
Nine Strings
To Your Bow

MAURICE WALSH

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by MAURICE WALSH

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CON MADDEN ESSAYS TO SELL
DANIEL GLOVER

I

THE tall man slouched along the pavement, and, though he moved lazily, his gait gave a sense of controlled power. He was bareheaded under the forenoon sun of early June, and his thick light hair was thrown off his brow in a cow's lick. He was smoking a cigarette and smoking it too rapidly, and cursing warmly underneath his breath.

"Blast you, Daniel! 'Make contact. Sell yourself.' Just like that, my gallant strategist! But how the bloody wars am I going to begin?"

The man he was wanting to contact was strolling leisurely twenty yards ahead. A young man, lathily but wirily built, wearing a plaid jacket over flannels. He did not seem to have a care in the world. But his face was too thin, his cheeks too hollow, and his pallor implied that he had long been hidden away from the sun.

"You're game, you're game, Peter lad," said Con Madden as Peter Falkner swerved to the edge of the pavement, and looked up over the tall city houses into the blue abyss of sky where white cloud islands were drifting.

Con Madden, pausing to light a cigarette, remembered *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

*I never saw a man who looked with such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue which prisoners call the sky.*

Peter Falkner had stepped down from the dock, a free man, only half an hour ago. The nolle prosequi proceedings had not taken five minutes. Two days ago the court had been packed by spectators avid to see a man in the toils: to-day only half a dozen saw him released. Con Madden was one who saw Peter Falkner walk out of court. And walk out alone. That fact disturbed Con. At least two of his friends should have been there to greet him: Hughes Everitt and Barbara Aitken. That they were not there might be Peter's own wish, and it might imply that he intended slipping away somewhere—perhaps out of the

country.

Con started to curse again, and then cheered up. If Falkner did slip out of the country that finished the case, and Con had never liked the looks of it. There were too many loose strings to be tied.

Con paused on the pavement to relight his cigarette, as Peter turned and entered a tobacconist's at the corner.

Peter came out of the shop, a new corncob pipe in his teeth and a blue tin of American Cavendish in his hand. He stood at the street corner and slowly ground a brown flake between broad palms, and the eyes that surveyed the press of business men and idlers were cool and challenging. No one took the least notice of him, and that surprised Con, for Peter's name had been in the mouths of men these many days.

A swinging sign a few doors down the side street caught Peter Falkner's eye. He walked down towards it, and pushed through a swing door.

"Bydam'," said Con Madden. "My own favourite caravanserai!"

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon, the low-water hour in the liquor trade. All the partitioned alcoves along the mahogany counter, except the last one, were empty. Con Madden, coming through the swing door, saw beyond the inner edge of the partition a strong white hand—a hand too white for its bony strength—reach for a silver tankard. Con slip-footed along the terrazzo floor and anchored himself on a high stool in the last alcove but one. The barman leaning against the inside arch leading to the lounge bestirred himself, and grinned a welcome.

"You're early this morning, Mr. Madden. A minute earlier and you'd be having the first one of the day on the house."

The barman caressed a lever and a pint of porter frothed creamily. He knew Con Madden and his profession, and was considering a subject for a chat during the slack hour.

"Did you take a look in at Greenal Street last week, Mr. Madden—the big murder trial? They say he was a tough-looking guy, the Falkner man, and a Yank besides."

"They, whoever they are, are damn bad judges of character, Michael," said Con. "He is a Canadian of one generation, and he may be tough, but he certainly did not look tough. I saw him at his second trial." Con's voice had a considering note. "No! he's not tough, but he's the sort of man you'd like to have with you and not against you."

The barman laughed. "I wonder, now, did he do the old uncle in?"

"How would I know? But if Falkner did not, the man that did fell over himself in trying to frame someone."

"How so?"

"By making his clues too palpable—too easy. A pig-headed policeman fell

for them, but three juries did not. Falkner's clean off but with a string tied to him, a marked man all his days."

"I wouldn't like to be the swine that framed him."

"How is Falkner to lay hands on him, Michael?"

"I'd search for him under the bloody mountains."

"Would you now, Michael?" Con pointed a finger at him. "Just put yourself in his place. What would you do?"

"What would I do?" Michael scratched the back of his head. "That's another question altogether. What would I do?" Then he grinned. "There was a bit of money going?"

"Oodles of it."

"All I'd ask for is one month to gather me resources, and then I'd be like a needle in a bundle o' hay."

"You'd clear out of the country?"

"Fast an' far an' with a new handle—an' that's what I'd whisper in the Falkner lad's ear if I got the chance."

"And you might be whispering in a deaf ear, Michael. I had a good look at him, and he struck me as a man who would not back down or run for shelter."

"What'll he do then?"

"One of two things, and I'll put half a dollar on it. If he's not guilty he'll do his damndest to put one over on the police by hounding out the man—or woman—that framed him."

"And if he is guilty?"

"Then, he will lie low and say nuffin. And yet, you were right, Michael. The thing for him to do, guilty or innocent, is get away and change his identity. The year he has been in prison has wiped out every trail. No man can live under a cloud all his days—more especially if he is guiltless. He must either get out, or get inside a hard shell and die in a corner of it after eating his heart out. Anyone in the lounge?"

"Nary the one."

"Is that the *Sporting Times* you have over there? Thanks. Bring me in another pint, and I'll give you a winner later on."

II

Peter Falkner at the other side of the partition had sat very quietly, and Con wondered if the seed he was scattering was falling on barren ground.

He picked up the sporting paper and went through into the lounge to the far corner and opened his paper, without a glance at the man in the last alcove.

Presently the barman came in with a fresh tankard and slipped it across the table. Con murmured, "Thank you, Mike!" and Mike moved back into the bar.

Con looked at the paper with unseeing eyes, but his ears and his mind were intent. The lounge door opened and closed again; slow footsteps moved across amongst the small tables and halted before Con's; Con lifted casual eyes and looked into the eyes of Peter Falkner; and Peter Falkner's eyes were amused and mocking and hard. He took the corncob pipe from between his teeth and pointed it at Con.

"You know who I am?" It was hardly a question. "I saw you in court this morning."

"You are observant, Mr. Falkner," Con said calmly. "I never caught your eye. Won't you sit down and have a drink with me?"

Mr. Falkner did not sit down, and ignored the invitation to drink. He leaned one large, too-white hand on the table edge.

"You followed me in here?"

"I saw you come in." Con was as calm as a post.

"You were talking at me out there with that Irish Michael?"

Con liked Peter Falkner for his insistency and directness. And he liked his voice, too, a resonant voice rather deep and with a quality of its own. His father had been Lowland, his mother half-Irish, he had grown to manhood in the West, and so his speech had a pleasantly flavoured drawl.

"The talk was about you out there," Con said, "but I did not start it."

"You kept it going, brother."

"I did, and I'll stand by anything I said as well."

"I know who you are too," said Peter. "You are one of those press-hounds snuffing around the law courts on the trail of more copy for your dirty rags." He was plainly contemptuous.

"God forbid!" said Mr. Madden.

"What is your game then?" His eyes narrowed.

"I'm on the look-out for a job. I can be as direct as yourself, Mr. Falkner. That's who I am." He tendered a card to Peter who glanced at it, and opened his eyes mockingly.

"I apologize to the press-hound," he said. "This must be the lowest thing there is this side of hell." He glanced at the card again. "Cornelius J. Madden —"

"Con to his friends," Con said.

"Cornelius suits me," Peter said.

"Not on your life, young fellow," said Con with some warmth. "I'm plain Mister to you for a little while yet."

Peter glanced at the card again. "Private Investigator—"

"A term insisted on by the founder of the firm," Con said.

"And are you his jackal, Mr. Cornelius J. Madden?"

"You might be a good judge of jackals, Mr. Falkner."

Peter Falkner restrained himself finely. He had had a long and bitter year in which to learn restraint.

"You'll explain that, Mr. Private Dick?"

"Sure, Mr. Peter Falkner! You enquired if I were a jackal? I'll answer you. I pull down my own meat at the tiger's side. And I'll ask you a question in turn. Are you a king tiger who employed a jackal that turned and bit you?"

"My Lord! One hour out of jail and a rough house on my hands already." He gazed down at the big man whose grey, wide-open, steadfast eyes had a gleam that he recognized. Whatever this man was he was no pan-handler. The rough house might come later.

"I asked for that," Peter said quietly. "I withdraw the jackal."

"Fair enough!" said Con. "I withdraw too. You have every reason to be bitter and suspicious."

"I am not bitter," Peter said, "but leave me my suspicions for this session." He pulled a chair round and sat down. "You play your hand well, Mr. Cornelius J. Madden, Private Investigator. You've got me interested. I'm a free man, and like to be amused, but be careful of the cracks you pull."

"Your mouth is too grim for freedom, Mr. Falkner."

"I'll be a free man till hell freezes over." There was a harsh note in his voice.

"Freedom's fight when once begun, though often lost is ever won," quoted Con. "Will you have a drink?"

"I am not drinking with you just yet," said Peter.

"I get you. Your very good health all the same."

Con laid down his tankard, lit a cigarette and reached the lighting match to Peter who accepted it and got his corncob going. He picked up Con's business card.

"Cornelius J. Madden, Private Investigator, looking for a job! How do you begin to pull it down, Mr. Madden?"

"Dam'd if I know!" Con said. "You heard what that Irish barman advised? For you to get out. He was dead right, you know."

"I'll take time off to prove him wrong."

Con looked at him through half shut eyes and nodded. "You'll face the music. You have decided to play with life."

"What's my game?" Peter Falkner asked. This big, seemingly quiet man had touched on the thing that Peter had been doing with all his might through many terrible months.

"To gather your resolution close about you, build up a philosophy to last all your days, deciding, while you had time, the course you would take if you won a doubtful freedom. You decided to go back to Eglintoun and live a free man till hell froze over."

"I like your style, Mr. Madden. You say that I cannot?"

"Not unless you clear your name. You cannot live a free man under a cloud."

"And you propose to get me out from under that cloud? There would be a fee of course? Quite a reasonable fee, but the expenses would mount up—isn't that the usual technique?"

"To hell with you and your fee!" said Con warmly. "You can clear out of here when you want to, and go to hell your own road."

Peter Falkner lifted a broad palm.

"Sorry if I touched you on the raw, but how sure are you that my road leads to hell?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Peter Falkner." Con sat up. "You'll go back where you belong, and you'll meet people who will congratulate you, and shake you by the hand, and all the time there will be speculation in their eyes; and some of them will wipe the hand that shook yours on the back of their britches; and some will slide inside shop doors when they see you coming; and others, fair enough to your face, will snigger behind your back and whisper that the big stake you played for was worth a few months in jail; and a few who believe in you will be terribly sorry for you, and grieve for you, and go on pouring their sympathy on you. And you'll know that a killer is not far away, and you will go on living your free life till hell freezes over. Will you, Mr. Peter Falkner?"

"Blast your eyes!" said Peter Falkner savagely.

"And another thing, Mr. Falkner! All the time, while you are living this free life of yours, you might be going round with two little fears gnawing at you."

"Two little fears?" Peter repeated.

"Yes, two! First, you might be afraid that if any more mud were stirred up someone might get soiled—someone you like—maybe a woman."

Peter stiffened. "Be careful, you mud-stirrer," he warned. "What is my second little fear?"

"I am not saying that you have it, but if you have you'll do nothing. You'll give me no job. I was once a policeman."

"Is that not a recommendation?"

"Once a policeman always a policeman. I would not condone murder. If I investigated your case and found fresh evidence against you, I would do my damndest to get you hanged."

"Is that a dare, sir?"

"A statement of principle. Don't employ me or anyone if you have that second small fear."

Peter spoke as if to himself.

"You have one hell of a kick, Mr. Cornelius J. Madden."

"I am one thorough-going brute," Con said, strangely touched. He put his hands on the arms of his chair. "The session is over, Mr. Falkner. I'll not trouble you again."

"Don't let me chase you off, Mr. Madden. The day is young," said Peter. "I set out to be amused, but you are not an amusing man. I am just beginning to wonder if your qualifications as an investigator are on a par with your come-back."

"You have a hefty kick of your own, young man," Con said. "To hell with your qualifications. I am not keen on this job any more."

"Haven't you a record that could be checked up on?"

"Do you know Inspector Myles of Eglintoun?" Con asked.

"Dick Myles? A sound man. He'll do to take along."

"You ask Dick about Con Madden. You ask him!"

"I am not weakening, big man." Peter leaned forward. "After the things you said to me you've got to prove that you were not baiting me to pass the time."

"And if I don't?"

"Then, by God! I'll try and take it out of your hide."

Con leaned back in his chair and looked Peter up and down. A lean and wiry fellow with limber shoulders, but the poor young devil was only just out of jail, and Con could give him forty pounds. But Con did not smile. He nodded seriously.

"Fair enough," he said. "I'm told you can be real tough in a free-for-all. Where do I begin saving my hide?"

Peter leaned back too, and turned his head towards the bar door. "Another beer, Mister," Peter called.

"A tankard of plain, Mike," Con gave his order.

"Suppose you begin by telling me some of the things Dick Myles would say about you?" invited Peter.

Con lit a cigarette and inhaled a few times before he began.

"God instruct me!" he said. "Dick Myles would tell you something like this. We entered the Force together, and he was my best friend—"

"Not any more?"

"We are still friendly, but our lines moved apart. He is an Inspector, and I got thrown out on my ear, and barely escaped a spell in jail—"

"That one of your qualifications?"

"You might think so when I tell you that the man that got me dismissed was your friend Superintendent Mullen. That same one who has been so set upon seeing you hanged."

"Damn Mullen!"

"To be sure. I became the youngest detective-inspector in the C.I.D. and

the most promising, and no one knew that better than myself. Unfortunately I didn't take my honours or my liquor with equanimity, and this Mullen as my superintendent rode me hard. I was desperate, young and proud, and I didn't take the riding in good part. One day, having one over the eight to encourage me, I bucked the rider off, rolled on him, kicked him in the slats, knocked some of his teeth down his throat, mixed his kidneys with his liver, and a few little things like that. No qualification yet?"

"A useful man in a rough house, I'd say."

"Make a note of it for immediate reference," Con chuckled. "The powers asked for my resignation. A man higher up saved me from a spell in durance vile, and ten of my colleagues conveyed to me a vote of thanks. Some of them are now superintendents themselves and my very good friends. But I was out of a job, and at a particularly loose end, for I was a policeman and nothing else.

"Then one Saturday evening I encountered a solid chunk of humanity in a public bar. After due libations, my personal grievances came home to me mountain high, and, my tongue being loosed, I detailed and enlarged on them to this new-found soul-mate of mine. He listened but did not hesitate to tell me that I jolly well deserved all I had got and more, or words to that effect in classical languages.

"My new friend and I cultivated acquaintance and discussion. I found myself spending long week-ends at his place in the far-out suburbs. He ran a bachelor establishment and cultivated fruit and vegetables in an expert manner. Who he was or what he had been I didn't know, and am not sure even now, but sometimes I suspect that he is a helper of lame dogs, and sometimes I have an idea that he once considered me lame on three feet and unsound on the other.

"He was interested in life, and especially in its vagaries on the abnormal and subnormal sides. At any rate he said he was, and his knowledge of criminology and aberrancy was full and fanciful. My own inclination was that way, and he put it to practical uses. Almost before I knew it I found myself a partner with him in a nice little organization. We are still partners, and the organization is nicer than ever—and profitable. And the organization is nice, too, in what it touches. You can ask the police about that. Most of its activities are hum-drum enough and concerned with search for documents and verification of facts and so on—"

"Divorce court proceedings?" suggested Peter.

"Why not? We turn down most of them, but where we think a man or woman is getting a raw deal we take a hand. We take a hand in other things too. My partner is always on the look-out for a busman's holiday. A case interests us; we may have no professional connection with it; but we take a look at it round and about; and if it has possibilities we try and make contact

with the interested party. In short, Mr. Falkner, like most business organizations we canvass for business, but unlike most of them we are particular where we canvass."

"Ah! I am beginning to see," Peter said. "My case interested you?"

"It did."

"And you had a look round and about."

"We had."

"And found possibilities."

"We have."

"And you tried to contact me as the interested party? Would you care to go on talking?"

"About what?"

"About what you propose to do for me. You would clear my name?"

"I cannot promise that. I propose to bring the murderer into the open, and if that clears your name, well and good."

Peter looked long at Con, his eyes frowning and intent.

"I like your style, Mr. Madden," he said at last. "You have made contact, and I will talk with you." He sat up and grinned pleasantly. "Have a drink with me?"

Con flicked his tankard. "I asked you first."

"Two is my usual limit of this, but I'll be glad to join you." Peter leaned forward again. "Could you conceive the notion that I would like to take a look at the man who killed Marcus Aitken? He was my uncle, you know, and I liked the old tyrant."

III

When Con Madden told Peter Falkner that he and his partner had had a look round and about at the murder of Marcus Aitken, it was in the nature of an understatement. For the look had been thorough, and Con Madden, after three weeks in the town of Eglintoun, had the facts on his mind as clear as a photograph. And the main fact was that Mark Aitken had been brutally murdered a year ago, shot through the spine from close up and his brains blown out as he lay on his face. That was the medical evidence.

There were other facts. The facts Con Madden had learned about Mark Aitken himself. That Mark had managed to survive to the age of sixty was only explained by the theory that the devil takes care of his own. On the surface Mark had been a big business man and sportsman, mill owner, company director, landed proprietor, justice of the peace, patron of racing, horse and cattle breeder, everything that makes a man the backbone of the country—for his own good! Actually Mark Aitken was a full-blooded blend of libertine,

regency buck, racketeer and spendthrift, with enough Scots in him to make him a patient gatherer, enough Irish to make him a bold gambler, and enough English to make him think he was by the Lord appointed. A big sanguine-hued, blond, tempered man, afraid of nothing on two feet or four, in this world or the next. A hard drinker, a hard fighter, a hard lover, and a hard bargainer all his life, and at the age of sixty he possessed all the lustful virility of Augustus the Strong of Poland. He'd married and buried two women, had no direct heir, but by all accounts did not lack natural progeny.

But Mark Aitken had acquired three heirs. Two of them were a twin brother and sister, a nephew and niece. . . . Toby and Barbara Aitken. They were about twenty-five, or thereabouts. Toby was a big ash-haired, ash-eyed hulk of a lad, whose main pursuits were the drinking of double whiskies and the playing of first-class golf. He was a plus two man, and it was said he would cheat to win side bets. An unmoral young hound was Toby.

Barbara, as Con Madden could attest, was a looker, of the slender but not angular type. Five foot six with nice eager lines, and the curves circumspect but in the right places. Brown haired and on the dark side, she was, and there were red lights in her hair of which she had plenty. The huntress type—Diana of the Uplands with the greyhounds, like the famous painting.

These two lived with Mark in the manor, Danesford House, where Barbara acted as chatelaine.

The third heir was Peter Falkner himself. Peter was the son of Mark's own sister and a Scotsman of the name of Robbie Falkner. It was Robbie who married Mark's sister over violent protest and whisked her off to Canada where Peter was born. It was five years ago, when Robbie and Mark's sister both died, that Peter wrote his uncle informing him of their deaths, and had received an offer from his uncle to come back to Eglintoun. Uncle and nephew had an interview, and as a result of that interview Peter had been appointed estate manager, under a written contract for five years. And beginning then and for the next five years these two had rowed until it brought down rain. At the trial Peter had claimed that underneath the quarreling was a mutual fondness and respect, but those who had heard the rowing wondered—especially when Mark's body was found on the path between Danesford House, and the Home Farm where Peter, as manager, lived. He was found there by Peter himself. The finder of the corpus delicti is usually the first object of suspicion, and a few of them have been hanged.

More particularly there was the final row Peter had with his Uncle Mark. The five years of his contract as estate manager were up and Mark wanted to renew, but Peter had refused. He had said he was going back to Canada. Old Mark had been extraordinarily mild about it and had offered to double his salary, so that he could settle down and find himself a wife. Peter had said,

irritatingly, that he didn't want the salary or a wife and that he was leaving for Canada on the Monday. After that Uncle Marcus ran true to form. He bellowed and most of his bellowing was abusive. He threatened to cut Peter out of his will. It was all heard by the servants and members of the family. Peter left the big house and stormed off to the Home Farm by himself.

The terms of the will which Mark Aitken had threatened to change did not help Peter's case. There was every reason why Peter shouldn't have wanted it changed. In Superintendent Mullen's mind it clinched matters. Mark had made two wills, the first about ten years ago. In that one he left his estate between Peter, Barbara and Toby. But six months before his death he made a new will, the one which was valid now. Under its terms Toby was left three hundred pounds a year, to be paid out of the estate at the rate of twenty-five pounds a month as long as he lived, and the testator expressed the opinion that he would not live long. Barbara Aitken was left six hundred pounds a year until her marriage, at which time the annuity was to cease. The residue of the estate was left to Peter Falkner, and there were no strings attached to it. That residue was reasonably estimated as worth two hundred thousand pounds.

Con looked across the tops of the fresh tankards which Michael had brought to Peter Falkner. "I would like for once," he said, "to hear your own account of what happened after that last quarrel with your Uncle Mark. I'd like to hear it without the objections and interruptions of the Crown Prosecutor."

Peter sucked on the stem of his pipe, which had gone dead. "After that row with my uncle," he said, "I needed a bit of calming down. I had in mind a discussion I'd had with Barbara. She and Hughes Everitt, to whom she's engaged, were going fishing for salmon early the next morning. I told her the salmon would not be biting. She stubbornly insisted they would. It gave me the thought of fishing, which is as good a way as I know to cool off from a row. While I knew the salmon could not be had, I also knew that the sea trout could.

"About five-thirty I set out. It was grand fishing, and the trout were tricky and game and tender in the mouth. I kept at it until the light went about ten-thirty. By that time I had a bag full of eighteen beauties, averaging about a pound and a half. I found that I was at a bend of the river only a couple of fields away from the golf club. I decided to cross over and get one of the stewards to cook me a dish of bacon and eggs. In order to lighten my burden and to save my catch from some of the sharks at the club, I hid my fishing bag under the overhang of a sally-bush and laid my rod among its branches."

"You weren't afraid someone would find them and take them?" Con asked.

"It was all posted land," Peter explained. "The only danger of that was from Charley Wells, the local poacher, and I wasn't much worried about him. I'd run him off the place with a good beating a while back and I didn't think he'd be in a hurry to catch another."

“Go on,” Con said.

“I went to the club and had my supper. As a matter of fact I talked to several friends about my catch of fish. Among them was Hughes Everitt. He’s my best friend, you know. I swore him to secrecy, knowing he was going fishing with Barbara in the morning. She’s so blasted stubborn. After she’d failed to get any salmon I intended to produce my catch of trout to rub her nose in the dust. I meant to stop on my way home to pick them up. But that didn’t happen.”

“And why not?” Con asked.

“I got into a poker game in the club manager’s back room. It lasted until six in the morning. After that I shaved and bathed and got into some clean things I kept in my club locker. Then I started for Danesford House. You understand, it was a custom for us all to have Sunday breakfast at the big house.”

“How did it happen,” Con asked, “that your Uncle and cousins Barbara and Toby live at Danesford House, and you a mile away at the Home Farm? Not very clubby, was it?”

Peter took a deep drink from his tankard. “When I came back from Canada my Uncle and I were stepping round each other like two fighting cocks. I wasn’t forgetting he’d disapproved of my father, and suspected he disapproved of me. When he offered me the job of estate manager I took it, but it was a business contract. He expected me to live as a member of the family at Danesford House, but I chose to live at the Home Farm, which was built for the estate manager. I wanted no favours. I lived at the farm with Denis Buckley, the foreman. My one concession to the family tie with Uncle Mark, was those Sunday breakfasts.”

“I see. So you headed for Danesford House instead of the Home Farm when you left the club.”

“Right,” Peter Falkner said. “On the road Barbara and Hughes Everitt caught up with me in Barbara’s car. They’d been after their salmon and as I’d predicted, they’d got none. That reminded me of my own catch, and that I must get it after breakfast. Hughes winked at me when Barbara cursed out the salmon. He’d been a good fellow and kept my secret.”

“As I recall,” Con Madden said, “Marcus Aitken was not, after all, on hand for that Sunday’s breakfast.”

Peter nodded, frowning. “I thought nothing of it. It wasn’t unusual for him to be off on a tramp with his two wolfhounds. After breakfast I left Barbara and Hughes and started back along the mile of path to the Home Farm. I decided to send one of the farm boys to the bend in the stream to retrieve my fish and tackle.

“I was walking along the path at a good clip when I saw my uncle’s two

wolfhounds lying down on the edge of a copse. I wasn't surprised to see them, but I *was* surprised not to see my uncle about. Not that I wanted to, mind you. We'd probably only have renewed the quarrel of the day before. Then I noticed something. There was grass fringing the path, and I noticed the hounds were lying unusually high, as if they were resting on something. I walked through the grass to see what it might be. As I approached, the dogs showed their teeth and hackled and growled, fiercely. I was puzzled. Ordinarily they were friendly to me. As I drew closer they grew more savage. Then I saw they were lying on the body of a man." Peter's mouth drew together in a hard line.

"You didn't recognize who it was at first?" Con asked.

"No. My first thought was that the dogs had turned man-killer and done in Charley Wells, the poacher. Then I saw the brown heather-mixture of the tweed jacket on the body, and I knew it was Uncle Mark.

"I couldn't approach closer, with those two red-eyed angry dogs standing guard. I had to get help, and a gun with which to deal with the dogs if necessary. I was still thinking it was the dogs who had done him in. I ran to the Home Farm. My double barreled shotgun, which usually rested on hooks behind the door, was gone. I thought only at the time that some one of the farm hands had borrowed it for rabbit shooting. I phoned the police at Eglintoun. I told them where the body was and to bring a gun with which to deal with the dogs, as mine was missing. I started back for the scene of what I still thought was an accident, and was overtaken before I got there by the police, in the persons of Superintendent Mullen and Inspector Myles.

"They had to kill the dogs, finally, to get to the body. It was then they found that Uncle Mark had been shot through the spine and the back of the head, and that it had been no accident. It was murder." Peter hesitated.

Con knew the next stages of the story well.

The police surgeon arrived. It was 8:30 Sunday morning. The body was warm. The first thing the surgeon did was to take the internal temperature of the body. It was 90°, or eight degrees less than normal. In ordinary circumstances cooling of a body after death takes place at the rate of about two degrees per hour, and that seemed to fix the time of death at about four o'clock that Sunday morning. But the circumstances were not ordinary, not by any means.

The police surgeon pointed at the carcasses of the dead dogs and asked a question: "How long were these lying on the body?" No one could tell him. The surgeon shook his head. "Then I can't tell you when Mark Aitken died. If these dogs discovered the body shortly after death and lay on it at once, the warmth of their bodies, somewhat above the normal human temperature, would slow down cooling and rigor mortis to an extent I'm not aware of. It might be anything from four to twelve hours."

The surgeon never did find out. No one had found out, neither the prosecution nor the defense at the trial. Superintendent Mullen had seized on this uncertainty. He had heard of the rowing between Peter and his uncle. He began hounding Peter. He demanded his alibi for the whole of the possibly critical time before Mark's death. Peter went over the night before. He'd been playing poker at the club. And before that? He'd been fishing. Alone? Yes. Anyone see him? Peter was not aware. Caught anything? A dozen and a half first run sea trout. Where were the fish now? Peter told his story of catching them by the brook. Mullen had one-track persistence. He would stick to Peter till Peter had established his alibi. They went to look for the fish. They weren't there. They searched every sally-bush in the radius of a hundred yards. There was no scale of a fish to be found, nor any rod or bag.

Mullen asked if there were anything in the bag but fish. Peter explained there was a telescope gaff in the netted front, a leather-bound fishing book with parchment leaves and pockets and felts. He said it contained several good casts for trout and salmon and a valuable collection of flies, many of them dressed by himself. He was an expert fly dresser. Neither rod, nor bag, nor fishing book was ever recovered. So much for Peter's fish story. It was no alibi at all.

Finally, there was other evidence. Three men going home from a local pub a little after ten claimed they'd heard two shots fired from the direction of the path where Mark Aitken had died. At the trial Barbara Aitken claimed to have heard two shots at a much later time; at around four in the morning to be exact. Her date with Hughes Everitt for fishing was at five, but she had waked early and decided to go out to the stream ahead of time. It was about four, and she heard the shots as she first started out. A few moments later, through the woods, she saw the hurrying figure of a man in brown. At the time, she coupled the shots and the figure she saw, and added them up to Charley Wells. Later, Hughes Everitt claimed to have seen the same figure. He had been late for his date with Barbara, his alarm clock having failed him. It was nearly six when he joined her, and on the way to their meeting place he, too, saw the figure in brown.

If Barbara's story held up, and the figure in brown had murdered Marcus Aitken at 4 A.M., then Peter had an alibi, for he'd been playing poker at the club at that hour. Some of the jury must have believed her, for they disagreed. But most people thought Barbara and Hughes were simply trying to save Peter by their story.

So, with no alibi, with his fantastic fish story unsubstantiated, with Mullen hanging onto him stubbornly as the only suspect, Peter had stood trial . . . had stood trial three times, and three times the prosecution had failed to make its case stand up. Yet there was no case nor any evidence against anyone else.

"This man in brown," Con said to Peter, "whom Barbara and Hughes saw

at different times . . . under oath they said they couldn't identify him. But do they have ideas who he might have been?"

Peter shrugged. "They both thought at the time of Charley Wells. But you must know, if you've followed the case, Con Madden, that Charley Wells has an alibi."

"I know," Con said, "though Mullen never tried too hard to break it. There are two more points, Peter Falkner. Your missing gun was found?"

"The police found it before mid-day of that Sunday," Peter said. "It was in the first place they searched . . . the copse where Uncle Mark's body was found, hidden carelessly under some undergrowth. The hider had been careful enough not to leave any fingerprints. There were two empty brass-cased cartridges in the breach, and they had been fired recently, and they had been loaded with No. 6 shot, the kind which had done for Uncle Mark."

"And the fishing tackle?" Con asked.

"They were found later at a distance from where I'd hidden them, but they weren't intact. There wasn't a scale of a fish in the bag. The telescope gaff was in the net all right, but the fishing book was missing."

"It was a valuable book?"

"The contents were. A good salmon cast costs three half dollars, and a good salmon fly the same. There were at least fifty salmon flies in the leaves, many of which I'd dressed myself."

"Then you could have identified them for certain if they'd ever been found?"

"Beyond a question of a doubt," Peter said.

Con was silent for a long time and then he emptied his tankard. "It's a man-sized job my partner and I are undertaking, Peter Falkner. But we'll give it a man-sized try."

PETER FALKNER COMES HOME

I

THE day after Peter Falkner had talked with Con Madden in Edinburgh he stepped down off the evening train at Eglintoun, and felt as alien as on that evening six years before when he had arrived for the first time. And, yet, he wanted to feel at home. In five years he had come to recognize that this was the place he wished most to live in. He wanted to take hold of the Danesford estate and reshape its economy, to redress, as far as in him lay, the old sins of landlordism, to introduce co-operation and fellowship and security. . . . And now he felt the stranger once more, and would have to begin all over again under a burden that might not be borne.

Con Madden came out of the compartment next to Peter's, brushed by his shoulder, and took half a dozen steps to the bookstall. Close by, a short, sturdy man, sporting a jut of spade beard, was reading a paper-covered book. Con glanced aside at him, caught his hard green eye and spoke casually.

"Well, Mr. Glover! Still here, I see?"

"I postponed my departure for a few days, sir." Daniel Glover's voice was uncordial.

"Any rooms available at the Spa Hotel?"

"It won't be half-full yet, sir," said the stallkeeper.

"I believe number 86 is available," said Glover, "that is, if you intend patronizing the establishment."

"I might move farther out into the country," Con said.

"That might be advisable," murmured Glover and moved farther along the stall to browse in *The Hind Let Loose*.

That is all that these two casual acquaintances said or had need to say to each other. Con turned to find out what was happening to Peter Falkner.

The porter had come hurrying along the train and impulsively thrust forth his hand.

"You're welcome back, Mr. Falkner! Everyone is glad about you. Man,

you're lookin' gran'."

"Thanks, Tom," Peter said easily. He could always control his voice. "There are some things in the van for the Home Farm. Chuck them in the waiting room, and one of the lads will run down later."

He turned about then, his eyes bold but watchful. A good many Eglintoun people were scattered about the platform, and most of them were eyeing him with aloof interest. Peter turned towards the entrance hall, but before he might move, two people hurried on to the platform, and Peter pulled himself up stiffly.

One was a tallish young woman. A yellow silk oilproof could not hide the fine slender lines of her; she was like a strung bow. The other was a man slightly under middle height, in old well-fitting brown tweeds, and with a disreputable tweed hat far back on his fine dome of brow. His face was roundly smooth, his nose and mouth sensitively carved, and his eyes were big and dark and brilliant, and as long-lashed as any woman's.

When the young woman saw Peter she cried out in a breathless way, "Peter! Oh, Peter!" and came running. Her eyes were alight, and there was colour high on her moulded cheekbones. Her leaping hands caught both of his and pressed them fiercely together between palms that were cold as ice. "You are all right, Peter! Aren't you all right, my dear?"

"Don't crowd me, you vixen!" he said. "I can still stand you on your ear."

"Don't let them get the better of you, Peter!" There was a husky note in her voice now. "Don't let the damn'd Aitkens do you down! You are your father's son, aren't you, Peter?"

"That's a solid fact, whoever he was," said Peter.

"That's the lad! The same old Peter!" She lifted one of her hands, and softly smoothed downwards his lean cheek.

"Oh my dear! My dear! We have been doing terrible things to you." Her voice broke a little then.

"Take it aisy my darlint!" His voice was pure Irish. He slipped his left hand inside her arm and pivoted her round to face the man who had come slowly across the platform.

"I am only a damn cry-baby," she said.

"Don't let our sentimentality run away with us in the presence of the neutrals, Barbara," said the pleasantly quiet voice of the man facing them. "Hello, Peter!"

"Hello, Hughes!" said Peter.

The two men smiled at each other, and their hands met firmly. Hughes Everitt's smile lit up his grave face. His eyes, looking deep into Peter's, saw that his friend had suffered but that he was not broken. Peter understood the contentment in his friend's smile.

"Time is only relative," Hughes said. "We are now at the beginning of a new incarnation."

"You've said it, Mahatma," agreed Peter equably.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," said Barbara. "I've the old bus outside. I've a meal for you at Danesford. It's your place now."

"Anyone at the big house?" Peter asked.

"Only Toby, but not this evening."

"Look, Barbara, old girl. You don't mind if I stick on at the Home Farm for a few days?"

"Of course not, Peter. I understand. I'll drive you across after we feed you."

But Peter hung back.

"You two go on and wait for me at Foster's. I would like to stretch my legs up High Street."

"Peter is right, Barbara," said Hughes Everitt. "It is fitting that the populace should know his attitude from the beginning. Come, my children!"

"Bah!" said Barbara. "You men do love to go about stiff-legged. Oh, all right! I'm coming."

