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***By the Same Author***

THE MURDER OF GERALDINE FOSTER  
THE MURDER OF THE NIGHT CLUB LADY  
THE MURDER OF THE CIRCUS QUEEN  
THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY

# MURDER OF A STARTLED LADY

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*A Thatcher Colt Detective Mystery*  
*by*

# *ANTHONY ABBOT*

*Published for*

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*To*  
**H. H. HARRIS**  
*with the*  
*Author's affection*

ALL THE CHARACTERS IN  
THIS BOOK ARE FICTITIOUS

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## *Introduction*

The truth about the case of the foundling bones should have been apparent from the start. At least, on looking back, it seems so to me. I believe that almost from the beginning, Police Commissioner Thatcher Colt had an idea of the nature of the deed and how it was committed. The problem was to prove it, and in this process, so Colt maintains, the Police Department and not himself deserves all praise. As to that, I make no comment, except to remind the reader that the only reason Thatcher Colt has permitted me to publish these memoirs is for the greater glory of the department which he administered so fairly and efficiently under two Mayors, of opposite political faiths. Colt's love for the Police Department is thorough and sincere; he is anxious to win public respect and support for the blue-coats in the war against crime. Some years ago, in presenting the first of these mysteries of New York to the public, I made a few remarks which may bear repeating now:—

"When Mr. Thatcher Colt was Police Commissioner of the City of New York he was confronted with a number of mysterious crimes. In the face of grave difficulties, not all of which were known to the public, he personally conducted the investigations and, under handicaps that might have discouraged a less determined man, he solved the cases, caused the arrest of the guilty persons and saw them convicted. Yet the credit for his detective work was given to others. Recently Mr. Colt was approached with the proposal that the facts in these startling cases be published. At first he declined, on the wholly reasonable grounds that it might appear he was seeking honour for himself. The argument which finally persuaded the former commissioner was that he would bring honour to a place where it is too often a stranger—the police department.

"It is all too true that the American public does not sufficiently appreciate its police. There is a romantic fallacy that the Force is hopeless when faced with a clever crime; indeed many persons hold the departments of the country in contempt and derision. From short stories and novels they seem to have gained the impression that puzzling crimes are solved only by brilliant amateurs. These whimsical creatures of the story-teller's imagination, a printed army of amiable dilettanti of the current fiction, are gentlemen of inexhaustible knowledge and accomplishment. They are experts in chemistry and astronomy, psycho-analysis and fire-arms; they know rugs, music, chess and wines; they are languid fellows with a great fund of humour, and a mischievous liking for cryptic utterances until they are ready to put a delicate finger on the malefactor. Their avocation is to catch elusive murderers, when the police detectives are ready to confess their utter ineptitude for their own business.

"Of course there are no such detectives in real life. Yet the crimes of reality are infinitely stranger than the fanciful misdeeds which these imaginary detectives are asked to unravel. The police face crime and mystery as a part of their daily routine, and they solve their cases by knowing their business and attending to it—by vast and competent organisation, patience and determined hard work, together with some ingenuity and an occasional streak of good luck...."

These were the methods employed in dealing with the mystery of the box of bones. They are described here just as I saw them performed; perhaps you will anticipate the solution long before I did. As I said before, it was perfectly obvious almost from the beginning—or should have been.

ANTHONY ABBOT.

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## **BOOK ONE**

### **We Don't Know Who She Is**

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## *Chapter One*

### A HELL OF A THING TO HAPPEN AT HEADQUARTERS

Three of us were walking through deserted streets of downtown New York at the dark hour of eleven. In the middle was Police Commissioner Thatcher Colt, top-hatted, muffled, silent. I marched with him on the building side of the pavement while near the curb was District Attorney Merle K. Dougherty, always over weight, and puffing slightly as he kept pace with Colt's long-legged strides. We were on our way to Police Headquarters; Lafayette Street was a lighted but lonely ravine. Half in jest and I think wholly in earnest, Dougherty was wishing for some excitement.

"You know, Thatch, a reporter was telling me, to-night—I need to give the public a good show. They're ready for it."

Thatcher Colt gave a chuckling sigh as if over a lost soul. "You mean you could do with a nice, juicy crime before election?"

"Now, Thatch—don't be crude!"

Only half a block from the corner of Broome Street gleamed the pale green lights of 240 Centre Street, the heart of New York's police force. The gray-fronted building, with its fussbudget façade, was like home to me now, for this was Thatcher Colt's third year as Commissioner and I had been his secretary from the beginning.

"You don't have to worry about the election," Colt declared, a hand on the District Attorney's shoulder. "New York will never let you get out of public office; you're too popular. And please don't go wishing for any first page hullabaloo—Tony and his wife and I wish to get away to Miami Beach for a couple of weeks."

"Just the same," wheezed the District Attorney, swinging his stick like a Broadway leading man, "I could do with a hot court trial——"

"With a love angle in it, no doubt?" I bantered, waving a pre-morning tabloid.

"That's it, Tony. A crime of passion!"

"And a triumphant solution?"

"Of course!"

"By the police department."

"Sure!—No! That is——" Dougherty snorted, and shook his head. "Certainly—I mean—working with——"

"An aggressive District Attorney."

"Exactly! Tony's got it right, Thatch! What can we do about it? We need a murder!"

As if the fate—or the furies—had heard and answered the district Attorney's prayer, a little man stepped out of the shadows beside the open door of Headquarters. He was pug-nosed, spectacled, bowler-hatted, overdressed—I recognised him as Sherman, a third-grade detective, inclined to be talkative, but a hard worker.

"Excuse me, Mr. Commissioner." He saluted. "I know this is all irregular bracing you this way but I wanted a word with you personal, and I know you generally drop in downtown after theatre—I made an arrest to-night and now I hope I didn't do the wrong thing."

"What's on your mind, Sherman?"

Colt had halted within the foyer of Headquarters; twin flights of wide marble steps rose left and right to the main lobby; a central flight of stairs led into a basement, the offices of the fingerprint and photographic bureaus. Sherman went on:

"The case I mean is mixed up with a big shot who says he knows you—a man named Gilman."

"Professor Leslie Gilman?"

"That's him—a highbrow college guy."

Colt cast me a hasty and slightly harassed glance. We both knew Leslie Gilman, a chemist of international renown, a physicist. He and Colt were old friends. But of late Professor Gilman had taken up psychic phenomena seriously, and since then we had seen little of him—the Commissioner distrusted occultism and mysticism of every kind. "Is Professor Gilman in any trouble?"

"He's making trouble, that's what he's doing—said he would break me in the department—that's what he said, on account of a pinch I made."

"What is this all about?"

"A bunch of spiritualists! They call it a church."

"And that's what it probably is," Colt rebuked him. "With the same legal rights as any other church. Why did you do it?"

"To catch a ghost," replied Sherman, righteously. "We had complaints—a man and his wife were giving private séances and exhibiting ghosts at three dollars per exhibit—and so we just pulled the joint on a disorderly conduct charge."

"And got what?"

"We got forty yards of cheese cloth daubed with luminous paint out of the spirit medium's bosom."

Colt made a wry face. Such cases always stirred him to low, dull anger.

"How does Gilman fit into this mess?"

"Well, when we locked up the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn and wife—2178 West Eighty-sixth Street——"

"The Lynns were what you called the mediums?"

"Not what I call them—that's what they call themselves—I don't call them anything but God damn—anyhow, the Lieutenant at the Twentieth Precinct—the West Sixty-eighth Street Police station—was a softie and let them use the telephone—oh, I know, they have a legal right to one call—and they called Gilman. So then Gilman gets down to the station house, talks with the prisoners, and starts yelling for you, Mr. Commissioner. He tells me, as the arresting officer, if I don't get his message to you it will go hard with everybody concerned. I told him the New York Police Department wasn't run by *in-floo-ence*, no matter who it was."

"The message?"

"I know it sounds screwy, Mr. Commissioner, but Professor Gilman told me to tell you that the Lynns were positively genuine mediums and could really and truly talk with the remains of the dead."

"Was that all?"

"That was all—except a lot of hooey about how the Lynns could tell you about a murder."

"About a what?" barked Dougherty. Until now he had been totally indifferent, stamping large, cold feet.

"Mrs. Lynn, the female of the mediums, is supposed to have got a message from what she calls her spirit guy——"

"Spirit guide!" corrected Dougherty.

