbag, and the contents were scattered about the room.

These included four hundred francs in small notes, some silver, and a season ticket for the Grand Casino theater. . . .”

“Has she lived here long?”

“Nine years. Before that she lived for some years in Nice. . . .”

“Did she work there?”

“No. She lived in rather a shabby lodginghouse in Boulevard Albert I. Presumably she had a small private income.”

“Did she travel at all?”

“She was in the habit of going away about once a month, for a day or two at a time.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“She was very secretive about her comings and goings.”

“And after she came here?”

“For the first two years she had the whole house to herself. Then she advertised three rooms to let during the season, but the house was not always full. Just now, for instance, the blue room isn’t let. . . . I should perhaps mention that each bedroom has a different color scheme. Besides the blue room, there are a white room and a pink room.”

At this point, Maigret suddenly noticed another odd thing. Nowhere in the living room was there the smallest touch of green, not a single ornament or cushion, not even a trimming.

“Was she superstitious?”

“How did you guess? One day she got into quite a state because Madame Maleski had brought home a bunch of carnations. She said they were flowers of ill-omen, and she wouldn’t have them in the house.

“On another occasion she warned Madame Vireveau against wearing a green dress, prophesying that she would pay dearly for it. . . .”

“Did she ever have visitors?”

“According to the neighbors, never.”

“Any mail?”

“We’ve spoken to the postman. There was an occasional letter from La Rochelle, but apart from that, nothing but circulars and bills from local shops.”

"Did she have a bank account?"

"With the Crédit Lyonnais, on the corner of Rue Georges-Clemenceau."

"You've made inquiries there, of course?"

"She deposited regularly, about five thousand francs a month, but not always on the same day of the month."

"In cash?"

"Yes. During the season she deposited more, because of the money coming in from the lodgers."

"Did she ever sign checks?"

"There were a number of checks made out to shops in Vichy and Moulins, where she sometimes went to do her shopping. Occasionally she would order something from Paris—something she had seen in a mail-order catalogue: look, there's a pile of them over there—and for these things, too, she would pay by check."

Lecoeur was watching the Chief Superintendent and thinking how different he looked, in his off-white jacket, from the man he had worked for in the Quai des Orfèvres.

"What do you make of it, Chief?"

"I'll have to be going. My wife is waiting for me."

"Not to mention your first glass of water!"

"So the Vichy police know about that too, do they?" grumbled Maigret.

"But you'll be back, won't you? The C.I.D. hasn't a branch in Vichy. I drive back to Clermont-Ferrand every night. It's only fifty miles. The Vichy Chief of Police has offered me the use of an office with a telephone, but I'd sooner have my headquarters here on the spot. My men are trying to trace any neighbors or passers-by who may have seen Mademoiselle Lange returning home on Monday night, because we still don't know whether the murderer came with her or was waiting for her in the house."

"Forgive me, my dear fellow. . . . My wife . . ."

"Of course, Chief."

Maigret was still determined to stick to his routine, though curiosity very nearly got the better of him. He felt he really ought not to have turned right instead of left when setting out from the Hôtel de la

Bérézina. Had he not done so, he would have lingered, as always up till now, in the children's playground, and then, farther on, stopped to watch a game or two of bowls.

He wondered whether Madame Maigret, all on her own, had followed the familiar route, stopping at all the places where they usually stopped together.

"Would you care for a lift? My car is at the door, and I'm sure there's nothing young Dicelle would like better than to . . ."

"No, thank you, I shall walk. That's what I'm here for."

And walk he did, alone, striding along at a brisk pace to make up for lost time.

He had drunk his first glass of water and returned to his seat, midway between the great glass hall built around the spring and the nearest tree. Although his wife asked no questions, he could feel her watching his every movement, trying to interpret his expression.

With the newspapers spread out on his lap, he sat gazing at the sky through the trees. There was scarcely any movement among the leaves, and the sky was still the same clear blue, with one small solitary cloud, dazzlingly white, drifting across it.

Sometimes in Paris he would feel a twinge of nostalgia for half-forgotten sensory experiences: a puff of wind, warmed by the sun, against his cheek, the play of light among leaves or on a gravel path, the crunch of gravel under running feet, even the taste of dust.

And here, miraculously, they all were. While reflecting on his meeting with Lecoœur, he was at the same time basking in his surroundings, savoring every little thing.

Was he really deep in thought, or just daydreaming? There were small family groups to be seen here and there, as there are everywhere, but in this place the proportion of elderly couples was greater.

And what about the solitary figures in the crowd? Were there more men than women? Women, especially old women, tend to be gregarious. They could be seen arranging their chairs in little groups of six or eight, leaning forward as though to exchange confidences, although they had probably known one another not more than a few days.

Were they really exchanging confidences? Who could say? No doubt they discussed their illnesses, their doctors, their treatment, and went on to talk about their married sons and daughters, and to display the photographs of their grandchildren, which they carried about in their handbags.

It was uncommon to see one of them remaining aloof, keeping herself to herself, like the lady in lilac, to whom he could now attach a name.

Solitary men were more numerous. Often these showed signs of exhaustion and pain, and it was an obvious effort for them to move with dignity among the crowd. Their drawn features and sad eyes bespoke a vague, distressed apprehension that they might crumple to the ground, and lie there in a patch of sunlight or shade, in among the legs of the people passing by.

Hélène Lange was one of the solitary ones, and everything about her, her expression, her bearing, told that she was a proud woman. She would not allow herself to be treated as an old maid, she would not accept pity. She went her way, very erect, chin held high, walking with a firm tread.

She consorted with no one, having no need of the relief of facile confidences.

Was it by choice that she had lived alone?

This was the question uppermost in his mind, as he tried to conjure up an image of her as he had seen her, sitting, standing, in motion, still.

“Have they any clue?”

Madame Maigret was beginning to feel a little aggrieved at his day-dreaming. In Paris she would never have dared question her husband while he was working on a case. But here it was different. Here, walking side by side for hours on end, they had got into the habit of thinking aloud.

They did not converse exactly, exchanging question and answer, but rather one or the other would occasionally let fall the odd, disjointed phrase to indicate what he or she was thinking.

“No. They can’t do much until the sister gets here.”

“Has she no other family?”

“Apparently not.”

“It’s time for your second glass.”

They went into the hall. The heads of the girl attendants showed above the sides of the well in which they stood. H el ene Lange came here every day to take the waters. Was this on medical advice, or was it just to give some point to her morning walk?

“What’s bothering you?”

“I’m wondering why Vichy.”

It was almost ten years since she had come to settle in the town, and had bought her house. She was therefore thirty-seven at the time, and must have had independent means, since it was not until she had had the house to herself for two years that she started letting rooms.

“Why not Vichy?” retorted Madame Maigret.

“There are hundreds of towns in France, small towns, larger towns, where she might have gone to settle, not to mention La Rochelle, where she grew up. . . . Her sister, having spent some time in Paris, went back to La Rochelle and stayed there. . . .”

“Perhaps the two sisters didn’t get on.”

It wasn’t as simple as that. Maigret was still watching the people strolling about. The tempo of the moving crowds reminded him of something, of a constant stream of people, ebbing and flowing in hot sunshine. In Nice, on the Promenade des Anglais.

For H el en Lange, before coming to Vichy, had lived five years in Nice.

“She lived five years in Nice,” he said, speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Like a lot of other people on small fixed incomes.”

“Exactly. . . . People on small fixed incomes, but also people from all walks of life, the same as here. . . . Only the day before yesterday I was trying to remember what I was reminded of by the crowds strolling in the park and sitting on the chairs. . . . They’re just like the crowds on the sea-front at Nice . . . an agglomeration of elements so diverse that they cancel each other out. Vichy, like Nice, must surely have its share of superannuated sirens, former stars of stage and screen. . . . You’ve seen for yourself the streets of opulent private villas, where there are actually footmen in striped waistcoats still.

"And up in the hills, well away from the public gaze, there are villas even more opulent."

"As in Nice. . . . And what do you deduce from that?"

"Nothing. She was thirty-two when she went to live in Nice, and she was as much on her own there as she was here. Solitude doesn't, as a rule, come so early in life."

"There are such things as unhappy love affairs."

"Yes, but the sufferers don't look as she did."

"Broken marriages are not unknown."

"Ninety-five per cent of those women remarry."

"What about the men?"

With a broad grin, he retorted:

"A hundred per cent!"

She could not be sure whether he was teasing her or not.

Nice has a floating population, several casinos, and branches of nearly all the main Paris shops. Vichy virtually changes its population every three weeks, as the hundreds of thousands taking the cure come and go. It has branches of the same shops, three casinos, and a dozen cinemas.

Anywhere else, she would have been known. People would have taken an interest in her, they would have pried into her mode of life, her comings and goings.

Not in Nice. Not in Vichy. Was it that she had something to hide?

"Are you going back to see Lecoœur?"

"He said to come whenever I felt like it. He calls me 'Chief,' just as though he were still working under me."

"They all do."

"That's true. It's just habit, I daresay."

"You don't think it could be affection?"

He shrugged, and suggested that it was time they were on their way. This time, they went through the old town, stopping to look in the windows of the antique shops, where so many old and some touchingly pathetic objects were displayed.

In the dining room they were conscious of being stared at by their fellow guests. Oh, well, they would just have to get used to it.

Maigret had conscientiously modified his eating habits in accord-

ance with the doctor's instructions: chew everything thoroughly before swallowing, even mashed potatoes; never replenish your fork until you have swallowed the previous mouthful; do not drink more than a couple of sips of water with your meals, flavored with a drop of wine, if you must.

He preferred to do without wine altogether.

On the way upstairs he permitted himself a couple of puffs at his pipe, before stretching out, fully dressed, for his afternoon rest. His wife sat in the armchair by the window. There was just enough light coming in through the slats in the blinds to enable her to read the paper, as he had done earlier. From time to time, as he lay dozing, he could hear the rustle of a page being turned.

He had been resting for barely twenty minutes when there was a knock at the door. Madame Maigret got up hastily and went out, shutting the door behind her. After a whispered consultation, she went downstairs. She was back within minutes.

"It was Lecoeur."

"Any fresh news?"

"The sister has just arrived in Vichy. She went straight to the Police Station. She's about to be taken to the mortuary, to make a formal identification. Lecoeur will be waiting to see her in Rue du Bourbonnais. He thought you might like to be present when he questioned her."

Maigret, grumbling to himself, was already on his feet. For a start, he would have the shutters open, to let a little light and life into the place.

"Shall we meet at the spring?"

Five o'clock in the afternoon: the spring, the first glass of water, the iron chair.

"It won't take that long. You'd better wait for me on one of the benches near the bowling greens."

He was looking dubiously at his straw hat.

"What's the matter? Are you afraid of being laughed at?"

Well, let them laugh. He was on holiday, wasn't he? Defiantly, he put it on.

The same policeman was on guard outside the house. There were

still a good many people about, drawn there by curiosity, but when they found that there was nothing to be seen through the closed windows, most of them moved off, shaking their heads.

“Take a seat, Chief. If you move your chair into that corner over there by the window, you’ll be able to see her with the light full on her.”

“Have you seen her yet?”

“I was in a restaurant having lunch—and a very good lunch it was, I must say—when I got a message that she was at the Police Station. They said they’d see to it that she was taken to the mortuary, and brought on here afterward.”

And at that moment they saw, through the net curtains, a black car with a policeman in uniform at the wheel and, following behind, a long, red, open sports car. It was plain from their disheveled hair and tanned faces that the man and woman in the front seats had just got back from holiday.

The couple talked for a minute or two, their heads close together. They exchanged a hurried kiss, and she got out of the car and slammed the door. Her companion, still sitting at the wheel, lit a cigarette.

He was dark, with strong features and athletic shoulders, which were clearly outlined under his close-fitting, yellow, polo-neck sweater. He was surveying the house with a bored expression, when the policeman ushered the young woman into the living room.

“I am Superintendent Lecoecur. . . . You are Francine Lange, I presume?”

“That’s right.”

She glanced briefly at Maigret, whose face was in shadow, and to whom she had not been introduced.

“Madame or Mademoiselle?”

“I’m not married, if that’s what you mean. I have a friend with me; he’s in the car. But I know too much about men to marry one of them. It’s the devil’s own job to get rid of them afterward. . . .”

She was a fine-looking woman, who appeared much younger than her forty years, and her provocative curves seemed out of place in this conventional little room. She was wearing a flame-colored dress

of material so thin that her bare flesh showed through it, and the salt tang of the sea seemed still to cling to her.

"I got your telegram last night. Lucien managed to get seats on the first plane to Paris. . . . We had left our car at Orly, so we drove the rest of the way from there. . . ."

"I take it she was, indeed, your sister?"

Showing no sign of emotion, she nodded.

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you. Do you mind if I smoke?"

She looked meaningfully at the smoke rising up from Maigret's pipe, as if to say:

"If he can smoke, what's to stop me?"

"Please do. . . . I take it you were no more prepared for this murder than we were?"

"Well, naturally, I wasn't expecting it!"

"Do you know of anyone who might have had a grudge against your sister?"

"Why should anyone have had a grudge against Hélène?"

"When did you see her last?"

"Six or seven years ago, I can't say exactly. . . . It was winter, I remember, and there was a storm raging. . . . She hadn't let me know she was coming, so I was taken by surprise when she coolly walked into my hairdressing salon."

"Did you get on well together?"

"As well as most sisters. . . . We never saw much of one another, because of the difference in our ages. . . . When I was starting school, she had just left. . . . Then she went to the Secretarial School in La Rochelle. . . . I didn't train as a manicurist till years after. . . . Later, she left the town."

"How old was she then?"

"Let me think. . . . I was in the second year of my training . . . so I must have been sixteen. . . . She was seven years older. . . . That would make her twenty-three. . . ."

"Did you correspond?"

"Very rarely. . . . We don't go in much for letter-writing in our family."

"Was your mother still alive then?"

"Yes . . . she died two years later, and Hélène came to Marsilly for the division of her property. . . . Not that there was much to divide. . . . The shop was almost worthless. . . ."

"What was your sister doing in Paris?"

Maigret never took his eyes off her, making a mental comparison, line by line, between her face and figure and those of the dead woman. There was very little resemblance between the two women, the dark-eyed, long-jawed Hélène and the blue-eyed Francine, who was almost certainly not a natural blonde, with that bizarre streak of fiery red dangling over her forehead.

At first sight she seemed a good sort, hail-fellow-well-met with her clientele, no doubt, exuberantly cheerful if a little coarse. She made no pretense of refinement, indeed she seemed bent on accentuating her natural vulgarity, almost as if she relished it.

It was not half an hour since she had viewed her sister's body in the mortuary, yet here she was answering Lecoeur's questions good-humoredly, almost gaily, and—probably just from habit—attempting to make a conquest of him.

"What was she doing in Paris? Working as a stenographer in an office presumably, though I never went there to find out. . . . We had very little in common. I was just fifteen when I had my first boy friend—a taxi driver, he was—and I've had a good many since. . . . I don't think that was Hélène's style at all, unless she was a very dark horse. . . ."

"What address did you write to?"

"At the beginning, as far as I remember, it was a hotel in Avenue de Clichy. . . . I forget the name. . . . She moved several times. . . . Later she took an apartment in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. . . . I can't remember the number."

"You yourself went to live in Paris after a time. . . . Did you never go and see her?"

"Yes, I did. She was living in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette by then. A very nice little apartment it was. I was amazed. . . . I remember remarking on it. . . . She had a large bedroom looking out

on the street, a living room, a kitchenette, and a real bathroom. . . .”

“Was there a man in her life?”

“I never found out. I wanted to stay a few days with her, while I looked for a suitable room. She said she knew of a very clean, modestly priced hotel where I could stay, but she couldn’t bear to have anyone living with her.”

“Not even for three or four days?”

“Apparently not.”

“Did it surprise you?”

“Not all that much. . . . I may say, it takes a lot to surprise me. . . . I don’t like other people to meddle in my affairs, and I don’t interfere in theirs.”

“How long were you in Paris?”

“Eleven years.”

“Working as a manicurist?”

“To begin with. I worked in several salons in the neighborhood, and then I moved to a beauty parlor in Champs-Élysées. That was where I trained as a beauty specialist.”

“Were you living alone?”

“Sometimes alone, sometimes not.”

“Did you see anything of your sister?”

“To all intents and purposes, nothing.”

“So that you can’t really tell us anything about her life in Paris?”

“All I know is that she had a job. . . .”

“When you returned to La Rochelle to open your own salon, did you have much in the way of savings?”

“A fair amount.”

He did not ask how she had earned this money, nor did she volunteer the information, but she probably took it for granted that he understood.

“You never married?”

“I’ve answered that already. I’m not such a fool as to . . .”

And, turning to the window, from which they could see her companion lounging at the wheel of the red sports car:

“He looks like a real lout, don’t you think?”



"And yet you're living with him. . . ."

"He works for me, and what's more, he's a first-class hairdresser. We don't live together in La Rochelle; I wouldn't want him around all night as well as all day. . . . On holiday, it's different. . . ."

"Is the car yours?"

"Of course."

"But he chose it?"

"How did you guess?"

"Did your sister ever have a child?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know . . . she was a woman. . . ."

"Not to my knowledge, she didn't. . . . I shouldn't have thought it was the kind of thing you could hide. . . ."

"What about you?"

"I had a child while I was living in Paris. Fifteen years ago . . . My first thought was to get rid of it. . . . It would have been better if I had. . . . It was my sister who urged me not to. . . ."

"So you were in touch with her then?"

"It was because of it that I went to see her. . . . I needed someone to talk to—a member of my own family. . . . You may think it silly, but there are times when one instinctively turns to one's family. . . . Anyway, I had a son, Philippe. . . . I put him out to foster parents in the Vosges. . . ."

"Why the Vosges? Did you have any ties there?"

"None whatever. Hélène saw an advertisement somewhere or other. . . . I used to go and see him. . . . I suppose I went about ten times in two years. . . . He was well cared for. . . . The foster parents were very kind. . . . They had a small farm, beautifully kept. . . . Then one day I heard from them that the child was dead, drowned in a pond. . . ."

She was silent and thoughtful for a moment or two, then she shrugged:

"All things considered, it was probably for the best. . . ."

"Did you know of no one who was close to your sister, man or woman?"

"I doubt if she had many friends. Even in the old days in Marsilly

she looked down her nose at the other girls. They used to call her the Princess. . . . It was no different, I imagine, at the Secretarial School in La Rochelle. . . .”

“Was it pride?”

She thought this over, then said uncertainly:

“I don’t know. . . . That’s not the word I would choose. . . . She didn’t like people. . . . She didn’t like the company of other people. . . . That’s it! She was happiest on her own.”

“Did she ever attempt suicide?”

“Why should she? You don’t think . . .”

Lecoeur smiled.

“No, no one commits suicide by strangulation. . . . I just wondered whether, at any time in the past, she had been tempted to put an end to her life.”

“I’m sure it never entered her head. . . . She had a good opinion of herself. Basically, she was very self-satisfied.”

Yes, thought Maigret, that was it, self-satisfied. In his mind’s eye he saw once again the lady in lilac sitting facing the bandstand. At the time, he had tried to interpret her expression, and failed.

Francine had put her finger on it: self-satisfaction.

She was so self-absorbed that she kept no less than three photographs of herself in her living room, and no doubt there were others in the dining room and bedroom, which he had not yet seen. She had no photograph of anyone else. None of her mother, none of her sister, none of any friend, man or woman. Even on the beach she had been photographed alone, against a background of waves.

“I take it that, as far as you know, you are her sole heir? . . . We found no will among her papers. Admittedly, the murderer scattered them all over the place, but I can’t imagine any reason why he should have made off with her will. . . . So far, we have heard nothing from any lawyer. . . .”

“When is the funeral to be?”

“That’s up to you. The forensic laboratory have completed their work, so you can claim your sister’s body whenever you wish.”

“Where do you think she should be buried?”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

"I don't know a soul here. . . . If I took her back to Marsilly the whole village would turn out for the funeral—to gape. . . . I wonder if it really would have been her wish to end up in Marsilly. . . . Look, if you don't need me any more, I'd like to go and book into a hotel. I'm longing for a good hot bath. . . . Let me think it over, and tomorrow morning . . ."

"Very well. I shall expect to see you tomorrow morning."

Just as she was leaving, having shaken hands with Lecoeur, she turned to glance briefly at Maigret. She was frowning, as though puzzled by the presence of this silent man sitting in shadow.

Did she recognize him?

"Till tomorrow, then. You have been most kind."

They saw her get into the car and lean over to say something to her companion at the wheel, and then the car drove off.

In the living room the two men looked at one another. Lecoeur was the first to speak:

"Well?" he said. It was almost comical.

And Maigret, puffing at his pipe, retorted:

"Well, what?"

He didn't feel like discussing the case. Besides, he hadn't forgotten that he had promised to meet his wife near the bowling greens.

"I must be going, my dear fellow. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Till tomorrow, then."

The policeman's military salute was no more than was due to him. All the same, he felt a glow of pride.



He was back in his old place, sitting in the green armchair near the open window. The weather had not changed since the day they arrived, warm sunshine in abundance, yet with a cool breeze at the start of the day, when the municipal sprinkler-carts made their rounds of the streets. And later on it would be pleasantly cool in the shade of the thickly wooded park, the many tree-lined boulevards, and the Allier promenade.

He had eaten his three croissants. His coffee cup was still half full. His wife was having her bath next door, and on the floor below he could hear the sounds of people moving about their rooms, getting ready to go downstairs.

It was not without a touch of wry amusement that he noted how quickly he had formed new habits. That was always his way. Wherever he was, he would almost instinctively establish a routine, and then adhere to it, as though subject to some immutable law.

It would be true to say that, when he was in Paris, each separate investigation had a tempo of its own, which included periods of rest in one particular bistro or brasserie, with its own characteristic smells and quality of light.

Here, in Vichy, he felt much more like a man on holiday than a

man taking the cure, and even the death of the lady in lilac had failed to shatter his indolent mood.

The night before, they had gone for their customary walk in the park, where several hundred others like themselves appeared as dark shadows, except when they moved through a pool of light cast by one of the frosted globes of the lamp standards. At this hour, most people were at the theater, the cinema, or the casino. Everywhere, after a light meal of cold ham, people were coming out of their hotels, pensions, and lodgings, in search of their own chosen form of entertainment.

Many were quite happy just to sit and relax on the florid little yellow chairs, and Maigret, without thinking, had caught himself searching in the crowd for an erect and dignified figure, a face with a long jaw line, a chin held high, and an expression that was at once wistful and hard.

Hélène Lange was dead, and Francine, no doubt, was consulting with her gigolo as to where she should have her sister buried.

Somewhere in this town there was a man who could solve the mystery of the lonely woman who owned a house called *Les Iris*, the man who had strangled her.

Was he taking his customary walk in the park, or was he, at this minute, on his way to the theater or the cinema?

Maigret and his wife had undressed and gone to bed in silence, but each had known what the other was thinking.

He lit his pipe and opened his paper at the section devoted to local news.

A photograph of himself spread over two columns caused him to draw in his breath sharply. It was a recent photograph, showing him drinking one of his daily glasses of water. He could not imagine when it had been taken. His wife had been sitting beside him at this time—they had left in about a third of her—and in the background were several blurred, anonymous faces.

MAIGRET TO THE RESCUE?

Out of consideration for his privacy, we have not hitherto informed our readers of the presence among us of Chief Superintend-

ent Maigret. He is in Vichy in a private capacity, having come, like so many other distinguished public figures, to take advantage of the beneficial properties of our mineral springs.

The question now arises, will the Chief Superintendent be able to resist the temptation to try his hand at solving the mystery of Rue du Bourbonnais?

He has been seen in the neighborhood of the house where the murder was committed, and rumor has it that he is in touch with Superintendent Lecoeur, the popular head of C.I.D., Clermont-Ferrand, who is in charge of the case.

With loyalties divided between the cure and the case, which will he choose?

He dropped the paper with a shrug. He was used to personal gossip of this sort, and it no longer angered him. He turned, and stared absent-mindedly out of the window.

Up to now—it was nine o'clock—he had behaved exactly as he did every morning, and when Madame Maigret reappeared, wearing her pink suit, they went downstairs as usual.

“Monsieur, madame, good morning. . . .” As usual, the proprietor was there to greet them. Maigret had already seen the two men outside, and the glint of their camera lens.

“They’ve been waiting for you for the past hour. They’re from the Saint-Etienne *Tribune*, not from the local paper.”

The photographer was tall, with red hair. The man with him, small and dark, had one shoulder higher than the other. They ran up to the door.

“May we take a picture? Just one?”

What was the use of saying no? He stood quite still for a moment on the doorstep, between the two flowering shrubs, Madame Maigret having retreated into the shadows.

“Look up, please, sir. Your hat . . .”

He could not remember when he had last been photographed wearing a straw hat. The only other he now possessed was the one he kept at Meung-sur-Loire for gardening.

“One more. . . . It won’t take a second. Thank you. . . .”

"Just one question, Monsieur Maigret, is it true that you are taking part in the investigation?"

"As Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department at the Quai des Orfèvres, I have no authority here."

"All the same, you must be taking an interest?"

"No more than all your other readers."

"It has one or two peculiar features, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"The victim was a recluse. . . . She had no friends. . . . There is no obvious motive. . . ."

"When we know more about her, the motive, no doubt, will become apparent."

It was not a particularly profound remark, and it committed him to nothing, but, all the same, it contained a germ of essential truth. For a long time now, others besides Maigret have seen the importance of studying the character of the victim. Increasingly, the attention of criminologists has centered upon the dead person, even to the extent of laying a large share of the blame at the victim's door.

Might there not have been something in Héléne Lange's manner and way of life which had, in a sense, doomed her to death by violence? From the very first, when he had seen her under the trees in the park, the Chief Superintendent had fixed upon her as an object of interest.

True, she was not the only one. The two whom he and his wife always referred to as "the happy pair" had also aroused his interest.

"Isn't it a fact that Superintendent Lecoœur used to be on your staff?"

"He did work for a time in the Law Courts in Paris."

"Have you seen him?"

"I paid him a friendly call."

"Will you be seeing him again?"

"Very likely."

"Will you be discussing the murder with him?"

"Very likely. Unless we confine ourselves to the weather, and the strange quality of the light in your charming town."

"What's so strange about it?"

"It's soft and shimmering at one and the same time."

"Do you intend to come back to Vichy next year?"

"That depends on my doctor."

"Many thanks. . . ."

As the two men leapt into their battered motorcar, Maigret and his wife walked slowly away from the hotel.

"Where shall I wait for you?"

She took it for granted that her husband was going to Rue du Bourbonnais.

"At the spring?"

"At the bowling greens."

In other words, he didn't intend to stay long with Lecoœur. He found him in the tiny parlor, talking on the telephone.

"Take a seat, Chief. . . . Hello! . . . Yes. . . . It's a bit of luck finding the same concierge there after all these years. . . . Yes. . . . She doesn't know where? . . . She went by métro? . . . From Saint-Georges? . . . Don't cut us off, miss. . . . Carry on, chum. . . ."

The call lasted for another two or three minutes.

"Thanks. . . . I'll see you get a formal authorization, just for the record. You can send us your report then. . . . How's the wife? . . . Of course. There's always something to worry about with kids. . . . I should know, with four boys of my own. . . ."

He hung up and turned to Maigret.

"That was Julien. He's an inspector in the IXth *Arrondissement* now. . . . You must have known him. . . . I called him up yesterday, and he agreed to look through his departmental files. . . . He's located the place in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette where Hélène Lange lived for four years."

"From the age of twenty-eight to thirty-two, in fact. . . ."

"Roughly. . . . The concierge is still there. . . . Mademoiselle Lange, it seems, was a nice, quiet young woman. . . . She went out and came back at regular hours, as one would expect of a working girl. . . . It seems that she seldom went out in the evenings, except occasionally to the theater or cinema.

"Her place of work must have been some distance away, as she

used the métro. . . . She always went out early to do her shopping, and she had no domestic help. . . . She usually got home for lunch at about twenty past twelve, and left again at half past one. After that she wasn't seen again until she got back from work at half past six."

"Did she have any visitors?"

"Only one, a man. Always the same man."

"Did you get his name from the concierge?"

"She knew nothing about him, except that he used to call once or twice a week at about half past eight at night, and always left before ten."

"What sort of man?"

"Very respectable, according to her. He drove his own car. It never occurred to the concierge to make a note of the number. It was a large black car, American, I imagine."

"What age?"

"In his forties. . . . On the heavy side. . . . Very well groomed. . . . Expensive clothes. . . ."

"Was he paying the rent?"

"He never set foot in the concierge's lodge."

"Did they go away for weekends?"

"Only once."

"What about holidays?"

"No. . . . At that time, Hélène Lange only got two weeks' holiday, and she nearly always went to Etretat, staying in a family pension, to which her mail was forwarded."

"Did she get many letters?"

"Very few. . . . One from her sister occasionally. . . . She subscribed to a lending library nearby. She was a great reader."

"Do you mind if I take a look around the apartment?"

"Of course not. Make yourself at home, Chief."

He noted that the television set was not in the little parlor, but in the dining room, which was furnished in provincial style, with the inevitable brass hardware much in evidence. On the sideboard was a photograph of Hélène Lange bowling a hoop, and another of her in a bathing suit, with a cliff in the background, probably taken at

Etretat. She had a well-proportioned figure, the long slender lines of the face being carried through to the body, though she was by no means thin or sharp. She was one of those women to whom clothes are unflattering.

In the kitchen, which was modern and bright, there was a dishwasher, not to mention every other labor-saving appliance.

Across the hall was a bathroom, also modern and well equipped, and the dead woman's bedroom.

Maigret was amused to find that it was almost a replica of his own hotel bedroom, with the same style of brass bedstead and the same elaborately carved furniture. The wallpaper was striped, lavender blue and pale pink, and here too hung a photograph of H el ene Lange, taken when she was about thirty.

But he scarcely recognized, behind that wide, spontaneous, joyous smile, the secretive face he had come to know.

It was an enlarged snapshot, probably taken in a wood, if the foliage in the background was anything to go by. She was looking straight into the lens, her features softened in an expression almost of tenderness.

"It would be interesting to know who it was holding the camera," mumbled Maigret to Lecoeur, who had just come into the room.

"A bit of a mystery, isn't she?"

"I take it you've checked up on the lodgers?"

"It was my first idea, too, that it might be an inside job. The widow is in the clear, and anyway, in spite of her bulk, she wouldn't have the strength to strangle anyone who put up a fight like Mademoiselle Lange. . . . The Carlton staff confirm that she was there playing bridge until twenty past eleven. . . . And, according to the police surgeon, the murder was committed between ten and eleven. . . ."

"In other words, by the time Madame Vireveau got home, H el ene Lange was dead."

"Almost certainly."

"The Maleskis saw a light under the living-room door. . . . It follows, since the lights were later turned off, that the murderer was still in the apartment. . . ."

"That's what I keep telling myself. . . . Either he came in with

his victim and strangled her before searching the apartment, or she found him at it, and had to be silenced. . . .”

“What about the man Madame Vireveau claims to have seen on the corner?”

“We’re working on that. Just about that time, as the proprietor of a nearby bar was pulling down his iron shutter, he saw a heavily built man walking rapidly past. He seemed out of breath, he says. . . .”

“Which way was he going?”

“Toward the Célestins.”

“Did he describe him?”

“He wasn’t paying much attention. . . . All he could say was that he was wearing a dark suit and no hat. . . . He thinks he remembers noticing that he had receding hair.”

“Any anonymous letters?”

“Not so far.”

There would be. There had never been a crime with a bit of mystery to it that did not produce its crop of anonymous letters and cryptic telephone calls.

“Have you seen the sister again?”

“I’m still waiting to hear from her what she wants done with the body.”

And, after a brief pause, he added:

“You could scarcely find two sisters more unlike, could you? The one so reserved, so introverted, so superior, and the other a thorough-going extrovert, overflowing with health and vitality. . . . And yet . . .”

Maigret looked at Lecoœur with an indulgent smile, noting that he had put on weight around the middle, and that there were one or two white hairs among the bristles of his red mustache. His blue eyes were innocent, almost childlike, and yet, Maigret remembered, he had been one of his ablest assistants.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Because I saw her alive, and yet you, who know her only from photographs and hearsay, have reached the same conclusions as I have.”

"You mean that H el ene Lange was a prey to sentimental and romantic delusions?"

"I believe she was playing a part, deceiving even herself perhaps, but she couldn't hide the look in her eyes, which was hard and shrewd."

"Like her sister . . ."

"Francine Lange has cast herself in the role of the emancipated woman, who doesn't give a damn for anyone or anything. . . . If you were to ask in La Rochelle, I'm sure you'd find that she had a wide circle of friends, all of whom would regale you with colorful details of her conversations and escapades. . . ."

"Which is not to say . . ."

There was no need for either of them to spell things out.

"That, underneath it all, she doesn't know that two and two makes four!"

"And what's more, gigolos or no gigolos, she knows what she wants. . . . Starting with a miserable little shop in Marsilly, she now owns, at the age of forty, one of the smartest hairdressing salons in La Rochelle. I know the town. Place des Armes . . ."

He took out his pocket watch.

"My wife will be waiting. . . ."

"At the spring?"

"No, I'm going to watch a game or two of bowls first. It will give me something else to think about. . . . I used to play a bit years ago, at Porquerolles. If only some of those fellows would twist my arm . . ."

He went on his way, filling a fresh pipe. It was warmer than it had been. By the time he got there, he was glad of the shade of the great trees.

"Anything new?"

"Nothing of any interest."

"Haven't they found out about her life in Paris yet?"

His wife was eyeing him warily, not wishing to overstep the mark, but he answered with perfect good humor:

"Nothing definite. . . . Only that she had at least one lover."

Madame Maigret grew bolder.

"Anyone would think you were pleased!"

"In a way, perhaps. It shows that, for a time at least, she got a bit of fun out of life, that she wasn't always shut up inside herself, chewing over God knows what obsessions and fantasies. . . ."

"What do you know about him?"

"Practically nothing, except that he drove a big black car, and went to see her once or twice a week in the evening, and always left before ten. They never went away together for a holiday, except that one time. . . ."

"A married man . . ."

"Probably. . . . Aged about forty, ten years older than she was. . . ."

"What about the neighbors in Rue du Bourbonnais? Did none of them ever see him?"

"Well, for one thing, he's not a man of forty now. More like sixty. . . ."

"Do you think . . ."

"I don't think anything. I'd like to know what sort of life she lived in Nice. Was it a period of transition, or had she already acquired the habits of an old maid? . . . Watch out, he's going to bowl. . . ."

The one-armed player, bowling with great deliberation, sent the jack spinning.

Involuntarily, he exclaimed:

"I envy them."

"Why?"

Her skin, dappled with sunlight and shade, was smooth. She's looking younger, he thought. His holiday mood was coming back. With a twinkle, he said:

"Haven't you noticed how completely engrossed they are? To them, bowling a good ball is the supreme fulfillment. It really is important to them. But when we come to the end of an inquiry . . ."

He left the sentence in the air, but his wry little grimace was eloquent. In this job, when they had finished with a man, he was abandoned, left to stand alone at the bar of Justice. . . . The end was prison, sometimes death. . . .

Shaking himself out of it, he emptied his pipe, and then said:

“What about our walk?”

Well, that was what they were here for, wasn't it?

Lecoeur's assistants had questioned all the neighbors.

Not only had no one heard or seen anything on the night of the murder, but all were agreed that Hélène Lange had no friends of either sex, and that she had never been known to have a visitor.

From time to time she was seen to leave the house carrying a small overnight bag, and on these occasions the shutters would remain closed for two or three days.

She never took any heavy luggage. She never ordered a taxi, and she had no car.

Nor had she ever been seen in the street with a companion, man or woman.

Every morning of the week, she went out to do her shopping in the local shops. Although she was not exactly mean, she knew the value of money, and on Saturdays always did her weekend shopping in the market. Invariably, she wore a hat, white in summer, dark in winter.

As to her present lodgers, they were completely in the clear. Madame Vireveau had come on the recommendation of a friend in Montmartre, who had stayed at Mademoiselle Lange's during the season, for several years in succession. A bit showy she might be, with her ample figure and flamboyant paste jewels, but she was not the woman to commit a murder, especially without motive. Her husband had been a florist in Paris, and up to the time of his death she had worked in the shop in Boulevard des Batignolles. Afterward she had moved to a little apartment in Rue Lamarck.

“I had nothing against her,” she said of Hélène Lange, “except that she had very little to say for herself.”

The Maleskis had been coming to Vichy for the cure for the past four years. The first year, they had gone to a hotel, and had discovered Mademoiselle Lange quite by chance, through a card in a shop window advertising rooms to let, which they had noticed one

day when they were out for a walk. They had inquired about her charges, and had at once booked a room for the following season. This was their third summer at *Les Iris*.

Maleski suffered from a disease of the liver, which meant that he had to take care of himself and keep to a very strict diet. Although only forty-two, he was already burned out, a shadow of a man with a sad smile. Inquiries made over the telephone to Grenoble, however, revealed that he was at the top of his profession, and highly regarded as a man of scrupulous honesty.

It had been made clear to him and his wife from the first that Mademoiselle Lange preferred to keep her distance with the lodgers. The only room they had ever been into on the ground floor was the little parlor, and then not more than two or three times. They had never been asked in for a drink, or even a cup of coffee.

Occasionally, when they stayed in on wet evenings, they could hear the television, but it was always turned off quite early.

All this information was buzzing in Maigret's head as he lay on the bed dozing, as he did every afternoon, while Madame Maigret sat at the window reading. Through half-closed eyes, he could see the lines of light thrown on the wall opposite the window by the slats of the Venetian blind, and was conscious of a golden afternoon outside.

Ideas swirled around and around in his head, broke up and reassembled, and suddenly he was asking himself, as though it were the key question:

“Why that night in particular?”

Why had she not been murdered the night before, or the night after, or last month, or two months ago?

On the face of it, it was a pointless question, and yet, half asleep as he was, he felt it to be of the utmost significance.

For ten years, ten long years, she had lived alone in that quiet Vichy street. No one had ever visited her. She, as far as anyone could tell, had never visited anyone, except perhaps when she was away on one of her brief monthly trips.

The neighbors had seen her as she came and went. She was also to be seen, sitting on one of the yellow chairs in the park, sipping

her glass of water, or, in the evening near the bandstand, listening to the music.

Had Maigret personally questioned the shopkeepers, they would probably have been amazed at the things he wanted to know.

“Did she ever indulge in small talk? . . . Did you ever see her bend down and stroke your dog? Did she talk to the other housewives in the queue, or exchange greetings with those whom she regularly met at the same time, more or less every day?”

And finally:

“Have you ever known her to laugh? . . . Only smile?”

It was necessary to go back fifteen years to find evidence of any kind of personal relationship with another human being, the man who used to visit her once or twice a week in her apartment in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.

Was it possible that she could have lived all those years without ever feeling the need to unburden herself to anyone, to speak her thoughts aloud?

Someone had strangled her.

“*But why that night in particular?*”

To Maigret, half asleep as he was, this question was assuming obsessional proportions. He was still seeking an answer when his wife’s voice broke in with the announcement that it was three o’clock.

“Were you asleep?”

“Dozing.”

“Are we going out?”

“Of course we’re going out! Don’t we always go out? Why do you ask?”

“I thought you might be meeting Lecoœur.”

“I’m not meeting anyone.”

And, to prove it, he took her on a grand tour of the town, starting with the children’s playground, and going on via the bowling greens and the beach, across the Pont de Bellerive, to walk the length of the boulevard leading to the Yacht Club, where they stopped for a while to watch the antics of the water skiers.

Then on much farther, as far as the new buildings, twelve stories

high, towering white blocks that were, in themselves, a town on the outskirts of the town.

Across the Allier they could see the horses cantering alongside the white fence posts of the racecourse, and the heads and shoulders of the people in the stands, and, on the lawns, groups of figures in sunlight and in shadow.

"The proprietor of the hotel says that every year more and more retired people are coming to live in Vichy."

Teasingly, he asked:

"Is that what you're softening me up for?"

"We've got our house at Meung. . . ."

They came upon a street of older houses. Each district had its own style, representing its own period. The houses had their own individuality, and one could envisage the kind of people who had built them.

It amused Maigret to stop outside every one of the innumerable little restaurants they passed, and read the menu.

"Room to let. Room with kitchen. Luxurious furnished rooms."

That explained the restaurants, and also the tens of thousands of people streaming through the streets and along the promenades.

At five o'clock, at the spring, they were both glad to take the weight off their aching feet. They smiled understandingly at one another. Maybe they had overdone it a bit. What were they trying to prove? That they were both young still?

In the crowd, they recognized two faces, those of "the happy pair," but there was something different about the way the man was looking at Maigret. What was more, instead of walking past, he was coming straight up to the Chief Superintendent, with his hand held out.

What could Maigret do, but take it?

"Don't you remember me?"

"I know I've seen you before, but I can't for the life of me recall . . ."

"Does the name Bébert mean anything to you?"

Nicknames like Bébert, P'tit Louis, and Grand Jules were common enough in his experience.

"The métro."

Smiling more broadly than ever, he turned to his wife, as if seeking confirmation.

"The first time you arrested me, it was during a procession in Boulevard des Capucines. . . . And, would you believe it, I can't even remember which Head of State it was in honor of, only the horse guards on either side of his carriage. . . . The second time was outside the entrance to the métro at the Bastille. You'd been following me for some time. . . . All this didn't happen yesterday. . . . I was a young man then. So, if I may say so, were you. . . ."

All Maigret could remember about the métro affair was that he had lost his hat while chasing the culprit across the Place de la Bastille, and good Lord, now he came to think of it, it had been a straw boater of the kind fashionable at the time—so this wasn't the first time he had worn a straw hat.

"How long were you sent down for?"

"Two years. . . . It taught me a lesson. . . . Made me pull myself together. To begin with, I worked for a junk dealer, mending vast quantities of old glass—I always was good with my hands."

He gave a knowing wink, intended, no doubt, to convey that this had been very useful to him in the days when he was a pickpocket.

"Then I met Madame."

He laid great emphasis on the "Madame," and quite glowed with pride as he spoke.

"No police record. She's always been straight. She was fresh from Brittany, working in a dairy. . . . It was never anything but serious with her, so we were married. . . . She even insisted on our going back home to her village for a real white wedding in church."

He exuded *joie de vivre* at every pore.

"I was almost sure it was you. . . . Every time I saw you . . . but I couldn't be quite certain . . . until this morning, when I opened my paper, and there was your photograph. . . ."

He pointed to the glasses in their little straw cases.

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"I'm in excellent health."

"Me too, or so all the doctors say, but here I am all the same, on

account of pains in the knee joints. . . . Hydrotherapy, massage under water, ultra-violet rays, the lot. . . . And you?"

"A few glasses of water."

"Oh, well, there can't be much wrong then. . . . But I mustn't keep you and your good lady. . . . You played very fair with me in the old days. . . . Lovely weather, isn't it? . . . Good day to you, sir. . . . Say good-by, Bobonne. . . ."

As he watched them disappear into the distance, Maigret was still smiling at the resolute little ex-pickpocket's success story. Then his wife saw the smile fade, and a worried frown take its place. At length, with a sigh of relief, he said:

"I think I now know why . . ."

"Why the woman was murdered?"

"No, why she was murdered on that particular day. . . . Why she wasn't murdered last month or last year. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since we got here we've been meeting the same people two or three times a day, and have come to know them quite well by sight. . . . Take that nut case. . . . He's never spoken to me until today, because he couldn't be sure about me until he saw my picture in the paper. . . ."

"But then, this is the first time we've come for the cure, and it will probably be the last. But if we were to come back next year, we'd very likely see quite a few familiar faces about the place."

"What I'm trying to say is this: there is someone else in Vichy who, like ourselves, is here for the first time . . . going through the same routine: medical examination, tests, prescribed course of treatment, visits to the springs, measured doses of the waters to be taken at fixed hours. . . ."

"He must have seen H el ene Lange somewhere, and thought he recognized her."

"Then he saw her again, and again. . . . Maybe he was not far from where she was sitting the other night, when she was listening to the music."

It all sounded so simple: Madame Maigret was surprised he should be making such a song and dance about it.

The Chief Superintendent, sensing this, hastened to add, not without a touch of self-mockery:

"According to the brochures, some two hundred thousand people come to Vichy every year for the cure. The season lasts six months, so presumably they pour in at the rate of more than thirty thousand a month. Assuming a third of them are newcomers like ourselves, that leaves us with about two thousand suspects. . . . No! Wait a bit . . . we can exclude the women and children. . . . What's the proportion of women and children, would you say?"

"There are more women than men. As to children . . ."

"No, wait! What about the people in wheel chairs, and those on crutches or walking with a stick? None of them, not to mention the very old, would be capable of strangling a healthy woman still in her prime. . . ."

Was he teasing her, or did he really mean it, she wondered.

"Let's say we're left with a thousand men capable of committing this murder. But, according to the evidence of Madame Vireveau and the proprietor of the bar, the murderer was unusually tall and thick-set, so we can ignore the skinny and undersized . . . which leaves us with about five hundred."

It was a relief to hear him laugh.

"What's the joke?"

"The policeman's lot. Our job. I shall shortly inform the good Lecoeur that I have narrowed the field down to five hundred suspects, unless we are able to eliminate a few more, those who were at the theater that night, for instance, or who can prove that they spent the whole evening at the bridge tables, or what have you. . . . And to think that, more often than not, that's how criminals are caught! In one case, Scotland Yard questioned every single inhabitant of a town with a population of two hundred thousand. . . . It took months. . . ."

"Did they find their man?"

Wryly, Maigret had to admit:

"Quite by chance, in some other town. The fellow was drunk, and opened his mouth too wide."

It was probably too late to see Lecoeur today. There were still two

glasses of water to be drunk, with a half-hour interval between. He tried to concentrate on the evening paper, which was full of gossip about visiting celebrities. It was an odd thing, but even those well known for the dissolute lives they led liked to be photographed surrounded by their children or grandchildren, asserting that they wanted nothing better than to spend all their time with them.

By the time they reached the corner of Rue d'Auvergne, there was a fresh breeze blowing. A truck was parked outside Mademoiselle Lange's house.

As they drew near, they could hear the sound of hammering.

"Shall I go back to the hotel?" murmured Madame Maigret.

"Yes. This won't take long."

The living-room door was open, and men in buff overalls were hanging black draperies on the walls.

Lecoeur came forward to meet him.

"I thought you might be coming. . . . We'll go in here. . . ."

He led the way into the bedroom, where it was quieter.

"Is she to be buried in Vichy?" Maigret asked. "Is that what her sister has decided?"

"Yes, she was here just before lunch."

"With the gigolo?"

"No, she came alone in a taxi."

"When is the funeral?"

"The day after tomorrow, to give time for the neighbors to pay their last respects."

"Will there be prayers?"

"Apparently not."

"Are the Langes not Catholics?"

"The old people were. The children were baptized, and took their First Communion. After that . . ."

"I was wondering if she was divorced."

"To find the answer to that we should need to know whether she was ever married."

Lecoeur, twiddling the ends of his red mustache, looked inquiringly at Maigret.

"You yourself had never set eyes on either of them before, I take it?"

"Never."

"But you did spend some time in La Rochelle?"

"I've been there twice. . . . Each time, for about ten days. Why do you ask?"

"Because I noticed a change in Francine Lange this morning. She was a good deal less lively . . . less forthright. I had the feeling that she had something on her mind . . . that there was something she wanted to tell me, but she was of two minds about it. . . .

"At one point she said:

"'Wasn't that Chief Superintendent Maigret who was here yesterday?'"

"I asked her if she had ever seen you before, and she said no, but she had recognized your picture in the morning paper."

"She's not the only one. I suppose there must be about fifty others among the thousands I meet in the street every day. . . . Only today, an old customer of mine bore down on me with his hand outstretched. I was lucky to escape a hearty slap on the back."

"I think there's more to it than that," said Lecoœur, still following his own train of thought.

"You mean you think I may have had dealings with her when she was living in Paris?"

"Considering her mode of life, it's not all that farfetched. . . . No! It's something less obvious, more subtle. . . . As far as she's concerned, I'm just a country cop, doing his best, asking the standard questions, noting the answers, and moving on to the next. . . . Do you see what I'm getting at? It would explain why, when she came here the first time, she was very much at her ease, as she was yesterday afternoon. . . . I caught her looking at you once or twice sitting there in the corner, but I could see she hadn't recognized you. . . .

"Then she booked in at the Hôtel de la Gare. There, as in most other hotels here, the local newspaper is sent up on the breakfast trays. . . . And when she saw your photograph, no doubt, she began to wonder what you were doing sitting in on our interview."

"And what are your conclusions?"

"Aren't you forgetting your reputation, your public image?"

He flushed suddenly, fearful that he might have given offense.

"Besides, it's not only the public. . . . We in the force are the first to . . ."

"Skip it. . . ."

"No, it's important. . . . It would never have crossed her mind that your presence—sitting in that armchair—might be fortuitous. . . . And even if it was, the very fact that you were interested in the case . . ."

"Did she seem at all frightened?"

"I wouldn't go as far as that. Her manner was different, more guarded. I only asked a few harmless questions, but even so, she weighed every word before answering. . . ."

"Has she traced the notary?"

"I wondered about that too. I did ask her. Apparently, the boy friend got a list of all the notaries in town, and rang every single one. . . . Hélène Lange, it seems, had never consulted any of them, though there was one who remembered that, ten years ago, when he was still an articled clerk, his firm had drawn up the deed of conveyance for her house."

"Do you know his name?"

"Maître Rambaud."

"What about giving him a ring?"

"At this hour?"

"Surely most lawyers outside Paris practice from their homes. . . ."

"What do you want me to ask him?"

"Whether she paid by check or bank draft."

"I'll have to stop those fellows hammering first."

In the meantime, Maigret prowled back and forth from the bathroom to the kitchen, though not with anything particular in mind.

"Well?"

"You guessed, didn't you?"

"What?"

"That she paid in cash. It's the only time Rambaud has ever known

it to happen, which is why he still remembers it. There were enough notes to fill a small suitcase.”

“Have you taken statements from the ticket clerks at the railway station?”

“Good Lord! I never thought of that!”

“It would be interesting to find out whether she always went to the same place on her monthly trips, or to a different place each time. . . .”

“I’ll let you know tomorrow. . . . It’s time you were off to your dinner. . . . Enjoy yourself! . . .”

There was a band concert in the park that night, and the Maigrets permitted themselves the luxury of sitting down to listen to it. They had walked far enough for one day.



For some mysterious reason, he was ten minutes ahead of schedule. Maybe there was less news than usual in this morning's *Journal de Clermont-Ferrand*? Madame Maigret, who always waited until he had finished before going into the bathroom, was still in there. He called to her through the half-open door:

"I'm going out. . . . Wait for me downstairs."

There was a green wooden seat on the sidewalk outside the hotel, for the convenience of residents. The sky was as cloudless as ever. During the whole of their stay in Vichy, it had not rained once.

Needless to say, the proprietor was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

"Well, what news of the murder?"

"It's no concern of mine," he answered with a smile.

"Do you think that these Clermont-Ferrand people are really up to the job? It's very bad, in a place like this, to have a strangler on the loose. Quite a number of old ladies have left already, I hear. . . ."

With a noncommittal smile, he set off for Rue du Bourbonnais. He saw, from the far end of the street, that the front door of *Les Iris* was draped in black, with a large letter "L" embroidered in silver on

the pelmet. There was no longer a policeman on guard outside. Had there been one last night? He had not noticed. After all, it was none of his business. He was here to take the waters, and his only interest in the case was as a bystander, an amateur.

He was about to ring the bell when he noticed that the white door was ajar. He pushed it open and went in. A very young girl, barely sixteen, he judged, was mopping the floor of the entrance with a damp cloth. Her dress was so short that, when she bent forward, he could see her pink bloomers. She had plump, shapeless legs, as girls so often do at the awkward age. They reminded him of the crudely painted legs of a cheap doll.

She turned to look at him, a pair of expressionless eyes staring at him out of a round face. She did not ask his name, nor what he was doing there.

"In there," was all she said, pointing to the living room.

The room, all draped in black, was dark, with the coffin resting on what must have been the dining-room table. There were unlit candles, holy water in a glass bowl, and a sprig of rosemary.

The kitchen and dining-room doors were open. The living-room furniture and ornaments had been stacked in the dining room. The young policeman, Dicelle, was sitting in the kitchen reading a comic, with a cup of coffee on the table in front of him.

"Will you join me in a cup of coffee? I've made a full pot."

On Hélène Lange's gas cooker, which would scarcely have met with her approval!

"Hasn't Superintendent Lecoœur arrived yet?"

"He was called back urgently to Clermont-Ferrand late last night. . . . A holdup at the Savings Bank. . . . One man killed . . . a passer-by, who noticed the door ajar and went in to investigate, just as the thieves were coming out. . . . One of them shot him at point-blank range. . . ."