The three went out together, carrying themselves easily. They were not going to shrink from public notice.

Barbara and Hughes got into the open two-seater, and Peter pointed a finger at them.

"Why are you two not married people? I ordered you to get hitched."

"Go to blazes, Peter!" said Barbara and put her toe on the self-starter.

II

Con Madden, one hand in pocket, one arm swinging loosely, one toe a little inwards, slouched up the street after Peter Falkner who had chosen his pace carefully. He must not move so slow as to give the impression that he invited inspection, nor so fast as to seem to be running the gauntlet. Just a nice easy pace, hands out of pocket, head up—and not smoking. Confidence without bravado. And he could not help it if he felt a little stiff about the knees.

The cobbled High Street of Eglintoun is a long street for a country town, and it is historically ancient. Once long ago it had been considered wide and straight out of the common, but in a motor age it is strait and crooked. There were few people on the narrow pavements, and none of them was particularly intimate with Peter. A man here and there lifted a hand and nodded, and Peter nodded back; one or two said, "Welcome home, Mr. Falkner!" and he said, "Thank you." He moved evenly on, and he was making a good impression though he was not aware of it. Some had expected him to come back cowed

and slinking, others held that he would brazen it out. This quietly striding man was neither slinking nor brazen.

No one offered to shake his hand until half-way up the street. Then a tall, lean, black-haired man in grey, on the other pavement, saw him and without hesitation walked straight across and offered a quick and frank hand.

"I am glad to see you home, Mr. Falkner," the tall man said.

"Thank you, Inspector," Peter said. "I guess you'll still have a string on me, Inspector Myles?"

"I have not, Mr. Falkner," Inspector Myles said. "It is the duty of a policeman not to be officious. Good evening, sir."

The two men parted, and Peter felt a little better. Twenty yards behind him Con Madden was leaning well into a bookseller's window trying to shroud his face in cigarette smoke. Inspector Dick Myles leaned casually at his side and blew the smoke away out of the side of his mouth.

"My Gawd!" he murmured. "Whin did the bogtrottin' Irish take to litheratchoor?"

"Get to hell out of here, you Portadown noranbe man!" murmured Con.

"God'llmighty Con! come away and have a drink somewhere."

"No, Dick, no. I'm on a job—now—this minute. Leave me be. I'll be in to tell you."

"I'll have the bracelets gilt for you. Make it soon, lad. I have three years' talk on my chest. So long now, and good luck!"

Beyond the old market across the Town Chambers was a plaque indicating the Police Station. As Peter came abreast on the other side, a slender man in a well-fitting blue uniform came through the arch and halted on the edge of the pavement to look across at Peter. Unlike Inspector Myles he made no move to greet the released man.

Peter turned on his heels, and without changing his pace walked across to face the police officer. They looked unsmilingly at each other, and each face hid all emotion.

"Which of us was the damn fool, Superintendent Mullen?" Peter said.

The Superintendent did not answer that. He said coldly, "You may consider yourself lucky to get off, Falkner."

Peter was nettled. This man had tried three times to hang him.

"The only luck I had, Mullen, was your pig-headed conduct of the case. It won me a decision over three rounds."

"The decision was not conclusive, Falkner."

"Meaning you're up for another round? Fine! I am not running out on you. You will find me at Danesford or the Home Farm carrying on as usual, or more so. And listen! if you come to see me, come in all the panoply of the law, or do not come at all. If you come snooping, watch out!"

“Is that a threat?”

“It is a warning.”

“I shall do my duty, Mr. Falkner.” Mullen was formally respectful now.

III

Peter had not far to go. He turned the corner and saw Barbara’s two-seater close to the kerb. He found his feet moving faster and schooled them back to their old pace.

On the side he was on, the Catholic chapel stood back from the street inside tall railings. As Peter passed the open gate a clergyman came out. He was short and old, with sagging pink chops and a noble mass of white hair.

“Peter—Peter Falkner! my dear boy!” he cried out in a baritone voice that filled his whole squat torso. He dropped a biretta on the gravel, caught up his many-buttoned soutane from his feet, and came at a shuffling scramble of a run.

“Man, you’re back—you’re back! I needed you.” His voice went deep and shook. “Thank God! You are all right, boy?”

“I am not, Padre,” said Peter suddenly serious, “and I have a confession to make. Those two bits of prayers you asked me to say when all else failed—I did not say them.”

“What harm—what harm! I could not pray myself—my prayers went dry on me. Peter, I am afraid. I’m sick afraid. There is an evil man amongst us. I have no patience with that fellow Mullen, and the other dam’ fools who ought to know better. Tell me, boy, did the knowledge of your own innocence keep your courage up?”

“It did not, Padre.” Peter shook his head. “It did not help me at all. I know that for I had not one scrap of courage the whole year. I haven’t now.”

“Oh, dear—oh, dear! What have we done to you?” The old man’s chin quivered. “We don’t deserve you amongst us. Look, boy! Go away back to your own country and draw the strings of your life together.”

“With my tail between my legs? They would know over there, too. I’m staying.”

“God is good!” The priest patted Peter’s sleeve. “God is good, Peter! He will not allow evil to prevail against you forever. I can pray now.” He looked up at Peter and his eyes crinkled. “Will you come in? I have a small drop left in the bottle.”

“Not now, Padre. Barbara is waiting for me at Fosters’. But I’ll be in.”

The priest put a finger on Peter’s wrist. “Be good to Barbara, boy, and don’t ye be biting each other’s noses off. She made your trouble hers, as I know.”

"And you took the trouble of both. Could we nip each other's ears now and then—you wouldn't mind?"

"Ye will, whether or no." Father Martin chuckled. "Well—well! I'll not be keeping you now."

A light hand was laid on Peter's arm, and a voice like a bell with a singing note in it spoke at his shoulder.

"Praise God! It is Peter himself."

Peter turned and looked at the young woman who was smiling warmly at him.

"Why Muriel, old girl!" he said. "You'd still knock a man's eye out."

That was an inadequate compliment. Muriel Gordon was a golden woman—gold, frankincense and myrrh—you could warm your hands at her. Not tall, she was built on generous flowing lines, and her pastel green frock was vibrant with the life inside it. A small white hat was perched on her hair over one eye, and the hair that it did not hide was fine gold, that Californian gold that has one touch of red in it. She smiled with her eyes and not with her teeth; and those grey eyes had a golden lustre that never goes with a mean mind.

Of all the people here in Eglintoun she knew best what it was Peter was going through at this moment. She, too, had suffered the curious stares of the townspeople, and had felt their speculations behind her back. The daughter of Denis Buckley, Mark Aitken's farm foreman, she had lived with her father and Abigail Shaw, who had been her nurse and later their housekeeper, at the Home Farm. That was before Peter's arrival on the scene from Canada. It was common talk in the town that Mark Aitken was much interested in his foreman's daughter, and that it was more than a fatherly interest he felt for her. And when she had suddenly taken herself away, accompanied by the faithful Abigail, there was gossip. When Mark Aitken followed, that gossip mounted. But Mark Aitken came back alone and seemed more subdued than the people of Eglintoun had ever seen him before.

Three years later Muriel returned with a husband, whose name was Philip Gordon, and a two year old son called David. The dour, acid-tongued Abigail Shaw was in her element with a small child to care for. These four took a cottage in the village and settled down there to live. Denis Buckley, Muriel's father, stayed on at the Home Farm with Peter, who was now estate manager, and took to drinking more than he should of a Saturday night in town.

"Blast them all!" Muriel said. "They couldn't make you cry out, Peter. I knew."

"You couldn't know that, my darling," Peter said.

"I could so. I knew you never killed Mark Aitken."

Peter cocked an eye at her. "A pity we could not put a finger on the man that did?"

"I was only guessing and you had to go on suffering. But this old spider-priest will tell you that suffering is not a bad thing if you have the fibre to stand it. Some of us have not." She laid her hand on the priest's sleeve. "Well, you old curer of souls! What are you going to do with your two black sheep? Keep on trying to make Christians of us?"

"I may succeed with one of you." The priest tapped her hand. "Don't you be delaying Peter. Barbara is waiting for him. Peter son, off you go now!"

Peter and Muriel walked down Booth Street together. Con Madden was ahead of them pausing to look into shop windows. She put a hand inside Peter's elbow, and moved forward, smoothly, on high-heeled shoes.

"I want to make Barbara jealous for the good of her soul," she said. "You are now her baby who has falled down and hurt his poor little nose."

"Boil your tow head, Muriel! Don't you start babying me."

"Not I, Peter! A man can take the pricks as they come. But don't forget that Barbara is all right."

"Are you still high-hatting each other? Why?"

"Dam' well you know why."

"I don't. How are Phil and son Davy?"

"Fine. Davy missed you. By the way, you are losing a tenant. Phil has been promoted to the head office. We are going to Edinburgh in a month."

"Good news—and bad too," said Peter. "I wanted to make a pukka farmer of Davy—and a forester."

"Like Toby Aitken?"

"Not on your life! Toby behaving himself?"

"Toby is no good. He is betting now you'll cut and run with the money you inherited. That is what he would do."

"I am staying on," Peter said quietly. "I told Father Martin so."

"Of course you are." Her hand pressed. "You will be careful and watchful, Peter?"

"Someone else will have to be twice as careful. I'm half Aitken, and an Aitken was killed foully."

"Just so! Don't get another half-Aitken killed. Listen; you wouldn't know that dad is leaving you? Coming up to town with us?"

"That's bad news," Peter said. "He taught me all I know, and I'll miss the grumpy old bear."

"And you his cub." She laughed. "You liked each other?"

"Sure we did. How is he?"

"Older and grumpier. Hello, Mr. Madden! Back again? I did miss your sootherin' Irish tongue."

Con Madden had turned round from a window to face them. "Don't talk to me, woman, you have broken my heart."

"Right on a fracture off-repeated," she said. "Do you know Mr. Peter Falkner?"

"I have heard of Mr. Falkner," said Con. "He is too good a judge of company for me."

"Mr. Madden is of an enquiring turn of mind, Peter. You try him. I have to be off. Phil is home and waiting for his supper—see you to-morrow, Peter."

She went off, her white parasol swinging. Peter, head aside, looked at Con, and shut one eye at him.

"How privately did you investigate this lady, Mr. Madden?" Peter asked.

"I'll investigate her some more," Con said.

"You'll have to get a move on, then. They—self, husband, son and father—are leaving here for good. Husband promoted to head office."

"I'll investigate that too," Con said.

"You were right, Madden," Peter said. "It will be no use to me living here under a cloud. If you don't get me out from under I'll break your bloody Irish neck."

"I will and you couldn't," Con said. "No Canuck could. Look here, Falkner, I'll absolve you from those two fears I taunted you with. You did not kill your uncle, and those two fine people across the street—You three make a team that I can use."

"Then you have decided to stay with me?"

"I—think so. Do not leave your back door on the latch."

"That's my second warning to-day."

"Your second warning?" said Con quickly.

"Yes. Muriel said I had to be watchful and careful."

"Did she, begod! That's interesting. But leave it for the time," Con said. "That young lady has been frowning at you for the last five minutes. Go on now!"

And Con went off down the street in the general direction of the resort hotel where people came to drink the waters of the spring.

IV

Daniel Glover was in his bedroom, at the Spa. He sat over a glass-topped table, thoughtfully puffing pipe smoke and working out a chess problem. On the dressing table at his right hand stood a three-parts-full bottle of Scotch, a full bottle of Irish, a soda-syphon, a jug of water and two glasses. The window was wide open, and the sun, low in the west, sent an orange ray aslant into the room.

He tentatively moved an obvious white knight, contemplated the board, and restored the piece to its former place; he did likewise with a less-obvious

queen, and shook his head.

A soft tap sounded and the door opened and closed softly.

"I am not sure that I should offer you a libation," he said, but did not turn his head.

"Thanks," said Con Madden at his shoulder. "Irish and water for me." His hand was already on the bottle, and he poured three fingers into the empty glass. "The labourer is worthy, you know."

"Then you did hire yourself?"

"By accident." Con moved across to the bed, and sat down heavily. They kept their voices low as was their custom in conference.

"Been investigating on your own, master? Did you try out Hughes Everitt?" Con asked.

"An attractive character. An odd character. He considers Buddhism seriously. Says he expects to return as a swine in his next reincarnation. And he is something more than a useful chessplayer."

"Did you find that I fell down anywhere in my earlier report to you about this place and its people?"

"Not disastrously. You underestimated Tobias Aitken's perniciousness. He is a false-fronted weakling, and under the influence of alcohol might act on any impulse."

"Impulse to murder?"

"Even so. It may be essential to retrace his course between certain hours on that fatal night." Glover frowned.

"Any other reactions or discoveries?"

"You were over-emphatic about Muriel Gordon's charms. Her intelligence is more important."

"And combined they are the very devil. You should have seen her this evening. Quite adequate, Mr. Glover." Con picked up his glass. "I notice you call her Muriel Gordon?"

"A convenient cognomen. Proceed, Cornelius."

"Our Miss Cole made searches at the Registry Office?"

"She found that Muriel Buckley's son was registered as David Buckley, and father's name not given."

"You astound me, Mr. Glover. Well?"

"He might have been legitimized. That is why I asked you to search for a record of the marriage of Marcus Aitken and Muriel Buckley. No such record exists?"

"Nary a record."

"It was necessary to make certain. Also, I conclude that no record was found of a marriage between Philip Gordon and Muriel Buckley, but it is also possible that your instructions to Miss Cole were inadequate. What period did

she search?"

"Inadequate, your granny!" said Con. "She searched from the time Muriel left home until this very last week."

"Wholly inadequate, Cornelius. Miss Buckley was at college in the town where Gordon resided."

Con's mouth opened. "God'llmighty! I fell down there, Daniel. They might have married then."

"Totally unlikely, considering the registered name of the woman's son. But a search going further back might establish that Gordon had married another woman, who may be still alive. I shall get our Miss Cole to institute a further search. Leave it at present. While we are on the Gordon household, the whole family, with Buckley the farm steward, are soon leaving permanently."

"I learned that this evening."

"Some folk are saying that Buckley will not work with a man whose hands are not clean."

"Blast them! Gordon and Muriel and Buckley may be leaving because their own hands are not clean."

"A speculation to be investigated. For that purpose, and pending verification, we shall assume that Gordon and the woman are not married."

"Where do we go from there?" Con enquired. He saw, as yet, no connection between bloody hands and living-in-sin.

"We shall discuss it after you have considered it," Glover said. "To return to the beginning, having achieved contact with Falkner what did you engage to perform?"

"To bring the murderer into the open. If we fail he engages to break my neck—bloody and Irish. But I forgot to bind him to a fee—or expenses."

"Makes your sincerity all the more impressive. A fee, no doubt, will eventuate. He invited you to stay with him?"

"At the Home Farm—he is staying on there."

"You accepted?"

"Tentatively. But it will spoil my incognito."

"You could not have maintained it, and it leaves mine secure. I want you close to Falkner and his friends—"

"You think he's running a risk?"

"I do not, but you had better take that automatic pistol with you. I want you to be friendly—sincerely friendly—"

"Not with Toby?"

"Do your best with Tobias. Take Everitt and Barbara Aitken into your confidence—and Falkner too of course. Only those three."

"Fine!" Con rubbed his big hands together. "I thought you would see that. With that team we should go places."

Glover leaned back in his chair and cleared his throat.

"Your close attention, please, Cornelius. You will remember that Hughes Everitt and Barbara Aitken, in their evidence, spoke of a mysterious man in brown, that they could not or would not identify. The girl saw him disappearing into the wood shortly after four, and Everitt saw a similar man one-and-a-half hours later. You also informed me that the girl is country bred and lives an outdoor life—a Diana of the Uplands I think you said—"

"Good for you, Daniel!" cried Con. "I did not think you noticed that. When I was a boy in the open if I got a glimpse of a man a mile off in any sort of light—even moonlight—I would know him by his carriage."

"And she did not, and the poacher fellow, Wells, is not a stranger to her. Moreover, Wells has a characteristic carriage including a limp, and Everitt recognized that the man he saw was limping."

"You think the man Barbara saw was not Charley Wells?"

"Either that or these two young people are hiding something important about that man in brown. Find out."

"Just like that! All right, guvnor! I can but fail. Do I gather that we are investigating Charley Wells?"

"Our investigation is already under way."

"Gawd help Charley! Have you had a look-see at him?"

"In a business way—his business. He is a rodent of an inferior type, and that second-hand emporium of his is unique in its decay. By the way I have, more than once, heard you extol your prowess as an angler?"

"I kept you in salmon salad all last season."

"Wells displayed some gaudy salmon flies, and I purchased a small present for you."

Con suppressed an anguished yelp. "Good Lord! not second-hand flies out of a junk shop? You don't buy even the finest fly for a real angler like me. You let me choose, and then you pay."

"Doubtless you can change them for your own choice," said Glover carelessly. "Here they are."

He presented Con with an untidy paper twist. Con opened it, and shook half a score of resplendent salmon flies. He bent over them, and his eyes opened wide.

"Begobs! I withdraw my uncalled for recriminations." He fingered through them. "Not a moth-eaten one among them. What did Charley soak you for these, friend Daniel?"

"They please your fastidiousness?"

"These are valuable flies, but I'll catch you no fish on them this season. They are all of the big early-spring type—February and March, but I am not looking a gift horse in the mouth." He fingered them again and suddenly

stiffened. "Hello! Hello! what have we here?" He picked up one richly hackled and brightly tinselled fly, and then two more. He was excited. "A Popham, a Jack Scott, and a Silver Doctor, but not the standard dressing. You have got something here, Daniel."

"Be explicit?"

"Do I need to be? These are home-dressed flies and beautifully tied, and not once in the water. The man who dressed these flies would recognize them beyond any possible shadow of doubt whatever. Is that explicit enough?"

"Moderately. If you go fishing with young Falkner he might choose you a suitable one."

"Not to use in June, but I get you, Mr. Glover." He restored the flies one by one to the paper twist, and put it carefully in his pocket. His hand was shaking a little. "We have started going places, Daniel, and Gawd help Charley Wells!"

CON MADDEN PICKS HIS TEAM

I

CON MADDEN was wakened at five o'clock in the morning by the crowing of a cock greeting the sun. Con was farm-bred, and, for a little, thought he was back in his own bed in the house where he was born, and that it would be time to get up for school in a few more minutes. He looked at his watch and swore.

When he got down to breakfast he found the dining room empty and the table laid for two. So Peter was still abed. Ah, well! he needed a clean rest between clean sheets with no dreams to trouble him.

The dining room was a good-sized square room with a high mantel over the big devon fireplace. The mahogany sideboard, table, chairs, and wall-clevee of blue delft were solidly antique.

A comfortably plump woman of more than mature years came in carrying a dish-covered tray under an ample bosom. This was Mrs. Johan Bartley, the cook-housekeeper, and Con had made her acquaintance on the previous night. Now he was not in the least hungry. He never was, for breakfast.

"Good morning, sir!" Mrs. Bartley greeted him.

"Good morning to you, ma'am. Hope I'm not too early for you?"

"Misther Peter was lazy this morning and had his breakfast not more than an hour ago. He couldn't wait. Denis was up at five and will be in any minute for his. But you're in grand time, sir."

"I forgot I was back on a farm," Con said. "So Peter is in harness already. It is good to have him back?"

"It is God's own blessing, sir." Mrs. Bartley spoke positively. "Lookat, sir! If an angel from heaven told me that Misther Peter had done what they said he did, I wouldn't believe one single word of it. He did no wrong, and that is what we all say in this place."

"The whole world will say it shortly, loyal woman."

Mrs. Bartley looked at him with lively interest. "Glory be to God, sir! and more power to your arm."

Hobnails sounded from the tiled back-passage, and Denis Buckley came clumping into the dining room. Con had not met him the previous night. He was a big lumbering man and unsmiling—not stern so much as dour, almost uncouth. He was not so tall as Con, but thicker and wider. His thatch of hair was a reddish grizzle, and his straight cut stub of a moustache was definitely red against a red-weathered heavy face. One might wonder how such a man was the father of a golden woman like Muriel Gordon.

“Denis, this is Mr. Madden, Peter’s friend,” Mrs. Bartley said.

“He told me,” he said in a surly bass, and forthwith sat down to breakfast. Buckley ate steadily and made no effort to be courteous to a visitor. Con considered an opening that might interest a glum farm foreman.

“A promising season, Mr. Buckley?”

Mr. Buckley chewed steadily and swallowed. “ ’Tis not then,” he said and refilled his mouth.

“Of course not!” Con laughed. “May was too harsh, with not enough wet and wind in it, and if we don’t get some more rain we’ll have to resow the neeps, while the hay crop is doomed—short and with no bottom. My dad was a farmer too.”

“A poor way of living,” said Buckley.

“Sure as you’re born,” Con said. “Every season is a bad season, and no season is a good season until it is two years behind. I hear you are leaving soon, Mr. Buckley.”

“I am.”

“Not a good time to be leaving.”

“The crops are all in.”

“I mean your leaving looks like forsaking Peter Falkner? He might need your moral support?”

“I am going in a month.”

“You might not be going in a month,” Con said smoothly.

“There is nothing to stop me.”

“I might.”

Buckley lifted his red eyes and fixed them on Con. “Young man, I had nothing to do with Mark Aitken’s death.”

“Had Peter Falkner? If you or he hadn’t, someone had,” Con said. “Are you afraid that you know?”

Denis Buckley laid his fork down, shoved his plate away, and lumbered out of the room.

Con Madden drank the last of his tea, lit the first cigarette of the day, inhaled luxuriously, and strolled out into the hall. On the left wall near the door two big curved hooks were screwed into the wall. *That’s where the fatal weapon rested, for anyone to see and lift*, was Con’s thought. Doubtless the

police were still holding the gun.

Con saw through an open baize door the tiled back passage. He lounged, and Mrs. Bartley's voice came from her kitchen. "You'll find Mither Peter in the bawn, sir."

"On my way," Con called.

Con lazed across and through to the bawn, with the long line of lime-washed steadings at the back. There was no one about. The cattle were at pasture, and the men in the fields after the breakfast hour. Not even a dog barked.

He found Peter sitting on the crotch of an old apple tree, recharging his sound and polished briar pipe. He was wearing uncreased flannel trousers and open-necked shirt, and his forearms carried no tan, and his face was too lean and too white. But the grim, line was vanished from his mouth this morning, and his blue eyes smiled at Con.

"Sitting under his own vine and fig tree," Con remarked. "Are we the only idlers on a fine farm morning?"

"I was waiting till you had breakfast."

"My first in years."

Peter looked at Con's waistcoat.

"Go to blazes!" Con said. "That's only beer."

"There's some about when you want it. Shall we scout round and see the boys sowing swedes?"

"I want to do some talking first."

Peter laughed. "Talk away then. This is a slack week. In ten days we cut the crop meadows and you'll talk as you work."

"I might not be here in ten days' time," Con said, and gestured a hand widely. "How do you find things?"

"Ship shape. Denis is sound but conservative."

"Is that why he is leaving you?"

Peter frowned. "I don't think so. His sort like to die in harness."

"That was my impression. I had breakfast with him."

"You did not gouge any small talk out of him?"

"Two useful words at a time."

"When I came here first I did my best to make him talk. After that I got to like his silences—a comfortable old grizzly to live with, and Johan Bartley talks enough for two."

"That's a loyal woman."

"Sure—if she would not croon over me."

There was a short silence before Con again spoke.

"What have you on this afternoon?" he asked then. "Could I do some fishing?"

"Taking time off?" Peter laughed.

"You might think so," Con said. "Any chance of a real fish?"

"Salmon." Peter shook his head. "Not enough rain, but you could try. We'll get Barbara and Hughes to come along."

"I brought a few flies with me," said Con. "You might look them over and pick one or two for the Doorn water."

Con reached across the paper twist. Peter opened the top and inserted a careful finger and thumb. The fly he brought up was big and gaudy. He looked curiously at Con.

"It is a salmon fly," he conceded, "but you did not expect to rise a fish with it in June water?"

"An ig'orant cuss, ain't I? On the big side?"

"By a mile."

The second was just as big. He brought the fly up to his eyes, spread the wing, and examined the set of the barb and loop. Then he stared up at Con, and his eyes were hard and wide and blue.

"You are a quick worker, Mr. Madden," he said. "I'll say that for you." He laid three flies on his palm and pointed a finger at them. "A *Jock Scot*, a *Silver Doctor* and a *Popham*, but jungle cock swopped for Chinese pheasant."

"They look over-winged to me," Con said judiciously.

"Maybe! I dressed them. My own tricks and variations." His finger pointed out. "The set and knots and wax, and the way I turn the loop skeways."

"You lost them somewhere."

"They were lifted, and you know it. In that fishing book that went missing that—that bad morning a year ago."

"It was a valuable book?"

"The contents were. The book was a nuisance—as big as a street directory. My father's—and I had a sentiment about it."

"I know where to look for your book, and I know where to put a finger on a certain man. We are moving nicely, Mr. Falkner, but I cannot tell you any more for the present."

"That goes with me," Peter said. "I have to apologize to you, Mr. Madden. In falling for your proposal I had no illusions about success. At the back of my mind I knew that I would have to carry on against something that will not give a man a hold. But, now, I have a sneaking hope that you will come back some day with the bacon on you."

"Ready for hanging," Con said.

"Gosh, son! I believe in you. This is the place I want to work for, to root for. You clear my name and watch me make Danesford a place worth living in for the men and women who work on it. Mark you! for the people who do the work. I have no use—"

"Easy all!" cried Con. "To-night about midnight, over a drink, I'll go to the mat with you on sociology."

Peter stepped back and considered the big lazy smooth-faced man. "Appearances are deceptive, big fellow," he said, "but you've got the goods on you somewhere." He grinned. "Should I call you Con or Cornelius?"

"You are aiming towards a thick ear, young Peter. Only one man calls me Cornelius, and I can't stop him."

Peter flexed his arms. "Right! In a month's time I might call you Cornelius for devilment. At your service, Con. What can I do for you?"

"Take me fishing this afternoon," Con told him. "My real object is to get you and Everitt and Miss Aitken into a quiet place and hold converse with you."

Peter looked up at him quickly, and Con nodded. "Yes, I am taking you three into my confidence."

"That is good hearing. You don't know—"

"I do. You were afraid, and are now relieved. We four make the working team. There may be another at a distance, but he need not concern you. Don't let your cousin, Tobias, come along this afternoon!"

"Don't need to. He's off at the West Coast tournament—golf, you know! He is a whale at golf."

"Are you going to make him hum too?"

"I'll kick him out on his ear, if he keeps on sponging on Barbara," said Peter.

"Just one other item," Con said, straightening lazily from the fork. "Do you tote a gun?"

"Should I?" Peter asked.

"Have you one?"

"Best automatic there is—Toronto made. Barbara had it, but I saw it back in the desk drawer this morning."

"There is no danger, I think," said Con slowly, "but we can't make too sure. Don't you prowl about much in lonely places, but if you have to, take along the gun. I am taking one too. That's all!"

II

The Doorn is an excellent fishing river. It is famed for spring salmon and autumn grilse, and the sea trout keep coming in and up from June onwards, but this is not a fishing record. The four young or youngish people landed three nice sea trout. Con caught two; Barbara the other; Peter, the best angler there, only wet a line occasionally. Hughes Everitt did not fish at all, and came trailing along with the picnic tea basket.

About five, Barbara made tea.

Barbara looked good in her breeches and knee boots, a new measure of contentment in her dark eyes. A tan greyhound sat couchant at her side and Barbara was pleased with Peter to-day. The rigid line of his mouth had softened, and his eyes were no longer watchful.

She could not understand the presence of this Mr. Con Madden. She thought she knew all of Peter's friends by name or in person. Her curiosity got the better of her. She said:

"Peter, you have a secret life?"

"Which one?"

"The one out of which Mr. Madden has stepped—as a Nemesis or something."

"That gate-crasher! Ain't you, Con?"

"When you come to think of it, I am," Con agreed. "I gather that the time has come to hold forth. Peter and I plotted to bring you out here to talk and be talked to. I'll do the talking to begin with. I talked to Peter for a day last week and he agreed to bring me down here to do a job of work. Now you know?"

"A job of work?" Barbara repeated.

"I am only the junior partner in a firm of two in a small private detective organization. A sort of a freelance organization, and we sometimes choose our own cases. The Aitken case is a famous one—"

"Notorious is the word," Peter amended.

"Notorious for its mishandling. My partner and I had a look at it from various angles, and we decided that it was a case made to order. That is all."

Barbara pointed a finger at him. "Mr. Madden, you would not have got into touch with Peter unless you were convinced of his innocence?"

"It is like this," said Con. "The firm decided that Peter was a thoroughly incompetent practitioner of murder as a fine art, or that there was a nigger in the woodpile who lacked subtlety. It would be nice exercise to bring that nigger into the open."

"Then you must assume that Peter is not guilty," persisted Barbara.

"He assumes more than that, Barbara," said Hughes Everitt. "He must assume that you and I are guiltless also, otherwise he would have told us nothing. What is on your mind, Mr. Madden?"

"Co-operation," Con told him. "I want an exchange of confidences. This is a case for team-work, and I cannot choose a better team than Peter and his two best friends."

"You have enlisted an accomplice, Mr. Con Madden," Barbara said.

"I am entirely on Peter's side," Hughes Everitt said, "but I do not know you, Mr. Madden. If I think you are running around in circles I shall tell you so."

“Fair enough!” said Con equably. “You could not say less as a loyal friend—though I naturally prefer a certain young lady’s attitude. Let it lay. I have chosen my team.”

THE TEAM GOES INTO CONFERENCE
BUT CON IS NOT HAPPY

I

HUGHES EVERITT was looking straight across the pool. Con Madden was struck by the eagle face of the man in profile: the aquiline nose not too prominent, the austere mouth, the non-prognathous chin like the chin of all men of intellect, and the half-hooded, long-lashed, brilliant eyes.

“Do we go into conference, Mr. Madden?” Hughes asked. “If we are, I want to register my first disagreement.”

“That’s what makes consultation valuable.”

“You said that the nigger in the woodpile lacked subtlety. He might be supremely subtle. We agree that Peter did not kill Marcus Aitken. Speaking cold-bloodedly he had motive and opportunity, but the killing is not in character, nor is it in character to leave clues lying about, or plead an alibi that was not one. Peter is foolish enough, but he is not that sort of fool, or that sort of killer. Someone else killed Aitken. But you will note that the police failed to find a clue leading to him.”

“Getting their case so easily did they try hard?”

“Granted that Superintendent Mullen showed lack of intelligence, I want you to consider Barbara and myself. We do not lack intelligence, I fancy,” went on Hughes, “and we had the incentive of friendship and faith, and for a full year we tried to get at that nigger. We failed. That nigger was no fool. Hiding his own traces he laid his clues so as to give Peter a chance for his life. That would seem to be subtle work, the work of a man taking slow thought.”

“Too blame subtle!” Con said.

“I agree. I am convinced, however, that no subtlety at all was employed. Peter was just unlucky, and he was implicated almost by accident.”

“How do you make that out?” Con was interested.

“Quite simply, if you accept the hypothesis that Marcus Aitken was shot at four on Sunday morning.”

“Two shots were heard at 10.30 on Saturday evening?”

“And Peter could not have fired them later. He had an unbreakable alibi. If Mark Aitken was killed by the two shots that wakened Barbara at 4 A.M. Peter was not implicated at all. It was the extraordinary incident of the two hounds that nearly did for Peter. The killer could not arrange for that.”

“Leaving for a moment the question of the two shots fired on Saturday evening, would not the hiding of the bag and rod and the disappearance of the trout imply that someone was trying to implicate Peter? How do you explain it?”

“By sheer blundering chance,” almost shouted the quiet Hughes. “Have we not thought about it, and thought about it? Peter, we accept, hid his fish and tackle, came across to the Clubhouse and did a little boasting—like all successful anglers. I heard him. He even told me whereabouts the fish were hidden—and asked me not to tell Barbara. He wanted to rub her nose in the dust as she had so frequently rubbed his—”

Barbara laughed sadly and turned her eyes on Peter.

“Peter lad, you and I will not rub each other’s noses in the dust any more.”

“The first chance I get,” Peter told her.

“Peace, bairns!” commanded Con. “Well, Mr. Everitt?”

“Just a moment, Mr. Madden!” He smiled at Con. “If you have a list of suspects were you not premature in removing my name from the list—or have you?”

“Why should I have inscribed it there?”

“Because if I had any reason to kill Aitken, I could have killed him at four in the morning, and only implicated Peter enough to give him a fighting chance. I knew where Peter kept his gun, and I knew the back door was on the latch. And another thing, I was an hour late for my appointment with Barbara.” He smiled at her. “Barbara, my dear, I have a brown suit—in fact I’m wearing it. Could not I have been that mysterious man in brown you saw slinking into the woods that morning?”

Barbara shook her head. “Nonsense, Hughes! Don’t you remember, I gave you a wiggling for wearing your best flannels.”

“I was, and waking an hour late I hopped into the first pants that had braces attached. A subtle murderer might change his identity by changing his suit.” He nodded at Con. “Mr. Madden, find out if I had any reason to kill Marcus Aitken.”

“Fair enough!” said Con. “Had you?”

“You can’t accept my word that I had not. Still I must be fair to myself. I knew the contents of Mark Aitken’s will—the will to be probated—leaving Barbara so much a year until she marries. The old devil told Barbara and Barbara told me. Oh! I assure you it was in the strictest confidence.” Here the

three men chuckled, and Barbara blushed. "I wonder were the two of them ensuring that I was not marrying the wench for her money? Anyway it was to my financial interest to get that will changed and to hope that Aitken would not die till he had changed it. Furthermore I knew long beforehand of Peter's plans to clear out for a while, and I knew on that Saturday night of Peter's quarrel with his uncle and the uncle's threat to change his will—"

"That's so, Con," Peter said. "I told Hughes and we laughed and this dollar-shark said, 'That leaves me in the money, fellow!'"

"So it did," Hughes said. "If Aitken changed his will—and I didn't think he would—Barbara was certain to benefit, so why should I kill him? That's the case for the defence, unless we can discover a motive that outweighs all pecuniary interest. I cannot think of one."

"Not at the moment," Con said, "and this young woman's lack of motive coincides with yours. Let us go back a little. You spoke of blundering chance?"

"You do not forget things, Madden," Hughes said and paused to collect his thoughts.

"I am only theorizing about chance," he said, "but the theory is tenable. There was a man in brown—probably two men in brown—prowling the woods that night. I hold that one of them was Wells the poacher. It was he who fired those two shots at 10.30 P.M., not at Mark Aitken, but he would, of course, never admit firing them. Whether he fired the two shots at 4 *a.m.* is another matter."

Barbara lifted a hand. "Not out of that sawed-off double-barrel, Hughes. I know the sound of that—just a smacking puff not carrying far." She looked slyly at Peter. "Since we are giving confidences I must confess that I caught Charley Wells poaching many times and I went poaching with him—four times. You see he is the last of the adepts, and I was interested. We may be poor later on, Hughes, but I can always fill the pot."

"Between spells in jail, you viper," Peter told her.