"And the spirit guy brought in a girl that had been murdered and the body buried——"

"Where?"

Sherman laughed.

"They wouldn't tell me! All they want is to get their names in the papers. Well, now they'll get it, plenty."

"Hell's breeches!" grumbled Dougherty. "I thought it was something important. Let's get going, Thatch."

The Police Commissioner looked puzzled; his sombre brown eyes parried mine with a thoughtful question.

"It's an odd message," he murmured. "Where is Gilman now?"

"Up at the Sixty-eighth Street Station, trying to raise bail for those Lynns."

"Get him down here to-morrow—I'll be in my office after ten."

And as the little detective hurried unhappily off, Colt added to us:

"No use in seeing him to-night—nothing to it, of course—it's just a duty I owe to an old friend gone wrong."

"Whatever you say," answered Dougherty with an affable grin. "If I played my hunches, though, Thatch—I'd see him now."

I was anxious to get home. I had promised Betty, my wife, to be back in my mother's home in Scarsdale, where we were visiting, soon after midnight. So I told the Commissioner I would take a look at my desk upstairs and then catch the eleven forty-five out of Grand Central Terminal. As I was explaining this, Colt led the way up to the central corridor, where he stopped at the information desk. A policeman is always on duty there, enclosed in three sides of glass, his back to the solid wall, reporters drift to him and away from him, and messages of black deeds tumble down to him in a crooked tube that runs from the telegraph bureau on the top floor. To-night Old Tim Dubble was in charge; at the sight of the Commissioner he stood up and saluted.

"Good-evening, Sergeant—all the animals in their cages?" asked Colt, with a friendly smile.

"Mr. Commissioner, it's as quiet as a deaf-and-dumb man's grave," answered Dubble, solemnly.

"What will the headlines be in the papers to-morrow?" the Chief asked; he knew that Tim Dubble heard everything from the reporters.

"Not much except a lot of hot air from Washington. One thing, though—that beautiful girl who married a Spanish duke some years ago has run away from him—said he beat her—she's back in New York—what was her name, now?"

Under the tan of his lean, long face, Thatcher Colt changed colour slightly, his sombre brown eyes widened, off guard for a tortured moment; before I could stop Old Tim he drumbled on:

"Oh, yes—Florence Dunbar. She's in New York to-night!"

Florence Dunbar! I knew the name. So did Dougherty. Neither of us would look at Colt. It was no time to look at him. In that instant I recalled a photograph that hung on the wall of Thatcher Colt's library; the only picture in that huge quiet room, and, aside from the pictures of his mother and father, which he kept on his dressing-table, the only photograph in the entire house that he called home. Often I had looked at that portrait and wondered what manner of girl had owned the beautiful face that half-smiled, half-chided the world she gazed at. Florence Dunbar—who had once been engaged to marry Thatcher Colt! She had a remote, legendary beauty; you felt somehow that she spoke strange languages, and understood least of all what we hedonists call "civilisation." Yet there was a wistful glimmer in her large, dark eyes, and a soft womanliness in the rich masses of black hair in a day of bobs. Only the imperious tilt to her head, the aristocratic curve to the proud sharp nose set her apart, as if she were quite unattainable, and knew it to her sorrow. None of Colt's later friends or associates had met Florence Dunbar, yet they all had a wise and knowing look when they referred to her. Once and once only Colt had spoken of her to me. Looking at the portrait, he had quoted the bitter lines of Rudyard Kipling:

"Lived a woman wonderful  
(May the Lord amend her)  
Neither simple, kind, nor true,  
But her pagan beauty drew  
Christian gentlemen a few  
Hotly to attend her!"

Now the woman who had quarrelled with him and in her pique married a Spanish nobleman was back in New York.

What would this mean to Colt? His voice sounded impassive, crisp, as always:

"What else is exciting, Tim?"

"The only thing that's happened to-night is an attempted suicide a few minutes ago—one of the night's catch up at the Sixty-eighth Street Police Station—a woman it was. She had been sent down to the West Thirtieth Street Station, where they keep the she-prisoners."

"What was her name?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"Lynn—Eva Allen Lynn. She's a fortune-teller, Mr. Commissioner—young woman and pretty, too, they told me."

The Commissioner's dark eyes kindled.

"I feel like working to-night, Dougherty—all night, if necessary," he snapped. "Maybe Gilman has got something worth listening to. Find Sherman, Tim. Tell him to bring Professor Leslie Gilman down here!"

I understood. If Colt went home and tried to sleep, thoughts of Florence Dunbar would keep him awake. I hoped he would not let that old dead ghost get him by the heart again. That would indeed be tragic.

"Well, Dougherty—want to stick?"

Dougherty rolled his eyes at Colt.

"Sure I do, Thatch!"

The Commissioner looked sombrely at me. I decided to stay.

## 2

Through the telephone from Colt's private office on the second floor north end, I questioned Lieutenant Summers of the West Thirtieth Street Police Station:

"What happened to Eva Allen Lynn?"

"Oh, she's all right, now. Nervous and scared—she tried to choke herself with her stocking! But the matron was watching okay."

"Did you get her a sedative?"

"A doctor's coming to take a look at her."

"Is Professor Gilman still there?"

"That meddling son of a sea-cook—no. He's cleared out of here and to hell with him, Mr. Abbot. The professor ain't used to a police station and he don't know how to behave in one. Good-night, Mr. Abbot."

By the time I had made my brief report to Thatcher Colt, a knock came at the door, it opened, and the stern silver-crowned face of Captain Israel Henry, guardian of the Commissioner's suite, and working late to-night, looked in on us.

"Professor Gilman to see you, Mr. Colt."

"Quick work—he must have come down in one of our detective radio cars. Send him right in."

None of us was prepared for the state of excitement in which Professor Leslie Gilman entered the room. It had been a quiet and sedate place a moment before; only the green lamp was lighted on Colt's broad desk; a splash of white light pooled around the Commissioner's folded hands. I stood against one of the panelled walls, half-hidden in shadow. Dougherty, too, was in shadow, his great paunch almost invisible as he lolled in an arm-chair. The shadows reached up to the high ceiling and down to the over-sized mulberry-coloured rug. All this placidity was shattered by the scientist. He rushed straight up to Colt's desk, leaned forward, flattening his palms on the glass; the back of his large strong hands

turned pale under the pressure.

"Colt!" he exclaimed, his voice low and quivering, "this Lynn business is a damnable and sacrilegious outrage. It's persecution! It's the Inquisition! It's an indefensible, high-handed, unconstitutional, tyrannical piece of intolerance and by God——"

"By God, you're losing your temper!" barked Thatcher Colt, standing up and leaning forward so that their faces were close together. A strange contrast those faces. Thatcher Colt was thin, tanned, elegant, with aristocratic features, but with a slight discoloration under his left eye from a boxing bout at the Police Academy. Professor Leslie Gilman was Colt's opposite—short, heavy, with the clear red skin of an English soldier, the blue eyes of a Norwegian sailor, and the almost bald head, the nose-glasses, and the bow tie that belong only to married and middle-aged Americans.

"I am losing my temper," agreed Professor Gilman with an imprecatory glance around the room. "I thank you for reminding me. May I sit down?"

"I was on the point of suggesting it," murmured Colt, indicating the comfortable chair before his desk. Both men sat down, and Gilman, with an angry gesture, snatched off his brown slouch hat, and dropped it on the rug.

"I am not any the less angry because I am now in control of my temper," the Professor resumed warningly. "I have come here to right a great wrong. My business is private. Who are these gentlemen?"

Colt introduced us, with the assurance that we were all concerned in his protest.

"Tell me straight out what the trouble is," urged the Commissioner. "The police are not like scientists, you know, Gilman—we do make mistakes sometimes."

The Professor's blue eyes flashed.

"I make mistakes all right—but not this time! I am here as a friend of two unfortunate people. I ask you to believe me when I say, as a scientist, an intelligent man, that these two people are great souls. And they should be treated like great souls. They are more wonderful than Kreisler or Heifetz or Paderewski. These people are like prophets! This horrible raid to-night—and then poor Eva trying to take her own life——"

"Far be it from me to scoff at your faith in them, Gilman—but what about the forty yards of cheese-cloth painted with luminous paint which the detectives seized as their Exhibit A."