"Nothing new here?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you questioned the station staff?"

"Trigaud—one of my colleagues—is looking into it. He's not back yet."

"I presume the little servant-girl out there has been questioned? What has she to say?"

"That half-wit! It's a wonder she can talk at all! She doesn't know a thing. She was only taken on for the season, to see to the lodgers' rooms. She didn't do the ground floor; Mademoiselle Lange saw to her own housework."

"Did she ever see any visitors?"

"Only the man who reads the gas meter, and the delivery boys. She came to work at nine and left at twelve. . . . The Maleskis upstairs are a bit worried. . . . They've paid in advance to the end of the month, and they want to know whether they'll be able to stay on. . . . It isn't easy to find rooms in the middle of the season, and they don't want to move to a hotel."

"What does the Superintendent say?"

"I think, as far as he's concerned, they can stay. . . . They're up there now, at any rate. . . . The other one, the fat one, has gone to the masseur for her daily pummeling."

"Have you seen Francine Lange?"

"I'm expecting her any time. . . . No one seems to know what's happening. . . . She insisted on the lying-in-state, but it wouldn't surprise me if no one turned up. . . . My instructions are to stay here and keep a discreet eye on the callers, if any."

"I wish you joy of it," mumbled Maigret, going out of the kitchen.

The books, like everything else from the living room, had been moved into the dining room. Mechanically, he picked one up off the top of a pile stacked on a small occasional table. It was *Lucien Leuwen*. The yellowing pages had the distinctive smell of well-thumbed books from lending libraries, public or private.

The name and address of the library was stamped in violet ink on the flyleaf.

He put the book back on top of the pile and slipped quietly out into the street. A ground-floor window opened, and a woman in a dressing gown and hair-rollers looked out.

"Excuse me, Superintendent, can you tell me if one can call and pay one's respects?"

It seemed to him rather an odd way of putting it, and for a moment he was nonplused.

"I imagine so. The door is open, and they've turned the living room into a little chapel."

"Can one see her?"

"As far as I know, the coffin is closed."

She sighed:

"I prefer it that way. . . . It's less distressing."

He found Madame Maigret waiting for him on the green seat. She seemed surprised to see him back so soon.

They set off on their usual morning walk. They were only a couple of minutes behind schedule, a schedule that they had never planned, but now adhered to as though their lives depended on it.

"Were there many people?"

"Not a soul. They're waiting. . . ."

This time they went straight to the children's playground, where they strolled for a time in the shade of the trees, some of which—like those along the banks of the Allier—were very rare specimens, from America, India, and Japan. These were distinguished by little metal plates, bearing their botanical names in Latin and French. Many were tokens of gratitude from long-forgotten Heads of State, who had benefited from the cure at Vichy, obscure maharajahs and other Eastern princelings.

They did not stop more than a minute or two at the bowling greens. Madame Maigret never asked her husband where they were making for. He always walked purposefully, as though he knew exactly where he was going, but more often than not he would turn down this street rather than that, just for a change of scene, because he enjoyed savoring new sights and sounds.

They still had a little time in hand before the first glass of water, when he turned into Rue Georges-Clemenceau. Was there something he wanted from the shops, she wondered? But he turned left into one of the little side alleys, the one leading to the theater, and stopped at a bookshop, where there were some second-hand books in trays on the sidewalk, and more books inside on revolving shelves.

"Come on," he said to his wife, who was looking at him inquiringly.

The proprietor, in a long gray overall, was tidying the shelves. He obviously recognized Maigret, but waited for him to speak.

"Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"With pleasure, Monsieur Maigret. It's about Mademoiselle Lange, I daresay."

"She was one of your subscribers, wasn't she?"

"She came in at least once a week, twice more often than not, to change her books. Her subscription allowed her to have two books out at a time."

"How long have you known her?"

"I took over here six years ago. I'm not a local man. I came here from Paris, Montparnasse. She was already a subscriber in my predecessor's time."

"Did she ever stop for a chat?"

"Well, you know, she wasn't very outgoing. . . ."

"Didn't she ever ask your advice, when she was choosing new books?"

"She had very decided views of her own. Come with me. . . ."

He led the way to a room at the back of the shop, lined from floor to ceiling with books in black cloth bindings.

"She would often spend half an hour to an hour browsing in here, reading a paragraph here and a page there."

"Her last book was Stendhal's *Lucien Leuwen*."

"Stendhal was her latest discovery. Before that, she had read all Chateaubriand, Alfred de Vigny, Jules Sandeau, Benjamin Constant, Musset, and George Sand. It was always the romantics. On one occasion she took one of Balzac's novels—I can't remember which—but she brought it back the next day. Apparently it didn't appeal to her. I asked her why. She said: 'It's too coarse . . .' or words to that effect. . . . Balzac coarse, I ask you!"

"No contemporary writers?"

"She never gave them a chance. On the other hand, she read the letters of George Sand and Musset over and over again."

"I'm much obliged to you. . . ."

He was almost at the door when the bookseller called him back.

"Just one more thing that might interest you. I discovered, to my astonishment, that someone had been marking passages in pencil, underlining words and phrases and, here and there, putting a cross in the margin. I wondered who on earth it could be. It turned out in the end to be Mademoiselle Lange."

"Did you mention it to her?"

"I had to. . . . My assistant was having to spend all his time rubbing out the marks. . . ."

"How did she react?"

"She looked very prim and said 'I'm sorry. . . . When I'm reading I forget that the books don't belong to me.'"

Everything looked just the same, the people taking the waters, the pale trunks of the plane trees, the patches of sun and shade, the thousands of yellow chairs.

She had not been able to stomach Balzac. . . . His realism had been too much for her, no doubt. She had restricted herself to the first half of the nineteenth century, grandly dismissing Flaubert, Hugo, Zola, Maupassant. . . . At the same time Maigret had noticed, that very first day, a pile of glossy magazines in a corner of the living room. . . .

It was as though he could not help himself, he must forever be adding fresh touches to the picture of her that he was building up. Her reading was confined to the romantic, the sentimental, and yet he had more than once seen her eyes narrow in a hard, shrewd look.

"Did you see Lecoœur?"

"No. He's been called back to Clermont-Ferrand because of a bank holdup."

"Do you think he'll find the murderer?"

Maigret started. He was the one who needed bringing down to earth! The truth was that he had not been thinking about the case in terms of murder. He had almost forgotten that the woman who owned the house with the green shutters had been strangled, and that the first priority was to find the killer.

True, he was looking for someone, more intensely, indeed, than he himself would have wished, almost to the point where it was becoming an obsession.

The really intriguing figure, as far as he was concerned, was the man who, at a given moment, had broken into the life of this solitary woman.

There was no trace of him in Rue du Bourbonnais, no photograph, not a single letter, not even a note.

Nothing! Nothing from anyone else either, apart from bills and receipts.

One had to go back twelve years, to Paris, to Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, to find anyone who remembered a shadowy figure who called once or twice a week, and spent an hour in the apartment of Mademoiselle Lange, then still a comparatively young woman.

Even Francine, her own sister, who was living in the same city at the time, claimed to know nothing about him.

She read voraciously, watched television, did her shopping and her housework, walked under the trees in the park like the summer visitors, sat and listened to the band, staring straight in front of her, and never addressing a word to anyone.

This was what puzzled him. Often, in the course of his career, he had met individuals, both men and women, who clung fiercely to their independence. He had also met eccentrics who, having renounced the world, had taken refuge in the most unlikely, sometimes the most sordid, surroundings.

But even men and women such as these, in his experience, kept some link with the outside world. The old ones, for instance, often had a favorite bench in a square, where they would meet some other old crone to talk to, or they were members of a church, going to confession, exchanging greetings with the priest. Some had a favorite bistro, where they were known, and welcomed as old friends.

But here was a case, Maigret realized—the first he had ever known—of stark, unrelieved isolation.

There was not even an element of aggression. Mademoiselle Lange had been civil enough to the neighbors and shopkeepers. She had not been high-handed with them nor, in spite of her somewhat formal style of dress and her preference for certain colors, had she put on superior airs.

It was rather that she did not concern herself with other people.

She had no need of them. She took in lodgers because the spare bedrooms were there, and they provided a small income. Between the apartment on the ground floor and the bedrooms upstairs, she had erected an invisible barrier, and to clean the guest rooms she had engaged a servant girl, who was little better than a moron.

"Can you spare a moment, sir?"

A shadow fell across Maigret. He looked up to see a tall man holding a chair by its back. The Chief Superintendent recognized him as one of the men he had seen with Dicelle in Rue du Bourbonnais, Trigaud presumably.

"How did you find me?" Maigret asked.

"Dicelle said you would be here."

"And how did Dicelle . . . ?"

"There isn't a man in the local force, sir, who doesn't know you by sight, so that wherever you go . . ."

"Any fresh news?"

"I was at the station for an hour last night, interviewing the night staff, and this morning I went back to question the day staff. . . . Then I called Superintendent Lecoeur, who is still at Clermont-Ferrand. . . ."

"Won't he be back today?"

"He's not sure yet. But whatever happens, he'll be coming early tomorrow for the funeral. I presume you'll be there, too. . . ."

"Have you seen Francine?"

"She called in at the undertaker's. The hearse will be leaving the house at nine o'clock. . . . Some flowers were delivered at the house. . . . They must have come from her, I imagine. . . ."

"How many wreaths?"

"Just the one."

"Check whether it did come from her. . . . I beg your pardon. . . . I was forgetting . . . it's really none of my business."

"I don't think the Super would agree with you there. He told me to be sure and let you know what I'd found out. He made a special point of it. I expect that there are a good many in the force, including your humble servant, who would go along with that. . . ."

"On these monthly trips of hers, did she go far?"

Trigaud pulled a bundle of papers out of his pocket and, after some searching, found what he was looking for.

"They couldn't remember all the details, of course, but one or two places stuck in their minds, because they are by no means easy to get to from here: Strasbourg, for instance, and the following month, Brest. Some of her trips involved changing trains two or three times: Carcassonne . . . Dieppe . . . Lyons . . . not quite so far . . . Lyons was, in fact, exceptional. . . . Mostly, she went much farther afield: Nancy, Montélimar."

"Never to a small town or a village?"

"No, she always seemed to choose a fairly large town, though, of course, she may have gone on somewhere by bus."

"Did she never take a ticket to Paris?"

"Never."

"How long has this been going on?"

"The last man I spoke to has been working at the same window for nine years.

"I ought to know my regular customers by now," he said.

"She was well known to the station staff. They looked forward to her coming, and even laid bets as to where she would choose to go next."

"Did she always go on the same day of the month?"

"No, that's the odd thing. Sometimes there would be an interval of six weeks, usually in the summer. I daresay it was on account of the lodgers. It wasn't always the end of the month, or any fixed date."

"Did Lecoœur tell you what he intends to do next?"

"He's having copies made of her photographs. . . . For a start, he'll send a couple of men to the nearest towns, and copies of the photographs to the various local police stations. . . ."

"You don't happen to know why Lecoœur wanted me put in the picture?"

"He didn't say. . . . No doubt he thought you had formed your own view. . . . That's what I think, too. . . ."

Everyone always credited him with knowing more than he let on. It was no good protesting. They would only think it was the old fox up to his usual tricks.

"Has anyone turned up at the house?"

"According to Dicelle, things started livening up around ten o'clock. . . . A woman in an apron put her head around the door, and then, rather hesitantly, went in to see the coffin. She took a rosary out of her pocket and muttered a prayer. Then she crossed herself with holy water and left. . . ."

"She must have told the neighbors, because they all came after that, in ones and twos. . . ."

"Any men?"

"A few . . . the butcher, and a carpenter who lives at the end of the street . . . all local people. . . ."

Why assume that the murderer wasn't a local man? They were searching up and down the country, in all the widely separated towns visited by the lady in lilac, in Nice, in Paris, trying to unravel the mystery of her life. But no one had given a thought to the thousands of people who lived in the France district of Vichy.

Maigret himself had not.

"Can you suggest anything further I should do?"

Trigaud wasn't saying this on his own. That cunning devil Lecoer must have put him up to it. After all, here was Maigret on the spot. Why not make use of him?

"I was wondering whether the ticket clerks could remember any precise dates. We wouldn't need very many. Two or three would do."

"I have one already. . . . June 11th. . . . The fellow remembered it because she took a ticket for Rheims, and his wife comes from there, and, as it happened, June 11th was her birthday."

"If I were you, I'd find out from her bank manager whether she deposited any money on the 13th or 14th. . . ."

"I think I see what you're driving at . . . blackmail."

"Or an allowance . . ."

"Why should anyone pay out an allowance at irregular intervals?"

"Just what I was wondering myself."

Trigaud stole a sideways glance at Maigret, convinced that he was either keeping something from him or making fun of him.

"I'd much rather they'd put me on the holdup," he grumbled. "At

least you know where you stand with pros. . . . I'm sorry to have bothered you. . . . My best respects, madame."

He got up awkwardly, not quite knowing how to make his escape, blinking, with the sun full in his eyes.

"It's too late now for the bank. I'll call in there after lunch. Then, if necessary, I'll go back to the railway station."

Maigret had been through it all in his time. Pounding the beat for hours at a stretch, on pavement scorching hot or slippery with rain, questioning wary witnesses, whose words had to be coaxed out of them, one by one.

"We'd better go and have our glass of water."

While Trigaud, no doubt, would be regaling himself with a long, cool glass of beer.

"You'd better be at the spring about eleven. . . . I hope I'll be able to get there."

He sounded a little out of temper. Madame Maigret had been afraid that he would get bored in Vichy, with nothing to do, and no one but herself for company, from morning to night.

The good-humored contentment that he had shown in the first few days had not wholly reassured her. She could not help wondering how long it would last.

However, in the past two or three days, he had been thoroughly put out every time they had had to miss one of their regular walks.

Today there was the funeral. He had promised Lecoeur to be there. The sun was still shining, and, as usual in the morning, the streets were damp, and a fresh breeze was blowing.

Rue du Bourbonnais was unusually crowded. Apart from the neighbors who could be seen leaning out of their windows, like spectators at a public procession, there were people all along the sidewalk, several deep outside the house itself.

The hearse was already there. Behind it was a black car, supplied, no doubt, by the undertaker, and behind that another, which Maigret had not seen before.

Lecoeur came out to meet him.

"I've had to drop the bank robbery for the time being," he explained. "There's a holdup practically every day of the week. The public are used to them, and they don't get het up about them any more. But a woman strangled in her own house, in a law-abiding town like Vichy, and for no apparent reason . . ."

Maigret recognized the scruffy mop of red hair belonging to the *Tribune* photographer. There were two or three other photographers there as well. One of them took a shot of the two police officers crossing the road.

The fact was that there was nothing to see, and, from the expressions on their faces, some of the bystanders were wondering whether it had really been worth their while to come.

"Have you got men on watch in the street?"

"Three. . . . I can't see Dicelle, but he's somewhere around. . . . He thought it would be a good idea to have the butcher's boy with him. . . . He knows everyone hereabouts, and will be able to point out any strangers."

There was no feeling of sadness, no sense of horror. Everyone, Maigret included, was waiting.

"Will you be going to the cemetery?" he asked Lecoer.

"I'd be glad if you'd come with me, Chief. I've brought my own car. I felt a police car wouldn't be quite the thing. . . ."

"What about Francine?"

"She got here a few minutes ago, with the boy friend. . . . They're in the house."

"I don't see their car."

"I daresay the undertakers, who know what's what, dropped a hint that an open red sports job would look just as much out of place in a funeral procession as a police car. . . . Those two will go in the black car."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"She gave me a nod when she arrived. I thought she looked nervous . . . anxious. . . . She stood for a moment, before coming into the house, scanning the crowd as though she was looking for someone. . . ."



"I still can't see young Dicelle."

"That's because he's wangled a seat in someone's window, for himself and the butcher's boy."

Several people came out of the house, two more went in and reappeared almost at once. Then the driver of the hearse took his seat at the wheel.

As though in response to a signal, four men, not without difficulty, maneuvered the coffin through the door and slid it into the hearse. One of them went back into the house and returned carrying a wreath and a small spray of flowers.

"The spray is from the lodgers."

Francine Lange stood at the door, in a black dress that did not suit her. She must have bought it for the occasion in Rue Georges-Clemenceau. Her companion was behind her, a shadowy figure in the darkness of the entrance hall.

The hearse moved forward a few feet. Francine and her lover got into the black car.

"Let's go, Chief."

All along the street there were people, standing very still. Only the photographers were darting hither and thither.

"Is that all?" Maigret asked, looking over his shoulder.

"She had no other relatives . . . no friends. . . ."

"What about the lodgers?"

"Maleski is seeing his doctor at ten, and the fat woman, Madame Vireveau, has her massage. . . ."

They drove through streets that Maigret recognized from his exploration of the town. He filled his pipe, and watched the houses go by. Soon, to his surprise, they were at the railway station.

The cemetery was nearby, just on the other side of the track. It was deserted. The hearse stopped at the end of the drive.

So here they were, just the four of them, except for the undertaker's men, standing on the gravel path. Lecoœur and Maigret went up to the other two. The gigolo was wearing sunglasses.

"Will you be staying long?" Maigret asked the young woman.

Maigret had spoken idly, just for something to say, but it did not

escape him that she was looking penetratingly at him, as though searching for some hidden meaning in his words.

"Probably another two or three days, just to get things sorted out."

"What about the lodgers?"

"They can stay till the end of the month. There's no reason why not. I'll just have to lock up the ground-floor apartment."

"Will you be selling the house?"

Before she could answer, one of the men in black came up to her. They wheeled the coffin, on a handcart, down a narrow side turning to the edge of an open grave.

A photographer—not the tall, redheaded man, but another whom Maigret had not seen before—appeared, apparently from nowhere, and took a few shots while the coffin was being lowered into the grave, then another as Francine, at a sign from the master of ceremonies, threw a handful of earth onto the coffin.

The grave was at the far end of the cemetery, a few yards from the low surrounding wall which divided it from a patch of waste ground, where derelict cars lay rotting. Beyond, in the background, were one or two white villas.

The hearse drove away, then the photographer. Lecoecr looked inquiringly at Maigret, who, however, did not respond, and seemed to be lost in thought. What precisely was he thinking of? Of La Rochelle, a town he had always liked, of Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, as it was in the very early days when he was personal assistant to the Superintendent of Police in the IXth *Arrondissement*, of the bowling greens, and the men he had seen there. . . .

Francine, clutching a crumpled handkerchief, was coming toward them. She had not used the handkerchief to dry her tears. She had not shed a tear. She had been no more moved than the undertaker's men or the gravedigger. Indeed, there had been nothing in the least moving about the ceremony. It could not have been more matter-of-fact.

The crumpled handkerchief was just for the sake of appearances.

"I don't know the form. . . . It's usual, isn't it, to provide refreshments of some sort after a funeral? But I'm sure you wouldn't want to have lunch with us. . . ."

"There's so much to be done," murmured Lecoeur.

"At least allow me to buy you a drink."

Maigret was astonished at the change in her. Even here, in this desert of a cemetery, from which even the photographer had fled, she was still looking about her anxiously, as though she felt some danger threatening her.

"I'm sure there will be other opportunities," replied Lecoeur diplomatically.

"Haven't you got a lead yet?"

It was not at Lecoeur that she looked as she spoke, but at Chief Superintendent Maigret, as though he were the one she was afraid of.

"We're still making inquiries."

Maigret filled his pipe, and pressed down the tobacco with his forefinger. He was puzzled. This was a woman who had certainly had a few knocks in her time, and was quite capable of taking things in her stride. It was not her sister's death that had changed her. She had been cheerful and ebullient enough when she had first heard of it.

"In that case, gentlemen . . . I don't know how to put it. . . . Oh, well, I daresay I'll be seeing you. . . . Thanks for coming."

If she had waited a minute or two longer, Maigret might have asked her point-blank whether she had received any threats. But she went, teetering on her high heels, impatient to get back to her hotel room, where she could shut the door and change out of the black dress, bought especially for the occasion.

Maigret turned to his colleague from Clermont-Ferrand.

"What do you make of her?" he asked.

"So you noticed it, too? I'd very much like a private chat with her in my office. But I'd have to find a plausible excuse. It wouldn't be decent today, somehow. . . . She looked scared, to me."

"That was what I thought."

"Do you think she's been threatened? What would you do, if you were I?"

"What do you mean?"

"We don't know why her sister was strangled. . . . It might, after all, turn out to be a family affair. . . . We know precious little about these people. . . . Maybe it was some business in which both women

were concerned. . . . Didn't I hear her tell you she'd be staying on in Vichy for another two or three days? I'm short-handed, of course, but the holdup can wait. . . . The pros always get caught in the end. . . ."

They had returned to their car and were driving toward the cemetery gates.

"I shall have her followed, discreetly, though in a hotel that's almost impossible. . . . Where would you like me to drop you?"

"Anywhere near the park."

"Ah, yes, I'd almost forgotten you were here for the cure. . . . I don't know why I've never got around to taking it myself. . . ."

At first he thought his wife had not yet arrived. She wasn't sitting in her usual place. He was so used to seeing her there that it gave him quite a start when he found her sitting in the shade, under a different tree.

For a moment he watched her, unseen. Sitting there placidly, with her hands folded in the lap of her light dress, she was looking at the people passing by, with a contented little smile, as though she were quite prepared to wait for him forever.

"Oh, there you are!" she exclaimed, then, without pausing, "Our chairs were taken. . . . I heard them talking. . . . They're Dutch, I think. . . . I hope they're not staying . . . otherwise we've probably lost our seats for good. . . . I didn't think it would be over so soon. . . ."

"It's not far to the cemetery."

"Were there many people?"

"In the street outside the house. . . . There were only the four of us at the funeral."

"So the boy friend went too, did he? Come on, it's time for our glass of water. . . ."

They had to wait in a queue for a time. Afterward, Maigret bought the Paris newspapers, but there was scarcely a mention of the Vichy strangler. One paper only, the evening paper of the previous day, had a photograph of Maigret under a headline in those very words: "The Vichy Strangler."

He was anxious to hear what, if anything, had been discovered as a result of the inquiries made in several of the many towns visited at various times by the lady in lilac.

Nevertheless, he allowed his mind to wander. With half an eye on the news, he could see the people walking past, over the top of his paper. After a time, they had to push their chairs back into the receding shade.

That was why they had chosen the place now occupied by the Dutch couple. The sun never reached it at the times they were in the park.

“Don’t you want a paper?”

“No. . . . Those two comics have just gone by, and he swept you a tremendous bow.”

They were already lost in the crowd.

“Did the sister cry?”

“No.”

He was still puzzled by her. If he had been in charge of the case, he too would have wanted to have her in his office for a private chat.

Several times, in the course of the morning, his thoughts returned to her. They walked back to the Hôtel de la Bérézina and, after going upstairs to wash, sat down at their table in the dining room. As usual, at every table except theirs, there were opened wine bottles beside the little trumpet-shaped vases, each holding one or two fresh flowers.

“There’s cutlet Milanaise and calves’ liver *à la bourgeoise*. . . .”

“I’ll have the cutlet,” he said with a sigh. “It will be grilled as usual, of course. I’ll be gone by the end of the season, but Rian will still be here next year and the year after. What he says goes. . . .”

“Don’t you feel the better for it?”

“Only because I’m away from Paris. Besides, I never felt really ill. A bit weighed down . . . giddiness from time to time. . . . These things happen to most people at some time or other, I imagine.”

“Still, you do have faith in Pardon. . . .”

“I haven’t much choice.”

They had had noodles as a first course and were just starting on their cutlets when Maigret was called to the telephone.

The telephone booth was in one of the smaller reception rooms, with a window overlooking the street.

"Hello! I'm not disturbing you, I hope? Had you started your lunch?"

Recognizing Lecoœur's voice, he replied crossly:

"For all they give me to eat!"

"I have news for you. . . . I sent one of my men to keep watch on the Hôtel de la Gare. . . . But first he thought he'd better find out the number of Francine Lange's room. The receptionist looked surprised, and told him she'd checked out. . . ."

"When?"

"Barely half an hour after they left us. It seems that, when they got back to the hotel, the man stopped at the desk before going up to their room, and asked them to get their bill ready. They must have packed in a great hurry, because ten minutes later they rang for a porter. They flung everything into the back of the red car, and off they went."

Maigret said nothing, and Lecoœur did not prompt him. After an appreciable pause, Lecoœur said:

"What do you make of it, Chief?"

"She's a frightened woman. . . ."

"Agreed, but she was this morning, too, anyone could see that. . . . But that didn't prevent her from saying she intended staying another two or three days in Vichy."

"That might have been just to prevent you from detaining her."

"How could I detain her, not having anything against her?"

"You know the law, but she may not."

"Anyway, we shall know tomorrow morning, if not tonight, whether she's gone back to La Rochelle."

"It's the most likely thing."

"I agree. I'm furious, all the same. I'd made up my mind that we were going to have a long chat. . . . Admittedly, I may find out more, as a result of this. . . . Could you be here at two?"

It would mean missing his afternoon rest. He said, rather grudgingly:

"I'm not doing anything in particular, as you very well know."

"This morning, while I was out, someone phoned the local Police Station asking to speak to me. . . . That's where I am now. . . . I decided, after all, to take them up on their offer of a room here. . . . The caller was a young woman, apparently by the name of Madeleine Dubois, and guess what she does for a living. . . ."

Maigret said nothing.

"She's a switchboard operator on the night shift at the Hôtel de la Gare. My colleague here told her that I would probably be here at the station—it's in Avenue Victoria—at two o'clock. . . . He suggested that she should leave a message, but she said she'd prefer to see me personally. . . . So I'm here, waiting for her. . . ."

"I'll be there."

He missed his rest but, by way of compensation, had the pleasure of seeing for the first time the exquisite, white turreted villa set in extensive grounds which did duty as a police station in Vichy. He was taken to the upper floor by a policeman and, at the end of a corridor, found Lecoœur ensconced in an office almost entirely devoid of furniture.

"It's just five to two," remarked Lecoœur. "I hope she hasn't changed her mind. Which reminds me, I'd better try and find another chair."

Maigret could hear him in the hall opening and shutting doors. Eventually he found what he wanted, and came back carrying it.

On the dot of two, the police officer on duty knocked at the door and announced:

"Madame Dubois."

She was a lively little woman, with dark hair and very expressive eyes. She stood there, looking from one to the other.

"Which of you is the officer I have come to see?"

Lecoœur introduced himself but not Maigret, who was sitting unobtrusively in a corner of the room.

"I don't know whether what I have to tell you is important. . . . It didn't seem so at the time. . . . The hotel is full, and I was kept very busy until one in the morning. . . . After that I dozed off,

as I usually do. . . . It's about one of the hotel guests, Madame Lange. . . ."

"I presume you mean Mademoiselle Francine Lange?"

"I thought she was married. I know her sister is dead, and that her funeral was this morning. . . . Last evening, at about half past eight, someone asked to speak to her. . . ."

"A man?"

"Yes, a man. He had an odd sort of voice. . . . Asthmatic, I think . . . I'm almost sure. . . . I had an uncle who suffered from asthma, and he sounded just like that. . . ."

"Did he give his name?"

"No."

"Did he ask for her room number?"

"No. I rang, and there was no reply . . . so I told him that the person he wanted to speak to was out. . . . He called again at about nine, but there was still no reply from Room 406. . . ."

"Did Mademoiselle Lange and her companion share a double room?"

"Yes. . . . The man phoned the third time at eleven, and this time Mademoiselle Lange answered. . . . I put him through. . . ."

She seemed embarrassed, and glanced quickly at Maigret, as though trying to gauge his reactions. Presumably she, like everyone else, had recognized him.

"Did you listen?" murmured Lecoeur, with an encouraging smile.

"I'm afraid I did. . . . I don't make a habit of it. . . . I know everyone imagines switchboard girls are always listening to people's conversations. If they only knew how boring they were, they'd think differently. . . . Perhaps it was because of the murder of her sister . . . or because the man had such a peculiar voice . . ."

"Who's speaking?" she said.

"Is that Mademoiselle Francine Lange?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Are you alone?"

"She hesitated. . . . I'm almost sure the man was in there with her.

“Yes,” she said, “but what business is it of yours?”

“I have something very private to tell you. . . . Listen carefully. . . . If I’m interrupted, I shall call back in half an hour. . . .”

“He had difficulty with his breathing, and every now and again he wheezed, just like my uncle.

“I’m listening . . . you still haven’t told me who you are. . . .”

“It’s of no importance. . . . What is of the utmost importance—what is essential—is that you should stay on in Vichy for a few days. . . . It’s in your own interest. . . . I’ll be in touch with you again. . . . I can’t say when exactly. . . . There may be a great deal in it for you . . . a large sum of money. . . . Do you understand?”

“Then suddenly he stopped speaking, and hung up. A few minutes later a call came through from Room 406.

“Mademoiselle Lange here. . . . I’ve just had a phone call. . . . Could you tell me whether it was a local or a long-distance call?”

“Local.”

“Thank you!”

“Well, that’s it! At first I thought it wasn’t any business of mine. But when I came off duty this morning, I just couldn’t get to sleep, so I phoned here and asked to speak to the officer in charge of the case.”

She was fidgeting nervously with her handbag, her glance shifting from one man to the other.

“Do you think it’s important?”

“You haven’t been back to the hotel?”

“I don’t go on duty until eight o’clock in the evening.”

“Mademoiselle Lange has left.”

“Wasn’t she at her sister’s funeral?”

“She left almost immediately after the funeral.”

“Oh!”

Then, after a pause for thought:

“You think the man was setting a trap for her, don’t you? Could it, by any chance, have been the strangler?”

The color drained from her face at the thought that she had actually heard the voice of the lady in lilac’s murderer.

Maigret was no longer regretting having missed his afternoon rest.



The two men stayed where they were after the telephone girl had left, Maigret puffing reflectively at his pipe, and Lecoœur smoking a cigarette that looked as if it were going to set fire to his mustache at any minute. The smoke rose, spread out, and hung above their heads. Down below in the yard, they could hear a squad of policemen drilling.

For a time, neither spoke. They were both old hands, and there was little anyone could teach them about their trade. They had had dealings with every sort of criminal, every sort of witness.

"There's no doubt that it was he calling her," Lecoœur said at last, with a sigh.

Maigret did not reply at once. His reaction was different. It wasn't so much a question of method—a term they both disliked—as of approach to a problem.

Thus, since the strangling of the lady in lilac, Maigret had given very little thought to the murderer. It was not deliberate, but simply because he was haunted by the recollection of this woman, sitting on her yellow chair near the bandstand, haunted by the memory of her long jaw line, and by her gentle smile, which belied the hard expression of her eyes.

Little details had been added to his picture of her as a result of his visits to her house in Rue du Bourbonnais. He had learned something, though not much, of her stay in Nice, her life in Paris, and a great deal about her taste in literature.

The strangler was still a very shadowy figure, a tall, heavily built man, whom Madame Vireveau claimed to have seen, walking very rapidly, at the corner of the street, and who had been glimpsed by the proprietor of a bar, who could not describe his features.

Almost without realizing it, he began thinking about him.

"I wonder how he found out that Francine Lange was staying at the Hôtel de la Gare."

The newspapers, which had announced the arrival in Vichy of the victim's sister, had given no address.

Maigret was feeling his way forward cautiously, one step at a time.

"Come to think of it, there was nothing to prevent him from ringing one hotel after another, and asking for Mademoiselle Lange."

He could picture him poring over a classified directory. The list of hotels in a place like this would be a long one. Had he gone through it in alphabetical order?

"You might try one of the hotels beginning with the letter 'A' or 'B'."

With a twinkle in his eye, Lecoœur picked up the receiver.

"Get me the Hôtel d'Angleterre, will you? No, not the manager or the desk—I want the switchboard operator. Hello! Is that the switchboard of the Hôtel d'Angleterre? I'm a police officer. . . . Can you tell me if anyone has been asking to speak to Mademoiselle Lange? . . . No, not the murdered woman. . . . Her sister, Francine Lange. . . . That's right. . . . Perhaps your colleague would know. . . ."

He turned to Maigret:

"There are two girls on the switchboard. . . . It's a huge place. . . . Five or six hundred rooms. . . . Hello, yes. . . . Hello! You say you took the call yourself? . . . Anything strike you as odd? . . . A hoarse voice, did you say? . . . As though the man . . . Yes, I see. . . . Thank you. . . ."

And to Maigret:

"Yesterday morning at about ten. A man with a hoarse voice, or

rather one who seemed to have trouble with his breathing. . . .”

Someone who was here for the cure, as Maigret had suspected from the very first, and who, quite by chance, had run into H el ene Lange. No doubt he had discovered where she lived by the simple expedient of following her home. . . .

The telephone rang. It was the inspector whom Leco eur had dispatched to Lyons. There was no record of the dead woman having stayed in any of the hotels in the town, but he had found a post office clerk who remembered her. She had been in the post office twice, on each occasion to collect a large manila envelope. The first time, the envelope had lain there a week. On the last occasion, it had just arrived when she called.

“Have you got the dates?”

Thoughtfully, still puffing lingeringly at his pipe, Maigret watched his colleague at work.

“Hello! . . . Is that the Cr dit Lyonnais? . . . Have you got out that list of deposits I asked for? . . . No. . . . I’ll send for it later today. . . . Can you tell me if she made deposits on January 14th or 15th, and February 23rd or 24th? . . . Yes, I’ll hang on.”

It didn’t take long.

“Eight thousand francs on January 15th, and five thousand on February 23rd of this year. . . .”

“Usually about five thousands francs, you say?”

“Almost always, with a few exceptions. . . . I have the figures here. . . . I see that, five years ago, the sum of twenty-five thousand francs was credited to her account. . . . That’s the only time such a large sum was ever paid in.”

“In notes, as usual?”

“Yes.”

“How does the account stand at the moment?”

“In credit to the tune of four hundred and fifty-two thousand, six hundred and fifty. . . .”

Leco eur repeated the figure to Maigret.

“She was a rich woman,” he murmured, “and still she let furnished rooms during the season. . . .”

The Chief Superintendent’s reply surprised him:

"He's a very rich man."

"You're right. . . . It does look as though she was getting all the money from a single source. A man who can lay out five thousand francs a month, sometimes more . . ."

Yet this man had been kept in ignorance of the fact that Hélène Lange was the owner of a little white villa with pale green shutters in the France district of Vichy. Each payment had been made to a different address.

The money had been paid every month, but not on any fixed date. Presumably, it was no accident that Mademoiselle Lange had generally allowed a few days to elapse before collecting it, no doubt as a precaution against being seen going into the post office by anyone who might be looking out for her.

A rich man, or at any rate comfortably well off. When he had finally tracked down the sister, he had not attempted to arrange a meeting, but had merely asked her to stay on in Vichy for a day or two, until she heard from him again. . . . Why?

"He must be a married man. . . . Here with his wife, and possibly his children too. . . . Obviously, he's not master of his own time. . . ."

Lecoeur, in his turn, was obviously enjoying seeing Maigret's mind at work. But was it really *his* mind at work? He was making every effort to get inside the mind of the murderer. . . .

"He couldn't find what he was looking for in Rue du Bourbonnais. . . . And he could get nothing out of Hélène Lange. . . . If he had, she would probably still be alive today . . . He tried to frighten her into telling him whatever it was he wanted to know. . . ."

"Whether his wife is with him or not, we know that he was able to get away that night."

Maigret was silent, pondering this objection.

"What was on at the theater on Monday night?"

Lecoeur took up the receiver to find out.

"*Tosca*. . . . It was sold out."

Moving toward a conclusion, Maigret was not exactly reasoning it out, but rather progressing by leaps of the imagination. Here was this man, a person of some social standing, staying, no doubt, at one

of the best hotels in Vichy, with his wife and, very probably, a party of friends.

The night before the performance, or possibly the night before that, he had seen H el ene Lange, and followed her, to find out where she lived.

On the night of the murder, *Tosca* was being performed in the theater of the Grand Casino. Is it not a well-known fact that women are generally more partial than men to Italian grand opera?

"Why don't you go without me? . . . I feel rather tired at the end of the day . . . the treatment . . . I'd be glad of the chance of an early night. . . ."

What was it he wanted to find out from H el ene Lange, which she had so stubbornly refused to tell him?

Had he reached the house before her, forcing the flimsy lock, and searching through drawers and cupboards, while she was still at the concert?

Or had he followed her home, strangled her, and searched the apartment afterward, throwing everything in confusion on the floor?

"What are you smiling at, Chief?"

"Something quite absurd that has just occurred to me. . . . Before he had that bit of luck with the H otel de la Gare, the murderer, if he really did telephone all the hotels in alphabetical order, must have made about thirty telephone calls. . . . What does that suggest to you?"

He refilled his pipe, thoughtfully.

"The entire police force is searching for him. . . . Almost certainly he shares a double room in the hotel with his wife. . . . But he's faced with the necessity of repeating the name of his victim aloud, over and over again.

"In a hotel, all phone calls go through the switchboard. . . . Besides, there's his wife. . . . It's reasonable, therefore, to suppose . . .

"Too chancy to make the calls from a caf e or bar, with the risk of being overheard. . . .

"If I were you, Lecoeur, I should detail as many men as I could spare to watch the public telephone booths."

"But, since he did get through to Francine Lange in the end . . ."

"He'd said he'd call her back. . . ."

"But she's left Vichy. . . ."

"He doesn't know that."

In Paris, Maigret, in common with most married men, saw his wife three times a day, on waking in the morning, at midday, and at night. And often, when he wasn't able to get home for lunch, only twice.

For the rest of the day, for all she knew, he might have been up to anything.

But in Vichy? They, like most other married couples there for the cure, were in each other's company almost twenty-four hours a day.

"He wouldn't have been able to risk a long absence, even to use a public telephone booth," he said with a sigh.

More than likely he had made some excuse—he was out of cigarettes or wanted a breath of air—while his wife was dressing. . . . One or two quick calls . . . if she too was taking the cure, perhaps having hydrotherapy, that would give him a little more time to himself. . . .

He could imagine him, taking advantage of every opportunity, making opportunities whenever he could, lying to his wife like a naughty child to its mother.

A heavily built man, elderly, rich, of some standing, having come to Vichy in the hope of finding relief from chronic asthma.

"Doesn't it surprise you that the sister has decamped?"

Francine Lange liked money. Heaven knows what depths she had sunk to when she was living in Paris, in order to get it. And now she was the owner of a flourishing business, and her sister's sole heir.

Surely she was not the sort of woman to turn up her nose at the offer of a further substantial sum?

Was it the police she was afraid of? Unlikely, unless she intended to make a clean break, and leave the country.

No! She had gone back to La Rochelle, where she was just as accessible to police questioning as in Vichy. For the moment, she was still on the road with her gigolo at the wheel, in the open red sports car, which must surely be the envy of every young person who saw it.

For a car like that would eat up the miles. She would probably reach La Rochelle sometime in the middle of the afternoon.

"Did any of the papers mention that she lived in La Rochelle?"

"No, they just announced her arrival."

"She was a frightened woman already, this morning in the house, and at the cemetery. . . ."

"I wonder why it was you she kept peering at, when she thought we weren't looking. . . ."

"I think I know why. . . ."

Maigret, smiling, went on, though not without some embarrassment:

"I've been built up in the newspapers as a sort of father confessor. . . . She must have been tempted to confide in me, to ask my advice. . . . But then, on reflection, she decided the stakes were too high."

Lecoœur frowned.

"I don't quite see . . ."

"The man tried to get some information out of Hélène Lange. It must have been important, because her refusal to give it drove him berserk. A man doesn't strangle a woman in cold blood. . . . He came unarmed to Rue du Bourbonnais. He never meant to kill her. . . . And then he went away empty-handed. . . ."

Brooding over the manner of her death, Maigret went on:

"If I may venture to say so . . ."

"You mean, he thinks the sister knows what she knew?"

"No doubt about it. . . . Otherwise, he'd never have taken so much trouble and run so many risks to find out where she was staying. . . . He would never have phoned her, and dropped that hint of a large bribe. . . ."

"And what about her? Does she know what he wants from her?"

"It's possible," murmured Maigret, looking at his watch.

"She must, surely? Unless she was scared out of her wits, why should she have run off without a word to us?"

"I must be off to meet my wife. . . ."

He might have added:

"Just like that other fellow!"

Just like that broad-shouldered, corpulent man, who had been forced to resort to every kind of childish trick in order to slip out to a public telephone booth to make his calls.

In the course of their daily walks, the Maigrets might well have passed that particular couple more than once. Who could tell? It was possible that they had sat side by side, drinking their glasses of water, that their chairs . . .

“Don’t forget the telephone booths. . . .”

“It would take as many men as you have in Paris. . . .”

“There are never enough. . . . When will you be calling La Rochelle?”

“About six o’clock, before I leave for Clermont-Ferrand, where I have an appointment with the examining magistrate. I’m seeing him at his house. . . . This business is worrying him. He’s in very well with the Compagnie Fermière, and they don’t much care for publicity of this sort. . . . If you want to be present . . .”

He found Madame Maigret waiting for him on a bench. Never in all their lives had the Maigrets spent so much time sitting on park benches and garden chairs. He was late, but, quick to note that his mood had changed since the morning, she made no mention of it.

How well she knew that preoccupied frown.

“Where are we going?”

“For a walk.”

Just as on any other day. Just like the other couple. The wife, surely, could have suspected nothing. How could she guess, as she walked at his side, that he blanched inwardly at the sight of every policeman in uniform?

He was a murderer. He could not cut short his cure and leave, without arousing suspicion. He would have to carry on with his daily round like the Maigrets.

Was he staying at one of the two or three luxury hotels in the town? It wasn’t Maigret’s business, but if he were in Lecoeur’s place . . .

“Lecoeur is a first-class man,” he murmured, by which he really meant: “He’s sure to think of it. There aren’t so many people staying in that class of hotel that . . .”

All the same, he would have liked to ferret about a bit for himself.

"We mustn't forget your appointment with Rian."

"Is it today?"

"No, tomorrow at four. . . ."

He would have to go through it all again, undressing, allowing himself to be prodded and then weighed, listening to the fair-haired young doctor solemnly laying down the law about how many glasses of water he should drink from then on. Perhaps he would prescribe water from one or more of the other springs this time.

He thought of Janvier, who had taken over his office, as Lucas was also away on holiday. He had gone to the mountains, somewhere around Chamonix.

Little boats in single file sailed gently into the wind and, one by one, tacked. Occasionally they saw a couple in a pedal boat. There was a wall all along the Allier, and beyond it, every fifty yards or so, was a miniature golf course.

Maigret caught himself looking back over his shoulder every time they passed a heavily built, elderly man.

To him, H el ene Lange's murderer was no longer a shadowy figure. He was beginning to take shape and assume a personality.

He was somewhere in this town, possibly on one of the promenades where the Maigrets so often walked. He was going through more or less the same motions as themselves, seeing the same sights, the sailing boats, the pedal boats, the yellow chairs in the park, and the constant ebb and flow of the crowds in the streets and gardens.

Rightly or wrongly, Maigret saw him with a woman at his side, perhaps, like himself, rather overweight, complaining of sore feet.

What did they talk about as they walked? What, for that matter, did all the other couples like them talk about?

He had killed H el ene Lange. . . . He was a wanted man. It needed only a careless word or an unguarded action to bring the police about his ears.

A ruined life. His name on the front page of every newspaper. His friends shocked and incredulous. The security of his home and family threatened.

From a luxurious hotel suite to a police cell.



It could all happen in a matter of minutes, or even seconds. At any time, he might feel a strange hand on his shoulder and, turning, see the glint of a police badge.

"You are Monsieur . . . , if I am not mistaken?"

Monsieur what? It was immaterial. His wife's astonished indignation . . .

"It's all a mistake officer! . . . I know him so well. . . . I should. I'm his wife. . . . Anyone will tell you. . . . Say something, Jean!"

Jean or Pierre or Gaston. . . .

Maigret was looking about him blankly, as though he had no idea where he was.

"And even so, he persists . . ."

"What does he persist in?"

"In trying to get at the truth."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know very well whom I'm talking about. . . . He telephoned Francine Lange. . . . He wants to meet her. . . ."

"Surely he won't run the risk of being caught?"

"If only she'd warned Lecoeur in time, he could have set a trap. . . . It's still not too late. . . . He's only heard her voice that once. . . . Lecoeur must have thought of it. . . . One would only need to plant a woman of about her age in Room 406. . . . Then when he rang . . ."

Maigret stopped short where he stood, clenched his fists, and uttered a grunt of fury.

"What the devil can he be at, taking that sort of risk?"

A man's voice answered:

"Hello! Whom do you wish to speak to?"

"Mademoiselle Francine Lange."

"Who is that?"

"Divisional Superintendent Lecoeur."

"Hold on, please."

Maigret was sitting opposite Lecoeur in the bare little office, listening on an extension.

"Hello! Can't it wait till morning?"

"No."

"Can you call back in half an hour?"

"I shall have left by then."

"We've only just got here. . . . Francine, Mademoiselle Lange, that is to say, is in the bath."

"Be good enough to ask her, from me, to get out of it. . . ."

Lecoeur winked at his colleague from Paris. Once again, they heard the voice of Lucien Romanel:

"She won't keep you a moment. She's just rubbing down with a towel. . . ."

"You don't seem to have made very good time. . . ."

"We had a blowout. . . . We wasted an hour trying to get a spare tire. . . . Here she is!"

"Hello!"

Her voice came across more faintly than the gigolo's.

"Mademoiselle Lange? . . . I understood from you this morning that you were planning to spend two or three more days in Vichy. . . ."

"I had intended to, but I changed my mind."

"May I ask why?"

"I could say: 'I just did, that's all.' There's no law against it, is there?"

"No, and there's no law against my taking out a summons to compel you to answer my questions. . . ."

"What difference does it make whether I'm in Vichy or La Rochelle?"

"It makes a great deal of difference to me. . . . I will repeat my question: What made you change your mind?"

"I was frightened. . . ."

"What of?"

"You know the answer to that. . . . I was frightened this morning, but I kept saying to myself that he wouldn't dare. . . ."

"Could you be more explicit, please. Whom were you afraid of?"

"Of my sister's murderer. . . . I said to myself, if he attacked her, he's quite capable of attacking me. . . ."

"For what reason?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Is it someone you know?"

"No. . . ."

"Haven't you the least idea who it could be?"

"No. . . ."

"And yet, having told me that you were staying on in Vichy, you suddenly decided, early this afternoon, that you couldn't get away fast enough. . . ."

"I was frightened. . . ."

"You're lying, or rather prevaricating. . . . You had a very particular reason for being frightened. . . ."

"I told you. . . . He killed my sister. . . . He might equally well . . ."

"For what reason?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Are you telling me that you don't know why your sister was killed?"

"If I had known, I should have told you. . . ."

"In that case, why didn't you tell me about the phone call?"

He could imagine her wrapped in a bathrobe, with her hair still damp, surrounded by suitcases which she had not yet had time to unpack. Was there an extension in the apartment, he wondered? If not, Romanel must be straining his ears, trying to hear what he was saying.

"What telephone call?"

"The one you received last night at your hotel."

"I don't see what you . . ."

"Do you wish me to repeat what he said? Did he not, in fact, advise you to stay on in Vichy for a day or two longer? Did he not say that he would be getting in touch with you again, and that there could be big money in it for you?"

"I was scarcely listening. . . ."

"Why not?"

"Because I thought it was some sort of spoofing. . . . Isn't that how it struck you?"

"No."

A very emphatic "no," followed by a menacing silence. She was badly shaken, standing there, all those miles away, holding the receiver, and trying to think of something to say.

"I'm not a policeman. . . . I tell you I thought it was a spoof. . . ."

"Have you ever known it to happen before?"

"Not quite like that. . . ."

"Is it not a fact that you were so badly shaken by this telephone call that you felt you must get away from Vichy as soon as you possibly could?"

"Well, since you obviously don't believe me . . ."

"If you tell me the truth, I'll believe you. . . ."

"It was frightening. . . ."

"What?"

"The realization that the man was still at large in Vichy. . . . It's enough to frighten any woman, the thought of a strangler roaming the streets."

"Nevertheless, I haven't noticed any mass exodus from the hotels. . . . Had you ever heard that voice before?"

"I don't think so. . . ."

"A very distinctive voice. . . ."

"I didn't notice. . . . I was taken by surprise. . . ."

"Just now you were talking in terms of a spoof. . . ."

"I'm tired. . . . The day before yesterday I was still on holiday in Majorca. I've scarcely had an hour's sleep since then."

"That's no reason for lying to me."

"I'm not used to being harried in this way. And now you have me out of my bath, and subject me to an inquisition over the telephone. . . ."

"If you wish, I can arrange for my colleague in La Rochelle to call on you officially in an hour's time, and take down your statement in writing."

"I'm doing my best to answer your questions."

Maigret's eyes sparkled with pleasure. Lecoeur was doing splendidly. He himself would not have set about it in precisely that way, but it would come to the same thing in the end.

"You knew yesterday that the police were looking for your sister's murderer. . . . You must also have known that the smallest clue might prove invaluable. . . ."

"I suppose so, yes."

"Now, there was every reason to believe that your anonymous caller was the murderer. . . . You thought so yourself. . . . In fact, you were sure of it. . . . That's why you were so frightened . . . though I wouldn't have thought you were the type to be easily scared. . . ."

"Maybe I did think it might be the murderer, but I couldn't be sure."

"Anyone else in your place would have informed the police immediately. . . . Why didn't you?"

"Aren't you forgetting that I had just lost my sister—my only relative? . . . She was not even buried. . . ."

"I was at the funeral, remember? You didn't turn a hair."

"What do you know about my feelings?"

"Answer my questions. . . ."

"You might have prevented me from leaving."

"There can't be anything very urgent for you to attend to in La Rochelle, since you were supposed to be still on holiday in Majorca."

"I found the atmosphere oppressive. . . . The thought that that man . . ."

"Or the thought that, if you mentioned the telephone call, you might have to answer some awkward questions?"

"You might have wanted to use me as a decoy. . . . When he called back to suggest a meeting, you might have insisted on my going, and . . ."

"And?"

"Nothing. . . . I was frightened, that's all. . . ."

"Why was your sister murdered?"

"How should I know?"

"Someone whom she hadn't seen for years recognized her, followed her, and forced his way into her house. . . ."

"I thought perhaps she had come upon a burglar unexpectedly. . . ."

"You're not as naïve as all that. . . . There was something he wanted from her, the answer to a question, a vital question. . . ."

"What question?"

"That is precisely what I'm trying to find out. . . . Your sister came into some money, Mademoiselle Lange. . . ."

"From whom?"

"You tell me."

"She and I jointly inherited my mother's estate. . . . She wasn't a rich woman. . . . There was just a little dry goods shop in Marsilly, and a few thousand francs in a savings bank. . . ."

"Was her lover a rich man?"

"What lover?"

"The one who used to call at her apartment in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette once or twice a week, when she was living in Paris."

"I know nothing about that."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"Don't hang up, mademoiselle, I haven't nearly finished with you yet. . . . Hello!"

"I'm still here. . . ."

"Your sister was a stenographer. . . . You were a manicurist."

"Later I trained as a beautician."

"Quite so. . . . Two young girls from a humble home in Marsilly. . . . You both went to Paris. . . . You didn't go together, but for several years you were both living there at the same time. . . ."

"So what?"

"You claim to know nothing about your sister's life at that time. . . . You can't even tell me where she worked. . . ."

"In the first place, there was a very big difference in our ages. . . . And besides, we never got on, even as children. . . ."

"Let me finish. . . . Not so very long after, you turn up again in La Rochelle—a young woman still—as proprietress of a hairdressing salon, and that must have cost you a pretty penny. . . ."

"I paid a lump sum down, and the rest in yearly installments. . . ."

"We may have to go further into that later. . . . As for your sister, she—if I may put it that way—went out of circulation. . . . To

begin with, she moved to Nice, where she spent five years. . . . Did you ever visit her there?"

"No."

"Did you know her address?"

"I got three or four postcards from her. . . ."

"In five years?"

"We had nothing to say to one another."

"And when she came to live in Vichy?"

"She said nothing to me about it."

"You never heard from her that she had moved here permanently, and bought a house?"

"I heard about it from friends."

"Who were these friends?"

"I don't remember. . . . Just some people who had run into her in Vichy. . . ."

"Did they speak to her?"

"They may have. . . . You're confusing me. . . ."

Lecoeur, very pleased with himself, once more winked at Maigret, who was struggling to relight his pipe, which had gone out, without putting down the receiver.

"Did you go to the Crédit Lyonnais?"

"Where?"

"In Vichy."

"No."

"Didn't it occur to you to wonder how much your sister had left you?"

"I shall leave all that to my lawyer here in La Rochelle. I don't understand those things. . . ."

"Indeed? You're a businesswoman, aren't you? Haven't you any idea how much money your sister had in the bank?"

Another long silence.

"I'm waiting. . . ."

"I can't answer that. . . ."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know. . . ."

"Would it surprise you to learn that it was something approaching five hundred thousand francs?"