Con stamped his foot on the gravel. "Who is chairman of this disorderly meeting? Carry on, Mr. Everitt."

"Whether the man Barbara saw and the man I saw are one and the same I will not say, but I believe the man I saw was Wells. I said to Barbara, 'Your old poacher is at work again, I saw him back there.'"

Barbara interrupted him again. "And I said, 'Gosh! that must have been Charley I saw too!'"

"Right. When I saw him he was heading downstream towards Eglintoun and towards where Peter had hidden his fish. And in prowling for rabbits he came on Peter's bag and rod. There is where chance came in. What would he do?"

"Nobble 'em," said Con.

"Surely. He would sneak off with them to that warren he has at the foot of North Road. The trout would go the way of trout, but the rod and bag became dynamite in his hands. Both were identifiable, and as soon as possible after Peter's arrest he got rid of rod and bag. That was very justifiable funk. In hiding the rod and bag where he did he gave his cunning and vindictiveness free rein. He covered his own traces and pointed to Peter's. That is my theory, Madden."

"There was a fishing book, too?" Con said.

"It could be burned or dropped in the river."

"There is cupidity also," Con said and caught Peter's eye. "One thing at a time—I'll do my theorizing later. That was good and close reasoning, Mr. Everitt. Do any of you know if Wells is a fisherman?"

"A killer of fish," Peter said, "by dynamite. Charley never cast a fly over a pool. He would not know one fly from another or one dressing from another. That what you wanted?"

"It is, but I'll get round to it in my own way. This has been a useful discussion, thanks to Mr. Everitt." He smiled. "If you want a job any time let us know."

"Thanks! I might."

"But this efficient and logical Mr. Everitt has given rise to one doubt in my mind, from the doubt in his. He said that for a year he has tried and failed to trace any clues leading away from Peter. I was going to investigate this Charley Wells, but where Mr. Everitt has failed, how am I, a stranger, going to succeed? You—and Miss Barbara—went into this case thoroughly, and was Charley Wells the first person you investigated?"

"Yes," said Barbara. "What do you want?"

"The story of that investigation," Con said.

"You are sure that you are all for Peter?" she asked.

"All the time," Con assured her.

Barbara did not speak for a while. "A cigarette, please, Mr. Con. May I call you Con, like Peter?"

"You call me Cornelius if you want to," he said.

"Sit down, Con," she said, "where I can see the lustre of your grey eyes clouding and clearing to your thoughts."

"Lord, Hughes! You're losing her," cried Peter. "Why did I bring this bohunk amongst us?"

"Just playing him on a string for your sake," Hughes said.

Con sat in his old place by Hughes. "Speak your piece, dear lady," he invited her.

Barbara fixed her eyes on Con's.

"We contacted Charley Wells at the beginning."

"How near the beginning?" Con interrupted.

"Monday morning. Peter was arrested Sunday evening. Hughes and I sat up most of that night, and we talked and talked. It was then he worked out his theory about Charley Wells. The police had visited Charley, yet arrested Peter, so we decided to tackle Charley first thing Monday.

"We found him amongst his jumble of sticks in his shop. There was cunning and fear in his eyes. We told him that we knew he was in Danesford ground Saturday night and Sunday morning. He denied it. We insisted that it was him we saw, and that we were going to make a statement to Superintendent Mullen. He said he had already made a statement to Mullen, and would stick to it. You know his statement?"

"I do. That he was drunk on Saturday, in bed till Sunday. There was corroborative evidence by his wife and his brother who, strangely enough, is an honest man."

"That's it. We said we did not care, we knew he was in the woods Saturday night and if he were in the woods there was nothing much that would escape his eyes and ears, and we hoped to get out of him anything that he had seen or heard. Then Charley turned on us. I have a good memory, Con, and I can give you almost every word and inflection of Charley's.

"'Very well so!' said Charley. 'Will ye come in this way and I'll tell ye all I know?' He lifted a flap of the counter and led us into an inner storeroom, a worse jumble than the shop, dust and ruin everywhere.

"He said, 'I wasn't on no Danesford ground Saturday night nor yet Sunday morning, but what good is the sworn oath of a jailbird against the bare word of a lady and a gentleman of the land. Are ye for puttin' a noose around me neck? Try it. I didn't kill Mark Aitken, and I'll not be hung for no Falkner or Aitken that ever was pupped—no, nor for a Mr. Everitt either. Mark Aitken is in hell, and I don't care if they send Mr. Peter Falkner there as well, the man that nearly drowned me and kicked me across the country.' Peter had done just that, one morning when he caught Charley after he had exploded Luden's pool. 'Listen to me'—and the little thug was almost dominating—'I don't want any act or part in this affair. I'll mind me own business and I warn ye to leave me at it. I'll not help that bastard, Mullen, and I'll not help ye, but if ye set about perjurin' me into jail, I'll up and perjure myself by tellin' the truth—and ye know what the truth is? Well ye know!'

"'You tell us,' said Hughes. 'I will,' said Charley, 'I was out that night, if ye say so, and I was out early and I was out late. Force it out of me, Mr.

Everitt, tryin' to save your friend, and I'll swear where I saw Peter Falkner at ten on Saturday evenin', and what he was carrying, and it wasn't no fishin' rod, and he wasn't going the way of the river either; and I'll tell of the two shots I heard not long after, and the direction they came from and the direction your friend travelled—' ”

“Charley was lying good and hard,” said Peter.

“We know that, Peter,” Barbara said. “Charley was not finished with us yet. It was my turn next. ‘Young lady,’ he said, ‘you are the only one of your name and family that was ever nice to me, making use of me for a bit of sport, and for your sake I'll try not to hurt you or your man. You was up early yesterday morning to go fishing, and you say you'll swear you saw me dodging about. You didn't. It wasn't me you saw. I was at the other side of the road, and I saw you—’ ”

“And there I jumped in,” said Hughes Everitt. “I asked him, ‘You saw the man?’ ”

“He wasn't to be drawn that way,” said Barbara. “He said, ‘I will not say who I saw or what I saw, but maybe I saw him as clear as you saw me when I was home in me bed.’ That is all Charley would say about the man in brown. ‘ ’Tis a great pity things went wrong for ye.’ ‘What things?’ I asked. ‘Fine you know! the plans the three of ye had to get hold of old Mark's money while ye had youth to spend it riotously. But if you think you can save one of ye by putting me in his place, just try it and see. I'll be silent as long as ye'll be but not a minute longer. And that's all I have to say to ye at this time.’ What could we do after that?”

“What you did,” Con said.

“Yes, I told only the bare truth in my evidence. I could not identify the man I saw.”

“I am afraid my veracity was doubtful,” said Hughes. “The man I saw I later identified in an identity parade—Charley Wells—but I did not tell Mullen that.”

“And I was sick with fright,” Barbara said, “that Charley would take our evidence as a challenge. I am frightened yet.”

Peter Falkner got to his feet. He was angry.

“You were wrong,” he said decidedly. “You should have let Charley do his damndest.”

“But Peter, Peter!” pleaded Barbara. “The jury could not know the character of Charley Wells, and his evidence might tip the balance against you.”

“I don't care,” he gave back stubbornly. “I hate to be saved by a suppression of evidence—even lying evidence.”

She was on her feet facing him. “And I would hate to be the one who

forced that evidence.”

They glared at each other. Con looked on, his face solemn. Hughes watched the two, his eyes half hooded.

“There we go! Bristling again,” said Barbara.

“I am not,” said Peter, “I am only reasonably protesting—” He turned away from her to Con. “You’ll use this anyway you please, Madden.”

“I will,” Con said. “I will make Charley Wells sorry he was ever born.”

Peter looked at him. “Haven’t you some chin-wagging to do yourself?”

Con put a hand in a jacket pocket, and his fingers closed on the paper twist containing the salmon flies. And there he paused, and brought his hand forth empty.

Con said, “I think we’ll call it a day. Before I arouse a hope I want to make sure it is not a false one.”

“Right!” agreed Peter, and put a light hand on Barbara’s arm. “Look. There’s a fish head-and-tailing. Let’s try him?”

“Let’s, Peter,” agreed Barbara.

Hughes and Con watched the two lithe figures moving up the margin of the pool. Hughes’ calm voice roused Con.

“You are an observant man, Madden! There goes one loyal man eating his heart out.”

“For whom?”

“Yes, you are observant. If ever I make sure about the woman I’ll try and be loyal too.”

“Make damn sure,” Con said, “or you might spoil three lives.”

“You might do that yourself by rousing a sleeping dog.”

“I might. I’ll tell you that in two days,” Con said, “though mind you, where you failed I am not likely to discover a lead—and that is not flattery.”

“I think that you have already found something that we missed,” Hughes said. “There was something that you were to tell us and show us?”

“You are an observant man yourself, Hughes Everitt. But it will keep till to-morrow.”

TOO MANY STRINGS

I

CON MADDEN looked at his watch. The time was 10 P.M. The sun had set but the even light, flooding in through the sun-parlour windows, was still strong enough to enable Denis Buckley to go on reading his farm journal.

On a certain evening, a year ago, but half an hour later, two shots had been heard. The gloaming would be thickening then, but there would be light enough to make sure of a man at close range. So there would be at four in the morning when Barbara Aitken said she was wakened by the sounds of two shots. What was certain was that the two fatal shots, from Peter Falkner's gun, had been fired some time in the night. If two other shots had been fired, someone was lying low and saying nothing. Who? Charley Wells, the poacher? Damn! Con couldn't keep his mind off the thing. . . .

Denis Buckley dropped his paper on the floor, growled a brief good-night, and lumbered into the house. He had spoken scarcely a word all evening, though Con had persisted in trying to mine words out of him.

Peter Falkner laughed. "You didn't strike his subject, son."

Peter and Hughes Everitt sat at opposite sides of a small green enamelled table. They were talking chess, and Con knew that it was only some notion of politeness towards him that kept the chessboard off the table.

Con lifted lazily to his feet. "Get the board out and indulge your vice! I'm going out for a stroll."

He went out by the front door. A side gate opened on the farm road curving down to the highway. On the left was the demesne wall, eight feet in height. Some distance along, there was an ordinary doorway in this wall. The door was locked. One of the things found in Mark Aitken's pockets was its key. Con knew that, and he knew that inside the door a path skirted a hazel shrubbery, and joined the private road from the Home Farm to Danesford House.

Con sent his mind back a full year. On a certain Saturday evening after

dinner, Mark Aitken had left his demesne by one of the lodge gates, and it was reasonable to infer that, some time in the night, he had returned by this gate. Where was he going when he left by the lodge gate, whence was he returning when he went through this door to his death?

Con shook his head. There were too many strings to follow. He would just walk on and try rubbing his mind against another mind till a spark flew.

Fifty yards in from the corner where the farm road joined the public road, Con came to the Gordon bungalow. It was a red-tiled, brick-walled, roomy sprawl of a house, some twenty yards back from the road.

Phil Gordon and Muriel were on the front lawn. The man was on his knees, garden trowel in hand, planting out godetia. She was standing over him, wearing her green frilly dress, and her head was bare. Her hair was like a nimbus of sunlight. It reminded Con of a ripe wheatfield that still holds the sun after the sun is set.

Con leaned his arms on the rustic gate and spoke in a quiet voice.

“God bless the work!”

Muriel swung quickly with a flowing ease. Phil Gordon, more stolid, only turned head over shoulder.

“And you too, Mr. Con Madden!” She smiled at him.

“Ye don’t keep trade-union hours,” Con said.

“No,” Gordon said. “The dew hour is the best for planting out annuals.” He was a middle-sized man, strongly built, his jowl was round and full, and his nose short and aquiline. He reminded Con of a Roman Emperor of the decadent era.

“You know Phil, my husband?” Muriel said.

“I do, ma’am. We had a drink together last month.”

“Come in and have one now,” invited Gordon.

“Thanks! another time,” he said.

“I believe you are staying with Peter and my father?” Muriel said.

“Sure the world knows that already,” said Con, lifted a finger in salute, took a couple of strides, and found the woman at his side. They came out on the public road and turned to the right.

“You are an old friend of Peter’s, Mr. Madden?” she asked.

“Why not I?” said Con.

“Very good! You will then accept my advice that Peter is in danger?”

“Put it in words of one syllable for me, Lady Brains?”

She touched his sleeve and made his flesh tingle. “Look! if Peter Falkner did not kill his uncle, the man that did, tried to point to Peter so blatantly that he must be mad as well as stupid.”

“You now imply that the man might be mad and stupid enough to try again? Who would he kill this time?”

“He might be mad and stupid enough to kill Peter, and yourself too.”

“That conclusion needs a few steps to lead up to it.”

“Find them out for yourself, Mr. Madden. When do you start questioning your suspects?”

“Just like that!” Con said. His hand felt for his cigarettes. He reached the open pack towards her, and they faced each other as he held a match for her. In the dying day the light of the match glowed in her hair and her eyes, and made the ivory and rose delicacy of her skin almost transparent.

“You are a lovely and dangerous woman, Muriel Gordon.”

“So I have been told.” Her eyes crinkled at him. “You are a dangerous man yourself, Con Madden, but let us be calm. You will have to question us all. Why not start on me—now?”

“Fair enough!” said Con.

The two walked on slowly. Con wished that the darkness were deeper, for the darkness makes talk easier and less guarded.

“Back the road a piece I was looking at a door in the demesne wall and I wondered why it was there?”

“Do you not know?” Her voice half-mocked him.

“I was only guessing.”

“And probably guessed right. That doorway served no virtuous purpose. It was broken through the wall a century ago by a laird of Danesford and it led to the house I now live in. That house was built as a bower for a frail beauty.”

“And it is still a bower of loveliness,” Con said.

“I like your style, bold man. Proceed.”

“If you want me to. The key to that door back there was found in Mark Aitken’s pocket. It is reasonable to assume that on a certain night he went back through that door, and along a path to a certain grove, and farther than that he did not go—ever—on his two feet.”

“Go on spinning your web, Mr. Spider.”

“The female spider is the formidable one,” Con said. “That door intrigued me. What I was thinking was that Mark Aitken did not come out through it that Saturday evening—to any bower.”

“It was proved that he came out by the East Lodge back on this road that we are on now.”

“And was not seen again? Could I assume then that he never got as far as any of the main roads where someone was bound to see him on a busy Saturday evening?”

“You are assuming that, and narrowing your web. What else do you assume?”

“I assume, as I said, that sometime in the night Mark Aitken came to that door. Further, it is reasonable that someone knew where Mark Aitken had been

in the meantime, that someone knew the road he would take homewards, and that someone was waiting for him by the hazel grove.”

“Who would know all that, Mr. Madden?”

“Who wouldn’t? Peter Falkner himself wouldn’t if he had gone fishing and kept on fishing. Toby Aitken wouldn’t if he did not get home from Eskhill races before Sunday morning. Nor would Hughes Everitt, at the Club till eleven, if he went straight to bed and stayed there. Nor would Phil Gordon away at Telltown if he did not get home till morning. Charley Wells might if he were out poaching. So might Denis Buckley coming home early. So might Barbara Aitken, leaving the house shortly after her uncle. And finally, so might Muriel Gordon and her nurse and companion, Abigail Shaw. Plenty of strings to choose from—too many damn strings if you ask me.”

“So that is your list of suspects, Con Madden—nine of us?” Her voice was quiet.

“Can you add to it—or subtract from it?”

She swung to face him at once, her head back, and her eyes watching him through lowered lids.

“To put me on that list you must have assumed that I was lying at the trial—and Aby Shaw too.” She was not angry.

Con said easily, “Sure anyone might tell a lie for a good cause—or in a good cause.”

“You are too dangerous company for any unsimple woman, man of brawn,” she said half ironically, half seriously. “I am not walking into your parlour. Here’s your mainroad!”

“I wonder what you are trying to evade by beating a strategic retreat?” Con half taunted her.

“You are thinking evil of me, sir?” Her voice was hurt and angry, and sad too.

“God’llmighty, woman!—”

“You are. You are wondering what I know about the death of Mark Aitken, and you are assuming that Peter is guiltless; therefore I am evil.”

“That is a woman’s reasoning,” Con said.

“Let us be reasonable then.” She was again calm. “Look! you were hinting that Mark Aitken visited me that night. If Mark Aitken was in my house between ten and eleven—for that one hour only—then Peter Falkner is guiltless, and I was wholly evil in suppressing that evidence for any reason whatever—not a scrap of virtue in me. Though you may not believe me, Mark Aitken was not in my house, or with me, between ten and eleven or at any time thereafter, and any evidence I could give would not help Peter Falkner.”

“So you gave none.”

“I had none to give.”

"You told Superintendent Mullen that you had not seen Mark Aitken?"

"Because—"

"After ten o'clock, shall we say—a reasonable hour?"

"You are assuming that I saw him before."

"Someone saw him leave—or saw him arrive. There are nine people to choose from—including your father."

"My father getting drunk in Eglintoun?"

"Not so very, and home earlier than usual."

"Because he wanted to persuade Peter to stay on."

Con bent close to her and saw that there was apprehension in her wide-open eyes. "You do not know who killed Mark Aitken, but you are afraid that you know too much. You saw Mark Aitken that evening and you kept silent for your own sake, and for the sake of a stupid old man acting God for half an hour. You may well be afraid. That is all now, and you can go, but I will talk to you again."

Con did an unusual thing then. Before loosening her hands, he raised one of them to his lips. Then he gave her a little swing to face her homewards, and pushed a broad palm softly between her shoulders. And without a word she walked away from him, slowly, her head down, and her feet no longer buoyant.

II

Con Madden came out on the main road, and turned to the right towards the Doorn Bridge, his eyes and ears watchful.

A small cough came through the fence.

"That's a sick sheep surely!" Con said in a carrying voice. He made sure that no one was on the road, before or behind, and threw a leg over the top strand.

The river was not more than two hundred yards away, and Con came to the bank of it round a thick clump of furze.

"I'll not play hide-and-seek any longer," Con growled.

"Be seated, Cornelius," came the deep murmur of a voice.

A sheep path went round the clump, and Daniel Glover was sitting down, his back to the thorns.

Con eased himself carefully down and sighed luxuriously.

"This is all right," he said in a low voice, "if I haven't to do some more talking."

"It was intended that other people do the talking," said Daniel, his voice equally low. "If speech has exhausted you we can postpone this conference."

"No, there is no time to waste. My mind got a hell of a twist in a recent

wrestle I had, I want you to take out the kinks.”

“Proceed then! I promise not to interrupt.”

Con talked and for once Glover did not interrupt.

“... I sent her away with a flea in her ear, and my arms were tingling with the pulse of her hands, so I came away myself, heard an ancient sheep cough across the fence, and here I am, my talking done,” Con finished. “Have I imparted any information of a digestible nature?”

“Denis Buckley’s your number one suspect?”

“Only by a bare majority.”

“Agreed. You refrained from exhibiting those salmon flies to Everitt and Miss Aitken? Yet they talked frankly, did they not?”

“Up to a point, and then Everitt went sour on me.”

“Knowing that he had acted unwisely on one occasion?”

“Maybe so. Look you, Daniel! this would be a perfect murder if the three, Peter, Hughes and Barbara were in a conspiracy.”

“Have you considered a conspiracy of two?”

“That is why I did not show the flies to the two. From the beginning—a year ago—Hughes Everitt’s mind has been cool and alert. That first Sunday night, according to Barbara, he worked out his theory leading to Charley Wells, and then he let Charley Wells slip through his fingers.”

“Explanation?”

“You don’t need one, surely? The moment he had tagged Charley he should have phoned the police station. An immediate police search would have discovered rod and tackle in Charley’s possession, and traces of the fish too, for that number of sea trout are not easily got rid of. They do not tell the police at all, they give Charley time to get rid of the evidence, and when they go up against him he turns the tables on them. It looks to me that they never considered Charley as the possible murderer. Why? Because they already knew who the murderer was? They never once tackled Charley about the fish. That hath a fishy look. Can you explain it away?”

“Psychologically. Everitt, like all men of intellect, is conceited and justifiably so—”

“And you can include yourself, Mr. Glover, sir.”

“And you, Cornelius. He did not trust Superintendent Mullen, especially following his friend’s arrest. It would please him to prick the policeman’s conceit. Let him establish his theory, and the policeman would have to partake of humble pie. I consider that is why he decided to act himself—unwisely I admit, but not criminally. Of course he dominated the young woman into agreement.”

Con shook his head. “Even on Monday morning he should have called the police, for if the tackle and traces of the fish were found, Charley was for it,

especially after the way he had already lied about his movements. Hughes Everitt should have grasped that?"

"He did grasp it and you are in error, Cornelius. Remember his theory was only a theory. It is still only that to him, for you did not confirm it by exhibiting the flies. The poacher's out-facing manner and threats meant only one of two things: that the theory was incorrect or that Wells had already disposed of the evidence—as he had. Everitt grasped even more. If he called in the police and the police found no evidence, Wells would almost certainly have put his threat into practice, much to the detriment of Mr. Peter Falkner. Everitt appreciated that, and had to stay on the horns of his dilemma."

"And is still on them."

"He certainly is not. He must have seen that if Wells could be kept silent long enough, his threats would be of no avail. A year has elapsed, and the poacher's evidence would now be only a boomerang. If we can convict him of stealing the flies, he will be in a dangerous position. Do I convince you?"

"You make Hughes Everitt altogether too able for my taste."

"You are difficult. Do you yourself consider Wells as the possible murderer?"

"That's a good point. I cannot see Charley shooting a man at 10.30 P.M. or 4 A.M. and prowling the woods till nearly six in the morning. He would make for cover like a cat out of hell."

"Then allow Mr. Everitt as many brains as yourself and absolve him for the time. Another point, would Wells, a murderer, have stolen identifiable articles near the scene of the murder?"

"He would not—not Charley. If he did, that proves that he knew nothing about the murder at the time."

"But would he have retained the flies?"

"After destroying the book with his fingermarks on it. He would hate to destroy things of value that he thought could not be identified. And he has been very careful. He did not show me those flies last month. How did you get round him?" Con asked.

"By not trying. He exhibits a case of flies at the street entrance, and that induced me to venture upstairs to his impossible emporium. I said that I had noticed these second-hand flies for sale. I represented that I had an improvident young friend who was addicted to the vice of angling for salmon, and that I wished to forward him a dozen flies for his approaching birthday. Your birthday is approaching, Cornelius, so my veracity cannot be questioned. I had no expert knowledge, but the flies must not be too expensive. He produced a box of flies but even my inexperienced eye recognized the moth-eaten quality of originally inferior articles. I fingered them doubtfully, explained that my friend, who was an expert, would recognize that these had

been in use on a previous occasion. I was apologetic, said 'good-day, sir,' and left rather hurriedly.

"He recalled me and assured me that he had some marvelous flies that he had acquired for an absent friend, and that he would let me have half a dozen—more expensive flies however, but still ridiculously cheap. He went into a back store up four wooden steps and I listened carefully. I heard earthenware being moved on the floor but not on wood—I would say an earthenware pot on the tiles of a fireplace. He was absent for some minutes, and on his return displayed a handful of flies which I purchased. A completely honest transaction and without guile."

"Like hell it was!" said Con admiringly, and lit another cigarette.

"There is one flaw in our reasoning, Cornelius. That fishing book might well be stolen by an ordinary tramp, and disposed of to Wells in return for board and lodging. He keeps that model lodging house for itinerants, you know?"

"In which case the book might still be in Charley's possession."

"It might. I would like to make certain."

"Carry on the good work then," said Con. "Do your own spot of burgling."

"I am inexpert, and the lock on the shop door is massive."

"And that is all it is. I had a look at it too," Con patted a breast pocket. "You are not forgetting that I took a course at the Kriminel Tekniski Institut of Stockholm under Harry Soderman?"

"There is another reason also why I should like you to examine the contents of the receptacle in which the flies were secreted."

"Another reason?" Con was interested.

"A theory of my own—nebulous at the moment."

"Clear as mud, Mr. Glover. I have a bit of a theory too, and it is not even nebulous. I suppose I could be one of your itinerants and take a night's lodging with Charley. When?"

"As soon as possible. Saturday night you inform me, is the poacher's night for depredation."

"And that's to-morrow night. Anything else?"

"Take those young people into your confidence at once. You may need their assistance if a certain theory works out."

"How many theories have we, Daniel?" enquired Con.

"That Mark Aitken was the father of Muriel's son, and was carrying on an affair with her up to the date of his death; that he visited her that night before ten; that Denis Buckley saw him leaving, or in the house, and waylaid him; that Charley Wells was on the prowl that night and saw something that he was not intended to see—and there is where your nebulous theory comes in. And there are the equally nebulous theories about Toby Aitken, and Phil Gordon,

and Barbara, and Hughes, and even Peter himself.”

“And Muriel’s nurse?”

“Abigail Shaw, whom I haven’t seen yet. That will be my first interview to-morrow.”

Con started to scramble to his feet. “I am now proceeding to my unfortunately virtuous couch, after one drink.”

“Hush! Look!” Glover’s hand pulled Con down.

Someone or something was moving at the far end of the gravel split downstream. There was scarcely a sound, but they saw a dark blotch against the grey-white of the gravel near the water’s edge. And it was drifting up towards them.

They could hear the soft crunch of gravel now, and the figure was clearer. The summer night was not more than half-dark. The man was Charley Wells. There was the hunch of shoulder, and the lift and dip of a limp. Directly opposite, at the breast of the pool, he turned and faced them, and they sat very still.

If the poacher saw them he gave no sign. He turned away and drifted up by the side of the pool, his movements as cautious as ever until he disappeared. Then Con whispered:

“Charley Wells on the prowl.”

“This is not Saturday night.”

“But it is a poacher’s night, not too dark.” Con chuckled softly in Glover’s ear. “I know what’s working in your mind.”

“But you are weary and without tools?”

“A bent wire and pencil torch, was I ever without them?”

“Do you propose to undertake—?”

“I am proposing nothing,” Con said. “I am just doing it, for I’ll never get a better chance. Give me five minutes and then go to your bed. See you to-morrow!”

THE RODENT IN A CORNER

I

WHAT Charley called his antique shop was on the edge of Eglintoun at the foot of the North Road. On one hand the road curved uphill into the town and on the other curved round to join the Doorn highway. Opposite was a laneway leading down to the river.

About midnight Con Madden came out boldly to the mouth of this laneway, and looked up the slope of North Road. One of the town's arc lamps was burning high up on a standard before the door, and showed stone steps inside. Con knew that these steps made a right-angled elbow and went up to a flagged landing on which were two doors. The door on the right led into the model lodging house and was locked at 10 P.M. The other door, facing the head of the steps, opened into Charley's shop.

Con, without hesitation, strode across the road, entered the doorway and mounted the steps. Around the elbow a dusty electric bulb dimly illuminated the landing, and showed the shop door with its Moorish arch of keyhole.

He took a flat leather wallet from breast pocket, and chose his sturdiest length of bent wire. In less than a minute he was within the shop and the door closed to behind him.

It was not dark inside, for the light from the street lamp shone through the cobwebbed panes of the only window, and showed the clutter of oddments that Charley called antiques; and sporting goods; cracked dishes of brown delft and blue willow, lustre jugs, verdigrised brass candlesticks, spoons and trays gilt-worn, fishing rods minus tips, golf clubs of the old long-faced spliced type, warped tennis rackets, unglued hockey sticks, and so on. The counter had a flap that squeaked as Con lifted it against the wall, and he left it propped upright. There was an open space across the floor to four wooden steps leading to the closed door of the backstore.

Con found that door locked too, but he was inside the store in a few seconds, leaving the door closed to, but not snicked. That door did not squeak.

This back room was larger but lower and darker than the shop, yet a certain amount of light slanted in through the grimy window. Con got out his pencil torch, and the light showed a clutter even more chaotic than the one in the shop.

“A needle in a bundle of hay!” muttered Con. The splay of light showed the cavity of a fireplace. Standing on the tiles, in and about it, was a collection of at least a score of old vases and red clay flower-pots.

He played his cone of light across the mouths of flower-pots and vases. Dust everywhere. Vessels and pots, all of them filmed with dust as if they had not been disturbed for at least seven years. No, not all! two of them—

And there Con got one of the surprises of his life. He had heard no sound, but suddenly there was a small snick, and a naked electric light went on close to the ceiling a foot above his head. A venomous voice said:

“Got you, you bastard!”

Con turned slowly. The voice was commanding as well as venomous.

“Put them up! Up with them!”

Con Madden did not put up his hands, but held them rigidly at his side, one fist clenched on his torch.

“You go to hell, Charley Wells!” he said. His heart was beating harder than usual, but he was cool enough, and knew that the man would not pull a trigger unless startled into a finger twitch.

Charley Wells stood in the doorway, a short figure of a man wearing a rusty-brown jacket and nondescript patched trousers with briar-tattered ends. He did not look in the least like a poacher, who is generally lean and weather worn; Charley was tubby, and his face was flabby and white. His top teeth showed ratlike above a chin that Con could not see, for it was cuddled into the stock of a double-barrelled, sawed-off, muzzle-loading shotgun.

“What are you after, you—?” he adjured Con. “Out with it, till I blow your gizzard through your backbone!”

“Don’t you, Charles!” Con advised him calmly. “Don’t you! or we’ll hang you for sure this time.”

That registered. Con saw the gun muzzle shift.

“A bloody peeler, is it?”

“Sure,” said Con. “Put that blunderbuss down.”

Then Con got his second surprise of the night.

Again he had heard no sound. Nor had Charley, with his poacher’s ears. The first impression that Con got was that Charley was growing a third arm, and then he recognized a broad hand with square fingers. It shot forward quick and sure over the hunched shoulder, and the broad fingers closed down over and around the lifted dog-heads. The muzzles jerked ceilingwards, and Con Madden swooped into action.

He dropped torch in pocket, and before the poacher could turn head, had him right-handed by the collar—collar and shirt and tie in one all-embracing grip. He reached left-handed for the gun, but, even as he reached, it jerked and disappeared backwards over Charley's shoulder. Con tugged Charley solidly into the room.

"Squeak now," he urged, "and have your own backbone blown into your gizzard."

Charley Wells had been at war with law and order for thirty years, and, though often savagely worsted, had never yielded without a wholehearted effort to retaliate with fist or foot or teeth. He came forward with the tug and, with double force, drove his knee into the pit of Con's stomach. Con should have known better.

A stab of unleavened anguish shot through him. He felt his muscles grow pithless; the grip at Charley's neck loosened; and Charley might have torn free but for fear of someone behind him. And then anger came to Con's aid. He drew his breath in long and hard, lifting his shoulders, tensing all his muscular control, shutting his teeth hard down on the waves of pain that were beginning to sicken him.

"Rat!" he said, and cuffed Charley left-handed on the side of the head. It was not a full-force cuff, and he used the flat of his knuckles; it was the roundarm admonishing cuff of a bear's paw. Charley's head jerked sideways and Con's right-hand grip jerked it upright again, and again the bear's paw administered that admonishing cuff. And again. And then for two minutes Con let his temper go, but not too far. This was no savage beating. It was a carefully administered cuffing that was relentless and ruthless and terror-inspiring, with just enough force in each cuff to shake the senses loose. Wells knew that if it went on long enough he would go mad or die. He was helpless, he could not even squeak.

And then Con let his victim go and Charley crumpled on the floor and clawed at the boards in an effort to steady a reeling world.

Con faced the door, but the door was no longer open. It was closed down to a chink, and the chink was a blackness. He glanced round the cluttered room. In the corner, an old arm-chair was propped in the angle of the walls, and before it was a low unvarnished table carrying an ink bottle and some rusty pens—probably Charley's office fittings.

"Now we begin, Mr. Wells," Con said.

He picked up Charley by the back of the neck and slung him into the old chair. Charley looked up at him speechlessly, venom in his black eyes. His heavy cap had fallen off, and his bald dome shone like ivory.

"You know what I'm looking for, Mr. Wells?" Con said.

"I'll have you up for ass'ult, as God's me Judge."

“Let God judge you, and choose me for a simple instrument,” Con said. “I gave you one red ear, and I judge you’re looking for another.”

“The p’lice inspect this place regular,” Charley said. “There’s damn the thing here.”

“Something to damn you only. Watch me!” Con moved to the fireplace. “Don’t try to get away,” he warned. “There’s a thoroughly unprincipled man outside that door who would love you to try.”

Con looked down at the disarray of vases and pots, and drew his stomach muscles in. There was still a sickish ache raying up from the pit of his stomach, and waves of nausea came into his throat. But his mind could work again.

He was trying to fit himself inside the poacher’s mind. Where would he hide a thing securely? Daniel had heard one of these vessels move. The vases and pots were the first things to investigate.

He had already noted that two of the pots were less grimy than the rest. Dust everywhere! He took out his torch and played it back and forth. And then his cone of light stilled on four big flower-pots nested into each other. The top one was packed with door-knobs of all sorts, wood, brass and porcelain.

“Hot!” said Con. “Why don’t you say hot, Charles?”

He saw Charley’s hunched shoulder twitch.

“You was in my shop before,” Charley said, “and I had nothing to show you. They’s nothing here.”

Con lifted out the top pot, there was nothing in the second, nor in the third, nor in the bottom one. Then he turned his attention to the top pot and began picking out door-knobs.

“You sent a bloody goat-faced spy in on me,” squealed Charley desperately. “I tell you they’s nothing in the place. You never, nohow, showed your search warrant.”

“It’s on the other side of the door. Go and have a look at it!”

“An’ you behind me, you robber!” Charley fell back again. “Go on then, burn you!”

Con lifted out the last of the door-knobs. There was something else below them.

“More here than I bargained for,” he said.

He brought forth a pocketbook, a genuine article of the finest morocco leather, and a gilt monogram TA was on the flap. Someone had begun to scrape off the gilt but had desisted. The wallet was empty and there was no writing on the memoranda leaves. Con mused for a moment, and spoke clearly.

“Monogram TA! Most interesting! We shall talk about this later on, Charles. Here we go again!”

Con again dipped into the pot. He brought up a round thick short packet,

wrapped in brown paper, and tied round the middle.

"The secret memoirs of a bird o' prey?" Con said.

Charley's agitation was evident. "Them's mine, every damn one, and honest come by. Don't you dare—!" He leaned and made a sudden snatch. Con's flat palm pushed hard into Charley's face, and threw him back against the chair—

"One other move like that and you get another dose," Con threatened, the flat of his fist ready. "I am not going to rob you. You keep watching."

He worked the hard-knotted string off the packet.

"Phew!" Con whistled. "Struck it rich!"

"All me little life's savings, what else?" whined Charley.

The round packet was a fine wad of one pound notes of various issues, and none of them new.

"Four hundred, Charles?"

"No, nor half. All me life—"

"Poaching must be a profitable avocation. You don't by any chance do a spot of—" Con paused and changed the last query. "Whose hen roost did you rob?"

"I earned them hard." His feet were restless.

"Hard and bitter and bloody, you did! There's hell in this, you dog. I feel the heat of it under my hand. It was the price of some soul in torment. Take it and hide it out of my sight!"

He threw the roll at Charley, who thrust it into his poacher's pocket. "Don't think you're bribing me with me own money, Mister Peeler," he said.