"Planted! Planted evidence! Not with your knowledge, of course——"

"I'm not shocked! I have heard suspicions of the police once or twice before. But are you sure the evidence was planted?"

"I can't prove that it was."

"Don't you believe mediums are sometimes fakes—and that even a smart man like you can be fooled?"

"Well—perhaps. It is true that even absolutely genuine mediums may deceive now and then, when they cannot get in touch with their real powers. I would hate to believe that of the Lynns. But even if they did deceive—I know they are still great people, good people, and it is horrible to humiliate them like this. Let them go, Colt—turn them over to me, back to science—I will provide for them——"

The Professor's earnestness was impressive. He was pleading from his heart. Yet it seemed an extraordinary position for a scientist, appealing for a woman who was caught with a bogus ghost in her brassière.

Colt's right hand was dawdling with an ivory head of Homer, the only ornament on his desk. His thumb rubbed the snub nose of the image.

"Where do the Lynns come from?"

"Ohio—I think it is Zanesville—somewhere in the steel and iron region——"

"Been in New York long?"

"About two years."

"Doing what?"

"Submitting to my experiments and preaching."

"They gave private readings and séances for which they charged, didn't they?"

"That is one way of preaching."

"And of collecting fees?"

"The labourer is worthy of his hire."

"What are their miraculous powers that have so impressed you?"

"They can communicate with departed spirits."

"How?"

"In many ways."

Colt sighed a little wearily and thrust aside the ivory head of Homer.

"Just what is it you want me to do about it?"

"Release them. Withdraw the charge."

Colt smiled sadly.

"It isn't in my power to do that, now. The facts are plain. The evidence of fraud is clear. It's up to the magistrate——"

"And you won't interfere?"

"Impossible."

"And you don't believe a word of what I have said, either, now do you, Colt?"

"We need not go into that, old fellow. I sympathise——"

"Sympathise!" repeated Gilman in a great shout. "You are blind. What blindness! What self-satisfied folly! You say you want to stop crime in this city. But do you? You say you want to solve all the mysteries, catch all the criminals—so what do you do? You take measurements, you count up the ridges in fingerprints, the ballistic riflings on bullets, you analyse the very dirt under the fingernails of corpses—bah! Rot! No good at all! Those childish little tricks and dodges take up your time when all the while there is a short cut, a straight way to the truth—and you will not take it!"

Professor Gilman stood up in defiant silence, twisting his reclaimed hat into a shapeless bundle, now that he had scolded Thatcher Colt.

"You propose," mused the Commissioner, "that through your mediums I should get in touch with the spirits of murdered persons and these shades, or astral bodies, or whatever they are called, would accuse the guilty killer?"

"Yes, that's just what I do mean!" cried Gilman passionately. "I mean even more than that. Murder not even discovered yet by your practical, brain-trust police can be brought to light by this simple and natural means."

Colt's smile was friendly.

"I'm sorry, Gilman. If we could adopt your plan, it would greatly simplify police work, but I'm afraid that we will have to stick to ballistics and the rest of the technique you deplore."

"Excuse me, Thatch," cut in Dougherty placatingly. "I'm a good Catholic and I don't go for any of this business in any way at all. But let me ask you one question, Professor—didn't you say there was some kind of message about a particular murder?"

Professor Gilman turned and looked appealingly at Dougherty as if he had just discovered a friend.

"I did, sir. I did. I sent a message by that flatfoot. But it is evident it is quite useless for me to refer to it again. In spite of the fact that I believe it would be a perfect test—establish our theories to the world, I do not expect to be taken seriously by those in authority. Of course, even if we were, we might fail. Unlike the police, Mr. Colt, our mediums are sometimes mistaken."

Colt chuckled at this melancholy ripost.

"Tell us about this perfect test," he invited.

"That's just what it amounts to—a perfect test. We have—or at least the Lynns have—been trying to get more information on this matter for months. But it was impossible. We told no one because we knew no one would listen—the newspapers and the detectives would all think it was a vulgar publicity stunt."

"Well, what information have you got so far?"

Professor Gilman sat down in his chair again; began to smooth out his battered hat. His eyes were lowered, his forehead covered with perspiration.

"For several months," he began deliberately, "the spirit of a young girl has been coming through to us. She speaks through Eva Allan Lynn while the medium is in a trance—using her lips, her tongue, her vocal cords—but the voice is very, very different. This young girl spirit says she was murdered—cut up into pieces—put in a box and buried in the water."

There was a moment's silence. We did not believe it, of course; not one of us, except Gilman. But the way he told it gave one shivers.

"Does the spirit of the murdered girl tell her name?" asked Colt.

"Yes. Madeline!"

"She gives only the first name?"

"So far, yes. Whenever we ask for the last name, she begins to cry and goes away!"

"Did Madeline say where the body was buried—in what body of water?"

"She was to tell us that to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes—after the church meeting she was coming to my apartment and we were to go on with our experiments. But the damned police raided our service——"

"Never mind that again," snapped Colt.

"But I say you have prevented a great revelation."

"Of what?"

"Of murder! Go along with me for a little minute, will you, Colt? Suppose a girl named Madeline was murdered. Suppose her body *was* cut up and the pieces *put* in a box and *dropped* into the sea. Then what would you say?"

"Thatch!" Dougherty's husky voice was warm with interest. "Listen, Thatch. The police don't want to interfere with science when it isn't necessary—ever! Why not let the Professor have his séance with the mediums to-night, anyway?"

"Where?"

"Well—I was thinking—why not right here and let us all take a look at it."

"A séance in my private office?" groaned Colt. His face lighted up with a brief grin.

"That would be a hell of a thing to happen at Headquarters," I burst out.

"It might be a heavenly thing, young man," crackled the Professor, his blue eyes reproving me.

"But the Lynn woman is ill—neurotic," demurred Colt. "It's out of the question."

"That's why she's ill—that dead spirit of a murdered woman seeking earthly justice is tormenting her, trying to break through for the final revelation of her murderer. Colt, try this for me on my sacred word just this once, will you?"

Colt hesitated a moment, then looked up at me.

"All right, Tony—call the Sixty-eighth and West Thirtieth Street Station houses and tell them to send the Lynns down here."

As I picked up the receiver, I happened to glance at Professor Gilman. His hat had fallen to the floor; his great, hairy hands were palm to palm, and Professor Leslie Gilman was praying.

### 3

A strange pair, the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn and his wife, Eva. Within fifteen minutes after my talk with Lieutenant Summers, a detective radio car brought them to the door of Headquarters and three minutes later they came into the private office of the Police Commissioner. We watched Professor Gilman go towards them with reverence and kindly affection. Deluded though Leslie Gilman must be, there was, nevertheless, something beautiful and touching in his behaviour. He walked forward with arms outstretched and gathered the young woman's thin, wraith-like hands into his own. He led her to the chair he had used and placed her in it with an air of gallant concern. And all the while, over his shoulder he smiled and nodded reassuringly at the husband; with his free left hand the Professor motioned the spiritualist clergyman to another chair. All this in perfect silence. Then, as if he had waited to set the stage, Professor Gilman faced around again; standing behind Eva Lynn's chair, his hands on her shoulder, he glanced challengingly at Dougherty, at me, and finally at Colt.

"Mr. Commissioner," he said in a formal tone and with a slightly pompous flourish of his hand, "allow me to present Mrs. Eva Allen Lynn. I want you to take a good look at her. Does she look like a swindler?"

She did not. Since Eva Allen Lynn entered the room, I had been telling myself that in no way did she resemble the familiar type of confidence woman. The medium was so unexpectedly young, so delicate, pale, there was so little of her, and—yes, she was so lovely, death-like in her loveliness. Coal-black braids were plaited around her narrow head, giving her a foreign appearance; her over-large black eyes were set wide apart in the pallid face, and glowed with a steady and unnatural brilliance. The small body was rigid; the narrow, phantom hands clutched together in a drowning person's grip; she looked steadily before her as if she saw eternity.

"Has Mrs. Lynn been given medical attention?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"She doesn't want a doctor—and that's flat!"

The high-pitched but most emphatic voice was that of the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn. He scrambled up from his chair with the graceless agility of an ape. Not a prepossessing creature, this dubious man of God. He was squat and strong, with long, drooping, jungle arms; his face was reddish and freckled, and his thick red hair was tousled, probably from a scuffle with the cops.