"That's a great deal of money."

She sounded rather matter-of-fact about it.

"A lot, I mean, for a girl coming from a little village like Marsilly, who worked as a stenographer in Paris for barely ten years."

"I wasn't in her confidence. . . ."

"Is it not a fact that when you took over the hairdressing business in La Rochelle, it was your sister who provided the money in the first place? Think carefully before you answer, and remember that we have ways and means of getting at the truth."

Another long silence. Between two people who are face to face, silence is less alarming than in the course of a telephone conversation, when all contact is temporarily broken.

"It's surely not a thing you could forget!"

"She did lend me a little money. . . ."

"How much?"

"I'd have to ask my lawyer."

"At that time your sister was still living in Nice, was she not?"

"Possibly. . . . Yes. . . ."

"So you were in touch with her, not just through the exchange of postcards. . . . It seems more than likely that you went to see her, to explain the details of your project. . . ."

"I must have. . . ."

"A moment ago, you denied it."

"All these questions . . . I'm confused. . . . I don't know what I'm saying."

"It's not my questions that are confusing. . . . It's your answers."

"Have you finished with me?"

"Not quite. . . . And I must impress upon you once again that you would be well advised to stay on the line, otherwise I shall be forced into taking more drastic measures. . . . This time I want a straight answer, yes or no. . . . In whose name was the deed of sale drawn up, yours or your sister's? In other words, was your sister, in fact, the owner?"

"No."

"Then you were?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"We owned it jointly."

"In other words, you and she were partners, and yet you've been trying to make me believe that there was no contact between you. . . ."

"It's a family matter, and nobody's business but our own. . . ."

"May I remind you that this is a case of murder?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Are you so sure?"

"I hardly think . . ."

"You hardly think . . . in that case why did you rush away from Vichy like a madwoman?"

"Have you any more questions to ask me?"

Maigret nodded, took a pencil from the desk, and scribbled a few words on the pad.

"One moment. . . . Don't hang up. . . ."

"Will you be long?"

"Here it is. . . . You had a child, did you not?"

"I told you so."

"Was it born in Paris?"

"No."

"Why not?"

All Maigret's note said was: "Where was the child born? Where was the birth registered?"

Lecoœur was spinning it out, possibly in order to impress his famous colleague from Paris.

"I didn't want it generally known. . . ."

"Where did you go?"

"Burgundy."

"Where exactly?"

"Mesnil-le-Mont."

"Is that a village?"

"Scarcely more than a hamlet, really."

"Is there a resident doctor?"

"There wasn't then."

"And you chose to have your child in this remote hamlet, out of reach of a doctor?"

"How do you suppose our mothers managed?"

"Was it you who chose the place? Had you been there before?"

"No, I found it on the map."

"Did you go alone?"

"I can't help wondering how you treat criminals, if you can torture innocent people in this way. . . . I haven't done anything. . . . In fact . . ."

"I asked you whether you were alone."

"No."

"That's better. It's much simpler, you know, to tell the truth than to lie. Who went with you?"

"My sister."

"Do you mean your sister H el ene?"

"I have no other."

"This was when you were both living in Paris, and never met except by chance. . . . You had no idea where she worked. . . . For all you knew, she might have been a kept woman. . . ."

"It was no business of mine. . . ."

"You didn't get on. . . . You saw as little as possible of one another, and yet, all of a sudden, she dropped everything, gave up her job, and went with you to some god-forsaken hamlet in Burgundy. . . ."

There was nothing she could say.

"How long were you there?"

"A month."

"In the local hotel?"

"It was just an inn, really."

"Did you have a midwife?"

"I don't know whether she was qualified, but she acted as midwife to all the women in the district."

"What was her name?"

"She was about sixty-five at the time. She must be dead by now."



"Don't you remember her name?"

"Madame Radèche."

"Did you register the birth?"

"Of course."

"You, personally?"

"I was still in bed. . . . My sister went with the innkeeper. He witnessed her signature."

"Did you go yourself later to look at the entry?"

"Why on earth should I?"

"Have you a copy of the birth certificate?"

"It was so long ago . . ."

"Where did you go next?"

"Look here, I can't take any more of this. . . . If you must put me through hours of questioning, come and see me here. . . ."

Unmoved, Lecoeur asked:

"Where did you take the child?"

"To Saint-André. Saint-André-du-Lavion, in the Vosges."

"By car?"

"I didn't have a car then. . . ."

"And your sister?"

"She never learned to drive."

"Did she go with you?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I'm sick of all this, do you hear me? Sick of it! Sick of it! Sick of it!"

Whereupon she hung up.



“What’s on your mind?”

In every marriage where husband and wife have been together for years, each observing the actions and emotions of the other, there are times when one partner, baffled by the expression on the other’s face, asks diffidently:

“What’s on your mind?”

Madame Maigret, it must be said, needed to be very sure that her husband was not under strain before she would ask this question, for there were certain boundaries in their relationship which she felt she had no right to overstep.

Following the long telephone call to La Rochelle, they had dined quietly in the relaxing atmosphere of the white dining room of their hotel, with its potted palms in the alcoves, and wine bottles and flowers on the tables.

Ostensibly, no one paid any attention to the Maigrets, though they were in fact the focus of discreet interest, admiration, and affection.

They were now taking their evening walk. From time to time there was a rumble of thunder in the sky, and the still evening air was churned up every few minutes by little flurries of wind.

They had come, almost as if by accident, to Rue du Bourbonnais. There was a light showing in one of the upper windows, in the room occupied by the stout widow, Madame Vireveau. The Maleskís were out, walking, possibly, or at the cinema.

On the ground floor, all was darkness and silence. The furniture had been put back in place. Hélène Lange had been blotted out.

Sooner or later, no doubt, the contents of the house would be carted into the street, and the props and chattels which had once been part of a human life would fall under the hammer of some wise-cracking auctioneer.

Had Francine taken away the photographs? It seemed unlikely. Probably she would not even bother to send for them. They, too, would be sold.

They had reached the park where, inevitably it seemed, they always ended up, when Madame Maigret ventured to put her question.

"I'm thinking about Lecoœur. He really is first-class at his job," replied her husband.

The manner in which the Superintendent from Clermont-Ferrand had hammered away at Francine, giving her no time to collect herself, was a good example. He had made the fullest use of the facts at his disposal, to get the fuller information he needed to carry the inquiry a stage further.

Why, then, was Maigret not entirely satisfied? No doubt he would have set about it differently. But then what two men, even when working to the same end, go about it in precisely the same way?

It was not a question of method. Maigret was, if anything, a little envious of his ebullient colleague's assurance and self-confidence.

No, it was something else. To Maigret, the lady in lilac was not just a murder victim. He was not primarily concerned with the kind of life she had led, nor with what had happened to her. He was beginning to know her as an individual and, almost without realizing it, to penetrate the mystery of her personality.

And while he was walking back to his hotel, pondering, to the exclusion of all else, the relationship between the two sisters, Lecoœur was bounding off, without a care in the world, to keep his appointment with the examining magistrate.

What could the examining magistrate really know about a case like this one, closeted in his office, and seeing nothing of life but what was laid before him, encapsulated in the official reports?

Two sisters in a village on the Atlantic coast, a little shop next door to the church. Maigret knew the village, whose people reaped a harvest from both land and sea. A village dominated by four or five big landowners, who were also the owners of oyster beds and mussel farms.

He recalled the women, old women, young women, and little girls, setting out at daybreak, sometimes even at night, depending on the tides, dressed in rubber boots, thick fishermen's jerseys, and shabby men's jackets.

Down on the shore, they gathered the oysters which lay exposed at low tide, while the men scraped the mussels off the wickerwork, which was pegged down by stakes.

Few of these girls were ever educated beyond the most elementary stage, and even the boys fared little better, at least at the time when the Lange girls were growing up.

Hélène was the exception. She had gone to school in the town, and had reached a sufficiently high standard to go to work in an office.

Cycling to work in the morning and returning at night, she was quite the young lady.

And later, her sister too had somehow contrived to better herself.

They are both living in Paris. . . . They are never to be seen in the village now . . . they think themselves too good for us. . . .

The girls who had once been their playmates were still going out every morning to gather oysters and mussels. They had married and borne children, who, in their turn, had romped in the square outside the church.

It was cold-blooded determination that had got Hélène Lange what she wanted. Even as a child, she had turned her back on the life that should have been hers. She had mapped out for herself a different life, and retreated into a world of her own, peopled only by the characters in her favorite romantic novels.

She had been unable to stomach Balzac. His world had reminded

her too much of Marsilly, her mother's shop, the freezing oyster beds, and the roughened hands of the women.

Francine, too, had managed to escape, in her own fashion. At fifteen, she had had her eyes opened by a taxi driver. She was plump and seductive. Men were attracted by her saucy smile. And why not, she thought, why not turn her charms to good account?

And had she not, in the end, succeeded?

The elder sister had acquired a house in Vichy and amassed a small fortune. The younger had chosen to return home, and flaunt her wealth in the most elegant beauty salon in town.

Lecoeur did not feel the need to enter into their lives, to understand them. He uncovered facts, from which he drew conclusions, and, in consequence, was spared the discomforts of an uneasy conscience.

Intimately concerned with the lives of these two women there was a man. Unidentified, he was nevertheless here in Vichy, in a hotel bedroom, in the park, in one of the gaming rooms of the Grand Casino, somewhere, anywhere.

This man was a killer. And he was caught in a trap. He must know that the police, with their formidable resources, were closing in on him, that the invisible cordon was tightening about him, and that, very soon, the impartial hand of the law would be laid on his shoulder.

He too had a whole life behind him. He had been a child, a youth, he had fallen in love, almost certainly married, or else why should he, the nameless man who had called once or twice a week at Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, not have been able to stay more than an hour at a time?

Hélène had disappeared from Paris. When next heard of, she was living a solitary life in Nice, deliberately shunning attention, it seemed, in that town crowded with people who were all strangers to one another.

Now they knew that, before settling in Nice, she had gone to a tiny village in Burgundy, lived in the local inn for a month, to be with her sister when she gave birth to a child.

Maigret was beginning to understand the two women, but he needed to know more about the man. He was tall and heavily built. He had a

distinctive voice, because he suffered from asthma, which was no doubt what had brought him to Vichy in the first place.

He had committed a murder, and gained nothing by it. He had gone to Rue du Bourbonnais, not to take a life, but to ask a question.

Hélène Lange had brought about her own death. She had refused to answer. Even when he had seized her by the throat—probably just to frighten her—she had not spoken, and her silence had cost her her life.

He could have abandoned his quest. It would have been the sensible thing to do. Any further step he took was bound to entail grave risks. The machinery of the law had already been set in motion.

Had he known previously of the existence of the sister, Francine Lange? She claimed that he had not, and she could be telling the truth.

He could have learned from the newspapers that Hélène Lange had a sister, and that she had just arrived in Vichy. He had got it into his head that he must speak to her, and, with astonishing thoroughness and guile, had managed to track her down to her hotel.

Hélène had refused to speak, but would the younger sister prove equally stubborn, if faced with the added inducement of a substantial bribe?

The man was rich, a person of some standing. It must be so, or he could not have afforded to part with more than five hundred thousand francs over a period of a few years.

Five hundred thousand francs in return for what? In return for nothing. He did not even know the address of the woman to whom he sent the money, *poste restante*, at the various towns designated by her up and down the country.

Had he been able to find her, would Hélène Lange have died sooner?

“Stay on in Vichy for another two or three days. . . .”

It was his last chance. He had to take it, even if it meant getting caught. He would phone her again. It wouldn't be easy, but he would find a way. He would do it as soon as he could escape from his wife without arousing suspicion.

But by now there was scarcely a public telephone booth in the town which was not being watched by one of Lecoeur's men.

Had Maigret been right in believing that he would not risk telephoning from a bar, a café, or hotel bedroom?

He and his wife walked past one of these public telephone booths. Through the glass panes they could see a teen-age girl chattering away with cheerful animation.

"Do you think he'll be caught?"

"Any time now, yes."

Because here was a man with an overriding obsession. Very likely he had lived with it for years. Probably ever since the very first monthly payment, he had been waiting and hoping for the chance meeting which had occurred at last, after fifteen years.

It might well be that he was a sound businessman, very level-headed as far as his everyday life was concerned.

Fifteen years of brooding . . .

He had squeezed too hard. He never meant to kill her. Or else . . .

Maigret stopped dead in his tracks, right in the middle of a busy boulevard. His wife, with a quick, sidelong glance at his face, stopped too.

Or else, he came face to face with something so monstrous, so unforeseen, so shocking . . .

"I wonder how Lecoeur will set about it," he murmured.

"Set about what?"

"Getting him to make a clean breast of it. . . ."

"He'll have to find him and arrest him first. . . ."

"He'll give himself up. . . ."

It would be a relief to him to surrender . . . an end to lying and contriving. . . .

"I hope he's not armed."

Because there was a wife in the case, Maigret could envisage an alternative outcome. Instead of giving himself up, the man might decide to end it, once for all. . . .

Had Lecoeur warned his subordinates to proceed with caution? It wasn't for Maigret to interfere. In this instance he was merely a passive spectator, keeping well in the background, as far as was possible.

Even if he did not resist arrest, was there any reason why he should talk? It would not mitigate his crime, nor carry any weight with a jury. To them, he would be just another strangler, and, whatever the provocation, in such a case leniency, still less pity, was not to be hoped for.

“What you really mean is, you wish you were handling it yourself!”

She found that in Vichy she could say things to him that, in Paris, she would never have dared to utter. Was it because they were on holiday?

Because, as a result of being together all day and every day, a new intimacy had grown up between them?

She could almost hear his thoughts.

“I wonder. . . . No . . . I don't think so. . . .”

Why should he worry? He was here for a rest, for a thorough clean-out of the system, to use Doctor Rian's phrase. In fact, he had an appointment with the doctor for tomorrow, and then, for half an hour at least, he would be just another patient, preoccupied with his digestion, his liver, his pulse rate, his blood pressure, and his fits of giddiness.

How old was Lecoeur? Barely five years younger than himself. In five years' time, Lecoeur too would be thinking about retirement, and wondering what on earth he would find to do with himself when the time came.

They were behind the casino now, walking past the town's two most luxurious hotels. Long, sleek cars slumbered along the curb. In the garden, to one side of the revolving door, a man in a dinner jacket was leaning back in a deck chair, enjoying the cool of the evening.

A crystal chandelier filled the entrance hall with a blaze of light. They could see oriental carpets, marble pillars, and the liveried hall porter bending forward to answer an inquiry from an old lady in evening dress.

This hotel, or the one next to it, was perhaps where the man was staying. If not, then he was probably at the Pavillon Sévigné, near the Pont Bellerive. Beside the elevator stood a very young page-boy, but not too young to be looking about him with a very supercilious air.

Lecoeur had concentrated his attention on the weakest link, in

other words, Francine Lange, and she, taken by surprise, had revealed a good deal.

Presumably he would take the first opportunity of questioning her further. Was there anything more to be got out of her, or had she told all she knew?

“I won’t be a minute. . . . I must get some tobacco. . . .”

He went into a noisy bar, where a great many people were looking at a television screen set up on a pedestal above eye level. There was a strong smell of wine and beer. The bald barman was filling glasses without a moment’s pause, and a waitress in black dress and white apron was going to and from the tables with laden trays of drinks.

Without thinking, he glanced at the telephone booth, at the far end near the washrooms. It had a glass door. There was no one in it.

“Three ounces of shag.”

They were not far from the Hôtel de la Bérézina, and, as they approached, they saw young Dicelle waiting on the steps.

“Could I have a word with you, sir?”

Madame Maigret, leaving them to it, went in to collect her key from the desk.

“Let’s walk, shall we?”

Their footsteps echoed in the deserted street.

“Did Lecoœur send you?”

“Yes, he’s been on the phone with me. He’d gone home to Clermont, to his wife and kids. . . .”

“How many children has he?”

“Four. The eldest is eighteen. He’s shaping up to be a swimming champion. . . .”

“What’s been happening?”

“There are ten of us watching the telephone booths. The Super can’t spare enough men for all of them, so we’re concentrating on those in the center, especially the ones closest to the big hotels.”

“Have you made an arrest?”

“Not yet. . . . I’m waiting for the Super. . . . He should be on his way by now. . . . There’s been a slip-up, I’m afraid. . . . My fault, entirely. . . . I was on watch near the phone booth in Boule-

vard Kennedy. . . . It wasn't too difficult to keep out of sight, with all those trees. . . ."

"And you saw a man go in to use the telephone?"

"Yes. . . . A big, heavily built man, answering to the description. He was behaving suspiciously. . . . He kept peering through the door . . . but he didn't see me. . . ."

"He began dialing a number, and then, all of a sudden, changed his mind. Maybe I poked my head out too far. I don't know. At any rate, he dialed the first three figures, then thought better of it and came out. . . ."

"And you made no attempt to stop him?"

"My instructions were not to interfere with him in any way, but to follow him. To my surprise, there was a woman waiting for him in the shadows, not twenty yards away. . . ."

"What was she like?"

"Distinguished-looking, well-dressed, fiftyish. . . ."

"Did you get the impression that there was any collusion between them?"

"No. She just took his arm, and they walked back to the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs."

The hotel with the sumptuous entrance hall and the crystal chandelier, which Maigret had stood and gazed at barely an hour earlier.

"What next?"

"Nothing. The man went up to the desk and got his key from the hall porter, who wished him good night."

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Enough to know him again. . . . I got the impression that he was older than his wife. . . . Nearer sixty, I'd say. They got into the elevator, and I didn't see them again. . . ."

"Was he wearing a dinner jacket?"

"No, a very well-cut dark suit. . . . He has graying hair brushed back, a healthy complexion, and, I think, a small white moustache. . . ."

"Did you make inquiries at the desk?"

"Of course. He and his wife have a suite—a large bedroom with

an adjoining sitting room—on the first floor, number 105. This is their first visit to Vichy, but they are friends of the proprietor of the hotel, who also owns a hotel in La Baule. The man's name is Louis Pélardeau. He's an industrialist, and lives in Paris, Boulevard Suchet."

"Is he here for the cure?"

"Yes. . . . I asked the hall porter whether he had an unusually distinctive voice. He said yes, he suffered from asthma. . . . They're both being treated by Doctor Rian."

"Is Madame Pélardeau taking the cure as well?"

"Yes. . . . It seems they have no children. . . . They've joined up with some friends from Paris who are staying in the same hotel, and they share a table with them at meals. Occasionally they all go to the theater together."

"Have you got someone watching the hotel?"

"I've put a local man on it, until one of our people gets there, which should be about now. The local fellow, though he had every right to tell me to go to hell, was most co-operative."

Dicelle was obviously thrilled by the whole business.

"He must be the man we're looking for, don't you think?"

Maigret did not answer at once. He lit his pipe with great deliberation. They were less than a hundred yards from the house of the lady in lilac.

"I think he is," he said with a sigh.

The young detective stared at him in amazement. From the way the Chief Superintendent said it, one would really think he regretted it!

"I'm to meet my boss outside the hotel. He'll be there in twenty minutes at the outside."

"Did he say whether he wanted me there?"

"He said you'd be sure to come."

"I'll have to let my wife know first."

In the intermission, crowds of people poured out of the Grand Casino theater into the street. Most of the women were wearing sleeveless dresses, cut very low. They and their escorts looked up appre-

hensively into the sky, which was streaked with intermittent lightning flashes.

Low clouds swirled past, and, worse, to the west the stars were blotted out by a dense, threatening blanket of cloud, moving slowly toward the town.

Outside the *Hôtel des Ambassadeurs* Maigret and Dicelle waited in silence, watched by the hall porter who, behind his counter of polished wood, stood guard over his nest of pigeonholes and panel of dangling keys.

Just as the first few heavy drops of cold rain were falling, Lecoeur arrived, and, at the same moment, a bell rang, signaling the end of the intermission. It took him some minutes of careful steering and maneuvering to park his car, and when he finally joined them he asked, with a worried frown:

“Is he in his room?”

Dicelle quickly assured him:

“Number 105 on the first floor. His windows overlook the street. . . .”

“Is his wife with him?”

“Yes. They went up together.”

A figure, a uniformed policeman whom Maigret did not recognize, loomed up out of the shadows.

“Am I to stay on watch?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

Lecoeur, taking shelter in the doorway, lit a cigarette.

“I am not empowered to make an arrest during the hours between sunset and sunrise, unless a breach of the law is actually committed in my presence.”

There was more than a hint of irony in his voice as he cited this section of the Code of Criminal Procedure, adding thoughtfully:

“What’s more, there isn’t enough evidence to justify a warrant for his arrest.”

It sounded like an appeal to Maigret to help him out of his difficulty, but Maigret did not rise to the bait.

“I don’t like leaving him to stew all night. . . . He must have



guessed that he's a marked man—why else would he have changed his mind about telephoning?—and I'm puzzled by the presence of his wife, so close to the phone booth." Almost reproachfully, he added:

"What do you say, Chief?"

"I have nothing to say. . . ."

"What would you do, in my place?"

"I shouldn't be inclined to wait, either. . . . I daresay, by now, they're undressing for bed. . . . I should try and avoid going up to their suite. . . . The discreet thing would be to send up a little note."

"Saying what, for instance?"

"That there's someone downstairs who wishes to speak to him on a personal matter. . . ."

"Do you think he'll come?"

"I'm sure of it."

"You'd better wait out here, Dicelle. It wouldn't do for us all to be seen going in together."

Lecoeur went up to the inquiry desk, leaving Maigret standing in the middle of the vast entrance hall, looking about him vaguely. The hall, brilliantly lit by chandeliers, was almost empty, except for an elderly foursome, two men and two women, a long way off—in another world, almost—who were playing bridge. Distance and the deliberateness of their movements made them seem unreal, like characters in a film sequence played in slow motion.

The page-boy, with an envelope in his hand, went briskly up to the elevator.

He heard Lecoeur's voice, muffled:

"Well, we'll soon see . . ."

Then, as though struck by the solemnity of the occasion, he removed his hat. Maigret, too, was bareheaded, holding his straw hat in his hand. Outside, the storm had broken, and the rain was pelting down. They could see a little group of people huddled for shelter on the hotel steps.

In a very short time the page-boy was back.

"Monsieur Pélardeau will be down directly," he announced.

They were both watching the elevator. They could not help them-

selves. Lecoœur was smoothing his mustache with his forefinger, and Maigret could sense his excitement.

Somewhere up there, a bell was ringing. The elevator went up, stopped for a moment, and then reappeared.

Out of it stepped a man in a dark suit, with a florid complexion and graying hair. He looked inquiringly around the hall, and then, somewhat hesitantly, came up to the two men.

Lecoœur, who was holding his Superintendent's badge discreetly in the palm of his hand, allowed the man to catch a glimpse of it.

"I should be obliged if I could have a few words with you, Monsieur Pélardeau."

"Now?"

Yes, there was the hoarse voice, just as it had been described to them. The man did not lose his head. There was no doubt that he recognized Maigret, and seemed surprised to find him playing a passive role.

"Yes, now. My car is at the door, if you will be so good as to accompany me to my office."

The florid cheeks turned a shade pale. Pélardeau was a man of about sixty, but his carriage was remarkably upright, and there was great dignity in his bearing and expression.

"I don't suppose it would do any good to refuse."

"None. It would only make matters worse."

A glance at the hall porter, then another at the little far-off alcove, where the four bridge players were still to be seen. A quick look outside at the pouring rain.

"I don't suppose it would be possible for me to get my hat and raincoat from my suite?"

Maigret, meeting Lecoœur's inquiring glance, looked up at the ceiling. It would be cruel, as well as pointless, to leave the wife in suspense up there. It looked like being a long night, and there was little hope of the husband's returning to reassure her.

Lecoœur murmured:

"If you would care to write Madame a note . . . unless she already knows?"

"No. . . . What shall I say?"

"I don't know. . . . That you have been detained longer than you expected?"

The man went up to the desk.

"Can you let me have a sheet of writing paper, Marcel?"

He seemed saddened, rather than shocked or frightened. Using the ball-point pen chained to the desk, he scribbled a few words, declining the envelope that the hall porter held out to him.

"Send this up in five or ten minutes' time, will you?"

"Certainly, sir."

The hall porter looked as though he would have liked to say something more, but, unable to find the right words, merely bowed his head.

"This way."

As Dicelle, by this time sopping wet, opened the rear door, Lecoeur stood by, murmuring instructions in a low voice.

"Get in, please."

The industrialist bent down, and got into the car first.

"You too, Chief."

Maigret, aware that his colleague would not wish their prisoner to be left alone in the back of the car, obeyed. In no time, they were driving through streets crowded with people hurrying for shelter, and huddling together under the trees. There were even people sheltering on the bandstand, under the canopy.

The car turned into the forecourt of the Police Station in Avenue Victoria, and Lecoeur spoke a few words to the officer on duty. There were only one or two lights turned on in the entrance. It seemed a long time to Maigret before they reached Lecoeur's office.

"In here. It's a bit Spartan, but I didn't want to take you all the way to Clermont-Ferrand at this stage."

He removed his hat, but did not venture to take off his jacket, which, like Lecoeur's and Maigret's, was sopping wet about the shoulders. In contrast with the sudden drop in temperature outdoors, the room was very hot and stuffy.

"Take a seat."

Maigret had retreated into his usual corner, and was watching the industrialist, under cover of filling his pipe. The man's face was ab-

solutely impassive, as he looked from one police officer to the other, wondering, no doubt, why Maigret was not playing a more active role.

Lecoœur, playing for time, pulled a memo pad and pencil toward him, and murmured, as though thinking aloud:

"Anything you say at this stage will be off the record. This is not an official interrogation."

The man nodded assent.

"Your name is Louis Pélardeau, and you are an industrialist. You live in Paris, in Boulevard Suchet."

"That's right."

"Married, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

After an appreciable pause, he said with an odd note of bitterness:

"No."

"You are here for the cure?"

"Yes."

"Is this your first visit to Vichy?"

"I've passed through it in the car. . . ."

"You've never come here with the specific intention of meeting any particular person?"

"No."

Lecoœur inserted a cigarette into his holder, and lit it. There followed an oppressive silence, then Lecoœur said:

"You know, I presume, why I have brought you here?"

The man, his face still impassive, took time for thought. But Maigret could see now that his blank expression was a sign not of self-control but rather of profound emotional shock.

He was completely numbed, and it was hard to tell whether he realized even where he was, as Lecoœur's voice rang in his ears.

"I would rather not answer that. . . ."

"You came here of your own free will. . . ."

"Yes. . . ."

"You were not unprepared?"

The man turned to Maigret, as though appealing for help, and repeated wearily:



"I would rather not answer that. . . ."

Lecoeur, aware that this was getting him nowhere, doodled on his pad before returning to the attack.

"Soon after your arrival in Vichy, you had an unexpected encounter with someone you had not seen for fifteen years. . . ."

The man's eyes were watering a little, but not with tears. It was perhaps due to the harsh glare of the single naked bulb, which provided all the lighting there was in this bare, usually unoccupied room.

"Was it your intention, when you went out with your wife tonight, to make a telephone call from a public booth?"

After a moment's hesitation, the man nodded.

"In other words, your wife knows nothing?"

"About the telephone call?"

"If you like to put it that way."

"No."

"You mean that there are some matters regarding which she is not in your confidence?"

"You're absolutely right."

"Nevertheless, did you go into a public phone booth. . . ."

"She decided, at the last minute, to come with me. . . . I didn't want to put it off any longer. . . . I told her I'd left the key of our suite in the door, and that I thought I'd better let the hall porter know. . . ."

"Why was it that you didn't even finish dialing the number?"

"I had a feeling I was being watched. . . ."

"Did you see anyone?"

"I saw something move behind a tree. . . . Besides, by then I had realized that it was pointless. . . ."

"Why was that?"

He did not answer, but sat motionless, with his hands lying flat on his knees. They were plump, white, well-kept hands.

"Smoke, if you wish."

"I don't smoke."

"You don't mind if I do?"

"My wife smokes a lot . . . far too much. . . ."

"You suspected that the call might be taken by someone other than Francine Lange?"

Once again he did not answer, but neither did he deny it.

"You telephoned her last night, and told her that you would call again to fix an appointment. . . . It's my belief that, when you went into that phone booth this evening, you had already, in your own mind, fixed on a time and place."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you there. . . ."

He was having difficulty with his breathing, and wheezing slightly as he spoke.

"I assure you, it's not that I want to be obstructive. . . ."

"You would prefer to consult your lawyer first?"

He made a sweeping gesture with his right hand, as though to brush this suggestion aside.

"All the same, you will need a lawyer."

"I'll do whatever the law requires of me."

"You must understand, Monsieur Pélardeau, that, as of now, you are no longer a free man."

Lecoœur showed some delicacy in avoiding the word "arrest," and Maigret was glad of it.

The man had made an impression on both of them. Here, in this tiny office with its dingy walls, sitting on a rough wooden chair, he seemed larger than life-size, and this impression of stature was enhanced by his astonishingly calm and dignified manner.

Both men had, in their time, questioned many hundreds of suspects. It took a lot to impress them, but this man was truly impressive.

"We could postpone this conversation until tomorrow, but, as I'm sure you'll agree, it would serve no useful purpose."

This, the man seemed to be thinking, was the Superintendent's business, not his.

"What is your particular branch of industry?"

"Steel pressings."

This was a subject on which he could talk freely, and he volunteered one or two particulars, just to show that he was willing to cooperate where he could.



"I inherited a small wire-drawing business near Le Havre from my father. Then gradually I was able to expand and build a plant at Rouen, and another in Strasbourg."

"In other words, you run a very flourishing business?"

"Yes."

He seemed almost to be apologizing for it.

"Your offices are in Paris, I take it?"

"Head office, yes. We have more up-to-date office buildings in Rouen and Strasbourg, but, for sentimental reasons, I've always kept the old head office in Boulevard Voltaire."

It was all past history to him. . . . This evening, in the space of time it took a liveried page-boy to deliver a written message, the greater part of his world had crumbled in ruins.

Probably because he was aware of this, he was willing to talk about it quite freely.

"Have you been married long?"

"Thirty years."

"A woman by the name of H  l  ne Lange was at one time in your employment, was she not?"

"I'd rather not answer that."

This was his unvarying response, whenever they stepped on dangerous ground.

"You do realize, don't you, Monsieur P  lardeau, that you're making things very difficult for me?"

"I'm sorry."

"If it is your intention to deny the facts which I shall lay before you, I would rather you said so now."

"How can I tell in advance what you are going to say?"

"Are you telling me that you are not guilty?"

"No. . . . In a sense, I am. . . ."

Leco  ur and Maigret exchanged glances. He had made this terrible admission so simply and unaffectedly, without the slightest change of expression.

Maigret was thinking of the park with its great, spreading trees, its expanses of grass which, under the lamp standards, seemed too green to be true, its bandstand and garishly uniformed musicians.

In particular, he was thinking of the long, narrow face of H el ene Lange as he had seen it when, to him and his wife, she was merely the nameless woman they had christened "the lady in lilac."

"Did you know Mademoiselle Lange?"

He sat motionless, gasping as though he were going to choke. It was, in fact, an attack of asthma. He grew purple in the face. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, held it over his open mouth, and was soon doubled up with a fit of uncontrollable coughing.

Maigret was thankful not to be in his colleague's seat. Let someone else do the dirty work for once.

"I told you . . ."

"Please take your time. . . ."

With eyes streaming, he fought to master the attack of coughing, but it persisted for several minutes.

When at last he straightened up, still red in the face, mopped his forehead and said: "I'm very sorry," the words were scarcely audible.

"I get these attacks several times a day. . . . Doctor Rian tells me that the cure will do me good. . . ."

He seemed suddenly struck with the irony of this remark.

"I should say, would have done me good. . . ."

They shared the same doctor, he and Maigret. Both had undressed in the same gleaming office, both had stretched out on the same couch, over which a white sheet was spread. . . .

"What was it you asked me?"

"Whether you knew H el ene Lange."

"There's no point in denying it."

"You hated her, didn't you?"

If it had been possible, Maigret would have signaled to his colleague that he was on the wrong track.

And indeed the man was staring at Lecoeur in genuine amazement. When, at last, he spoke, this sixty-year-old man sounded as artless as a child.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why should I have hated her?"

He turned to Maigret, as if appealing to him for support.

"Were you in love with her?"

His response was a puzzled frown, which surprised them both.

Clearly the last two questions had thrown him off balance and, in some strange sense, changed everything.

"I don't quite see . . ." he stammered.

Then, once more, he looked from one to the other. At Maigret, he looked hard and long.

It was as though they were somehow at cross-purposes.

"You used to go and see her at her apartment in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette."

"Yes," in a tone of voice that implied, "What of it?"

"I presume that it was you who paid her rent?"

He confirmed this with a slight nod.

"Was she your secretary?"

"She was a member of my staff."

"Did your affair with her last long, several years?"

It was obvious that they were still at cross-purposes.

"I used to go and see her once or twice a week. . . ."

"Did your wife know?"

"Obviously not."

"She never found out?"

"Never."

"Doesn't she know, even now?"

The poor man clearly felt that he was beating his head against a brick wall.

"Not even now. . . . All that has nothing to do with . . ."

Nothing to do with what? With the murder? With the telephone calls? They weren't speaking the same language, but neither realized it. No wonder they were baffled by their inability to get across to one another.



Lecoeur's glance fell on the telephone on his desk. He seemed about to pick up the receiver when he caught sight of a small white bell-push and pressed that instead.

"Do you mind? . . . I don't know where this rings, or even if it's working. . . . We'll soon find out at any rate. . . . If anyone comes . . ."

He was playing for time. They waited in silence, avoiding one another's eyes. Of the three men, Pélardeau was probably the most self-possessed, on the surface, at least. Admittedly, as far as he was concerned, he had staked his all, and had nothing more to lose.

They heard at last, a long way off, the ringing sound of footsteps on an iron staircase, then on the linoleum of a corridor, drawing nearer, followed by a discreet knock on the door.

"Come in!"

It was a very young, well-scrubbed policeman in uniform. In contrast to the three older men, he fairly radiated youthful vitality.

Lecoeur, who felt something of an interloper in this place, said:

"I wonder if you could spare a moment?"

"Of course, sir. We were just passing the time playing cards."

"We're going out for a moment. Be so good as to stay with Monsieur Pélardeau until we get back."

"It'll be a pleasure, sir."

The young officer, having not the least idea of what it was all about, kept darting puzzled glances at the well-groomed visitor. He could not but be impressed.

A minute or two later, Lecoœur and Maigret were standing in the doorway. The steps leading down to the forecourt were protected by a glass roof, but they could see a glittering curtain of rain in the darkness beyond.

"I was suffocating up there. . . . I thought you might be glad of a breath of fresh air too."

The heavy storm clouds, streaked from time to time with lightning flashes, were now overhead, and the wind had dropped.

The road was deserted, except for an occasional slow-moving car splashing through the puddles.

The head of the C.I.D. in Clermont-Ferrand, lighting a cigarette, watched the rain beating down on the paved drive, and dripping from the trees in the grounds.

"I know I was making a hash of it, Chief. I ought to have asked you to take over. . . ."

"He was at the end of his tether, numbed with shock. At first, there didn't seem any point in answering your questions. He was determined not to speak, whatever the cost. But, little by little, you won his confidence. What more could I have done?"

"I thought . . ."

"You succeeded, up to a point, in breaking down the barriers. . . . He was beginning to take an interest . . . to co-operate even. . . . Then something went wrong. . . . I don't understand it. It must have been something you said."

"What?"

"I don't know. . . . All I know is that it switched him off like a light. . . . I never took my eyes off his face, and at one point I caught a look of absolute astonishment and bewilderment. One would have to go back over every word that was said. . . . He had been so sure we knew more."

"More about what?"

Maigret sucked at his pipe in silence for a moment.

"Something that to him is patently obvious, but that we have missed. . . ."

"Maybe I should have had someone sitting in, taking a record of the interview. . . ."

"You wouldn't have got a word out of him. . . ."

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to take over from here, Chief?"

"Not only would it be irregular, a point which his lawyer might well exploit at a later stage, but I shouldn't handle it any better than you. Quite possibly not so well."

"I honestly don't know where I go from here. The worst of it is that, murderer though he is, I can't help feeling sorry for him. . . . I'm just not used to handling that sort of man. . . . He doesn't belong in the realm of crime. . . . When we came out of the hotel just now, I felt as though he had left a world in ruins behind him. . . ."

"So did he."

"Do you really think so?"

"He refused to play on our sympathy, like a beggar in the streets. . . . He was determined to keep some semblance of dignity, whatever the cost. . . ."

"Will he break down in the end, I wonder?"

"He'll talk."

"Tonight?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"Should we carry on here, or . . . ?"

Maigret opened his mouth as though about to speak, then, apparently thinking better of it, closed it again, and relit his pipe. At last he said evasively:

"Don't spring it on him all at once, but you might try leading up to the subject of Mesnil-le-Mont. You could, for instance, ask him if he'd ever been there."

Lecoecur couldn't make out whether he himself attached any great importance to this.

"Do you think the answer will be yes?"

"I couldn't say."

"Why should he have gone there, and what possible bearing could it have on what happened here in Vichy?"

"It was just a thought," replied Maigret apologetically. "When one is adrift, one clutches at straws. . . ."

There was another very young policeman on duty near the entrance, and, in his eyes, the two men standing talking on the stairs were persons of tremendous importance, who had reached the very pinnacle of eminence.

"I wouldn't say no to a glass of beer."

There was a bar on the corner, but there was no possibility of getting to it in this downpour. As for Maigret, the very word "beer" brought a wry smile to his lips. He had given his word to Rian, and he meant to keep it.

"We'd better go back"

They found the young policeman leaning against the wall. He sprang smartly to attention, and stood motionless, while the prisoner looked from one to the other of the older men.

"Thanks, young man. You can go now."

Lecoeur returned to his seat, and began fidgeting with the memo pad, the pencil, and the telephone.

"I wanted to give you a little time to think, Monsieur Pélardeau. I have no wish to harass you or tie you up in knots. For the present, I'm just feeling my way. . . . One tries to form a general picture, but sometimes one gets hold of the wrong end of the stick. . . ."

He was feeling his way, trying to strike the right note, like a musician tuning up before a concert. The man was watching him closely, but still betrayed no sign of emotion.

"You had been married some time, I take it, when you first met Hélène Lange?"

"I was over forty . . . no longer a young man. . . . I had been married fourteen years. . . ."

"Was it a love match?"

"Love is a word that has different meanings at different stages of a man's life. . . ."

"At any rate, it wasn't a cold-blooded marriage of convenience?"

"No. . . . It was my own free choice. . . . And, in that connec-

tion, I have nothing to regret, except the misery I have brought upon my wife. . . . We're very good friends, and always have been. . . . No one could have been more understanding. . . ."

"Even on the subject of Hélène Lange?"

"I never told her. . . ."

"Why not?"

He looked from one to the other.

"It was something I just couldn't talk about. . . . I've never had much to do with women. . . . I've worked hard all my life, and I think perhaps, even in middle age, I was a bit naïve. . . ."

"Was it infatuation?"

"I don't know if that's the right word for it. . . . Hélène was different from anyone I had ever known. . . . I was attracted by her, and yet somehow afraid of her. . . . She was so intense, I didn't know what I was doing. . . ."

"You became lovers?"

"Not at first . . . not for a very long time."

"You mean, she kept you dangling?"

"No, I was reluctant to. . . . You see, she had never had a lover. . . . But all this seems very commonplace to you, I daresay. . . . I loved her, or rather, I thought I did. . . . She made no demands; she seemed content to occupy a very small place in my life, just the few hours once or twice a week that you mentioned. . . ."

"Was there ever any question of divorce?"

"Never! Besides, in a different way, I still loved my wife. . . . I would never have agreed to leave her. . . ."

Poor man! He should have stuck to his office, his factories, and his board meetings, where he knew his way around.

"Did she break it off?"

"Yes. . . ."

Lecoeur exchanged a brief look with Maigret.

"Tell me, Monsieur Pélardeau, did you go to Mesnil-le-Mont?"

His face took on an unhealthy, purple flush. With eyes lowered, he stammered:

"No."

"But you knew she was there?"

"Not at the time. . . ."

"Was this after you had parted?"

"She told me she never wanted to see me again."

"Why was that?"

Once again, that look of utter bewilderment, as though he simply could not make out what was going on.

"She didn't want our child to . . ."

This time, it was Lecoeur whose eyes widened in amazement, while Maigret, apparently not in the least surprised, sat comfortably hunched up, like a contented cat.

"What are you talking about? What child?"

"Why, Hélène's . . . my son. . . ."

In spite of himself, a touch of pride crept into his voice as he spoke of his son.

"Are you telling me that she had a child by you?"

"Yes, my son, Philippe. . . ."

Lecoeur was seething.

"And she hoodwinked you into believing that . . ."

But the man was shaking his head gently.

"There was no question of hoodwinking . . . I have proof."

"What proof?"

"A copy of the birth certificate."

"Signed by the Mayor of Mesnil-le-Mont?"

"Naturally."

"And the woman named as the mother was Hélène Lange?"

"Of course."

"And yet you never went to see this child, whom you believed to be your son?"

"Whom I believe to be my son . . . who is my son. . . . I didn't go because I didn't know where Hélène had hidden herself away to have the child."

"Why all the mystery?"

"Because she was determined that nothing should be done which might, at a later date—how can I put it?—place the child in an equivocal position."

"Wasn't that rather an old-fashioned view to take?"

"You might say so. . . . But H el ene was old-fashioned in some ways. . . . She had a strong sense of . . ."

"See here, Monsieur P elardeau, I think I'm beginning to understand, but for the moment, if you don't mind, we'll leave sentiment out of it. . . . Forgive me for putting it so bluntly, but facts are facts, and there's nothing either of us can do about them. . . ."

"I don't see what you're getting at. . . ."

His outward self-assurance was beginning to give way to a vague uneasiness.

"Did you know Francine Lange?"

"No."

"You never met her in Paris?"

"No. Not in Paris or anywhere else."

"Didn't you know H el ene had a sister?"

"Yes. She used to talk of a younger sister. They were orphans. . . . H el ene left college so that her sister . . ."

Unable to contain himself any longer, Lecoeur got to his feet. He remained standing. If there had been room for it, he would have worked off his fury by pacing up and down.

"Go on. . . . Go on. . . ."

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"So that her sister should have the education she deserved. . . ."

"The education she deserved, indeed! Don't hold it against me, Monsieur P elardeau, but I'm going to have to cause you a great deal of pain. . . . I ought perhaps to have set about things differently, to have prepared you for the truth. . . ."

"What truth?"

"At fifteen, her sister was a hairdresser's assistant in La Rochelle. She was also, at that time, living with a taxi driver, and he was only the first of heaven knows how many men. . . ."

"She showed me her letters. . . ."

"Whose letters?"

"Francine's. She was at a well-known boarding school in Switzerland."

"Did you actually go there and see for yourself?"

"No, of course not."



"Did you keep her letters?"

"No, I just glanced through them."

"And during the whole of that time, Francine was working as a manicurist in a hairdresser's in the Champs-Élysées! Don't you see, the whole thing, from beginning to end, was a sham?"

The man was still putting up a fight. . . . But his self-control, though still remarkable, was beginning to crumble, and suddenly his mouth twisted in an expression so pitiable that Maigret and Lecoeur could not bear to look at him.

"It's not possible," he stammered.

"Regrettably, it's the truth."

"But why?"

It was a last desperate bid to avert his fate. Let them say right out, here and now, that it wasn't true, that it was an ignoble police trick to undermine his resistance.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur Pélardeau. Until tonight, up to this very minute, I too never suspected the extent to which those two were in collusion."

He started to lower himself into his chair, but then sprang up again. He was still too overwrought to sit down.

"Did Hélène never raise the subject of marriage?"

"No. . . ."

This time, he sounded less confident.

"Even when she told you she was pregnant?"

"She didn't want to break up my home. . . ."

"In other words, you did discuss marriage. . . ."

"Not in the way you mean. . . . Only to explain why she was proposing to disappear. . . ."

"To commit suicide?"

"There was never any question of that. . . . But as the child would not be legitimate. . . ."

Lecoeur sighed and, once more, exchanged glances with Maigret. Each knew what the other was thinking. Both, in imagination, were dwelling on the exchanges that must have taken place between Hélène Lange and her lover.

"You don't believe me. . . . I myself . . ."

"You must try and face up to the truth. . . . Self-deception won't help you now. . . ."

"Can anything help me now?"

With a sweeping gesture, he indicated the walls of the little office, as though, to him, they were the walls of a prison cell.

"Let me finish. . . . I know it will sound mawkish to you, but she wanted to devote the rest of her life to bringing up our child, in the same way she had brought up her sister."

"And you were not to be allowed to see your child?"

"On what terms? How could she explain me to him?"

"You might have been an uncle . . . a friend. . . ."

"Hélène hated lying. . . ."

His voice had suddenly taken on a faintly ironic inflection. It was a hopeful sign.

"So she was determined that your son should never know that you were his father?"

"Later, when he came of age, she was going to tell him. . . ."

He added, in his strange, hoarse voice:

"He's fifteen now. . . ."

Lecoeur and Maigret listened in painful silence.

"When I saw her in Vichy, I decided . . ."

"Go on."

"That I must see him, or at least find out where he was. . . ."

"And did you?"

"He shook his head, and this time there were real tears in his eyes.

"No."

"Did Hélène tell you where she was going to have the child?"

"In a village she knew. . . . She didn't tell me the name. . . . Then, two months later, she sent me a copy of the birth certificate. The letter was posted in Marseilles. . . ."

"How much money did you give her before she left?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal, as you will see."

"Twenty thousand francs. . . . I sent thirty thousand more to her

in Marseilles. . . . Naturally, it was my wish that, thereafter, she should have a regular allowance, to enable her to give our son the best of everything. . . .”

“Five thousand francs a month?”

“Yes. . . .”

“What reason did she give for wanting the money to be sent to a different town each time . . . ?”

“She was afraid I wouldn’t have the will power”

“Was that what she said?”

“Yes. . . . I had agreed, in the end, not to see the child until he came of age. . . .”

Lecoœur’s look plainly asked Maigret:

“What’s to be done?”

But Maigret only blinked rapidly two or three times, and bit hard on the stem of his pipe.



Lecocour was sitting down, having lowered himself very slowly into his seat. He turned to the man whose puckered face revealed all that he had just had to endure, and said, almost sorrowfully:

“I’m going to have to cause you still more pain, Monsieur Pélardeau.”

The man responded with an embittered smile, as though to say:

“Is that possible, do you think?”

“I feel for you, and indeed respect you as a man. . . . I’m not fabricating all this to trick you into making admissions which, anyway, would be superfluous. . . . What I have to tell you now, like everything I have told you so far, is strictly true, and no one is more sorry than I am that the truth should be so harsh. . . .”

A pause, to give his hearer time to prepare himself.

“You never had a son by Héléne Lange.”

He had expected a vehement denial, or least a violent outburst of some sort, but he was met with a blank, expressionless stare, and silence. This was a broken man.

“Did you never have any suspicion?”

Pélardeau raised his head, shook it, and put his hand to his throat

to indicate that, for the moment, he was unable to speak. He barely had time to get his handkerchief out of his pocket when he was racked by another attack of asthma, more violent than the first.

In the silence that followed, Maigret became aware that outside too it had grown silent. The thunder had ceased, and the rain was no longer thudding down.

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"You did have occasion to suspect the truth, didn't you?"

"Once. . . . Only once."

"When?"

"Here . . . that night. . . ."

"When did you first see her?"

"Two days before. . . ."

"Did you follow her?"

"Yes, keeping out of sight . . . to find out where she lived. I was waiting for her to come out with my son, or to see him come out alone. . . ."

"On Monday night, did you speak to her as she was going into the house?"

"No. . . . I saw the lodgers go out. . . . I knew she was in the park, listening to the music. . . . She always liked music. . . . I had no difficulty in opening the door. . . . The key of my hotel room fitted the lock. . . ."

"You searched through the drawers?"

"The first thing I noticed was that there was only a single bed. . . ."

"What about the photographs?"

"They were all of her. . . . Not one of anyone else. . . . I would have given anything to have found a photograph of a child. . . ."

"And letters?"

"Yes. . . . I couldn't understand it. . . . There was nothing. Even if Philippe was away at boarding school, he must have . . ."

"And she found you there when she got in?"

"Yes. I begged her to tell me where our son was. . . . I remember asking her if he was dead . . . if there had been an accident."

"And she wouldn't answer?"

"She took it all much more calmly than I did. She reminded me of our pact."

"That she would give you your son when he reached the age of twenty-one?"

"Yes. . . . On condition that I should never make any attempt to see him before then."

"Did she talk about him?"

"In great detail. . . . About when he cut his first teeth. . . . His childhood ailments. . . . The nurse she engaged to look after him when she herself was unwell. . . . Then school. . . . She gave me almost a day-by-day account of his life."

"But she never said where he was?"

"No. . . . She said that recently he had begun to take a great interest in medicine . . . that he wanted to become a doctor. . . ."

He looked straight at the Superintendent, without embarrassment.

"There was no such boy?"

"Yes, there was. . . . But he was not your son. . . ."

"You mean there was another man?"

Lecoeur shook his head.

"It was Francine Lange who gave birth to a son at Mesnil-le-Mont. . . . I confess that, until you told me so yourself, I had no idea that H  l  ne Lange had registered the child as her own. . . . The plan must have occurred to the two sisters when Francine Lange found she was pregnant. . . . If I know anything about Francine, her first thought must have been to get rid of it. . . . Her sister was more far-sighted. . . ."

"It came to me in a flash, as I told you. . . . That night, when I found that she was deaf to my entreaties, I used threats. . . . For fifteen years I had looked forward with longing to the time when I should see this son of mine. My wife and I have no children of our own. . . . When I knew that I was a father. . . . But what's the use?"

"You took her by the throat?"

"To frighten her, to make her talk. . . . I shouted at her. . . . I demanded the truth. . . . I never thought of the sister . . . but I feared that the child was dead, or crippled. . . ."

His hands slipped out of his lap and hung down limply, as though all the strength of that great, burly frame had drained away.

"I squeezed too hard. . . . I didn't realize. . . . If only she had shown the faintest spark of feeling! But she didn't . . . not even of fear. . . ."

"When you read in the paper that her sister was in Vichy, it gave you fresh hope?"

"If the child was alive and Hélène was the only person who knew where he was, there was no one left to care for him. . . . I knew I must expect to be arrested at any time. . . . You must have found my fingerprints."

"Without knowing whose they were . . . though, in the end, we would have caught up with you. . . ."

"I had to know, to make provision. . . ."

"You worked your way, in alphabetical order, through the list of hotels. . . ."

"How did you know?"

It was childish, but Lecoeur badly felt the need of a boost to his self-esteem.

"Each time you used a different phone booth."

"So you had tracked me down already?"

"Almost."

"But what about Philippe?"

"Francine Lange's son was put out to foster parents soon after birth—a family called Berteaux, small tenant farmers at Saint-André-du-Lavion, in the Vosges. . . . The sisters used your money to buy a hairdressing salon in La Rochelle. . . . Neither of them took the slightest interest in the child. . . . He lived with his foster parents in the country until, at the age of two and a half, he was drowned in a pond."

"He's dead, then?"

"Yes. . . . But, as far as you were concerned, he had to be kept alive. All that about his childhood, his early schooling, his pranks, and his recent interest in medicine, was made up on the spur of the moment."

"How monstrous!"

"Yes."

"To think that any woman could . . ."

He shook his head.

"It's not that I don't believe you . . . but, somehow, my whole being revolts. . . ."

"It's not the first case of its kind in the history of crime. . . . I could tell you of others. . . ."

"No," he begged.

He sat hunched up, limp. There was nothing left for him to cling to.

"You were quite right, just now, when you said that you didn't need a lawyer. . . . You have only to tell your story to a jury. . . ."

He put his head in his hands and sat there, very still.

"Your wife must be getting anxious. . . . In my opinion, it would be kinder to tell her the truth—otherwise she'll be imagining much worse things. . . ."

He raised a flushed face to Lecoeur. He had probably forgotten her until then.

"What am I going to say to her?"

"Unfortunately, for the present, you won't have an opportunity to say anything to her. . . . I am not at liberty to release you, even for a very short time. . . . You will have to accompany me to Clermont-Ferrand. But, unless the examining magistrate objects, which I'm certain he won't, your wife will be able to visit you there."

Pélardeau, deeply disturbed on his wife's account, turned, in desperation, to Maigret:

"Couldn't you see to it?"

Maigret looked inquiringly at Lecoeur, who shrugged as if to say that it was no concern of his.

"I'll do my best."

"You'll have to be careful, because my wife has suffered from a weak heart for some years. . . . We're neither of us young any more. . . ."

Nor was Maigret. Tonight, he felt old. He couldn't wait to get back

to his wife, and resume the humdrum routine of their daily life, walking through the streets of Vichy, sitting on the little yellow chairs in the park.