Con clenched his left hand. "I do my bribing with this. Are these things your own too, and honest come by?"

He lifted the pot and turned its remaining contents out on the table. There were some half dozen gut casts and a jumble of salmon and trout flies.

"Anybody knows I sells 'em," Charley said.

"And chose the wrong customer, one time." Con picked out two of the largest flies and held them in his palm. "What flies are these?"

"Two ordnar' flies for salmon, what else?"

"Surely. Do you fish yourself?"

"What chance has a poor man to fish a rich man's water?"

"What indeed? And a complete apology for poaching. But you should have studied flies in your profession. Look! that's a *Dusty Miller*, shop made, and beautifully finished, and it is not secondhand, for it was never in the water; yet, you can see where the tinsel has tarnished from long keeping in a flower pot. Look at this one now! also a *Dusty Miller*, but home-made, and well dressed. See! the fulness of wing, and a slight roughness in finish; and that tinsel! no tarnish there. That tinsel is the real article."

Charley's feet shifted. "Go to hell! Who could tell one make of fly from another?"

"I can, and so can the man that dressed that fly and many more—and swear to it. Well, Charles?"

"I don't care a tinker's dam who made the bloody flies! I bought 'em off a tramp fiddler, and where he got 'em was none o' my business."

"Who was this convenient tramp fiddler?"

"I'm hidin' nothin'," proclaimed Charley virtuously. "Tim Molloy was his name."

"And where is Tim now?"

"In hell. He was killed by a bus playin' the streets in Orange Belfast."

"A convenient tramp and a convenient bus!" Con said. "The flies were in a big leather book?"

"They wasn't," said Charley promptly—too promptly. "They was loose like that."

"A year ago?" Con snapped the question.

"No, nor half of it." Charley was equally quick.

"Six months ago?"

"About that."

"My poor fellow!" Con chuckled. "Slipped again! But you were right about Tim Molloy. I knew Tim—in the way of business—and he was killed by a bus in Belfast. But that was on the last Twelfth of July nearly a year ago. Was it his ghost sold you the fishing book?"

"There was no book, I'm tellin' you—you can't trap me." Charley made the best of it. "Maybe it was longer than I thought since Tim was here—they're always comin' and goin'."

"Your register will tell us. Charley, my son, you had better talk turkey."

"I won't talk nothing."

"You will. You kept those flies hidden while the police were looking for them. If I ring up the police now, you'll have the handcuffs on in five minutes—for murder at the worst, for suppression of vital evidence at the least, and that means penal servitude."

Charley would not be stampeded. "Ring away then!" he squealed. "Look here, me bucko copper! I'll not talk another word till me solicitor is at me side, and then if anyone—if anyone pushes me the wrong way I'll talk plenty, and 'tis not me will hang."

"Who will hang?"

"I'll tell you if you want to know—that jailbird, Peter Falkner."

Con slapped him back-handed across the mouth, and Charley cowered away, but he would not be cowed.

"You can bate me to death, you bastar', but you'll get no more out of me

till I'm ready."

"I will, you maligner of the dead and the living! You can't hang anyone. You couldn't hang a cat—after a year of silence. Any prosecutor that brought you into court would be laughed out of it." Con leaned across the table. "Listen, Charley! The victim you are blackmailing will recognize his safety. Don't try and pump him any more. That well will be dry as soon as I find the source—and I will—in one week. Just one week, Charles!"

Charley remained dumb, his head down, but one foot slipped. Con put the flower-pot on the floor, and carefully gathered a handful of flies. "I am handing these over to the rightful owner, Charley. You have no objection? No! Not another word then about the flies. I don't think I'll even mention them to Superintendent Mullen—not for a week at any rate. You might have something to tell me then."

Con stored the last of the flies and casts in his jacket pockets, and picked up the morocco pocketbook blazoned with the monogram TA.

"Now here is a subject we might hold converse on, Charles—this empty pocketbook! I wonder was it empty when you picked it up? Never mind! You don't care a damn about the owner of it. To hell with the Aitkens! is your war cry. Cast your mind back a year ago! The night two witnesses saw you on the prowl. One saw a man in brown—By Gum, Charley. You do make your suits last out. Is that the same suit you are now wearing?"

"Go to hell!" said Charley.

"One witness saw a man in brown shortly after four in the morning. The other saw you before six o'clock. Sometime in the night you picked up this pocketbook. And yet that is impossible, for the owner of it was forty miles away, and swore that he did not get home till six in the morning."

"The bloody perjurer!" exploded Charley.

"He is that sort of perjurer," Con agreed. "Toby Aitken was back from Eskhill shortly after two in the morning and you saw him?"

"I'm not saying it."

"Toby Aitken was back shortly after two," repeated Con, "and you picked up this book somewhere about Danesford House? That was one dangerous place to be at that hour if Mark Aitken was already dead. Perhaps he was not?"

"I wasn't nowhere near Danesford House."

"You said you were. You admitted it."

"You're a liar."

"You just agreed that you picked up this book there?"

"I didn't," shrilled Charley, "I found it outside the door of Toby's car at the back of the Home Farm."

"And Toby was in the house? At 2.30 in the morning?"

"At the back o' two by the feel o' the night."

“You saw him come out again?”

“I didn’t. I came home to me bed.”

“That’s right! Home you came. Whom did you see on the way?”

“Why the hell did I open my mouth at all? Not another word will you get out of me, you twister. Let me get out o’ here!”

Con knew that the session was over. Charley would talk no more, for he had realized that this big patient devil had lured him into talking too much.

“Both of us slipped up a bit, Charley. I’ll take this pocketbook and find a use for it. Was there some money in it to pay you for your trouble?”

But Charley would not be drawn into a retort. Retorts had betrayed him more than once. Con smiled pleasantly at him.

“If you put your head outside your front door in the next fifteen minutes don’t blame me when you meet Gabriel. Good-night. I’ll be seeing you.”

There was no one in the shop, nor on the landing. Con pulled the shop door shut after him, and a murmur of voices floated up from the elbow of the steps.

“Let him circulate.”

“Why not?” Con murmured back. “Spurious coin, but let him circulate.”

Con stepped boldly out on the pavement and, before he could turn, a broad hand was placed on his forearm.

“A highly efficient investigation, Cornelius,” commended the deep voice of Daniel Glover.

“Like hell it was!” growled Con.

They kept close under the wall and did not speak again until a curve of the road took them out of sight of Charley’s doorway.

“How did you and Charley arrive so—so opportunely?” Con wondered.

“He deceived us earlier—probably saw us from the beginning. I estimated five minutes after your departure, and made a cautious exit. Luckily I saw a movement amongst the gorse bushes and concluded that Wells was also making his exit. I knew that his greater experience would help him to evade any delaying tactics such as an enfolding movement, so I sought the road and attacked his head-quarters directly.”

“Just in time to frustrate his knavish tricks. Very concise, sir, but lacking atmosphere. You heard and saw me give him some mild third degree?”

“I hope, Cornelius, never to face your outrageous methods.”

“God ha’ mercy!” said Con chuckling. “All the same I fell down, Daniel. A kick even where I got it, should not make a man fall down on his job. I was leading Charley nicely along, and should have kept on doing so, instead of trying to jump him over. By gradually introducing the names of our eight—or nine—strings I might have found out something useful.”

“You have. I consider that you extracted all there was to extract—or nearly all.”

"Have it your own way." Con stopped and pointed. "There is the road leading to the Spa. It is long past your bedtime, granfer."

Daniel walked on unheeding, and Con again ranged up to his side. They were out past the suburban lights now, and the country half-dark was about them. Most honest men were long abed, but these two men, honest enough, disregarded time when at work on a case.

"Words of not less than three syllables, please?" Con said.

"My object is to clarify my mind and yours, Cornelius, and possibly arrive at an avenue of procedure," Daniel began. His deep voice ruminated. "Our friend Wells is not a psychologist, and so all those things you extracted from that flower-pot were associated in his mind with one thing and one thing only: the tragedy of last year. Having, as he thought, found a secure and cunning hiding place, he used it only for articles in any way connected with the tragedy. By-the-by I must congratulate you on the extraordinary feat of discovering that Tobias Aitken was back shortly after two that morning."

"That was a fair long shot," Con said. "When Charley called him a perjurer I guessed Toby was home earlier than he said. And then I remembered that Johan Bartley had heard someone in the house that night at the back of two. I tried it on Charley, and it came off. Say, Daniel, we'll have to put Toby high on our list."

"One thing at a time—the important thing."

"And that is Charley's four hundred pound notes," said Con. "You proved our nebulous theory, Daniel."

"Yes, I wondered if blackmail was possible."

"Is he blackmailing Toby?"

"Has Tobias been curtailing his expensive habits?"

"Not noticeably, he hasn't. Sponging on his sister too."

"It is quite possible that Wells has been using that pocketbook to extract money from Tobias, yet I consider that the greater portion, if not all, of that four hundred pounds came from another source. The money was the product of blackmail; Wells was abroad on that fatal night and in addition to pilfering Peter Falkner's paraphernalia, obtained some information that made blackmail possible. Wells has consistently protected his victim from other people. If he claimed the reward he must divulge the information that would point to someone other than himself as the murderer. Yet he withheld information and ignored the reward. Why?"

"Because blackmail was more profitable."

"Exactly. He was protecting his victim as a valuable source of income. He is consistent in that. He was quite willing to accuse Peter Falkner, therefore, Peter is not his victim. When cornered, he betrayed Tobias Aitken without a qualm, therefore Tobias is not his victim—or at best is negligible."

“For what?”

“For our purpose of bringing the murderer into the open.”

“How?”

“Consider for a moment.”

They had passed the left flank of the golf course and were at the beginning of the Danesford woods with its eight-foot wall. A hand gate in this wall gave access to a footpath curving on the edge of the trees towards a small cottage, some two hundred yards back, whose lime-washed walls were only a white glimmer in the half-dark.

“Hughes Everitt’s dwelling place, I understand?”

“It is. No lights showing! Give a couple of addicts a chequered board and some forty gadgets—”

“Thirty-six at most.”

“—and one bottle of whiskey, and they’ll move pieces about twelve times an hour as long as the bottle lasts out.”

“That cottage is included in the Danesford estate?”

“Yes, Peter let it to Hughes at a nominal rent.”

“In Muriel Gordon’s euphemism, was it also erected as a bower for frail beauty?”

Con laughed. “You are not suggesting that Hughes uses it as a bower?”

“Why not?”

“Why not, indeed?” Con humoured him. “Hughes is a male man, and those poet’s eyes might be basilisk to a woman. Still I never heard his name coupled with that sort of woman, and I know how difficult it is to hide intrigue in a small town. And remember Hughes is blest with a charming sweetheart and a proper young virgin.”

“Charming certainly, but—!”

“My God!” Con Madden stopped dead, and this time Daniel paused at his side. “My God! Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I generally do.”

“You are encouraging me to find a motive that would make Hughes Everitt want to kill Mark Aitken. And you are even suggesting a motive.”

“Remotely.”

“Remote and revolting, but we cannot turn away from it. Ours is a dirty job, Daniel.” Con was gloomy. “It is difficult to hide intrigue in a small town, I said, but the Danesford desmesne is isolated in woods, and an affair might be kept circumspectly secret.”

“What affair?”

“An affair between Hughes Everitt and a woman.”

“And the woman?”

“You hinted at Barbara Aitken?”

"I did not," said Glover sharply.

"I took it as a hint," said Con decisively, "and blast it! I have to face up to it. Barbara is often in the woods at night. That hell of a night, no one saw her after 9.30. No one saw Hughes after 11. No one saw Mark Aitken after 8. Supposing there was an intrigue—and Mark Aitken discovered it that night? There you have the motive for the two killing him. And Charley Wells on the prowl saw enough to make blackmailing profitable. Damn it, it all fits, Daniel. Oh, hell!"

"You make it fit. I had not Barbara Aitken in mind. You did not let me complete my sentence. A charming sweetheart certainly, but a proper young virgin sometimes palls. From my reading and observation your male man afflicted with a proper virgin not infrequently seeks a solace that he has every reason to keep secret."

"Ah! you mean another woman? Where is she?"

"Not far away," said Daniel and strode ahead.

"Oh, blazes!" exclaimed Con. "You are scandalous bad company, Mr. Glover. Yes, your other woman is there, not so far away, but I will not name her. She seems to be under the protection of another man, and it is held that to be faithless to a protector is more reprehensible than to be faithless to a husband."

"And if Marcus Aitken discovered the intrigue and charged Everitt, at the same time threatening to tell Barbara Aitken?"

"Again Everitt has motive and opportunity for murder. It is the very devil."

"I assure you, Cornelius, that I am not asking you to consider Everitt more than any of the others. We all like him, but he is one of your strings, and a case can be postulated against him. But do not ignore the others. For instance, have you considered the case that can be made hypothetically against Philip Gordon?"

They walked on slowly, and Glover's deep voice was ruminative but clear.

"They came down from town some years back, man, woman, child and faithful nurse. Why? To be near the woman's aging father, or for some other reason?"

"To be near Mark Aitken, say!"

"Possibly she entered into another intrigue with him," Glover said. "She permitted you to assume he was in the house with her at 10 P.M. Did Gordon intervene unexpectedly—?"

"Not before 3 A.M. at the earliest."

"And we do not know where Aitken was at 3 A.M. He might have been in the woman's house. Gordon is a man of strong feelings."

"The woman would arouse strong feeling in any damn sort of man," Con said.

"And Gordon is not a weakling. Finding out that he was losing the woman he would not hesitate to kill the man. And the woman would have to maintain silence to save her protector."

"It is a hell of a case."

"So I have been demonstrating. But we need not worry about its difficulties any more."

"What do you mean?" queried Con.

"You have established a base from which we can lure the murderer into the open through Wells the poacher."

"All right, Mr. Glover! Give me a general outline of your plans to make use of Charley?"

"I have none," said Glover. "You are the planner in our organization."

Con threw away his cigarette. "Would you mind accepting my resignation, Mr. Chairman?" he said softly.

"You are highly inconsiderate."

"On with your considering cap, my master!" said Con.

Con smiled into the half-dark. His senior, as a sop to Con's conceit or self-respect, had a habit of apparently withdrawing from a case at a certain point, and Con had always to insist on his remaining. Con could finish a case if he had to but Daniel's capacity for thinking before and after could not easily be dispensed with.

They went on in silence. That was one of their habits too, for they were not talkative men without purpose. They turned off the main road into the by-road running through the Danesford woods, and still their silence held. Farther on they passed by the Gordon bungalow, where all the windows were dark. They were within a hundred yards of the farmhouse when Glover halted.

"Thanks for your communicativeness!" Con said. "Won't you bring forth even a mouse?"

"Back there in that sink of iniquity listening to you leading your unfortunate victim, I saw where your mind was leading. You were already formulating a plan of action?"

"It was only an inkling of a plan, and I want it developed."

"We shall develop it—to-morrow—with fresh minds, as well as our own. Take your three friends into your confidence, for I think that their assistance will be necessary."

"Were you too thinking along those lines?"

"Inevitably, but action is your domain. Enough. I shall be on the hotel lawn to-morrow if the evening is fine, and at the Clubhouse later. If you are there, treat me with respectful aloofness. Good-night!"

"Be circumspect," advised Con. "Our Mr. Wells may be circulating."

"I anticipate as much," said Daniel, and stumped off into the night. Con

slouched away, still unhurriedly, towards a last drink and five hours of sleep.

II

Daniel Glover took Con's advice. He was circumspect. He no longer patted jauntily down the middle of the road, but slipped along on the grass edging close under the *Ionicera* hedge. So he came to the rustic gate leading to the Gordon bungalow. He halted by the gnarled post and peered round it towards the darkened windows.

A short, squat figure with a limp came round the corner of the house and drifted across its front. He kept close to the wall, and at each of the four windows along the front, paused as if listening intently. Then he turned and came across the grass towards the gate. The man was unmistakably Charley Wells.

Daniel could not control the instinctive movement he made to get closer into the hedge by the post. The poacher gave no evidence that he had caught that movement, for he did not halt or hasten or slow down, yet half-way across he swerved off between two flower beds, then swerved off again, and, never changing his pace, disappeared around a corner of the house.

Glover straightened out of the hedge, moved quietly along the grass margin and so came out on the by-road. There he walked boldly down the middle of the road. In time he came out on the main road and turned towards Eglintoun, strongly resisting a temptation. If Charley Wells was trailing him, Daniel could not hope to match him at night work, and if he tried he might only give his own game away. Daniel went home to bed.

CON MADDEN BARKS UP A TREE

I

CON MADDEN slept an hour longer this Saturday morning. He would have slept still longer if Mrs. Bartley had not tapped at his door at nine o'clock to inform him that a gentleman wanted him on the phone. Con rolled out of bed wide awake, slipped on an old brown dressing gown, and tumbled downstairs. The phone was in the front hall in the angle of the stairs.

"Good morning, Cornelius! Sorry to disturb you," came the clear deep voice of Daniel Glover.

"I'm listening," said Con.

"Important item for your consideration. That spurious coin of yours was in circulation last night."

"Interesting. That seed I planted! Go on."

"He was prowling round that bungalow listening at the windows, apparently wanting to communicate with someone. He saw me and disappeared. I could not hope to keep in touch, so I proceeded bedwards."

"A good job you did, or you might not be circulating yourself this morning."

"Are you sure that he is circulating this morning?"

"My lord!" exclaimed Con. "I'll let you know if he isn't. Things are moving, big chief. Get your war-paint on. Anything else?"

The phone went dead. Con grinned, dropped the receiver on its cradle, and turned over the directory to get the police number. He got it and rang up. A voice said:

"The police station, Eglintoun."

"Can I speak to Inspector Myles? I am an old friend."

"Hold on."

A crisp northern voice that he knew spoke in Con's ear.

"Inspector Myles greets an old friend."

"You're up early, Richard! Con Madden at this end."

"I withdraw the old friend. No! I will not cover your traces. What is it, Con?"

"I'm on the job. Listen, Dick! Do you know Charley Wells? Is he in circulation this morning?"

"The same old Con! You want to know if he is in or about his burrow in North Road."

"Exactly. But don't rouse his suspicions."

"Go and suck eggs! I'll ring you in two minutes."

In very little more than two minutes Dick Myles was on the phone again. His voice was very serious.

"I regret to inform you that the party is not in circulation."

"Good God!"

"I mean that he is in bed."

"Blast you, Dick! Are you sure?"

"His wife is, and I heard him swear at her over the phone. Anything for this department?"

"I'll let you know this afternoon. Thanks, Dick."

Con got down to breakfast at 9:30. Peter and Buckley had had theirs long before, and Con apologized to Mrs. Bartley.

"No trouble at all, sir." She smiled at him. "Now that Mr. Peter is home we'll be keeping all sorts of hours—same as before. A spoonful of porridge and cream, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am. My appetite is coming back on me."

As Con ate, Mrs. Bartley fussed about the sideboard.

"I suppose you know why I am here, Mrs. Bartley?"

"Can you do anything for us, sir?"

"If I get all the help that is going," Con told her.

"You'll be getting all the help that's in this place, sir—but what good will it do you?" A note of despondency came into her voice, showing that she had given up hope long ago.

"You would never know," Con said. "You know the place and people well, Mrs. Bartley?"

"I do then. I buried a man here, and reared three children of my own to send out into the world."

"And one child not your own—Muriel Gordon?"

"That's right, sir! myself and Aby Shaw."

"Maybe she was a hard girl to rear?"

"The easiest in the world." She laughed. "You just gave her her own way because it was the easiest thing for you to do, and she was no trouble at all. She was a darlin' girl them days."

"But much changed when she returned home a married woman?"

"She wasn't changed at all. She took to the old life like a duck to water, and her beauty had grown on her—it was like a light inside her." Her wise woman's eyes met his and she nodded a matriarchal head. "Don't you be making a mistake about Muriel, sir. I brought her up. She is a woman that could be hurt once, but after that no man in the world could hurt her again—and let men look after themselves."

"You like her, Mrs. Bartley?"

"Why not I, sir? Do you know what I do be often thinking?" Her smile was almost embarrassed. "She's the sort of woman all women would like to be, God forgive me for saying it."

"He will, ma'am, and He will forgive her too. He invented the two of ye, and the three of ye know it. How did she and your Mr. Peter get on?"

"Fine, sir. She has a great liking for him and he for her. I know what's in your mind, sir." She smiled at him. "And I know Peter Falkner. Peter could be a devil on two feet if he wanted to, but he don't want to—yet. If things was different, Peter and Muriel might be different to each other too—if you know what I mean?"

"I do, ma'am. The dead have a good deal to answer for."

"God forgive them! they have."

Con reached his cup to Mrs. Bartley.

"Speaking of the dead, ma'am, Mark Aitken was a dangerous sort of man."

"He was, sir, but in the end he was no more dangerous than a cock robin. He rode for his fall and got it."

"Death?"

"Death was no part of his fall," said Mrs. Bartley quickly.

"I am very stupid, ma'am." Con shook his head at himself. "The fall he got took six years from stumble to pitch."

"Be the powers!" said Mrs. Bartley admiringly. "If you know that you haven't been wasting your time. And here I am wasting it, and the day's work before us." She began piling dishes on a tray.

Con drank off his tea and pushed the tray away from her. "Are you in a great hurry this morning, Mrs. Bartley?"

"Divil a bit, sir! I hear you and Peter are lunching at the Big House."

"We are, ma'am. I want you to clear my mind some more for me, before I encounter the atmosphere engendered by the upper classes, as a friend of mine would say."

He put a friendly hand on her arm and drew her towards the big bay window. They sat together on the wide window seat half-facing each other. She smiled at him.

"You have a power about you, Mr. Madden," she said.

Con lit a cigarette. "You know Miss Barbara Aitken very well, Mrs.

Bartley?"

"Why not I, sir? Now that's a darlin' girl."

"Two darlin' girls! They must have seen a good deal of each other?"

"Muriel and Miss Barbara? They were thick as thieves."

"But not any longer?"

"You know that too, sir!" Mrs. Bartley frowned. "Mind you 'tis all on one side. Muriel says that Miss Barbara sometimes don't know that she is a woman at all, and that she won't know her own power and weakness till she has suffered, and then it might be too late. God forbid!"

"Amen! She knew she was a woman when she fell in love with Hughes Everitt?"

"You would think so, sir."

"An attractive man."

"He is that, and a nice frank man as well."

Con touched her knee with a finger. "Do you know the sort of a half thought I am having, ma'am? It is that Peter is fond of Barbara—and I mean fond—and that his loyalty to his friend Hughes keeps him from trespassing."

"I couldn't tell you—I couldn't tell you at all, sir." Mrs. Bartley was troubled. "Mind you, when Peter came first I was hoping for things between the two cousins, but I'm only an old matchmaking widow-woman. But they were like two boys together, fighting and making up, and fighting again. And Mr. Everitt spoiled the hope of that."

"Your opinion is to be respected, wise woman," said Con, and changed the subject. "You know Toby, too?"

"I do, sir—we all know him," said Mrs. Bartley. "We keep him in his place, sir. He drinks too much for a young man, and has for years."

Con changed the subject again. "We are getting closer to the mark now, Mrs. Bartley. You remember Peter's gun that went missing that bad night a year ago?"

"I do, sir—bad scran to it!"

"Have you any notion who might have taken it?"

"Not the least, sir—in that way. Some of the lads used to borrow it, when my back was turned, for the rabbits."

"One of them would not borrow it for shooting Mark Aitken?"

"Make your mind easy on that, sir. I know them all, seed breed and generation, and I've been watching them for a year. There's not one of them is a traitor."

"The gun was there on Saturday—on its hooks?"

"It was, sir—in the afternoon. I ran a duster over it."

"Was it there that night when you returned from the pictures?"

Mrs. Bartley shook her head. "I didn't notice it, sir. We came in by the

back door.”

“Denis Buckley was in his room, then?”

“He was, sir. He talked to me at his door.”

“There was someone in this room later that night?”

“There was that—at the back of two.” She was very definite. “I heard someone moving quiet, and a bottle against a glass.”

“Could the someone be Denis Buckley downstairs for a drink? He had less than usual that night.”

Mrs. Bartley shook her head. “I’d have heard his heavy foot on the stairs.”

Con left that subject. He did not want to turn her mind to Toby Aitken who was capable of stealing a drink at any hour.

“You did not hear any sound after that—any least sound at all?” he put to her.

“Not a stir, sir. I went to sleep straight off. It gives a body a comfortable feeling to have all her men under the roof—as I thought—”

“And the back door on the latch?”

“Sure ’twas always on the latch.”

“Like a princely generous house. Your servant girl—Mary Kate heard nothing?”

“You could knock the house down on top of that one. The next we knew was after eight on Sunday morning when Peter came buck-lepping in looking for his gun. It was then the hullabuloo started. That’s all I know, sir. I wonder have I any right to be putting my trust in you?”

“You have,” said Con. “I’ll take the weight off this house for you before you’re a week older.”

“Glory be to God!” said Johan Bartley.

II

Con went out into the yard, head down in thought.

Some person unknown was in the dining room that Saturday night. Toby Aitken stealing a drink? Where was Mark Aitken all those hours? Had he come to the farmhouse to find Peter and talk him over? Had he waited about for him? Had he encountered Toby and given him a black eye? Could Denis Buckley come down the stairs silently if he wanted to?

“Bah!” said Con. A door was wide open at the right of the arch leading to the farm steadings, and inside the room Denis Buckley sat behind a leather-topped table leaning over a big ledger. Before him were many small piles of silver and treasury notes. He lifted a shaggy head as Con paused in the doorway, and sunk it again over his work. Con leaned a shoulder against the jamb and lit a fresh cigarette.

"God bless the work!" he saluted.

"Morning!" growled the deep voice.

"Pay day? Any little thing for me?"

Buckley ticked off an item. "No."

"Haven't earned any, have I?"

Buckley went down his money column. "You will not."

Con caught the undertone. That put Con on his mettle, and his Irish flag was flowing free.

"I am earning some, Mr. Buckley," he said smoothly. "I am earning it now—right now."

Con picked up a small stack of half-crowns resting on a pound note. There were seven of them.

"Thirty-seven and a tanner! the weekly wage all found of a farm hand—one essential worker—and five shillings above the average. I earn more than that and I am no dam' good in your opinion."

Buckley had stopped ticking off figures, and was tapping the ledger quickly. That quick tapping showed that there was a temper behind the head-bent stolidity of the man.

"My busy morning!" growled Buckley.

"I am busy too, though you would never think it," Con said easily. "I am on the job, and all other work ceases till I say go!" He stacked the coins neatly on the pound note. "Stay where you are, Buckley. You are going to listen to the last dam' word I have to say. Don't move, I warn you. You cannot go out that door till I say so." His voice came smooth as steel. "And you cannot throw me out either, though I invite you to try. No Buckley could. Relax and listen, you sullen old bull of Bashan! You know why I am here?"

Buckley nodded shortly.

"I am here on Peter Falkner's business and it comes first all the time," Con went on. "I will restore the wings to his heart. The fruit is ripening, Buckley, and I'll garner the crop sooner than you think—barring an accident that will be regrettable only if it be premature, as the man said."

"I am listening," Buckley said.

"That is all I ask you to do, but you will speak when you find words." Con picked up a single coin and ran a thumb-nail round the milled edge. "Here goes then! Six years ago you had it in mind to kill Marcus Aitken, and maybe you had good cause. You changed your mind. Why? Because someone induced you to. Killing was too primitive, killing was no salve for the violence done. Let him live, break his pride, keep on breaking it, leaving a small shoot to grow again, again to be broken, and again broken. And after five years Mark Aitken was killed. Was that an escape or a termination? You will not answer?"

Buckley stirred and Con lifted a finger.

"I see the question you'd like to ask me, for 'tisin't porridge you carry under your thatch. Why kill Mark Aitken if a slow revenge were so perfect and cumulative? Why indeed? Was an inducement offered in the end that made one weaken, and the other, who would not weaken, take drastic action? Only conjecture, you will say! Let us get on firmer ground. On a Saturday evening a year ago you left Eglintoun early. Your daughter was home early too. You passed by her gate. Did you see Mark Aitken? Who saw Mark Aitken? You were in your room here at eleven. Did you go out again? Do you know as well as I do that Mark Aitken was not killed till four in the morning? Did you betray Peter Falkner?"

"I did not," said Denis Buckley.

"Only one answer to all my questions!" Con paused invitingly, but Buckley remained grimly silent. "All right, Buckley! Stick to your one answer. But why not stick to the job that you love? What is driving you away?" Con moved lazily towards the door.

"Listen, Mr. Buckley! The man that went gunning for Mark Aitken that night was seen. The teeth of the man that saw him are drawn, but his tongue has not been silenced." Con held up three fingers. "In three days I shall have the killer in the open where I want him."

"A threat?"

"If the cap fits. I am sorry if I seem to be hard. Let me imitate the Greeks. You ask your daughter, Muriel, why she is so deadly afraid."

Buckley sat up and his eyes blinked. "Say that again, Mister?"

"Why is your daughter afraid? You ask her."

Con went out through the arch, and across the wide sunny bawn towards the steadings. He lifted his hand and looked at the half-crown that he had forgotten to restore.

"The labourer is worthy of his hire," he said aloud, and pocketed it.

III

There was no one about the bawn or in the steadings, but a sound of voices and hammering came through from somewhere in the rear. Along the back of the byre there was an open-sided lean-to for farm implements, and here a dozen or more men were busy getting ready for the hay harvest. Out on the flank under the full light of the sun Peter sat on a box over a small anvil, and he was rivetting new triangular blades in a long cutter.

Con strolled across, halted at Peter's side and gestured a hand generally.

"Morning, folk! God bless the work!"

"And you too, sir," a voice murmured here and there.

Peter looked up from the careful tapping that was flattening the soft metal

of the rivet. "Want a job, fellow?"

"Got one. Drew down half-a-dollar on it already. One could do worse than spend it in the village inn with worthy men."

Someone laughed, as Con slouched a step forward, and his toe collided with a wooden bar let horizontally into the ground. Behind it was a patch of packed clay and resting against it was an iron ball. Con tucked in his stomach, picked up the ball with both hands and groaned under the weight of it.

"Where's the cannon you fire it out of?"

"You are the cannon if you have a trigger to pull."

A deep growl of voice spoke behind Con's shoulder.

"That half-crown, Mr. Madden—you forgot it?"

Con threw the ball into his left hand, felt in hip pocket, and faced round to Denis Buckley.

"I didn't earn it?"

"Not yet," said Denis Buckley.

"Status slightly improved," Con said, and placed the coin on the broad palm. "You'll return it in three days and you'll know why."

Buckley did not reply. He saw the iron ball in Con's hand and an interest lit in his eyes. "You push the shot, Mister?"

"Gosh, what a memory I have!" said Con. "Of course! This is the sixteen-pound shot."

Peter laughed and rose from his box. "Look! and eat mud," he said and pointed. Thirty-fourty feet out from the wooden bar the ground was so scored and pitted that no blade of grass grew in a space covering a couple of yards.

"My mark is down there in the ruck," Peter said. "But take a look at that square of rock bedded in beyond. That's the mark we aim for in vain. One Denis Buckley made it."

"It's no record," rumbled Buckley.

"Good enough for us. No man coming into this place has touched it by a foot." An old man looked at Con's shoulders. "Maybe this gentleman has putting in him?"

"And putty besides," Con said, drawing in his frontal curve and suppling his shoulders. He stood close-footed behind the wooden bar, looked, head aside, at the square block of granite down the pitch, and consideringly hefted the shot in his left hand. Forty feet about, and on a time he could add feet to it, but now he wondered if he had any explosive power left. He set his mind in tune with his muscles, the weight and the distance, again suppled his shoulders, and felt that he could still tighten his stomach muscles by a couple of notches.

"I aim to putt one in the ruck with the best of ye," he said. He turned, took two long paces, and pivoted round. The clinking of metal ceased, as men

straightened up and stepped closer.

Con concentrated eye and mind on that flat small square of granite. He was left-handed and gradually he dropped his weight back on his left foot, his right foot tapping the ground as he sought for the balance he wanted. Long out of practice, the balance would not come, and he straightened up again, shook himself, twitched a muscle here and there, and threw the shot into his right hand and back again.

He got his poise the third time of asking, and then he looked neither heavy nor awkward. He lifted forward in two rubber-ball hops, pivoted half circle onto his left foot and the shot went soaring, two hundred and ten pounds of exploded force behind it. Con balanced, arms wide, behind the bar and watched the ball soar in a long parabola, come down steeply and crash on the very centre of the granite stone.

"Fair enough!" said Con, and brushed one hand on the other after the manner of Mr. Cagney.

"By crums!" cried the old man. A tall ruddy man came forward and lifted a finger to Con. "Mr. Madden, isn't it, sir?"

"Con to his friends hereabouts."

"Yes, sir! Mr. Con Madden. I saw you putt at the Internationals one time. The best man at the shot in the C.M.P."

"Not quite," demurred Con. "The best left-handed one if you like, and that's a hell of a distinction." Denis Buckley was moving away, slowly and heavily, his head down. For a moment Con felt sorry for him.

"Out of here, fellow!" Peter punched him softly in the ribs. "You're bad medicine for working men." He turned to the bearded man. "If one of them touches that ball before pay-hour, shove it down his neck, Grieve." He twitched Con's sleeve and the two walked off side by side towards the byre door.

"Still on the job?"

"I am. I've been on it every walking minute since we got off the train at Eglintoun."

"How are you making out?" Peter kept his voice casual.

"I see a light before my nose, where I saw none before." He touched Peter's sleeve. "There are a few half-leading questions I want to ask you."

"I'll answer them. Wait! Barbara wants us over to lunch. I'll wash my hands and slip on a jacket, and you can do your talking on the road over."

IV

Con and Peter took the back road. In less than a quarter-mile they came to a five-bar gate in the demesne wall, and inside that, were in private park land.

Some distance along and some fifty yards back from the road they passed on their right a copse of hazel. Peter raised a hand as he went by, and Con did likewise. On the near edge of that copse the body of Mark Aitken had been found. A little farther, also on the same side, a footpath joined the road at a slant. Con paused to glance back, and noted that the path curved close round the hazel copse. He knew that that path led down to a door in the wall beyond which was a bungalow that had once been a bower for a Danesford light-o'-love.

The two men talked as they snailed along, pausing often to discuss a point, or light pipe or cigarette.

"Am I right in thinking that you rather liked your uncle?"

Peter answered readily. "I did—but not at first. At first I had no use for him."

"Yet you took his job?"

"Because he made a dare of it. One of the first things he said to me was that my father was no damn good. And I got back at him by calling him—my uncle—a damn liar. My father did not need any excuses. He gave Mother and me twenty years of a good lively time, and I am proud to be his son. But let that ride. Old Mark came back at me by saying that as the son of my father I could be no damn good either. I agreed that I might be no damn good, but that he was a damn bad judge of goodness. He said he could prove I had bad blood in me even if it took him all of five years. And there the old devil got me. I took his dare, and tied myself up."

"Smart man, your uncle! You got to appreciate each other?"

"I guess so. But he climbed me for five years, and I bucked."