"Eva Lynn won't have no doctor. She refuses medical attention of all kinds. That right, Eva?"

"Yes!" Her voice was a frightened whisper.

"Why?" asked Thatcher Colt, with a satyr's smile.

"Because no doctor would understand her condition," put in Professor Gilman, returning to Colt's desk and leaning over persuasively. "I told you she was to be hostess to Madeline to-night. And because of the Police Department of New York City and its utterly idiotic detectives, she has been forced to keep the poor, distracted soul of the murdered girl waiting. No wonder she, herself, is distracted and ill. Her whole nervous system is like a barred door on which the dead are rapping, pounding, demanding admittance. The sooner we get this over the better."

"Get what over?" piped the husband, ambling forward and swinging his arms. "What's the programme now, Professor? Eva can't stand no more, you know."

"I have induced these officials to permit Madeline to come through—perhaps to investigate——"

A sneer distorted the freckled face.

"Why waste our time?"

"Wait," whispered Eva. "God is willing. So are the police. So am I. So must you be!"

The whispering voice of Eva Allen Lynn had a disciplinary effect upon the husband. He shrugged his high shoulders, swung his arms and scrambled back to his chair like a trained animal.

"May we proceed, Mr. Colt?"

"One moment, please. May I ask a few questions of this young woman, Professor Gilman?"

That, of course, was Dougherty talking; the under-slept, sceptical District Attorney, beguiled in spite of himself. But Gilman quickly protested:

"Mrs. Lynn has not come here to answer any questions. That is not the understanding at all. In the first place she doesn't know anything. In the second place, she is very weary and ill, and she is making a great sacrifice to put her scientific gifts at the disposal of the police, in the hope of advancing psychic truth. You may question me—or the spirit, or the spirits, if any come under these unpleasant and undignified police surroundings—question them all you like. But not Mrs. Lynn—she is already sinking into a trance."

"I don't want to third degree the lady," protested Dougherty, squirming in his chair until it creaked. "I want to inform myself, so that I can understand what is going on."

"That's fair, Mr. Gilman. Mind?"

"No, I suppose not, Colt. What is it you would like to know, Mr. Dougherty?"

Dougherty blew his nose loudly.

"Is spiritualism her religion?"

"Of course."

"What type of mediumship will she practice to-night?"

I could feel a vibration of antagonism; it was as if some physical, tangible currents sprang in conflict from the two men. Gilman cleared his throat, and said:

"I don't think I understand."

"Well, is she to be clairvoyant—or clairaudient? Will she materialise—do telekinesis, for example? Just what is to be the nature of her phenomena?"

That was a trick of the District Attorney. He seemed so disorganised mentally; his manners were often enough a little brusque; he played a political rôle of good-natured, hard-fighting, golden-hearted rough-neck—but the man read, and remembered what he read; he was well-informed and hid his knowledge as if it were a vice, or, at least, disreputable.

"Perhaps," the District Attorney added, "she can get the direct voice. That would be very interesting."

Now he was showing off!

"I see what you mean," faltered Gilman. "It's hard to tell in advance. You see—she does get the direct voice. I've heard it. They are extraordinary mediums—extraordinary because they have a vast range where most ordinary mediums can use only one method. Mrs. Lynn gets direct voice, she is clairvoyant, she is a psychometrist and she is, above all, and in spite of everything, a genuine materialising medium—she brings before your eyes visible spectres of the dead."

"Will she do that to-night?"

"Certainly not!"

"But voices talk to her and give her messages?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can anybody hear them?"

"She hears them. Sometimes she hears the voice only inside her head."

"But other times?"

"Outside! Yes, sir!"

"You mean—in a room, just as you hear my voice right now?"

"Yes. At certain séances—not with Eva—I have even heard a voice clearer than yours."

"I'd like to ask a question," put in Thatcher Colt. "Does Eva often hear these voices outside of her head?"

"Not often, no."

"And did anybody else hear them?"

"I don't think so—except, of course, the Reverend. He was present."

"Only one more question," resumed the District Attorney. "Is she going to try for the direct voice to-night?"

"She is not going to try for anything. She makes herself passive, not active. She leaves the doors of her body open for spirits to come in. If they do not come in, we will fail. We will get nothing. If they come, we may hear their direct voices, not in our heads, but over our heads, in front of them, behind them, under our chairs or even in the wastebasket. Or you may not hear that at all. More likely they will use her voice; they do that very often. Then it's just her voice being used by the dead spirit inside."

Dougherty blew his nose again, emitting a snort that was a triumph of impatience.

"In which case," went on Gilman, unhampered by the snort, "you can tell whether the spirit is true or false, good or bad, by the message they bring."

"Fair enough," agreed Thatcher Colt.

"May we proceed?"

"Certainly—what do you do next?"

"We turn out all the lights, Mr. Commissioner."

The Professor's short, powerful arm protruded; the sleeve fell back a little, exposing the white and hairy forearm strangely animal-like in that forward dart. I caught a glimpse of the girl medium before Gilman reached the desk-lamp—she was much paler now, her eyes were rolled back, her lips parted, her breath came in short tugs—and her knees were thrust out, the whole posture rigid and uncomfortable.

Then, darkness. The darkness was complete. I began to regret this whole brash proceeding. We must see that it was kept a profound secret. And for a common-sense important reason. Half of the metropolitan journals were against the administration, and the spectacle of the chief officer of the Police Department and the District Attorney communing with the dead down in Centre Street would have made a hippodrome holiday for the opposition. With cartoons and caricatures and editorials and interviews and with ribald paragraphing by all the clever columnists they would have kept the joke hot for days. Indeed, if it leaked out, the séance might have been a major political blunder; many a campaign has been lost through ridicule. Colt knew then, and so did Dougherty but they would not turn back.

In the darkness, Professor Gilman spoke solemnly:

"From this moment on, I hope you and your associates will regard all arrangements as in my hands. In other words, I and no one else am in command. Is that agreed to?"

"It's all in your hands," Colt replied positively.

"Very well, then. There are really three rules—effective from this minute on, for Eva Allen Lynn has now reached the state of deep trance."

"Rule Number One—no one is to touch the medium until it is all over."

"Rule Number Two—no one is to leave his chair until it is all over."

"Rule Number Three—no more smoking until the ceremonies are over."

"Those are the only rules and I hope you understand they are solely for the protection of Mrs. Lynn; while she is in a state of trance her life is in your hands."

Instantly I wanted a smoke; wanted one damnable. I shifted about in my chair, listening to the hard breathing of Eva Allen Lynn, wondering if it were just put on and if so how long she had practised it, and I was just beginning to feel perfectly sure that she could stop gasping and breathe normally any moment she chose to do so—when suddenly I heard a new sound, and it startled me.

It was a humming sound, a deep human voice humming, and the tune of it was "There's a Long, Long Trail A-winding into the Land of My Dreams." Not a cheerful ditty under any circumstances, it was especially dismal now. Gilman's voice, of course; for a moment it had given me what Betty calls "the creeps." Only Gilman's voice at first, but presently the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn joined in. And then with some distaste I recalled that sad music is supposed to entice the wandering phantoms of the wayward dead.

In the midst of the song, a voice spoke—quickly, sharply—and the singing stopped. The new voice spoke again. It was not like Eva Allen Lynn's voice. I had to be honest with myself, even then, and admit that. The quality of its tone, when it spoke the first word, was utterly different.

"Madeline!" was what it said. "Madeline! Madeline!..." And then, "Madeline is here!"

The tone, I repeat, in no slightest accent resembled the flat and passionless whisper of the girl in the chair. Its timbre, its very vibration was more buoyant, a deep, musical contralto voice, fuller and richer and younger. If this were the voice of a dead person it was livelier than that of the living girl of whose lips and diaphragm it had taken possession.

I slipped a notebook from my pocket, and in the dark I began to jot down all that was said.

There was a long silence, a deep sigh, and then the same new vivacious voice announced:

"I want to tell about my trouble."

Again silence, but briefer this time. It spoke once more; the voice grew plaintive, and I had the horrible—and, of course, mistaken—illusion that it had moved, changed its position, got behind me somehow.

"Mr. Colt! Is Mr. Colt there? Please, Mr. Colt."

Gilman called out: "Speak to her, Colt. Don't be afraid!"