They went downstairs together.

"Do you want a lift, Chief?"

"I'd rather walk."

The streets were glistening. The black car, taking Lecoeur and Pélardeau to Clermont-Ferrand, disappeared in the distance.

Maigret lit his pipe and, without thinking, put his hands in his pockets. It wasn't cold, but the temperature had dropped several degrees after the storm.

The shrubs on either side of the entrance to the Hôtel de la Bérézina were dripping.

"Here you are at last!" exclaimed Madame Maigret, getting out of bed to welcome him. "I dreamed you were at the Quai des Orfèvres questioning a suspect, and having beer sent up to you every five minutes. . . ."

But when she had had time to take a good look at him, her voice changed, and she murmured:

"It's over, then?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"A very respectable man. He had charge of thousands of office and factory workers, but he never learned much about the ways of the world."

"I hope you'll be able to sleep late tomorrow morning."

"I'm afraid not. . . . I've got to go and explain to his wife. . . ."

"Doesn't she know?"

"No."

"Is she here in Vichy?"

"At the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs."

"What about him?"

"Within the next half-hour, he'll be behind bars in the Clermont-Ferrand prison."

She watched him closely as he undressed, but could not quite interpret his rather odd expression.



“How many years do you think he’ll . . .”

Maigret always liked to have two or three puffs at his pipe before going to bed. He was filling it now. Without looking up, he said:

“He’ll be acquitted, I hope.”

THE END

HONEST RELIABLE CORPSE

BY

GEORGE BAGBY

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I suppose we were friends, Mrs. Carpenter and I. She irritated me, but I respected her. I found her absurd, but I admired her. Although my initial reaction to her was wary, I came to look on her, as time passed, with affection. She could be the silliest of women, and in many respects she was never anything but silly. At the same time, however, she never lost her capacity for coming up with a surprising shrewdness and good sense.

She belonged to the generation that had been reared to believe that competence in any but some carefully delimited areas was unwomanly and that even the smallest show of competence in any field external to the womanly sphere could bring upon a lady nothing but masculine displeasure and disapproval.

An Italian statesman once remarked that efficiency was a form of ambition and therefore despicable. Although Mrs. Carpenter would never have accepted this dictum as a universal principle, it was, to her way of thinking, true for her own sex. Efficiency and even ambition were suitable to gentlemen. For a lady they had to be limited to such matters as her dress, her grooming, and her household management—all of these pursuits which were not only beneath the notice of the superior male but also designed with the sole purpose of contributing to his comforts and his pleasure.

Mrs. Carpenter was old. How old I shall never know since she was firmly convinced that age was at least as unwomanly as reason. Each accumulated year was a secret disgrace. It had to be hidden away. If a lady had no other skeletons in her closet, these she did have, her years. Nothing would ever persuade her to admit to them. So Mrs. Carpenter to the end of her days never attained a seniority more specific than was required for voter registration—"over twenty-one." I think she would have welcomed a reduction in the voting age to

eighteen. She could have been a happier woman if throughout her long march across all those uncounted decades she could always have been only "over eighteen."

When I knew her, she was already ancient. We began merely as neighbors. I moved into the apartment directly above hers. Only because she was so staggeringly old did I become aware of her before I'd even begun to recognize the faces of any of my other new neighbors. The building was one of New York's impressive town houses, broken up and converted into small apartments. Mine was one flight up. Hers was on the ground floor. The street door was glass set in a wrought bronze frame and covered with a handsome grille of wrought bronze.

Obviously way back there when the house was built there had been no expectation that this door would ever be handled by anyone but the most muscular of butlers or footmen. Certainly no female of that day could have had the muscle it took to move its great weight. For a lady of Mrs. Carpenter's antiquity it was unthinkable.

So as early as the first days after I moved in, I made Mrs. Carpenter's acquaintance. It seemed to me that almost any time I went in or out during the daylight hours, I would no sooner touch that heavy front door than the lady would emerge from her apartment and begin her slow progress down the hall on her way to the street. I would open the door and stand holding it for her until she had passed through it. It was never just a moment's wait because, done at Mrs. Carpenter's stiff and painful crawl, even that short distance from her apartment door to the street door took a bit of time.

It is true that she was never alone. She always had another woman with her, easily spotted as a maid-companion. These maid-companions were all much her junior. She had many of them in rapid succession. It was obvious that the turnover was quick and constant. Although younger than Mrs. Carpenter, virtually all of them were at least elderly; and, although steadier on their feet and swifter of movement than the lady herself, the best that could be said for any of that lot would be that she was spry for her age and steady enough to give the old lady a supporting arm. Mrs. Carpenter had to have that if she was going to make it down the hall.

Mrs. Carpenter never failed to thank me; but since she not only unflinchingly observed the amenities but also always kept them in proportion, there was invariably too much time for filling up with nothing but expressions of gratitude. Rather than allow herself to become fulsome, therefore, she always appended to her thanks a nicely measured sentence or two of gracious conversation. It was all most engagingly artful with never an embarrassing moment of speechlessness, never a speech left unfinished, and never even the smallest additional pause in the doorway to give her time to finish what she was saying. Her words were always perfectly timed to her steps.

I came to suspect her of dressing for the street and lurking behind her window draperies until she saw me coming up the block so that she could time her emergence from her apartment to coincide with my putting my key into the front door or alternatively waiting similarly ready just inside her door until she heard my step on the stairs as I started down to go out, but I didn't mind. It seemed a harmless little stratagem, and I could imagine that it might even help to fill up time for a lonely old lady.

I wondered how they managed the door when they would be on their way in. I couldn't imagine how she could work it to loiter in the street until some neighbor came along and she could make it seem as though it had just happened that he was in time to hold the door for her. Then once, not more than a couple of days after our first encounter, I did happen to meet them on the street when they and I were both on our way home. Since I was there and, of course, again holding the door, I didn't get to see how they might have managed without, but I did notice a few small changes, and they gave me some ideas.

Coming back home, Mrs. Carpenter's pace was far more rapid than I ever saw it when she was on her way out. It seemed notably less stiff. She also appeared to be far steadier on her feet. Even though she still had the maid-companion's arm, the need for it appeared to be markedly less great.

On her way out it would be doubtful whether she could stand alone while her companion struggled with the heavy front door or go through it alone while her companion would be fully occupied with

holding it open for her. Coming back in, she could, if necessary, have managed nicely.

There's nothing mysterious about this seeming transformation. The poor old lady was painfully arthritic. Trying to favor one aching joint or another, she was forced into an unnatural walk which tended to make her balance precarious. A lesser woman would have long since taken to her chair and allowed those joints to seal into immobility, but old Mrs. Carpenter was a woman of courage, energy, and indomitable will. In anything but the most inclement weather she forced herself to go out, and she had her walk, keeping those joints mobile, fighting past their pain to limber them up.

It was only by making herself walk that she could keep herself walking. The Mrs. Carpenter who came home from each of her walks was enjoying the limbered-up rewards of another in her endless succession of small triumphs over the wheelchair that loomed menacingly in her future and that she had again, by an effort of will and a victory over pain, held off.

Despite the fact that she lived in the least expensive apartment in the house, the noisy, dirty, and over-accessible ground floor, she gave every evidence of being far more affluent than any of the rest of us in the building. Her furs, her jewels, and her clothes attested to that. There was never anything casual or informal about her dress or her grooming, nor was there ever anything about them to suggest an elegance left over from younger days.

I make no pretensions to any kind of expertise in the field of women's fashions, but there is an expensive look that even I know cannot be cheaply achieved. A young chick with the right figure can flip a miniskirt around her trim behind, and what man will think to ask whether she looks expensive or not? The question becomes wildly irrelevant. A Mrs. Carpenter, however, can't zip herself into just anything. Picture it for yourself. Most of the anythings currently available on anyone's bargain rack would make her look horrible. Those that came nearest to suiting her would make her look merely ridiculous.

If a thing was even to begin to suit her, you would think it would

have to be emphatically out of style; but Mrs. Carpenter never came out her door that she didn't look smart and, in some mysterious fashion you mustn't ask me to explain, curiously with it. The lady obviously had someone who built clothes specially for her and built them with a skill that made her look as though she belonged in these times, not as though she had miraculously survived into these times out of an earlier era or as though she were making herself ridiculous by trying to pretend that she was not over twenty-one but under.

Everything she wore showed these evidences of being the product of a dressmaking genius, and she wore a great many things. I can't tell you just how many weeks of doorholding it took, but it was many before she came through wearing a dress or a suit I'd seen her wearing previously. She did repeat on fur coats, because in all the time I knew her I saw only five of those, and even by the end of the first week I'd held the door for her more than five times.

Whether without Geneva Washington our friendship would ever have ripened beyond these amenities at the street door I don't know. I don't think she would have made any moves toward anything more, and I know I would have had no thought but to dodge and resist any such moves. Sharing a pot of decaffeinated coffee down by the old boob tube? It's not the way Bagby spends his evenings.

But then there was Geneva. The first time I saw her I narrowly missed losing control of the door. To the last she never came before me as anything but a fresh astonishment, and it wasn't only that she was so startling a change from her string of predecessors. They had been many and various, Mrs. Carpenter's maid-companions. Narrow and wide, short and tall, round and angular, misshapen and shapeless, they had run the gamut from frump to horror.

I could well understand why Mrs. Carpenter had the quick turnover on them. If at any time I'd been forced to look at one of them for longer than it took her to shepherd Mrs. Carpenter past me at the door, the ordeal would have driven me straight up the wall. Anything that wasn't painful to look at, even anything that didn't have a lugubrious look would have come as a surprise after Mrs. Carpenter's haunt parade.

Coming after them, a girl who had anything at all would have looked good. But then there was Geneva, and when I describe her, you won't believe me. I never quite believed myself.

If Trojan Paris had ever seen Geneva, he would have stormed up to Olympus yelling "apple back." He would know that he'd been cheated when he was handed Helen of Troy. Helen could only have been second best. Geneva was the most.

What was more, she did it without even trying. You know those movies in which Hollywood's most glamorous dish goes through half a film in the wrong hairdo and the wrong clothes and the wrong everything so that she looks like the girl nobody sees until the one touch of love comes along and by its magic she's transformed into the thing you see on the billboards. Geneva gave every appearance of being gotten up for the first half of one of those movies, but in her case it made no difference. The girl had it in every way there is for it to be had, and it never mattered what she did to herself. It still showed up. No matter how shapeless her clothes, her shape came through. She was obviously doing her best to look like a frump or even like a horror, but she wasn't even getting to first base with it. She was Geneva. She was beautiful. She was sexy. She was wildly desirable. She couldn't be anything else.

Mrs. Carpenter never had bothered to introduce me to any of the others, and maybe the first ten times I held the door for her and Geneva she didn't think to introduce me to this paragon either, but Mrs. Carpenter wasn't blind and Mrs. Carpenter was no fool. She had to know what she had there, and she couldn't be unaware of what it was doing to me. You don't go through a door past the man who's holding it for you day after day without sooner or later noticing that he's panting and that his tongue is hanging out.

So when eventually she did introduce me, I thought it was because I had by then become so abjectly pathetic a spectacle that she had found it in her heart to pity me.

"This is Mr. Bagby, Geneva," she said. "He's our neighbor in the apartment above us." Then she turned to me. "Miss Washington, my companion," she said.

I found some words I hoped might suggest the measure of my

delight. Miss Washington found for me an icy "how do you do," and a look that just passed over me without ever touching. It didn't even leave me the hope that she had taken note of me as someone from whom she could one day borrow a cup of sugar.

We met several times that way. I got to the place where I didn't even run down to the corner to pick up a newspaper without first brushing my hair and brooding a while about my choice of tie or turtleneck, but all to no effect. So far as Geneva was concerned, I was beginning to think that even if I were a turtle in a peopleneck sweater, she would still take no notice of me.

I guess it was all of a week or a bit more that we hung at that stage. Then Mrs. Carpenter gave it a nudge. She sent me a note. It explained that she had been both remiss and dilatory. When I first moved into the house, she should have asked me down for drinks as a gesture of welcome to a new neighbor. As I may have observed, however, she had, ever since I first moved in, been having a protracted period of companion trouble. The women in her employ had been an unbroken succession of disasters, each more depressing than the one before.

"I felt it would be neither courtesy nor kindness," she wrote, "to ask anyone to come and drink under the eye of one of those Gorgons. That they were rapidly turning me to stone was my own private tragedy. I was not asking anyone to share it. Now, however, that I have Geneva, would you come this afternoon at five? If you cannot today, then set any afternoon at your convenience. This time of year we're always back from our walk well before five. It's so much pleasanter to get it in before the sun is down, so any day that suits you."

Five of that same day suited me fine. I went downstairs with my hopes running high. Geneva, after all, was a companion. Would she not, over drinks, be professionally obligated to be companionable? I was no more than in the door, however, before the question answered itself. Geneva Washington was Mrs. Carpenter's companion. She wasn't mine.

She opened the door for me. When I extended my hand, she made a good try at not seeing it. I left it out there waiting, determined that the girl was going to recognize something. If it couldn't be my

friendliness, it would at least be my embarrassment. She did notice and after a too obvious stage-wait she finally did take my hand. She pumped it vigorously just once and then disengaged herself from it. She didn't just let go of my hand or pull hers away. It was more as though she had grasped my hand firmly and thrown it back at me. I felt as though we might have been playing a game of catch with that hand of mine and that she had immediately tired of the entertainment.

We were in the small entrance hall of the apartment. Beyond it through broad double doors that stood ajar lay the living room and there, uncompromisingly straight backed in her *Louis Seize* chair, my hostess was waiting for me. Her room was like herself. The whole of the house could once have been like that before it had so far fallen from its grand estate that it opened its doors to the likes of me and the other tenants.

It was all grace and delicacy and understated grandeur in its French antique furniture, its Aubusson rug, its palatial appointments, and its pale damask draperies that completely covered the windows. You could forget that outside lay only our Manhattan street with the cars parked along the curb and not the gardens and fountains of Versailles.

Even while I was busy greeting my hostess and making the proper responses to her gracious words of welcome, I was aware that Mrs. Carpenter and I were alone. Geneva had not accompanied me in from the little hall. She had disappeared.

Mrs. Carpenter asked me to sit down. She called my attention to the vermeil cup that held the cigarettes. I passed them to her, and she took one. When I had both our cigarettes lighted, she twinkled at me.

"Don't begin regretting that you came, Mr. Bagby," she said. "You shan't be stuck with me. Geneva will be out directly. It's not possible that she'll be taking more than a minute or two."

I worked at the required lies, and even while she was thanking me and commending my politeness, she laughed at me.

"I'm a foolish woman," she said, "but not yet that foolish. Geneva

is an incredibly beautiful child. I was beautiful myself once, but never more than credibly so, never like this girl. Has anyone ever been?"

So we waited for Geneva and we made conversation. In the classic manner Mrs. Carpenter manipulated me into talking about myself. I could imagine her learning that at her mother's knee. "If you want to hold a gentleman's interest, my child, you must induce him to talk about himself. You must never expect him to be interested in what you think. He is interested only in your being interested in what he thinks. Admire him and he will find you admirable. Admire his intelligence and he will find you admirably intelligent. Advance one idea of your own and immediately you become the silly goose who entertains the delusion that she can think."

It doesn't matter if you know what one of these old-time belles is doing or even if you are fully aware of how she is doing it, the response is automatic. You can't possibly fail to expand under the treatment. I told her I was a writer and that I wrote about crime. I explained that I did my work in close collaboration with my friend, Inspector Schmidt, and that, since Schmitty was New York's Chief of Homicide, the crimes of which I wrote were those that fell within the inspector's sphere. They were murders.

"How exciting," she said, and suggested that I fix myself a drink. "I think you'll find everything you need."

I had already noticed the commode with the marquetry front and the array of potables and crystal on its marble top. So far as I could see, it held everything anyone could ever need. There was no telling about brands since everything had been poured off into cut crystal decanters and was identified only by the silver bottle tags which told you no more than which was Scotch and which sherry, which was gin and which vodka.

"What may I fix for you?" I asked.

"Oh, would you? I have been looking forward to it. Drinks always taste so much better when they are done by a gentleman. Would you give me a sherry, please?"

"Certainly, but there isn't much a gentleman can do with that."

"Oh, no," she said. "You must have whatever you like. The whisky or the cognac. You'll find either all right. I don't trust my own judgment. I just reorder what Mr. Carpenter used to put in."

I assured her that I would do very well and explained that I couldn't lay claim to bringing anything special to simply pouring sherry into a glass.

"But you will," she said. "I know you will. It is different when a gentleman does it. There's a mystique to it."

I poured her sherry and hoped I was putting enough mystique into it. I aimed at about five to one. For myself I tried the Scotch.

Mrs. Carpenter took a sip. "Delicious," she said. "I knew it would be."

I sampled my Scotch. I should have known. It was a whisky that made me feel callow and presumptuous. No man not in a position to filter that beautiful liquid through a perfectly kept white mustache could ever think himself worthy of it.

On a table at Mrs. Carpenter's elbow a crystal bowl of fresh caviar stood in a larger bowl of cracked ice. She spooned a mound of it on to a square of toast. That was for me. She followed it by fixing a bit for herself.

"That girl," she grumbled. "That impossible girl."

"I'm afraid she's taken a dislike to me," I said.

"Nonsense. On the contrary, she's in her room making herself pretty, which is no more than proper, but if she had done it when I urged her to, she'd have had more than enough time. Urged her to? I commanded her, and she ignored me. So now when she should be out here, now she goes to do it, and she's taking a ridiculously long time for it, too. It's not as though she were a woman who must spend despairing hours before her mirror, trying this and trying that in the desperate hope of finding something that might help a little. Almost anything this girl would do—it would take no more than a touch really—and she's radiant. And that's not the most ridiculous part of it. I've seen the clothes she has, one thing grimmer than the next. Since with her looks she really needs no doing and since she hasn't a thing out there to do with, what can she possibly be spending all this time on?"

"Steeling herself to the point where she can stand being in the same room with me, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "Unhappily, the conclusion seems inescapable."

"Ridiculous. She's an intelligent girl."

"It could be an allergy," I suggested.

"We've met you in the hall dozens of times and she's never even so much as sneezed."

"I noticed that," I said, "but I've also noticed that she has never even so much as smiled."

"Yes. She's a strange girl."

Mrs. Carpenter plied me with more caviar. She kept a watchful eye on the level of the whisky in my glass, ready to urge me to replenish it the minute it would drop low. She deftly steered the conversation back to me and to murder. She suggested that I must be a great help to the inspector in his work.

"Such wonderful luck for a police officer," she said, "to be able to turn to a man like you, a man of education, of culture, of experience."

I told her about Schmitt and assured her that it was only because he was a patient man that he ever put up with me.

"He doesn't turn to me," I said. "He can't. I'm always lagging too far behind. The inspector is a genius. He's brilliant. In his field I'm afraid I'm not even bright."

She liked what she insisted on calling my modesty and my generosity. She thought it charming of me to speak so glowingly of my friend.

"You must bring him to see me," she said. "You must do it very soon. I should like that."

I could imagine nothing less probable. Schmitt, for one thing, dislikes antique French furniture. He doesn't trust it. He's always expecting it to collapse under him. I didn't tell her that. I said nothing. I didn't have to. She was looking at her watch.

"But really," she said, obviously rising to a full boil. "That girl. This is really too much."

She snatched a little vermeil bell up from the table beside her and rang it. Geneva came into the room.

"You wanted me, Mrs. Carpenter?" she asked.

The girl looked exactly as she had when she opened the door to me. If she'd been spending the intervening time before her mirror, it could only have been to study out some possibility of making herself, against every force of nature, look even more forbidding.

Mrs. Carpenter, prepared even before seeing the girl to be waspish, now exploded in exasperation.

"You thought perhaps I was tuning up to play JINGLE BELLS?" she snapped.

"I thought you wanted me, Mrs. Carpenter."

"Clever of you, my girl. Most clever, but why didn't you think of obliging me?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Carpenter. I did come the very moment you rang. Now what can I do for you?"

"You can stop fencing with me. You undertook to be my companion. Since when do I have to ring to let you know I want you with me? Shutting yourself up alone in your room is certainly not companionable. Or could I have been mistaken? Perhaps you are not a companion?"

"When you have company, Mrs. Carpenter, surely you don't need me then."

"I'll be the judge of when I need you, Geneva. Now you will sit down and you will tell Mr. Bagby what you will have to drink. You will serve Mr. Bagby the caviar. You will allow me the pleasure of a civilized hour."

For just a moment they were quite still, glaring at each other while the tension between them built to what would have to be a breaking point. When I say breaking point, I mean I was expecting that they would be grabbing things up and letting fly at each other. I felt I was only a moment away from being caught in the middle of a cloud of flying Sevres and Baccarat.

But it didn't happen. Geneva Washington gave way. She smiled. She went to the table and took a cigarette. Turning to me, she waited for me to light it.

"I'd like a martini on the rocks, Mr. Bagby," she said. "Dry, please, and, please, nothing Dickensian."

Just as suddenly as the babe had yielded, just so suddenly Mrs. Carpenter became the relaxed and gracious hostess. She laughed.

"What does nothing Dickensian mean?" she asked. "I haven't been keeping up."

"Charles Dickens," Geneva said.

"I know. *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP*. I know he's out of fashion. People say things like a man would have to have a heart of stone to read of the death of Little Nell and not laugh. I like *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP*. I cried over the death of Little Nell. I think it's a pity that there are no books today that make me cry, but what has any of that to do with your martini, my dear?"

"Just a straight martini," I explained. "No olive or twist of lemon."

Mrs. Carpenter winced at the pun. You could always count on the old girl for doing the correct thing, but she enjoyed it, nonetheless. She let me pour her another sherry, and she made certain that I replenished my beautiful Scotch. Geneva, now that she had accepted defeat, set herself to accept it gracefully. She complimented me on the martini and she agreed with Mrs. Carpenter that drinks never tasted quite good enough unless they were made by a gentleman.

"You can make my martinis any time, Mr. Bagby," she said.

I told her that she could spoon me my caviar any time, and we had a delightfully cozy interval while Mrs. Carpenter was steering the conversation back to where her training told her it belonged. Subtly she enlisted Geneva's cooperation in the project of inducing me to talk about myself.

"Mr. Bagby is a writer," she said. "He writes about homicide. Of course, he's modest about it, but he helps the police, specifically the Chief of Homicide." She turned to me. "It's Inspector Schmidt, isn't it?"

I said it was.

"He's going to bring the inspector around to have drinks with us one day soon. Isn't that lovely? We shan't be dull, my dear."

Geneva spilled her martini into her lap. Mopping at it frantically in an effort to catch the spilled gin before it could run down off her skirt and dribble on the rug, she hit the caviar spoon with her elbow.

It went flipping out of the bowl and fell to the rug she'd been trying to save, scattering big, gray pearls of the roe all around it.

"Oh," she wailed. "I am a clumsy fool."

"It doesn't matter, my dear," Mrs. Carpenter told her. "According to its history, it was soaked with blood during the Terror and that washed out. Actually if we get the caviar up without anyone stepping on it and crushing the grains, I don't think it will even stain."

I got down on my knees alongside Geneva and together we picked the scattered gray grains off the rug. Mrs. Carpenter was quite right. Gathered up quickly while they were still chilled from the iced bowl, the undamaged grains left no mark on the tight weave of the Aubusson. It struck me that this might well be the ultimate mark of affluence, for a woman to have such sure expertise in the effects of spilled caviar.

Taking with her the spoon and what we'd gathered up from the floor, Geneva went out to the kitchen for a fresh spoon. Mrs. Carpenter waited till she was out of the room.

"Oh, dear," she whispered, as soon as the girl was gone. "That was too bad. I had just begun to think that things might go well. I must find a way to do something for that child."

"Why? What's wrong with her?"

"She's a treasure. I'm terrified of losing her, but I don't see how I can keep her. It's impossible for her to go on indefinitely the way she's been doing. It's unnatural. She has nothing."

Nothing seemed to be the wrong word to use of Geneva who was most arrestingly the babe who had everything. I was about to embark on a catalogue of all the things Geneva had, but Mrs. Carpenter's elbow in my ribs warned me that Geneva was returning with the fresh spoon. It was time for a change of subject.

"There's a martini that needs rebuilding," I said. "Just as it was, Miss Washington?"

"Don't you think I shouldn't have any more till I've learned how to get it up to my mouth successfully?" she said.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Carpenter told her. "How will you learn unless you practice? And if you think I will permit you to go back to your

room and shut yourself away while you try it with your toothbrush glass, forget it. Now where were we?"

"Down on the rug picking up spilled caviar," Geneva said.

"Not that," Mrs. Carpenter decreed. "We were talking about Mr. Bagby bringing Inspector Schmidt around for drinks, and they were going to tell us all about their exciting murders."

Geneva shuddered. "Mrs. Carpenter, please," she said. "Could we talk about something else? I hate violence. I'm terrified of it. I'm sorry. It's the way I am. I'm one of those people. The world, life, reality, it's all too much for me. I can't live with it. Maybe I oughtn't say this, but haven't you thought it strange that I should take this job? I love it here. It's everything I want. Don't misunderstand me, but I know it isn't natural for me to want no more than this. I'm young. I'm healthy. I'm not ugly. You'd expect me to want to be out in the world like other girls, having fun, going out with men, doing all the normal, gay things; but I don't. I just want to be here with you, dear, dear Mrs. Carpenter. Please."

Mrs. Carpenter took the girl in her arms. It seemed a pity that I couldn't have been the one to do it.

"One dry and unfrightening martini coming up," I said.

Everybody laughed. Geneva took a sip of her fresh drink and spooned me up some more caviar.

 II 

After that only moderately successful cocktail party I did get to see some more of Geneva. Our little door-holding ceremonies continued as before, but, in addition, on a couple of occasions I had a few minutes with the girl alone. Once it was when she was on her way out to do the marketing and the other time when I met her on the street. That time she was on her way home from marketing.

She was always pleasant enough but, despite my best efforts, we made no progress. The chief difficulty seemed to be that both times she was in a hurry. Mrs. Carpenter was alone, and Geneva didn't like leaving her alone.

"She's marvelous," she said, "but she is so old, and she's hardly well. She oughtn't ever be alone, not even for a little while."

Talk never goes well when two people are racing along a street. Conversation works better when it's done at a saunter.

"It's not that bad," I argued, galloping along beside her and trying to persuade her to slow down a bit. "Before you came there were many days when she was between companions. She managed beautifully alone."

It was the wrong thing to say. As though spurred with fresh terror at the thought of the risks that had been run before she first came to Mrs. Carpenter, she scooted along at an even faster clip.

"But she shouldn't have," she gasped.

That was our first meeting *à deux*. It wasn't until I was back in my own place and Opal came in to give me my daily hour of tidying up, that it occurred to me that Mrs. Carpenter had not been alone. Opal was the jewel shared among four of us in the building. She came to Mrs. Carpenter for a couple of hours a day, to me for an hour, and to two of the other people for an hour each. I knew her routine. She always started at the bottom and worked up. It was first Mrs. Car-

penter, then me, and then the others. So if Opal was now in my kitchenette loading my stacked breakfast dishes into the dishwasher, then for two hours back she should have been downstairs doing for Mrs. Carpenter.

I asked her.

Yes. She had just come from there.

"It's been quite a change," I remarked.

Opal sniffed.

"It's much better for Mrs. Carpenter having someone young and pleasant around her," I persisted.

Opal sniffed again. This time the sniff hovered around the dimensions of a snort.

"Young and pretty and devoted," I said.

"Yeah. She's young."

Opal granted me that much, but even then it was grudging.

I let it rest. It was obvious that Opal, for one, was not charmed by Geneva Washington. Even what little I was saying of the girl was putting Opal into a bad temper. You have to watch yourself with jewels. You never tamper with their precarious good will.

When I had my second encounter with Geneva alone, however, I was prepared. She was in the same tearing hurry. She had to get her errands done and return to Mrs. Carpenter. Mrs. Carpenter was alone and it was all wrong.

"Opal didn't come in today? Don't tell me I'm going to have to make my own bed."

A pretty flush came up into her cheeks. For a moment she was at a loss, but she made a quick recovery.

"Opal," she said, and her scorn of the jewel was at least the equal of the jewel's scorn of her. "Whatever good could Opal be if Mrs. Carpenter were taken suddenly ill? Opal, now really."

And there she was putting on another of those fresh bursts of speed, as though the thought of all the wrong things competent Opal might think to do for a suddenly ailing Mrs. Carpenter had awakened in her a new assortment of fears.

Now Opal was a sensible woman. She took care of a ne'er-do-well husband. She'd raised a brood of kids with great success. She had

nursed her own old mother through the old lady's declining years. She was level-headed, experienced, and unflappable; and if she had anything in her nature you could call vanity, it was the pride she took in her ability to cope with anything that came along, whether it was routine or emergency.

"You're underestimating Opal," I said. "She's a tower of strength."

"She's clean," Geneva said, "and she doesn't break things. I'm happier when I'm with Mrs. Carpenter myself."

If she was going to get back home any faster, she was going to need roller skates.

That was the last time I saw Geneva alone. After that meeting, it was only when I would run into her on her outings with Mrs. Carpenter. It was about a week later that Opal brought me the news. She came to me early that day and she was breathless and even more briskly efficient than usual.

She hoped I wouldn't mind if she gave me less than my hour that day. She would do only what was imperative and she would keep track of just how much time she gave me. She was going to make the same arrangement with the people upstairs. She had to be through early.

"Tomorrow," she said, "I'll fix it at home to stay longer. Today it's the only way I can manage."

"Trouble, Opal?"

I had to follow her around as she worked. She was taking no time for chatter.

"Mrs. Carpenter," she said, as she stripped my bed. "I have to take her for her walk this afternoon."

"Something wrong with Geneva?"

Opal put such muscular vehemence into shaking out a fresh sheet that the thing cracked like a whip.

"Her," she growled. "I knew from the first what she was."

"What happened?"

"Can't leave Mrs. Carpenter alone for a minute. Can't leave her alone not even with me. So devoted she's a big, fat pain in the you-know-where. So now look what she's gone and done."

By following Opal from task to task in the short time she gave me

that day, I finally worked past her anger and indignation and got her down to the simple facts. They couldn't have been simpler. They also couldn't have been more peculiar.

Geneva Washington was gone. Just like that, without notice, without a word of warning, without cause or reason, she was just gone. It had happened the evening before. Geneva had been fixing dinner. Mrs. Carpenter and the girl were almost ready to sit down to it. Geneva was doing the last few things. She was about to fix a salad when she discovered that in her hurried marketing she had forgotten the bibb lettuce. The markets hadn't yet closed, and she had just run out to pick up a couple of heads of bibb and that was it. She hadn't returned.

"Not all night?" I asked.

"Not all night and not all morning. She's gone. It's the way they do."

"That's ridiculous, Opal. It's not the way anybody does. She's had an accident. Has Mrs. Carpenter phoned the police?"

"What for? The witch didn't take anything."

"But she must have had an accident. The police would check the hospitals."

"She didn't have no accident," Opal told me. "It's not the first time one of them's done Mrs. Carpenter that way, and this one was crazy from the first. The first time I saw her, I knew she wasn't going to stay. Every day I came in there and she hadn't gone yet, I was surprised. You had to expect it. Her kind, it's a wonder she stayed as long as she did."

"What kind is her kind, Opal?"

"How would I know? Maybe she's an acidhead. Maybe she's one of them speedfreaks. I don't know what she is except that it's something kooky. God knows what she wanted with Mrs. Carpenter, but whatever it was, she didn't find it. So she just ups and goes. That's the way they are, Mr. Bagby, no sense of responsibility, no heart, no head, no nothing. Mrs. Carpenter's well rid of that one."

Leaving Opal to do what she felt was essential, I went downstairs to see Mrs. Carpenter. I found her calm. She was distressed but not as much as I'd expected she would be. Although she shared neither

Opal's opinion of Geneva Washington nor Opal's guesses at why Geneva had gone, she was no more inclined to go along with my estimate of the situation.

The simple facts were as Opal had reported them. Geneva had gone out to pick up the forgotten lettuce and she had not returned.

"I am a little disappointed in her," Mrs. Carpenter sighed, "but I should be used to that. Whenever a person seems perfect, with time you learn that there is some flaw. It might be a very small flaw, but there always is something." With a crisp little gesture of dismissal she thrust the subject aside. "But I'm keeping you standing," she said, "and I haven't even offered you a drink."

"I didn't come down for a drink, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "I wanted to ask if there isn't something I could do for you."

She patted my hand. "Dear of you," she said, "most dear of you, but nonetheless you can ask over a drink. It's the whisky you like, isn't it? Or would you prefer something else this time of day?"

I told her the whisky would be fine and asked her if I couldn't get it. She wouldn't allow that, but she did let me help her. She needed help. She was navigating around the apartment by reaching from one piece of furniture to the next and holding on, but it made no difference. It was not suitable that a gentleman should not be waited on.

She brought out the glasses and the Scotch and the sherry. She let me pour out while she was tipping some macadamia nuts into a *blanc de chine* bowl. The only reason for allowing me to pour was, of course, because drinks always taste better when a gentleman does them. It was only after we had settled down and she was satisfied that I had everything I needed that I could switch her over to saying anything more about Geneva.

"I don't pretend to understand the girl," she said, "but I should have allowed her to do as she pleased. Even though it was for her own good and I do know better than she possibly can what is for her own good, I shouldn't have pressed it. Young people never like that."

"Then there had been difficulties?" I asked.

"There were difficulties from the first. If I had consented to it, she would have never set foot outside this apartment. Nor would I for

that matter. Even my walks, even when I explained to her that the walks are necessary, that it is only because I persist in walking, make myself keep on walking, that I am able to walk at all, even then she wanted me to do my walking right here at home. She wanted to walk me around and around in the apartment, walk me from room to room."

I thought I understood. "The same trouble as you had with many of the others," I said. "They didn't want to walk."

She thought about it for a moment. "No," she said. "Not quite like. The others were lazy. They wanted to sit all the time. When we did walk, they creaked and groaned and dragged every step of the way. Geneva isn't like that. She's energetic. She's alive. She would have walked me around these rooms inexhaustibly. Of course, I couldn't agree to that. It would have driven us both mad."

I found it hard to believe. Geneva had struck me as more than a little strange, but irrational to this extent did seem too much.

"You can hardly blame yourself for refusing to hold still for anything as insane as that," I said.

Insisting on her walks, however, wasn't what Mrs. Carpenter was regretting. She had taken her stand; and once that had been settled between them, there had been no more trouble about it.

"Geneva never brought it up again," she said. "Day after day she would look out at the weather and suggest that it looked changeable. Didn't I think it would be wiser not to go out and risk being caught in the rain? Just in the uncertain weather couldn't we stay home and take our exercise indoors? Of course, I always did insist on going out, and it was all right. She would try, but once I had given her a firm no, she always took it in good part."

"But yesterday there was something special?" I asked.

"Nothing we hadn't been having day after day. There was always the trouble about the marketing. I suppose yesterday she just boiled over. She decided to teach me a lesson."

I didn't understand. Mrs. Carpenter insisted that I pour myself another Scotch. Once she was satisfied that I'd done right by myself, she explained. Geneva was a strange girl. There was something very wrong and unhealthy about her.

"There was that outburst the afternoon you were here, Mr. Bagby. She didn't want any of the things a girl should want. She just wanted to be here with me, shut away from all the fun and all the excitement of life. She wanted to bury herself."

"A religious girl," I said, thinking aloud, "could have gone into a convent. Not being religious, she wanted to make this her convent."

Mrs. Carpenter nodded vigorously. "Yes, Mr. Bagby," she agreed. "And so well put. It takes a gentleman's intelligence and a gentleman's knowledge of the world to see through to the core of things. I sensed it, of course, but never with your clarity." She sighed. "But I must confess," she added, "it probably would have made no difference. Clarity wouldn't have changed me. I would have meddled despite it."

"Meddled?" I asked. "In what way, Mrs. Carpenter?"

"In the way you yourself saw. That afternoon when I forced her to come in and join us. I thought I knew best. The child is shy, I thought. She doesn't recognize her potential. She needs taking out of herself. Oh, don't let me make myself appear unselfish. I was thinking of myself."

She explained that. After her dreary parade of impossible companions, Geneva, even with her peculiarities, had been a joy. Mrs. Carpenter had been resolved to do everything to win the girl's affection. She would make every effort for the girl's happiness, and all this, she said, because she wanted to keep Geneva Washington. She didn't want to lose the girl.

"I knew," she said, "that if I let her go on the way she thought she wanted, she was going to make such a dreary thing of it for herself that very soon she would have to give up on it and leave me. It seemed to me that the only way I could keep her would be by trying to bring into her life some of the pleasures she was trying to shut out. I thought I could leaven the lump for her, make her work with me not merely a refuge but something of a pleasure. I hoped it could be enough a pleasure so that she would stay with me. I pushed too hard."

"I came to cocktails so Geneva could have some diversion?" I said.

Mrs. Carpenter laughed softly. "I'm not even going to ask you if

you mind," she said. "I saw by the way you always looked at Geneva that you wouldn't mind. I could see that it would give you pleasure, Mr. Bagby, and I was happy to give you pleasure. You can't mind that it didn't happen to be my prime purpose."

"Of course. If I mind anything, it is that it didn't work. She didn't want it. I can hardly help minding that."

"It wasn't you, Mr. Bagby. She didn't want anyone. There was all the difficulty about the marketing."

For a moment I thought Mrs. Carpenter had taken to wandering. I thought she was going to tell me what I'd already had from Geneva herself, that the girl was reluctant to leave her alone even with Opal and even for a few minutes.

Mrs. Carpenter, however, was right on the beam. She presented the girl's reluctance to go out of the house and leave her in a light that was at once more reasonable and less rational. It was yet another manifestation of the girl's strange urge toward withdrawal.

"If she could have had her way," Mrs. Carpenter said, "she would never have set foot outside this apartment, not for my walks and not to do the marketing. She wanted to do it all by telephone. It was only on my insistence that she went out even to buy the food."

Mrs. Carpenter gave me the full rundown on the struggles they'd had over that. There are parts of town where marketing by phone would be difficult if not impossible. This didn't happen to be true of our neighborhood. We happen to have in the vicinity, in addition to the ubiquitous supermarkets, a good assortment of old-fashioned little places which survive on the basis of the service they give. They take phone orders. They run charge accounts. They make prompt deliveries, and what they send out is uniformly of such good quality that even the hardest-to-please housewife could never select better for herself.

Mrs. Carpenter was not unaware of these possibilities. She had, in fact, been well established with all these tradesmen, and all her marketing had for a considerable time been done by telephone order. All through the time she had been suffering under the string of incompetents who had preceded Geneva in her employ it had been necessary to market by phone.

"There wasn't one of them I could have sent out for anything," she said. "They were too stupid. They would have brought back all the wrong things. I much preferred to eat what the tradesmen selected for me than to have touched anything they would have picked out."

When she had first taken Geneva on, therefore, they had continued as before. After only a day or two of it, however, she had begun to be concerned about the unnatural sort of life the girl was leading. She began worrying lest the young woman would not be able to endure such seclusion for long, even if it was self-imposed.

"I became more and more convinced that whatever Geneva thought she wanted, I knew better," she said. "Going on the way she was, she would either tire of it and leave me or else she would go quite mad and I would have to let her go. I was determined to take the girl out of herself."

Actually Geneva's peculiarities could not have been better suited to Mrs. Carpenter's needs. The girl wanted no time off. She said she had no place to go. She had no friends. She knew nobody in the city and she had no wish to make friends.

"It was perfect," Mrs. Carpenter said, "but it was also peculiar. I couldn't believe it would last."

She tried several approaches, all designed to arrange something for the girl that would make for a less confined life. She suggested that of an evening, when she was settled in her bed with a book and would be needing nothing, Geneva might go out to a local movie or even downtown to a theater or concert. Geneva would have none of it. She wanted only to stay home, looking at TV or settled in with a book of her own.

"I couldn't push her out of the house," Mrs. Carpenter said. "Whether it was only because I was worried for her sake or if being uninterruptedly in the company of one person night and day began to get on *my* nerves, I don't know. In any case, I hit on the marketing. That was an area where I could be insistent."

Mrs. Carpenter laid her ground carefully. She took to complaining about the food. Looking at the salmon, she pretended a suspicion that the fish man was thawing out frozen salmon and sending it to them for fresh. She didn't like the look of the fruit and vegetables.

She complained of the quality of meat and poultry. She accused all the tradesmen of sending short weight and of padding their bills.

"Of course, I was slandering all those good people," she told me. "They never sent anything that was less than perfect and their bills could not be more honest. Geneva's no fool. She knew all along that I was complaining without cause, but I thought that would be all right. People expect it of old women. They are astonished if we're not crotchety and unreasonable. Geneva did try to show me that everything was as good as it could be and that all the transactions were honest, but I just went on playing the stubborn old crank. She had to give in. That way I forced her to go out every day and do the marketing. I was certain that at least this small change she had to have. It was for her own good, and her good was my good."

That brought us to the forgotten lettuce. Geneva wanted to phone and have it sent over. Mrs. Carpenter insisted it wouldn't be fit to eat unless Geneva went out and selected it. Geneva argued that going out would hold up the dinner preparations and that also it was a time when she couldn't possibly go out. There wasn't even Opal around to be with Mrs. Carpenter while Geneva was gone. If she went, she would have to leave things cooking. That was too dangerous. Something could boil over. There might be escaping gas or a fire. She wouldn't go.

"We had a scene," Mrs. Carpenter continued. "I told her I was not incompetent. I told her I would be mistress in my own house. I told her that if she telephoned for the lettuce, I would not eat the salad. I suppose I worked myself up into something of a tantrum. She went."

Although she put it all as play-acting in Geneva's interest, I sensed that not all of it had been an act. Even though she was only quoting herself to me, when she spoke of being mistress in her own house, a ring of something genuine sounded in her words.

"I thought I had to take a stand," she explained. "If given her own way, that girl would have made a prisoner of herself and a prisoner of me, as well. There was the difficulty we had about the doctor, for instance. Have I told you about that?"

She hadn't, but she did.

This was another episode, and it had come up that same day, only

hours before the lettuce fracas. It was the time for one of Mrs. Carpenter's regular visits to the doctor, her first since she had hired Geneva.

"When I told her we would be going to the doctor, she asked me where he had his office. When I told her Fifth Avenue in the Seventies, I thought the child was really going mad. She said it was impossible. It was insane. She wanted to know what sort of a quack he might be, expecting me to make the trip to and from his office. The man should be making house calls for a patient like me, she insisted. She was all for phoning him and telling him I couldn't possibly make it to his office. He must come and see me here. When I told her he would just laugh at her, she said I would have to change doctors. I would have to find a proper doctor who would have a proper concern for my condition and not expect me to come to his office. Of course, I'd have none of that. I made her take me, but she didn't like it. I suppose that started it. Then the lettuce made it two defeats all in one day. She decided she'd give me a fright. She'd just go out and not come back. She'd stay away for a while."

"How long a while?" I asked. This seemed a highly improbable assumption. "The whole night? It's already well into the next day, and she's not back yet."

"She'll be back. She left all her things, not that they're anything much. The child has practically nothing to wear, and of what she has there isn't a thing that isn't grim."

"How can she come back? How will she ever explain?"

Mrs. Carpenter smiled. "It will be interesting to hear what she says. I can't imagine what it will be, but the girl's no fool. She'll find something to say and, whatever it is, I shan't question it. I'll just accept it. You see, Mr. Bagby, she has taught me my lesson. When she comes back, I'll not be pushing her any more. She will do the marketing as she likes. She'll lock herself up here as much as she likes. Maybe she can take it; but if she can't, I'll have her for at least as long as it lasts. She's taught me that there's nothing I can do but let her have her way, that and hope that she knows what's good for her."

"Her way?" I asked. "Taking your walks inside these four walls, pacing the floor of this apartment? Finding a doctor who'll come here on house calls and not expect you to come to his office?"

"No. What's necessary is, of course, necessary; but hereafter it will be that and no more. What I must have, she will concede to me. I expect she'll be reasonable to that extent. She will settle for my dropping all the things I have been pressing not for my own sake but for hers."

"Have you thought that you might be all wrong about this?" I asked. "Something could have happened to her that prevented her returning."

"In that case she would have telephoned me or sent a message."

"Perhaps she can't," I said. "Let's say she's unconscious."

I didn't want to make it too rough on the old girl. "Unconscious" would do. I didn't have to say "dead."

"I would have been informed. She carries identification."

"Are you listed as the person to be informed?"

"Naturally. She knows nobody else in the city. Who else would there be to inform?"

"Are you assuming that, or did you see her identification?"

"I've seen it."

"You know she had it on her when she went out for the lettuce?"

"She took her purse. She carries it in her purse."

"Always changes it from purse to purse."

"She has only the one purse, the one she took with her. I told you she has practically nothing. I've never seen a woman with less, not to speak of a young woman and one with looks like hers."

"Have you checked on whether she ever got to the vegetable market?" I asked.

She said she had. She'd already been on the telephone to do her ordering for the day. All the tradesmen had been surprised by having her revert to phone ordering. They had all asked about Geneva.

"I don't like tradespeople knowing my business," she said. "I just told them Geneva had gone away for a bit. The vegetable man said it was funny she hadn't said anything about going away when she

had been in yesterday morning. Those were his words—'yesterday morning'—he said nothing of her having returned for lettuce in the evening."

I thought the man should be asked specifically when he had last seen Geneva Washington, and I told her as much. I told her that it would be wise for her to report the girl as a missing person.

She laughed at me. She'd had experience with companions, too much experience. It wasn't the first time one of them had walked out on her in just this fashion. They go off in a temper. They're gone maybe a day or two or even as long as a week. Then they call and ask if they can come and pick up their things.

"They've thought better of it," she said. "When they come for their things, they try to sound me out on whether I would consider having them back. I never take them back, but Geneva is different. I shall take her back. If she doesn't come for her things herself, if she sends someone, I'll refuse to give them anything. I'll insist on her coming herself because I mean to try to persuade her to come back."

"Whom can she send? She knows nobody in town."

"That's why I expect she'll come herself. Hard as it may be for her to face me, she'll have to come herself."

"Meanwhile are you trying to get another girl?"

"No. I want Geneva back."

"How long do you propose to wait for her?"

"As long as I can. Opal is arranging to give me time in the afternoons. She will go for my walks with me. I can manage the rest."

"Be here alone all night, every night?"

"I was alone last night and I managed. I can manage another night or two. She'll be back. She's fond of me. I know she is. It was just a clash of wills, and I shan't oppose her again. She'll be back."

"Your meals, Mrs. Carpenter?"

"I can boil an egg, Mr. Bagby. Do you know the French bakery down on the avenue? They do all manner of wickedly delicious things like *quiches* and *crepes farcis* which they will send in frozen. I can manage very well. If you would care to come to dinner tonight, I'll promise you an excellent meal. You'll see how well I manage."

"I have a better idea," I said. "Tonight I'm taking you out to dinner."

"Oh, but that's not necessary," she protested.

"I never do what's necessary," I told her. "I do only what I like. May I pick you up at seven?"

"You may."

She needed no more coaxing than that. Going off and using the Police Department connections I have through being a friend of Inspector Schmidt's, I did make the standard inquiries about Geneva Washington. I arranged that Mrs. Carpenter wasn't to be alarmed or disturbed. I asked only for a check of hospitals and morgue.

A woman is hit by a truck. Her bag flies out of her hand. Some ghoul grabs it and runs while better citizens are occupied with seeing to the injured woman. She is unconscious or dead. Her identification has vanished. It can happen that way.

It was one possibility. Another was that the girl had an accident. She's not in coma, but she insists that Mrs. Carpenter not be informed. If she is fond of the old lady and recognizes that the old lady is fond of her, she might prefer that Mrs. Carpenter be angry rather than frightened and worried. In the light of Geneva's exaggerated concern over Mrs. Carpenter's health, this seemed not at all unlikely. She had shown every other inclination toward over-coddling her employer, as, for example, wanting for Mrs. Carpenter a doctor who would come out on house calls even when it was only a routine checkup and no emergency.

The boys took it on for me and came up with nothing. Geneva hadn't been admitted to any hospital in the city, and no patient had come in who even remotely answered her description. The police were inclined to agree with Mrs. Carpenter. Missing Persons all too frequently has calls from aroused employers reporting maids who have walked out on them without warning.

"It's a thing these babes do," the boys told me. "One like you say she is, she had a fight with the boy friend. She decides to disappear for a while just to give him a hard time. He finds her. She goes out for the lettuce and he's waiting for her outside. They kiss and make

up, and she goes off with him, forgetting all about the old lady. She won't remember again till she needs a change of panties for herself. Then she'll remember to go back and get her stuff. It's a thing these babes do."

When Opal had finished her day in the building and was ready to go home, she took a moment to run up and speak to me. I told you Opal was a jewel. She'd taken Mrs. Carpenter for the old lady's walk; and, when they returned, Mrs. Carpenter had asked her to stay on a little longer to help her dress.

"She's sitting down there all ready and waiting for seven o'clock, Mr. Bagby. She's wearing her pearls and a black velvet dinner gown I never seen out of the closet before. I just thought you ought to know and not wear the tweed jacket with the leather patches on the elbows."

"Black tie, Opal?"

"Your tuxedo, Mr. Bagby, and please with a tie, not one of them white turtlenecks. She's an old-fashioned lady, Mrs. Carpenter, and she's made herself look awfully nice for you, Mr. Bagby."

 III 

Long before I was through dining Mrs. Carpenter that evening I had reason to regret it. The lady seemed to be at her silliest and most trying. She kept preening herself ridiculously, and the way she flirted with me was so blatant that waiters preserved a decorous sobriety only by mercilessly chewing their lips. Everywhere I looked, I was confronted by people tittering behind their hands; and when any eye met mine, I could read in it nothing but contempt and possibly a shade of pity.

Everyone who saw us that evening must have had me ticketed as the silly old babe's gigolo. If I could have addressed her as "grandma" or "auntie" I might have induced some of our audience into believing I was a relative doing his good deed. Since I had to call her Mrs. Carpenter, I worked at looking like her attorney or possibly a man who handled her investments for her. I can't pretend that I brought it off even for a moment. I know I looked like a fool. I'm very much afraid I looked like a heel as well.

She enjoyed her dinner, and I got through mine somehow. When at the end of what had come to seem an unbearably long evening, I finally brought her home, I found that I couldn't just see her into her apartment and take off. She was insistent that I come in with her for a nightcap. I tried to refuse. I asked if I might have a rain check, but she would have it no other way. I had to come in.

I went and I even managed to keep a smile going. As I saw it, she was having a bad moment. By daylight she had been brave enough about spending another night alone in the apartment, but now she could be lonely and frightened.

I had a cognac and she a creme de menthe, and she seemed neither frightened nor lonely. She was painfully arch. Her flirtatiousness grew to alarming proportions. It was too ridiculous to believe that in

the words of her own generation she had carnal designs on me, but it seemed all but impossible to put any other construction on her behavior. Eventually, however, and only after I had announced firmly that now I must go, she broke down and told me what she required of me.

She couldn't manage the catch on her pearls. Unless I opened it for her, she would have to sleep the night in her necklace. I did the pearls and after that it was her dress. It had a back zipper which she couldn't reach. I could see her problem. Her request, if not for the extremes of flirtatiousness she brought to her making of it, would have seemed not unreasonable.

There was nothing for it, however, but to do as she asked. I couldn't leave her to bed down for the night in all that black velvet. With some trepidation I attacked the zipper, but it was all right. As soon as I had it down some eight or ten inches, she reached around and showed me that I now had it within easy reach for her. She could manage the rest for herself. I was free.

When, at an hour in the morning far earlier than any civilized person uses the telephone, mine rang, I assumed it would be Inspector Schmidt. The inspector's work, of course, follows no set time table. He is likely to be up and doing at any hour at all. When something comes up he thinks might make a story for me, he calls me, whatever the hour, to tell me to jump into my pants and come out to meet him.

Assuming it was the inspector, therefore, I picked up the phone prepared to do my part in our customary exchange of friendly discourtesies. I was brought up short by a woman's voice, particularly since I recognized both the voice and the diction. Only women of Mrs. Carpenter's generation speak as she did, and even among them it is only the few. If this was a courtesy call of thanks for the dinner, she'd chosen an unconscionable hour for it.

But it wasn't a courtesy call. She apologized for disturbing me. She knew how early it was. She was certain I would regret ever having shown her a kindness. She hated to bother me with her troubles, but she knew no one else who had my experience with crime, and she did need advice.

"I could call the police," she said, "and I expect I shall have to call them in the end, but I couldn't be more upset. If I could talk to you before I did anything, if I could have your advice, it would make me feel ever so much better."

"Certainly, Mrs. Carpenter. Are you all right, Mrs. Carpenter?"

She sounded all right. Her voice was strong and calm and resolute. There was none of the archness in it. She sounded neither ill nor frightened; and despite her saying that she couldn't be more upset, she didn't sound hysterical or even tremulous. She sounded as though she were completely in command, both of the situation and of herself.