"That was dwelt on by the prosecution?"

"And the prosecution was wrong. The old fellow was just trying me out in his own way, and it was mostly hot air between us." Peter laughed a little sadly. "It was just a game, and in the end I weakened. I had made up my mind to hold down that job for five years and not one blame minute longer. Why, I had my farewell speech ready! I would jump him before he could open his mouth, sling his job in his teeth, and walk out after telling him that a no-use Falkner had shown an Aitken how to run an estate. I made that speech too—and a shade more—but down below I was licked. I liked my work and I liked the old fellow, but I would take six months of freedom to prove my point, and, if you must know, I had a notion at the back of my mind that I would get Barbara to stage a come-back for me. But I must have that final gloat. Damn fool!"

He halted his slow pacing and rubbed a hand under his rush hat. "Blast it, Con! I often wondered if that final blow-up had anything to do with my uncle's death? How could it—unless I killed him?"

"You did not, and it had not. You think Barbara would have staged a reconciliation—?"

"You bet she would. Barbara and I were as thick as thieves."

"And sometimes fell out—as thieves do? That was all make-believe?"

"Don't you believe it. We fought like a couple of Kilkenny cats. But we always made it up. Barbara Aitken is the real goods, Mister, and I am mighty happy about her."

"Happy that you are good friends?" asked Con carelessly.

"That too, but I mean happy in her luck."

"The luck of losing a fortune to a Canuck interloper?"

"Go to blazes! Finding or noosing or nobbling—anything you like—one of the finest men I know."

"Not Hughes Everitt by any chance?"

"Hughes will do to take along."

"Barbara and Hughes may not be very well off?"

"Not very. Mind you, Hughes can make money fly if he wants to, and he can make a pile too, if he wants to. He says he doesn't worship Mammon enough to wear his livery."

"You haven't a bit of almsgiving in your mind?"

"Glory be!" cried Peter. "That is what Barbara, the minx, would call it and throw it back in my face. But Hughes has got horse sense. We talked it over last night when you were on the job somewhere—we didn't play chess all the time—and he agreed that in equity Barbara is entitled to her share."

"And Tobias too?"

"Like hell he is! You don't want to talk about him?"

"Not yet. Let me see now. The impression you gave me was that Mark Aitken was a likable sort of customer."

Peter considered. "He was, you know. Down at bedrock he was the real ore—ten foot of detritus on top. You could not help a sneaking sort of admiration. Women fell for him because they're made that way, but he was a man's man back of all. I often thought that if he was short on that devil-may-care likableness, some man would have wiped him out years ago."

"That saved him from Denis Buckley six years ago?"

"I wasn't about," evaded Peter. "Have you been raking some scandal, brother?"

"Why not I?" said Con boldly. "If you ask me, I would say that a certain young David is your first cousin."

"And if you ask me, I regret that I agree with you."

"Fair enough! She was your uncle's mistress?"

"She was not—not in a million years!" said Peter impulsively.

"Be reasonable, blast you! Take the facts. She was attracted by him, to put

it mildly. Wait! She left home suddenly, and he left home a day or two later, and was absent for some time. Well?"

"Your facts lead up to a big guess. All I will say is that he probably succeeded in seducing an infatuated girl—the old swine!"

"And never got over it?"

Peter looked at him. "You have been on the job."

"Never got over it," repeated Con, "and was never let forget it, and died because of it a year ago?"

Peter shook his head gloomily. "Are you barking up the wrong tree?"

"I dunno. You like Muriel Gordon?"

"I'll say I do." Peter's voice did not change. "With all her other qualities she's got sand. As Padre Martin said, she is a law unto herself, and I will not talk her down. No, sir!"

"Who is asking you to? If she is a law unto herself she can be discussed without scandalmongering."

"That's what Barbara calls casuistry. I ain't playing."

"I see. I'll get round by another road," said Con patiently. "I suppose in moments of self-adulation, you would call yourself a man of the wide open spaces?"

"Some wide and some high and all handsome."

"You were dragged up in the West amongst cowboys and you learned to read sign?"

"You read some sign yourself, old timer."

"You've got five years advantage of me in this here case. I want you to give me the benefit. You read sign. You have been out in all sorts of weather, day and dark—and say! how was it that you did not know that Barbara used to go poaching with Charley Wells?"

"I knew all right, brother," Peter laughed. "I trailed her for her own good. It was after she left him one morning before dawn that he exploded the Luden's pool, and I kicked him across two fields."

"And Charley did not know you were on his trail. You are the man I want, and I'll have a job for you. Now look here! As one of my team you will now tell me if you ever noticed anything between Muriel Gordon and Mark Aitken?"

"I'll answer that. To the best of my knowledge there was nothing illicit between Muriel and my uncle from the time she came home until he died. If I am on your team I do not want to hide a thing, so I'll add that old Mark deserved no credit, for I'll bet my shirt that he was still attracted by her."

"He might want his son? Wouldn't he want his son legitimized?"

"Muriel Gordon." Peter emphasized Gordon. "You are asking me to read sign that I always refused to consider."

“*Refused* is the keyword, signreader. Leave it. Would you be surprised to know that Mark Aitken was in Muriel Gordon’s house the night he was killed?”

“At what hour?” Peter asked quickly.

“Not later than 10 P.M. Saturday.”

Peter nodded. “You are on the job, tenderfoot! He was.”

“You knew?” Con was now the surprised one.

“She told me. Right at the start, before the first hearing. She said that he left the house at ten and that she and Aby Shaw—that’s her woman—would come forward with that statement if I thought it would help. It would not, as you know.”

“So you made her keep silence?”

“It was no use to me to turn the tongue of scandal her way, was it?”

“Damn the bit,” said Con. “And that’s the end of the session. Isn’t it a fine fresh day, glory be to God?”

“It is.” Peter walked on. He twitched a finger. “Could I ask you a question?” he enquired. “Has all this chin-wagging led you anywhere?”

“It has cleared most of the ground for me. Our team is going into action, probably to-night.” He glanced at Peter. “This is club night. You’ll be there?”

Peter nodded and frowned. “I suppose so. I’m not keen, but—Ach, hell! I’ve got to turn up.”

Con tapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Peter! I am bringing home that bacon. Do you want it hung?”

Peter did not hesitate. “No. I do not want to hang anyone anymore. But I do want my name cleared.”

“Sound man!”

SOME GROUNDWORK AT THE BIG HOUSE

I

PETER and Con had taken a fork of the road and were looking at the front of Danesford House. It was early Georgian in white granite, long-fronted, flat-fronted, two-storied, a columned portico jutting from the centre, and a balustraded terrace running its full length.

"Ugly but solid," Peter, the new owner, remarked.

"You are moving in?"

"Don't want to."

"A certain young lady might insist."

"She will, by gum!"

They came round to the front of the house and walked down the terrace. A disreputable old bicycle leaned against the balustrade.

"Hughes is ahead of us," Peter said. "That's his chariot. Barbara has a workroom down at the end where she gets the sun most times. We gather there as a rule—till she throws us out."

A French window at the end of the terrace was wide open, and the room inside it was lighted on two sides. Though it was evidently a workroom, it showed signs of feminine occupancy. Scattered about were several comfortable chairs of light yellow wood with red leather cushions. An ivory-toned curtain stirred in a soft flow of air. The whole room gave an effect of bright airy cheerfulness.

Barbara Aitken sat at the far side of the desk, her darkly fair, shapely head bent over a big account book. Her fawn greyhound was asleep under the desk, his long muzzle resting on her instep.

Hughes Everitt lounged back in one of the red-leather chairs, a tall flagon of beer near his right hand.

Barbara rose to her feet with a little cry of welcome as the two men appeared in the doorway. She was no Diana of the Uplands to-day. She was wearing a tailor-cut skirt of Irish tweed, a white blouse with a turn-down

collar, and a dark tie.

She came straight at Con and grasped his hand.

"You are welcome, Mr. Con, darling," she greeted him.

Con felt his heart warming to her. She smiled up at him, and a spot of colour came into the cheeks that were a shade too hollow.

"Tell me, O lady damosel," he asked curiously, "should not a mere pleb like myself crave admission at the menial entrance?"

She nodded at him. "Yes, Con. Yes! And I would love to be the maid that opened the door to you. I would draw you inside." Her cool fingers pressed and she drew him forward. "Right into the butler's pantry." She swerved him round. "And I would sit you down in a comfortable chair." Con felt the edge of a chair against the backs of his knees and sank into it. "And I would draw you a quart of British ale, and"—she glanced furtively around—"and if no one was looking I'd sit on your knee while you sampled it."

"Begorrah, my darlin'!" said Con. "'Tisn't sampling the beer I would be most of the time."

"The wench is learning her woman's trade despite my best efforts," cried Hughes. "Lord Satan! why did you bring this pastmaster amongst us, Peter?"

Barbara was already at Peter's side, and grasping his arm.

"Do you look for an account of my stewardship, new lord?"

He looked down at her fiercely. "In every item, chatelaine."

"Come then, and be lenient!" She drew him round the desk and pushed him into her own chair.

"Your orders, my lord?" Barbara said.

"Of the aforesaid British beer, two quarts, my good wench—and jump to it!"

"That's a good beginning anyway," Con said.

Barbara went across between rugs to a corner cupboard and turned a key in the lock.

"Still keeping the mercies under lock and key, old girl?"

"Have to—now you're home. Another varlet is in residence—since last night."

"That would be Toby," Peter said.

Barbara flicked the cap off a bottle, and carefully poured the beer into a tall glass, and brought it round to Con.

"God increase your store, woman-of-the-house!" he blessed her.

She poured a bottle for Peter, put it on the desk beside him, and stood at his shoulder. He took a sip, laid his glass down, cleared his throat businesslike, pretended to fit on a pair of spectacles, and bent over the account book. Barbara placed a brown hand on the page.

"Stop playing!" she reprimanded, and turned to Con. "Is this a business

morning, Mr. Con Madden?"

"If Peter is finished accountancy," Con said.

Peter sat up. "Fine! I'm all for business this morning." He embraced Barbara and Hughes in one gesture. "I'm on the job like our Mr. Madden, and we will take your business first. What about it, you two?"

Con had noted already that Hughes was a quiet man. He might be a comfortable sort of man in a woman's house. Now he sat up and moved a negative hand back and forth.

"No, Peter, definitely no! Barbara and I have decided not to obtrude our business until Madden has finished his. Don't rush us. We are a team."

"We are," said Con. "And our team will bring some coon down out of his tree-top, or hook a coon out of a woodpile, or scotch a snake in the grass, or net a tiger in his jungle or—"

"Con, you darling! I could kiss you," cried Barbara.

"Hold her off, fellows!" cried Con.

"You are sanguine of success then?" asked Hughes.

"I am, but I touch every piece of wood I see. There is one big risk we have to take, the risk of another killing."

"Oh, Con!" whispered Barbara, and turned her eyes on Peter.

"Not any of us, my dear," Con told her. "We have to keep a man alive for a week while I work on him. He is in danger, and it is to safeguard him that our team will be working. If we let him die, I shall have to begin over again."

Before they might ask any more questions, the tall door in the corner opened slowly, and a big, ruddy-faced young male in a dressing gown nearly filled the framework. He was taller than Con, and his shoulders were thicker. A man, with shoulders like that, would drive a golf ball an incredible distance, and the very solidity of him would keep his hands steady on a thick-headed morning. In no single feature was he like Barbara, his twin sister.

Toby Aitken did not salute anyone in the room. He slouched in leaving the door open, and looked at Peter's profile.

"They let you out?" he said in a light but husky voice.

"They let me out," said Peter equably.

"This is Co—Mr. Madden, a friend of Peter's," Barbara said.

Toby glanced at Con. "Peter's friend! I've met you before, Madden?"

Con nodded and said, "How are you?"

"Top-hole!" Toby glanced at the desk. "I'll try a bottle of that, Babs."

Barbara hesitated, and said then, "Just one, Toby."

He almost snatched the glass from her hand, looked for a moment through the frosted amber, and practically poured the liquor down his neck.

"Anybody got a fag? Mine are all gone."

Toby took two cigarettes from Con's packet, and put one behind his ear.

Con's inclination was to squash the cigarette and the ear at the same time. Instead he lit Toby's cigarette and gave him the packet. "If you're short. I've more."

"Thanks, Madden!" Toby promptly pocketed the cigarettes.

"See the morning paper about?" Toby enquired. "Notice that I won the Western and the Cairns Cups? Twenty pounds in the sweep, and twenty betting on myself. Beat Sam Flood three and two—two over fours on the thirty-fourth."

"You'll pay me that ten pounds I lent you?" Barbara said.

"Take it out of my pay," said Toby carelessly.

"You'll have no salary left," Barbara said.

"What matter! I have resources of my own." He turned to Hughes. "Well, Hughie! The black sheep is back. When are you and Babs getting spliced?"

"When the air here is cleared and someone is in hell," replied Hughes in his calm way. "Take care it is not yourself, Toby."

"Not in a thousand years, old hoss," said Toby confidently.

Barbara locked the cupboard door, and slipped the key on the desk by Peter's hand. "Can't waste any more time this morning," she said. "I must see to lunch." She went out and closed the door behind her.

Somehow the room was no longer a pleasant, airy room. There was a strain now that might cause tempers to break.

The door was scarcely shut before Toby moved quickly to Peter's side. "I'll have another before I dress," he said, and reached a red fleshy hand for the key.

Peter's broad lean hand moved three inches, and the key was under his palm. Toby's hand poised for a moment, and Con thought the breaking point had come. Toby thought better of it. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown and laughed jeeringly.

"Ah! sorry I forgot you were the new laird of Danesford. You can keep your bloody beer."

"You poured a pint of it down your neck a minute ago," said Peter. "Barbara must have had a hell of a time with you."

"To hell with you and—"

"Shut up, you damn fool!" Peter's explosion was dangerous.

"You can't make me." Toby's voice had a shrill note. He sneered down at Peter. "You want to show that you are the big boss right off, Mr. Peter Bloody Falkner of Danesford?"

"I am the boss all right, Toby," said Peter agreeably. "I always was."

"You'd love to give me my marching orders, wouldn't you?"

"You can stay in your job if you can hold it down."

"The kind fellow you are—after nobbling the whole bloody boodle!" His

blood pressure was rising, Con thought.

Peter kept his temper finely. He twitched a thumb over his shoulder. "Go and clothe your hulk, Toby."

"I have something more to say. To hell with your bloody charity! I don't like it and I don't like you. I don't care a damn who done in old Mark, but you were more than lucky to get off."

"The devil's own luck, Toby."

"You can't bribe me with a job, Cousin Peter. I earned twenty-five quid a month and there are three hundred coming to me under the will, and three hundred a year after that. Give me my three hundred, and I'll clear out and bedamn'd to you. I have resources of my own." Resources of his own! Con wondered about that.

"Them there sort of resources dry up," Con said, "and the money digger digs himself straight into jail—or a grave, and God ha' mercy on his soul!"

Toby stiffened. "You're looking for a thick ear, Madden?"

"My own method chooses the ear mostly," Con said, and rose to his feet.

Peter tapped firmly on the desk. "You've said your piece, Toby. Fine! You can cut and run any time you want to, your money in your pocket." Peter loosed a little temper. "And you are clearing out of Barbara's room right now. Out you go, blast you!"

"On his ear, I would suggest," said Hughes. Con took a slow step forward, his left shoulder hunching.

Toby showed some of the craven that was in his make-up.

"To hell with ye! I'll not give you bullies a chance to rough-house me."

He swerved round the desk, made for the door, and banged it hastily behind him.

Peter laughed. "Gosh! to think that I have been worrying about him for Barbara's sake; and here he puts across his own solution. He gets his three hundred and out he goes—"

"To draw on those resources of his?" interposed Con.

"Not if I know it," said Peter. He leaned sideways to Hughes and pointed an accusing finger. "You and Barbara are it, young fellow. He has been sponging on you two, and hopes to make a life work of it?"

"Mostly Barbara," Hughes agreed. "I couldn't—or wouldn't—just a little to edge him off Barbara."

"Seems I was wrong about the skunk," Peter said. "Toby is no jug-headed fool after all. He knows that Barbara and you and I make a team, as Con says, and that I am bound to make a settlement on her when she gets married. Notice how he wanted to know when you were marrying. He was just making provision against a rainy day. That's our Toby."

Con leaned comfortably back in his chair. He turned his head towards

Hughes.

“Did Toby seem to be in the money this past year?”

“Yes and no.” Hughes considered. “He discovered some beginners at poker and had some lucky bets. Yet he seemed to be as hard up as usual.” He smiled at Con. “Knocks your theory on the head, I fear? I gathered from something you said that you thought Toby capable of a little blackmail.”

“On whom?”

“On Barbara and me for instance.”

“What in Hades are you jumping at—?” began Peter.

“Blast it all!” cursed Con. “I’ll have to explain.” He glanced towards the door. “Can we keep a certain young woman out of this?”

“You’ll have to sandbag her,” Peter said.

Con spoke quickly. “Listen! there is something I want to tell you that’s off the record for her—at present. You remember that Mrs. Bartley heard someone having a drink in the Home Farm dining room shortly after two that Saturday night. I think that was Toby home from the races.”

Peter’s voice was stern. “You know what you are implying, Madden?”

“I am keeping an open mind, and I want you to. Let me get on—I haven’t much time. Toby had a wallet pocketbook?”

Peter said, “Barbara gave it to him one birthday.”

“Morocco leather with his monogram,” Hughes said. “He said it was picked from him at the races.”

“Charley Wells says that he picked it up near Toby’s car at the back of the Home Farm at 2.30 A.M.”

“This is pure hell,” Peter whispered. “My God! What have you been finding out?”

“Plenty. When Toby spoke of other resources I wondered if he saw something or someone that night, and was doing a spot of blackmail. That goes by the board. Toby is more likely to be blackmailed. Listen! Charley Wells has four hundred pounds hidden away. Where did he get it?”

“Not from Toby,” said Hughes. “Never four hundred.”

“So I thought, but we cannot be sure. Personally, I do not think that Toby is a murderer, but he is implicated somewhere. This is what I want to tell you. When our team goes into conference I will not mention Toby’s name, but you two will have him in your minds. I have that pocketbook. He is not a man of resolute character?”

“Would he break under pressure? He would,” Hughes said. He spoke out of deep consideration. “The sooner we get at Toby, the better. He is running a risk, or someone else is.”

Con nodded. “Before he is a day older.”

“At the same time, Madden, all your theories are tenable, and you cannot

ignore any of them. Toby may be blackmailing me or Barbara or Toby, or two or three of us—that would account for his four hundred.”

“That’s so,” said Con. “Also there are five others who fit my theory.”

“Then we must go for Wells and Toby as soon as possible.”

“We begin to-night,” Con said.

Peter groaned and straightened up.

“Hush!” he whispered. “Here comes Barbara. The poor kid.”

II

After lunch Barbara and her three men had coffee in her room. Toby, feeling out of it, had taken himself off to the Golf Club at Eglintoun to boast or celebrate his success.

Con drank a second cup of coffee, waited till the two men were looking the other way, caught Barbara’s eye, and moved a head towards the French window. She gave him back a little intimate nod and smile.

After a time, he rose to his feet, slouched aimlessly about the room, and moved out onto the terrace. Con leaned against the balustrade and looked down over the formal lawn, where all the flower beds were ablaze. In a minute or two, Barbara came swinging along, her fawn hound at her heels.

“Do we conspire together,” she whispered, “or it is company you want?”

“Betwixt and between, and don’t you be tempting me, young Eve.”

“You have business with me?”

“And nothing else, I am sorry to say. You see, I have to clear the ground as I go along. Already I have put your half-cousin and whole sweetheart through a stern catechism. It is your turn now.”

“Oh, Con! You are not losing faith in us—you are not losing faith in me?” She turned wide-open eyes on him.

“Why would I?” he said. “You are on my team and I want the benefit of your local knowledge and observation before we plan our campaign. Would you tell me for instance, if you are an outdoor girl?”

“I suppose I would. In ten years time I’ll be leaner even than I am now, all brown leather, and my voice raucous from bellowing against the wind.”

“Don’t you believe it, Diana! Your bones are too cunningly wrought ever to be unshapely. At sixty you will have grace, and charm, and your daughters and daughters-in-law, green with envy.”

“How lovely, Con. But I am not contemplating—”

“Why not? Oh, Lord, there we go! I also suggested to Peter that he was an outdoor fowl and a signreader.”

“Why, Peter is a marvel at reading and hiding signs. He taught me to trail Charley Wells.”

"Fine! And trailed the two of you himself."

"I didn't know that." Her eyes opened.

"Speaking of Charley, you should have known him that Sunday morning ____"

"I did not." She shook her dark head. "The man I saw was not Charley. I would know. I just got a glimpse of him. It was as if he had seen me first and was hunching down and limping to confuse me. No, Con, he was not Charley Wells—but I would have known him in another instant. He is always on the fringes of my memory."

"Perhaps it was a woman's figure."

"No. I don't think so. But it—No, Con! It was a man."

"You have no inkling at all—?"

"None whatever. I have tried and tried. I have dreamed about him. I can see him now." She slowed down and stopped, and spoke in a small awed voice, "Oh, Con! Why did I not notice that before? I saw the man just now as in a vision and he was limping on the wrong foot—the left foot. The man I saw that morning was not Charley. Charley limps right-footed. It was someone imitating him who forgot."

"He was wearing brown? Damn brown. The all-prevalent shade in this territory."

"That was a brown year everywhere. I had a brown costume, and Peter had a brown suit but he was in plaid that night. Hughes usually chooses brown tints, but he was in grey flannel—and my uncle wore near-brown."

"And brown is the farmer's colour—and the golfer's. Was your brother in brown too?" Con's voice was casual.

She nodded readily. "He was, but he was not home till morning—and, I am afraid, not too sober when we waked him up."

"Leave the man in brown," Con said. "Now I'll tread softly. Why don't you like Muriel Gordon?"

"That's not treading softly, Mister," she gave him back. "I like her and despise her."

"Bejabers and his great-grandmother!" cried the surprised male. "You wouldn't sort of despise her because men like her—too much—say even Peter?"

"No. Peter likes her fine, and so does Hughes. Nothing on that line of approach. But there is something I should tell you about Peter. He has a blind spot where woman as woman is concerned. He is immune."

"Yerra, go to God!" said Con in his broadest brogue.

"I'm telling you." She turned and looked out over the lawn and tree tops. "I know. He likes me and I like him, but even a cousin—or half one—likes to be liked because she is a woman, and not a boy in petticoats. Probably, once on a

time, I tempted Peter—for fun.”

“It was your beholden duty,” Con said.

“I could never touch Peter where he lived,” she said. “So we squabbled and argued religion and rationalism. That was fine too. Con darling, you have a deceitful, confidential way with you. A splendid father confessor was lost in you.”

“Proceed with your confession, my daughter,” said Con.

“Why not I?” she mimicked him. “When Hughes came to live here, you know he preferred Peter’s company to mine.”

“You larned him?”

“Worse than that, I set my cap at him in the first place merely to get Peter’s reactions. There weren’t any. He was just happy that I liked his best friend.”

“Hughes has no blind spot about woman as woman, I’ll bet a hat?” Con suggested.

“I don’t know. In Peter’s language I may not have what it takes. Hughes is no great lover, and sometimes I think that he still prefers Peter’s company. That’s my confession, father!”

“Not yet,” said Con. “You are an irritatingly clever sort of a sinner, and you are driving me to the direct question.”

“Yes, Con?”

“Very well then. No—not yet! You like Muriel Gordon?”

“I do. I always did. We grew up together. She has charm and brains and—and then something happened.”

“The direct question then. Why do you despise her?”

“Because she was cruel.”

“Cruel?” he repeated without purpose. “She was cruel?”

“Yes. She was wickedly cruel to poor Uncle Mark.”

“By the great hornspoon!” cried Con warmly and with a flash of temper. “Your Uncle Mark, by all accounts, was the one man deserving a woman’s cruelty.”

But Barbara had made up her mind on this question. “No doubt he was not a good man in the way you mean,” she said. “But there is nothing in the world that should make one human being cruel to another. Nothing at all.”

“That is a very fine ethic, my dear lady,” said Con gently. “But I do be wondering how Muriel Gordon could be kind to Marcus Aitken?”

“I never said anything about kindness. There was no demand for her to be kind, only not to be cruel. She need not have come down here at all. It was not hate—I could understand that. It was a cold vengeance. She no longer cared for him in any way, and I know that he still cared for her, and wanted to make restitution. It was abominable. There it is for you now.”

“So it is.” He spoke diffidently. “Excuse my stupidity, but how could a

man make restitution to another man's wife?"

"If you knew that you would know more than enough."

"Perhaps I used the wrong word there," Con said. "The last one."

She considered that. "You are no longer the confessor," she said, "but a dangerous devil of a detective."

"On the spur of the moment I would say that Muriel née Buckley started by taking someone into her confidence, and that someone jumped down her throat as it were."

"Let's not talk scandal. I don't know why I like you."

"I don't either. Very good then! That is the end of the catechism, and half the time I didn't know who was the examiner."

"I did, you gentle-looking devil. You riddled all you wanted out of me, but are you any the wiser?"

"Less ignorant shall we say. I am not coming in if you don't mind. Some more work to do. Thanks for everything."

"God help the next poor sinner you shrive," she said.

"God help me!" said Con, and took the four broad steps in one easy swoop. He swung round at the bottom.

"This is dance night at the Club. You'll be there with Hughes and Peter?"

"An order?"

"From the captain of the team. Make sure they come. I am using you tonight."

A PICTURE IS PAINTED

I

CON went directly back to the Home Farm and up to his own room. There he changed into heather-mixture tweeds with a brown tint.

Next he unlocked a strongly made attaché case. Among other things, it contained the flies and casts recovered from Charley Wells, the wallet pocketbook belonging to Toby Aitken, and his own flat automatic pistol. He picked up a careful handful of flies, made sure that some of them were of Peter's dressing, and dropped them into an outer pocket. He stowed the wallet away in an inside breast pocket, and hesitated over the automatic. He did not like firearms. Finally he decided that this case might be the exceptional one, and slipped the automatic into his hip pocket. Then he remembered that he had not told Peter to take his pistol to the club this coming evening. He could remedy that by taking it himself and slipping it to Peter if necessary.

He went downstairs and found Mrs. Bartley in the dining room with a tea tray. "I thought you might be needing a cup, sir," she said.

"A woman after my own heart, ma'am," Con said. "The very thing I am needing." He noted a second cup on the tray. "I'll join you in a cup with a heart and a half." Con was lying pleasantly, for he despised afternoon tea.

"Did you like your lunch, sir?"

"So-so! Been eating your viands, ma'am," said Con shamelessly, and came to the point while it was in his mind. "Didn't Peter have a bit of a toy pistol somewhere, Mrs. Bartley?"

"A flat bit of a thing firing itself off like a boy at a paling. Miss Barbara and Mr. Everitt used be practising with it, a danger to life and limb. Sure, she near killed my best gander blazing away at a bottle. 'Tis in the third drawer of the desk over there. Do you want it, sir?"

"Not particularly," Con said. "I would like to compare it with one I sometimes carry."

"I'll get it for you, sir." She waddled across to the desk and pulled open the

third drawer, and felt amongst some loose papers.

“’Tisn’t here, whatever!” she said in surprise, “and it was two days ago. I saw it myself.”

Con was at her shoulder. There was a box of cartridges, but there was no automatic, nor were there any spare clips. Mrs. Bartley pulled open the other drawers hastily, and felt amongst a disarray of papers. There was no automatic.

“Peter has it on him,” he said easily, though his mind was troubled. “I told him to go heeled.”

She opened her eyes wide. “Is he in danger, sir?”

“Not a scrap of danger, ma’am. But we must remember what happened to his shotgun last year. Who was here yesterday?”

“No one at all, sir, only Miss Barbara and Mr. Everitt before and after the fishing. Faix! I’m wrong. There was a woman here you wouldn’t know at all, Aby Shaw, the Gordons’ housekeeper, an old friend o’ mine. We had a cup o’ tea in here while ye were in the sun-parlour at that chess game.”

“Abigail Shaw. I heard of her. Devoted to her mistress?”

“Why not she? She reared her. A pleasant body, too, for all that she is a Scotch Presbyterian from the Border. That is all we had yesterday—I’m sure o’ that.”

“And to-day?”

“To-day, in the morning, Mr. Everitt was in looking for ye, after you went out. He was on that old bike of his.”

“He was at the Big House ahead of us. Well, ma’am?”

“There was Muriel, too, and her man. They were here for lunch with Denis, as Aby had taken Davy to the dentist.” Mrs. Bartley’s placid forehead wrinkled into a frown. “And not more than an hour ago I found Toby in this room—the scrounger!”

“Got in unbeknownst?”

“He did then. I wonder, now, would he have stolen the pistol?” She was perplexed. “But why—”

“Would he know where to look for it?”

“Sure, everyone knows where everything is in this house. An’ didn’t he know where the whiskey was as well?”

“A noble generous house, and we shall so keep it.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t be worrying, my darling woman. Peter will have the gun on him according to orders. Now I am walking into Eglintoun on business, and I may be late—”

“That’ll be all right, sir. If you’re not too late, I’ll have something hot for you, and if you’re later than that, it isn’t anything hot you’ll be wantin’.”

“Be the powders o’ war!” cried Con. “Your knowledge of man is final and comforting.”

"You're a comfortable kind of a man about a house, yourself, sir," said Mrs. Bartley and laughed. "'Tis a wonder no woman hooked you—but maybe she did?"

"Not yet, ma'am." He put a lightly affectionate arm across her shoulders. "Faith! there are two or three women not far from here I could be doing with at my fire corner—the maturer the better."

"Away with ye, ye Irish Turk!" said the pleased Mrs. Bartley.

Long striding down the farm road, Con wondered about that missing automatic. Peter would not have taken it to Danesford House. Who then could have taken it? Anyone of several people: Barbara Aitken, Hughes Everitt, Toby Aitken, Denis Buckley, Phil Gordon, Muriel and her Abigail. Abigail Shaw! a Border Presbyterian and pleasant withal. Sounded like a contradiction.

He slip-footed along until he came to the gate of the Gordon bungalow. There he paused and groaned. *Help! I'll be compelled to drink some more afternoon tea.*

On the lawn, a garden table, whereon stood the implements and offerings of this ritual feast. Some wicker and canvas chairs were grouped round. Phil Gordon and Muriel were sitting in two of them, and on a third, drawn close to the table, was perched a child intently watching a woman in a blue print dress pour tea out of a silver teapot.

A pleasant and homely scene, and Con Madden was bent on ruffling it, not on the surface, but deep down where currents of feeling twisted. He threw away his cigarette and cleared his throat loudly. Muriel turned her golden head and beckoned.

"Come right in and rest yo' feet, big man!" she called.

"You'll not forget you invited me, lady?" Con said, and came across the grass. "Take notice," he announced, "I've been drinking Johan Bartley's cream tea. Have mercy on me."

"Our lares and penates are mildly inclined these days," said Muriel with some meaning.

Phil Gordon, his face set saturninely, gestured to Con, and Con sank circumspectly in a chair, leaning back to ease the tightness of his waistband.

"This is son David," Muriel said. She did not say our son.

"And a grand boy for his age, God bless him," Con said. "How are you, David? My name is Con Madden."

"Good, Conwadden!" said the child. He was too eager for his tea to be interested in a stranger. He was, indeed, a lovely child, with his mother's colouring and hair, but his eyes were blue. Con liked children and could talk to them, but the crisis of his problem loomed so near, that he could not now lose his mind in a child's mind.

"This is Abigail Shaw, our friend," Muriel said.

Con bowed, and the woman smiled faintly and ironically at him.

"You'll be the braw lad boasting the braw things you'll be doing for Peter Falkner?" she said.

"The very same, hoosewife," Con said. "Braw things for a braw, braw lad—and a lassie or two in the bygoin'."

"Losh! he's makin' up to me a'ready," said Abigail Shaw. "You'll be for a cuppie, Meester?"

"Without sugar or milk, mistress, and God increase your store. A certain young gent will eat my share of the cookies."

One who did not know the Lowlands would never take Abigail Shaw for a Calvinist of the Border, for, surely, a Calvinist woman should be tall and gaunt and stern. This woman was on the small side, and she was buxom, her second chin receding into a fine column of neck that swelled into a noble bust. She had frank blue eyes and a mop of tow hair. She was no menial woman.

Con sipped his tea and made small talk for a while. Abigail Shaw poured tea for herself and sat close to young David. Phil Gordon waited till his tea was cool enough, drank it off, set his cup on the grass and filled a pipe. He did not talk at all. Muriel ate adequately, took a cigarette from Con, and leaned back in her chair, ankles crossed. She wore sandals and was stockingless, and Con could not keep his eyes away from the lovely smooth golden texture of her shapely legs. She smiled at him and said:

"Abigail is the exception, Con Madden. She will not fall for you. I have no secrets from her, and I rather think she wants to take the hide off you."

"It has happened to me so often," Con said, "that I wear it loose now—buttoned up the back."

"I wouldna skin the big chiel," said Abigail Shaw. "As long as he thinks we're a' guilty, there'll be nae hurt till him."

"I wouldna hurt a flea," Con said.

"I would then!" She looked at the child. "And I wouldna mind putting a thumb-nail on a two-legged beastie either."

"I like fleas," piped the child. "I swat them."

"Why not you?" Con agreed. He looked out into the distance and spoke as if to himself. "The thought has been in my mind that a woman might be in this before and after, but no woman at all would stay to pull a second trigger—if ye ken what I mean."

"I ken fine, laddie," said Abigail. "You're nae sae foolish as you look, my man."

"I am then," Con said, "but I might not be as foolish as the foolish individual who seeks to fool me."

"I think you have met your match, Aby," said Muriel.

"The Irish ha'e glib tongues, the warld knows," said Aby.

Phil Gordon spoke for the first time. "Little pitchers have long ears, Aby! I have a few words to say to Mr. Madden."

"And I've a puckle to say mysel' tae," she said and looked directly at Con, her eyes no longer pleasant. "You had better ca' canny, my fine Irisher."

Con said smoothly, "I'll ca' canny, but it will not be long now."

"You've a tongue in your heid, onywey," she said suddenly mild. "A great pity if it sets scandalous tongues awagging."

"I'll do my endeavours not to, Abigail Shaw," he said. "We understand each other." This woman was bent on saving her lady from scandal. But what scandal? The old one or a brand new one?

Abigail Shaw watched her young charge drink the last of his milk, rose to her feet and reached him a hand. "Come along, laddie! Let's be seeing if Uncle Peter brought us back that Jabberwocky from town?"

"And a shrimp bird as well," Con said, "with an orange head and a screw tail. He got out this morning and is climbing a tree by the door in the wall. Off ye go and see if ye can catch him."

Young David trotted across the lawn dragging at the woman's hand.

Gordon was smoking his pipe calmly, his face grave and massive, looking more like a Roman emperor than ever.

"You had a word or two to say, Mr. Gordon?"

"I have." He did not turn his head. "You are investigating Peter Falkner's case?"

"I am. I hope to clear his name."