The voice of the Commissioner was matter-of-fact and natural:

"I am here. Have you something to tell me?"

"Do you know who I am, Mr. Colt?"

"I am sorry—no."

"My name is Madeline."

I heard Dougherty clear his throat; then silence as we all waited to hear what Thatcher Colt would say to her.

"Yes, Madeline—is there something you want to tell the police?"

"You do not believe I am Madeline."

"Does it matter what I believe?"

"Yes. But it should not be hard. I want to help you—for it was murder."

"Murder? You were murdered?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it, then."

"I'll try."

"Will you start by giving me your last name?"

"I can't do that."

"But weren't you going to tell that to-night?"

"Yes—but I can't now."

"Why not?"

"I don't know it."

"Don't know your own last name?"

"No, Mr. Colt."

"Try to remember, Madeline——"

"I did try. But I can't remember. I can remember all about the murder. I was shot. Shot in the head. The bullet is in my head now and when I think about it, it hurts. It horrifies me, too, to think about it. I've been horrified ever since the day it happened."

"Do you remember the date?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly. It was May first."

"Of what year?"

"This year."

"And what else do you remember about the murder?"

And then came the long speech; I got it all down, for our future study, making my stenographic pot-hooks in the dark—a difficult feat, too; try it sometime:—

"Murder has been committed. Foul murder. Horrible murder. I was a beautiful girl with everything to live for. I was scared! I was scared! I was scared! I died in sight of the sunlight in the streets of New York—and then I was sawed up in pieces and—oh-h, that was horrible... And then I was put in a box and put down in the water—I can give you the very spot—about a hundred yards off shore from the Laflin Hotel at Fairland Beach, beyond Jones Beach Park—try there for me and I'll be there—dredge for me and dig me up—I don't want to go on lying there—please, please, Mr. Colt..."

"Who killed you?" asked Thatcher Colt, his voice crackling.

"I don't know."

"Didn't you see who shot you?"

"I saw it all. I saw him dismember me, too. But I had never seen him before in my life."

"A stranger killed you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know that either. And I can't find out—not for the life of me."

Weird phrase, from one who pretended to have lost her life. Weirder still, for it was the last word we were to get from the medium that night. I heard a slow, gurgling gasp, a swishing noise and the heavy clump of a body falling to the floor. Gilman swore softly.

I turned up the lights; Eva Allen Lynn was lying collapsed in a heap on the floor; she was totally unconscious and there was no fake about that.

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## *Chapter Two*

### THE TWO HUNDRED-ODD PIECES OF MADELINE

My telephone was ringing.

From somewhere in a bottomless pit of sleep I heard the scolding clamour of the bell. Its buzzing jingle called me, even as I wrestled with dark angels, tormented me, while I felt trailing garments of corpse-cloth slither across my cheeks and fought off horrible old women who skated on their heels——

Nightmare! I shivered with relief to awaken and find myself in the bedroom of the old Abbot homestead in Scarsdale. The shrilling of the bell was just beyond my left ear now. Still I did not stir from my catalepsy, too bewilderingly in my own entranced thoughts. I began to remember things clearly—the spirit séance in Colt's office; the medium fainting, Colt sending her and her husband away in the care of Professor Gilman—but that was all more than twenty-four hours ago. That was Thursday. I had gone home after that séance, gone to sleep, got up again the next morning, worked all day at the office; I had come home again—it must be Saturday!

I sat up and glared at the folding, leather-cased timepiece on the table between our beds. Ten minutes after two in the morning and dark as the inside of an executioner's belly. I had been asleep only a little over an hour——

"Hallo!"

"Sorry to wake you up, Tony!"

"Chief! Good-morning—what's up? Anything wrong?"

"I don't know, Tony—but maybe you would like to come down here and help me to find out."

"Sure I will. Where are you—Headquarters?"

"No—at my home."

"I'll be right along—but I wish you would give me some inkling of what it's about, Chief."

Thatcher Colt hesitated a moment and an almost embarrassed note crept into his voice when he answered:

"Well, Tony—ever since that spook show we had here the other night, I've been restless—and a little sleepless. I didn't believe in the séance, of course, and yet I wondered if I had any right to ignore such a message without investigation. You see?"

"Sure, I see," I whispered, not to arouse Betty. "I felt a little that way myself. What did you do?"

"Well, naturally, I inquired at the Bureau of Missing Persons first. No report of a girl named Madeline missing."

"Hmpf!"

"Exactly. Then I looked up the location at Fairland Beach—and I sent three men from the emergency service division down there after nightfall. That was just to be circumspect—I didn't want the papers full of this."

"No. Did the emergency men find anything?"

"They have just telephoned me from Bellevue dock. Yes, they did find something—a box—filled with human bones."

"Good God!"

"Something like that, I suppose. They are bringing the remains up to my library."

"I'll be there in forty-five minutes," I promised. As I sprang to the cold floor, a muffled voice came from the quilts and coverlets of my wife's bed. I promised not to drive more than sixty-five miles an hour and so I got dressed, kissed Betty, and started off on my lonely drive into town. It was the end of any personal life for Colt or myself until a vicious, hideous mystery in human behaviour was made known.

Arthur, the giant negro serving man, let me in Colt's front door on West Seventieth Street and directed me to the long library on the third floor. There I found Dougherty sitting before a hearth blazing and crackling with cannel coal; the District Attorney thrust the toe of his right boot into the nap of the library rug like a child dibbling its toes in the sand; while his popping, flabbergasted eyes followed Thatcher Colt, in pipe and purple dressing-robe, back and forth and up and down the room.

"It was really not a difficult thing to manage," Colt was explaining; he motioned me to a chair and drinks. "Having located the spot on the map we had to locate it in the water. So I sent three emergency service division men in a row-boat down there. One man rowed the boat, a second wore a diver's helmet and a third handled the air hose and grappling hooks. And, gentlemen, telling the truth and shaming ourselves for the materialistic sceptics that we are, the man with the hook did find something that felt like it might be a box. But he couldn't get it up. It seemed to be held down there by some powerful grip. So he ordered the diver down."

My blood tingled as I imagined the dark scene. Fairland, between Jones Beach and Long Beach! A coast resort, a flash place now, though, founded by New England puritans nearly three hundred years ago; to-day we called it the Cicero of New York—the place where the big shots among the big-money criminals, the policy men, the racketeers, could congregate and have a local habitation. Fairland Beach! Its outraged decent citizenry hated the bandits and their harlots who had moved into power in that lovely place—a strip of sand between Wiswall Channel and the open sea. The Boardwalk, really made of cement, would be covered with ice to-night; the wind would cut the spume from the tall breakers as they rushed in under the pilings of the promenade; lights would be glimmering on Point Lookout and along shore; liners to all the coloured ports of the earth would be passing up and down; it would be the time, too, for the flights of the migratory birds, moving in a wedge, close to the water, and near to shore, flying all through the night. These were the sights the diver must have seen before the helmet was locked on his head and he was lowered into the December water, far down to the soft, wet bottom, there to grope among crabs and fishes, in that nightmare region, that other world, to probe and blunder and at last to come upon it, to find the predicted and horrible thing.

"He found it," Colt was saying. "They brought it up with a derrick."

"And where is it now, Thatch?" breathed Dougherty.

Before Colt could reply, black Arthur tapped lightly on the door and thrust in a face full of fright, whites of eyes prominent: "Mr. Colt! Detective Sherman is here—and some other men too—and they're carrying a long box up the staircase, Mr. Colt—I tried to stop them—this ain't no funeral parlour——"

"Bring the box in here!" snapped Thatcher Colt, as Dougherty and I hastily rolled back the Persian rug and began to spread out newspapers.

They set the box—dripping wet, worm-chewed, falling to pieces—in the middle of the library floor—a long, narrow box of the sort used to store bed blankets a box with a lid, handles at each end and four small feet, one of them missing. It looked as if it had been in the water a long time. The three of us stared at it, unmindful of anything else, until I became aware of a cluster of police faces at the door, and of Detective Sherman standing inside the room. Sherman himself was a sight to behold. The dapper and talkative little detective fellow was transformed almost beyond recognition. His glistening bowler hat was broken and battered out of shape; his face was covered with mud and sweat; his Broadway raiment was soggy and befouled and Dougherty hoarsely declared that he smelled like the bottom of an old scow. Sherman removed his wreck of a hat, saluted and sneezed.