"I am quite all right," she said.

"Good. Then tell me what's troubling you."

"I can't over the telephone. Would it be an awful nuisance for you to come down?"

"You'll have to give me a couple of moments," I said. "I'm not dressed."

A small cry of dismay did escape her then. Quickly she tried to cover it over with a show of concern for me. She should have waited before calling me. She had disturbed me. It was a good effort but somehow unconvincing.

"You're alone, Mrs. Carpenter?" I asked.

"Yes. Opal won't be in for hours."

I couldn't help getting the picture. Something had happened during the night. It was something she thought she'd have to take to the police. I could imagine that she had waited before calling me. She hadn't been able to hold out long enough to make it any sort of decent hour. Her nerves wouldn't stretch that far, and now she was going to have to stretch them a little more. She was frightened and not admitting it.

"Could you manage it to the elevator and come up here?" I asked. "I'll leave the door off the latch for you. You can sit in my living room, and while I'm making myself decent, we can talk from room to room."

"No," she said. "I can wait. You take your time, Mr. Bagby. At your earliest convenience will do. I'll be here." Her voice broke

slightly as she made a rare dip into self pity. "I can't go anywhere," she said.

It occurred to me that she mightn't be dressed either. It even came to my mind that she might be wanting me to help her with another back zipper, but I quickly put that notion away. That wouldn't be a problem she would at any time have to take to the police.

"You'll take me without a shave?" I asked.

She rose to it. She gave me a small laugh. "Just this once, Mr. Bagby," she said. "Do come down as quickly as you can, beard and all."

I wasn't even a minute, only long enough to climb into slacks and shrug into a shirt. I buttoned the shirt while I was galloping down the stairs. I rang Mrs. Carpenter's door bell and had to wait a moment before I heard her work the lock. That was okay. Even if she was right inside the door waiting for me and didn't have to work her way across anything, grabbing on to furniture for support as she went, she would be taking that moment for checking on me through the peephole.

I heard the click of the lock, and I opened the door. I was wrong about her not being dressed. She was all ready for the day, fully clothed, hair done, face on, the works. Something, however, had been added. Clutched in both her hands she had a .45. It's a lot of revolver for any female less hefty than a Russian Olympic shotputter. For old Mrs. Carpenter it was more than she could bring up into firing position even when she was using both hands.

"Mr. Bagby," she said. "Come in. Do. And take this thing. I think it's what has me the most frightened. I've always thought I could handle it if there were a need. I've discovered I can't."

I let her put the .45 into my hand while I was shutting the door, but my mind wasn't on it. I was too much occupied with a faint reek that hung in the air. It was only just perceptible, but it didn't have to be any stronger. I was recognizing it and with complete certainty. It was chloroform.

I took her arm and helped her to a chair. I checked the revolver. It was carrying a full load.

"Where did you get the cannon?" I asked.

"It was Will's, Mr. Carpenter's. It was always rather heavy for me but once I could manage it. I haven't the strength in my hands I used to have."

"What's happened?"

"Oscar," she said. "I've always liked Oscar. Now I'm afraid he's a thief."

"Who's Oscar?"

"You know him. The janitor and handyman. Oscar."

I knew Oscar. "That Oscar, Mrs. Carpenter?" I said. "Oh, no. I'd trust him with anything. He's as solid a man as you could ask for. We're lucky to have him."

I was thinking fast. It's a crazily dangerous thing to do, but I've known people to do it. They take it instead of sleeping pills. They get nerved up and can't sleep. A few drops of chloroform on a handkerchief and they lay it on the pillow. That had to be it. She was still fuzzy with it and having delusions.

"I'll make you some coffee," I said.

"I've already made it," she told me. "If you wouldn't mind pouring it out. Suddenly I feel rather weak. It's the reaction. I was holding on to myself till I could get you down here. I would like a cup of coffee. You have some too, Mr. Bagby."

I went on to her kitchen. This was a lot of old babe. She hadn't only made the coffee. She'd set up a complete tray for two and it was Spode, no less. Cups and saucers, cream pitcher with cream in it, filled sugar bowl, jug of marmalade, toast wrapped in a linen tea napkin, the necessary silver. All I had to do was move the coffee pot to the tray and carry the whole works in. She had obviously been up an hour or more, getting herself dressed and ready, fixing this breakfast for two, figuring how she was going to get me downstairs to share it with her.

Coming back to her with the coffee tray, I was bristling with wariness. She told me where to set it down and she asked me to do the pouring out.

"I'll be all right soon," she said. "My hands are trembling, and just now I can't control them."

"It'll help you pull yourself together if you tell me what happened," I said. "And I do have to know."

"Yes," she sighed. "Oscar broke in here during the night while I was asleep. He's a thief."

"You saw him?"

"No, of course not. I was asleep. I'd taken my sleeping pill, as I do every night. With it I sleep soundly. He would have to have been noisy to wake me, and evidently he wasn't noisy. He stayed away from my room. I didn't wake. I didn't know a thing."

"Then how do you know it was Oscar?"

"I don't want to think it any more than you do, but it could be no one else. No one else could have fixed it to get in."

"What are you missing?"

"Nothing."

"You had a thief and he took nothing?"

"He found nothing he could take. I never keep money around, never more than a few dollars. I do everything by check, and anyhow he never came into my room."

We weren't in her bedroom but even out where we were I could see plenty that was a standing denial of her statement that there was nothing that a thief could have found to take. There was the vermeil bell and the vermeil cup that held her cigarettes. There were all manner of other ornaments in the fabulously costly silver gilt. There was the silver.

I said nothing, but she followed my gaze.

"Yes," she said. "It is surprising, I know, but I suppose he was after money, not things. I can't believe Oscar is a professional. I don't think he's the sort of man who makes a habit of stealing. It's likely he's never done this before. If he took things, I suppose he wouldn't know where he could go to dispose of them with any degree of safety."

I tried another approach. "You said you took your sleeping pill. You slept soundly. You saw no one. Nothing woke you."

"One second," she said. "Without it I don't sleep at all. With it I sleep like a baby. It's all I need."

"Good," I said. "Then why the chloroform, Mrs. Carpenter?"

She looked genuinely startled. I was watching her closely, expecting she would put on an act, but it didn't look like an act. The question did astonish her.

I sniffed the air. She sniffed with me. Her look of astonishment gave way before one of uncertainty and panic.

"Chloroform?" she whispered. "Is that the odor? Chloroform?"

"Faint, Mrs. Carpenter, but unmistakable. What have you been thinking it was?"

"I didn't know," she said. "I didn't think. I assumed it was something the air conditioning was bringing in from outside, something perhaps that had been used to clean the halls or polish the brass of the stair rail. There was a time when soap smelled like soap and polish smelled like polish, but they've been changing everything. Horribly perfumed detergents, strange new chemicals. I keep asking Opal to find something scentless she can use for the kitchen and bathroom floors, so that I won't have to make the choice between having dirty floors and feeling as though I had filled my home with harlots."

"Even the little that's hanging in the air is fading fast now," I said. "Was it stronger when you woke?"

"Much stronger." She had gone white-lipped. Visibly she was taking a grip on herself. "It's stronger in my bedroom than it ever was in any other part of the apartment. I've been stupid, Mr. Bagby, and small wonder. He was in my room. He chloroformed me. That's why I woke feeling not at all myself. That numb, thick-headed feeling and the slight headache. That was the chloroform. Just burglary was enough, Mr. Bagby. Even that I found it hard to believe of Oscar, but this makes it too horrible. This is terrifying."

I went out to her bedroom. Even with the chloroform, this was a disciplined old babe. She had made her bed. She had the room in perfect order. I could read her thinking. If she was going to have Bagby down and if she was going to have the police in, none of these chores which ordinarily would be left for Opal could be left undone. She was not the woman to permit strange men to see either herself or her things in disarray. She was right. The smell of chloroform was stronger in her bedroom.

I came out and poured us second cups of coffee. "You say it's Oscar because no one else could get in," I reminded her. "How did he get in?"

"By the window. He came in through this room. He came in by the window behind you."

I was for the moment relieved. I liked Oscar. She had been reluctant to believe it of him. I was more reluctant.

"This is the ground floor, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "Hasn't it occurred to you that anyone anytime could come in just off the street? Climbing in a street-level window is no trick at all. This place of yours is burglar-prone. No apartment could be more burglar-prone."

I'd turned to look at the window she indicated; but, of course, I was seeing nothing. She had the damask draperies that completely concealed the window and its view of the street and the parked cars.

"Not past the bronze grilles, Mr. Bagby," she reminded me. "There are heavy bronze grilles on all my windows just like the one over the glass on the front door. Haven't you ever noticed as you go by outside? That's why I keep my windows so heavily shrouded. It would be like living in a prison if I had to look at those grilles all the time."

"How did Oscar get past the grille?" I asked.

She suggested that I examine the window. I went to it and pushed back the drapery. The window was shut and locked, but through it I could see the bronze grille. It was hanging unfastened. It wasn't swung wide open, but I could see that it wasn't secured. On the windowsill lay three long bronze screws about as thick as my little finger. I took one thing at a time.

"The window," I told her, "is shut and locked."

She was aware of that. When she had come out to the living room in the morning, she had seen at once that something was amiss. The drapery on that one window had been drawn back. The window stood wide open and the grille outside was hanging ajar.

"I pulled it back shut," she said, "but I didn't know how to fasten it, and even if I had known, I didn't have the tools. I did what I could. I pulled the grille back shut, and I drew the window down. I could lock the window, and that I did. It was a matter of securing what I could."

I unlocked the window and pushed it all the way up to examine the grille. It was, as she said, the same heavy, ornamental bronze as covered the glass of the front door. The setup should have been completely secure. It was hinged at one side. The hinges were solidly bolted into the stone of the house wall, and the hinges were under a heavy bronze covering that made it impossible for anyone to get at them from the street. At the other side there was a heavy, bronze bar also securely bolted into the stone. The grille closed snugly against this bar with screw holes in the grille meeting screw holes in the bar. If the screws that lay on the windowsill were in place, they would hold the grille solidly to the bronze bar and the stone. Like the hinges, the screw holes also could not in any way be reached from the street. With the screws lying on the windowsill, however, the grille, of course, was unsecured, free to swing on its hinges.

While I was examining the window situation, Mrs. Carpenter went on talking. Immediately on seeing the window she knew she'd had a burglar. Almost at a glance she determined that nothing had been touched in the living room. There was no disorder and all the pieces of vermeil and silver were in their accustomed places. She returned to her bedroom and checked her jewelry. What she had worn the evening before she had left on top of her dressing table, expecting to put it away in the morning. It had all been there, lying on the dressing table just as she had left it. Doing a thorough job, she looked for the rest of her jewelry. It was all there. Nothing had been taken. So far as she could know, nothing had even been touched.

"It all seemed incomprehensible, even nightmarish," she said. "I didn't begin to understand it until I'd been through the rest of the apartment and I looked into Geneva's room. He had been in there. No question of that."

As I've already told you, I'd been into Mrs. Carpenter's room. The police were not going to be happy about the way she had been busy-ing herself that morning. Pulling the grille shut and closing and locking the window were understandable. As she said, she had secured the place as best she could. Even drawing the drapery back across the window I could explain. It could have been habit. It could have been a nervous reflex. It could have been an effort to shut out the

terrifying reminder any sight of the window would have been for her.

She hadn't, however, stopped with that. She'd made her bed and tidied up her whole room. She'd put away her jewelry and not left it laid out as it had been for the burglar. If her visitor had left anything behind that could have been useful to the police, Mrs. Carpenter had almost certainly obliterated it.

I had my fingers crossed while I asked my next question.

"Her room torn up?"

"Closet door standing open. Her clothes are off the hangers and dropped to the closet floor. All the drawers are pulled out of the chests and dumped on the floor. Everything's been turned out, but nothing's been taken."

I groaned. "You've put it all back in order," I said. "You've neated everything up."

She glared at me. I was being offensive.

"Do you take me for an imbecile, Mr. Bagby?" she huffed. "Why would I do that? The police will want to see it exactly as I found it. There may be fingerprints. I just looked at it and shut the door on it. I touched nothing."

I wanted to know how she could know that nothing had been taken from Geneva's room. I could well imagine that some of those times when she'd forced the girl to go out for the marketing she had done a complete job of examining Geneva's things. It was in character. She would be that prying, but I had a mental picture of a closet with everything dumped on its floor and of drawers turned over, leaving their contents heaped on the bedroom floor. Even if Mrs. Carpenter had a mental inventory of every last button the girl had in that room, it still didn't seem possible for her to know it was all there unless she had at least picked the piles over to add things up. I held back on the question. It could wait until she'd cooled down a bit. My earlier question had irritated her.

"All right if I have a look?" I asked instead.

"I should appreciate it if you would," she answered. There was still a slight touch of frost on her tone.

As soon as I'd opened the door on the second bedroom and looked inside, I was glad I'd held off on my question. The picture I'd formed for myself of contents of dumped drawers lying in disordered heaps could hardly have been more off the mark. The room and the things in it were exactly as Mrs. Carpenter had described them; but the things, even taken all together, were so few that they made only a sparse scattering on the floors of bedroom and closet. Without touching anything Mrs. Carpenter could easily have checked over the whole lot and accounted for everything. When I returned to her, Mrs. Carpenter welcomed me back with a small harpoon.

"I hope you didn't touch anything in there," she said.

"Nothing. I suggest we have the police right now."

"In a moment," she said, "but first I'd like you to advise me. I do hate telling them about Oscar, but I suppose I must."

"I would most strongly suggest that you don't, Mrs. Carpenter," I told her. "Your suspicions may be quite unfounded. I'm inclined to think they are unfounded. You'll be far happier if you just let the police draw their own conclusions from what they see here and what you can tell them. By that I mean you tell them only what you know as fact, nothing that you conjecture."

"Don't you think they should be told that Oscar has the key that opens all our apartment doors?" she asked.

"It's common practice. The janitor or superintendent of any building must have the keys. In case of fire or flooding or a gas leak when one of us isn't at home, he must have access to the apartments. That's routine for the police. They'll check on everyone who might have access to the apartment. No need for you to tell them."

"Very well," she said. "Would you call them for me then, Mr. Bagby? And I am grateful. I hated to accuse Oscar, but I felt I couldn't withhold the information. It's a great relief to know the police will have it and without my volunteering it."

I called the local precinct for her. They got right on it, but in the few moments I still had alone with her, I worked at getting her straightened around on her thinking about poor Oscar. I knew the man and I was ready to take my oath that he was above suspicion,

but I'd already taken that tack with Mrs. Carpenter, accomplishing nothing. I thought I could do better if I simply sorted out the available facts for her.

Oscar, I told her, could not get that grille open from the outside any more than anyone else. The removal of those screws could be done only from inside the apartment. She had recognized that. Oscar had his master key. Getting in would be no trick for Oscar. Oscar also knew just how the grille fastenings worked, and he had the tools for coping with them. Regularly once a fortnight, when she had the window cleaner, Oscar came in and unfastened all the grilles so the man could get at the windows to wash them on the outside. Oscar also went around after the man each time and made the grilles secure again.

"All he had to do was leave the screws out of that one," she said. "With the draperies drawn all the time, nobody would see them on the windowsill. Nobody would know there was anything amiss."

"When did you last have the window cleaner?"

"Monday of last week."

I did a quick sum on the days. "That's been nine days," I said. "Eight yesterday. Wouldn't Opal have known? Doesn't she pull back the draperies to dust windowsills and windowframes?"

"Every day," Mrs. Carpenter answered. "You know Opal."

I knew Opal. She was always finding things to clean I'd never have known could need cleaning. It was inconceivable that Opal for even one day in soot-burdened New York would have neglected the dusting of a windowsill.

"Then when she was in here cleaning yesterday, not to speak of all the other days since you had the window cleaner, she couldn't have missed seeing those three great bronze brutes sitting on the windowsill."

That had Mrs. Carpenter stopped but only for a moment.

"He could have come in and removed the screws anytime," she said. "Yesterday afternoon. Opal cleaned in the morning. She came back later to take me for my walk. He has his key. While we were out, he slipped in here for a moment and unscrewed that grille. You're right, of course. That's when he did it. Opal came back with

me, but only to help me dress. She had finished all the cleaning in the morning.”

“But why, Mrs. Carpenter?” I protested.

“So he could return last night and come in the window,” she said.

“Doing it the hard way? He still had his master key. Why all this risky nonsense when he could have just unlocked the door last night and walked in?”

“Very likely,” she said, “that’s the way he did do it. He came in by the door and left by the door, but he pushed back the drapes, raised the window, and swung the grille open to make it look as though it were someone from the outside, someone who couldn’t come in the easier way with the key. If he hadn’t left any indication of how the burglar got in, everything would have pointed straight at him. He has the key.”

“One moment,” I said. “What good could it do him? He would make it look as though someone came in from the outside but by a means of access that could be set up only from the inside.”

She sighed. “You think he’s a good man,” she said. “I always thought he was a good man, but I never thought he was particularly clever. Do you, Mr. Bagby? Do you think Oscar is particularly clever?”

Oscar is no genius. I had to admit that, but this seemed rather too stupid. The man was no idiot either. She argued that he didn’t have to be an idiot.

“Don’t you see?” she said. “It’s the crime that’s idiotic. This may be the first time he ever tried anything like this. Certainly whether it was Oscar or someone else, and I don’t see how it could be anyone else, he was inexperienced. He made mistakes. He made nothing but mistakes. An experienced thief would have taken the vermeil and the silver. He would have taken the jewelry. This was a thief who had no way of getting rid of anything he stole. He was looking for nothing but money, and he touched nothing but money.”

“He didn’t touch your money either,” I reminded her.

“My money?” she said. “The only money I ever have here is a little change I keep on hand. It’s for tipping delivery boys. I do everything else by check. Whenever I am in the bank I pick up ten dollars in

silver. I shall be going to the bank soon again. What I had in the house last night was less than two dollars in quarters and dimes. I can well imagine him looking at that and leaving it in disgust.”

She was saying the last of that when the bell rang. She finished it while I was going to the door. The detective who came over from precinct was Joe Simmons. I knew Joe, as I knew all the boys over at the station house. At times when I'm working with Inspector Schmidt we drop by there all the time. I am, after all, the next thing to being on the force.

Joe's a good man. Mrs. Carpenter asked if I would give him the story. Then if he had any questions, she would be happy to answer them; but since I knew as much of what happened as she did, it would be easier if I did the talking.

It suited me. I wanted Joe to have the thing straight, just the simplest factual account of the whole affair. He heard me out. He looked at the window and the grille. He looked at Geneva's room. He asked Mrs. Carpenter to bring out the jewelry she had worn the night before and show him how it had been lying on the dressing table top.

“Right,” he said. “He wasn't messing with anything but cash. He was somebody who knew quite a lot about you, Mrs. Carpenter. He knew that the few coins you had in your purse would be all you would have around the apartment. If you had no more than those quarters and dimes there, you'd have no more anywhere else around the place. He knew it was no use looking.”

“But how could anyone know that?” I asked.

“Someone who knows Mrs. Carpenter well enough to know she never keeps anything around but the bit of tipping money,” Joe said. “He was going to ransack her companion's room, and he was taking no chances on Mrs. Carpenter waking and hearing him. He took care of that with the chloroform.”

“Once he had Mrs. Carpenter chloroformed,” I said, “he could have worked in her room slowly and carefully. We don't know that he didn't ransack her things.”

“He did,” Mrs. Carpenter said. “I think he did. I think he came into the apartment expecting to find money in Geneva's room. If he

knew she wasn't here last night, he thought he could rob her and never have to go near me. It was only when he was disappointed in there that he decided to come into my room. It was a risk he hadn't been planning on taking, but he decided to take it rather than come away empty-handed. He chloroformed me and then he was disappointed in my room as he had been in Geneva's. He was so disgusted that he didn't even take the little change I did have. He ended up leaving empty-handed and in disgust."

The question had to come. Joe wanted to know who had keys to the apartment.

"You have a super here," he said. "He'll have a master key?"

She gave him Oscar, but except for a small look of triumph she tossed at me, she left it at telling him there was a janitor and he did have a master key.

"Okay," Joe said. "We'll talk to him. Anyone else?"

"Nobody," Mrs. Carpenter said.

I could read that as only the silliest sort of lie. It seemed to me that malice had taken over. She wanted to keep the focus exclusively on poor Oscar. It wasn't that I was eager to toss Joe either Opal or Geneva, but I couldn't go along on playing games with the police.

"You're not thinking, Mrs. Carpenter," I said. "What about Opal?"

"Opal's never had a key."

"She has my key."

"Obviously, Mr. Bagby. When Opal goes up to clean your apartment, you are likely to be out. Unless she has your key, she can't get in. She's never needed my key. I'm always here."

"I'm sorry. What about Geneva?"

In Opal's case I'd been making an assumption. I knew Geneva had a key. I'd seen her use it.

"Of course, Geneva has a key," Mrs. Carpenter said. "Are you supposing the child stole in here last night and chloroformed me just so that she could rob herself? Really, Mr. Bagby."

 IV 

She had me there; but Joe, maybe because he had never seen Geneva, wasn't so easily put down. He began shooting the questions. Had it been the girl's night out? Mrs. Carpenter explained that Geneva had no night out. She'd never asked for one. Under Joe's questioning the old lady gave him the whole picture on Geneva Washington. You already know all that. We can skip it here.

I'll just give you what was new to me. She had been paying Geneva a hundred and twenty-five a week. Like everyone else Geneva received her pay in a check. She had been with Mrs. Carpenter through three pay days. She'd had three checks.

"She walked out of here the night before last in a huff and she didn't come back," Joe said, "but you didn't know she wasn't coming back. You expected her back. I have that right, haven't I?"

"She left in a temper, but I was expecting her back with the lettuce. All I knew was that she was going out for the lettuce."

"So, of course, she just went as she was. She didn't pack a bag. She didn't take anything with her."

"She took her purse. What else would she take?"

"To go for lettuce," Joe said, "nothing else. So except for what she stood up in when she walked out of here, what I can see in her room was all she had to wear."

"I know it's incredible for a beautiful young woman," Mrs. Carpenter said. "She's a really lovely child, but she doesn't have the first bit of vanity. I expected she'd go on a shopping spree with her first check. No woman in the world gets along that way on only the barest grim essentials, but as far as I know, she didn't buy a thing. I do know. What you see in her room is all she has. She brought that with her and she bought nothing."

"She bought nothing," Joe summed up. "She never went out. She

had a hundred and twenty-five a week here, a hundred and twenty-five and her keep. If she wasn't spending it on anything, it has been piling up."

Joe was building something, and long before he had filled in the last details for Mrs. Carpenter, I was catching the whole picture and, however regretfully, I found myself swinging around toward Mrs. Carpenter's views on Oscar.

"A man with a key to your door," Joe said. "A man who knows quite a bit about you. Maybe even a man who so obviously knows about you and how you do with money that when we get around to questioning him he can claim he'd never come in here even if he was a crook. He'll say it would have to be someone who never knew Mrs. Carpenter kept no cash money around."

He filled the whole thing in for her. This someone would have been watching. He would know that Geneva wasn't in the apartment. He would have known that three pay days had rolled around for Geneva and she hadn't gone anywhere or spent any part of her earnings.

"Maybe he went away empty-handed," Joe said, "and maybe he didn't. Maybe he got what he came for. Three hundred and seventy-five bucks or a good part of it he might have found in the girl's room. On the other hand, there's also the girl. She had her key with her when she went out of here, didn't she?"

"She kept it in her purse," Mrs. Carpenter said. "She took her purse with her. I assumed her money would also have been in her purse."

"Three hundred and seventy-five just for a little lettuce?"

"She would charge the lettuce," Mrs. Carpenter said.

I stuck my oar in. "No reason to think she kept the cash on her or in her room," I said. "How do we know she wasn't banking the money or paying off debts? Those are still alternatives to spending."

Joe grinned. "So long since I saw any money that doesn't go whizzing right out for a payment on the house or a payment on the car or oil for the heater or shoes for the kids, or the groceries," he said, "I was clean forgetting that people bank money, too. But how could

she bank it if she never went out at all? How could she pay off on a debt?"

"How could she cash the checks if she never went out at all?" I countered.

"When she went out to market she could have cashed her checks," Joe reminded me.

"She could also have bowled them into the bank then," I said. "Or she could have been making mail deposits."

"Right," Joe agreed. "It's just one theory. If someone saw her cashing checks and no evidences of spending, he could have thought there'd be the haul in here among her things." He turned back to Mrs. Carpenter. "This girl?" he asked. "Where did you get her? Through an agency?"

"No. I advertised in the *Times*. I'd tried all the agencies and I couldn't make myself face even an interview with another of the freaks they kept sending me. I tried the *Times*."

"She answered your *Times* ad. Did she have references?"

"Obviously, young man. I wouldn't have considered her without."

"Did you check them?"

"She had one letter, the most enthusiastic reference I've ever seen—honest, reliable, wonderfully competent, able to take over in any emergency, cheerful about working under difficulties, wonderful personality, a joy to have around. It was so glowing, I found it difficult to believe."

"Uhuh," Joe said. "I've got a good wife. No kicks. But even her, I couldn't give her a reference like that. You did check it?"

"I was so charmed with her on sight that I was tempted to try her out without bothering to check at all, but it all seemed to be too good to be true. I telephoned the woman."

"She backed her letter up?"

"She said it was every word true. She said she supposed that in writing it she should have explained why Geneva was no longer with her. She had employed Geneva as a companion to her mother who had been very old and very ill. Geneva had remained with the old lady till the poor old thing died, and this woman said it had been a cruel and difficult year made bearable for herself only by Geneva and

that, in looking back to it, she had the one comfort that in finding Geneva she had at the end been able to give her mother decent comfort and pleasant days. Obviously, from what she said, she'd had the experience I'd just been through, a succession of impossible witches. Geneva, she said, was an angel. She asked me to give Geneva her love. She sent the girl all manner of fond messages."

"And it was working out?" Joe asked.

"I soon found it wasn't all that perfect," Mrs. Carpenter said. "Geneva is self-willed. She tends to think she knows better what is good for me and what isn't than I do. In this earlier job of hers I can see how these faults would not have shown up. Maybe it was on that earlier job she developed the habits of mind which caused our little difficulties here. Taking care of a very old woman, she probably had to make all the decisions. Doing that could very well have developed in her this strain of peremptory bossiness that didn't go so well with me."

I was thinking, as I listened to her, that the differences between a very old woman and herself could possibly be evident to her. They wouldn't be evident to anyone else. That, however, was not to the point. What did matter was that Mrs. Carpenter was perfectly satisfied that Geneva Washington was exactly as represented. Even this worst thing she'd done, walking out without warning and leaving Mrs. Carpenter to stew over whether the girl would be coming back or not, was only the result of their clash of wills. The girl had, in fact, been so satisfactory that, as Mrs. Carpenter had told me at the very first, Geneva when she returned would be given much more her own way. Mrs. Carpenter was ready to capitulate to that extent. She was not going to permit Geneva to determine what Mrs. Carpenter must do for Mrs. Carpenter's own good, but she was withdrawing from her efforts to determine what Geneva must do for Geneva's own good. When the girl returned, Mrs. Carpenter would offer her true equality. Each would permit the other to go to Hell in a handbasket of her own choosing.

"The girl said she knew no one," I observed. "She had no friends. She wanted no time off. She had no place to go. The woman who gave her the reference certainly sounds like a friend."

"A former employer who had nothing but the friendliest feelings toward the child," Mrs. Carpenter said. "That's not quite the same thing as a friend, certainly not the crony she might go to a film with or spend more than the smallest snippet of free time with. Also the woman is not in the city. Before she came to me, Geneva had never worked in New York."

There can be no criticism of Joe Simmons. He gave it the full treatment, possibly even more than it seemed to warrant. You have to recognize the fact of police life in a big city. Burglary is an all too common crime. The police do what they can, but burglaries come at them on a frequency rate that simply doesn't permit them to give much time to any one case.

The department is forced to set up priorities, and the priorities are based on two factors. One factor, of course, is the size of the loss. The theft of half a million in jewels out of a hotel penthouse must get more police attention than the loss of a small-screen TV out of a tenement flat. You can argue that the babe in the hotel penthouse suffers less from her loss than the poor person who loses the TV set even before it's been all paid up, but that unfortunately is the way of the world, and it is not all injustice.

Lacking the time and the manpower to run every burglary into the ground, you can go a longer way toward upholding the law by catching up with the organized big operator than you ever will by reducing by one little punk the great army of small-time crooks.

On the basis of size of loss, obviously Mrs. Carpenter's burglary had no priority at all. She'd lost nothing. The only reason why Joe could justifiably spend even the time he did on her burglary was the priority it derived from the factor other than loss. It was not merely the attempted crime against property. We also had the crime against her person. Only the chloroform gave this burglary importance. A burglar who carries and uses chloroform is obviously a more dangerous criminal than your simple sneak thief. To put him out of circulation is more important than eliminating even some considerable number of those timid thieves who commit crimes only against property and who carry no threat of doing anyone bodily harm.

So Joe worked on Opal, and he worked on Oscar. Before he left the building he came up to my place and told me where the thing stood.

"You'll be getting a new key for your downstairs door," Joe told me. "I'm sure it was no key job, but there is the companion chick on the loose and she has keys, so it's just plain common sense. Maybe the old lady's right and this girl has just gone off to sulk while the old babe learns a lesson, but that's not the way the odds run. I figure the girl went out for the lettuce. She was mad. On her way to the store some guy gave her the eye, and she was just in the mood for it. She was ripe for a little fun, and it would serve the old crank right having to wait for her dinner. She lets him take her to a bar and one thing leads to another."

Letting one item in his thinking lead to another, he made quite a story of it. He explored the possibilities. Even though Mrs. Carpenter had scouted any suggestion that Geneva could be working with the burglar, giving him her keys and briefing him on the geography of the apartment, Joe was still insisting that there was just enough possibility that Geneva's keys had been used and might be used again to make it wise to do the changes on the locks.

Mrs. Carpenter had offered powerful arguments in Geneva's favor, and I was backing all her arguments up. She was convinced, as was I, that Geneva just wasn't the type. Joe took little stock in that.

"The old babe tells me the kid's a dish," he said. "I wouldn't pay any attention to that. What women look at I don't know. All I know is it's not what we look at. I remember before I was married. Mom was always looking for girls for me, trying to get me settled down. What did she come up with? Dogs every one of them, but my grandmother got into the act, too, and hers were worse, pure bred English bulldogs. So what an old lady calls a dish and what anyone with the other kind of hormones will call a dish is maybe not at all the same thing, but I've had it from you, too, and I've seen some of the stuff you go for." He paused a moment looking wistful. "It makes a cat wish maybe he could be a bachelor again just for one night," he said.

I assured him that Geneva was indeed a dish, but that being a dish wasn't the whole story. There was also a question of character. He poohpoohed character.

"That's just the type," he said. "It's the quiet, well-behaved, shy ones. Put them in company and they're afraid of their shadow. Get them with a stranger, off where nobody knows them, and they're the ones to go whee. They have to break out sometime."

"Nonsense," I said. "With all the stories you hear these days, what girl is going to let some strange man pick her up in the street? The girl's no fool, and everyone knows how dangerous that is."

"Come around some time and take a look at our police blotter," Joe told me. "We get it every day. 'He was so nice and so polite, such a gentleman, how could I ever think he was going to beat up on me and rob me?' And that's only some of them. The ones that get racked up never get to tell us how surprised they were."

Of all the arguments in Geneva's favor Joe had from Mrs. Carpenter and me, there was only the one he found convincing. Nobody had known better than Geneva that a burglar interested only in cash would be wasting his time in the Carpenter apartment.

"The girl knew there was never more than the tipping change around. The girl also knew even the tipping change was running low. They were only a day or two away from going to the bank to pick up a fresh ten bucks worth."

The way he was adding it up, Joe was certain that, whether or not it had anything to do with Mrs. Carpenter's peculiar burglary, Geneva Washington was off somewhere with a man.

"She doesn't have to be in on anything with him," he explained. "Suppose he swiped her keys and did the job on his own. It's a possibility. He knows she's been working for a rich old babe. He knows that with the chick shackled up with him, the old lady will be alone in the apartment. He doesn't know that Mrs. Carpenter keeps no cash around the house."

I suppose it was vanity that made me boggle at the thought of Geneva being off with a man. You've made your play for the world's most delectable girl. She finds you depressingly resistable. A cop

who's never seen her suggests that she'll walk out of the house and pick up with some passing character who's given her the eye. Try that for size, brother. See what it does to your self-esteem? Despite such feelings, however, I did have to concede that the situation had possibilities it would be foolhardy to ignore.

"He chloroforms Mrs. Carpenter," Joe said. "He messes up the girl's room but the rest of the apartment he ransacks carefully. That could make sense if he's the chick's boy friend and he doesn't want her guessing that he was the one who did the job. He makes it seem that it had to be someone who doesn't know her and who would figure she had three weeks' pay stashed away in her room."

"Or else," I suggested, "we're wrong about him going away empty handed. He picked her up. She has no money with her. He asks her what makes. Doesn't she get paid on this job of hers? She tells him she does get paid but she was just running down to the store for some lettuce. She didn't take her money with her. Maybe without knowing what she was doing, she told him all about herself and Mrs. Carpenter. In that case he knew there would be no money except in Geneva's room. He never touched anything in Mrs. Carpenter's room or in the rest of the apartment."

"That's why I said change the locks," Joe said. "Any time there are keys on the loose, it's smart to change locks. That's basic horse sense. If the chick ever comes back and we can get her to tell us who she's been with, we can look the guy over and maybe go some place with the thing, particularly if she did have the money in the room and she's lost it."

I harked back to what he'd said when he first came upstairs.

"In the light of all this," I asked, "what makes you say you don't think it was a key job?"

He explained that, although it was a good enough possibility to necessitate the change of lock cylinders, it was not what seemed to him the most likely possibility.

"There's the window," he said.

"Cover-up," I told him. "Someone who has a key fixes it that way to make it look as though the job had been done by someone who didn't have a key."

Joe picked that apart. I had some preconceived notions that worked strongly against my going along with him on what he was calling the most likely possibility, but he came up with the logic that knocked all my preconceptions down. First of all, he had questioned Oscar. He was as convinced as I was that Mrs. Carpenter's suspicions of our janitor were not worth consideration.

"He's not stupid," he said. "The window gives him no cover-up, and he didn't need it. He had every opportunity to go through that apartment any afternoon while Mrs. Carpenter was out for her walk and he could have done it during the time before the Geneva babe came when Mrs. Carpenter was hiring and firing companions about one a day. You've got people zipping in and out of a place like that, it's a good time to pull a job. Suspicion gets spread around so wide, nobody ever knows where to put it. Why does he wait to do it now and why at night when Mrs. Carpenter is in there? It's doing it the hard way, going to a lot of trouble to put himself to a risk he doesn't have to take. The best possibility on this thing is just ordinary carelessness. The last time he was fastening up after the window cleaner, he missed the one window and he left the screws sitting on the windowsill."

That, of course, was where my preconceptions came in. I gave him the full rundown on Oscar, how methodical and reliable the man was and the accompanying rundown on Opal, that jewel of a cleaning woman.

He'd already heard all that. He'd heard it from Oscar and Opal. He was believing none of it.

"It's just because they are so good and so reliable and they take all this pride in doing their jobs right that they'll never admit to even one moment of carelessness," he said. "He didn't skip the window deliberately. He missed it. He was going around the apartment, fastening them all up. Something interrupted him. When he came back to it, he didn't pick up where he'd left off. He forgot just how many he'd done and how many he had left to do. He missed one. He swears he didn't, and he's not really lying about it. He just can't believe it of himself."

I broke in on that. What he was saying about Oscar did make

sense but only because he was considering Oscar alone. He was leaving Opal out of the picture.

"It's been more than a week," I said, "and Opal's cleaned that apartment every day. She didn't let all that time go by without dusting the windowsill, not Opal."

He laughed. "She swears she dusted it every day," he said. "She swears those screws weren't sitting on the windowsill yesterday morning. Obviously she's lying."

"I know Opal. She's been working for me ever since I've had this place. She wouldn't lie to save her life."

"I know the type," Joe told me. "They won't lie to save their lives, but they'll lie any time to save their pride. She keeps that apartment clean. Two hours a day, five days a week she's in there. She cleans. She scrubs. She does the old lady's laundry, and she does the pressing. Nobody can do all that on just two hours a day. It's impossible. She has to be cutting a corner or two somewhere. The windows are all covered up with the drapes all the time. The only time anybody ever sees the windowsill is when the windows are being washed. The windows are never opened. These apartments are airconditioned. The windowsills are corners she can cut. She hates neglecting them but there's only so much anybody can do in two hours. She's been skipping them and she'll die before she'll ever admit it."

I still had to be convinced. "I don't know how she does it," I said. "I have her only an hour a day five days a week, and yesterday she had to give Mrs. Carpenter extra time because there was nobody to take the old lady out for her walk. So yesterday she whipped through here in fifteen minutes, and she hasn't been in here yet today. Does this place look as though she cut any corners even yesterday? She's a whizz."

"That she is," Joe said. "But look at your place and look at that place downstairs. Does she do your laundry?"

"No. It goes out."

"Right. You have one bedroom and one bath. Downstairs it's two bedrooms and two baths. More rooms to clean. You don't have stuff all over the place like there is downstairs. You have a table with nothing on it. She runs a dustcloth over it, and that's it. Downstairs

she wants to dust the top of anything, she's got a dozen little things she has to lift off and put to one side and more than half of them are things you've got to be careful with, china and glass that'll break just from your looking at it. All that has to be moved aside and moved back into place. All that has to be kept clean. Polishing the silver alone; and, brother, it sure is polished. Even cutting corners like those windowsills nobody ever sees, it's a miracle the way she keeps the place for the old lady. This Opal babe is every bit as good as you and Mrs. Carpenter think she is. She's a whizz, but she's not as good as she'd like to be. Nobody could ever be that good, but she'll die before she admits it."

So that was his most likely possibility. Oscar had missed the one window. Opal, to her secret shame, had out of necessity been cutting corners. A passing sneak thief walked along testing the grilles, looking for a loose one. He came on one that swung open under his hand.

"Everybody down there agrees," he said, "that no one ever bothered about any window locks. There was no need to. The windows were barred. No trouble at all pushing the window up and climbing in. The guy looks around. Plush room with the old lady asleep in it. Plain room with nobody sleeping in it. Where's the money likely to be? In the old lady's room. He gives her a whiff of chloroform and goes through her room carefully. He finds no dough. He looks everywhere else carefully. No dough. He ends up in the companion's room. By then he's mad and he doesn't bother to work carefully. He's also in a hurry by then. It's getting on to morning. He has to get out of there. So there he does the quick search."

I sighed. "It's too bad," I said. "Of course, Oscar will never miss a window again, and Opal will find some other corner to cut. She'll be checking those windows every day and so will Mrs. Carpenter, but this will shake the old lady. She's never going to feel secure again."

"Yeah," Joe sighed with me. "It's sad. You never think what it's got to be like, being old like her. You can say she's got it good. She's still on her feet. She's loaded; and, if she isn't, all she has to do is sell a couple of the things she's got down there. A few pieces of the jewelry, one or two of those gold cups and things she has sitting all over

the place. She's got so much of it, she can let a couple of those things go and you'd never even see they were gone. Just one or two of those things would bring in enough bread to keep her like a queen the rest of her life. So what good is it? She has to live down there and never see the light of day because she can't see it without looking through bars like in a prison. It's enough to drive a person nuts."

"I suppose she likes the apartment," I said.

"She hates it," Joe told me. "I made two suggestions. One was changing the locks. The other was she should move some place to an upstairs apartment where she wouldn't have to have bars on her windows and where she wouldn't have to be worried all the time about are the bars fastened up right. You know what she told me?"

"I will thank you not to meddle in my affairs, young man," I said.

"That I expected," Joe said, "but no. She broke down and cried. She hates the barred windows. She hates keeping the drapes closed all the time, but she has no choice. She can't do stairs. With her arthritis it's rough enough doing the curbs when she goes out for her walk. Stairs are out."

"Nonsense," I said. "There's the elevator. I don't use it, being just the one flight up, but it's there."

"I used it," Joe said. "A tiny, self-service job, and it creaks. I was sure I was going to get stuck between floors. When I go out of here, I'm walking down."

"It's never gotten stuck," I said, "and she could move into one of the big houses with regular elevators and elevator boys, the lot."

"Not her. Claustrophobia. She's never been in an elevator in her life, and it's too late for her to start now."

"Oh," I said.

I was remembering the way the day had begun, when she called and I suggested that she come upstairs to my place. I was remembering the way she sounded then, terrified, pulled out to the very edge of her nerves. I had to admire her steel. Torn between her terror of the elevator and her terror of being even a moment longer alone in the apartment with its unbarred window, she had found the strength to tell me to take my time. She would be there. She had nowhere to go.



Oscar came up to give me my key for the new lock on the front door. He was in bad shape. He might have gone to pieces completely if he hadn't had his indignation to hold him up. Happily he had taken most of the questioning as nothing more than police routine. The way he talked about it, he was even more eager than any policeman possibly could be to lay his hands on the stinking skunk who had invaded Mrs. Carpenter's apartment.

She was a wonderful old lady. She had her crotchets and quirks, but which of us hasn't?

"She has guts, Mrs. Carpenter," Oscar said, "and she's a lady. She's always a lady and that's more than I can say for most nowadays."

It evidently hadn't even for a moment occurred to him that he could have been under suspicion. That anyone might have thought he could be the man who sneaked into Mrs. Carpenter's apartment and chloroformed her to ransack the place was beyond the range of his imagination. What had him shaken was the line of questioning Joe Simmons had hammered at him.

That he could have been suspected of being careless with Mrs. Carpenter's window grilles was a shattering shock to the man. That in the face of his denials and protestations plus Opal's supportive testimony such suspicion had persisted was an affront that had him almost completely out of control. The one thing in the building to which he had always given his most special vigilance was the security of Mrs. Carpenter's windows.

"I don't know when I was careless about anything here in the house," he said, "but maybe I was sometimes about something but never about Mrs. Carpenter's windows."

"You've never been careless about anything, Oscar," I told him. "It's just that in a thing like this the police have to test everything

out. If there was a simple answer, they wouldn't have to go digging around for a way to explain that window."

"It's simple enough," Oscar growled. "They better go find that girl. She's a good girl, and I don't care how aggravating Mrs. Carpenter was, that girl didn't go walking out on her the way people are saying she done. She wouldn't do a thing like that. It's as plain as the nose on your face. She went out and she didn't come back. What does that mean?"

"What does it mean, Oscar?"

"It means she met up with foul play. Somebody mugged her and killed her. It happens every day, all over the city, all of the time. He got her purse and so he got her keys. Maybe she had identification in her purse, so he knew where to go and maybe he's been watching, figuring all along Mrs. Carpenter would be a good one to rob. They do that too. They call it casing the joint."

"So why the window if he had the keys?" I asked.

"On account of me the window," Oscar said. "That's why the window. You can't get the screws out from outside, not with a full set of burglar tools you can't; but from inside it's easy. Any kid could do it with nothing but a pocketknife. He came in with the keys; but when he wanted out, he couldn't go that way. I was in the hall."

"During the night?"

"You call it night. I call it morning. You know the marble floor in the downstairs hall and the marble stairs up to here? Ever walked on them when they was wet or slippery?"

I hadn't, but I thought he was wandering. He wasn't. He was right to the point. Marble is slippery when wet but marble floors and stairs have to be wet once a day. They need daily washing if they are to be kept clean.

If at any time during the standard working day Oscar were to wash the marble floor or the marble treads of our handsome staircase, he would have no way of barring them to the tenants' use until they dried and were no longer hazardous. It was a problem; and Oscar, being Oscar, had his own solution for it. Every morning, well before daybreak, he was out in the lower hall, scrubbing the marble floor and washing down the stairs.

"That way," he said, "they're dry before anyone comes down in the morning. It's still dark when I start on them, and the sun's up before I'm through."

I jumped at that. "Then you saw someone?" I asked. "You heard something?"

He had been looking unhappy before the question. Now he was freshly flooded with a new wave of bitterness.

"If I saw someone or heard something," he wailed, "you think I would just have let it pass? What do you take me for?"

It was just something that stood to reason. The burglar, ready to pull out before daybreak, heard Oscar outside Mrs. Carpenter's apartment door with his pail and his scrubbing brush. Oscar always did his best to be quiet at his work but an iron pail on a stone floor isn't a quiet thing. Naturally the burglar couldn't make his exit past that. Oscar was guessing that the man waited, thinking the work in the hall would be quickly done.

"Like most janitors, they do it," Oscar said.

Since it had been Oscar doing it and since Oscar did his work properly, it wasn't quickly done, and the burglar came to recognize that full daylight would trap him before he could leave the apartment by the way he had come. He went by the window.

Everybody had a theory. Opal didn't get to me till afternoon. What with the time the police had wasted for Opal and what with Mrs. Carpenter having to have her walk right after the police left her, most of Opal's day had gone.

"I couldn't do like yesterday," Opal explained, "come to you and upstairs and then go back later to take her for her walk because Mrs. Carpenter, she had other plans for this afternoon. She had to have her walk right after that there detective was gone or she wouldn't get it in at all."

If Oscar had come away from his interrogation at the hands of Joe Simmons in a resentful mood, Opal had come out of hers with a general contempt for the male mind and a specific contempt for police mentality.

"Windowsill not touched for more than a week," she stormed. "Where does he think he is? Out in the country somewheres without

no dust or no soot or no nothing? He's never even heard of air pollution maybe. You know how it is here, Mr. Bagby. Even with the windows never open and using only the air conditioning, it comes in. There's no keeping it out. It leaks in around the edges of the windows. Of course, there was soot and dust on her windowsill with that window wide open for God knows how long last night, but even with the window always shut and nothing for air but the air conditioners like always, that windowsill not touched for more than a week, you'd have soot on it so high you'd need to shovel it off. Anybody but a man would know that, just like anybody but a man would know that just because a girl is good looking don't have to mean she's a good girl."

"Geneva?"

"Who else?"

So then I had Opal's theory. There hadn't been any burglar. There had been nobody but Geneva. Geneva never fooled Opal. Opal knew Geneva's kind. It was just like a movie Opal remembered seeing. She would never forget it. She kept repeating that over and over. She remembered it like it was yesterday. The movie was called *Kind Lady*, and if that didn't describe poor, dear Mrs. Carpenter, what did?

Opal ran through the whole *Kind Lady* plot for me. She told me how these evil people moved in on the poor, old thing and started right out to get her in their power, working on her till they had her just where they wanted her and she couldn't call her soul her own.

That, Opal explained, was what Geneva was up to. There had been a girl in the movie, and Opal remembered her, too. A pretty girl, she acted as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"This here one too," Opal said. "Like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and if you want to know, Mr. Bagby, it wouldn't. She's that cold. In her mouth, she takes a drink of water, it's an ice cube when she gets it swallowed."

Opal had the whole scenario. It was just as Mrs. Carpenter said. Geneva had gone off to show Mrs. Carpenter that Mrs. Carpenter couldn't get along without Geneva.

“But just leaving poor Mrs. Carpenter alone,” Opal explained, “that wasn’t enough. She has to scare her and good. She came in last night after Mrs. Carpenter was asleep. She gave Mrs. Carpenter that chloroform. Then she messed up her own room. That was to make it look like it couldn’t have been her. Then she took the screws out of the window and just went away. Now she’ll come back, and it’ll be Mrs. Carpenter ain’t safe without her. Mrs. Carpenter must do just like Geneva says. She mustn’t ever make Geneva mad. Mrs. Carpenter knows what can happen to her if Geneva isn’t there.”

It was ingenious even if movie inspired, but it had even more ingenious ramifications. Opal filled me in on all of them. The opening of the window grille, as Opal saw it, had been a particularly subtle and vicious bit. I might think that part of it had been just to make it look as though the visitor hadn’t had the keys, but there was far more to it than that.

“That she done for Oscar and for me,” Opal announced. “It was to make us look bad. Mrs. Carpenter can’t be thinking that maybe she don’t need Geneva. She can get me to give her more time, take her on her walk and all. She can call Oscar if she needs something and I ain’t around. That Geneva’ll come back and she’ll rub it in on Mrs. Carpenter. Mark my words, Mr. Bagby. I know that one. She’ll be telling Mrs. Carpenter there’s nobody Mrs. Carpenter can depend on but her. Oscar’s no good. He leaves that window so anybody can come in during the night. I’m no good. A whole week and more, and I don’t even dust a windowsill. It’s just the kind of trick they played on the old lady in the movie. It’s the same thing all over again, but if she works it on Mrs. Carpenter, mark my words, it’s going to be over Opal’s dead body. I’m on to her. That miss don’t pull no wool over Opal’s eyes. Not for a minute, she don’t.”

I left Opal to her cleaning and got myself out of the apartment. It seemed by far the wisest thing I could do. I wasn’t even tempted to tell her that her hypotheses were so far out that they had even over-leaped the left-field bleachers. Call it cowardice if you like, but I had only the one thought.

This was no time for any man to confront Opal with even the smallest measure of disagreement. She was filled with a raging mis-

anthropy and she was also in the process of revising her work schedule so that she could give Mrs. Carpenter a larger portion of her work day. Since her rage against my sex had as its special focus those members of my sex who are engaged in police work, I didn't dare let myself forget that I wasn't merely another despised male. Through my association with Inspector Schmidt, I am at least a quasi-cop. I could only hope that in her schedule revisions she wouldn't revise me right out. I was not going to ruffle her by either word or gesture.

The last person I expected I would encounter when I went down the avenue was Mrs. Carpenter. Opal had already had the lady out for her daily walk, and although I could well imagine this would be a day when the old lady might welcome any opportunity to be out of her apartment with its disquieting memories of the night before, I assumed that she would have had no choice. With Geneva gone and Opal busy with taking care of me, Mrs. Carpenter would be without a supporting arm for any venture abroad.

So seeing her at all was a surprise. Seeing her as she was I found staggering. The picture of her I was carrying in my mind that afternoon was, of course, a special one, colored by what I'd had from Joe Simmons, Oscar, and Opal. Joe had seen her in tears. Oscar proclaimed her a great lady who under all circumstances would never be anything but a lady. Opal tabbed her for a victim type but still inflexibly a lady, however mistakenly kind.

The Mrs. Carpenter I saw on the avenue was not in tears, and to look at her, one would never think that anyone under any circumstances could have called her a lady, kind or otherwise. She was the perfect picture of the ancient harridan, the superannuated courtesan who had outlived the potential but neither the impulses nor the tricks. If the way she flirted with me at dinner had been absurd, she was now walking with another man, and the performance she was putting on with him was spectacular.

He was a young man. No boy, but certainly not yet out of his thirties. He was tall. He was broad of shoulder and lean of waist and flank. He had that look you see on the men in the ads, both super-masculine and supercorrect. It is the look of the Beautiful People, male division, the look that suggests that he is sufficiently male to put

out a body odor and sufficiently knowing to choose the deodorant that will be just right for eliminating it.

He was handsome and all too evidently aware of it. I've known men who have the looks and take them in their stride. I've also known men who do betray varying degrees of personal vanity, but there is another breed and in them at very first sight you can detect the difference. They are not merely conscious of their male beauty or even simply vain about it. They are professionally preoccupied with it. Actors of the matinee-idol type. Crooners of the vintage that had not yet taken up the fashion of being unkempt or epicene or both. Gigolos. Authors who give more of their time to appearing before women's clubs than they do to writing. The politician whose link to statesmanship is his TV makeup man. Fashionable gynecologists.

He couldn't have been more correctly or more discreetly dressed, but the clothes were like his person, possessed of that extra edge of perfection that passed beyond anything that could be natural. They also had that touch of professionalism. Creased trousers, shined shoes, a coat that hangs well, the immaculately white shirt, a perfectly knotted tie, you'll see those on men all over town; but I can only say that in his case all these things had a special something. You can see a hundred pairs of neatly creased trousers, but it's only the hundred and first that strikes you as being the very model of what trouser creases should be. You could never put your finger on the difference, but it does strike you. This isn't a shoe shine. It's *the* shoe shine. It's *the* white shirt, *the* uncreased sleeve, *the* rolled lapel.

Even the attache case he was carrying had it. I've seen attache cases that could be suspected of carrying chicken legs and apples for their owners park-bench lunches. Just to see his attache case was to think it could contain nothing but the draft of the contracts for some multi-million-dollar deal or the *aide memoire* on which will hang the fate of nations.

He was hatless, but not even that marred the picture. His hair was too beautiful. No man could be expected to cover such hair any more than he could ever allow his lips even for a moment to drop out of a smile and conceal such magnificent teeth.

That Mrs. Carpenter, walking along on the arm of anything so magnificent, should have gone dizzy with delight or that she should have been betraying her excitement by twittering and fluttering might have been expected, but I could never have imagined that even at her silliest she might have descended to cuddling. Even in private it seemed inconceivable. This was right out in the public street.