"I hope you do. Apparently you are throwing a wide net and investigating all and sundry?"

"All and sundry is right. I have to. A regular cat o' nine tails."

"And I am one of the tails—and Muriel too. You are investigating us of course?"

"Why should I?" enquired Con.

"Because you know your job, Mr. Madden—and other things as well." He smiled faintly. "I have heard of you—and a mysterious partner in the background, probably fabulous."

How did Gordon hear of the fabulous but solid Daniel Glover? Charley Wells knew. Con was thinking hard. If Charley had made contact with someone last night, that one would know too.

"You're taking it that Peter Falkner is not guilty," Gordon was saying. "I never thought he was—so your attention must be turned to Muriel and me amongst others. In fact, I might be your leading suspect."

"You were not home till six on a certain morning?" Con said.

"So I said, and such is the fact. But no doubt you calculated times and mileage from where I started at Telltown. I could have been home at 3 A.M. and

Aitken could have been killed at four—according to expert evidence. What I want to say is that in investigating us, you would be thorough. You would go into our records—all available records—for the past six years.”

“We have to,” Con said. “I never liked it.”

“And you found no record of Muriel and me—and you will not. Is that clear enough?”

“It is.”

Gordon smiled again. “You did not go very far back in my case, did you? If you did, you might find one important record of mine.” He was hinting plainly enough that the record to be found was of Gordon’s marriage—but not to Muriel. Con said nothing.

“The record is there,” Gordon admitted. “It still holds good.” His voice flattened. “But even if it did not, I am no blind fool wanting the moon.”

“A want that all men have sometimes,” murmured Con meditatively, and glanced aside at Muriel. She was lying back in her chair, her hands shading her face from the afternoon sun—or from his eyes. She was no frigid moon. Her very dress of pastel blue was vibrant with the life inside it. A man would want to keep this woman.

“Why do you tell me all this?” Con asked.

“To show that I am not much afraid of you or anyone else. I do not like to be handled with a velvet glove.”

“I rather like it myself,” murmured Muriel.

“You would, old girl—you wear one,” Gordon said. “Well, Mr. Madden, ask any question, and I’ll answer if I can. And you can make any use you think necessary of your information, and I’ll abide the issue. That is all.”

“Fair enough!” Con said. “You were not within a mile radius of this vicinity before six that Sunday morning?”

“I was not.”

“And that being your answer, I have not another question I want to ask *you*. The man I am looking for was seen by one—or two men. He was seen by a woman also, but she does not yet know who he was. The two men are weak vessels, and the one I want will break under pressure, and I know the pressure to employ.” He thrust out a big left hand and clenched it slowly. “Soon now.”

“I wish you luck,” Gordon said calmly.

Con rose, and made a small gesture of farewell.

“Thanks for everything, tea and talk and son David, not forgetting that mild tigress, Abigail Shaw. Business calls.”

“More business, you mean?” said Muriel.

“As you say, wise lady.” Con went across to the gate, opened it, turned to close it behind him, and found Muriel’s hand on it. She came through and closed the gate.

"From a certain emphasis, Con Madden, I gathered that you wanted to ask *me* some questions?" she said.

"I dunno that I do," Con scratched his poll. "'Tis damn difficult to ask you the sort of questions I have in my mind."

"Don't be squeamish. I may not answer them—at least not directly like old Phil. You are going townwards? I'll walk with you till I lose my nerve, as I did last night."

The two walked along, shoulders almost touching.

"I don't think I'll let you question me after all, Con Madden," she said. "I think the time has come for me to complete the picture. A sordid enough picture, my master, but not false."

"I am watching your brush," Con said.

She threw out a hand—"There I am leaving home—my Abigail taking me away—oh! so many years ago, and I am dead, and I did not think that I would ever come to life again. In those far-off days I had qualities worth nurturing. I can see that now. I might have become a nun."

"Thank the Lord you did not!" Con said warmly.

"I did die for a while. And it was Marcus Aitken who brought me to life again. You need not be surprised. He followed us to town, and found me. You do not know the terrible loathing revulsion that sometimes comes over a woman. You could not, and I cannot begin to tell you. He had killed something fine in me, and now he wanted to take me under his protection."

"He is dead," said Con.

"And Abigail Shaw wanted to kill him then—to kill him openly and take the consequences. I knew that was not the way. That was God's vengeance, mine would be long-drawn out." She laughed sadly. "I was like the wronged heroine in melodrama. And then Mark Aitken offered to marry me—wanted to marry me. I had power over him that he had never felt before. I had him in the hollow of my hand. I was the vengeance of all the women betrayed and despoiled. There is a despoiling apart from seduction that some women suffer, and I suffered it—some high chastity lost forever. I was a wicked fool. I made Mark Aitken suffer for what I had suffered. It is not easy to go on, Con Madden."

"Do not go on," said Con harshly. "That is all I want to know."

"Thank you, Con. I used all that was in me for the purposes of revenge. For five years I tortured Mark Aitken."

She paused and went on. "But I am no longer that sort of fool. If David shows a bent for the soil—and it is in his blood—I shall not hesitate to put him in Peter Falkner's hands."

"Peter would do a good deal for you?"

"But not what you think. Leave that!" She touched his sleeve. "But you

were right, Con, in a left-handed way. I did weaken. Perhaps I grew weary, or my hurt mended, or an old priest showed me the pettiness of what I was doing—and the wickedness too—I found myself with no feeling at all, one way or the other, for Mark Aitken. Wait! I am wrong there. I saw him growing old in futile rages, and found myself thinking sorrowfully for him, for all he had wanted, and all he had lost. My cruelty came home to roost.”

“I heard it called that name.”

“You would. The only solace I had was that, somehow, I was remaking Mark Aitken into a not bad imitation of a decent man—Peter and myself. Honestly we were, Con. In the end I weakened so much that I decided to go away. And then Mark Aitken was killed. But I am going away nevertheless, Con Madden.”

“Taking your father with you?”

“If he comes, which I doubt now.” She grasped his arm and held, and he felt his blood move. “You are a darling, Con Madden! Something you must have said has lifted a weight off the old fellow’s mind. I had lunch with him to-day and he asked me a straight question. He said, ‘Daughter, are you afraid that I killed Mark Aitken?’ And I had to answer that I was. He was astonishing after that. He became talkative—almost. ‘That’s grand!’ he said. ‘That’s right grand! I doubt I’ll have to give that Mr. Madden his half-dollar back’—whatever he meant.”

“A small misunderstanding we had,” Con said.

“Anyway he was relieved and almost gay, and cracked a joke with Johan Bartley. I couldn’t understand how—”

“For a smart woman, you have a blind spot,” Con said. “Can’t you see that your fear made his own fear groundless?”

“His own fear!” She did not get it for a moment. Then, “Oh, Con! The poor man! Was that what was wrong with him? The poor, poor man! But how could he fear that I would do such a thing? And you too thought me guilty—?”

“I did not—not ever,” Con denied, and wondered if he were telling all the truth.

“Thank you, Con Madden. Of course his fear shows that my fear was unfounded. And look! I will try and answer any question you care to ask me.”

“Fair enough!” Con glanced at her. “A man who takes six hours to drive one hundred and fifty miles is in no great hurry?”

“Does that trouble you? Phil would never think of killing anyone because of me.”

“Cold blooded?”

“He is not. He has a philosophy of his own. He is my very good friend. We suit each other. Neither he nor I will ask what neither of us will give, and there is no question of treachery or deception. We go our own ways.”

"Maybe you do, and it strikes me as a dam' fool way," Con said with a little heat.

They had turned out into the main road, and a small man in black was ambling along towards them. He was Father Martin, the priest of Eglintoun.

"I am calling on Peter, with his wheat and wine and oil," said the small man.

Muriel glanced at Con. "Peter about?"

"He'll be back from Danesford by now."

The old priest stopped in front of them and looked from one to the other.

"This is Mr. Con Madden, Father Martin, and he would be my enemy if he had to be. He is Peter's friend, and he is down here from town to clear Peter's name."

"Clear Peter's name!" cried Father Martin. He looked at Con with a new interest. "Can you clear Peter's name, Mr. Madden?"

"I hope to, Father," Con said.

"I wish I could help."

"You are the last man I would ask," said Con calmly, and smiled. "But when it is all over I might come to you for a spiritual verdict."

"Bravo, Con!" cried Muriel. "I could have cleared Peter Falkner's name a year ago if that man there had let me." She turned to the priest. "I asked your advice a year ago, and if you'd let me say what I wanted to say there would be no need for Con Madden at this late hour."

"I will not listen to you, woman." The priest's voice was stern yet disturbed.

"Let me have my own way in this, Father," she begged. "This panther under his mask of diffidence is ruthless like steel. He has been putting the beginning of wisdom in some of us, and I would love him to winnow the soul in you too. This thing I am going to tell him is sheer ignoble vanity on my part, so that, though I was wicked, he will not think me as wicked as he once thought I was—and he might not believe me if you were not here."

"I will not speak even if you speak truth."

"Therefore I speak truth, Mr. Jesuit." She turned to Con. "One Sunday afternoon a year ago I went to this priest and I asked him could I make a statement that Mark Aitken had been in my house on Saturday night at eleven o'clock. And he answered, 'Was he in your house at that hour, O daughter of shame?'"

"That is not my form of address," protested the priest.

"It was at the back of your mind. I said, 'He was in my house within an hour of eleven, and what is an hour with a man's life at stake?' And he said. 'No, daughter. If a life is to be saved, God will save it, and He will not use a lie and the shame of a woman for His purposes.' Do you deny that?"

“I do not speak.”

“Therefore I do not lie. That is all, Con Madden. Peter was not my lover. If he were, I could save him? A strange philosophy! Will you rend this old man for me?”

“I leave Father Martin to you, lady,” Con said. He lifted his hand in salute to the priest and the woman, turned on his heel, and went loose-footed on the Eglintoun Road.

CON MADDEN GOES ON A FAST

I

CON paused at the road to the Spa, then passed it by. He had one small job to do before a final conference with Daniel Glover.

He went down Loaning Road, and into High Street. He kept his eyes open, but the man he was looking for was nowhere on the streets.

At the corner of High Street, Con strode into the angle of the Town Chambers where the Police Station door stood open. He did not want to run across Superintendent Mullen, but he had to take that risk. He mounted three steps, pushed open a glass-panelled door, and found himself in the day room. He leaned across a scuffled wooden counter and sniffed.

"The same old desiccating smell of law and order! A cross between a jail and sanatorium."

A young constable sat on a high stool and nodded over a sporting paper. He lifted his head, yawned, and came across to the counter buttoning his tunic.

"Is Superintendent Mullen on the premises?" Con whispered.

"He's at his tea, sir." The young constable grinned.

"The milk will curdle it—God is good!" Con said. "Is Constable Myles on duty?"

"Constable—? Inspector Myles, sir. You want to see him?"

"No, I don't want to see him, but if he is having his afternoon snooze I might have time to rob the bank."

The young constable grinned again. "I think he's busy, sir, but I'll see."

He strode across the room and knocked sharply at a door.

"There's a gentleman wants to rob a bank, sir! Has he time?" enquired Mackie.

Con heard a yawn cut short. Dick Myles's voice lifted.

"I know that gentleman. Warn all the banks, Mackie."

A chair scraped, and a black-browed man in a suit of brown mufti, came out.

"Begod!" cried Con. "Another man in bloody brown! Who did Dick Myles murder, I wonder?"

The Inspector's voice was savage. "Out with the handcuffs, Mackie. The terrible Con Madden in the lion's den!"

He grasped Con by hand and shoulder and hauled him across the floor towards his own room. It was small and bare, with a pedestal desk, a telephone, two or three chairs, a big filing cabinet, a press, and no more. Myles thrust Con into his own comfortable chair at the desk.

"Dambut, Con!" he said. "You look prosperous. Bank robbing must be a good trade."

"I am in disguise, Dick," Con said. "You haven't half a dollar on you?"

"The last one. We'll go over to the Danesford Arms and talk of old times over a pint."

Con shook his head. "No, Dick. I'm on the job and close up."

Myles nodded. "Madden and Glover, Private Investigators—I've heard about ye. Who is Glover?"

"A fabulous solidity," Con said.

"You are on the job—the Falkner case?"

"That's right."

"See that file under your hand? That's the Aitken-Falkner file. Since I saw you in High Street two evenings ago, I have been raking through it."

"Find anything new?"

"Not a thing. Falkner is out and will stay out."

"You liked Peter Falkner?"

"I did, and I do."

Con looked at his friend and shook his head dolefully. "I had great hopes for you once, Richard. I'll not blame you—much. But someone left a stable door wide-open that Sunday. When did you lock it?"

"Meaning?"

"When did you search Charley Wells's junk shop?"

"Monday afternoon, I got Mullen to do it. He had his case so satisfactorily that he wouldn't or couldn't see further than his nose and that's long enough. I did any raking there was." He leaned forward. "How did you get on to Charley Wells?"

"By following my nose, and it is not as long as Mullen's."

"Are you on to something? Dammit! I followed the trails of seven or eight myself and couldn't lay a finger on one."

"Who were they?"

"Denis Buckley the foreman, his daughter Muriel supposed-to-be-Gordon —"

"Supposed to be Gordon?"

“Go to blazes! You didn’t miss that bet, and neither did I. I thought that Buckley, Muriel, Gordon and Aby Shaw—she’s the super-servant—might have ganged up on old Mark.” He frowned. “I would hate to think of our Muriel taking that road out.”

“Poor old Dicky!” said Con. “He fell for her too.”

“Who wouldn’t? Then there was Toby Aitken—only he hadn’t the guts—”

“With a little Dutch courage?”

“Yes, he was still drunk Sunday morning—too drunk. And there was Charley Wells, of course—”

“You left his stable door open too long. Any more?”

“Hughes Everitt and Barbara Aitken. They were my best bet for a whole month.”

“Could you see Barbara Aitken doing the dirty on Peter Falkner?”

“I couldn’t. But if Everitt succeeded in eliminating Falkner she would be worth a cool hundred thousand—maybe more. So I concentrated on Everitt. He’s one of those writing Johnnies, making good money and spending it too, but nothing shady or unusual. A pleasant chap and no damn fool, as that killer must have been, but he could do with a hundred thousand all right. But what’s the good of talking?” He looked at Con keenly. “Unless you’d like to do some talking yourself?”

“I’ll say this, Dick. Through no fault of your own, you missed one bit of evidence, if you had it—but as you say, what’s the good of talking? I might talk plenty to-morrow or next day. Meantime, I want a bit of help. Listen!” He leaned forward. “I am for trying a small experiment to-night and want you to do something for me—strictly within the limits of the police code.”

Dick Myles chuckled. “That is what you used to say when you worked ten miles outside it.”

“Fair enough. I am inclined to think that Charley Wells will be on the prowl to-night. I want you to keep him under observation and indoors until eleven o’clock this evening, and not a moment longer.”

“Is that all?”

“You might have to do the same to-morrow.”

Dick laughed. “Chicken feed. Eleven o’clock! that’s easy and quite legal. He runs a model, you know, for travelling men—mostly rogues. We give him regular inspections and special ones when we are on the look-out for a man. I am. I’ll give him a special to-night at 10.30 and apprise him that his presence will be required. Meantime Mackie outby can keep his place under observation. Anything else?”

“Yes. Don’t let Charley take a phone call after ten. Thanks, Dick! I’ll reward you with a story later.”

“Why not now—ten miles outside the codes?”

"Not with handcuffs on the premises." Con rose to his feet. "Tell you what, Dick. I'll meet you on North Road—out of sight of Charley's—sometime after ten. If I see my way, I'll give you a hint—and you can use it."

"Fair enough, as you say yourself. Shall we go and drink that half dollar?"

Con shook his head. "I'm on one of my fasts, Dick."

"Gawd help Charley Wells!" Myles said. "I wish you all the luck in the world for Peter Falkner's sake."

II

Con Madden climbed up to the green lawn fronting the Spa, and found Daniel Glover sitting in a wicker chair, his panama hiding all but his jutting spade beard. Con approached him soft-footed.

"Time stands still for the great gawd Buddha. *Om mane pudme bum*, lotus-eater!"

Glover lifted a book from the other chair. Con eased himself into it.

"Gosh! I'm tired."

"You are suggesting an alcoholic beverage?" murmured Glover's deep voice.

"I am not," said Con. "Bite or sup will not pass my lips till the cock crows."

Glover sat up, solicitude in his green eyes.

"Your plans then, are approaching consummation, Cornelius?"

"What about your own plans, kind sir?"

Daniel gestured. "I have been wondering what artifices you would resort to, assuming that Wells got into communication with his possible victim last night," and Daniel related where and how he had seen Wells.

"That would seem to prove that Peter's automatic was not lifted last night. You did not know about that?" Con told him briefly. "If that automatic had been stolen last night by this possible victim, our Mr. Wells might not be particularly extant to-day."

"Falkner may have it."

"He may, but I don't think so—not during working hours. If Charley knew that Gordon was home last night he might be trying to contact him—or Muriel, or Abigail Shaw—"

"Or someone he had already failed to find at home?"

"And who might be in the Gordon bungalow? Denis Buckley is one. He left the farmhouse before I did." A note of gloom came into Con's voice. "Or to be scandalous, it might be Hughes Everitt who was at the Home Farm when I got back. Peter beat him twice at chess."

"You suggest that Everitt was off-form because, for some reason, he could

not concentrate?”

“Or he might let Peter win to encourage his conceit. He left at once to go home by the short-cut through the woods. A pity you are not a night-hawk, Daniel.”

“I did not feel competent, and you are aware of my cowardly nature.”

“Of experience, sir.” Con sniggered. “Faith! I am not blaming you. I would not care to trail Charley in his own woods unless I was in plate armour and drunk. Are you wanting to hear of this day’s operations?” As Con talked, Daniel leaned back in his chair. Occasionally he groaned, but did not once interrupt.

“That is the situation up to this moment,” Con finished. “I have still to contact Toby Aitken, and after that we might go places. I wait for your usual disapproval?”

“More than usual. Entire. You have been inciting various people, hoping that one of them will attempt to silence—”

“The most venomous of the snake tribe. Well? I am only asking a man to take a risk—unbeknownst—in the interests of Justice. I had one of my hunches, and my backbone has been tingling all day.”

“Another of your feminine intuitions! Must you act on it?”

“We always do. This is the night of all nights in the year that we wander some there and some here, in the words of Poe.”

“Grossly adapted. But do not visualize me as one of your wanderers. I am retiring at my usual hour, possibly to be distressed in the morning by news of a double assassination.”

“Double? Con Madden with his toes up!”

“That would make it treble. I have considered that some unfortunate scoundrel may be driven to kill twice.”

“Let me assure you that your unfortunate scoundrel shall not be able to kill once if my method works.”

Glover spoke very seriously. “I shall not dissuade you, Cornelius, since your mind is made up, but you must be extremely precautions. Assassination is wholly unnecessary. Will you kindly detail the precautions you are taking?”

“They are of no interest to you,” said Con lightly. “You are going to bed. And when I say bed I mean bed. I’ll not have you snooping about my bailiwick. You are well known as a quiet, careful, prudent, timid, cowardly chunk of craven, and that’s the sort that a bullet goes looking for around corners. Are you listening to me?”

“I am listening to gross impertinence. By the way, did anyone, but Gordon, of the people you dragooned, browbeat, incited, intimidated, give a hint that I was in the vicinity?”

“No one gave the least hint,” Con told him.

Glover cleared his throat. “Now, none of your nonsense, Cornelius. I insist on knowing your plans for to-night. Recall that I am your senior partner.”

“Long may you remain so,” said Con respectfully, “and I will not risk making your night restless by worry and prayers for your junior partner. Midnight, that’s your bedtime! You are out of bounds anywhere at any time between twelve and four, and if I catch you snooping out the Doom Road between the golf course and the by-road, I shall be compelled to take steps required by the circumstances. A pleasant sleep, partner!”

CLEARED FOR ACTION

I

*T*HE Spa Company owned the Golf Course including the Clubhouse. Guests had free use of both; residents of Eglintoun paid nominal fees. The Clubhouse was actually the town's club, where residents and guests intermingled. There were dancing and cards twice a week all the year round.

This was a dancing night, or, rather, a dancing evening, for the sun would not set till 9.50, and there would not be more than a half-dark at midnight when dancing usually ceased.

Con Madden arrived shortly after eight, and shared the time between bar and lounge. Muriel and Barbara were there, and Con danced with both, and had a drink with them. It was only an orange splash. Muriel laughed at his soft drink, but was unusually serious this evening. Hughes Everitt had come with Barbara, danced twice with her, chatted easily with Muriel, and disappeared into the refuge of the bar. Daniel Glover turned up before nine.

A few minutes after nine, when Con re-entered the bar, the people he was keeping under observation were disposed as follows: Barbara and Muriel were in the lounge, and Muriel was dancing with the man generally believed to be her husband. Hughes Everitt and Daniel Glover had withdrawn into the bow window of the bar, sat erect at opposite sides of a small table, and were intent on that leisurely, over-complicated, supposed-game called chess. Toby Aitken, still in golf attire, was back-leaning against the bar counter, drinking his second double-whiskey of the evening, but he was quite sober. He turned a grouchy eye on Peter Falkner who had just arrived and was surrounded by half a dozen men. This was Peter's first visit to the Club since his release, and these men, who had been his friends, were doing their best to show him that they were still his friends, but they were too effusive and cheerful.

Con looked on. To-morrow or next day, God aiding his efforts, these men could proclaim that they had never doubted Peter's guiltlessness, and had been among the first to welcome him while he was still under a cloud. Who would

be under a cloud then? Con had forgotten to tell Peter to wear neutral tints, and was glad to see that he was in dark grey—a colour that would not stand out against most backgrounds in any half-light.

After a while he caught Peter's eye, beckoned with his head, and went off down a passage, and into the open. On the terrace back of the first tee was a scatter of rustic seats. Con chose one well away from the walls and open windows, sat down, lit a cigarette, and sighed. Through the lounge windows the dance music filled him with a vague depression.

Peter Falkner came across the grass, sat down at his side, and began to fill a pipe.

"Afraid?"

Peter was frank. "If it is fear. Just a sort of sinking feeling, with a touch of futile resentment."

"You are on edge and you need action." Con tapped him on the knee. "You are going to get it this very night. Have you your gun on you?"

"No. Johan Bartley told me about it." He turned to Con interestedly, "Con, someone lifted that automatic with two full clips."

"I feared so. No, I didn't! We are after that someone."

"But who the hell—? In my own house—"

"Always in your own house. Keep your mind off it! You'll need all your wits for the job you'll be on. You can have my gun. You won't have to use it, I think, but if you have to, remember you are up against one out to kill. Can you shoot?"

"Not as well as I can," said a voice behind them.

Con's hands rose above his shoulders. "Take the Canuck first, Billy the Kid!" he urged.

Barbara Aitken, slim and lovely in a dress of old gold, came round, sat down between them, and shook a brown fist. "See that! If you two conspirators think you can leave me out of anything, you have another guess coming. What is this talk about shooting, Mr. Con Madden?"

"About the time you killed Mrs. Bartley's gander blazing away at a bottle," Con told her.

"I didn't either! I broke the bottle and Charley—that's the gander—got in the line of fire and had his leg broken. I put it in splints and he is still alive. We call him Charley because he limps like Charley Wells. Were you talking about Charley—Wells, I mean?"

"We are going to talk of Charley Wells." Con jerked a thumb over shoulder. "But I want our full team."

"He's in the bar playing chess with a capable-looking bearded guy," Peter said.

"That's one Mr. Glover," Barbara said. "Hughes introduced me to him last

week.”

“I’ll haul Hughes out,” volunteered Peter.

Con stopped him. “You are game, I know, but I can’t risk you to the fury of the addict. Moreover, I don’t want Hughes just yet.” He turned to Barbara. “We are not leaving you out of anything, Diana of the cussed ways. Listen! I have a small job of work to do first, but, in exactly twenty minutes from now, I want you three confederates to meet me out here. If I am not here, wait for me.” His voice was very serious. “I shall talk to you with complete frankness, and after that we begin to operate. Now you two go in and dance.”

He got to his feet and moved towards the porch. From the doorway he looked back. The two cousins were sitting very still side by side, looking out to the distant downs.

II

Hughes Everitt and Daniel Glover were deeply concentrated in their game of chess. Toby Aitken, glass in hand, stood over them, his legs wide apart. Con lounged across and stood at Toby’s shoulder.

Toby glanced at him gloweringly, and twitched a shoulder irritably. The two players took no notice of them. It was Everitt’s move, and he leaned well over the board.

“Two-four-ten!” Con pretended to count. “Thirty-six I was told—where are the four missing gadgets?”

Hughes, not lifting his head, spoke calm-voiced. “Betake yourself to a nunnery, Madden, and haul Toby along—by the slack of his breeches!”

“Like hell, he will,” said Toby.

“I like your orders, Mr. Everitt,” Con said smoothly. “I am going to talk to young Aitken for two minutes. Come outside, Tobias.”

“Sounds like an invitation to war,” Hughes said.

“You shut up!” growled Toby threateningly. “Madden can have trouble if he’s looking for it.” He tossed off the last of his drink, and made as if to turn round towards the bar. Con’s detaining hand was inside his elbow.

“Whoa there—and listen!” Con kept his voice low. “Last year you dropped a certain article—dangerous to leave lying about. Come outside and I’ll show it to you. Come on, or I’ll expose you before the whole company!”

Con turned and moved towards the door. He went out into the open, and glanced across towards the seat where he had left Barbara and Peter. They were no longer there.

Con, not looking behind, went towards a clump of spruce. He went a dozen yards in among the trunks and waited. He had not many seconds to wait, for Toby was practically at his heels.

"What bloody nonsense is this!" he blustered.

Con placidly considered the face that could not set itself.

"I should not waste much time on the likes of you," Con said, "but one Saturday a year ago you went to Eskhill Races. You left Eskhill at 1 A.M. on Sunday and you said that you were not home till five in the morning. That was a lie."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. You parked your car on the road at the back of the Home Farm, you sneaked into your cousin's dining room by the back door—not for the first time, drank a stiff whiskey, and took the bottle away with you. What did you do after that?"

Toby said: "You'd like to frame me—"

"Why not? What did you do next?"

"I wasn't there, blast you!"

"You were. You ran into your Uncle Mark," went on Con implacably, "and he gave you a black eye that lasted you a fortnight."

"My Uncle Mark was dead—"

"You cowardly hound," said Con. "Your uncle was alive at two on Sunday morning and you knew it, and kept your mouth shut. Why? To save your own neck."

Toby's voice shrilled. "Now I know the liar you are. The whole thing is a frame-up, and you are another bloody blackmailer."

"Ah! Another blackmailer! Who are you blackmailing?"

Toby had been about to launch himself at Con, but Con's words stopped him like a blow.

"Who told you this cock-and-bull story?" he asked.

"Your pocketbook. The one given you by your sister."

"That was picked from me at Eskhill."

"It was picked from your car at the back of the Home Farm, and you know who picked it. He was watching you, and he had you in the hollow of his hand. What has he been doing to you, what have you been doing for him?"

Toby had a streak of cunning in him. "You know dam' well there's no pocketbook."

Con tapped his breast. "It's right here, Toby."

"You're the liar," Toby snapped. "You'll take dam' good care not to show it."

"For once I'll be careless," Con said and held the book up. "There it is, monogram and all, and worth a word or two!"

Toby was quick and explosive, as any first-class golfer must be, and he exploded all of his two hundred pounds on Con. He snatched away the book cleanly, and Con would have been knocked over but for the three behind him.

But Con could explode too. Before Toby could recover balance, Con had him right-handed by the collar, and Toby could not use his right hand without dropping the pocketbook. He tried to break Con's choking grip with his left hand. He wanted to get away as quickly as he could.

"Let go, dam' you! By God! if you don't let me go I'll smash you." He was not physically afraid of Con.

"Right, Toby," Con said. "I am letting you go now."

He loosed his grip on Toby's collar and launched that left-handed unorthodox bearlike cuff that had rattled the brains of Charley Wells. But it was no admonishing cuff this time. Rather was it the full drawing stroke of an angry grizzly, an over-arm, curved-arm wallop driven home with the pivot of the wide shoulder. Toby behaved as if he were a wooden nine-pin. Legs crumpling, he landed on one shoulder, rolled twice and lay flat as a frog on his face. His legs did not even twitch.

Toby had held on to the pocketbook, but Con jerked it away and thrust it back into his pocket. His hands moved over Toby quickly and expertly. Toby was carrying no secret arms. Then he propped the still inert carcass against the tree trunk.

In twenty seconds Toby's mouth and eyes opened and shut, and opened again. He groaned.

"Easy, son, easy," Con soothed him. "It was the sky that fell on you."

"Where's my pocketbook?" Toby said.

"It fell in the soup and the dog ate it."

"I want my pocketbook, damn you!" He was not yet fully conscious. Con bent over him.

"Time flies, Toby. I would not give tuppence for your life this next week. A word of advice not for your own sake. Get out while the going is good, and keep going!"

Con straightened up, went out of the trees, to where his team of three were waiting for him.

After a time Toby Aitken staggered to his feet, but he did not face back towards the Clubhouse. He went the other way on unsteady feet.

III

At twenty minutes past ten, Inspector Myles turned into North Road. He found Con Madden waiting for him round the corner.

"Evening, citizen. Care to do this inspection with me?" Myles enquired.

"No, sir. I was just wondering if Charley had any unusual customers this evening?"

"Mackie should know. He's further along."

The two tall men walked on together.

“Like old times!” Con murmured with a touch of nostalgia.

“Been looking at that file from a fresh slant,” Myles said. “Can’t say that I saw much daylight, but what I did see was that you are playing with fire, my friend.”

Con touched his friend’s sleeve. “Dick, my son, if you had been in charge of this case a year ago, I would not have to play with fire at this late day.”

Myles felt a glow at this compliment, but all he said was, “I shall be sorry if you burn your fingers. Here’s Mackie now. Anything to report, constable?” he enquired.

“Just the usual lot off the road, sir—barrin’ one. That big lad, Toby Aitken of Danesford, sir. He only left five minutes ago.”

“Constable Mackie might be a little more ample,” Con said, “if his training hasn’t been neglected.”

Mackie grinned. “He came down from the Spa in one of them brown golfing jackets, a bit unsteady on his feet as he passed me by, but I wouldn’t think that he had drink taken, and he carried his head on a twist as if it hurted him.”

“Strained himself playing parcheesi,” Con said.

“He might then. A hard game. There was temper in his face, and he went bargin’ in Charley’s door and up the steps. He was in there half an hour, and when he came out the temper was off him, and he went off like as if he had business.”

“Nicely observed!” commended Con. “The police rules would not permit you to eavesdrop?”

“Only as far as my duty demanded,” said Mackie, “to prevent a breach of the peace which was likely to be broke.”

“You are well founded, young man,” said Con. “What steps did you take to ensure the peace of the realm?”

Mackie looked at his Inspector and got his nod. “I went up the stone steps as far as the turn. I couldn’t go beyond for the shop door was open and the two inside. They were argy-barging with each other to beat the band, at least Toby was, and Charley trying to mollify him. There was nothing I could make sense of, only something about a lost book and bloody traitors and a man by the name of Marrin or something like that who was the worst in the world. Before I could get the hang of it, Charley said something about being in one boat, and closed the door. The voices quietened down after that, and I could hear nothing at all, sir.”

“That was all, Mackie? And good enough too.” Con nodded at Myles.

“You can take the evening off, constable,” said the Inspector kindly.

“And all the pubs about to shut,” remarked Con.

“It is not pubs Mackie is interested in,” said Myles.

Mackie blushed, saluted and took himself off.

Con hesitated and made up his mind. He put his hand on his friend’s arm. “Two leagues outside the code, Dick?”

“And not an inch more.”

“Fair enough. Listen! Be the invisible man and take a stroll out the Doorn Road about midnight, not further than the end of the golf course—back and forth. If you come on a solid chunk of humanity under the disguise of a spade beard send him straight home to bed—he’s staying at the Spa. If he insists on his rights as a respectable citizen, stick on to him, and for the Lord’s sake don’t incommode him with your bloody elastic Northern conscience. That’s all. Off you go!”

Con gave him a shove and watched him till he disappeared. Then, without hesitation he turned in at Charley’s door, mounted the stone stairs, and halted before the locked door into the shop.

He selected his little crooked instrument of forged steel and bent to the keyhole. He knew his lock, and in less than a minute was inside the shop. His pencil of light splayed across to the far wall. He knew what he was looking for, and it was still there: one of those old rectangular clocks, with a rural scene in greens and reds on the lower part of the glass door around a clear circle showing the tarnished brass pendulum.

Con shuffled carefully across the cluttered floor. With his handkerchief over his hand he turned the wooden stud of the clock door and opened it. The bottom of the case below suited his purpose. Into it he put all the salmon flies he had in his pocket, and, on top of these, Toby Aitken’s pocketbook. Then he shut the door and made sure that nothing showed through the circle of clear glass.

Within five minutes he was back in the street. He turned to the right, and went out the Doorn Road until he passed the last of the houses. There he edged into the wire fence on the left, and threw a leg over. In half a minute he was lost in the gloaming amongst clumps of salleys, the very salleys where Peter Falkner had hidden his fish and tackle a year ago.

THE MAN IN BROWN LIMPS AGAIN

I

NOTHING happened for a long time. It was reasonable to expect that nothing would stir about Charley's place between midnight and three in the morning. The gloaming and the dawn are the poacher's chosen times. Charley would never risk the dark hours between twelve and three. During these hours, not even a poacher's eye can pick out friend or enemy within twenty yards, and twenty yards is a nice handy distance to get killed in.

It was nearly three o'clock and on the brink of dawn before there was any movement at that corner house. No light went on, nor was there any sound; but Con Madden's tireless eyes, watching from between two tall rows of peas in one of the garden allotments, saw a head in a heavy brown cap thrust out low down from Charley's doorway. The head moved about and disappeared, and next instant a squat figure darted across the road into the laneway. The street lamp showed briefly the hunched shoulder and the lively limp.

The man was Charley Wells. As soon as he got well into the laneway, he drew out his shortened double-barrel, and clicked both hammers to the full. Then Charley disappeared into the trees.

But Peter Falkner, a half-glimpsed, crouching figure in grey was doing exactly the same thing, and fifty yards back and to the right Con was imitating them to the best of his ability. Possibly Charley Wells was not so careful as he could be. He was supremely careful in prospecting yard by yard the ground in front, but having passed a point that had no danger he neglected to watch his rear. Peter knew that from experience.

Con Madden, trailing along on the right flank, never once saw Charley Wells on that stalk. In fact he got barely enough glimpses of Peter Falkner to keep his own position, and he was wondering how in glory Peter did manage to trail an expert. But Peter did it, tacking this way and that, circling, lying down, crawling, darting and, even, sometimes retreating.

At the end of a mile the position was thus. Con was on hands and knees

behind a whin bush in the middle of a small furze-scattered field. Fifty yards ahead Peter, acrouch, was looking between two whitethorn bushes in a hedge. The light was better now, and Con could pick out Peter's grey against the young green of the thorn. Suddenly he saw the grey figure flatten out, and he did likewise himself.