"There they are, Mr. Commissioner—and not a pretty sight for this hour in the morning."

"Good work, though, Sherman," nodded Colt, towering over the box. "Arthur will take you inside, give you a bath, dry your clothing and give you a drink."

"There is one thing more, Mr. Commissioner. I found these in the box, too."

He took from his pocket a damp envelope which he passed to the commissioner. Colt took them out—a pair of imitation pearl button ear-rings that gleamed dully as they lay in his cupped palm. I heard Colt's swift intake of breath and saw the sparkle of hope in his eye.

"Thanks again, Sherman," he said heartily. "I'm glad you did not let these get away from you."

He returned the ear-rings to the envelope, passed it to me, and waved Sherman and the others away. In his dressing robe of purple silk, Colt knelt at the hearth-stone and lifted up the lampshade. District Attorney Dougherty watched with bulging eyes. I stood on the other side as Colt lifted the lid off and disclosed a scrap-heap of human bones. We looked at the bones and for a while we did not speak. In the dressing-room beyond Colt's library a table clock tinged out the hour of three.

Colt straightened up. In his left hand he held a long, slender thigh bone; in his right was a human skull. I looked at the skull attentively—small, delicately formed, probably a woman's skull, and quite hideous. But what beauty might once have been stretched over those gray-white walls! And would we ever find the answer to the skull's eye-open, mouth-open, teeth-exposed riddle? Eyes, ears, mouth—all the openings were small; the teeth clean; Colt was looking at the teeth now, seeking tell-tale traces of dental work, his best hope for an identification.

But Colt did not linger long over the small, white teeth that seemed to smile up at him in gentle mockery. Suddenly he turned the skull over and lifted it up, squinting into a deep hole in the frontal bone and listening. "Tony! Dougherty! Look here!"

The District Attorney blinked. With Colt in the last three years, Dougherty had looked upon death in a hundred horrible forms. But such scenes were for station houses, murder places, the morgue. This was different; fantastically so. This was Thatcher Colt's library, a warm friendly room, within whose walls this little white skull seemed especially disagreeable.

Colt jiggled the head in his hands and it rattled.

"What is it, Thatch? What's the matter with the thing?" asked Dougherty fretfully.

"Sounds like a piece of lead," Colt answered lightly. "Listen!"

Again he shook the skull violently, like a bartender with a cocktail shaker.

"A bullet rattling around inside, beyond a doubt. Let's look a little farther."

Into the open hole in the frontal bone—a hole not more than two inches wide—Colt thrust a narrow pair of shears taken from his desk. Using these as a forceps, he probed for the bullet and presently extracted it—a slug of lead as long as my first little finger joint; it was flattened, smashed.

"At a guess from the size of it, I would say a revolver bullet of .32 calibre," murmured the Commissioner, handing the slug—what the newspapers were soon to call "the lethal pellet"—to Dougherty. The District Attorney brooded over it as it lay in his fat, red palm; then, without a word he passed it to me. I put it also in an envelope, plainly marking it as to date, hour and how it was found; in the morning I would turn it over to the property clerk at Headquarters for safe-keeping until it was wanted.

Meanwhile, Thatcher Colt set the skull on his William and Mary mantelpiece, where it stared off with a gentle sneer, as if mocking the rows of medico-legal books lining the opposite wall. Colt turned his back on the head; he was busying himself now in drawing from the interior of the box, piece by piece, a dreary assortment of human fragments, more than two hundred in all, jumbled together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Having counted them, Colt calmly set about to reassemble the pieces in their proper order against the chaste pattern of the hardwood floor. He worked with precision; he was an expert anatomist.

"Fibula!" he muttered, laying a lower leg bone carefully in place. "And this is a tibia and probably goes over here. Now what else have we? Here's a humerus and an ulna. And these little pieces are parts of fingers and toes and ribs. And this clavicle goes right up here."

It was a grisly job. Yes, I might as well admit it, I was quite affected. In fact, never before and certainly never since have I felt such a touch of nature to make me kin to District Attorney Merle K. Dougherty. I watched Colt as if he were some one I had never known, or even seen before. He seemed to me then—he, my friend, my chief—he seemed to be like some fabulous and unhuman person, as he occupied himself so intently fitting those bones together; matching thigh bone to hip bone, knee joint and ankles and shin-bones, and heels, piecing them together with a shrewd and slightly cheerful air. I knew my feeling of recoil was unworthy, silly. Better than any one else, I knew that Thatcher Colt was only doing his job, and if I were worth my salt, I would not be ogling or recoiling, but helping. For these were Colt's first steps toward the solution of a shocking mystery. Nevertheless I could not look upon those two hundred fragments as merely anatomical specimens. To me they were the broken pieces of some one I had heard speak. Of course that was sheer nonsense. Yet, try as I had to remain untouched by the mediumistic mumbo-jumbo, the thing had got to me; I could still hear the rich, sweet voice in the darkness saying, "I am Madeline—he cut me into pieces—"

I wondered how long ago it had been, and what the place had been like, when these bones were last inside a warm and lighted room.

No matter what the explanation, I felt certain that these *were* the pieces of Madeline and of no one else. Had not the spirit voice named the precise spot on the whole earth where her remains would be found? It certainly had! More—it had said the bullet was still in her head. No more now, though; it was in an envelope now, in my pocket, over my heart. I felt jumpy and sought for a cigarette; I found one in Colt's favourite humidor, made of agallochum, the fragrant wood of the laurel family; the aloes wood of the Bible, and I felt there was something religious and therefore comforting about that. I wondered that Colt—under the surface, a highly imaginative and sensitive person—could seem so indifferent. He told me afterward that he worked in such complete detachment that the very feel of the white wet bones scarcely registered upon his skin.

At last the skull was taken down from the mantel and laid on the floor and the job was done. There it lay—that thing that had once been a moving hoping, dreaming unit but was now not even a skeleton—only the separate, disunited pieces of a skeleton. Put together at our feet, it sprawled, a dull jest on all the dignity of mankind.

"Well, there she is!" rumbled Dougherty.

"Who is she?" murmured Thatcher Colt, as he knelt again and began to make measurements with a ruled tape. "Could it really be a person named Madeline, do you suppose?"

"Dental work will soon settle that," said Dougherty confidently. "You trace the dentist, he traces his records—in twenty-four hours you will have her life story complete."

Colt looked up from squinting at his tape, and his expression was wry.

"No such luck this time, Dougherty. It begins to look to me as if we have on our hands—or at our feet, better—that old sea-serpent fable called the perfect crime."

"I thought you said there never was any such thing."

"There never was—before," answered Colt. He rose to his feet, went to the back of the room and at a basin washed his hands in an antiseptic solution. "And I hope it hasn't happened now. But look at those teeth, Dougherty—close up."

"I can see them well enough from here. Hmm—yes—pretty ones."

"Pretty? They're perfect. As far as I can see no dentist has ever touched them."

"Then you can't—"

"Bright lad—correct! I can't."

"What else have you got to go on?"

"Not much," agreed Colt ruefully, as he lowered his body on his toes and began to examine some holes in the back and two sides of the box. "But something. First, we have the box itself. It's pretty far gone, but maybe we can find out who manufactured it. If so, we next trace the retail stores in this part of the world that sell this particular line of boxes. Then the sales-slips of those stores for the names of purchasers. That will tell us something if ever we get that far. Also we

shall take a look at what else is in the box——"

He had lifted a bundle of wet cloth, a part of a girl's dress, a faded and rotting rag. It had once been green; the water had soaked away most of its colour and eaten it into such fragments that there was hardly one sliver whole enough to be tied to another. Colt examined the material with the closest attention—he sat down at his desk, focused a lamp on the garment and drew from a top drawer his favourite magnifying glass. He gave a little chuckle of satisfaction; put the remains of the dress aside and turned to another discoloured remnant, a piece of what had once been a man's scarf. Carefully, he handled the faded, discoloured piece of silk and woollen material fringed around the edges; it, too, was about to fall to pieces.

"We shall try to trace the scarf and what is left of the dress; under the glass in the laboratory, the weave, the texture, the material will all be isolated, checked with clothing factories and traced. Furthermore, I am going to have this material duplicated in the same size and style of dress, if that is possible, because I have a notion that if what I hope to do is successful, a duplicate dress will come in handy."