She was cuddling. I could find no other word for it. Granted that she couldn't walk without someone's arm for support. I had, however, seen her walk with Geneva and with her earlier companions, and the evening before she had walked with me. She required only a little support. What she needed mostly was steadying. Her hand rested on your arm would do it. Up and down at the curbs she did need a little more but nothing like what she was taking from Wonderboy.

They were making a spectacle of themselves. He had his arm around her, holding her close, and she was pressing up against him in a manner that would have been shameless if it hadn't been so ludicrous. You'll see young lovers walk that way. The young lovers do it because it isn't walking they're interested in. It's body contact.

They were a good half block away when I spotted them coming toward me. I was making for the bank, and I had only just enough time to be in there before the doors would be closed. I dodged the encounter. Turning off into the side street before they reached me, I went into the bank by the side entrance instead of through the main door on the avenue.

I had every possible reason for this evasive action. I did want to make the bank and unless I could go right by Mrs. Carpenter and her Greek God with no more than the tip of my hat, I'd have the bank's doors shut in my face. I was quite certain I couldn't get by her with only that. I had too vivid a memory of the way she had flirted with me the night before. I had no wish to learn how she would perform with two men at her disposal.

It seemed to me that she was putting on the show of shows, and I certainly had no wish to be drawn into the act. She could just go on

making a spectacle of herself with Body Beautiful. He might be enjoying it. There was no need for letting her make a spectacle of me as well. She'd already had a shot at that the night before.

As I went into the bank, I was remembering that Opal had said something about having to take Mrs. Carpenter for her walk early since Mrs. Carpenter had other plans for the afternoon and that if the walk had waited until after Opal had done my place up, it would have had to be canceled altogether because then it would have been too late.

Now I knew what Mrs. Carpenter's other plans had been. I was amused. It was so much in pattern. Despite all her good resolutions about mending her ways and being less dictatorial in the future, she was already back to her old tricks. She had made arrangements for a walk today. She had enlisted this young man for it, but would she tell Opal? Oh, no. It was not for Opal to know that other arrangements were possible. Opal must hold herself available for Mrs. Carpenter's pleasure whether she was needed or not. It seemed to me that it was with just such little acts of deviousness that the Mrs. Carpenters carry on, hungrily clinging to at least a semblance of power.

I was calling it all to the good. I had been fighting off the thought of what I'd felt I was going to have to do. After the scare the poor old thing had been through and after the way she had turned to me when she was in need of help, I couldn't have had the face, knowing she was alone, not to have called around and asked her if there was anything I could do for her. I had been thinking that I could hardly escape asking her to dine with me again. I had been working at inventing previous engagements of the most pressing nature, and I had known I would make no use of my inventions. I'd been certain that by evening I was going to suck myself in. I couldn't have looked myself in the face otherwise.

By the time I had pulled away from Opal to go to the bank, I had been down to hoping the phone would ring and that it would be Inspector Schmidt to tell me that the whole city had been bloodied by a Manhattan massacre and that he wanted me to join him at once in his investigation of this horror because it was the biggest story he'd ever had for me.

I didn't need it any more. Now that I'd seen Mrs. Carpenter with Glamor Boy, I was going to be well able to cope with my better nature entirely on my own. I didn't have to give her another thought. My conscience would be leaving me alone. Its teeth had been drawn. The lady was having herself a big day. She would be needing neither my company nor my solicitude. She had no further need for being taken out of herself. She was already out, way out. The posture assumed by her and her young man in their walking could be characterized only as perpendicular bundling. If she was lonely or frightened she could keep Pretty Boy around for the evening, and when he left her, she would certainly be ready for a rest. There'd be no reason for me to go near her any more that day. It would be cruel to disturb her.

My business in the bank didn't keep me there long. It was nothing complicated, just the usual. I deposited a couple of checks and drew out a little cash I needed to go along on. I had pulled it so fine on closing time, however, that even the few moments it took for those simple transactions carried me past three o'clock.

When I was ready to leave, the main entrance on the avenue side had already been locked and I was shunted back to that side-street entrance I had used for coming in. They had a bank guard on the door there. He was holding it against late-comers and unlocking for departing customers. He let me out and locked up again after me.

A black Cadillac, complete with uniformed driver, was parked at the curb. I had noticed it on my way in. Those Caddies are by no means as ubiquitous as the New York taxi cab, but you do see them around town. You are most aware of them at theater time, but they aren't too unusual otherwise. There are a couple of fleets of them operating in town. You hire them by the hour or by the day or week.

As I turned toward the avenue, the driver accosted me. He wanted to know if there were any people still left in the bank.

"The bank people are all still in there," I told him, "and quite a few customers. Once it hits three o'clock they won't let you in any more, but if you've made it inside the door before three, they don't toss you out till you've finished your business even if it does keep them overtime."

The driver relaxed. "Sure," he said. "That's all right then. People sometimes they go places where there's more than one door and they forget which they went in. They go out the wrong door, and then there's hell to pay because you're not there waiting for them."

"Lots of people still in there," I assured him, and went on my way.

I could have gone home and put in a couple of hours at the typewriter, but I remembered that Opal was there doing up the apartment. She would be giving me at least my full hour that day, and there was still a good part of it to go. I had some errands that needed doing and decided they would be just as well done then. At the end of the afternoon I stopped in at the club for a drink. In the members' bar there were some men trying to whip together a bridge game. They were hanging on the bar laying ambushes for the fourth they were still needing. They caught me.

So it was a relaxed evening at the club in good company. Even if the evening hadn't shown me a pleasant little profit, I would have called it time well spent. It was about midnight when the losers gave up on trying to pull even, and by then I wanted some air. I walked home, coming into the house shortly before one. The first thought I had of Mrs. Carpenter was when I brought out my key for the downstairs door. The bright gleam of the new key under the street light reminded me. I took a couple of moments before I went in. I walked back past Mrs. Carpenter's windows, pulling at the bronze grilles that protected them. They were all solidly fastened. I couldn't even rattle them, much less swing one open.

It was no more than one might have expected. Certainly Oscar had run a check on the lot of them. If that had been the way Mrs. Carpenter's burglar had come in, there was this much I could guarantee for all time hence forward. Nobody would ever come in by one of those windows again, not so long as Oscar was on the job.

I went up to my own place and settled in for the night. I had a peaceful night, and with no disturbances in the morning I did get to the typewriter. It was midmorning by the time Opal broke in on me. I hadn't been expecting her that early, and the ringing of my doorbell was so prolonged and peremptory that I rose to answer it, won-

dering what was amiss. It never occurred to me that it could be Opal. Imperiousness and impatience had never been her style.

Hysteria had also never been her style; but it was Opal, and she was in a state that at least bordered on hysteria. It was Mrs. Carpenter again. Something awful had happened to Mrs. Carpenter. Opal had known all along that something awful was going to happen to the poor old lady and now it had.

"All right, Opal," I said. "Simmer down. What's happened?"

"She doesn't answer her bell. I rang and rang and she doesn't answer."

"Get Oscar to let you in with the master key," I suggested. "She may have overslept. It's no good panicking."

"The master key doesn't work in her new lock."

It seemed a ridiculous obstacle.

"He doesn't have a duplicate of her new key?" I asked.

"He has, but he had to go get it and she's in there alone and the Lord himself only knows what's happened to her."

"Oscar doesn't have to go far. He'll be back with the key in a minute. He'll let you in and you'll find that she's only overslept."

"Overslept? Old like she is? Mr. Bagby, when you're old like her, you have trouble sleeping at all. Old folks don't ever oversleep."

We were at my door. Oscar came half way up the stairs. He had the key. He wanted Opal. He was ready to open the door, but he wasn't going into the apartment. He thought that was for Opal to do.

"It had ought to be a woman," he said. "She's maybe not dressed."

Opal grabbed at my arm and tugged. "Come down with me, Mr. Bagby," she begged. "Please come down with me. I will have to go in there alone. He's right. We don't know. She may not be dressed, but you and Oscar stand in the door. Please! I'm frightened, Mr. Bagby."

"Okay, okay," I told her. "I'll come down. Oscar and I will be right behind you. There's nothing to be frightened of."

Opal raced for the stairs and I came after her. She was talking all the time.

"She's old, Mr. Bagby," she kept saying. "Nobody's ever been that old. She hadn't ought to be ever alone and not only because somebody might do something to her, old and frail like she is, but on

account of accidents, too. Old like that, they fall, they always break a hip. At her age, a broken hip, it's no joke."

Oscar had gone down the stairs ahead of us. He was now at Mrs. Carpenter's door. He had the key in the lock waiting to turn it.

"All right already," he growled. "You can talk about it later. If she's in there needing help, it's no time for all this talking."

Opal fell silent, and we joined Oscar at Mrs. Carpenter's door. He turned the key and pushed the door open a crack. Stepping aside he made room for Opal to come forward and take it the rest of the way. I jumped in there ahead of her. This was no time for worrying about an offense to Mrs. Carpenter's modesty.

Even through that scant inch of door opening Oscar had ventured, it had come at me, sharper and stronger and heavier than the previous morning. The air in the old lady's apartment reeked of chloroform. I didn't have to go looking for her. She was right there in plain sight just inside her living room. She lay on the Aubusson rug, and she was fully dressed, dressed exactly as she had been when I'd seen her on the avenue the afternoon before. She hadn't even removed her hat or her gloves.

She lay with her head fallen to one side and with her face turned away. It wasn't until I had gone in and bent over her that I could see it. It was a great, thick wad of white surgical gauze taped down to her face. It bulged like a pillow, and it covered her whole face almost up to the eyes. Her mouth and her nose were completely hidden under it. It was damp.

I knew at once that she was dead. In my years of exploring homicide in association with Inspector Schmidt, I have been confronted with more cadavers than I care to count. I have seen them freshly dead and when they have been dead far too long. I don't pretend to being an expert in the field of forensic medicine. Any estimate of just when Mrs. Carpenter had died would, of course, be in the Medical Examiner's department, but it took no expert knowledge to see that she had been dead for a considerable time. The body was quite cold. Rigor had set in. The eyeballs showed some flaccidity. None of this develops immediately after death or even within the first hour.

I turned back to Oscar. He was standing awkwardly outside the

door. He had Opal plastered against him with her face burrowed into his chest. He was holding her up, but in the clumsiest fashion. He didn't want to let her fall but he didn't want to seem to be embracing her, and he didn't know how to manage the one without the other.

"Take Opal up to my place," I told him. "Call the police. Tell them you're calling for me and tell them I say it's murder. I'll stay here, but I don't want to touch anything here, not the telephone, not anything. So you make the call for me. As soon as you've done that, pour Opal a good, big drink. Make it the brandy. You'll find the bottle on the bar. It says Remy Martin on the label. Look for the letters VSOP. That will be the right bottle."

Oscar gulped. "Mrs. Carpenter?" he whispered. "She's dead? Nothing we can do for her? Maybe a doctor?"

"Too late for a doctor," I said. "Too late for anything but the police. Hours too late, maybe all night. I think since yesterday afternoon."

He shifted his grip on Opal and started her toward the stairs. Then he stopped and stood a moment shaking his head, obviously trying to make some sort of sense.

"The elevator, man," I told him. "Use the elevator." I was being careful not to shout at him. He was in no shape to take it. "And after you've made the call," I added, "slug yourself with that brandy, too. It's good medicine."

"Yes, Mr. Bagby," he mumbled, as he turned Opal and drew her toward the elevator. "After I've called the police. Yes. Thanks, Mr. Bagby."

I watched him get her into the elevator, and then I shut the apartment door. I walked around the place, looking it over. Everything seemed to be in perfect order. All the disarray of Geneva Washington's room had been set to rights, and I could see no indication that anything had been disturbed anywhere. I went around checking all the windows. Beyond pushing the draperies aside to look behind them I touched nothing.

All the grilles were in place. Through the window glass I could see the heads of the screws that secured the grilles. Every screw was

well seated. There wasn't a screw head that protruded so much as the smallest fraction of an inch. They were all down absolutely flush. Inside the grilles the windows themselves were all shut tight, and now every one of them was locked as well.

That would be part of the explanation of why the reek of the chloroform was so much stronger than it had been the previous day. Mrs. Carpenter's burglar that first time had left the one window wide open behind him, and in the morning Mrs. Carpenter, after shutting and locking the window, had set her air conditioners going. Most of the fumes had been cleared out of the place then. By the time I'd come down, there had been only a whiff of the chloroform left in the air.

This time it was different. This time there had been no open window, and this time there had been no one to set the air conditioners in operation, and this time there was the great wad of gauze still damp and still giving off fumes of the chloroform.

The first time it had been held over her nose only long enough to put her out. No wad of chloroform-soaked gauze had been left behind in the apartment. The burglar, once it had served his purpose, had carried it away with him and disposed of it elsewhere. In addition to all this I felt certain that the second dose had been far heavier than the first. Mrs. Carpenter did survive her first chloroforming. Now, after the second, she was dead.

 VI 

When it's only burglary, precinct sends one man from its detective squad out on it. When it's homicide, however, precinct throws in every man it can spare. When it's homicide in a neighborhood that has a low incidence of violence, your whole street will go blue with police officers.

An army of them came flocking in on me, and, as was to be expected, Joe Simmons was in charge. The way the poor lad looked, I was tempted to take him upstairs and pour a slug of my Remy Martin into him. He needed it at least as much as Oscar, possibly even as much as Opal. It wasn't that he hadn't been hardened by previous experience with cadavers. He also hadn't been in Mrs. Carpenter's company long enough to work up for the old lady anything like the feeling Oscar and Opal had for her.

His was another trouble. He was fighting off a sense of failure. He had been here only twenty-four hours before. He was the man who caught the burglary squeal. He had done everything he knew how to do. He had left it feeling that he might even have done more than it called for. He had given the old lady his best advice. He had shirked nothing. It shouldn't have turned out this way.

"I sure muffed this one," he said to me. "I should have known there had to be more to it than was showing up. It was too peculiar."

"It still is," I said. "It made no sense yesterday, and it makes even less sense today. She had a burglar and he found nothing to steal. Why would he come back, and this second time how did he get in?"

"This time it looks as though she let him in," Joe said. "Hat on, gloves on. She's all ready to go out. She opens her door. He's right outside. He pushes her back in and comes in after her."

"She never went out alone," I told him. "She couldn't walk without someone to steady her. Inside the apartment she got around by

reaching from one piece of furniture to the next or by steadying herself against the walls. When she went out, she had to have someone with her."

"Which means we've got to find out who she was out with last," Joe said, "and who she came home with."

"Glamor Boy," I groaned. "I saw her, Joe. Out on the avenue yesterday afternoon. She was with a man, a young man, and she was making a fool of herself over him, but he was someone she knew. She knew him well."

"Who?" Joe asked.

"Nobody I'd ever seen before. I just saw them walking together on the avenue, and the way they were behaving, he was someone she knew well."

Joe sighed. "It'll mean digging into all the people she knew," he said. "We'll maybe turn him up that way."

It wasn't long before the inspector had the word. When it's homicide, it's always quick to reach him. As soon as the police were on the scene, I hit the phone and tried to reach him directly. He wasn't at his desk or at the end of any of the other lines that could reach him immediately, so all I could do was leave a message, but it didn't matter. He was in touch with headquarters within a few minutes and he got both things together, the departmental flash and my message. Although I had asked that he call me, he didn't bother. He knew from the address on the homicide flash what I'd been calling him about. He came right over.

He examined the body. He prowled the whole apartment looking at everything. He listened attentively to all the stories we had to tell him. He heard Joe and Oscar and Opal and me. For that part of it, the questions and answers, he settled himself upstairs in my place. He did all right with all of us except Opal.

At her first sight of Schmitt, she went hostile. I thought it meant she was going to be difficult, and I blamed myself. I should have warned him. I, after all, was the one person in the best position to foresee it. I was the one who knew Opal and the one who knew Schmitt.

He's Inspector Schmidt. He's Chief of Homicide. He's a man to be respected, but to Opal he's none of these things. To Opal he's a sloppy oaf. He's a man who takes his shoes off in public and sits around in his socks while his shoes are cluttering up the floor beside his chair. Is that any way for an important man to behave?

Opal, of course, doesn't know that Schmittty wasn't born Chief of Homicide. She knows nothing of the long road he took to get himself where he is today. She doesn't know that he began his career in the department down there where those careers begin. He was a patrolman pounding a beat and that was back in the days before the department had prowl cars. When Schmittty was a precinct patrolman, patrolmen walked and stood. All the long hours of each tour of duty they were on their feet, and young Patrolman Schmidt was just not cut out for it. Anything else a man needed to be a good police officer he had and in the fullest measure, but in this one important area he wasn't up to it. You've heard of Achilles. He was a lot of man, too. Nobody, Greek or Trojan, was more than Achilles, but he had the same trouble, except that his was only a heel. In Schmittty's case it was heels, toes, insteps, arches, the works.

Mostly you can't get him to talk about himself at all, but if you can get him to discuss his rise in the department, he'll tell you that it was his feet that made him a detective and his feet that sent him up and up in the department. Anyone else will tell you that his head had a lot to do with it, too, but he dismisses that as inconsequential. He lays it all to his feet.

They ached too much. He had to make detective just to get off them for a while. As a detective he had to do better than any of the other boys. It was self-preservation. He couldn't take any chances on losing grade. He couldn't risk being bumped back to patrolman, not with the tender feet he had.

That's it. Schmittty never stands when he can sit. He's never shod when he can slip out of his shoes. Since that first morning I've had occasion to speak to Opal about him, and I've given her all the explanation I've given you. It makes no impression.

"Doing housework," she said. "That's hard on the feet, too. I don't

go taking my shoes off when there's people around. I don't go taking my shoes off when I'm on the job. I don't go taking them off before strangers. I'd be ashamed."

So all the time Schmitty was questioning her, she had nothing for him but monosyllables, and even those were grudging. She never looked at him at all. She glared at his feet and looked down her nose at his empty shoes.

Schmitty did try. He asked her her name, and he wouldn't settle for Opal. He had to have her full name, and with a start I realized this was the first I ever knew it. It was Sinnott—Opal Sinnott. Meticulously polite with her, he called her Mrs. Sinnott when he wasn't calling her ma'am, but it had no effect. I gathered that she considered it no more than was her due from a man who took his shoes off. She, after all, kept hers on.

You must, however, never underestimate the inspector. He found a way. He dropped the questioning.

"Mrs. Sinnott," he said, "can you think of anything that I should know? Anything that you'd like to tell me?"

None of the sour went out of Opal's expression. It was clear that she didn't want to tell the inspector anything, but that didn't matter. She was so full of it, that she had to tell everyone and anyone. Shod or unshod, he had indicated that he was disposed to listen. Opal poured.

"It's that Geneva," Opal said. "It was her the night before and it was her again last night. The night before was only so that when she came again it would look like it wasn't her. It would look like someone they couldn't get in without they climbed in windows and it would look like somebody who was out to rob Geneva, and who's going to think she'd want to rob her own self?"

It astonished me that Schmitty didn't interrupt this. He just sat and listened, nodding approval of Opal's deductions, giving every evidence of being content to sit back and let Opal handle all his ratiocination for him. I had too often been around when a witness would only get started on some speculation and before the witness was even far enough along for me to recognize that he was begin-

ning to wander away into conjecture, Schmitty would have already sensed it and he would be in there cutting it off.

I waited, expecting that at each word he would break in on her and say it.

“Let us come up with the conclusions, Mrs. Sinnott. You just come up with the facts. Only what you know, ma’am, not what you think. Not what any fool would know or any of that. Only what you yourself know.”

He said nothing. Opal could have been a valued colleague. She was giving him the benefit of her wisdom and he was ready to sit at her feet and lap it up.

“Sure they changed the locks and she has no keys to the new locks,” Opal said, “but what difference does that make? She didn’t need keys. All she had to do was ring the bell, and Mrs. Carpenter would let her in and glad to do it. That’s how that Geneva had Mrs. Carpenter wrapped around her little finger. The poor old lady was waiting for her to come back. She was going to let her have her own way in everything. She was going to let that girl climb all over her till she wouldn’t have been able to call her soul her own. Mrs. Carpenter would have let her in, all right.”

The way Opal saw it, the thing was all of a piece, and the piece was Geneva Washington. She was basing everything on MO even though she wasn’t calling it anything as professional as *modus operandi*. She had her own words for it.

“It’s all just like her,” she said. “It’s her way of doing things. The first time she comes in with her key and it ain’t enough what she does to Mrs. Carpenter. It ain’t enough that she messes up her own things so it’ll look like it couldn’t be her what done it. She’s got to put it on to Oscar and me, taking them screws out of the window bars, leaving them on the windowsill. It has to look like Oscar don’t do his job and I don’t do mine. Then yesterday she comes back and she kills poor Mrs. Carpenter who never done her nothing but good, and again it ain’t enough. She has to fix it so it’ll be put on to me.”

If Schmitty wasn’t going to do anything about moving all this babble in the direction of some simple facts, it seemed to me that I

had to try. I don't pretend to being smarter than Schmitty in any matters of murder or detection. He's always thinking a dozen steps ahead of me, and I know it. In this case, however, I knew the people and he didn't. It was quite possible that Opal could have been in possession of facts I knew nothing about, but if she did have any, I was quite certain that none of them was appearing in this flood of balderdash.

"The windows and the grilles weren't touched last night, Opal," I interrupted. "It wasn't at all the same as the night before."

"When that one wants to do the same thing she done before and she can't think up a new way every time," Opal retorted, "that'll be the day. It was the same, her putting it on to me. It was just the way she done it this second time was different."

She elaborated the point, explaining it in detail. Everybody knew that Mrs. Carpenter couldn't go out alone. Everybody knew she had to have someone with her to give her an arm. With Geneva gone, with Mrs. Carpenter waiting for her to come back and, therefore, doing nothing about hiring a new companion, it was obvious that it would fall to Opal to take Mrs. Carpenter out for the old lady's walks.

"See what she did?" Opal said. "She comes back. Mrs. Carpenter lets her in. Mrs. Carpenter is so glad to see her again, so happy she came back. Mrs. Carpenter don't know Geneva's come back to kill her. Mrs. Carpenter thinks she's a good girl. Mrs. Carpenter thinks she's wonderful. She tells Mrs. Carpenter she should get ready. They'll go out for a walk. She tells Mrs. Carpenter she knows Mrs. Carpenter ain't had no good walks with her gone. What kind of a walk could Mrs. Carpenter have with nobody to take her but that Opal? Mrs. Carpenter will tell her she's right. She'll tell her she ain't had a decent walk at all, because now Geneva's back, Mrs. Carpenter'll be wanting her to stay. Mrs. Carpenter ain't going to tell her she done all right without her. Mrs. Carpenter puts on her hat and her gloves. She gets all ready to go out. That's when the girl kills her. That way it looks like she was killed when she come in from her walk, and who brung her back from her walk? Me. See how that girl works things? If it wasn't my luck Mr. Bagby seen Mrs. Carpenter

out on the avenue in the afternoon, I'd be in real trouble now. How could anybody believe Mrs. Carpenter was still living when I last seen her? It's only that Mr. Bagby seen her alive after I come up here yesterday to do out his apartment."

That was all of it. She had been possessed with it. Now she had it out, and she was finished. She went back to looking down her nose at Schmitt's shoes on the floor beside his chair.

"Mr. Bagby saw her with a man," Schmitt said. "Do you know the man? Any idea who he was?"

"I don't know no man."

"She said she had to have her walk early. She was going to be busy in the afternoon. Did she say with what or with who?"

"Busy. That's all she said. Busy."

"She had a second walk with this man," I offered. "It wouldn't be likely she'd get ready to go out for a third. It's more likely that she was killed when she came home from her walk with him."

"It wasn't him, Mr. Bagby. It was that Geneva."

"But why?" I asked. "Whatever for, Opal?"

"Her will. You look at Mrs. Carpenter's will. It was only last week. The girl was out marketing. I heard Mrs. Carpenter on the telephone. She was talking to her lawyer, telling him to put that Geneva into her will."

Schmitt reached for his shoes. "Thank you, Mrs. Sinnott," he said. "You've given me ideas. Whatever we do in this case, we'll have to find the girl."

I waited till I had Schmitt alone.

"Opal," I told him. "The scenario is out of Hollywood. She saw a movie."

Schmitt grinned. "That's only part of it," he said. "She's the cleaning woman. The girl was the companion. That's always a tricky human-relations deal. If you have both a maid and a nurse or companion in a house, you always have a war on. The nurse or companion asserts her superiority over the maid, and the maid isn't going to take it. It's easy to see what went on in Opal's mind. She's going to think anything but good of this Geneva Washington, and she's not likely to be mistaken. If I've ever been handed a phoney name, this is it."

"It is unusual," I said.

"Unusual? Suppose you're called Washington and you have a kid. Washington's going to be enough load for any kid to carry around. You don't make it worse by tacking on a fancy first name as well. You call the kid something simple and ordinary. Something like John or Jane."

"Or George or Martha?" I suggested.

"Not those," Schmitty said. "Not unless you're a sadist. George is okay for Bagby. Nobody's going to fasten it on a kid who's already got to carry Washington. Not George and not Geneva. It's phoney. What bothers me about it is it's maybe too phoney. Mostly aliases are simple. This one's a show stopper. We'll have to find her. The name makes it two things wrong with her."

"What else?" I asked.

"The way she walked out on the old lady," Schmitty said.

"Yes," I agreed. "That part of it bothered me from the first, but when we checked yesterday, she hadn't turned up in any of the hospitals. No indication that she had an accident or ran into foul play. Foul play, you know, is Oscar's theory."

"That would have to mean kidnaped," Schmitty said, "or killed and the body not turned up yet."

"Both Mrs. Carpenter and Opal came up with the theory that the girl had just walked out," I said. "They insisted she was staying away to show Mrs. Carpenter how essential she was. It sounded crazy to me, but Mrs. Carpenter told me it wasn't the first time it had happened to her. She'd had the same thing with other companions. They'd go out and not come back. They'd do it just this same way without any warning or other preliminaries."

"Yeah," Schmitty said. "I know. It happens all the time, but not this way. You've got a babe working for you. She goes out on her time off. When she's due back, she doesn't show. Sometimes she'll get back late. Sometimes she doesn't come back at all. She just sends someone around for her things. The story always is she got sick or something like that and she couldn't get back. They're out. They're having too much fun and they overstay, or else they get caught

drunk and they can't come back until after they've sobered up. That kind of thing is routine, but just running out for lettuce and not coming back is different. It's special enough to be worth our looking at."

"If she was going to do it at all," I reminded him, "it had to be a time like that. She never left the apartment except to run out for the marketing. The only other times she was out at all was when she had to go out with Mrs. Carpenter."

Schmitty nodded. "Exactly," he said. "It's all part of the picture. Fake name. Refuses any time off. Hardly can be pushed out of the apartment. Fights going out even on errands. See how it begins to shape up?"

"She took the job as a hideout?" I asked. "Is that what you're thinking? She wanted to drop out of sight and she thought she could hole up in the apartment downstairs? She was hiding from someone?"

"It's a possibility. It's even possible she was hiding from herself. Suppose she was an alcoholic and trying to cut away from it. She wants to break with all her earlier associations. She wants to set herself up so she won't be tempted. She fights going out even to market because she doesn't trust herself. One of these times she'll drop into a bar for just one, and she'll be off again."

I shook my head. "Not alcoholism," I said. "Mrs. Carpenter had me down for drinks one afternoon. The girl drank martinis. She drank as though she knew her way around alcohol, but it was a can-take-it-or-leave-it deal. Mrs. Carpenter drank sherry, but she had everything else down there as well. They always had drinks before lunch and drinks before dinner. If the girl overdid it even a little bit, we'd have heard about it from Opal. Alcoholics can't go on for weeks, drinking regularly but in moderation. One drink and they're off. It's the all-or-nothing deal for them."

"Yes," Schmitty conceded. "I did see all that liquor downstairs. It could be a drug habit. She broke it. She was clean. She was afraid of slipping back. She went out for the lettuce and ran into an old friend. She did slip."

"And what's happened since?" I asked. "Mrs. Carpenter? Why all that?"

"Too early to say. We may have to find the girl before we can begin to get any of those answers. If it is drugs, some possibilities can be worked out. She goes for the lettuce. She runs into an old crony. It's what she was afraid of. A fix is available and she hasn't the strength to say no. Old crony gets the idea that here's a chance to finance their habit for a while. He takes her keys and goes to rob Mrs. Carpenter. He won't take anything but money. The other stuff is too dangerous. But there is no money. He goes away empty-handed. It was a good try, but it didn't work."

"Then why would he come back the next day to do it all over again?" I asked.

"The next day is another story. Your addict has just had a fix or he maybe has an extra bag in reserve. At a time like that, he can be cautious. He won't take unnecessary risks. No money in the apartment? Bad luck, but he'll find some elsewhere. He's not going to mess with anything that can be traced. He goes away with nothing. Then it gets to be the next day, and he's having no luck elsewhere. He reaches the place where he's worried about where the next fix will come from, and he remembers all the jewelry and the silver and all that gold stuff. He walked away from all that and now he's kicking himself for having been so chicken. He's beginning to forget about risks. They do. The nearer it comes to the time when they have to have a fix, the more they come to disregard risks. He returns to correct his mistake."

"And again leaves empty-handed?" I asked.

"How can we know that he did leave empty-handed the second time around?" Schmitt met question with question. "Yesterday Mrs. Carpenter checked over all her stuff and said it was all there, nothing missing. Who can check it over today? Is there an inventory to check against? How do we know he didn't take one piece of jewelry or a couple of pieces or one of the little ornament things?"

"The place looked as though nothing had been touched," I said.

Schmitt shrugged that off. "Somebody was in there the night be-

fore last," he said, "and somebody was in there yesterday. That somebody came for something and it wasn't just to kill the old lady. Enemy out of her past come to revenge himself on her?"

He broke off while he put on his shoes. You have to know the inspector. That is something he never does lightly. It's best if conversation waits till he's finished putting himself through the ordeal. I waited till he was on his feet.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Downstairs for starters," he said. "We'll see what the boys are developing."

The body had been taken away. The specialists had taken over on the apartment. Joe Simmons was going through Mrs. Carpenter's desk. Schmitty came up behind him and gave him an approving pat on the shoulder.

"Good boy, Joe," he said. "That's just where I was going to begin."

Joe started to his feet, but Schmitty pressed him back into the desk chair.

"I thought you might want to take over on it yourself, Inspector," Joe said.

"What for? What'll I do there that you can't do? Anything to show what employment agencies she used? We have to find the companion."

Joe sighed. "One time or another," he said, "she used just about every domestic employment agency in town. She's got receipts here for the fees she paid them and it looks like she tried them all."

"Dated receipts?" Schmitty said. "One of them sent her Geneva Washington."

I was ready to speak, but Joe was in there. He hadn't forgotten. He explained about the *Times* ad and how the girl had come in answer to it.

"She told me the girl came with a letter of reference," Joe said. "Mrs. Carpenter checked it out. I was hoping she maybe kept the letter, but no dice. It isn't among her stuff here in the desk."

"She'd check it out and return it to the girl," Schmitty said.

"Yes, Inspector," Joe agreed. "It's not in the girl's room with the

girl's things, so it probably went out with the girl in her purse. I've been looking here in the desk just on the outside chance, but that hasn't panned out."

"Did Mrs. Carpenter happen to mention the name of the woman who gave the reference?"

"She didn't remember it. All I had from her on that was that there was a letter from a woman somewhere out of town. The girl had never had a New York job before. But the letter, it was a glowing reference. Mrs. Carpenter called the woman to check, and the woman was even more enthusiastic on the phone. It's a blank, Inspector, but I've got something else here maybe. It's not what I was looking for, but it's something."

"What?" Schmittty asked.

"Here on the desk," Joe answered. "The old lady's memo pad. I guess at her age she didn't trust herself to remember things. Looks like she wrote everything down. Yesterday's sheet isn't torn off. You can see the date, the fifteenth. She had 'vault' written here and 'Cavendish—2:30.' Now Mr. Bagby saw her on the avenue maybe coming from the bank just before three o'clock. He saw her with a man. Can't it be that she had an appointment with this Cavendish to go to her bank vault? Then maybe we're wrong and the second time wasn't like the first. There was cash to take yesterday. She'd been to the bank."

"To get the usual tipping money?" Schmittty muttered. "Ten bucks in silver? Big deal."

I was doing some muttering of my own. "Cavendish," I said. "I have a hunch, Schmittty."

"Cavendish is the man you saw her with yesterday," Schmittty said. "He was someone she knew well, but not well enough. He'd stolen in here the night before last to rob her while she was asleep, but he found no money worth taking. But he had this date to take her to the bank yesterday, so he fixed it then. He persuaded her to take out more than ten bucks this time, and then he brought her back here and killed her for it. Come up with a better hunch than that, Baggy."

"Much better," I told him. "Cavendish wasn't the man's name."

"You know his name?" Schmittty barked the question at me.

In detective work Schmitty rates me as an amateur. At times he'll up it to enlightened amateur or semi-pro, but at his lowest estimate of my abilities he gives me credit for being more competent than I must have been appearing at that moment. The possibility that I knew the man's name and had waited this long to volunteer it was enough to make him flip, and rightly. I hurried to get that straightened around.

"No," I said. "Of course, I don't. It's just my hunch that Cavendish isn't the man's name. It's something else. Cavendish Cads."

I had it coming at me faster than I could get it said. There are several of these outfits that hire out the super-duper cars with the super-duper uniformed chauffeurs. Carey Cadillac, Buckingham Livery, Cavendish Cads. I was remembering the Cadillac and chauffeur parked outside the side entrance to the bank. I was remembering the chauffeur's worry that his people had come out the other entrance and he'd missed them. I gave Schmitty and Joe the whole thing as fast as I could get it out.

"I'll bet that was her hired Cadillac," I told them. "She'd been into the bank with her young man. He suggested that they stop in at the cocktail lounge on the avenue and hoist one before going home. They left the car waiting while they did something like that. When I saw them, she was behaving like a silly old fool. It's exactly the way she would have been behaving if that beautiful, beautiful boy had invited her to have a drink with him. Cavendish Cads will know whether they sent a car around here yesterday afternoon. They'll know which driver it was. He may have heard something or seen something. She probably called Pretty Boy by name. She had that habit. She used people's names. 'How very kind of you, Mr. Bagby. You are thoughtful, Mr. Bagby. I can't take any more of your valuable time, Mr. Bagby.' If she talked that way in the car, the driver just might remember. We would have the man's name."

Schmitty slowed me down. With a string of questions he took the thing apart and winnowed out the few facts I had from the conjectures I was wrapping around them.

Even winnowed down, he liked it.

"It's worth checking, Joe," he said to Simmons. "Ask Cavendish

Cads if they had a car here yesterday. If they had, take it from there."

Joe reached for the phone. Schmitty held him up for a moment.

"Meanwhile something else," he said. "The old lady kept receipts. While you're on the phone, let me at the desk. I just might find something."

They switched places, and Schmitty went ferreting into the desk so avidly that he was all but diving head first into the drawers. It wasn't the way a man looks when he's merely hoping to come on something. He seemed to know exactly the one thing he was looking for, as though there was just this one specific thing he had in mind and he was hoping to find it among the receipted bills in Mrs. Carpenter's desk. It seemed certain that what he was looking for would have to be one of her receipted bills, and he had lost me completely. A receipt for what? I couldn't begin to imagine.

Meanwhile Joe Simmons was on the phone; and, since it was my own hunch he was checking out, I left the inspector to his burrowing and gave all my attention to Joe's end of the telephone talk. What I could hear was gratifying. It was jumping me up to at least semi-pro status. I had read Mrs. Carpenter's memo right. She had ordered a car and driver from Cavendish Cads for 2:30 of the afternoon before. She had taken it for just one hour. Joe was asking questions, but he was getting extensive answers and those I couldn't hear. Since I could hear him setting it up for the questioning of the driver, it was beginning to sound as though my hunch had not only been a good one but as if it might even be a productive one. We were on to something that just could pay off.

Waiting for him to finish on the phone, I was beginning to be impatient. I looked to the inspector for a word of commendation, but Schmitty was preoccupied. He had a slip of paper in his hand, and he was looking from it to Mrs. Carpenter's desk calendar and back to the slip again.

When Joe Simmons finished on the phone, however, Schmitty set his little slip of paper down on the desk and turned to give Joe his full attention.

"That's it, Inspector," Joe said. "Mr. Bagby had it figured."

Schmitty gave me a grin. "After all the years he's been watching us, Joe," he said, "something had to rub off on him. That's the Cavendish of it? She hired a Cavendish Cad?"

"Yes, sir. She ran a charge with them, opened it up when the little cabs first came in. She couldn't squeeze in and out of those, not with her arthritis. She had to have something that gave her more room, so she used Cavendish any time she went any place. They always gave her the same driver, and it's always been fine, but yesterday she had the driver in a sweat. He took her to the bank and he was parked outside waiting for her to finish in there. He waited till after the door was locked and all the time the guard was on the door letting late customers out. Before the guard left the door, the driver caught him and asked. The guard told him everybody was out. Nobody left in the bank but employees. The driver insisted she had to be in there, so the guard went and checked. He came back and told the driver that she'd been there, but had gone. She had gone out the other door before the bank closed."

"The driver left it at that and took off?" Schmitty asked.

"They say not, Inspector. He was sure there was a mistake somewhere and she'd still be coming out, so he went on waiting where she had left him. When the bank really locked up with the last of the employees coming out and going home, he drove back up here. By then he was figuring the old lady had maybe been slipping. She forgot all about him and came home some other way though he couldn't figure how. Anyway she hadn't dismissed him. So he was hoping he'd find her here and she'd tell him if she wanted him any more."

"Was she here?" Schmitty asked.

"He rang and rang and got no answer, Inspector. So then he phoned his office to ask them what he was to do. They told him to give up on it and come on in."

"He'll be available for questioning?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"Good." Schmitty turned back to the desk and picked up his slip of paper. "I've been looking at her telephone bills. You're right about her keeping receipts. She has the phone bills here for a year back and in the whole year they have her charged for only one out-of-the-

city call. The date on it is right for when Geneva Washington came to work for her. It has to be the call she made to check the girl's reference. It isn't far out of town. New Jersey, a Montclair number. Would you work the phone company on it, Joe? Get me the name and the address of the subscriber. Meanwhile I'll see what I can get out of the bank."

I went down to the bank with the inspector. Schmitt, of course, didn't need me except insofar as this had begun to look as though it would be one for me to write up, but since it was my bank, he didn't have to hit them entirely on the strength of his police status. I introduced him to the manager.

Of course, he couldn't get into the safe deposit box just like that. For that you have to go through all the forms set up by law and you have to have the tax people present when you open it up. So there at the first it was only what the bank people could tell us.

Most of Mrs. Carpenter's banking she had done by mail. Her deposits were all in checks and all done by mail. The only exception was her depositing of bond coupons, but with those she'd also had an unvarying routine.

Always on the exact day her coupons fell due for payment she came into the bank. She would go into the vault and clip the coupons. Before she left the bank she would deposit the coupons to her account. Otherwise she visited the bank only to make her small cash withdrawals. Those had always been the same, ten dollars in dimes and quarters. The only times there had been cash withdrawals of more than ten dollars would be once a year just before Christmas. Then she would take new bills and the bank's gift envelopes. These, of course, would represent her Christmas gifts to people like Opal and Oscar and the delivery boys who worked for the tradesmen who regularly served her.

Usually on her visits to the bank she would come with her companion. It would be a stop on her daily walk once a fortnight. There had been occasions, however, when she would need a fresh infusion of tipping money or a coupon-clipping day would come around, and she would be between companions. On those occasions she didn't miss coming in. Then she would come somewhat as she had the day

before. She would be driven to the bank in the Cavendish hired Cadillac. The chauffeur would give her his arm into the bank. There one of the bank guards would take over until the manager or one of his assistants rallied around to take care of her.

If it was just the usual ten-dollar withdrawal or the bigger Christmas withdrawal, she would be settled at the manager's desk where she would fill out the withdrawal slip and the silver would be brought to her there. If it happened to be a coupon-clipping day, she would be taken into the vault and escorted to one of the little rooms where she could do her coupon clipping. Manager or assistant manager would wait outside the door till she was ready to leave. He would take care of depositing the coupons to her account and he would escort her out to the car, where the chauffeur would again take over.

When she was not between companions, the bank people would still show her all the courtesies, but she would then move about the bank on the arm of her companion, and it would be the companion who waited for her outside the little room in the vault area. Only her last two coupon-clipping days had been different.

On the first of these two occasions she had come in with the only pleasant and attractive companion the bank people had ever seen with her. That, of course, had been Geneva Washington. She had introduced the bank manager to Geneva, and it was his impression that with her the old lady had been enjoying a most comfortable relationship. For the first time, when she came with Geneva, nobody waited for her outside the little room in the vault area. She had taken Geneva in with her while she clipped her coupons.

Her last visit, the one of the day before, had also been a coupon-clipping day. That time she had come with a man. None of the bank people had ever seen this man before, and Mrs. Carpenter had not introduced him. They had the impression, however, that he was a relative, perhaps a nephew. There seemed to be such great affection between him and the old lady. She had come into the bank on his arm, and, as she had with Geneva, she had taken him into the little room with her.

"It was exactly as it had been the time before that," the bank man-

ager told the inspector, "except for two things. She didn't make her usual withdrawal of change. She made these withdrawals regularly and she was due for one, but she didn't make any yesterday and she also didn't deposit the coupons. She just came in, went to her box, went into the room with the box, came out again, and left. We assume she took the coupons with her."

The manager hadn't realized that it had been a Cavendish Cadillac day. All he knew was that she had come in on the young man's arm and had left on the young man's arm. He had assumed it was one of the days when she visited the bank in the course of her walk. When asked if he had any idea of what she kept in her box aside from the bonds from which she clipped the coupons, he couldn't help the inspector at all.

"None of us was ever in the room with her," he said. "A customer is free to keep whatever he chooses in his box. We have no supervision of that. We hope that no one will ever leave a bomb in a box, but we know nothing but what we can conjecture of a box's contents. I remember one old lady we had. Hers was a big box, and she visited it regularly. She died and the arrangements were made for the opening of the box. The attorneys for her estate were here, her heirs, the tax people. We went through all the official formalities. When we opened the box it was completely empty except for one very stale ham sandwich. That's something I'll never forget."

"I'll bet," Schmitt said. "You say Mrs. Carpenter came in to clip coupons yesterday, but she didn't deposit them. How do you know she clipped them then?"

She had always been a customer of the most regular habits. It had been a saying around the bank that if you had Mrs. Carpenter for a depositor, you didn't need a calendar. She never missed the due date on her coupons. She always came in on the day they fell due, even in the filthiest weather. She had been doing this over the years; and, as a result, the bank people knew what the due dates were. The fifteenth of that month—that previous day—had been a due date.

Schmitt asked if there was any possibility that she had been keeping cash in her box, that instead of making her usual withdrawal, she might have taken what she needed out of the box.

"Possible," the manager said, "but she never did that before."

"She never left the bank without depositing her coupons before and she never left without taking the money she needed for tipping either," Schmittty reminded him. "You had two firsts right there."

The manager sighed. "Yes," he agreed. "Yesterday was different. When we saw her, none of us dreamed how different it was going to be for the poor old lady, but about your question. Of course, I can't know. She might have had some cash in the box, but it doesn't seem likely. We've always assumed that her total income derived from the dividends and interest on her securities. Those came in checks or coupons deposited here. She never made any withdrawals except the checks she wrote to pay her bills and the little money she took in change for her tipping and then the Christmas gift money. It is possible that she didn't give all that each year at Christmas or that she didn't use all the tipping money as she went along and that she'd put a bit of surplus cash into the box each time she visited it, but it never occurred to me that she might be doing that. It would have to be that or dividend checks we didn't know about, ones that she always cashed elsewhere and that never passed through us at all. All her income we knew about can be accounted for in the transactions that show in her account; and, on the basis of those, she had no cash. There's another possibility, of course, and that is that when she first came to us and took the box, she put some cash into it then. None of these things are at all likely, Inspector, but I wouldn't rule them out. After that ham sandwich that turned up in safe keeping, I'll never rule anything out."

 VII 

There were other lines to follow. Taking off from the contents of Mrs. Carpenter's desk, Joe Simmons was running those down. He was going down to talk to her attorney and her broker. He had started the machinery toward opening up her safe deposit box. He had the information from the phone company on the one out-of-the-city call Schmitty had turned up among Mrs. Carpenter's receipted bills. The Montclair number was listed for a Kent Hammersmith. He had the Cavendish Cad driver on his way up to precinct for questioning.

"Do you want to take him, Inspector," he asked, "or should I?"

"I'll take the driver and the woman out in Montclair," Schmitty told him. Get what you can from the broker and the lawyer. You have Baggy's description of the man she was with in the bank. Try that on them. Otherwise we'll want a copy of her will and anything you can get on whether there was any chance she kept cash in her box at the bank."

He filled Simmons in on what we'd picked up at the bank. Then we went around to the precinct station house where we settled in with the Cavendish Cad chauffeur. It was the driver I'd seen outside the bank, but he was a disappointment.

It wasn't a problem of cooperation. The man was willing, even eager. Since he was also clear-headed and intelligent, attentive to questions and lucidly responsive in his answers, it was no fault of his that he didn't have much to give the inspector.

On all Mrs. Carpenter's car hires he had been her driver. On other occasions when she was between companions he had taken her to the bank. The procedure, as he described it, tallied at every point with what we'd already had from the bank manager.

That her last bank visit departed from this routine we already knew. The chauffeur filled in some gaps. The beginning had been no

different from previous bank trips. He came to the apartment at the appointed time. He parked out front and rang Mrs. Carpenter's bell. She let him in, meeting him at the door hatted and gloved, ready to go. He gave her his arm out to the car. Having settled her comfortably, he drove her to the bank, bringing her to the side-street entrance as he always did, since at the avenue entrance there was a bus stop with its no-parking area. In the side street he could park directly in front of the bank door and leave his car while he was giving Mrs. Carpenter his arm and taking her into the bank.

It was only when he drew up at the curb in front of the bank's side-street entrance that the difference set in. He left his seat behind the steering wheel to come around and open the door for Mrs. Carpenter. As he came around, however, he found that there was a gentleman before him. The man had already opened the door for her. He was offering her his arm and he was greeting her. The driver gave us direct quotation of everything he'd heard.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Carpenter," the man said. "May I help you?"

The old lady gave the man a big smile.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "You are very kind."

"Not at all, Mrs. Carpenter," the man said. "It's my pleasure."

As the driver explained it, he saw that his passenger didn't need him.

"I figured," he said, "he was one of the bank people who'd been somewhere on business. Happening along when we pulled up, he stopped to help her out of the car. He'd do that, wouldn't he? He wouldn't go running inside to take her from me in there."

Satisfied that his passenger had an arm to lean on, the chauffeur returned to his seat to wait for Mrs. Carpenter to complete her business in the bank.

"By the time they were across the sidewalk and going in the bank door, I was guessing he had to be a relative, maybe her grandson. He'd put his arm around her and he was holding her real close, like hugging her, and she was snuggling up to him."

"A grandson who called her Mrs. Carpenter?" Schmitty asked.

"It was the way he said it. Like it was some kind of a joke. Like me

and the wife. Sometimes, kidding like, I'll call her Mrs. Dutton. That's our name, Dutton. Then some other times I'll call her Miss McClure. That was her name before we was married, McClure, and we've been married now twelve years, but I still call her that sometimes for a joke and, when I do it, I kind of sound the way he did when he called her Mrs. Carpenter."

And that was all of it. He remembered seeing me come out of the bank and speaking to me. For the rest of what he did, he could add nothing to what Simmons had already had from the man's office. When he had gone back to the house to see if she was there, he had noticed nothing.

The whole thing had been quite unlike her. Other times when he had been waiting for her and the waiting time was at all extended, she had been most scrupulous about sending someone out to tell him that her business was keeping her longer than she had expected, and that he was to, please, go on waiting.

He knew Geneva Washington, and he disliked the girl. In his words, she was stuck up. She had such an exalted opinion of herself that she didn't even do any of the things all other girls did to make themselves look attractive.

"The way she looked and acted," he said, "she was too good for anybody. She was so wonderful that she didn't even have to try, not even a little bit. You was supposed to be knocked over just because she was her."

Schmitty worked it over, exploring for anything he could tell us about the girl, but all the man had was an impression. He had seen her only once, when he had worked the Carpenter call previous to that last one. It had been one of the regular monthly jobs, taking Mrs. Carpenter down to Fifth Avenue and Seventy-eighth Street for her checkup with her doctor. He knew the girl by name because, riding along, he'd heard Mrs. Carpenter call her Geneva. Since it was only three days back, he hadn't forgotten. Also Mrs. Carpenter had formally introduced him to Geneva, calling her Miss Washington.

"When Mrs. Carpenter went into the doctor's office," he said, "she asked me to take care of Miss Washington until she came out. She always did that, whatever companion she had."

"The companion didn't go in with her?" Schmitty asked.

"Only as far as the door. The doctor's office nurse took over there. When Mrs. Carpenter was finished, the nurse would bring her to the door and me and the companion, we'd go get her at the door and bring her to the car. When Mrs. Carpenter went to the doctor, she never wanted none of her companions to go in there with her. She always had them wait outside with me in the car, watching for her to come out. It was her way, and what difference if that was the way she wanted it? The rest of the companions she had, they was all freaks, but they'd sit in the car and we'd chew the fat. They'd take a cigarette. They was freaks, but they was human."

As he talked about it, it was clear that Geneva, despite the lack of those little touches that even a beautiful girl will give to her appearance, had at the first struck him as a radical improvement on the succession of freaks. He had looked forward to being alone with her for a while even if it would only be parked out on Fifth Avenue in broad daylight. Geneva, however, alone among the companions, had kicked up a fuss when she was told that she wouldn't be going into the office with Mrs. Carpenter but would have to wait outside in the car with Dutton.

"Miss Highandmighty didn't like that at all," he said. "She didn't want to be pushed into associating with the lower classes."

All the time they waited for Mrs. Carpenter, the girl sat in the back of the car like a sulky child, hanging her head, and snapping at him if he made even the most tentative approach toward being friendly.

"Mrs. Carpenter herself," Dutton said. "She was never like that. She'd always chat with me. It was always real pleasant with her, but not the stuck-up snip."

Since in that area Dutton appeared to have nothing to give us but repetitious glimpses into his wounded feelings, I began to feel that the inspector was giving this little area of the questioning too much time and attention. I did, after all, have an explanation for the girl's behavior with the chauffeur. As soon as he'd finished with Dutton and sent him off, I filled the inspector in, giving him a full account of Mrs. Carpenter's cocktail party.

"No men, no recreation, no breaks from the job of any kind," I said. "Mrs. Carpenter felt that no young woman could keep that sort of life up and not crack under it. She was happy with the girl and she didn't want to lose her. So she kept trying to work up little diversions for Geneva whether Geneva wanted them or not. She tried it by asking me down for drinks. She tried it by giving her a little time alone in the car with Dutton. She tried it by making her go out to do the marketing. She felt the girl needed it, if only to see a few other faces and exchange a word or two with a few other voices. Geneva behaved with me exactly as Dutton described her behaving with him."

"Yes," Schmitty said. "Thanks for telling me, but still the whole picture needs more understanding. I'd like to know why Mrs. Carpenter never let any of her companions go into the doctor's office with her, not even to sit in his waiting room. Not any of them. Did she want to give them all a few minutes diversion with Dutton or could she herself been having something going with her doctor? You knew the old babe, Baggy. Possible?"

I shrugged. "People are falling in love with their doctors all the time," I said. "Even old women or perhaps particularly old women. It's an intimate relationship and, if the doctor is congenial, it may be inevitable. Nothing happens, of course, but the feeling is there. For Mrs. Carpenter it could have been the only intimate relationship life was still letting her have. Almost certainly it would have been the only intimate relationship she could have been having with a man."

When Schmitty spoke, I couldn't tell whether he'd been listening to what I said or had been completely engaged with his own thoughts. What he said did sound as though it might be a continuation of something that had been going on before, as though a line of thought he had begun in silence he was now carrying forward out loud.

"The chloroform two days running," he said. "She was a very old woman. We'll hear from the Medical Examiner on this, but I'd say chloroform given to a woman her age might be almost a sure thing to kill her. Old folks having surgery, they give them locals or spinals or one kind of brand new anaesthetic or another. Even with all kinds of

hospital controls on it and all kinds of equipment right there for handling a bad reaction, they don't like giving them anything that can hit the lungs. It's too risky."

"It's not surprising it did kill her the second time around," I said. "It was probably something like a miracle that it didn't kill her the first time."