For many seconds the grey figure lay still, then lifted slowly and wormed between the two thorn bushes. Con crouched across the field and, head down, forced his way between the same two bushes. His broad shoulders hampered him and he heard and felt a thorn rip a perfectly good jacket.

Beyond the bushes was another field, a wide one, and beyond that field was the Doorn Road over a wire fence. At the other side of the road was the golf course inside its unscalable railing. Close on Con's left, a thick overhanging hedge ran down to the Doorn Road, and he caught a glimpse of Peter crouching along close under it. Con followed his example.

Half-way along to the road, Con dropped on his knees and waited. The light was growing, and he could just make out Peter leaning over the road-fence at the end of the hedge. And there Peter surprised him, for, instead of crawling through the wires, he straightened up and came tearing back towards Con, and he was cursing as he came.

"Con, I've fallen down on you. The man in brown is on the loose again."

"The man in brown!" Con's blood stirred.

"Just in time to see him cycle round the corner towards the Doorn bridge —"

"But Charley—"

"Blast! it was not Charley. Charley can't cycle—never could, even before he broke his leg—"

"Did you know who it—"

"No. I got only a glimpse. Hunched over the bars, but he was in brown. Hell! he drew me like a badger."

Peter explained hurriedly. "I was prospecting back there between the bushes, and the man I took to be Charley scrambled up from the bottom of the hedge forty yards out and went scuttling along towards the road, head down, hunching and limping, and going hell for leather. I flattened out and cursed myself for nearly overrunning him. I thought that Charley had heard me—and was getting out from under. But it wasn't the damn little thug at all."

"Was it Charley—any of the time?"

"It was. I made sure of him—hunch and limp." Peter struck his brow suddenly. "My God! I was blind as a bat. That last man was not Charley. He was limping on the wrong foot."

"The man in brown is on the kill," said Con in a voice strangely calm. "Where did Charley go?"

Peter gestured at the hedge. "Through there."

"Then that cooks his goose," said Con.

Peter shook his elbow. "Look! We don't want the poor old devil killed. Go through the gap and make for the bridge. Don't mind the noise you make—if he circles back for his burrow, all the better! I move faster than you do, and I might head him off up the road. Get to it!" He turned and ran.

Con ran too, back along the hedge and through the gap. Beyond the gap there were trees, but these thinned rapidly to a wide stretch scattered with whin hummocks. He could not keep a straight line, but kept trending towards the bridge.

In half a mile he pulled up to get his wind. He listened. Above the sucking beat of blood in his ears, there was no sound at all. If Charley had heard Con floundering, he would be lying in hide somewhere, or hurrying forward into the danger zone. Con could not do anything but forge ahead for the bridge, come out on the road there, and make contact with Peter.

He was about to start off again, when a double sound startled him right off the ground. It was the flat smack-smack of an automatic fired not more than two hundred yards away. It came from on his right, and a little forward—there was no mistaking the direction and the nearness. Over there was the Doorn Road and the Danesford woods inside the demesne wall.

Con did not hesitate for a moment. He inclined to the right and crashed through the whins towards the road. In little more than a minute, he reached the road-fence, leaned over without touching the wires, and looked up and down. The light was now enough to show him a stretch of a hundred yards on either hand. There was no sign of Peter or anyone else. Peter would have heard the shots too, and could not be far away. Con looked across at the demesne wall. It was eight feet high and with a crenellated coping. The shots must have been fired over that wall, and not far over. Someone might be lying dead or wounded in there not twenty yards away, and—the thought came with a shock—that someone might be Peter Falkner. Those two shots so close together might mean two men firing at each other at close quarters. Con had to get over that wall.

He slipped through two strands of wire, stepped down on the road, clenched his teeth hard, and faced the wall. He chose a spot by the side of a thorn bush and took it on the full run, using the method of his boyhood: thrusting a foot hard against the wall, lifting with the impetus, clutching at a coping stone, and hurling himself right over. He landed on a mat of rotten leaves. But while he was still in the air, a fierce hard voice commanded him.

"On your feet! I got you."

Con threw up his hands, and in a blinding flash, the thought came to him: *Good God! Peter Falkner all the time!*

For Peter Falkner crouched forward, not ten paces away, by the trunk of a big beech, Con's own automatic poised above his shoulder. And at his feet lay the body of a man in brown.

Peter Falkner spoke again. "Sorry, Con!"

Con drew a long breath of heartfelt relief.

"We killed old Charley between us," Peter said, his voice low and deep, and sad too.

"You didn't—?"

"No. It was our swine in brown—got him twice."

"You saw him?"

"No. I was half-a-minute too late." Peter faced round to the ranks of trees behind the beech, his pistol half-raised. "I thought I was waiting for you, but I guess I hadn't the sand to face in there. I am doing it now."

Con's left hand scooped him behind the tree trunk.

"Blast it, man! You are not inviting a shot?"

"If I get one in return."

"You might not." Con's hand firmed on Peter's arm. "I take charge from now on," he said.

"All right, Con. I fell down on you."

Con looked down at the still body. "Dead?"

"Out like a candle—left side and neck."

The body was lying half-over as if it had fallen away from the tree. The wound in the side scarcely showed, but the wound in the neck was still bleeding. The heavy cap had fallen off, showing the meagre bald head; and six inches in front of one outstretched hand, the shortened muzzle loader lay on the ground.

"The risk was too much for him, Con," Peter said. "I am sorry I failed you."

"Say that when the game is over," Con said. "Let's get out of here."

They climbed back over the wall, and Con set his face towards Eglintoun. Peter had expected him to face the other way, and was first surprised and then disturbed. He said nothing, however, but ranged up to Con's side, and Con went off in great swinging strides.

They did not speak anymore, for each was under a growing strain. Con knew that the risks of the night were by no means over, and that the risk he was presently to take was the biggest risk of all. Peter felt that Con had something in and on his mind. What it was, he did not know, but he was afraid to ask a question, and he did not know why he was afraid.

On their left hand was still the wall of the demesne, but some distance on, this wall gave place to the high railing of the golf course. Where wall and railing joined, was the hand gate leading to Hughes Everitt's cottage far back

on the edge of the trees. As they approached this hand gate, Peter checked suddenly and his heart jumped.

“My God, who have we now?”

Con never paused in his long-striding. “One of the team who did not obey orders,” he said. “The other is the second string to my bow, and it does not break or sag.”

Two people had come out of Hughes Everitt’s gate. A man and a woman. The man was in brown and the woman in dark-tan riding breeches and brown jacket; and the man was holding the woman’s arm to keep her feet steady.

II

Con Madden’s plans for that night had been carefully made and had involved Peter Falkner and him alone. But if he imagined that by the simple giving of orders he could be assured that others who had a stake in this case would spend the night sleeping peacefully in their beds, he was wrong. At the same time that he and Peter were stalking Charley Wells, one of these others was also on the move.

It is doubtful whether Con really believed that his partner, Daniel Glover, would obey orders. It was not Daniel’s way. Daniel *did* leave the club after his game of chess with Hughes Everitt, and he *did* return to the Spa, but he did not go to bed. Instead he changed into a suit of brown, with a green line, and shortly after midnight set out on the main highway on a bicycle, borrowed from the barman. He took the curves like a bird soaring, turned left towards the Doorn highway. It was not a dark night, and the lamp on the bicycle served no purpose other than the legal one. Evidently Daniel thought it wholly unnecessary, for, half a mile out the Doorn Road, he extended a hand and turned it off.

Within another hundred yards a tall man materialized out of the half-dark at mid-road and held wide his arms.

“Halt, sir! I am a police officer.”

Daniel Glover dismounted obediently. “Dear me! have I broken some regulation, officer?”

“Only the lighting-up one, sir—by about two hours.”

“This ridiculous contrivance was evading the law only a moment ago,” Daniel explained truthfully. “I suppose I must provide you with my name and address?”

“We cannot dispense with that formality, sir.”

“Glover, sir—Daniel Glover. I am at the Spa.”

The tall man spoke musingly. “Glover. Glover and Madden! How are those two names connected in my mind?”

"I suggest that you are not unaware of the connection, Inspector Myles," said Glover.

"I might inform you, Mr. Glover," said Dick Myles, "that a certain unspeakable individual, known to us both, suggested to me this midnight stroll that I am at present interrupting."

"The interruption was also suggested?"

"It was, sir. But unfortunately it was also suggested that I request you to return to your bed."

"By the Lord, sir," said Daniel. "I have a damn'd good mind to accede to your request." He paused. "Will you return with me to see that I obey orders?"

"Wholly unnecessary, Mr. Glover. I shall resume my constitutional out the Doorn Road."

"You are not a spoil-sport, I hope, Inspector?"

"I love nothing better than a bit of sport, Mr. Glover."

"That unspeakable individual aforesaid," said Mr. Glover, "has a fortuitous method that I deplore."

"In which case you might well take advantage of circumstances, Mr. Glover," suggested Dick Myles.

"I might discuss them with you, Inspector, if you permit me to accompany you on your constitutional."

"I should be most happy, Mr. Glover," said the gratified Inspector.

"Thank you, sir," said Daniel, and reached a hand towards the screw of his head light. "Shall I have to obey police regulations?"

"No, Mr. Glover. We are now outside the police code—by close on two leagues."

III

Daniel Glover was not the only one disobedient to Con's orders. She had worked herself into a fine rage at the dance. Her three men had treated her shamefully, she considered. Did they think she was a child to be hedged round from danger? Peter and that Con Madden, calmly appropriating the night work, and allocating day duty to her and Hughes and blatantly pretending that the day was as important as the night! She would just love to teach them a lesson. And she would—by glory! She would do her damndest to show them up.

She left the dance alone, after a tiff with Hughes in which she accused him of having a secret arrangement to join up with Con and Peter after she was safely tucked away. He had laughed and not given her the satisfaction of denying or affirming. Then, damn him, he could walk home, she told him.

She drove back to Danesford by the East Lodge, garaged her car, and went straight upstairs. There, like Daniel Glover, at about the same time, she sat on

her bed and considered things for a long time, her hands tapping the coverlet and one foot aswing. In time she went to her wardrobe, and fingered over a half a dozen dresses. Her other hand sought a hook at the shoulder of her old-gold dress.

When she came cat-footed downstairs again she was wearing riding breeches and long boots of dark tan, a heather-mixture brown jacket, a dark muffler, and a wine-coloured silken veil tied so loosely over her hair that it could be pulled down to hide her face. She knew her business.

From a stand in the outer hall, she armed herself with an old hockey stick, and went out on the terrace.

She slanted down through the home-farm orchard and into Peter's backyard. There was no light downstairs or up, and she wondered if the back door was on the latch contrary to Con's orders. It was. She entered noiselessly, and made her way to the foot of the stairs in the front hall.

At the foot of the stairs she looked up and coughed softly. There was a fumble and a soft thump, and a woman's voice said:

"Who is it?"

"It is me, Johan," said Barbara, who was no schoolteacher.

"Miss Barbara! I'll be down."

Barbara turned the corner into the open door of the dining room, and switched on the light. On the polished mahogany of the table there was a tray covered with a white cloth. Barbara lifted a corner. A plate of sandwiches, a slab of spiced beef, a jar of chutney, some early tomatoes and a big thermos flask.

"'Tis a bit of a night robber we have in the house," said Johan Bartley's voice at the door. She was enfolded in a blue dressing gown, and her feet were bare.

Barbara laughed. "Caught again! I just remembered that I had no supper. Your young men won't be home till morning, and you might spare me a sandwich."

"Why not I? That poker game again. They'll rob that poor Mr. Madden."

"By the strong-arm method only. Is that coffee in the thermos?"

"Wait till I pour you some, darling! 'Tisn't coffee they'll be wanting at some unearthly hour in the morning."

Barbara sat on a corner of the table and munched sandwiches. Mrs. Bartley looked her over. She was worth looking at. The riding things suited the long limber lines of her, and her face framed in the loose silk was lovely, the light shining darkly in her eyes, and delicate colour under the brown of her cheeks. Mrs. Bartley clicked her tongue.

"You're at it again, you rogue. Some fine night—Timmy the keeper'll shoot you dead."

“Not Timmy. I have stood near enough to pull his whiskers. Peter and I will have to do most of the keeping as of old. Losh, Johan! I wonder would Peter give me Timmy’s job?”

“Once on a time I thought he had another job in mind for you, girleen!” said Mrs. Bartley.

Barbara changed the subject. “Is Denis in bed?”

“No then. He went off on his old boneshaker to Eglintoun, but he won’t be long now.”

Barbara drank two cups of coffee and hopped off the table. “Thanks, Johan! I am taking a turn round the policies. There might be a new generation of poachers, thanks to old Timmy. Go back to your bed, you old clash-pie!”

She caught the elder woman in an impulsive embrace, kissed her cheek, and went limber-legged out the door.

IV

Barbara went down the farm road towards the Gordon bungalow. They were not yet abed, for she saw the splay of light from their dining room window.

It was a warm June night; the window was open and the blinds undrawn. Barbara saw everyone very clearly. There were Phil Gordon, Muriel, Abigail Shaw and Denis Buckley; and, most surprisingly, Denis Buckley seemed to be doing most of the talking. He was standing at the end of the room near the door, a big fist emphasizing his points, and his head turning slowly back and forth between Gordon and his daughter. Gordon was not looking at him. He was leaning forward, elbows on a card table, his head between his hands; and Barbara noted what a massive head he had. Muriel sat back in a low armless chair, looking up steadily at her father, and tapping her finger tips together. Abigail Shaw, in her blue print dress, stood behind her mistress’s chair. The light made a halo of Muriel’s hair, but her rose and gold skin seemed to glow with a light of its own.

“What a lovely darling you are,” whispered Barbara. “Damn all lecherous brutes of men!”

Barbara heard the growling murmur of Buckley’s voice; then he stopped talking; Muriel lifted a hand, moved it definitely and negatively, and said something briefly. Without another word her father turned, opened the door behind him and disappeared.

Barbara heard the hard slam with which he shut the door. She went past the gate, moved some distance down the road, pressed back into the hedge, and waited. In a little while, Buckley came through the gate, wheeling his bicycle. He banged the garden gate too, and walked towards the Home Farm. Evidently

he was in a temper.

Barbara knew now that Denis Buckley was one of Con Madden's many strings. She would pursue this one till it went to ground. She followed him home, right round to the yard where he dropped his cycle roughly against a wall and entered the house by the back door.

Barbara slipped round to the front. The dining room light was on, and the window was unblinded. She saw Buckley pour himself a stiff whiskey and toss it off in one gulp. He lifted a corner of the tray napkin, dropped it again, hesitated, and went towards the door. The light went off and in a few seconds another light went on upstairs. In less than five minutes that light went out too.

Buckley had gone to ground, and Barbara went back to the Gordon bungalow. There was no light at the front now. She opened the gate noiselessly, and slipped round the edge of the lawn to the back garden. The rear windows were all dark too. The Gordons had gone to bed quickly—perhaps too quickly, but the hour was well past midnight now, and all honest country folk should be abed. Yet Barbara was not satisfied. Some decision had been made in that house that night, and why had not Denis put his cycle in the cycle shed just at the back of the yard?

There was a milk path from the garden, through a strip of plantation, to the farmhouse, and she flitted quickly along this, a dim figure scarcely noticeable.

When she got round to the backyard, she found that Denis Buckley's bicycle was gone. It was no longer thrown against the wall, but it might be in the open cycle shed. It was not.

Barbara cursed herself then. This was bad scouting, and Peter was right not to trust her. Peter would have kept an eye on that old bike and never have gone far away, or if he had to, would have left the machine out of action by puncturing a tire or something.

Someone had taken the cycle, and her immediate duty was to try to get in touch with him at once—or with her. Why not? She could ride a man's cycle, so why not another.

She put her own and Peter's method of scouting promptly into action. If whoever took the cycle kept to the roads, she had no great reason to worry. If he or she took to the wood paths then he or she was her meat. She threw a loop—not a wide one at first—round the two houses, farmhouse and bungalow, and made sure that no one moved inside it. The demesne wall was no trouble to her; she wriggled up and over it, handy as a boy.

Her next loop was wider, and her third went far afield. She saw no one and she heard no one, but at the end she heard the birds singing to greet the dawn.

It was efficient work and it went on for three hours, patient, painstaking, unseen, and silent. Fortunately or unfortunately she was well away on the other side of the road that time that Con Madden was ploughing through the whins.

The dawn was clearing when she got her first real heart-stopping startle. She was then in the woods at the back of the golf course, and it was her intention to work across the rear of Hughes Everitt's cottage, cross the road, and make a final scout down to the river. After that, she would go home to bed, and to the devil with day watching!

The sound that startled her to the stounding of her heart and the weakening of her knees, was the quick explosion of two shots coming from the direction of the road. She knew at once that it was not the sound of Charley Wells' double-barrel: it was more the sound of rifle, but flatter. She knew what it was: of course, she knew what it was. It was the sound of Peter's automatic.

But Peter's automatic had been stolen yesterday, so Con Madden had told them. That was why Peter and Con were doing a night trail. They reasoned that Charley Wells was in communication with someone, probably a murderer as well as a pistol stealer, and they hoped to make contact with that someone through Charley. And, now, someone had fired two quick automatic shots—she came back to that. There was something ominous in the quickness of one shot on the other—like a deadly exchange of fire. Who fired at whom? There were Charley Wells, and Peter, and Con—and another! And that other had an automatic. Something terrible might have happened.

Barbara's knees weakened and the beating of her heart hurt her, but she shook herself together, and did not hesitate. She faced in the direction of the shots and went forward between clumps of undergrowth. And she did not lose her head, for she moved as carefully as ever, and made very little sound. That is why she heard and saw, and was not herself seen or heard. She heard something that was like the rattle and squeak of an ungreased wheel and a slack chain, and, at once, she crouched down against the brown trunk of an elm. She was not five yards back from a wood path meandering through the trees. A man in brown, hunched over on a bicycle, went bumping by her. He was going towards Hughes Everitt's cottage.

The bicycle had once been enamelled green, but most of the enamel had scaled off. Barbara, at a glance, recognized the cycle as Denis Buckley's. But the man on it was not Denis Buckley. The man was her brother Toby, and he was in a hurry.

Barbara's astonishment was lost in dismay. Toby could have stolen Peter's automatic. Toby could have fired those two quick shots. At whom? And now he was hurrying towards Hughes's cottage. Had he gone insane? Was he out to kill the three men who had drawn a net round him—the team of which she was one? Was he the man in brown that she had seen a year ago, hunched over and limping to hide his identity?

Would she shout after him? She would not. In desperation he would not hesitate to kill her, and that would not help Hughes. The thing to do was to

follow as quickly as possible and shout from where Hughes might hear her.

She kept in amongst the trees and moved quickly, parallel to the path. She flitted from tree to tree round the clumps of undergrowth, and already she caught occasional glimpses of the white-walled cottage in the distance.

And then another sound and glimpse sent her shrinking against the gnarled bole of an elm. There was another man coming through the woods at the other side of the path, and he was hurrying too, but on foot. For a moment she was glad. This would be one of her team on the trail like a hound. She pulled her head covering over the side of her face and peeped round the bole, hoping to see Peter Falkner.

It was sheer brutal terror that overwhelmed her this time. She had to put an arm round the trunk to keep herself from crumpling. For this was the man in brown. This was the man in brown that she had seen slinking a year ago as he was slinking now. She had seen him in bad dreams a hundred times, and even in her dreams she would have recognized him in another second, but always, in that second, she had waked herself with a cry. And always had he limped on that wrong foot.

He was not Charley Wells, though he was in brown, and wearing a cap, and had a shoulder hunched up, and went with a limp. But, my God! he limped on the wrong foot. A year ago she would have recognized him in another second. Now she had seconds to spare. He passed within ten feet of her. He was the man in brown, and now she knew him. . . .

He went rapidly towards the cottage and she stayed clinging to the tree. Her world had fallen about her feet. And yet, so strangely are women made, there was a spark aglow somewhere deep down in her. For the world she had been unhappily contemplating for a year was really not her world at all.

What did it all mean? And what was she to do now? She did not know, but, as she had intended to go down to the cottage, mere instinct sent her footsteps in that direction. But she no longer took care. She struggled out to the path and went along it, her knees shaking. And she wondered why all the birds were singing.

She put her hand on one massive trunk as she went by, and a man cleared his throat softly behind her. The woods were full of men this morning.

Barbara's shoulders jerked as if she had been shot, and as if she had been shot, she crumpled down on her knees. Her hands fluttered to her mouth to stifle a scream. A quiet deep voice spoke behind her.

"It is all right, Miss Aitken! I am here to help you."

Barbara Aitken was of good fibre. This night and morning had worn her down, body and mind, but, panting a little, she managed to struggle to her feet and face round. A short, strongly built man, with a jutting spade beard, leaned at ease against the tree-trunk and smiled at her.

“Who are—? Oh! You are Mr. Glover.”

“I am Con Madden’s partner here to take charge of you.” This was not all the truth. He had to take charge of her, but her presence had astonished and disturbed him, and was about to waste valuable time. He straightened up from the tree, stepped forward, and took her arm firmly.

“Con Madden’s partner?” she said. “Is Con dead then?”

“No, nor is Peter Falkner. They are both perfectly safe and in charge. I am in charge too.”

“What am I going to do?” whispered Barbara.

“Nothing. I am taking you home.”

She stirred. “But my brother Toby—he is gone down there. I must go to him.”

Daniel turned her about, and settled his arm firmly inside hers. “There is a good man in charge down there,” he said. “This is no place for a girl.”

“It is no place for a girl,” she agreed, humble at last. “I should have obeyed Peter and Con. The man in brown is killing again. Who has he killed now?”

“No one,” he assured her, and pressed her forward. “Come on, young lady, I am taking you home.”

She went with him without further protest. Before going, he extended his left hand behind him and signalled with it. The signal said, “*stay put.*” They turned in among the trees well away from the cottage, and worked down towards the road.

So they went through the hand gate out on the Doorn Road, and walked straight into the arms of Con Madden and Peter Falkner.

THE NIGGER IN THE WOODPILE

I

BARBARA saw the two men of her team and cried out. "Oh, thank God! they are safe."

She freed her arm from Daniel's, but it was not to Peter she went. She could not face Peter yet. She went to Con and grasped the lapels of his coat. Her eyes were all pupil, there was a spot of colour high on her cheeks, and below that, a bloodless pallor.

"Con, I saw the man in brown again—my man in brown, limping on the wrong foot," she whispered. "I know him now—"

He put his fingers on her mouth. "Hush, girl! Don't jump to conclusions."

She drew her mouth away. "Who has he killed this time? Charley—?"

"I am not sure that *he* has killed anyone."

"He has. Con, I am sorry I disobeyed you. I want to go away."

"You are going home, my dear," Con said. "Peter will take you home. Listen, girl!" He put a hand on hers. "Peter will take this badly and you must help him. Do not tell him anything until we make sure. He is only guessing now, and you must not hurt him where he lives, without reason."

Con beckoned to Daniel who came and again took Barbara's arm. Con went across to Peter, and Peter faced round to him.

"Peter, Barbara is all in."

"She has every reason to be." Peter's voice was steady but his blue eyes were washed out and bleak. "Blast you, Madden! why did I bring you down here to spoil all my days for me?"

"Blast yourself!" said Con savagely. "Your day is only at the dawn. Listen! You are taking Barbara home right now. You are not in this any longer."

"I'll stick—"

"You will not. That is my very adequate partner over there, and he is the man I want. Take Barbara home and stick by her till I come. Don't let her out of your sight. These are my orders, and by the Lord—!"

"To hell with your orders!" He was about to thrust Con aside, but with a fine effort, recovered self-control. "Sorry, Madden. You have to finish what you began. Right! Barbara and I will take ourselves off."

He went to Barbara and hooked her arm possessively, almost brusquely. "Come along, old girl. You and I are no longer good enough to take along."

She went with him without a word, her shoulder to his, and her feet no longer unsteady.

II

Daniel Glover and Con Madden leaned against the demesne wall close to the handgate, so that no one scouting from within could see them. Con's voice was low and troubled.

"I did not arrange for this, Daniel. Had you a long sleep?"

"I failed to woo the fickle goddess at all."

"You did not try hard enough. For a small timid man you have a strange knack of turning up at the worst moment in the danger zone. I was afraid you would not. That man in brown fooled us—"

"I saw him do it."

"You would," said Con without surprise, and livened up. "We lost Charley's trail, and when we picked it up again, it was the end of all trails for Charley. His body is up there behind the wall, two bullets in it."

"I know."

"What else do you know?"

"Enough." Daniel was unusually laconic.

Con looked down at him. "Meet anyone on the road?"

"Fortuitously. He is not a spoil-sport. Ignore him for the present."

"You call this sport? Did that poor girl see anything?"

"Only the man in brown and her brother Toby."

"Toby! Lord'llmighty! Where is Toby?" Con was surprised at last.

"In that cottage among the trees."

"This is going to be a clean sweep, then. How are we going to tackle it, Daniel?"

"The obvious way. I think that you are afraid, Cornelius."

"You bet I am afraid." He struck his hands together, "Damn! I forgot to take my gun back off Peter. Aren't you frightened, yourself?"

"If your fear is as great as mine, Cornelius, you have all my sympathy."

Con chuckled. "Very well so. We can carry on. Take over!"

"Come then. You can shelter your big hulk behind my back."

"The devil sweep you!" Con said.

It was Daniel that took the lead. He slipped inside the handgate and dodged

in amongst the trees on the left, Con close at his heels. They made a half-circle to the rear of the cottage. It was full morning now. The sun had risen, but the Spa Hill a mile away, shut off its rays from this spot.

The cottage was one-storied, with lime-washed walls and purple slates. At each side of a faded green door was a small diamond-paned window so high-set that even a tall man could not look over the sloping window ledge. The green door was closed, and they caught the dull sheen of a tarnished brass knocker. There was no sound or sign of life anywhere. The two men crouched at the edge of the trees and examined the back door. Con brought his mouth close to Daniel's ear. "I am going to see if that door is locked—and bolted. You stay put."

Glover nodded. Con was the lock expert. This was no time for hesitation, and Con, watching his feet, moved quickly. Holding his breath, he darted between the bushes and brought in the angle of the walls, and facing the door. Still holding his breath, he listened. There was no stir from inside.

His left hand was trembling a little, but his grasp on the iron loop below the latch, steadied it. His thumb came down lightly on the flat iron tongue, and very gradually he applied pressure. Slowly the latch lifted to the full, and slowly he pressed inwards but the door held obdurately. It was locked on the inside.

He put an eye to the keyhole. Luckily the key was not in it. He turned an ear to listen and through the keyhole caught a faint murmur of voices. That murmur did not come from the back place but from the room in front. He must get inside this door.

He quickly selected his length of wire, inserted it and felt ever so gently for the tumbler. Within a minute he had that door noiselessly open and was looking in. The murmur of voices sounded a little louder.

He shoved the door open until the foot of it checked on the flags. It held there, but there was enough room for him to slip in side-ways.

Before he did that, he glanced back. Daniel Glover's bearded face projected from the corner of the gable end. Con gestured him off, but the head refused to move.

Con looked round him. This was the cooking and wash-up place, and it was an untidy mess. This was where an unaccustomed male had pigged it, and no woman had used a tidying hand for many days. There was another door in the room, and it was through that door that the murmur of voices came.

Con slip-footed carefully to face this door, and examined it. It was not locked, for he could see the single tongue of the snick projecting into its pocket in the jamb.

Con looked at the door-knob for many seconds. He knew that he must try it.

Before touching the knob, he glanced out the back door. Daniel's head had disappeared.

He placed his left wrist, head-high on the jamb and propped his fingers on the panel, thus holding the door firmly in place. His right hand drifted down and over the knob, and steadied there. Slowly he turned the knob till he got purchase, and went on turning till it checked. Against his propped fingers he drew on the door, and it came to the draw. When the opening chink was a bare inch in width, he held it so, his hand on the knob and his propped fingers holding an exact poise. He put his forehead against his wrist and set his eye to the chink.

III

He was looking at Hughes Everitt's brown-clad back not more than five feet away. Everitt, propped on his left hand, was leaning forward on a round dining table. His right hand at shoulder level, was moving slowly up and down. That hand held Peter's automatic.

Con looked over Hughes's head. Toby Aitken was in the corner between the window and the white door into the hall. He was pressed close into the corner as if he were trying to force himself into the solid walls, and his big hands were spread wide on the old flowered paper. There was fear in the protuberant eyes fixed unwinkingly on Hughes, and the too-ruddy colour had faded from his face, leaving it blotched and ugly.

"Sure you have made a clean breast of it, Tobias? Anything more?"

"I had to do it while he held that book. What else could I do? Look, Hughie! we can pitch him to hell now—you and me."

"He is there already, Toby. And so you thought you and he could venture to give me a last squeeze, didn't you?"

"I was squeezed too, damn it all!"

"And I am giving you a last squeeze now. You make things easy for me, Toby, and my conscience will never trouble me. You are worse than a blackmailer—you are a blackmailer's hack—his tool, his go-between, his bully. You'll not mind if I kill you now?"

"You can't, Hughie—you can't." Toby's voice shrilled. "Charley will know—"

"You brazen liar! Charley is dead, and you killed him."

"Me kill Charley?" Toby's voice squeaked.

"You had good reason to kill him. He had your pocketbook—and he still has it."

"That's a dam' lie! That bastard, Madden, has it."

"No, he hasn't. He put it back to damn you, and it will. You were driven to

kill in desperation. Three of us—probably four—were out to-night—last night—to trail Charley Wells, who was to meet you by appointment, you that were being blackmailed for killing your uncle a year ago.”

“Oh, you lying devil!” gasped Toby.

“Circumstantial truth, me boy. You knew Charley’s road through the woods. An old poacher is like an old badger, with his own tracks where he knows every landmark and can see and smell danger. I learned that for myself. You and Charley forced me to learn it, Toby. And to-night at a certain point you lured away the trackers by a trick that you remembered from last year. And you knew where Charley always climbed over the wall. He was not a very good climber with that game leg of his, but there was a place behind a bush where he had gouged out a couple of stones for his convenience. I found that out too, Toby. And to-night when he clambered over, you were waiting for him behind a tree and made deadly sure of him with two shots—always two shots, Toby!”

“You murderer! I heard the shots.”

“You fired them, and rushed in here to hide—”

“What a dam’d fool I was!” cried Toby.

“You were. With our net closing in on you, you were driven into my cottage, and here in sheer desperation you destroyed yourself. Coming in from the trail I found you and raised the alarm.”

“And your dam’ friends—what are they doing? They’ll know.”

“No, Toby. My dam’ friends did not know that I was on a trail of my own. I am giving them time to get away. That is why I did not kill you at once. Look, Toby. I am pretty useful with this toy at ten feet. Through your peanut of a heart, and a second in the same spot, close up enough to scorch you—always the second shot, Toby. And you’ll be found dead, the pistol under your hand. Good-bye, Tobias!”

“Oh, you swine!” cried Toby, and crouched for one desperate leap.

Con was about to leap too. But at that moment there came a sound that checked the three for one essential moment. The knocker on the front door crashed once. Daniel Glover was at his own game.

Toby shrieked. It was a wordless shriek for help.

But Hughes Everitt was not startled. “The doors are locked, Toby. This is the time you kill yourself in desperation.”

He brought his hand up for the throw, but something nicked under his elbow to send his hand higher, a long arm snaked over his shoulder, and a great paw closed over hand and pistol. The trigger was not pulled.

“Sorry to interrupt,” said Con Madden.

Con’s left arm was already a curved bar round Everitt’s left arm and body. Hughes Everitt made no least attempt to struggle. His grip relaxed on the pistol

butt, and Con drew it away, dropped it into his own jacket pocket.

"I was just holding him for you, Mr. Madden," said Hughes Everitt calmly.

Toby came out of his corner with a bound.

"Let me get my hands on the swine," he shouted.

"Swine, yourself!" roared Con. "Keep off!"

Toby lunged vindictively at Hughes's face, but Con pivoted away and took the blow on his own shoulder. It was a solid drive and meant to hurt, and it threw the two men forward on the table. Con had no intention of releasing Everitt. He yelled for help.

"God'llmighty, Dan'! where in hell are you?"

"I'll take him," said Daniel, swinging expertly round the jamb of the half-open door. Toby who was clutching at Con's shoulder straightened up and turned.

Daniel charged in at Toby with the drive of a blue terrier. Toby tried to shove his beard down his throat, but the smaller man went under his hands, and his own right arm had the force of a piston, the shoulder behind it. Every molecule of air was expelled from Toby's lungs in one gust; he folded over, and at the same time, went backwards, his heels actually off the floor, and collapsed into his old corner.

"Good man, yourself!" cried Con. "Kick a coupla ribs in as well."

Daniel looked down at Toby. "Not necessary just yet," he said, and went round the table to face Con and Everitt.

"Will Mr. Everitt take a seat?" Daniel invited.

IV

There were only three chairs in the room: an old tapestried arm-chair by the empty fireplace, and two straight-backed dining chairs. One of these, at Daniel's side of the table, was piled with books. He placed the books carefully on the floor, pulled the chair round to the table and sat down. The other chair was within Con's reach; he hooked it to him with his foot, swung Hughes onto it, and shoved it close to the table.

"Thanks, Madden," said Hughes, and placed his long fine hands on the edge of the board. "There would seem to be a misunderstanding, Mr. Glover."

"We shall discuss it, sir," said Mr. Glover.

There was a complete silence then in that small room. It was not an ominous silence, nor was the setting in any way dramatic. Two men sitting opposite each other calmly contemplative, a tall man standing at ease behind one chair, a lazy lout sitting on the floor and now breathing comfortably. Con looked down at the crown of the seated-man's head. He had plentiful rather long hair, dark and fine, receding from a good brow, and waving over the

closely-set ears. One long forefinger began to peck softly on the table. Daniel Glover ran a hand under his jut of beard, cleared his throat, and spoke.

“A dead blackmailer, for whom we have little sympathy, has left us in an awkward situation, Mr. Everitt.”

Hughes lifted a wrist and moved a hand negatively.

“Not at all, Mr. Glover. Mr. Madden may have heard how friend Tobias killed this blackmailer?”

“A pack of dam’ lies!” shouted Toby from his corner.

Con leaned over Everitt’s shoulder, picked up a cloth-bound book, poised it left-handed and hurled it with full force at Toby’s head. The book opened in the air, and the leaves fluttered like small thunder before it crashed on Toby.

“Most inconsiderate, Cornelius,” said Daniel. “That is no way to treat a book.”

“Sorry,” Con said. “Next time I’ll use my foot.”

Toby sank back into his corner. Daniel looked at Con.

Con nodded. “According to Mr. Everitt it was Toby who threw Peter and me off the trail and waited for Charley over the demesne wall. I would be glad to believe it. But was it necessary to kill Toby and plant the evidence on him?”

Hughes Everitt chuckled. “But I did not kill him. I had half an hour in which to kill him, and did not. I was merely holding a dangerous criminal until the arrival of the full team—the team of which I was one.”