"Then I have a faint hope of another clue. The dress may have been sent to a dry cleaner. If so, it will have an indelible laundry mark and will be possible to trace——"

Dougherty managed a grunt of pleasure.

"Then it's not a perfect crime?"

"Not if these clues pay out. Anyway, I shall not wait for them. I shall go on to other methods."

"You mean—the mediums!" exploded Dougherty triumphantly. "The Lynns. They gave us the tip—they knew—they had guilty knowledge—there is where the solution lies, all right!"

"Perhaps, Dougherty."

"Only perhaps?"

"Only a dubious perhaps."

"Now, Thatch, why do you take a cantankerous attitude like that to a perfectly reasonable theory?"

Colt was drying his hands, his movements like a ceremony of purification.

"Think a minute more, Dougherty. Suppose you had killed this girl."

"I?"

"Yes. And suppose you were also a fake spirit medium. Would you let any message get through you—spirits or no spirits—that would put yourself in the chair? For what?"

"Well, I admit that doesn't sound sensible—but on the other hand—you can't ignore the fact that they did predict precisely——"

"Right. We have to follow up the medium angle."

"Well, what will be your next step, Thatch?"

Before replying to Dougherty, Colt filled his pipe, lighted it, sat down in his arm-chair and stared with some impatience at the bones.

"It's as plain as plain can be. Look at them—the bones of a petite woman, quite young, I should judge—not more than twenty-five at the outside, nearer twenty in my unexpert opinion. She probably weighed a little over a hundred pounds—there was a very slight curvature of her spine which makes her height a little uncertain—she was about five feet, four inches tall. She was probably from a good station in life. The hole in her skull was caused by a bullet and she died around May first."

"The time the medium said."

"Just about," assented Colt imperturbably.

Dougherty sank back in his chair and shook his head.

"I'm not going to flatter your vanity, Thatch, by asking you how you figured out those deductions," he declared. "Or any of the details. It only makes me annoyed that I don't see those things for myself. But after all, it's your job, that kind of thing, not mine. Mind if I light a cigar?"

"Go right ahead. It was really very simple—the condition of the bones. No adipocere—corpse-fat, you know—it takes time for bones to get in this condition. They are as clean as if a ghoul had been at them!"

"Yes! Yes!" agreed the District Attorney throatily. His face was getting a little purple. "And now, Thatch—now that you've given us this perfect demonstration—can't we pack up those bones and send them to hell out of here?"

Summoned by some undetected signal of Colt, Arthur arrived with a fresh bottle of cognac. The black man, at the sight of the outstretched bones, set down the bottle with a trembling clatter and, eyes popping, bolted from the room. The liquor rejoiced all our hearts. In deep silence we drank again, as if by general consent with our backs respectfully to the poor puzzle on the floor.

"I can't send them away immediately," apologised Colt, "because the medical examiner is on the way here to look at them, together with the photographers and fingerprint men——"

"You are going right through the department routine?"

"Without delay. The boys will be here any minute. Meanwhile there is plenty to be thought about. Those holes, for example—why are they bored in the box? The box was once lined with cedar; the moths could get in through holes like that—no, they were bored in after the box was bought—and for what purpose? There's something mephitic about such holes where no holes should be; something foul and damnable."

He vaulted from his chair at the sound of voices and the tramp of feet; the party from headquarters had arrived. First to enter the library was Doctor J. L. Multooler, assistant medical examiner; following him came the camera man, the fingerprint man, a representative of the Bureau of Missing Persons, detectives from the Borough Homicide Squad, the Inspector commanding all the detectives in the Borough of Manhattan and the Captain of the local precinct.

Colt gave them a brief statement of what had happened. In crisp orders, he arranged for the tracing of the box, the scarf, and the dead girl's dress.

"Shall I send the rag and bone and hank of hair down to the morgue when we are finished with it?" asked Multooler, a good-humoured sawbones if there ever was one.

"No, doctor," said Colt emphatically. "I want the bones left here!"

"Mind telling a mere medical examiner what you are going to do with them?"

Thatcher Colt grinned.

"That's my secret for now—but I'll take full responsibility. Go ahead, boys. I'm going inside to change."

As Dougherty ambled after Colt into the bedroom at the rear of the house, he asked:

"Thatch, what are you going to change?"

"My clothes."

"At this hour?"

"Certainly."

"What for?"

"I have work to do."

"On this case?"

"Certainly!"

Dougherty sat down disconsolately on the side of Colt's bed. He could never go home to his own bed if there was a chance that he would miss anything. And the big man was exhausted.

"Can't we all wait until morning, Thatch?"

"No, I'm afraid not——" Colt's voice came spluttering from under the shower, while Arthur was laying out a tweed suit.

"I don't see what you can do now!"

Colt was rubbing himself with a towel.

"You know better than that," he remonstrated. "There is plenty I can do."

"Check all reports of missing girls—get the newspapers to play it up and all that—but that can wait."

"I can't wait," insisted Colt, getting into underwear. "Tony, let me have my private telephone list from the desk, please—I want to get hold of a man named Fitch—Imro Acheson Fitch is his full name. He is the man who can help us identify this girl——"

"Wait, Thatch!"

Dougherty's voice was suddenly solemn and indignant.

"Is that the Fitch who worked on the Harvey case last year?"

"Sure. In his own weird line, he's a genius."

"He won't do, Thatch. Don't have anything to do with him. He's in bad with Tammany Hall——"

"Really?"

"And he's in bad with O'Toole, too."

"You mean the Brooklyn political leader?"

"You know perfectly well that I do. O'Toole had Fitch canned—as a loyal party man, Thatch, and a public office holder, don't have anything to do with Imro Acheson Fitch. Besides, everybody knows that for that sort of thing Captain Williams, one of your own force, or used to be, is the greatest expert in the world."

"Sorry, Dougherty. But for this job, Fitch is just our man. You are right about Captain Williams. But Fitch did me a good turn once and I owe him this chance. Coming?"

"No—I can't encourage a man that's in bad down town—not when it's not really necessary, I can't."

"Sorry then, Dougherty—good night. You can sleep here if you don't want to go all the way home. Coming, Tony——?"

Five minutes later Thatcher Colt walked down his front stairs, suitcase in hand. In the suitcase were more than two hundred pieces of a murdered girl.

"Who is this Imro Acheson Fitch that the District Attorney got so excited about?" I asked as we came to the front door. "I never heard of him."

Colt smiled a little sombrely.

"Never heard of Fitch?" he parried. "I am surprised at that. Fitch is a modern sorcerer. He can put that dead girl's face back on her skull so that we can see what she looked like in life. I call Fitch the crime sculptor. Let's go!"

He opened the door.



## *Chapter Three*

### THE FACE OF THE STARTLED LADY

It was four-thirty in the morning and graveyard cold. The dim gorge of Seventieth Street was empty. No lights were in the windows of the Chalfonte or the Bradford apartment houses; Dorb's corner drug store was locked and dark; and in the whole long block there was no sound except our footfalls on the cement sidewalks and the purr of the motor of Colt's limousine, as Neil McMahon, our sleepless and many-scarred chauffeur, thrust the stick into gear.

The suitcase of bones was at our feet and I could hear the pieces rattle as the car plunged west on Seventieth Street, turned sharply south into West End Avenue, heading downtown to Cherry Hill Place, wherever that was. I had never heard of it before, until Colt gave the curt direction to Neil McMahon; having given it, the chief sat back in the car, drew a fur robe over both of us and smoked his pipe in silence. Before the ride was over he was to be exceptionally garrulous, but it was not until we had raced across Fourteenth Street that he spoke at all.

"So you do not remember Mr. Imro Acheson Fitch?" he began accusingly. "Nor his remarkable agnomen of crime sculptor? Don't you recall that Italian——"

"Wait, Chief—I believe I do remember. Wasn't that the case of a brush salesman?"

"Quite. The problem there was very like the one we have here. The skeleton of a man was found—head bashed in with a shovel—clothes burned—apparently no way to make an identification. But Fitch, who worked on the case, had a peculiar theory about skulls—he believed they could be reconstructed. And he did it."