"Unless it wasn't a miracle at all," Schmitty said. "A doctor, her doctor who knows all that can be known about what she can take and what not, sneaks in on her when she's asleep and chloroforms her just to make sure she'll stay asleep till he's through doing whatever it was he came to do in her apartment. It's no good, though. What he's after isn't in the apartment. It has to be in her box at the bank. So the next day he's waiting when she comes to the bank. They have this thing going, so she takes him in with her and he takes her home."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "How does he know she's going to the bank and at what time?"

"Easy. He was in the apartment. He saw her memo pad. He can read as well as we can. But now he's not operating while she's asleep. She knows he was with her in the bank. She knows he brought her home. If anything she took out of the box turns up missing, she'll know he swiped it. So this time it's enough chloroform to kill her."

I worked it over in my own mind.

"Her doctor would know just how much to give her," I murmured. "The dose just to keep her in sleep for the time he wanted and the dose that would finish her off. For his first visit though, how does he get the key so he can let himself in while she's sleeping?"

"Maybe he had a key. Maybe she gave him one."

"Oh, come," I scoffed. "This was Mrs. Carpenter, not some dizzy teen-ager who's just discovered the pill."

"Not like that, chowderhead," Schmitty growled. "She's old. He's her doctor. Suppose she's alone and feeling sick. She can pick up the phone and call him. He comes right over, but how can she get up to let him in? Why not a key for just such a contingency?"

"Oscar could always let him in with the master key."

"If it hit her in the wee hours?" Schmitty asked. "Would you know

where to find Oscar in a hurry if you needed him in the wee hours?"

"It would explain the way she acted with the man," I conceded.

All the same, I couldn't believe it. The thread of reasoning ran straight enough, but it seemed far too tenuous and too far out. Now that he had sucked me into almost accepting it, however, Schmitty climbed into his shoes and walked away from it.

"It doesn't explain Geneva Washington," he said. "It's time we got out to Montclair, and had a talk with Mrs. Kent Hammersmith."

Although Montclair is well inside the city's suburban belt, it seemed a long way to go without anything like an appointment. The Kent Hammersmiths might be off on a trip around the world, or this could be Mrs. Hammersmith's day for the hairdresser or her bowling club, and we would be going all the way out there for nothing.

"This could be a wild matron chase," I remarked. "Montclair housewives are a mobile lot. What makes you think she'll be home? Aren't you going to call her first?"

"And give her time to sort out which answers I can have and which she won't give me?" Schmitty asked.

"What's wrong with giving her time to think about her answers? With time to think she might very well remember stuff about Geneva that on the spur of the moment won't even come to her mind."

"Assuming the lady is honest and cooperative," Schmitty said. "If she is and, after talking to us, she remembers something she neglected to tell us, she can phone and fill me in."

"You're assuming she isn't honest and won't be cooperative?"

"It's a good enough possibility to make it worth throwing questions at her without preliminary alerting. You're right. We can be wasting time, going out there with no appointment, but that's the whole of the risk we're taking. Forewarn the lady and we run the risk of being fed nothing but a prepared story. It can cut us off from ever getting out of her what she may have to tell us."

"But what makes you suspect her?" I asked. "All she did was give the girl a reference. In all good faith you give references on the basis of what you know about a person. What you happen to know is all to the good. You have no reason to think that in areas you don't know about there is anything bad, but who's so stupid as not to realize that

in the unknown areas there always can be something horrible? All a reference can say is that as far as my experience of this character goes, he's great. You can make it more useful by indicating how far that experience does go. Was it five minutes' conversation once at a Jehovah's Witness convention or was it fifteen years of close daily contact? You can't guarantee that there's no hidden fault or even no not-so-hidden fault which in your association with this gal just didn't happen to emerge."

"Right," Schmitty said, "but this Geneva Washington was special. I don't believe she was operating under anything but an alias. Jobs aren't hard to get these days. For a chick with the kind of looks even her enemies say she has, jobs are a cinch to get. If she has anything on the ball, and you think she has a lot on the ball, this girl could have had her choice of good jobs."

"Maybe that wasn't what she wanted," I said. "She's the type that wanted to pull away from the world, so she tried to bury herself in her job with Mrs. Carpenter."

"An unnatural thing for her to do," Schmitty said.

"We know nothing about her nature," I insisted.

"We know that she skipped out under circumstances that need explaining and that about twenty-four hours after she pulled out Mrs. Carpenter came down with a chronic case of chloroform in the kisser. Geneva Washington is suspect, Baggy, and anybody who helped her get into that job with Mrs. Carpenter has to be enough suspect so that there can be everything to gain and nothing to lose from making our first approach to this Mrs. Hammersmith on the assumption that there's been some kind of complicated scheme going and that Mrs. Hammersmith is a knowing party to it."

"And what's become of those ideas you were having about the old lady's doctor?" I asked.

"It's another possible thread to follow. We follow them all. We may even find them twisting together into a single thread."

"Geneva and Mrs. Carpenter's doctor working in cahoots?" I exclaimed. "That I can't buy, Schmitty. If the doctor wanted to get the girl in there, Geneva wouldn't have needed any references. It would have been all too easy. The doctor just tells Mrs. Carpenter that he's

seen what trouble she's been having with all those goon companions. He has a girl for her that will be everything she wants. That's all it would take."

"And when things start happening, he's linked to Geneva. Let's say he'd been successful with whatever he wanted the first night. There would have been no need for a second act. Mrs. Carpenter could have been allowed to go on living. Whatever would have been done would look as though it was all the work of the girl, and the girl has disappeared. If the doctor had linked himself to Geneva by recommending her to Mrs. Carpenter, we wouldn't be on our way out to Montclair to work on Mrs. Hammersmith. We'd be on Fifth Avenue grilling the doctor."

"Okay, but this way Mrs. Hammersmith is the one who's laid herself open. You're on your way out to Montclair to grill her."

Schmittty made short work of that argument. If Geneva had come to Mrs. Carpenter recommended by the old lady's doctor, there could have been not the slightest possibility that, when the police began asking questions about the girl, they would not have been led directly to the doctor who had sponsored her.

"Opal would have known who sent the girl to the old lady," he said. "All sorts of people would have known. You would have known, for instance."

"How?" I asked.

"You heard about all her trouble with companions. She finally gets a good one. Isn't she going to tell you what a relief it is to have this one? Don't you ask where she found her? That's even before anything happens to bring Joe Simmons around with his questions. Even if no one else knew, Mrs. Carpenter would have told Joe."

"Just as she told Joe about Geneva's letter of reference."

"Look," Schmittty explained. "Joe Simmons is a good man. He's thorough. He asks the right questions. So what does he get? Mrs. Carpenter tells him the girl turned up in answer to the ad Mrs. Carpenter ran in the *Times*. She tells him the girl had a letter of recommendation. She tells him she called to verify the letter. She didn't have the letter. She'd returned that to the girl. She didn't remember the name of the woman she'd called. She did happen to remember that it was

an out-of-the-city call. Taking it from there, we've got to admit that it's only a string of miraculously lucky breaks that has given us Mrs. Hammersmith so quickly."

He ticked off the individual miracles for me. There was the not-to-have-been-expected singularity of the call to Montclair. Mrs. Carpenter might have been a woman who made dozens of toll calls every week. Schmitty and his men could have had the task of sifting through all the numbers in search of the one that belonged to the woman who recommended Geneva to Mrs. Carpenter.

Topping that, there was the discovery of the little slip that listed the number called. Those little slips in your phone bill that list your toll calls, what do you do with them? Do you keep them along with your receipted phone bill?

For that matter, how many people keep receipted phone bills? It was only Mrs. Carpenter's penchant for squirreling away every bit of paper that was in any way connected with her record of the money she spent that had given us such quick access to Montclair's Mrs. Hammersmith.

"All of this part of it," Schmitty said, "merely saved us time. What gave us Mrs. Hammersmith was the happy accident of Mrs. Carpenter's letting the word drop to Joe that told us to look for a toll call. Even if she hadn't saved receipts, once we knew that, we could have gotten the information from the phone company. Their business offices keep the lists of toll charges on all subscribers for six months. We would have asked them what out-of-city calls were made from Mrs. Carpenter's phone around the time when Geneva first came to work for her. The date we'd have had from you and from Opal."

"Also you could figure it from the date on the first of the checks made out to Geneva," I added. "One week back from the date on the first canceled check."

"Yes," Schmitty said. "We'd have that on Mrs. Carpenter's check book stubs. When we were in the bank and asking about cash in the safe deposit box, don't you remember they showed me the current statement on Mrs. Carpenter's account? They'd been just about ready to mail it out to her. It covered the whole time the girl was with her. I looked for checks drawn to Geneva Washington, just in

case we could get something out of the endorsements. There were no checks drawn to Geneva. Not even the first one had come through."

"That's strange," I said.

"Come up with something about the girl that isn't strange," Schmitt said, "if you want to knock me over."

I went back to our talk about Mrs. Hammersmith.

"Mrs. Carpenter might have been a thrifty type," I said. "Instead of phoning to check the reference, she might have written a letter. Then you'd have had no lead at all."

Schmitt nodded. "As it is," he said, "I'm figuring that Mrs. Hammersmith can't possibly dream that there was any way we could get a lead to her. That's why we're just going to walk in on her. If she has a part in this thing, I want to throw her into a panic. She'll be asking herself how we ever got on to her and so quick. It's going to seem like magic to her. She'll lose confidence in herself and in the whole plan. If we could go straight to her right off this way, who's to know what else we could do? If she has a story prepared, she'll get to feeling it isn't good enough. She'll tamper with it, trying to come up with extemporaneous improvements. She may trip herself up doing that or I'll maybe manage to trip her up. I can do it if my finding her is enough of a shock to make her feel she's up against Superman."

"Isn't she?" I asked.

"When you write this thing up," Inspector Schmidt answered, "if you put that in, I'll pick up your typewriter and I'll beat your brains out with it."

 VIII 

The luck that led the inspector so quickly to Mrs. Hammersmith rode with him out to Montclair. She was not off at the tennis club or the bridge club or the golf club. We found her out in front of her house, exercising her green thumb. She was weeding or cultivating or something. Don't expect me to tell you which. I'm a city type.

She looked young, at most in her early thirties, but she was the type of woman who wasn't likely to permit herself to begin to look that way before she had already edged past forty. She was not a beautiful woman; but since she was not ugly either and she had with taste and discretion availed herself of everything the beauty shops can do for a woman, she looked fine.

She was wearing a pink coverall. When Winston Churchill wore them, they were called siren suits. She looked more the siren in hers than Winston ever did in his.

It was a small house with a small garden and a two-car garage. The garage doors were standing open and I could see one car inside, a Mustang. It was a pleasantly leafy street. Everything looked solid and comfortable at a level of reasonable affluence but not of great wealth. Mrs. Kent Hammersmith did her own gardening. I could imagine that Mr. Hammersmith mowed his own lawn.

She accosted us cheerfully as we started up her path.

"Mrs. Kent Hammersmith?" Schmittty asked.

"Inside the house I am," she said. "Out here I'm Old Jake, the yard boy."

"Could we talk to Mrs. Hammersmith?" Schmittty said. "We're trying to locate Geneva Washington."

"Oh, dear. That's funny. The way you don't hear of someone for the longest time and then when you do hear, you keep on hearing. I hadn't the first idea of what had become of Geneva until about a

month ago I had a call from a woman in New York. She was asking for references. It was a maid-companion job. Geneva had applied for it and she gave me as reference. I suppose she's in New York, working for this woman. The woman's insane if she didn't grab her, but I'm afraid that's all I know. The woman did tell me her name, of course, but it was in one ear and right out the other. I have that kind of a head unfortunately, not a thing between the ears that might stop something that's passing through or latch on to anything and hold it."

If Schmittty was any sort of shock to this woman, it didn't show. If she thought she was up against Superman, she gave every evidence of being accustomed to such opposition and of being confident that she was no more than evenly matched.

Schmittty identified himself and introduced me. He didn't make it the complete identification. He said nothing about being Chief of Homicide, just left it at Schmidt of the New York Police Department. Similarly I was just Mr. Bagby. He didn't say I was also of the department, but it was natural that she should assume it.

"Police?" she said, cocking a quizzical eyebrow at us. She seemed puzzled and astonished but not in the least perturbed. "What would the police be wanting with the saintly Geneva?" she asked.

The question was clearly rhetorical, but Schmittty chose to answer it.

"She's disappeared," he said. "We'd like to locate her."

Hearing that, she did seem distressed but no more than moderately.

"It is a pity I'm so dim," she fretted. "If I could only remember the name of the woman who called me. I had the distinct impression that she was going to hire Geneva. So that's where Geneva undoubtedly is, with this woman, which of course is no help at all. Is it?"

"If we could have a few minutes of your time, Mrs. Hammer-smith," Schmittty said. "Talking about it might refresh your memory."

She smiled prettily. "My memory, I'm afraid, doesn't need refreshment," she said. "It needs replacement, but you can have all my time. The weeds will still be here tomorrow and tomorrow I may be less bored with them. Let's go inside. I can use a cup of tea. I'll give you

a drink and you mustn't mind if I don't have one with you. You see, Mr. Hammersmith does martinis when he comes home from the office, and he likes me to join him before I put dinner on the table and, if I let myself have even the smallest head start on him, dinner is shocking."

"We'll have a cup of tea with you," Schmittly told her. "Duty hours."

She led the way into the house. "I wish Mr. Hammersmith were a policeman," she said. "He's in advertising, and in advertising they drink at lunch and they drink with the accounts and they just drink. Do you mind the kitchen? I always seem to be at my best in the breakfast nook."

Schmittly told her the kitchen would be fine.

With brisk efficiency she went about making the tea. It was tea out of a cannister and the heated tea pot and water only just come to the boil. No tea bags or instant something for Mrs. Hammersmith.

"You knew Geneva Washington well?" Schmittly asked.

"A solid year of seeing her at least once every day and talking to her on the phone repeatedly in the between times," she answered. "I just about came to feel closer to Geneva than to anyone else in the world. Perhaps she didn't save my life, but she did save my sanity."

"She was your mother's companion through the last year of your mother's life?"

A little shudder shook her. "It was a horrible year," she said. "The vegetable sort of thing if you know what that's like. She had to be spoon fed and her chin wiped after each spoonful, and believe me that was the best of it. I can't bear to talk about the rest. Nobody who didn't see it could possibly believe it, but Geneva took hold of this hopeless, helpless thing and by the miracle of her patience and her love and her good sense and her tirelessness under a back-breaking job, she not only handled the whole thing but somehow managed it so that mother was left some dignity to the end." Shaking herself like a dog coming out of water, she broke away from the memory. "I am the Number One Geneva Washington fan, you see," she said.

"How did you find her?" Schmittly asked.

"Ad in *the New York Times*. I'd tried all the agencies. I'd tried nurses. I'd tried companions. Things were just going from bad to worse. I was about ready to move mother in here with us even though we had no room for her since the kids were home then and it would have been bad for them. They were still teenagers. They're off at college now. But I was desperate. There seemed nothing for it but to have her here and try doing it all myself although I knew I couldn't even begin to do it well. I was telling myself that no matter how clumsy it would be, there would at least be some love in it. Then I saw Geneva's ad and I phoned her. The minute I heard her voice on the phone, I knew she was from heaven."

"Do they give references up there? Did she have any?"

"References? She had them from here to Christmas. That's Geneva. She goes through life trailing behind her a long line of people like me, people who know that if they have any sanity left, they owe it to Geneva."

She poured the tea while Schmittty was trying to get her to remember at least one name for us, recalled from Geneva Washington's pile of references. She didn't even try. It was no use. It was that head again with nothing between the ears.

"I hope you won't hate this tea," she said. "It's the only kind I like, but it is smoky and Mr. Hammersmith abominates it. He says it smells as though I brewed it from old coals left in the barbecue pit. He only knows the smell. He won't even taste it."

"The tea's fine," Schmittty told her.

She made a face. "But you wish my memory were some good," she said.

"Mrs. Carpenter," Schmittty tried.

She jumped. "That's it," she laughed. "Mrs. Willoughby Carpenter. I was so impressed when she phoned me. The name alone—it sounded like one of those terrifying dowagers Emily Post used to invent, the one who knew exactly which card was to be left for whom on what occasion. And the name seemed to fit her. She sounded as though she would know about the . . ." Her voice faded out. She gave Schmittty a sharp look. "Then you do know," she mur-

mured, "and you said Geneva disappeared. She didn't take the job with Mrs. Willoughby Carpenter?"

"She took it," Schmitty said. "It was only three days ago she disappeared."

For a moment Mrs. Hammersmith scowled into her tea. "Maybe I'm stupid," she said. "But you're going to have to tell me what disappeared means. If you were talking about one of those things I got from the agencies, I would understand. It would mean she packed her junk, tucking away with it grandmother's silver spoons and grandfather's gold watch and Mrs. Willoughby Carpenter's emerald tiara, and she vanished with the loot. That's easy, but it's Geneva we're talking about. In story books, of course, angels do appear and disappear, but there was never any policemen in those stories, not even policemen who slip their shoes off."

Schmitty had been most surreptitious about it. Now he apologized and bent to put them back on.

She laughed. "Oh, please don't," she said. "Look. Mine are off, too. Isn't it the most delicious feeling?"

"Thanks," Schmitty said. "It is. Three days ago Geneva Washington was about to serve up dinner for herself and Mrs. Carpenter. There was no lettuce, and they wanted a salad. She nipped out to pick up the lettuce. She hasn't been seen since."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Hammersmith moaned. "She's had an accident."

"We'd know it if she had. We've checked that out."

"You must check again. It can't be anything else. Nothing could be less like Geneva. Even if things had been going badly, even if she couldn't stand it any more, and I can't imagine anything that Geneva with her saintly patience couldn't stand, even then she wouldn't leave that way. It's just not Geneva."

"They did have words before she went out," Schmitty said.

"Geneva? Words? It's incredible."

Schmitty gave her a quick rundown on the points of friction that had arisen between Mrs. Carpenter and Geneva Washington. Mrs. Hammersmith hung on his every word. I have never seen anyone listen to anything more attentively. From Mrs. Hammersmith it was

startling. She was no sort of a listener. She was much more the chatterbox.

She said nothing until he had finished, and then she spoke thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose she could seem self-willed, even dictatorial. You see, with me it never arose. She took hold. She was marvelous. I never had to give her any instructions. It was so obvious from the first that she knew so much better than I did just how to handle it. The marvelous things she thought of to do for mother would never have occurred to me in a million years. I suppose I never told Geneva anything except how wonderful she was and how grateful I was. If I'd ever vetoed anything or even made any suggestions, I might have come to know about this other side of Geneva's character. I do see how it might be there. When I had her with mother, it was a completely different situation. I'm so selfish that I just adored her for never wanting a day off or even an hour off for that matter. Mrs. Carpenter obviously is a much nicer person than I ever was. I should have thought that it wasn't natural and that it couldn't have been good for Geneva, but all I did was revel in the marvelous darling, and I must say she seemed to thrive on it."

"It never occurred to you that she might have been using the job as a hideout?" Schmitty asked. "After all, she was a woman. She was young. She was beautiful."

"Oh, gorgeous. My husband used to say I should move over to take care of mother and send Geneva here to take care of him. You should have seen the leer that went with it. Yes, a woman and young and beautiful, but also dedicated. I've never known anyone more dedicated. She's had an accident. You must check again. It can't be anything else. Maybe amnesia. Do people have amnesia or is that only in books?"

"It's rare," Schmitty told her. "It's probably rarer than appears. People try to fake it. It's likely that sometimes they succeed."

"Not Geneva. Hers would have to be the real thing. She'd never fake anything."

"Did she ever tell you about herself? Where she came from? Who her people were? Anything you can remember. All it needs to be is

something that may give us a lead to someone else who knows her."

The question brought him nothing. Mrs. Hammersmith reverted to calling herself a selfish beast. She explained that in all the time she had Geneva's services for her mother, they had never really talked.

"Whenever we did talk, it was always a report on mother's condition and what Geneva was doing about it. All I ever said was how wonderful she was and how I could never thank her enough. It was never more than that on the phone. When I went over to see mother, it was even less. You see, the time I'd be there sitting with mother would be the only time Geneva ever had wholly to herself. She'd have her bath then. Sometimes she'd wash her hair; or if mother had given her a restless night, Geneva could catch a nap. There never was any time to talk. When I got there, I was careful not to keep her from the things she wanted to do for herself. Before I left, when she was ready to take over again, just that little time I'd been with mother had me so beaten down I was jumping out of my skin. I'm ashamed to say it, but the very second I'd see Geneva ready to take over, I'd just cut and run."

Schmittty shifted to another approach. "I've never seen Geneva Washington," he said. "Not even a picture, just descriptions people have been giving me. Would you by any chance have a picture of her? Even a snap would help."

Mrs. Hammersmith flapped her hands in a little gesture of despairing helplessness.

"We had a camera once," she said. "That was long before Geneva. When the children first came, it seemed something we had to do. You know. The first step. The first tooth. His first haircut. Her first hair-ribbon. You'll want them later to moon over, like now I wish I had them. But my husband took snaps of them and I took snaps of them and, if anything came out at all, they made our lovely, lovely babies look like blurry little monsters. We gave up before the first year was out, and nobody in this family has ever touched a camera since. We're not picture people. I'm sorry. I'm no help at all."

Schmittty laughed. "Never mind," he said. "Describe her. Everyone else has. I'm making my own composite picture of Geneva Washington."

"She was lovely. Just a shade taller than me. Her figure was a dream and I'd say it still is. She can't have put on any weight. Anybody who pushes herself the way Geneva does never puts on weight. She has the most extraordinary skin. I never saw her with even a spot of makeup on, but her skin was smooth and soft, and I never saw her with a blemish on it either. I remember her hands. At the last, when it was so dreadful that I quite lost my head, I grabbed her hands and I hung on to her. Her hands were rough. They had to be with all the washing and scrubbing she did for mother, but since it was her skin, even the roughness had her quality. There was something wonderfully comforting and strengthening in the touch of her rough hands." She stopped short. "Oh, poof," she said. "I'm dithering. This can't be any good to you."

In my mind I was working on what she'd said about Geneva's height. I would have described the girl as a shade shorter than Mrs. Hammersmith, but you know how that is. I'd never seen them lined up side by side, and if Mrs. Hammersmith had a memory of being slightly topped by Geneva, on that point she would be far more likely to be right than I could be.

"Do you suppose that was her real name?" Schmitty asked.

"Of course, it was her real name. And she took great pride in it. I asked her what she liked to be called. Jenny? Eve? Eva? She told me, and very firmly, that her name was Geneva and she liked people to call her Geneva. You seem to be having some awful ideas about her, as though she might be a thief or leading a secret life or something. I can guarantee you she isn't anything like that at all. Nobody could be more honest or open. About her name, we made the social security payments. They were in the name of Geneva Washington."

"It sounds made up," Schmitty insisted.

"Of course, it does," Mrs. Hammersmith growled. She was beginning to lose patience with this policeman who was so stubborn about not believing that if Geneva Washington could be called anything but Geneva Washington, it could be nothing but angel. "It sounds made up because it was made up. All of their names were made up, and not only made up but foisted on them as well. They were, you know,

in the beginning, and it's just gone on since then. That's why some of them, the ones who want to break all ties to all that, are insisting on being called Muhammad Ali or something else equally absurd. I can understand it. At least the Ali silliness is their own absurdity, not one that was imposed on them."

"Geneva Washington was black?" Schmittly asked.

I just sat there with my mouth hanging open. It takes me a little time to adjust to a moment like that. At first I just gape at the spectacle of all my certainties flipping inside out.

If I was agape, so was Mrs. Hammersmith, but she made the quick recovery.

"Now really," she said. "Could you imagine even for a moment that any white girl would give herself the way Geneva does? Geneva's particularly wonderful, but many of them have it at least to some measure, not as she does, but to some measure. It's a gentle understanding, a sympathy for suffering and helplessness. I suppose it's because they know these things in themselves, the suffering and the helplessness. Of course, she's black."

"Now we're getting some place," Schmittly said.

"Some place crazy?" Mrs. Hammersmith purred. "Everybody's been describing her to you? Is color blindness epidemic? How was she described to you? Purple? Indigo? Puce?"

"White."

"Somebody's insane. If it should be me, all I can say is I've always been afraid of it."

"Nobody's insane. Your Geneva Washington was the real one. The one we're looking for seemed to be a phoney. Now we know she is."

"She was working for that Mrs. Carpenter. She came with my letter of recommendation. That would have to be my Geneva. How would anyone else?"

"That," Schmittly said, "is exactly what we're now going to try to find out. I'm hoping you'll help."

"Some white witch stole Geneva's references and used Geneva's name and got herself into a job with a helpless old woman? Oh, no.

When I think of the way I babbled to that poor woman on the phone, telling her how lucky she would be to have my wonderful Geneva. This is horrible."

Schmitty shrugged. "How were you to know?"

"I should have asked her if Geneva was there. I should have asked to speak to Geneva if only to say hello and how have you been, my dear. I should have done that. Then I would have known. I could have warned the poor woman."

"Other times you've been called on someone's reference have you ever done it that way? Does anyone?"

"No," she conceded, but she wasn't finished blaming herself. "No, but I've learned my lesson. I'll never do that again without asking. How really awful."

"Bagby here saw a good deal of the false Geneva," Schmitty said. "He will give you his description of the girl just in case it is someone you know."

"How could it possibly be anyone I know? Someone, somewhere, who stole the letter of recommendation from Geneva, how could I know her?"

"If it's like that, you almost certainly wouldn't know."

"How else can it be?"

"Someone who knows you and who knows how wonderful Geneva Washington was when you employed her. She would know how you feel about Geneva Washington and what you could be counted on to say if you ever had a call asking about Geneva. She could write her own references and sign your name to them. All she had to do was call herself Geneva Washington."

"That's millions of people," Mrs. Hammersmith said. "Anybody who knows me or knew me even casually, but I don't know people who do things like that. I know people who'll make passes at their best friend's husband and sneaky passes, too, but this sort of cheat? No."

"You never can be too sure about people," Schmitty said, trying to push a little.

Mrs. Hammersmith was feeling the pressure, but even without it

she had become a different woman. She was wide-eyed and white-lipped. Her hands were shaking.

"No," she babbled. "Nobody I know. Nobody I know even slightly. It has to be the other way. Somebody stole the letter Geneva had from me."

Schmitty turned to me. "Let Mrs. Hammersmith have your description of the woman who was calling herself Geneva Washington," he said.

I described the girl, putting in everything about her that I could remember, not only her looks but the sound of her speaking voice as well and such details as the way she liked her martinis.

"I made her one once," I said. "She wanted it dry with nothing in it. The gag has been going the rounds, but it just might help. You just might remember hearing someone you know use it. She said she didn't want it Dickensian, no olive or twist."

Mrs. Hammersmith just listened and shook. She asked no questions. She hung on my every word. Her nerves, which had already been coming apart visibly before I began my description, seemed to be fraying out more and more while I spoke. Recalling the details of that martini I had mixed for the girl, I was reminded of something else that till then had been slipping my mind.

"She was drinking her cocktail," I said, "and Mrs. Carpenter, just making conversation, told her that I worked with you, Inspector. Mrs. Carpenter said I might bring you around for drinks some time. The girl jumped a mile. She spilled her drink, and she was so flustered that, while trying to recover, she tipped the spoon out of a bowl of caviar and sprayed the stuff all over the place. At the time it just seemed like one of those accidents people are always having with drinks, and maybe that's all it was."

"And maybe it was reaction to the word police and to the threat of her meeting a policeman," Schmitty said.

"I never thought of the possibility at the time," I muttered, "but now . . ."

Mrs. Hammersmith was saying nothing unless you want to count a little under-the-breath moaning as utterance.

"Does any of that suggest anybody?" Schmitty asked her.

"No. Nobody. I've never known anyone at all like that, and I never heard that awful Dickens pun before either."

"But you are terrified, Mrs. Hammersmith."

"You come along with a shocker like this. You scare the life out of me. Then you tell me I'm terrified. Are you always this much a comic, Inspector?"

"What has frightened you so much?" Schmitty asked.

"Everything. The duplicity of it. The way this woman used me."

"Did she use you, Mrs. Hammersmith, or just Geneva Washington's letter of recommendation? I tell you that a total stranger, a woman you've never known or known of insinuated herself into a job by dishonest use of a letter of reference. Why should that terrify you so much? Is this the first you've known that there are liars abroad in the world?"

"Just what are you thinking, Inspector?"

"That you know this phoney Geneva Washington, that what she's been doing frightens you, that through mistaken loyalty or out of fear—I don't know which—you are not telling me what you know about her, and that you've had no previous experience with lying to the police and, therefore, what you yourself are doing frightens you."

She sighed. By working hard at it, she was bringing herself back under some kind of control.

"How I wish you were right, Inspector," she said. "I'm not a coward. If I know what I'm up against, mostly I can make myself cope with it. It's the unknown thing that gets to me, and I don't think I'm peculiar in that respect. I think most people are like that. I can see your problem, and if you don't think I would do everything humanly possible to help you, you're wrong. If I had the slightest clue to who this woman could be, you can bet I wouldn't be holding anything back. I'd be screaming my head off at you, demanding that you grab her and clap her into jail. This is the worst thing I ever heard. It terrifies me."

"Can you tell me exactly what it is you're afraid of?" Schmitty asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I can. I'm terrified of what has happened to Geneva. Not this woman you're looking for, whoever she is, but my Geneva, the real Geneva, the most wonderful person I've ever known."

"What makes you think something's happened to her?"

"It stands to reason. I know her. I know how honest she is and how conscientious. Someone stole my letter from her and used it to cheat her way into the job with Mrs. Carpenter. That means Geneva doesn't have the letter. I know her. I know what she would do if anything like that ever happened. She would have called me immediately to tell me the letter had been stolen from her."

"So you could give her a replacement?" Schmitty asked. "You say she came to you with good references all the way up her arm. Would she need yours? One more or less, why would it matter so much?"

"Because a letter like that is a worthless piece of paper unless someone plans to use it. Why would anyone steal it unless it was to make just that use of it this creature did make in weaseling into that job with Mrs. Carpenter? Obviously anyone who goes about getting a job that way is above nothing. It all pieces together. You ask what I'm not telling you. I have far better reason to ask what you aren't telling me. That woman didn't just walk out on her job. She did something far worse than that. Otherwise you wouldn't be trying to find her. The police don't go looking for a woman just because she quits a job. It's a long time now since we've had any fugitive slave laws."

The longer she went on about it, the more excited she became. Before long she was storming at Schmitty. The crux of her argument was that the real Geneva Washington, conscientious as she was, would worry about the use that might be made of the stolen letter. She would have immediately informed Mrs. Hammersmith of the loss so that if anyone called on it, Mrs. Hammersmith would know it was in the hands of an imposter and could warn off the employer who might be considering taking the false Geneva Washington on.

"She hasn't called me," she said. "I haven't had a word from her. I know Geneva. She isn't just sitting back somewhere ignoring the

possibilities. Something terrible has happened to her. She's dead or so badly hurt or something that she can't even call me. And it's been weeks. Of course, I'm frightened."

"You're reaching, Mrs. Hammersmith," Schmitty said. "First of all, we don't know that Geneva Washington's letter of recommendation was stolen. You're refusing to think about the other possibility, that someone who knows you and knows her counterfeited a letter of recommendation."

"I don't know anyone who'd do a dreadful thing like that," Mrs. Hammersmith protested.

"Okay. So there's the other likelihood you're ignoring. Geneva Washington doesn't know her letter was stolen. She doesn't bring it out every day to read it over and over again. She brings it out only when she wants to use it in a job application. That's the most likely reason for her not calling you to warn you about false Genevas. She doesn't know the letter is missing, if it is missing."

"But it must be missing. This woman used it."

"If that's the way it is," Schmitty said, "you should be hearing from Geneva Washington very soon. Tonight or tomorrow she'll see her name in the papers. If she's the kind of person you say she is, she'll be calling you, and she'll be calling us. I want you to promise that when you hear from her, you'll let us know immediately."

If Schmitty had any idea of trying to cheer Mrs. Hammersmith up a bit, he was disappointed. If anything, she dropped into a deeper depression.

"I won't hear from her," she moaned, "and you won't either. Geneva never reads the papers. Somebody will have to see it and tell her. Geneva never reads anything but her Bible. She reads it straight through, Old Testament and New. When she finishes with Revelation, she goes right back to Genesis again. I don't know how many times she's read it."

And that was all Inspector Schmidt had to bring back from Montclair with him. Mrs. Carpenter's companion had not been the real Geneva Washington, and Mrs. Hammersmith had not the faintest idea of who the imposter could have been.

"She's a quick thinker, our Mrs. Hammersmith," Schmitty grum-

bled on the drive back into town. "She's also an expert liar. She knows just how to go about throwing up a lot of words that don't say anything while behind them she's shaping up her story and testing it out in her mind before she lets me have it."

"You don't think her Geneva Washington and Mrs. Carpenter's could be one and the same?" I asked. "You don't think she's lying about that."

No. He didn't think that. He reviewed the whole interview with Mrs. Hammersmith. The possibility of a conspiracy in which the lady had all along been a knowing participant he was now ruling out. To that extent she had convinced him.

On that he was believing her. There had been a Geneva Washington who was the paragon she described. To this Geneva Washington Mrs. Hammersmith had given a glowing letter of recommendation. When Mrs. Carpenter had telephoned her, Mrs. Hammersmith had in completely good faith confirmed everything she had said in the letter.

"When it came out that it was a white Geneva Washington she had recommended to Mrs. Carpenter, that was a real shock to her," Schmitty explained. "If she had been faking that, the reaction would have been milder. Surprise, consternation, concern, worry, that's all she would have shown. What she did show was too extreme, Baggy. It was immediate panic. She was frightened and disproportionately frightened. Why?"

"She explained her fright. She's fond of her Geneva Washington and what she says about not having heard from the real Geneva about the missing letter does make sense. Her Geneva would have called to warn her if she could."

"Uhuh," Schmitty mumbled. "She did a lot of clever dithering while she thought that nonsense up. She knew she had given herself away by reacting too strongly and she found this way to explain her panic, but it took her a long time to come up with it."

"Then what is with her?" I asked. "I don't get it."

"As soon as she realized that we weren't talking about the same Geneva Washington," Schmitty said, "she knew who it was we were talking about and she was scared."

"You mean she knows someone who pulled this kind of stunt before?" I asked. "You think her reaction was something like 'Oh, God, here we go again.'"

"It doesn't have to be that. She knows somebody who's dropped out of sight for weeks. This gal dropped out of sight just about the time Mrs. Hammersmith had the call from Mrs. Carpenter. Remember that in all the time she was on the job that gal never took even the shortest spell of time off. She wasn't making any phone calls to her friends from the apartment because she told Mrs. Carpenter she didn't know anybody. Okay. When she was out alone marketing, she could meet someone or make a call, but on what you say about how she was always hurrying it and trying to get out of going, that's not likely."

"A woman she knows," I said, picking it up. "The woman has dropped out of sight. It's a woman who knew about the real Geneva Washington and knew what sort of reference letter Mrs. Hammersmith had given the real Geneva. It's a woman who could write for herself a letter that would be a virtual duplicate of the one Mrs. Hammersmith wrote. I see what you mean. Mrs. Hammersmith knew right away that it's Mary or Jane or Whatever and now she knew why Mary or Jane or Whosit dropped out of sight. It has to be something really bad or the police wouldn't be looking for the girl. Mrs. Hammersmith isn't frightened for the real Geneva. She's frightened for the chick I knew as Geneva Washington."

"Right," Schmittie grumbled, "and a lot of good it does us unless I can find something to throw at her that'll shake her up a lot more, like enough to shake her loose from what she knows."

Back in town he found all sorts of things. I didn't see that any of them could be used for additional leverage on Mrs. Hammersmith, but they were all things that took thinking about. First Joe Simmons had stuff to report. He had been talking with Mrs. Carpenter's attorney and her broker. He had seen Mrs. Carpenter's will. Everyone who had anything to do with the lady's financial affairs was agreed that it would be a virtual certainty that she kept no cash in her safe deposit box. All of her known income was accounted for in terms of

the checks paid into and drawn against her account at the bank. There had been no other possible source of income for the old lady. All her jewelry she had kept in the apartment.

On that she'd had definite views. To own something and not use it was stupid. She would either have it always ready to hand and wear it when she felt like it, or she would sell it. It was to be worn and to be looked at, not to be hidden away in a box. That she had acted on this principle was borne out by all the evidence. Her attorney had a list of all the jewelry she owned. He had made the arrangements for its insurance appraisal. Item for item this list tallied with what was on her dead body and what she had in her bedroom. There was nothing that hadn't been accounted for, leaving nothing that might either have been stolen or stowed away in the box at the bank.

We had, of course, previously known that she kept bonds in the safe deposit box. She always went to it on coupon-clipping days. Her broker came up with the information that she also kept her other securities there. Instead of leaving the stock certificates in the care of her broker, she always insisted on having possession of the certificates.

The stock certificates would not be negotiable. The bonds would not be easily negotiable. On her government bonds, coupons that had reached their due date would be readily negotiable. Bond coupons on corporate bonds, since corporations did keep lists of bond numbers in numerical order, would be risky for anyone to dispose of, considerably riskier, for example, than selling stolen jewelry.

In the opinions of her broker and her attorney, both of whom were familiar with her financial habits, there could have been little in that safe deposit box of hers, when she had gone to it with the unknown man, that could have been of any value to him. Although her bond holdings were not small, the coupon due dates were widely various. Since she invariably went to the box on each coupon date and never permitted coupons to go even one day uncollected, there could have been no backlog of cashable coupons. According to all available records of her holdings, and everyone involved was certain that their records were accurate and up to date, the safe haul a thief might

have made out of that box could have been only slightly in excess of one hundred dollars. That would be what the government bond coupons due that day would have come to. Beyond that there would have been nothing which, if it was negotiable at all, was not far more dangerous for a thief to try to dispose of than the jewelry which the thief twice to our knowledge had at his disposal and which on both occasions he hadn't touched.

An appointment had been made for the following morning. Her attorney and her broker, the joint executors of her estate, were meeting at the bank with the tax people and Inspector Schmidt for the opening of her safe deposit box. Meanwhile we had a copy of her will.

There are only three bequests to individuals. One thousand dollars to Oscar because in the performance of his duties he had regularly gone beyond what his job required of him to provide for her comfort and convenience. Two thousand dollars to Opal for like reasons. Ten thousand dollars to her physician, Dr. James Peabody, in recognition of the many kindnesses he had shown her over the years. The residue, including all her personal property, went to a group of charitable organizations.

On the subject of the will, Joe Simmons had a bit of further information. About a week before her death she had asked her attorney to prepare a codicil to leave five thousand dollars to her companion, Geneva Washington. The codicil had been drawn and had been ready for her signature, but early in the afternoon of the day before she died Mrs. Carpenter had telephoned to say that she wanted it held. Geneva Washington had left her and, although she did expect that the girl would be coming back, she would now wait until Geneva had returned and had been with her a while longer before she would be ready to make a decision on the bequest.

As soon as he'd heard Joe's report, the inspector went looking for the Medical Examiner. The ME had under way an exhaustive post mortem examination of Mrs. Carpenter's remains, but on the basis of what had already been done, he was ready to give Inspector Schmidt the important answers. He was also able to add an assurance that

there was no expectation that the remaining explorations and tests would bring about any material alteration in the nature of his findings.

The chloroform was the cause of the old lady's death.

"The amount she was given," the ME said, "would kill anybody. You take a great wad of gauze and saturate it with the stuff and then tape it down tight over the subject's nose and mouth, and it's going to be lethal. A young man in top physical shape, a great strong bull of a fellow, could never survive it. She was a frail old woman. In her case even a small fraction of the chloroform used on her would have been fatal. The quantity administered to her practically drowned her in the stuff."

He was calling it a case of chloroform overkill, and he ran through the evidence on which he based his opinion. It was not only that the condition of her lungs indicated it. There were other indications as well.

On his calculation of the time of death, she had been given the chloroform shortly after I'd seen her on the avenue outside the bank. She had died within an hour after that last time I had seen her. Since it had been getting on to eleven in the morning when Oscar opened her door and we found the body, she had then already been dead about nineteen hours. Even after all that time, however, the wad of gauze taped over her mouth and nose had still been moist with chloroform. Since the stuff is highly volatile, its rapid evaporation rate would have dried any reasonable amount of it out of the gauze in far less time than nineteen hours. The killer had saturated the gauze with just as much chloroform as it would hold. Since it was a thick wad of gauze, it was reasonable to conclude that the quantity of chloroform used on Mrs. Carpenter had been enormous.

"When a woman is as old and frail as she was," the ME said, "giving her even the smallest whiff of chloroform is dangerous, and this was no small whiff."

"Then you would be ready to testify," Schmitty said, "that the person who gave her the chloroform intended to kill her."

"I am ready to testify that what she was given was inevitably le-

thal," the ME said. "I guess it will be for the jury to decide whether the man who gave it to her knew enough about her and about chloroform to know it would kill her."

"You just said that much would kill anyone," Schmittly reminded him. "The killer didn't have to know anything about her."

"Okay, but he could also have been ignorant about chloroform. Plenty of people know it only as something that can be used to render a person unconscious. They don't know the risks."

"Suppose our killer is a physician," Schmittly suggested. "Let's say he's her own physician. He knows her condition. He needs to be sure she'll stay unconscious while he prowls her apartment, but he needs to keep her alive so he can go to her bank with her the next day. Could he regulate the first dose of chloroform so it would work the way he wanted it to?"

The ME wasn't going to be pushed into offering a conclusion he didn't consider scientifically sound.

"Let's say it did work that way for him," he said. "I'm not going to make any guesses on what a physician might or might not do. There are physicians who take chances they never should take. I'd have a low opinion of any doctor who gave a patient of her age and condition any chloroform at all. No matter how carefully calculated a dose it was, it was a most hazardous thing to do."

Inspector Schmidt wanted something more definite than that.

"She was chloroformed the first time and survived it with no ill effects," he said. "Could that have been anything but the smallest possible dose?"

"Certainly the smallest possible dose," the ME said.

"Then if the same man gave her both doses, we can say that what he gave her the second time was a quantity he knew was going to kill her."

The ME grinned at him. "When you catch this man and he's brought to trial, the prosecutor will certainly tell the jury just that. If he asks me under oath, I'll testify that it was a dose that anyone who knows the effects of chloroform would have known to be lethal. I won't be able to testify to what this man knew or didn't know."

 IX 

Inspector Schmidt would have liked to have something firmer from the Medical Examiner before he talked to Dr. James Peabody, but he was going along on what he had.

"Big shot doctor," he said. "Fifth Avenue office in the fashionable Seventies. I'd have to go easy on this guy anyway, but let's go see him, Baggy. The main thing is for you to have a look at him. If he's the baby you saw with her outside the bank, we can take it from there. If he isn't, we can forget about him."

"Why him, Schmitt?" I asked. "Why not her broker or her lawyer or some young man out of one of their offices?"

"The man showed himself in the bank. If it was only an innocent meeting that just happened on the day she died, we'd know that. Joe Simmons has been talking to the lawyer and he's been talking to the broker. They'll both be in the bank for the opening of the box tomorrow. They would have told Joe that the man you saw is of no significance. Her doctor could have pulled it off, figuring he won't ever go near that bank again. Neither her lawyer nor her broker could count on never having to go into the bank again."

"And he's in her will and they're not," I added.

Schmitt shook his head. He was attaching little importance to the will.

"All that's good for," he said, "is an indication that she liked her doctor a lot and she trusted him. He's somebody who maybe could do pretty much what he liked with her, but for a doctor today what's ten thousand bucks? It's nothing. They're all raking it in, and the babies with the Fifth Avenue offices and patients like Mrs. Carpenter, they're making it big. He didn't kill her for the inheritance. The killer wanted something she had. He looked for it in the apartment, and when he didn't find it there, he had to get into her safe deposit

box, and that he couldn't do without her knowing it. Whatever it was, it was so important that he couldn't give it the skip. He had to have it even though it meant killing the old lady."

I was panting along behind him trying to follow the line of his thought.

"He had the fake Geneva working for Mrs. Carpenter," I said, doing my thinking aloud. "She failed to find him what he wanted, but her chances to search were limited by the danger of Mrs. Carpenter catching her at it. So they set it up for her to go out and just not come back, that way making it certain that Mrs. Carpenter would be alone in the apartment through the night. That way he could come in and give her the chloroform while she slept and be free to do the complete search of the place. When even that didn't find him what he wanted, he knew it had to be the safe deposit box."

It was a thought, but I couldn't make it jell. Every step of the way I felt as though I were pushing the thing past all varieties of impossibilities. I threw some of them at the inspector.

"But we know from the bank people that she took Geneva in with her when she opened her box," I said. "So Geneva had already had access to the box. Why wouldn't Geneva have told him it was no use trying in the apartment? What he wanted was in the box at the bank."

"Mrs. Carpenter took the girl into the room with her. The girl presumably watched her open the box and take out the bonds for the coupon clipping. Could the girl have gone rooting through the box to see what else was in it? Of course, she couldn't. She'd have no way of finding out whether or not what he wanted was in there."

"Doesn't the same apply to him when Mrs. Carpenter took him in with her?" I asked.

"I'm wondering whether Mrs. Carpenter did take him in with her," Schmitty said.

With that he startled me. It wasn't like him. He carries every detail of a case in his head. I'll overlook things or let them slip my mind, but not the inspector, never the inspector.

"The bank people told us she did," I reminded him. "They couldn't be mistaken about a thing like that."

"And you saw them walking up the avenue with his arm around her and her all cuddled up against him. You couldn't be mistaken about a thing like that."

"I'm not. She looked ridiculous, the poor, old thing."

"Okay. The bank people saw them go into the room together. That they know. They know he was in there with her when presumably she opened the box. Actually, since she went right on out of the bank afterward without stopping to deposit the coupons the way she ordinarily would do, the bank people, if they were as careful as the ME, would recognize they have no way of knowing whether she opened the box or not. They also have no way of knowing whether she took him in or he took her in."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the way he was holding her. Was it to give her more support than she needed or was it to hold a knife or a gun pressed against her while he forced her to put on a good show and do whatever he told her to do?"

"A man she liked and trusted?" I asked.

"A man she could never like or trust again," Schmitty said. "A man who was going to finish off that trip to the bank by killing her because once he'd forced her to take him into the vault and open the safe deposit box for him, he couldn't let her go on living. A man who had it all planned. He was going to get what he wanted and then he was going to kill her. He had the chloroform for it in that beautiful attache case you admired so much."

"This is crazy. What could she have that he would want that much? Can you imagine anything? Have you any theories?"

"One thing at a time," Schmitty said. "First we see whether you recognize him. You give me that, and I'll take it from there."

I couldn't give it to him, not that evening. Dr. James Peabody was not available. His office was locked. There was no one there. Telephoning him got Schmitty the doctor's answering service. Dr. Peabody was out of town. He would not be back until the next day. The

inspector could have Dr. Elman who was covering for Dr. Peabody while Dr. Peabody was away.

Schmitty talked to Dr. Elman. Dr. Peabody had flown to Chicago for a consultation. He was to be gone only one day. He had left on the morning plane that same day. He was expected back the following day in time to take his office hours. That would be at one o'clock in the afternoon.

Schmitty said he would see Dr. Peabody then. I thought that with this phone conversation we'd be calling it a day. Anything further, it seemed to me, was going to have to wait for the next day, the opening of Mrs. Carpenter's safe deposit box, the confrontation with Dr. James Peabody.

I should have known better. Schmitty settled in at his office. He took his shoes off and went to work on all the routine that had accumulated in the case. In the morning there would be these other things to do, so now was the time to get the routine out of the way.

Since it was only routine, it might have waited until after we'd had a decent dinner, but this is Schmitty's one failing. It's only when he isn't working that he can be interested in food at all, and even then his interest never amounts to much. When he's hot on an investigation, he's quite unaware of what he's eating.

Such dinner as we had, therefore, was sent in and we ate it off his desk. It wasn't good, but if I hadn't myself taken the phone and done the ordering, it wouldn't even have been edible.

The inspector didn't know the difference. He was eating fingerprints. His boys had done the complete job on Mrs. Carpenter's apartment. They had, of course, fingerprinted the old lady's body and had taken prints from Opal and Oscar. Schmitty tossed me their report. Reading it, I kept thinking that I must tell Opal. It was something to make her proud.

The level of operations in the dusting and polishing and scrubbing department in Mrs. Carpenter's place had been so high that far fewer prints had been turned up than is usual as a result of any such exhaustive job as the lab boys had done there.

Most of the prints they had turned up were the expected ones. They belonged to Mrs. Carpenter and to Opal and they were in the

expected places. There were none to indicate any activity that would not be part of the daily routine of occupancy.

In the companion's room they turned up prints of a set that were neither Mrs. Carpenter's nor Opal's, although some prints that belonged to both of them were developed in that room as well. The unidentified ones, it could be presumed, were left by the girl who had occupied the room in the name of Geneva Washington. They were all in places where the business of normal occupancy would have put them. Prints out of this same set were turned up on shoes in the girl's closet. Those prints were where a woman grasps her shoe when she's putting it on or taking it off. Some of these same prints had been discovered on Mrs. Carpenter's purses.

"What about the prints that look as though they'd be the girl's?" I asked the inspector.

"What about them?"

"On Mrs. Carpenter's purse. Indication that the girl did search Mrs. Carpenter's things as much as she could? Went through Mrs. Carpenter's drawers perhaps?"

"No," Schmitty said. "She took Mrs. Carpenter for walks. She'd pick up the purse and hand it to the old lady. She'd take it from her when they came back in. Those prints look innocent."

It seemed reasonable. I went on with the report. The window frames showed Oscar's prints and Opal's and Mrs. Carpenter's. Those prints explained themselves. After the burglar they had all three been around testing the windows.

Outside the apartment the doorknob showed Oscar's prints. Those were also expected. He was the one who opened the door when we found the body. There was only one place where the boys turned up prints that were neither identifiable nor matches for the set presumed to be that of the girl who called herself Geneva Washington.

These prints of a person unknown turned up on the bronze window grilles where they appeared along with Oscar's prints and Opal's. The Oscar prints and the Opal prints disturbed no one. Both of them had told the police they had handled the bronze grilles. As soon as they heard about the first intrusion, they had gone around testing all the grilles and several times afterward during that day

they had tugged at them in passing, nervously reassuring themselves that all the grilles were still fastened. The fingerprint men were checking the unidentified set, hoping to turn up a match for them.

When I came to that part of the report, I was able to offer a helpful suggestion.

"Schmitty," I said. "On the grilles there's the one set of unidentified prints. They're not on all the grilles, just on the windows that face the street."

"Yes," Schmitty said. "They have to be checked out in any case but the odds are they don't mean a thing. Our man didn't try all the street windows looking for one where the grille wouldn't be fastened. The only reason he'd have for doing that would be if the girl left one unfastened for him before she took off and then didn't tell him which one. That seems unlikely when he had her key he could use and anyhow she would tell him which one. Those prints'll turn out to be innocent."

I laughed. "Even if they're mine?" I asked.

Schmitty chuckled. He picked up his phone and called the fingerprint men.

"You have prints on Bagby," he told them. "Check them for that match you're looking for. He was nervous, too. He checked the window grilles when he went by on the street."

Of course, it checked out, and Schmitty was left with a clean blank on the fingerprint findings. It didn't bother him. He'd expected nothing in that quarter.

And that was the way the whole evening went. The fingerprint stuff was only one item, but none of the other items looked to be more productive. The boys combed through all the papers in Mrs. Carpenter's desk. All they got out of that was further evidences of the compulsive way the old lady hung on to every receipted bill. They'd been through bank statements and correspondence from her broker and attorney. The broker provided a schedule of dividends she'd been receiving, and the boys had tallied those off against her bank deposits.

What they came up with was exactly what we'd already had from all her business connections. Every penny that came in went into her

bank account. Everything that went out was paid by check. Cash withdrawals were limited entirely to the small sums of tipping money and the larger sum each year at Christmas. The total picture remained unchanged.

By midnight even the inspector was satisfied that there was nothing for him in the mass of paper that through the day and evening had accumulated on his desk. He was ready to call it a night. He said he'd drop me off at my place on his way home. I'd been riding around with him all day, and my car was sitting in the garage uptown.

We were on our way up from headquarters when the word came through on Schmitt's car phone. He had a fresh murder on his hands. Up by the Harlem Meer—you may not know it but it's the pretty little lake up in the northeast corner of Central Park—a patrolling police car had come on the nude body of a young woman at the side of one of the park roads. She was dead. A fresh needle puncture showed over the vein in her left arm. Her face had been mutilated to the point where it was not recognizable as a face.

Schmitt swung his wheel over and headed into the park. He rammed his shoeless foot down on the accelerator, and we went screaming along the sweeping curves of the park roads.

"Another one of those," I muttered.

"Another one of which?" Schmitt asked.

"A couple is mainlining. She gets too much and comes up dead. He has to get rid of her. He dumps her in the park, but first he messes up her face because too many people know they were a couple and an identification will lead you to him. How many times have you had them like that?"