“You had the fear of death in him sure enough,” said Con. “But why did the criminal hand you over his gun?”

“He was here before I was. I came in quietly, saw the gun on the table, and got to it first. Quite obvious—”

“My dear Watson. Fair enough. I am agreeable to try and hang Toby. Take over again, Mr. Glover?” Con said.

“Certainly, Cornelius.” He addressed himself to Con. “Mr. Everitt’s reconstruction was no doubt admirable, and I regret that it does not tally with some observations that I myself made. Contrary to your advice I took rather a lengthy constitutional on the Doorn Road last night. I saw your man in brown cycle through a gate in a wall, and unseen myself, remained in touch for a considerable time. In fact I could lead you to the clump of furze where his cycle is now hidden, and to the place where he climbed the demesne wall, and where the victim Wells clambered over some two minutes later. During that brief period I also succeeded in getting over the wall but farther down and with some difficulty. I was too late to prevent the subsequent tragedy but I was a witness of it. Thereafter I followed the individual in brown, and so we have arrived at this present moment. You may draw your own conclusions, Cornelius.”

Con looked at his partner with affectionate surprise. Everitt’s version of the

killing might be riddled under examination, but Daniel's intervention had at once shattered it to pieces. And Con wondered if the small and ruthless man could not have intervened earlier to save Charley Wells. Aloud he said:

"What conclusions would Mr. Everitt draw?"

Hughes Everitt, tapping the table softly, sighed rather resignedly, but when he spoke his voice was calm.

"The conclusion I would draw, Mr. Glover, is that you can furnish enough evidence to hang the individual in brown. But I would ask you what good it is going to do you?"

"You are not suggesting that I condone the murder of even a blackmailer? Hang the man will—if he lives so long."

"And hang merely for the murder of an old poacher. You misunderstood my question, sir. I ask you to condone nothing. Not to beat about the bush how is my death going to help your purpose? Your purpose is to clear Peter Falkner's name. My death will not do that."

"I do not agree, sir," said Glover.

"I rather think you do, Mr. Glover. You cannot assume that because I killed Wells, I killed Marcus Aitken."

"I do not assume that at all, sir. You killed Wells because you killed Aitken."

"And your proof of my killing Aitken?"

"I reserve them," said Glover.

"Because you have none. Wells is dead and cannot help either of us, and that craven bully in the corner knows nothing and is worth nothing. You have no legal evidence at all, Mr. Glover. Mr. Madden's boast that he would bring Aitken's murderer into the open is as far from fulfilment as ever, and need I say more than that?"

"Not unless you possess some of the finer qualities, and I have considered that you might."

"Some of the finer qualities!" repeated Everitt satirically. "Such as?"

"Say a final loyalty to a friend—injured unintentionally?"

Hughes laughed shortly. "A sort of final reparation that required another murder to induce me to make it? Did you arrange for that, Mr. Glover? I believe you did."

"If that is your view, sir," said Mr. Glover more frigidly than ever, "I shall be glad to see you hang."

"If I live so long, you should add," said Everitt.

Con looked across at his senior partner. For once Daniel had met his match. Unless he was holding some strong card in reserve he had lost the game. Glover looked up at Con and nodded.

"You are assuming, Cornelius, that I have not made the best of a bad

business?”

“Faith I’m not!” Con said. “All I know is that this bonny fighter has stood you on your ear.”

“And you on yours, Madden,” said Hughes. “I am ashamed to confound you, but for men of some ability you do deserve some castigation for blind shooting in the dark wondering who was going to bolt from cover—a nigger in the woodpile indeed!”

“We knew from the beginning who was the nigger in the woodpile, Mr. Everitt,” said Glover mildly.

“*Speak for yourself, Daniel,*” said Con to himself.

Everitt tapped the table sharply and evinced his first sign of temper. “You could not know. You could not know for a moment at any time.”

Daniel Glover’s eyes gleamed sharply. He put no emphasis in his voice, and even gestured with some indifference.

“We knew from the beginning that you killed Marcus Aitken.”

“Nonsense! Where did you get your information?”

“From yourself, Mr. Everitt.”

“Would you satisfy my curiosity, Mr. Glover?” Hughes asked.

“I shall try, Mr. Everitt,” Glover said. “You hold serious views on Buddhism, Mr. Everitt?”

“If there be any truth Buddha enunciated it, Mr. Glover.”

“You said to Cornelius that in your next incarnation you expected to be a swine. That is equivalent to a Christian believing that he is doomed to Hell. The Buddhist reincarnation implies a belief in the Law of Karma, in cause and effect, that the punishment exactly fits the crime with no least margin for mercy or vindictiveness. A reincarnationist believes that he will become exactly what he desires to become. To fall back in the cycle of incarnations from a man to a hog implied that a man had done or was doing an exceptionally vile thing, something he cannot justify to himself by any casuistry. The remark was made just before Peter Falkner’s third trial, and it might well be dictated by the thought of how disloyal and treacherous you were to your best friend. Treachery, disloyalty, greed, incontinence, these are the swinish acts of the reincarnationist, Mr. Everitt.”

“I congratulate you on your reasoning, Mr. Glover. Anything else?” Everitt said.

“There is, sir. Once my attention was drawn to you, everything you said and did received the most careful consideration. Your habit is to sit up late and rise late. That fateful Saturday night you left the Club at eleven, to go to bed, you said. There were cards and talk and drink at the Club all night, and you would have to rise at 4 A.M. to go fishing with Miss Aitken. Why go to bed at all? You did not go to bed, Mr. Everitt. Where did you go?”

"Do you need to tell me?" Everitt asked.

"No, sir. You challenged Mr. Madden to find a motive that would make you kill Marcus Aitken. He found it. But I vouchsafe you a hint. You were wearing a new flannel suit at the club, you went home and changed into brown tweeds more suitable for fishing, yet you were back in your grey flannels when you joined Miss Aitken. Furthermore Miss Aitken saw a man in brown shortly after four in the morning. That man was you, and you were then in brown—"

"Pause a moment, Mr. Glover. Why do you deduce that I was the man in brown seen by Miss Aitken?"

"She saw a man in brown slinking into the trees. She knew that he was not Wells the poacher, though he was hunching and limping. You see, Mr. Everitt, he was limping on the wrong foot."

"Did Barbara say that?" Everitt asked.

"She did, but she only remembered it recently."

"I see. But I do not follow your reasoning yet."

"In a moment. You do not know that Miss Aitken was in the woods near here this morning. She was, and she saw the man in brown—her man in brown. I saw him too. He was hunching and limping, but he was again limping on the wrong foot. Miss Aitken had time to recognize you this morning, Mr. Everitt. You passed within a few yards of her. Well?"

"Yes, I follow your reasoning now, Mr. Glover. But you were only guessing at the beginning. You said you knew?"

"I knew enough to make you my number one suspect. Barbara Aitken saw her man in brown shortly after four, you saw yours one and a half hours later. No murderer would stay near the scene of the murder for that length of time. I suspected that you saw no man in brown, Mr. Everitt, and that you were subtly suggesting the old poacher to Miss Aitken."

"Go on, Mr. Glover."

"Principally because Falkner's gun was used I agreed with my partner that one of nine people had committed murder. I took the obvious causes of murder: money, sex, hate and fear: and you were the only one of the nine that the four fitted. I was not guessing at the man we were going to drive into the open—and have driven into the open."

"I was guessing good and hard," Con said frankly.

"No, Cornelius. You were only making sure. You chose Mr. Everitt on your team because it was a perfect place for him guilty or innocent. Mr. Everitt was rather contemptuous of your intelligence, and you encouraged him, and you induced him to take a risk he need not have taken at all. He neglected to obey the maxim that the murderer never obeys: leave well enough alone: and there he sits now with a second murder brought home. As regards the first murder we may have no case to present to a jury, but Hughes Everitt is our

man, and he is going to hang in any case.”

Hughes Everitt laughed a little harshly. “So I am going to hang in any case—if I live so long. What bargain do you want to make with me, Mr. Glover?”

“I have no power to make a bargain with you.”

“Then why use that phrase—if I live so long? Were you going to give me an opportunity for a quick finish in return for a confession? Did you think that I would prefer a quick finish to a long-drawn-out ordeal?”

“Would you not make reparation—?”

“Why should I? I did Peter Falkner no harm—”

“Good God!” exclaimed Con.

“I assure you I did not, Madden,” Everitt said. “I have confuted you, but, nevertheless, you touched me on the raw. You mentioned treachery and disloyalty. I would hate to pass out, even to swinedom, leaving Peter Falkner to think that I was treacherous and disloyal to our friendship—which was a real friendship. There is a writing pad on the desk over there. Will you please hand it to me? With your permission I would address a few words to Peter.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Daniel. He rose without haste and went to the desk below the window. He even paused to look down coldly at Toby, who pulled his legs up out of the way. “Stay exactly where you are, fellow,” he commanded.

He slipped the writing pad across the table to Everitt, and felt for his fountain pen.

“Thanks. I have a pen,” Everitt told him.

V

This is what Hughes Everitt wrote, Con Madden looking over his shoulder. He wrote it with remarkable speed and facility, pausing hardly at all:

My dear Peter:

Your agent promised to bring the murderer of your uncle, Marcus Aitken, into the open. He has done so, but not quite as he intended.

I am the murderer. I killed Marcus Aitken with two shots from your gun.

This confession should end here, but Superintendent Mullen, with a bee in his bonnet, might hold that it was the bogus confession of an insane man. So I must be more detailed.

I needed money. I like money to spend it. Also I needed your cousin Barbara Aitken, and for a time I understood that she would have money. Barbara is one of the loveliest and most sterling women that I have met, and I have met all sorts.

Let me confess that Barbara never really loved me, and I knew these many months that she would not be my wife. Marcus Aitken did not want her to marry me. He wanted her to marry a man of his own choosing, and took steps accordingly, by making a will practically disinheriting her. I did not kill him for the money motive though his death ensured Barbara of all the money she needed from your friendly hands.

Marcus Aitken was obstinate in achieving what he wanted. Somewhere somehow he got an inkling of something that would wholly discredit me in Barbara's eyes. He followed it up and it pierced him to the quick. The hate motive was on his side not on mine. He hated me.

"Here we move carefully, Mr. Madden," he murmured.

What he discovered was not in the least discreditable in my eyes, but it would surely discredit me in Barbara's eyes. He lay in wait for me that Saturday night and taxed me with his discovery, walking with me as far as the cottage where I am writing this. He gloated that he would tax me with it in Barbara's presence next morning. But it was not the fear of that that made me kill him. Fine as Barbara is I could lose her and live.

I killed him because he manhandled me contemptuously. Physically I was no match for him. In the hurt to his pride and prowess he was savagely angry and took that opportunity to take it out of my hide as he said. He did. He mauled me, using the flat of his hand mostly as if I were a naughty child. He threw me on the ground and kicked me carefully as if I were a spaniel that had mouthed his own game. God! I wish he had nine lives. Yes, I had the hate motive then.

You know that I am physically and mentally adverse to manhandling. Remember that brutal *voyageur* in Quebec that I tried to kill and would have killed if you had not soused him in the Saguenay till he lost consciousness. The lust of anger is in my throat even as I write.

He left me lying on the ground outside this cottage and went down towards the road. I ran up through the woods, got your gun and was waiting for him on the edge of that grove behind a hazel bush. I shot the brute through the body. The second shot was in a blind lust of anger and revenge. Then I thrust the gun into a bush, but was collected enough to wipe it clean. I would hate to hang for Mark Aitken.

I killed him at four o'clock on Sunday morning at the dawn of day. I had no thought at all of implicating you. I left you at a night session of poker at the Club. It was the hounds and those damned doctors that brought you into it.

Now here is where you may consider me a disloyal friend. When you were arrested should I have confessed at once? I would have been hanged and you would have been saved a year in jail, your life three times at stake. But as long as you were not condemned to death I considered that I was justified in trying to preserve my own neck.

I had not and I have not any overwhelming compunction for what I made you suffer. I might have if suffering had embittered you. In the beginning you were bitter and resentful, but you soon recovered your poise, and you never lost it again. You are a finer man now than you were a year ago.

But I have no time to be sententious, and I may be only making excuses for myself. I hope that this confession will not embitter you. I am making it under no compulsion. I am making it for my own sake.

I shot Charley Wells two hours ago. It seems longer. He has been blackmailing me for a year. He saw me that night. He saw Mark Aitken too, long after midnight. He too kept silent, and would have let you hang for the sake of gain, no matter how dirty. I think that I would not let you hang—but how do I know? Also he stole your fish and tackle.

Barbara saw me too, but I saw her first and had presence of mind to imitate the poacher, whom I knew about. Also I changed back to flannels and turned her mind on the poacher by saying that I had seen him. I had not seen him at all. It is strange that she never said anything to me about the man in brown limping on the wrong foot. All I remembered of the poacher was a hunch and a limp.

To clear all issues do not think that I killed Wells because you employed that quite adequate man Con Madden, who forced the killing on me. He did not. Many months ago I made up my mind to kill Wells and possibly—

His quick moving pen paused, and he rested his head on his hand very wearily. "Is he worth mentioning?" he said.

"No, but please yourself," Con said.

"There is his sister to consider. Right! We will finish that sentence another way."

—myself, but, of course, I would not kill him while you were in

danger. There was the necessity of avoiding the risk of hanging while you were running the same risk. I could not come to your rescue at all if I were hanged. I would not let you hang, Peter. Well, this is only your third day home, and Wells is dead. I am quite pleased about that, and I am rather pleased too at that bit of night strategy that hoodwinked even such a sound scout as yourself. I very nearly pulled it off, but I overlooked a certain Mr. Glover, who is about as ruthless a man as I know in attaining his purpose—even if it is a good purpose.

This solution of all your difficulties has come sooner than I expected. My difficulties too. In spite of my own philosophy, I have realized for some time that our old easygoing friendship was gone forever. It was I that was under a cloud wide as the world. There was only one way out. This is it. I have been contemplating it for one whole disastrous year. But I had to kill Wells. I am getting confused in my reasoning, and I know that I am no longer altogether sane. No pessimist is, and I am one. That is why I believe in Buddhism, which is the faith of pessimism. Damn! Why do I not stop. I will. Hold you to your fellowship of men. That is all.

Yours as ever,
Hughes Everitt

VI

There was an unusual constriction in Con Madden's throat. Hughes Everitt pushed the writing pad to his left, and held his pen above it between thumb and forefinger. "Will you please witness it, Mr. Madden?"

Con looked across at Daniel and nodded. Then he took the pen, pushed the pad farther across the table, and leaned far over to sign. He signed his name very slowly, and slowly added the address and date. Then he straightened up, handed Everitt his pen, and Everitt pushed the pad across the table.

"That is what you wanted, Mr. Glover," he said. "You may now call in your other myrmidon."

"I am here, gentlemen," said a cool voice from the doorway to the back place.

Inspector Richard Myles, that tall lean man, took two long strides round the table. "I will take charge of that document, Mr. Glover."

Daniel Glover's broad hand was firmly on the pad.

"Like hell you will!" he said. "It is addressed to Peter Falkner, and he is going to see it first."

How far the Inspector would have insisted just then, is not known, for

Hughes Everitt took them all by surprise. Their attention was drawn away from him, and he seized the opportunity. He pivoted sideways off his chair, swung round the back of it, and clasped Con Madden round the waist from behind.

Con fell in a forward lurch, the whole two hundred odd pounds of him, into the arms of Dick Myles who was charging round the table. The two of them heaped in the corner on top of Toby Aitken. In the confusion, Daniel Glover making no attempt to stop him, Hughes Everitt darted through the back door.

Con was slow in getting out of the tangle and he was on top too. But Myles kicked him energetically to his feet, and scrambled to his. Toby, whose head had been bumped solidly on the wall, stayed where he was, groaning.

Myles pushed Con away and leaped for the back door. Con took even a longer leap, and clutched his shoulder.

“Out by the front, you dam’ fool! He’s got a gun.”

Daniel Glover sometimes wonders how Con knew that Everitt had retaken the gun from Con’s right jacket pocket. Daniel was watching and he insists that Con did not slap or put hand in pocket to find out.

“To hell with his gun!” shouted Myles. “Do you want him to get away?” He wrenched his shoulder free and bundled through into the back place.

Con hesitated, and as he hesitated, there came the flat yet muffled smack of the automatic.

“By God! I hope he’s knocked him into smithereens,” exploded Con and jumped through the door.

Hughes Everitt had not shot Inspector Myles. Myles was bending over a body in brown lying on its face between two broom bushes.

“God rest him!” prayed Con. “And he was no swine either.”

THE GOD FROM THE MACHINE

I

DANIEL GLOVER, the case being completed, took no interest in loose ends. Having brought his man into the open, obtained his confession, and so cleared Peter Falkner completely, he decided that trimmings had no interest for him. He took himself off, and was confident of a due reward.

Con Madden, more interested in the people than in the case, wanted to round things off. There was a sour taste in his own mouth, and he knew that there would be a worse taste in the mouths of two or three other people.

Sometime shortly after noon on that Sunday he laboured up the steps under the portico of Danesford House, and turned left along the terrace. The depression that always follows a crisis was weighing him down. He had not changed his clothes, one shoulder was rent in two places, and a little triangle of cloth hung down on one sleeve; the sagging of his usually smooth face showed that he was no longer a young man, his grey eyes were tired and lustreless, and his bush of hair untidy.

The French window of Barbara's workroom was wide open, and the June sun was shining through the end window into that pleasant room. Barbara and Peter were inside. Barbara, no longer in her riding dress, sat at the desk, her elbows resting on it, and her chin in her cupped hands. Her face was pale, with only one spot of colour high on the cheekbones, and her eyes, darker than usual, were lit from within. She smiled wanly.

Con stood in the doorway and considered Peter. Peter was sitting back in one of the red leather chairs at the end of the desk, his unlighted pipe in his teeth. He looked level-eyed at Con, and did not even smile. That letter from his dead friend had touched him deeply, and at present he was inclined to blame Con and himself for the tragedy.

"Am I intruding on a con—" Madden stopped. At their last conference another man was present.

Barbara moved her head negatively. They had not spoken a word in half an

hour.

"The tumult and the shouting dies, the captains and the kings depart," Con said smoothly. "I am about to depart too—one of the lesser breeds without the law."

Peter drew a foot in. "You will want to talk business, Madden? I'll come across to the farm with you."

"To hell with that!" Con shook his head strongly. "I'll talk business with you in six months' time—if you think I have earned my keep."

"Nonsense, man." Peter sat up, fixed his eyes on Con's, and came to the thing that was on his mind. "There is one thing that nags at me, Madden. Did you know from the beginning that—that Hughes was your man?"

"How far off is the beginning?"

Peter opened his eyes in surprise. "Why, it is less than seventy-two hours since we came down together!"

"It seems longer to me too," Con said.

"You were here for a week or two before that, of course?"

"And nosing about. I was. I decided then that the murder of your uncle was not premeditated, and that you were only implicated by accident. Hughes Everitt suggested the same and I took note of it. He was one of nine on my list, and so were you two—"

"We knew that, Con," said Barbara.

Con looked at her. "Hughes Everitt was second last on that list until yesterday when he went to the head of it. You yourself were last, my lady, but I took you right off as soon as you looked at me out of your truth-telling eyes. Lesbia hath a beaming eye, right and left the arrows fly—"

"No, Con." She moved her head again. "Your integrity is proof against that sort of arrow."

"Don't you believe it, my dear Puritan," Con said. "You two are thinking cold things about a cold-blooded Irishman?"

Peter did not reply and Barbara shook her head, but faintly. Con knew how their minds were working. What had he suspected about Hughes Everitt to suspect him of murder with a motive? They were two nice-minded people, and his heart warmed to them.

"I am not so cold-blooded at all," he said. "I'm an interferin' ould grandmother, and you would never guess at the thing I am aiming for to try for to do this here minute."

"You tell us, Con?" Barbara said in a low voice.

"I am trying to take a spanner out of the works. It is much harder than throwing one in." His voice went gloomy. "I'll probably lose a thumb and four fingers in the machinery."

"Whose machinery, Con?"

"Yours—both of you. It was yourself pitched the spanner in, young woman."

"What spanner?" she asked.

He did not answer her. He looked at Peter. "Are you taking that six months off, Peter?"

"Later I might." Peter glanced at Barbara.

Con looked at Barbara but she would not meet his eye.

"I am not asking you a question, ma'am. I'm stating a fact. You are thinking of shaking the dust of this place off your feet."

"I am, Con." She lifted her eyes and smiled at him.

"There's Peter who was clearing out for six months, and yourself thinking of lifting sail. Why not take a trip together in a friendly, cousinly sort of way?"

Her eyes remained on Con. Peter turned to her abruptly, interest in his voice.

"That's one swell idea, old girl. You need a change. What about a six months' trip to Canada?"

It was Con that Barbara answered. There was appeal in her eyes, and colour coming into her face.

"I couldn't, Con. You know dam' well I couldn't, you wise old devil!"

"It wouldn't be seemly you mean? That's the puritan strain. Tell you what!" He spoke as if the thought had just struck him. "Ye could start off by contracting one of those companionable—I mean companionate—marriages, and after six months of the utmost propriety, Peter could throw a shoe at you, and you could amble down to Reno and, after six weeks in Nevada state, unshackle yourself from such a cruel brute. There's a notion for you."

Barbara was not looking at him any longer. She was looking down at the desk, her brown fine hands over her cheeks to hide the flush. Peter was looking queerly at the red lobe of her ear. "What am I saying?" Con cried. "I forgot about you, Peter. Barbara told me that you are not the marrying kind; that you are woman-shy or sex-blind or immune or allergic or something!"

Peter turned to him. "Go to blazes, you clown!"

"There's me thumb gone, but I have four fingers left." He straightened up in the frameway. "Blast it all, you two blind babies! This has been a stark day, where we have seen and said and done stark things. This is a day where one man can answer another man's straight question. I will put you a straight question, Peter. Will you answer it?"

"I'll answer it," said Peter.

"How long have you been wanting to marry Barbara Aitken?"

"Why, always," said Peter.

"Peter! Oh, Peter!" cried Barbara and her heart was in her voice and her eyes.

"There I leave you," Con said. "God bless us all!" He swung round in the doorway.

"Con—Con, darling! You are staying for lunch?" cried the hostess Barbara.

"Not eating these days, ma'am," Con said. "I'm off to bury what's left o' me heart." He strode away.

"Thanks, Con. See you later," came Peter's shout.

"Fair enough! In six months' time," Con said, and went on striding.

II

That was one loose string tied. He did not know whether there were any others to tie or that he could tie—or that he wanted to tie. He walked back to the Home Farm, feet and eyes again listless, and the depression still weighing.

He went into the dining room and found Denis Buckley at lunch. Buckley looked at him out of a red eye, nodded briefly and went on eating cold beef, sour pickles, hot potatoes and green peas.

Johan Bartley came fussing in from the kitchen. She was in good mood, though she did her best to be lugubrious. She wouldn't trust anyone, never again. Any night at all she might be murdered in her bed—or out of it—bad cess to her!

"Wirra, wirra, Mr. Con," she said. "I thought you'd be having lunch with the two crathurs. I wasn't able to cook a bite this bad day."

"I was thrun out, ma'am," Con said. "Do people still eat? 'Tis a bad habit I gave up yesterday."

"Glory be to God! You'll die on our hands," cried Mrs. Bartley.

"And a good thing to be glorifying God for!" Con said.

"What you need is something hot to soothe your poor misused stomach, sir. Hold on a minute!"

Mrs. Bartley hurried out, and came back bearing a tray holding the remains of a cold sirloin and a deep plate of soup.

"The soup you're needing, darlin' man," she said.

He came across and she shoved him affectionately into a chair. Then she noticed his ripped shoulder and sleeve.

"Holy Mother! You've ruined yourself," she said. "You're as bad as Mr. Peter."

"Och! I only wrastled a thorn bush," Con said carelessly.

"You wrastled the devil as well," Mrs. Bartley said. "I'll put a coupla stitches in that after you've et."

The soup had a rich brown colour and Con tried a spoonful. It was based on a good stock, and had a piquant, savoury flavour. Con tried another

spoonful and reached for the bread board.

Denis Buckley had finished eating, but did not rise from the table and lumber out, as was his custom. He sat back in his chair, brought forth his pipe, and glanced at Con.

"Smoke up, sir," Con told him. "That's another habit I hope to resume. Do you know, Mrs. B. them knots are coming undone. Is that beef tough?"

"Often it is, but to-day," Denis said. He laid his pipe down, drew the tray towards him, and began carving a plate of cold roast. He was not awkward with his hands, and the choice thin slices of meat rolled off the carver. Mrs. Bartley added potatoes and peas.

Con ate slowly and smiled secretly. Could it be possible that Buckley was wanting news from the horse's mouth?

"I have another ugly job in front of me," he said. "Packing my bag I have in mind, a job I hate."

"You're not leaving us so soon, sir? Sure I'll pack your bag for you, but what's your hurry. Och! I suppose you want to get away from this gloomy house?"

"Gloomy indeed! Take the cork out and it will bubble like champagne. Uncork yourself, old lady!"

"How can I, sir? Sure I couldn't believe my own ears when I heard about that poor Mr. Everitt. A nice man and nice in his ways."

"His passing out was the nicest thing about him. But never mind." He shook his head. "Wo-wo! I'm sick, sore and sorry for our poor Miss Barbara, her heart broken on her. She intends going right away from here and Peter talks of going away too."

"If anything, he has less sense than that same girl."

"But things are much worse than that, my Christian woman," Con said. "They are thinking of going away together."

"Huroosh!" cried Mrs. Bartley. "Faith! I don't care how they go, or when, so long as they go away together."

"You shameless old lady. I tried to dissuade them—"

Mrs. Bartley glared at him. "You are an interfering sort of a devil, so you are."

"It took an interfering sort of a devil to open their eyes to each other. All right so! I am ready to forgive you. You opened my own eyes for me, and I just sort of helped things along for you on a propitious occasion."

Mrs. Bartley's eyes were suffused. "You are not joking me, Mr. Madden?"

"Not on that subject, my dear. I left them so busy reading things in each other's eyes that they forgot the knot in my stomach—till the last moment. But as God loves you, you old schemer, keep this under your hat—I mean locked in your ample bosom, till Peter tells you. You, too, Mr. Buckley?"

"I will, sir. It is good news," said Denis Buckley.

"News from the horse's mouth, Mr. Buckley. Those two fine young people will go away and come back man and wife. Are you going away too?"

"I'll stay—if Peter wants me." He began to fill his forgotten pipe, but his hands were fumbling.

"Peter wants you," said Con definitely, and then put a tentative question. "Your daughter—she is going away?"

"She is—last night she would not listen." He hesitated. "Her going away—it has nothing to do with—all this."

Con could lie too. He spoke slowly. "I know that. But even if it had, there is no need for her to go away—no need at all."

Buckley got to his feet and put his unlighted pipe in his pocket. "I made a mistake about you, young man."

"I made a mistake too, but yesterday I knew you for the steadfast man of them all."

Denis Buckley went as far as the door and turned, a hand fumbling in a trouser pocket. He laid a half-crown on a corner of the table. "You earned it well," he said, and smiled. It was the first time that Con had seen him smile, and it was a quiet and pleasant smile.

Con came round the table and extended a hand, "We'll shake on that, Denis?"

The two big hands met firmly. Then Denis turned, hastily for him, and lumbered out of the house.

"That's a couple more strings tied," Con said. "I don't know any knot that would hold another."

III

Con, after drinking two cups of coffee and listening to Mrs. Bartley making plans for the next several years, went upstairs, had a tepid bath, a cold shower, a shave, and a complete change of clothes. He felt better after that. Inhaling his first cigarette, he went out by the front door, across the lawn, and on to the farm road. And there was his partner, Daniel Glover, leaning against the demesne wall a little distance down, reading a *Penguin*, and his pipe in the corner of his mouth.

Con walked straight up to him, took the book from his hands, shoved it into a pocket, took hold of his arm, and drew him out on the road. The two walked on slowly.

"Did you have your prandial meal, Mr. Glover?" Con asked.

"Prandial usually refers to dinner, Cornelius. I hoped to encounter you on my usual constitutional stroll."

"The first in years. No, the second. That was a damn nice, bloody, hellish bit of a constitutional that you arranged last night."

"In your present mood I shall have to bear with your insults, Cornelius."

"I see! You are here to nurse me along?"

"If you must know, I am here hoping to ensure the respectability of the firm. I have not forgotten that on the conclusion of our last case you remained intoxicated for a week, each day winding up the business, and dismissing the staff for the sake of their immortal souls."

The two paced on slowly. After a time Daniel's deep voice ruminated aloud.

"I am not proud of this case, Cornelius. Fortune favoured us too much. It might have been an entertainingly difficult case, with the solution long delayed—or missed altogether. Any credit there is, is fully yours. Your final scheme had a daring beyond my compass—"

"And it fell down, and you had to play God from the machine."

"But the machine was of your contriving. Well, it is all over now, though I am afraid that you are touched more deeply than usual, Cornelius. Which of the two charming ladies am I to blame?"

"One is charming, the other is not—the other is a charmer. The charming one and Peter Falkner have discovered that they have business with each other. The charmer I cannot help. She'll go her own gait."

"An unusual woman?"

"I don't know how usual. Like most, she is apt to choose the wrong vocation. But how do I know? A man gave her the wrong twist, and she chose the wrong object in life—vengeance that she mistook for retribution. And it wasn't an object worth wasting five years on, she found in the end. Now she is broken out of anchorage, and she is in danger of drifting on a lee shore."

"Would you suggest a new object in life for her?"

"No, I wouldn't, not me!" said Con. "I would give her a breathing space to make her own choice. She will always do that of course, but she should take thought first. She lives in there, and I doubt if she's very proud of herself this day."

They were passing by the gate of the Gordon bungalow, and paused to look over it. There was a woman bending over a flower bed near at hand, pulling weeds. She heard the murmur of voices and lifted her head. She was not Muriel. She was Abigail Shaw in her blue dress. She straightened up, came across to the gate and placed her plump hands on it.

"Awa wi ye, my fine Irisher," she said. "I'll no' have ye lickin' yer chaps about this house. A muckle bit of a tin god you'll be thinkin' yourself, dispensin' life and death? What good have you done to a'e body?"

"Have you done much good, your ain self?"

"I can take care o' my ain."

"You cannot," said Con firmly. "That is the very last damn thing you can do. I ken you fine, lassie. I do so. You are that Lowland-Low woman that carries loyalty so far that it becomes a vice. I have met women like you. I have the devil's own mind to hold the best one I ever met up to you as a warning."

"The muckle tin god again! G'ie us your warning."

"She was as like you as two peas in a pod. A buxom wife that had ne'er been wed. She was fond of women delicate and unwise, and she took loving care of them. She damn near made them respectable in the job they had. She had many lorn lovely ones about her, and she had a red lamp above her door. That's the sort of woman she was, and I'm warning you, Abigail Shaw."

"Gang to the de'il, you impudent Irishman!" said Abigail Shaw, and flounced off across the green.

"Maybe I didn't tie any string for that one," Con said.

"But you are discharging your choler quite creditably," Daniel told him. "There is your charmer now?"

Muriel may have seen them through the window. She came through the open door with a small man in black, who was Father Martin of Eglintoun. Con stepped away from the gate, but she stopped him with a slow graceful gesture of hand. She came across the grass, the priest a little behind her. She moved slowly, and her feet, that used to be buoyant, were inclined to drag. The rose was faded from her face, and her complexion below her nimbus of gold, was almost transparent. She placed a hand on the gate and looked gravely from Con to Daniel and back again. The priest halted to one side and a little behind, but Con would not look at him just yet.

"Courage, comrade," he said to Muriel. "You are no more to blame than another young woman who threw the first spanner in the works. When the time came, you told me what I wanted to know with a fine courage. Listen! The stone that was dropped in a pool this morning, set no ripples flowing to touch your shore. The man that had to die and the man who let him, saw to that."

She moved a hand wearily and dropped it back on the gate. "What solace is that to me, Con Madden?"

"None now, but there are days ahead. There'll be a problem for you round every corner, and you'll solve it your own way. At the age of eighty you'll be lovelier and wiser than you are now, same as a woman before you." He touched her hand with a finger. "Did your spiritual adviser tell you that?"

The spiritual adviser came to her side, and his voice was challengingly serious. "I told her, young man, that she can make her life lovely and useful like many a saint and sinner before her. Would you deny that?"

"Why not I?" said Con. "The lovelier the better, but usefulness often takes a drab road." He looked at the priest, and wrinkled his nose whimsically. "Was

it yesterday, Father, that I would not ask you for your spiritual advice?"

"Men like you never do, my son—before or after. But then, men like you cause me no trouble—except for a small twinge of jealousy now and then."

"Thank you, Father. There are two young people not far from here that you should be troubling about this very minute."

"You mean—?"

"I do, Father. They are in the mood—and don't blame me if you are slow off the mark. You cannot do any more good here."

"See that you do no harm, my man," said the priest warningly.

Con opened the gate for him and saluted his back. "A good man, but jealous of lay sinners. I had to get rid of him to say my piece."

"You have a piece to say, Con Madden?" There was some life in Muriel's voice.

"I have. You should take a job."

"Are you offering me one?"

"If I had my way I wouldn't have you inside our office door," Con said. "I work. My partner doesn't. You have never met that man of low mystery? Take a look at him! To the front, Daniel Mysterious Glover!"

Daniel Glover took off his panama and bowed deeply.

"I guessed who you were last night, Mr. Glover."

"And I hoped to make your acquaintance, madam." Daniel, who could bandy words more expertly than Con, was not bandying words with this lady. He said:

"If you would consider what Cornelius calls a job, may I be privileged to offer you one?"

She opened her eyes at him. "A helper of lame dogs, Mr. Glover?"

"Assuredly no—a supremely selfish man of business. For some years I have been seeking a woman of intelligence and parts to complete our organization. You may not possess the requisite qualifications. None of the others did. Some of them Cornelius wanted to marry. They went. Others wanted to marry Cornelius. Cornelius went into hiding. The present one wants to marry me. She is under notice."

Muriel chuckled satirically. "You are dangerous males, Mr. Glover."

Daniel gave her a level hard green eye. "Some people have found us so, madam, but to you we are not dangerous. You may consider my offer at your leisure."

Muriel flushed. "You flatter me, Mr. Glover," she said softly. "I appreciate your trust."

"This is not charity. The salary is reasonable and would enable you to keep your own establishment, but the work is onerous, often tiresome, and only occasionally interesting."

She glanced at Con. “A satisfactory sort of job, Mr. Glover, but I could always get the sack by ogling Con Madden.”

“I assure you, madam, Cornelius palls on acquaintance.”

“Cornelius! What a happy name. Could I call him Cornelius, Mr. Glover?”

“You’ve done lost a job, woman,” cried Con. “Hell’s blazes!”

He swung away from the gate and strode away furiously. In a few yards he slowed down, lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. Strangely enough he was no longer heavy-footed. The old slouching, in-toed resiliency had come back. But he was not at all sure that he had tied that last string.

The End

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Nine Strings To Your Bow* by Maurice Walsh]