"Too many times," Schmitt growled, "and this could be another one. Suppose, though, that it's the girl who never came back with the lettuce, her or our friend, Mrs. Hammersmith."

I couldn't imagine why he would bring Mrs. Hammersmith up in this connection, but I took one thing at a time.

"Oh, come," I said. "It's a big city, a lot of people. I don't have to tell you that you're always having crimes all over the place and all the odds are against any two of them being connected."

"You don't have to tell me," Schmitty said, "but it looks like I have to tell you that on this one the timing is just too right."

"Timing for what?"

"The girl was using the Carpenter job for a hideaway. She was afraid of someone. She wanted to hole up in that apartment and not go out at all. Mrs. Carpenter made her go out, and she had enough hope it would be all right so that she didn't quit the job at the very start. It must have been another neighborhood, but even so she was nervous about it. She was always hurrying it as much as she could and she was particularly nervous when Mrs. Carpenter made her wait in the car outside the doctor's office. Now, that could have been the dangerous neighborhood. It's also the avenue that borders the east side of the park. The girl was all right about taking Mrs. Carpenter out for her walks, but she didn't want to go out alone. Then on the one trip out of the neighborhood, that jaunt to the doctor's office, she kicked up her biggest fuss."

All the way through the park, riding up toward the Harlem Meer, Schmitty went on with his suppositions. She had been seen while she waited in the car outside the doctor's office, but the man couldn't touch her then, not past the stalwart Dutton. He could follow the Cavendish Cad when it took them home, and he could keep watch on the apartment for the next time she would come out alone. The next time was when she ran out for the lettuce.

"He picked her up then," Schmitty said. "He kidnaped her."

I still had my doubts. "So he had the girl," I said. "What would he want in Mrs. Carpenter's apartment or in Mrs. Carpenter's safe deposit box? Why would he kill Mrs. Carpenter?"

"A frightened girl but a smart one," Schmitty said. "She was afraid he might find her and she was afraid he might grab her. She set up a safeguard. It wasn't anything wildly original. It was the usual deal. Among her things in her room at Mrs. Carpenter's, she left a letter for the old lady. You know how those letters go. 'If anything happens to me, if I disappear or anything like that, please, Mrs. Carpenter, call the police immediately and tell them to pick up Mr. Soandso at Suchandsuch number Thisandthat Street. He did thusandso and I

found out about it. If anything happens to me, tell the police that he's the one who put me out of the way and why.'"

I tried working it out, but I couldn't get it clear in my mind.

"She tells him he doesn't dare touch her," I said. "She tells him he better let her go before Mrs. Carpenter finds the note and calls you. He takes her key and goes up to the apartment and picks up the note before Mrs. Carpenter has started going through the girl's things. Good enough so far. That's why he ransacked the girl's room and left the rest of the apartment alone, but why didn't it end there? Why the safe deposit box? Why kill Mrs. Carpenter?"

"A smart girl and a frightened one," Schmitty repeated. "She knew a note left in her room might not be enough. She had an idea of how tough he could get if he wanted to make her talk. Once he did make her talk, he could take her key and go after the note just as he did. He did get tough and she held out on him as long as she could. That was long enough so he couldn't get around to the burglary till the next night after she disappeared. Obviously that was her first line of defense, that she could hold off long enough on telling him where she had left the note and that Mrs. Carpenter would wait no more than overnight before she went through the missing girl's things. Her second hope would be that if he did make her tell him where she'd left the note, he might get caught while attempting the burglary, but she couldn't depend on that. She had to back her one note up with another, one that would be in a place he never could get at, or so she thought. The time she went to the bank with Mrs. Carpenter she had her note all ready. While the old lady was busy with her coupon clipping, the girl just slipped the note into the box. That would be her ace in the hole."

"Yes," I said. "She tells him he can't touch her. She's left a note. He works her over and makes her tell him where she left it. She gets him off her back by telling him it's among her things in the apartment. He goes after it, but she isn't lucky. He pulls the burglary off successfully. He doesn't get caught. He comes back and she tells him he still can't touch her. There's another note and that one's where he can never lay his hands on it. It's in the old lady's box in the bank. The

next time Mrs. Carpenter's in there to clip coupons, she'll find it and he'll be cooked. I suppose it never entered the girl's mind that she was endangering Mrs. Carpenter."

"It would seem safe enough," Schmitty told me. "It would do him no good to kill Mrs. Carpenter. Instead of Mrs. Carpenter opening her box and finding the note, it would then be her executors finding it. The girl had every reason to think it was failure-proof."

"Yes," I muttered. "Damn it. That explains the whole thing, and it would have worked for the poor kid, too. It was just her bad luck that while he was in the apartment he happened to see the old lady's memo pad. He knew she was going to the bank vault the next day and at what time."

"Right," Schmitty said. "He also knew she was going in a Cavendish Cad. He'd seen one waiting for her outside the doctor's office, so Cavendish on her memo clicked for him. Since the bus stop on the avenue makes parking impossible at the main entrance to the bank, he knew which entrance she'd be using."

"A handsome young man," I groaned. "He's beautifully dressed and he has beautiful manners. He comes by and offers her his arm into the bank. That's a nice change for the old girl. It brings a pleasant bit of novelty into her day. What harm can there be in accepting that little politeness just across the sidewalk? And he knows her name, too. He must be one of the bank officers she never happened to notice."

"How pleasant that her bank should have such a delightful young man around," Schmitty added. "Then there's the knife or the gun in her ribs and he's telling her just what she has to do and just how she must behave if she wants to stay alive."

The inspector didn't have to spell out the rest of it for me. The man made her take him into the vault and into the private room. He got the note out of the box and then he walked her home, holding his knife or his gun on her all the way. Shut up in the apartment alone with her, he brought out the chloroform and killed her. There would be no one left alive to identify him or wouldn't there?

"What about me?" I asked.

"How would he know about you? How could he know you knew the old lady?"

"Right. He wouldn't. But the bank people and the Cavendish Cad driver, Dutton."

"That much risk he had to take. It wasn't his neighborhood. There was no reason for them to have been particularly impressed with him. The odds were much against any of them running into him any time again or remembering him if they did. It was a risk he could take."

"But Mrs. Carpenter wasn't? If he stayed out of the neighborhood? She gets around a lot less than the people in the bank or Dutton."

"But she would be able to tell us what he took out of her safe deposit box, and it could have been enough to give us a pattern to start us looking in his direction. Also if we're right about him seeing the girl outside the doctor's office, she did go into his neighborhood. Also she did have reason to be impressed with him, every reason and all of the best. For Dutton and the bank people he was just a young man. They wouldn't have studied him or made a point of remembering him. She would have done just that."

It was no trick finding the spot. Precinct cars were already there, and the barricades were up. They drew the covering back from the body. Schmitt examined it, and I had to examine it with him. Going about with the inspector, I have seen dead bodies of all sorts and conditions. At best they're never pretty and mostly they're bad, but I have become fairly well inured to the usual things and even to some of the unusual ones, but this one really hit me. It was a special sort of horror.

The report about her face hadn't been exaggerated. She just had none. There's no need for me to go into details. It had been cut away, and I don't know that it wasn't the more horrible for having been done neatly with what looked like surgical precision.

Schmitt was watching me. I couldn't help turning green, but I made myself hold steady.

"Well?" he asked. "Could it be?"

Swallowing hard, I located my voice.

"It could be," I said. "She's right for height and weight, and you can see it is a beautiful figure. More than that I can't say. You must remember I never saw her with either her clothes or her face off."

I know it. It was a bad joke. It was ugly and no time for making with the wit, but I had to. Unless I gave it the lighter touch, I would be tasting again that bad dinner I'd eaten off the inspector's desk. It would be headed the other way this time.

Actually Schmitty came up with something a lot firmer than my "it could be." They fingerprinted the body, and he had his match. This dead girl without a face was the girl who had occupied the companion's room in Mrs. Carpenter's apartment and who had there called herself Geneva Washington.

I had one last question for the inspector that night.

"You said this girl or Mrs. Hammersmith?" I asked. "What made you think it might be Mrs. Hammersmith?"

"I hadn't seen the body. I was thinking something ordinary in the way of mutilation, battering the face until it was unrecognizable. Then the timing would have been better for the Hammersmith babe than for this one. He could have gotten rid of this one last night. Hammersmith wouldn't have begun asking questions until after we talked to her today."

I felt even greener in the face. "You mean he did that slowly?" I asked.

"I mean he's a neat and careful type. He doesn't hurry things. He tried to keep things safe. I think he gave her enough heroin or some such to kill her. Then he waited till she was dead. Then he had to fix her up and wrap her in something so she wouldn't drip blood all over the place while he was carrying her out to his car. He had to hit this part of the park when there wouldn't be any constant stream of passing cars, because he would have to take a little time for dumping her. He had to unwrap her and not get blood on the car. For a careful operator like that everything takes time."



In the morning I had a moment of thinking that for once Inspector Schmidt's theorizing had led him astray. It was in the bank when we assembled for the ceremonial opening of the late Mrs. Willoughby Carpenter's safe deposit box. We made a sizable group—a couple of bank officers, the lady's broker with one of his bookkeepers in attendance, her attorney with one of his law clerks in attendance, the tax people, Inspector Schmidt, Joe Simmons, and myself.

Every rule of protocol was observed. It was a solemn and momentous occasion. The box was brought out of its nest in the vault and, as was to have been expected, it was one of the medium-sized boxes. Neither the smallest nor the largest, it was of a size nicely suitable for holding the number of bonds and stock certificates represented by the securities lists we'd already had from the broker.

The box was carried to a private room and deposited on a table. We gathered around and watched the senior of the bank officers lift the lid. The laquered metal bottom of the steel box reflected back the overhead lights. The box was empty. It contained not even that erratic ham sandwich we'd been told about, not even so much as a small crumb that could have been dropped from any sandwich that might have been stored there. It had been cleaned out.

The broker was the first to speak.

"You've got your man, Inspector," he said, "or you will have him the first time he tries to realize anything on any of Mrs. Carpenter's securities. The stock certificates are worthless without her endorsement. Circularize all banks and brokers on those. I have the certificate numbers. You'll have him even if he does try to get by with forged endorsements. Even the bonds will trip him up. He can sell those in some sort of private sale perhaps; but if we circulate the bond numbers, they'll be picked up as soon as they appear any-

where. If you don't have him then, you'll have the man who buys them from him. This is probably the stupidest crime in history."

Schmitty turned to Simmons. "You take this end of it, Joe," he said. "We want all banks and brokers circularized with the numbers of all the missing stuff. We want the issuing companies for all stocks and bonds informed. Get the thing completely covered. It's a possibility we can't let slip by us even though it's not going to do us any good."

Brokers and attorneys looked at him as though wondering what would make a sober and experienced police officer like the inspector suddenly go out of his mind. The bank people, absorbed in their own image, took umbrage. They hurried to assure the inspector that they could speak for themselves and for every last one of their colleagues in the whole banking industry. Circularized with security numbers that could lead the police even to a thief, not to speak of a murderer, there wasn't a banker anywhere in the country who would not be on the alert.

"All he has to do is present the first coupon for collection," they promised. "We'll have him for you. The man's put the noose around his own neck."

"Your careful operator," I said.

I couldn't help it. The words just slipped out of me.

"My careful operator," Schmitty echoed. "He's so careful that when he does slip a noose around his neck, he does it in a state that's abolished capital punishment and that, even when it had capital punishment, didn't do it by hanging. Any time this bird slips a noose around his neck, he's only tying his necktie."

Everybody jumped the inspector at once. Each in his own way was trying to explain to Schmitty what had already been explained. He shouted the lot of us down.

"I know all that," he said, "and if I hadn't known, everybody's already told me. If he tries to liquidate anything he took out of this box, we'll have him; but we're never going to get him that way because he's never going to try and he never intended to try. He's been a busy man ever since he emptied this box, and part of what he's been busy with is destroying every last scrap of paper he had out of here. He's careful and he's thorough. I'm guessing that he's burned it

all, piece by piece, and has then flushed the ashes down the john."

The way the assembled company took that, they assumed that the inspector had decided that the man we were after was crazy. Most, if not all, of us were wondering whether the inspector mightn't have gone crazy himself. Schmitty explained. Among the reports he had been studying were appraisals of the contents of Mrs. Carpenter's apartment—her jewelry, her silver, antique ornaments in vermeil, in china, in glass.

"I'm just talking about the small things," he said, "small enough to be carried away easily, say in an attache case. That stuff adds up to a fortune in any market. They tell me that furniture and rugs represent another fortune, but getting that big stuff out of the building would have been a problem. The man was in the apartment twice. The first time he could have walked away with a terrific haul, and the stuff would have been a lot easier to fence than anything he took out of this box. He could have had all that without committing murder. It would have involved nothing more than simple burglary, but he didn't touch a single piece of it. He came back the next day and took the most desperate risks up to and including murder, and for what? To steal a whole boxful of paper, paper so worthless in his hands that he can't unload it for even ten cents on the dollar. The things he left untouched in the apartment, even if he did have to fence them at ten cents on the dollar, would have brought him a considerable haul. He passes that up to take immeasurable risks for a haul that can bring him nothing. It doesn't work, gentlemen. We can't have it that he's too smart on the fourteenth of the month and too stupid on the fifteenth."

"But the facts, Inspector," Mrs. Carpenter's attorney argued. "He took nothing from the apartment. He took everything out of here."

"No," Schmitty said. "He took what he wanted from the apartment, and he took what he wanted here. The way he operates, if there's anything he has to do, nothing stops him. He'll take every necessary risk, but he's careful. As far as he can, he avoids the extra risks. Burglary in the apartment and robbery here, with the robbery topped off later by murder, and in both the burglary and the robbery he was after nothing of monetary value, but the man isn't stupid. He

could see that we'd never believe a burglary and a robbery and a murder to boot that netted him absolutely nothing. He knew we would be asking what he had been after, and that was a question he didn't want us asking. He didn't stop at taking only what he wanted out of this box. He took everything in the hope that he could mislead us into thinking the securities were what he was after."

I picked it up from Schmitt. "While the police would be busy watching for some of the securities to turn up," I said, "he would be gaining time. It would be time for covering his trail, possibly time for making a getaway. He hopes that even when none of the securities ever turns up, the police will be stuck fast in the theory that he'd taken them in the mistaken notion that they were negotiable and that, after he had them, he learned that he had committed his crimes all for nothing. He couldn't realize a penny on them without getting caught. Actually he took them only as camouflage and, as the inspector said, he never had any plans for them but to destroy them."

"And he didn't think of doing the same thing in the apartment?" the attorney asked. "Why didn't he steal something there and camouflage the whole operation?"

It was a question that had been bothering me. I listened carefully to the inspector's answer to it. He had an answer. He was way ahead of the lot of us on this whole thing.

"He takes all the risks he has to take," Schmitt explained, "but he won't take even the smallest extra risk. He knows that no police department puts as much steam behind a burglary investigation as they are going to put out when it's a matter of robbery. Robbery plus murder will bring out the maximum effort. Everybody knows that."

The way Schmitt laid it out, the man had gone to Mrs. Carpenter's apartment planning nothing more than the burglary. He would take what he came for and, if he found any cash, he would take that as well. It would look like a simple burglary, but he found no cash. At that point, however, it didn't seem to him that it would matter much. He expected that the burglary would still be written off as the work of a thief who was too cagy to involve himself with fences, a thief who touched nothing but cash. The police would think that, finding no cash, he had just gone away disappointed.

The attorney wasn't that easily satisfied. He wanted to know why the man hadn't taken any of the jewelry or all of it. He argued that it would have been the same thing as taking the securities. If he wasn't going to try to realize money on either, one would be no more risk than the other.

"What he took from the box here," Schmitty said, "was paper. Paper, even in quantity, can safely be destroyed and disposed of. All it takes is a little time and patience. You don't do it all at once and stop the john up with it. You don't just tear it up and leave the pieces in a waste basket. You don't just pile it in a fireplace and burn it up, leaving the ashes for us maybe to work over. You have to be careful, but you can get rid of it and be sure it will never turn up in any form that can be traced to you. In the apartment Mrs. Carpenter had no valuable paper he could take. Jewelry, silver, all that kind of stuff? He takes it and keeps it, and there's the risk of its being found on him. He loses it or dumps it somewhere. He can be seen getting rid of it. It's that extra risk he doesn't need."

"You want the security numbers circularized anyway, Inspector?" Joe Simmons asked.

"Yes, Joe. We follow through on that part of it, regardless of what I'm thinking, and it's still important. First of all, there's always the chance that I'm wrong about all this. I can be wrong two ways. Maybe he's bright about some things and ignorant about others. Maybe he thinks the stuff is more negotiable than it will prove to be. It's a slim chance, but we can't ignore it. That's one way I can be wrong. The other is that he hasn't destroyed the stuff. I hope we'll be closing in on him. We do have some leads and I'll be working those. Let's say he hasn't destroyed all the bonds and stock certificates. Let's say the leads work out and he feels us coming close. I see him as a man who hasn't been planning on making a run for it. He's been working at making everything safe for himself right here. Let's say we can come close enough to make him panic. A sudden, unforeseen need for getaway money just might suck him into taking a chance on trying to cash some of this stuff in after all. That could turn out to be our easiest way of getting him pinned down. The way it stands, I'm still betting the stocks and bonds won't be doing us any good, but it's

only my bet and we'll hedge on it. So you cover that angle, Joe, and don't think about what I'll be doing. Cover it as though it was the only hope we had."

I was itching to ask Schmitty whether we did have any other hope, but I waited it out. Before the vault meeting he had tried to phone Mrs. Hammersmith out in Montclair. There had been no answer. Now he tried again. There was still no answer. He gave up on that and called the Montclair police.

He explained to them that it was a matter of murder and that he had reason to believe the lady might be in danger. He had been trying to reach her by phone all morning without success. Would Montclair, as a favor to the New York department and also as a measure toward prevention of a murder in their area, send a squad car around to the Hammersmith address and try to locate the lady for Inspector Schmidt? In fact, if they could locate her and put a discreet tail on her, they would find it worth the expenditure of manpower.

"It looks as though she could be the key witness against a man who has already killed two women," Schmitty said. "One of them he certainly killed for no reason but to keep her quiet. It looks as though that was his reason for the second murder as well. Mrs. Hammersmith may very well be the last loose end left to trip him up."

He didn't have to say any more than that to secure their cooperation. He set it up with them so they would let him know as soon as they located her. He asked that they tell her nothing, just keep an eye on her for her own safety. He wanted to talk to her himself.

"I have a body over here," he explained. "I hope she'll consent to look at it."

They promised to hop to it.

"You're going to show her the thing that turned up in the park?" I asked.

Schmitty shrugged. "If Montclair can find her for me, if I can coax her across the river, out of New Jersey and into New York, I'm hoping a look at the body will scare her into opening up."

"What if it scares her into complete silence?" I asked.

"Then we'll have to see what we can work out with Montclair in

the way of a shared surveillance on her. It'll be our best bet. If she won't talk, we'll be left with trying to nab him when he goes after her. I'd rather do it without taking the risks involved in using her for bait."

"You're sure he is going to go after her?" I asked.

"I'm hoping no answer on her phone doesn't mean he's gotten to her already," Schmitt answered. "If instead of talking to us she made the mistake of talking to someone else, she could be turning up as a third body."

"And if she won't talk to us or anybody else, what happens then?"

"Then I make him go after her."

"How?"

"I talk to the papers. I tell them we have a lead. We are looking into the identity of the murdered girl found last night in the park. We know that she had last been seen alive when she had been working as Mrs. Carpenter's companion and we have learned the identity of the woman who recommended the girl for the job with Mrs. Carpenter. Once that's published, he'll have to go after Hammersmith and quick. He'll have to put her out of the way before we can get to her."

That was all Schmitt had to tell me. I could see what he meant about preferring to close this out without using Mrs. Hammersmith for bait. I was already too clear on what this man had done to the girl who called herself Geneva Washington. A session with the Medical Examiner, the next item on the inspector's agenda, made me even clearer.

The police guess on the cause of death for the girl found faceless and lifeless by the Harlem Meer was standing up. She had died of a massive dose of heroin injected into a vein. Post mortem had turned up no indication that she had been a previous or habitual user.

"If she was," the ME said, "she had been off the stuff for a considerable time. We find no old needle scars and none of the indications of malnutrition or serious vitamin deficiency that will turn up in a habitual user. As a matter of fact, she was a young woman in exceptionally good health. For example, if you're working at an identification, you'll get nowhere with dental records. This young woman was

a phenomenon we almost never see. She had all her teeth and she'd never had even the smallest cavity. Every tooth is perfect. If she ever saw a dentist it was for no more than having her teeth cleaned and none of them keep charts on that."

"I was expecting something like that," Schmitty said. "The way her killer works, he would have pulled out any teeth that showed dental work."

"Yes," the ME agreed, "particularly since there is every indication that he would know how to go about it and he would have the equipment for it."

"Every indication?" Schmitty said, jumping at that. "Give, doc, give."

"The old woman we were talking about yesterday," the ME said. "I had a feeling you were trying to push me into saying she'd been killed by an MD."

Schmitty chuckled. "I was hoping you'd say it," he murmured. "You know I never push."

The ME sniffed. "You picked the wrong body for it," he said. "On this one I can say that, if the man who mutilated her face after death was also the man who killed her, then it was done by a physician, or more precisely it was done by someone experienced in the use of surgical instruments."

"You can testify to that?" Schmitty asked. "It was done with a scalpel?"

"Nobody could testify to a scalpel. It could have been some other sort of knife equally sharp and equally suitable in shape and size. What I can swear to is something closely related. It was done after death, but even then there would be extensive bleeding. Loss of blood makes no difference to a patient who is already a cadaver, but if it can be controlled, somebody can be saved a lot of cleaning up, not to speak of the danger that remaining traces of blood might be discovered and prove troublesome to the operator and useful to you, Inspector. There are marks on the tissues at the edges of the cut area that could have been made only by a surgeon's haemostat."

"You know a lot of doctors around town," Schmitty said. "Ever heard of James Peabody?"

"Office in the upper Seventies on Fifth?"

"Yes. That's the one."

"Perpetuation Peabody we call him. Ask me about him thirty years from now. You're too young for him, boy. In terms of his practice you haven't even been born yet."

"Good reputation?"

"National reputation. No, more than that, international. He's a young fellow, so there's every reason to expect he'll still be around if any of us hang on long enough to need him. When you're coming up to the place where you'll be pushing ninety, he'll be just the lad for you. In geriatrics you won't find a better man."

"Do you know him personally or just by reputation?" Schmitty asked.

"I've met him. He's younger than I am, but we both trained in the same teaching hospital. We have alumni meetings. I see him at those. Being younger, he wasn't in my time, but he's a fine boy. Everybody likes him and everybody respects him."

"Young," Schmitty said. "Good looking?"

"He drives the women crazy." The ME laughed. "They think with his looks he oughtn't be wasting himself on the old folks. They think he should be in gynecology."

"Then he has a lot going on his reputation," Schmitty said. "Any scandal about him and he'd have a lot to lose."

The ME gave Schmitty a sharp look. "Your interest in him is professional?" he asked. "I mean your profession, not his."

"Mrs. Carpenter, the old lady who died of the second chloroforming, he was her doctor."

"He doesn't kill them, Inspector. He keeps them alive."

"He inherits ten thousand bucks from her."

The Me looked pointedly at Schmitty's feet. As usual, Schmitty was doing this with his shoes off.

"And he needs it," the ME said, "the way you need a bunion. He was born with money. He has a millionaire wife and a profitable

practice. Ever heard of the Peabody Medical Research Grants? They run ten thousand per and up, up to almost anything the specific research needs. It's his money, old boy. Better find yourself another doctor."

"I don't know," Schmitty persisted. "This one does have a lot to lose."

Obviously the ME had his own opinion on that point. He considered it not worth talking about.

"Want me to fill you in on what else the body shows?" he asked.

"Fill."

"She was bound at the wrists and the ankles. It was done with wide strips of adhesive tape and not for only a couple of minutes. It was hours and maybe even days. We turn up traces of the adhesive where it worked into the skin, as it will with the friction and pressure a person sets up trying to break out of that kind of binding. Also there are indications of the skin irritation that is characteristically set up when tape is on for any length of time."

"Like forty-eight hours or a little more?" Schmitty asked.

"With the pressure and friction set up by fighting it, forty-eight hours will do it."

"Okay, doc," Schmitty said, resuming the martyrdom of his shoes. "Thanks a lot. You've given me just what I need."

"Not Jim Peabody," the ME said.

"We'll see." Schmitty looked at his watch. "It's almost twelve. We should know at one."

"You're going to be disappointed. Don't wait even the hour. Start looking in other directions right now."

"We're always looking everywhere," Schmitty told him.

Back at his desk Schmitty had word from the Montclair police. They hadn't found Mrs. Hammersmith. There was nobody home at the Hammersmith house. The neighbors had last seen her that morning. As was her custom, she had seen her husband to his car when he left for his office. Shortly after that she had come out of the house again, this time dressed for town, and she had taken off in her own car. It was not an extraordinary thing to do. They all had their days when they did this same thing, making an early start for a day's

shopping, whether it was just down to Newark for Bamberger's or on into New York for a more extensive tour.

Although we did have a little time before we had to be at Dr. James Peabody's office for the one o'clock start of his office hours, I couldn't get the inspector to hold still for anything more in the way of lunch than grabbing a quick sandwich and a cup of coffee. Even that he threw into himself so fast that I felt I had to warn him that eating this way he wasn't giving himself the slightest chance of being around long enough ever to be a Peabody patient. The warning was futile.

"I've been doing this all my life and you know it," he said. "I have a stomach with teeth in it. The first day after I'd made detective I taught it to chew."

"One of these days it'll start chewing on itself. You're sucking around for an ulcer."

"And you're practicing medicine without a license," Schmitt said. "If you want your sandwich, hurry up and eat it. If you don't want it, leave it. We have to get uptown."

I looked at my watch. "It's still early," I said.

"If I didn't need you," Schmitt growled, "I'd leave you here to spend the afternoon chewing every mouthful forty times; but if we're going to have a recognition, you've got to be there to look at the handsome doctor. We might even catch up with him before the start of his office hours. You can look at him while he's getting into his white coat."

We were early, of course. The doctor wasn't in yet, and his office secretary conferred with his battalion of starchy white office nurses. They didn't know. The doctor had a full schedule of appointments. They didn't see how they were going to work Inspector Schmidt in. If the inspector would tell them what his business with the doctor was, perhaps they could help.

"It's about one of his patients," Schmitt said. "Mrs. Willoughby Carpenter."

"Oh, yes. The poor woman. Such a dreadful thing."

They had read the papers, of course, and although the stories of Mrs. Carpenter's death had been meager, for most people sudden

death is horror enough just of itself and murder is shattering. The morning papers had also carried the story on the body found by the Harlem Meer, but they didn't have the full horrors on that one—Schmittty and I had ourselves only just had those from the Medical Examiner. Also the papers had carried nothing to connect this second murder to Mrs. Carpenter. Schmittty had not yet released anything on that phase of it. So even if the babes in the Peabody office had been reading all the murder news, for them Mrs. Carpenter would remain someone they knew. The young woman with neither clothes nor a face on would just be another murder in a world that was too full of them.

"I'm sure the doctor will work you in, Inspector," the secretary said. "We were all so fond of dear Mrs. Carpenter. His plane is in. We've heard from him. He's on his way here. It may be any moment now. It just depends on the traffic in from Kennedy. If you don't mind waiting, just please have a seat."

Schmittty minded waiting. He always minds waiting and most particularly under circumstances when he has to keep his shoes on. Seeing that he was keeping them on, I tensed up. I knew what that meant. It wasn't that he was embarrassed about shucking them in Dr. Peabody's superbly comfortable waiting room. It was that he was waiting in full readiness. He was prepared to move and move fast. When the time came for a confrontation between Dr. James Peabody and me, Schmittty was not going to be slowed up by having to climb back into his shoes.

It wasn't any moment. It was a full ten minutes, and even that took us only to a quarter to one. We had been that early. While we waited, the patients started coming in. We got to see two or three of them, men and women of unbelievable antiquity. On the roster of Peabody patients Mrs. Carpenter must have been the equivalent of a teenager.

At exactly a quarter of one, the receptionist called us. One of the nurses took us in tow.

"The doctor will see you now," she whispered. "The first appointment is for one, but that's the way they are. They always come early

and they fret about waiting. If they knew he was in and taking someone before them, it would make them dreadfully unhappy, poor dears."

As we followed her down a hall toward the consulting room, I saw Schmitty's hand slide inside his coat. I knew what that was for. He was checking his shoulder holster, testing the draw on his service revolver.

The nurse knocked at a door midway along the hall.

"Come in." The voice was strong and vibrant.

The girl opened the door. "Inspector Schmidt and Mr. Bagby, Doctor," she said.

He came forward to meet us, and at that moment it first occurred to me that the inspector and I should have arranged a signal. I didn't know how I was going to let him know that this was not his man. Then I needed no signal. He knew it as quickly as I did. After all, I had described to him in detail the man I'd seen with Mrs. Carpenter. He'd also had descriptions from the Cavendish Cad driver, Dutton, and from the people in the bank. Whether from those descriptions he could have recognized the doctor for the man we'd described would be uncertain, but for knowing that the doctor was not our man the descriptions had been more than enough.

Although this man was young, he did look rather older than the one we were trying to find. He was strikingly handsome, although he had none of that appearance of always having his good looks on his mind; but beyond such similarities there was nothing. Hair color, color of eyes, height, build, shape of face, and type of features, all were different.

Schmitty took an offered chair and immediately slipped out of his shoes. That proved it. He'd had no need for a signal from me. The doctor started to say something about his horror and grief over the death of Mrs. Carpenter, but Schmitty cut that short.

"Dr. Peabody," he said. "You have an office full of patients out there waiting to be kept alive. I don't want to keep you from them. We are after a man who we know has already killed twice. If I'm not already too late, I have to get to him before he kills a third time. In a

way we're in the same business, Doctor, you and I, trying to keep people alive. The one I'm making the try on is a young woman, and I hope you can help me."

"Two already you say?" the doctor asked. "Mrs. Carpenter and someone else?"

"Have you seen the morning papers?"

"The woman found in the park last night?" the doctor said. He had seen the papers. "The account I saw said her face had been mutilated to forestall identification."

"We've identified her," Schmittty said, "at least to the extent of knowing she was Mrs. Carpenter's companion until she disappeared. The night after she disappeared Mrs. Carpenter had a burglar who gave her a little chloroform. The next day Mrs. Carpenter was killed."

"I don't understand," Dr. Peabody said, "but any way I can help. Inspector, you can ask anything."

"Thanks," Schmittty said. "We're working on a very slim thread, but it's the best we have. We think our man is a colleague of yours, and we think there is a very good possibility that he had an office right here in this neighborhood. Mr. Bagby can give you a good description of the man. If you know any doctor around here who might even remotely answer that description, we can take it from there. Mr. Bagby has only to look at him. If he's not the man, he need never even know we were looking at him. If he is, it will be all we need."

The doctor squirmed in his chair. "I don't know," he said. "We're stiff with doctors around here. The ground floor of every apartment house along this stretch of the avenue is solid with doctor's offices, and many of them shared by three or four men. It's the same way up every side street, clear to Madison Avenue and on over to Park Avenue and beyond, not to speak of the same situation in house after house along Park Avenue. Needle in a haystack, Inspector, or I should say one particular wisp of hay out of a haystack. In this part of town we doctors are legion."

Schmittty turned to me. "Describe the man," he said.

I launched into the description, and Dr. Peabody heard me out. When I had finished, he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said. "Nobody I know." He thought for a moment and his lips twitched in a smile he tried to suppress. "I have five young women the other side of my consulting room door. If the Greek god Mr. Bagby has described frequents the neighborhood at all, I would guess he hasn't escaped their notice even though he seems to have escaped mine. Why don't you try this on them, Inspector? They just might be able to help you. They're the right sex." He paused again, sobering. "I mean the suggestion seriously," he added. "I'm here only for my office hours, and the office hours always keep me jumping and I keep the girls jumping. But they're here before I come in and after I leave. They eat their lunches in the local restaurants and coffee shops. I take mine either here off my desk or at the hospital. They're out around the neighborhood, doing my errands. That the description rings no bells for me means nothing. It wasn't likely it would unless it happened to be a colleague I actually know, and the men I know could never be suspected."

"Try not to think of it in those terms, Doctor," Schmittly urged. "It's no good thinking who do I know around here I could suspect of being a killer. He's somebody beyond suspicion. He has to be, because he's killing to keep it that way. Just concentrate on the description, anyone who looks like that, no matter how strongly you believe in him."

"Yes, Inspector. I understand. I have been concentrating on Mr. Bagby's description. I have been thinking along the lines you indicate, but I'm certain I've never seen this man or, if I ever did, I didn't notice him or remember him. Try the girls. Do." He rose and offered his hand. "Good luck, Inspector," he said.

He rang, and the nurse who ushered us in came to usher us out. Dr. Peabody briefed her on what Schmittly would be asking of her and her colleagues.

"Give the inspector all the help you can," he said. "It's important." He turned to Schmittly. "All right if they know just how important?" he asked.

"Why not?" Schmitty said.

"The inspector is looking for the man who killed Mrs. Carpenter. They are going to give you a description of that man."

"Poor Mrs. Carpenter," the nurse moaned. "The way we feel about that monster, we'd like to see him in the electric chair and we'd like to be allowed to pull the switch ourselves."

"We don't do that any more," Schmitty told her.

He was back in his shoes, and she took us outside. Off the waiting room there was a small cubicle where the receptionist had a desk and where the nurses popped in and out, pulling patients' records out of filing cabinets.

I started with the receptionist. She was around the neighborhood more than any of the others, but it was difficult even getting started with her. The phone kept ringing all the time and I had to keep breaking off while she answered it. The inspector just couldn't take it. He fidgeted and he was sweating. He drifted away from us and went to the window. For only a moment he stood there looking out at the avenue and at Central Park across the way.

I waited until the receptionist would get through explaining to someone at the other end that an appointment with Dr. Peabody during the next two weeks would be impossible. There would be nothing until Thursday of the third week unless it was an emergency and it's ridiculous for you to say you have an emergency scheduled for next week because if you know about it in advance, it isn't an emergency, dear, is it now?

Suddenly Schmitty wheeled away from his window and came charging past me, heading for the waiting room and the door to the street. He grabbed at my arm as he galloped past.

"Never mind that now," he shouted. "Let's go."

All those triumphs of medicine over time who were out in the waiting room jumped as though they'd been electrocuted. Even the ones with the hearing aids heard the inspector. The receptionist turned from the telephone to shush him. She was shocked. In Dr. James Peabody's offices voices were never raised.

 XI 

Schmitty didn't stop to make apologies. He tore out of there and dragged me after him. Outside, the curb was parked solid. Schmitty's car was still there, but other cars had come up and settled into all the free spaces while we'd been in with Dr. Peabody. Among the parked cars I noticed a couple of Cavendish Cads with their uniformed drivers waiting behind their wheels. I wondered what proportion of the car-line business would be just this, taking Dr. Peabody's patients to him for their preservation sessions.

Schmitty didn't seem to be wondering about anything. I couldn't imagine what had bitten him. He charged across the sidewalk and shouted at the nearest of the Cad drivers.

"Were you here when that Jersey Mustang pulled in?" Schmitty shouted.

The driver looked as though he might be less unaccustomed to shouting than were the Peabody nongenarians, but he didn't like it any better than they did.

"What if I was?" he asked.

Schmitty identified himself. Meanwhile I was looking for a New Jersey Mustang. It was right there in front of me, the Mustang and the Jersey plates.

"Dame driving it?" Schmitty asked.

"Yeah. A looker. Maybe a little old, but stacked."

"Where did she go? Did you see where she went?"

"Into the doctor's office, only a minute or two ago."

"All right. Quick. Which one?"

The driver pointed. "Up the block," he said. "Third door up."

Schmitty didn't wait for any more. He took off and I was at his heels. I was beginning to remember. I remembered the Hammer-

smith two-car garage. I remembered the garage doors standing open and the one car parked inside. I couldn't remember whether it was a Mustang or a Stutz Bearcat and I had no memory of the number on the license plate; but I'm just Bagby, and Schmitty is Inspector Schmidt. He'd noticed and he'd remembered.

Do you know what those big apartment houses along Fifth Avenue are like? There's the broad lobby entrance with its doorman and canopy, but all along the building front both sides of the lobby entrance you have all the small doors, separate entrances for the doctors' offices.

The door the driver indicated was one of those maisonette deals. It wasn't in Dr. Peabody's building, but in the next one up the avenue. Along there they fill the blocks in a solid mass. From one cross-street to the next there's no space between the building fronts.

Schmitty took off on a dead run, and I raced along with him. It was only when he came to the door that he stopped even for a moment and then it was only for the moment, no more than long enough to read the name on the shingle. That was a help. It might have been one of those offices Dr. Peabody had mentioned, shared by three or four men, but even as I was thinking that, I knew it never could have been. A man who did the sort of surgery we had seen on the remains of the girl who called herself Geneva Washington would need an office all to himself.

There was just the one name on the shingle.

Sanford Gorme, M.D.

Schmitty wrenched the door open, and we went in. A receptionist, far more glittering than the one we had left in Dr. Peabody's office, looked up at us. She was startled. Patients don't ordinarily make that kind of a banging entrance into doctors' offices.

"Dr. Gorme right away," Schmitty barked.

"You have an appointment?"

"He'll see us without an appointment."

"He never does, not anyone, and certainly not right away. The doctor is with a patient now."

"Never mind that." Schmitty identified himself.

The receptionist reached for the phone on her desk. She never

made it. Schmitty clamped his hand around her wrist and held fast.

"You can't," she gasped. "This is disgraceful. I don't care if you are from the police. I don't care if you're the U.S. Cavalry. You can't."

"There's no time," Schmitty told her. "Where is he?"

She looked wildly toward the patients in the waiting room, evidently hoping for some aid from that quarter. There were three of them out there, all women and all fairly young, certainly spectacularly younger than Dr. Peabody's lot. Although none of them looked in the least ill, they all sat tight. She was on her own.

Schmitty pulled her up out of her chair and out from behind her desk. Pushing her along before him, he charged up the hall that led off from the waiting room. The layout, although less extensive than Dr. Peabody's, was similar. There were four doors along that hall. Schmitty pushed them open as he came to them. The first was a lavatory and it was empty. The second was an examining room. I caught a quick flash of table, instrument cabinet, the usual fittings, plus a patient. She was a woman, and she had nothing on but one of those sterile white things they give them to wear in doctor's offices when they are to be examined all over. We pulled back and Schmitty hauled the door shut. The receptionist was working at getting control of her voice, but Schmitty took care of that by clamping a hand over her mouth. That had him completely tied up with her. At the next door he shoved her at me.

"You hang on to her," he said, "and keep her mouth covered. Don't let her scream."

I did as he told me. There was no time for anything else, and I wasn't up to anything but the one thought and that kept repeating itself over and over in my mind:

"You better be right, Inspector Schmidt. You damn well better be right."

He hauled that door open, and it was the consulting room. Like the lavatory, there was no one in it. That left only the one remaining door. He tried that one. It was locked. He waited for nothing. Jumping back from it he gave himself room for building a little momentum. Throwing himself at it, he rammèd it with his shoulder. It gave and we came jamming into another examining room.

This one was also occupied, but from the door we could see nothing but the doctor's back.

"Get out," he roared. "Can't you see I'm with a patient? Get the hell out and stay out."

The patient was not visible. Where we were any view of the examining table was screened off by the doctor's broad back.

Schmitty had his gun out. He stepped forward and let the doctor have the feel of the gun muzzle in his back.

"Police," he said. "Come away from that table."

The man froze. It was only a moment, but it seemed like a long wait; and as far as I could see, nobody was doing anything. Quite suddenly, however, the man doubled over, and then I could see the table.

Mrs. Hammersmith was on it. She was bound tightly at the ankles with broad bands of adhesive tape, and similar binding held her wrists together behind her back. Another strip of the tape sealed her lips. I was thinking that in his report on the dead girl the ME had said nothing about evidences of a taped mouth, but then I remembered that when that corpse reached the ME it no longer had any mouth at all. Mrs. Hammersmith was kicking out with her bound feet, taking aim at the man's head, but Schmitty had him now and he pulled the man out of her reach.

That, of course, would have been the second kick. The first had reached the man, and where it counted. That was what had doubled him over. Now Schmitty was taking the hypodermic out of the man's nerveless hand and was snapping on the handcuffs. He pulled the man around and I got a good look at him.

"That's the one," I said, "the man I saw with Mrs. Carpenter."

Schmitty grinned at me. "Thanks," he said. "I would never have known, but don't you think it's time you let go of that poor woman and let her phone the police. You also might see what you can do to help Mrs. Hammersmith."

It was only then I realized I still had the squirming receptionist in my clutches. I let go of her and she ran screaming out of the room.

"That's all right," Schmitty said. "She'll call. We'll have some men

around from precinct in a minute or two. Maybe on what she'll tell them it will even be faster than that."

I went to Mrs. Hammersmith. I nicked up the edge of the tape he'd put over her mouth, but as soon as I started pulling, she winced away from me. That way I was going to skin her lips. I looked around for benzine. After sniffing at a few bottles, I found it. Working with the benzine, I got the tape off without hurting her. While I was working at it, Schmitty was talking to her. He told her what a fool she'd been. He told her that the man was twice a murderer, Mrs. Carpenter and the woman who called herself Geneva Washington. He told her she had come only moments away from making herself the third victim.

When he spoke of the second murder, tears welled up in her eyes. She shook with sobs. The tears spilled over my hands while I worked at the tape on her lips. As soon as I had her mouth free, she started talking. She talked all the time I was freeing her wrists and ankles.

"The papers today," she sobbed. "The girl dead in the park. Was that Meg?"

"Who's Meg?"

"Meg, Margaret Johansen, the girl you were looking for, the one who used Geneva's name."

"Yep," Schmitty said. "That's who it was."

"I was a fool. I never thought he'd do it, not to Meg. It was only just now when he started on me that I began to think. I was such a fool."

"Want to tell us all about it?" Schmitty asked.

Of course, she wanted to. She could hardly keep it under control, it was pouring out of her so fast. Meg Johansen was her closest friend. Nothing had ever come between them until Meg met the handsome Dr. Sanford Gorme.

"I never liked him," she said, "and Kent, he's my husband, couldn't stand him. He always seemed too slick, too smooth; but he was so good looking and so successful and Meg was my friend and I didn't want to lose her. It was obvious that she was going to marry him. Kent and I talked it over and we decided that if she wanted him, and

except for our prejudice against him he was a good catch, who were we to show our feelings about him? We worked at taking it well, making them both our friends.

"Then one morning I had that call from Mrs. Carpenter about Geneva and that same evening he came out to the house." She jerked a newly freed thumb in Gorme's direction without turning to look at him. "He was very smooth as usual. Had we seen Meg? She'd walked out on him and simply disappeared. They'd had a little spat, but nothing of such proportions. If I heard from her, would I please let him know?"

Of course, she had been curious. She had been dying to hear Meg's side of it, but Gorme had been right. Meg had dropped out of sight. She had locked up her apartment and gone away. She'd left no forwarding address, and nobody had heard from her.

The Hammersmiths were bewildered and hurt. It seemed to them that if the girl had taken off because she was through with her Dr. Gorme, she might at least have gotten in touch with her old friends. Didn't she know she could trust them not to tell him where she was if she didn't want him to know?

Then Schmitty had come out to see Mrs. Hammersmith with his questions about Geneva Washington. As soon as she recognized that the Geneva she had recommended was not the Geneva she had known, she began to suspect it might be her old friend, Meg. The timing was right. Meg knew all about Geneva and all about how the Hammersmiths felt about Geneva. She was someone who could have pulled that trick off. She had all the needed information for it, and the timing was so precisely right.

Then when I gave her the description of the girl, she was certain. I was describing Meg Johansen in every detail, even to the way she took her martinis and to her little Dickens pun about them.

"I was terrified," she said.

"Why?"

"I didn't know what to think. If she'd walked out on that Mrs. Carpenter because she had made it up with him, that would be all right, but I couldn't think that she had. First of all, why wouldn't we have heard from them if she'd come back, and then there was the

way you said she'd left Mrs. Carpenter, just taking off that way, leaving the poor old woman high and dry. She wasn't Geneva, of course, but she wasn't that unfeeling. I couldn't imagine her doing a thing like that."

As Mrs. Hammersmith said, she didn't know what to think. Meg was her friend, and Meg had pulled a dirty trick. Now the police were looking for Meg. Do you hand a friend over to the police that way without even knowing what you're doing? She wanted to talk to Meg first, learn what her explanation would be.

"I kept calling her apartment, but her phone was still disconnected," she said. "I kept calling here, but all I got was answering service. He wasn't in. He wouldn't be available till today."

She'd had a bad time of it. She couldn't tell her husband because she knew he would insist on her going straight to the police with everything she knew; and, if she didn't, he would. Then there had been the newspapers with the story of Mrs. Carpenter's death, and the stories named Geneva Washington. She saw the papers before her husband came home, so she was able to tell him the police had been in touch with her, asking about Geneva, and wasn't it too, too awful? Some white woman had stolen Geneva's letter of recommendation and used it to get a job with this poor Mrs. Carpenter.

"The more I thought about it," she said, "the more it seemed to me that it could be only the one thing. I knew how crazy Meg was about him. I thought he could get her to do anything he wanted her to do. He had some smart, dirty scheme going, and he made Meg pull that trick with Mrs. Carpenter. I couldn't imagine what the trick could have been, but Mrs. Carpenter was dead, murdered, and I was sure he had Meg involved. I didn't give a hoot about him, but I was sure he'd sucked Meg into this and she hadn't known that what he was planning was all that bad. I had to find Meg and do what I could to help her. I knew if you came out again and happened to hit us when Kent was home, all he had to hear was that description of Meg and he would be telling you everything. I felt I had to warn her of that danger."

She waited till her husband was off to his office in the morning and then she came straight into town. She went around to Meg's locked-

up apartment, thinking she might find her old friend there even though the phone was still disconnected, but she drew a blank.

She spent the whole morning doing the rounds of places where Meg might have been, the hairdresser she knew Meg always used, the little shops along Madison where Meg liked to get her clothes. Evidently what the girl brought to Mrs. Carpenter's was clothes specially bought to give her what she'd hoped might be a companion look.

"Places," she explained, "that I knew about and that he would never know about at all, but nobody had seen her or heard anything of her all these weeks."

Finally there was no place left to try but Gorme's office. The minute he heard she was there, he switched his appointments around and took her in right away. He started out all eager, as though he thought she had come to bring him news of Meg. When she said she had none and asked if he hadn't heard, he said he hadn't. He seemed so cut up about it and so sincere that she had believed him. She told him about the Geneva Washington bit and about Mrs. Carpenter.

"I got no further than that," she said, "when he lost interest. I don't mean he lost interest exactly, but he sort of brushed it aside because all of a sudden he was all doctor and nothing else mattered till he did what he had to do for me. He grabbed my arm and told me to be still while he took my pulse, and when I tried to talk, he said we'd talk about it later. This was more important. He didn't at all like the way I was looking."

She told him to forget it. It was just that she hadn't slept all night, worrying, and he told her he was afraid it was a lot more than that. He wanted her in the examining room.

"He was so gentle with me and so concerned, and he looked so frightened," she explained, "that I thought he was really seeing something. Anyhow I thought he was so steamed up about it that I could never get him to make sense about Meg until I had let him check me over. Also I had the second thought that if Meg had been in on this Carpenter thing, whatever that was, with someone else and I didn't know Meg at all, then did I want to tell him all this stuff.

I wanted to think for a minute. I didn't know whether to be loyal to Meg or what to be."

The rest had been all too easy for him. He'd had her sit on the edge of the examining table with her legs dangling. He stepped behind her to his instrument cabinet: and, the first she knew, he whipped his arm around her and had her held fast while with his other hand he slapped the tape over her mouth. After that she did struggle, but it was a silent struggle while he taped her wrists and ankles.

Then she watched him prepare the needle, and while he prepared it, he told her how sorry he was. He told her it was a pity the police had found her. He hadn't ever thought she would be involved, but since the police had found her, she was involved, and that was just rotten luck. He promised her it would be easy. She would have no pain.

"Then you burst in," she said.

"Did he tell you what it was all about?" Schmitty asked.

"No. Nothing."

The inspector turned to Gorme, but the man was still not talking. He stood on his right to be silent and on his right to an attorney and on all the rights there are, plus some there aren't. It didn't matter. There are things that it is ridiculously easy to learn about a man. The only explanation of their having gone unknown is because no one has had any reason to ask. Once Schmitty had him, there was, of course, every reason to ask, and it turned up almost at once.

The man was not a doctor and never had been. He'd had extensive experience as a medical corpsman during the Korean fighting, and that was all the medical training he'd ever had. All the rest had been a con game.

Once we had that much, Schmitty dug further and filled the thing out. He looked into all recent death certificates Dr. Sanford Gorme had signed. He came on one the Medical Examiner didn't like the look of. The body covered by that certificate was exhumed, and autopsy showed a cause of death completely at odds with the one shown on the death certificate. Obviously Dr. Sanford Gorme

couldn't have been expected to put it down for dead as the result of his treatment.

"No telling how many people he killed," Schmitty said, "just in the ordinary run of his practice."

"Probably few or no more than this one," the ME said. "He set himself up as an internist. Most of what came to him he could take care of with placebos or by prescribing the currently promoted antibiotic. He could read the manufacturer's literature on that and know as much about it as any of us knows. A Fifth Avenue internist, he would follow the Fifth Avenue custom and at the drop of a symptom fix his patient up with a consultation. A man can run a practice like that and seldom be anything but the sympathetic friend who listens to his patients' troubles and makes soothing noises."

What had happened with his girl was clear enough. Somehow she found him out. Some little thing made her ask the questions and that was all it would ever take, thinking to ask the questions. Maybe she tried to persuade him to quit what he was doing. She probably told him she was quitting him. It's a good guess that the way he reacted to whatever she did say to him made her suspect that he could be dangerous. She had to get away from him if only to have time to think. This was a girl who had decisions to make. Should she turn him in? Should she go back to him and try again to coax him away from his dangerous fraud? If she was crazy about the man, the decisions were hard ones.

She ran and hid. She found a good hiding place. There she would have time to think and decide. There was only the one thing wrong with her hideout, and that was Mrs. Carpenter's insistence on going to a doctor in the wrong neighborhood and her further insistence on her companion waiting for her outside the doctor's office.

Schmitty got an explanation on that from Dr. Peabody when we were cleaning up the final details.

"Mrs. Carpenter was independent," the doctor said. "She was always afraid that I would tell her something soothing and tell the truth about her condition to someone else. She made sure that she kept everyone else away from me. There was no one to whom I could tell anything about her except herself. Aged patients tend to

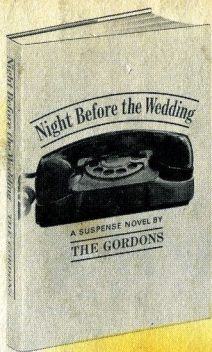
have that worry. Most of them don't have her determination in dealing with it. I examine them and then the nurse helps them dress. When they come out and join the relative or companion who brought them in, they are miserable in the certainty that we have been having secrets while they were dressing. She made certain. She always kept her companion outside in the car."

None of the bonds or stock certificates taken out of Mrs. Carpenter's safe deposit box was ever recovered, and it wasn't until after his lawyers had exhausted his last possibility of appeal on his murder conviction that Gorme talked at all. Even then he never confessed to the murders, but he has admitted to taking and destroying the securities and he has verified Inspector Schmidt's conjectures about the two notes, the one Gorme took out of the girl's room in the apartment and the back-up note he removed from the safe deposit box the following afternoon.

During the trial the real Geneva Washington turned up. She was working out west. When the trial stories made the papers clear across the country, someone told her about them. She called in immediately.

Sanford Gorme, of course, is in for life. The inspector had heard from the warden that mail comes to the jail addressed to Dr. Sanford Gorme, M.D. It's from some of his old patients. They describe their symptoms and ask him to prescribe by mail. Nothing has shaken their faith.

The warden, even though he reports that Gorme is a model prisoner, does tell us that the man has to be watched closely. Too many of the other prisoners, instead of reporting themselves to the prison doctors for treatment, are going to Sanford Gorme with their ailments. Even up in Sing Sing there's something about the man that's persuasive.

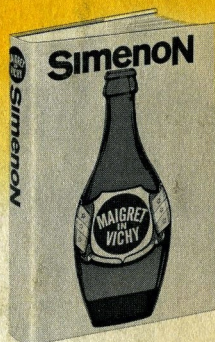


Night Before the Wedding

BY THE GORDONS

Maigret in Vichy

BY GEORGES SIMENON



Honest Reliable Corpse

BY GEORGE BAGBY