"Seems like black magic. After all—a skull is just a skull——"

"And still Mr. Fitch—no one ever calls him anything but Mr. Fitch—Mr. Fitch took the Italian's skull, modelled it over with clay, painted it up, put a wig on it—and the man was identified."

"Voodoo!" I insisted.

"Right," chuckled Thatcher Colt. "The art of Mr. Fitch does seem a little demoniac when you consider it calmly. And yet the whole thing is quite scientific—based on the fact that no two skulls are even remotely alike to the trained eye—and that on every death's-head a face is latent, like an undeveloped fingerprint. It needs only the knowing eye of an anatomist, and the skill of an artist to bring it out."

"It needs a genius," I protested.

"Right again," smiled the Commissioner. "Mr. Fitch is a queer sort of genius—that's why he could not get along with those Tammany Hall politicians. They could never understand him in a thousand years—for at heart the man *is* an artist. He hates this kind of job we are going to ask him to do and you can't much blame him for that. Any man with the strange speciality of restoring old death's-heads has a right to feel offended at life. No little boy looks forward eagerly to such a career. In fact, Mr. Fitch once confessed to me that his boyhood ambition was to be a wood-carver—he wanted to create wooden Indians for cigar stores. But by the time he learned to carve, the wooden Indians were a vanished race."

"Has he a sense of humour, Chief?"

"None, probably. You see, he is really a thwarted personality. He wanted to be an artist. But his parents sent him to a polytechnic institute. He was made to study electrical engineering but he hated it so, he ran away and found work with a stone-cutter. He cut his first tools on epitaph lettering and later he was graduated into the junior guild of angel makers, weeping graces and broken pillars. It was then he studied at nights at the Art Students League. But cemetery sculpture saddened what was originally a buoyant if simple and quiet nature; Mr. Fitch wanted gaiety, not sorrow; wide, not long, faces; white, green, blue, yellow, pink, orange—anything but black, anything but crepe—he did not want to make any more monuments for tearful people dressed in mourning. This explained his sudden flight from Jericho—an unwalled village in middle Long Island. Determined to find gaiety, Mr. Fitch went to Coney Island, where for a while he was a barker, learned to do sleight-of-hand tricks, magic and juggling on the platform in front of side shows—but finally he saved enough to realise the dream that had brought him to Coney Island—he bought a concession as a sand artist. Old Boardwalk loafers, the real critics of sand artists, were a unit in declaring that Mr. Fitch's Statue of Liberty, his Niagara

Falls, and his Chariot Race from Ben Hur were among the immortal accomplishments of beach modelling. Dimes and quarters in great heaps were tossed down to Fitch; nevertheless tragedy still barked at his heels. His talent was observed; people talked, and soon a job was offered him. It was a job he did not want but Mr. Fitch had two snaggle-toothed parents back home—so how could he, with a clear conscience, turn down an offer that would more than treble his income? In justice to his parents he sold his sand studio concession, he retreated from the Boardwalk, deserting his true metier and retiring from the open air and the sun to a stinking shack behind the façade of Surf Avenue—an *atelier* in which he now turned out life-like models for the Chamber of Horrors. How Mr. Fitch hated these abominable tasks. He who had run away to find fun and laughter and sunshine and self-expression was condemned to knit his brow over all the tortures the fiendish mind of the Chamber's manager could excavate from Sunday supplement literature or invent out of his own head. Mr. Fitch made wax and clay models of Australian bushmen roasting the tender babies of Baptist missionaries over a slow fire; of Landru killing one of his frail victims while he kissed her—of gangsters lying naked and dead on a morgue slab—of poor Starr Faithful washed up on the strand—these were the works of the middle period of Mr. Imro Acheson Fitch.

"But after a few years he felt he could not stand it any longer and so confided in his friend, Police Captain Christensen, that he felt it was time for him to run away again. Not right away, but later that same week, Captain Christensen got an idea. He had been assigned to the case of an unidentified skull—and he took it down, one lunch time, and showed it to Mr. Fitch. The sculptor glared at it over a dish of chicken livers. But Captain Christensen kept saying what a pity it was that no human being was bright enough to put the face back on the head. That started it. Like an enchanter of old, Mr. Fitch went to work. He restored the face of the murdered Enzo Valenzi to a semblance of life—enough for quick identification. After that, Mr. Fitch's whole life was changed. Members of the Homicide Squad, not only of New York, but throughout the country, are always putting Mr. Fitch to work over their latest find of bones. Often substantial rewards come to him. Now Mr. Fitch has his laboratory in an old backstreet house to which we are coming very shortly; he lives in its three stories, upstairs and down, all alone; he spends his spare time growing flowers in the backyard, playing the radio, winding the phonograph, reading magazines, doing everything to make himself forget this horrible third phase of his artistic career. Never a sociable creature, he tried to become one; he joined his precinct Democratic club, sought to mingle with the boys in the back room, meddled foolishly in local politics and last spring got bounced by the powers that be."

"That's why Dougherty did not want him on this job?"

"Perhaps!" remarked Colt cryptically. "Anyway, we can't let political squabbles stand in the way of results. We are good Democrats but we want these bones identified—so we want Mr. Imro Acheson Fitch. And here we are!"

## 2

The house of the crime sculptor was one of a dingy row of seven in a back-wash street of forgotten people not far from the foundation piles of Brooklyn Bridge. Our car, whirling in one of Neil McMahon's remarkable parabolas, stopped at the corner of Cherry Hill Place, really a *cul-de-sac* running back from the bridge to the brick wall of a machine shop—a ding-dong neighbourhood, noisy even now.

We set off down a narrow pavement, too bright in its empty stretches, the frequent lamps shining on the fronts of narrow houses in which all living things were, or seemed to be, fast asleep.

Presently we stopped at a stone stoop with an iron railing to a forlorn-looking door. All six windows of the house were hidden behind massive shutters. Colt put his gloved forefinger on the button of the doorbell and kept it there; with his other hand he pointed to a dilapidated Chevrolet parked at the curb, and chuckled: "That's his car. He calls it Pocahontas. Any other car would curl up and die in this cold but not that one."

From inside we heard the sound of running feet. Then the door very slowly opened—only a little ways, a very few inches, it is true—but there it was opened, on a chain guard, and behind it, secure from a rush attack, was a face that looked out at us with a most unfriendly expression. It was a homely, wrinkled face. In that first glimpse of this remarkable man, whose brilliant mind and clever hands were soon to play so helpful a part in our investigation, I photographed an unforgettable image—pale, with sad, large eyes, a sentimental mouth and a thin coating of oily, womanish black hair over a square-cut head. But it was his expression that I most recall now; his fretfulness and yet his

fear, too, as if he distrusted all comers; some pathetic phobia, some mysterious, perhaps psycho pathological fear that held him in a pale, stormy grip. Or, I wondered fantastically, was this wistful look, the glare of one always lamenting the loss of wooden Indians?

"Good-morning, Mr. Fitch," began Colt, with that air of apology a leader accords only to an irreplaceable expert. "I am terribly sorry to get you up——"

"You didn't! I've been listening on my short wave set—got Moscow and the man was speaking in excellent English about how they had embalmed Lenin—it wasn't much fun—Come in."

As he talked, Mr. Fitch unhitched the chain guard and opened his door. Shivering with cold, he stood back—a chunky man in a blue bathrobe and fur slippers. His uncomplacent eyes fluttered from Colt to me in a fretful, riddling way; then he turned abruptly and strode off down the dark corridor, leaving me to close the door. Colt and I followed him into what once had been a dining room but was now evidently Mr. Fitch's chamber of solitary recreation—a sad old room, with a chessboard, a radio, phonograph, stereopticon, and cards, a cage with coloured birds, stacks of old magazines, books and newspapers, and a saxophone with a set of correspondence school instructions.

Thatcher Colt set down the suitcase beside a small table while Mr. Fitch hastily cleared chairs of a litter of papers, and entreated us to sit down.

"We've got a problem for you," began the Commissioner, upon which Mr. Fitch threw his hands above his head, rolled up his eyes and groaned. But Colt smiled good-naturedly as he lay the suitcase flat, opened it and lifted out a piece wrapped in a towel. Fitch, whose hands were nervous and restless, opening and closing, clasping and unclasping, rubbing the thin, oily black hair above his ears, scratching his neck, fussing around like a child on a rainy day, gave a low bird-like chirp when he saw the thing Colt lifted out—the head of the murdered woman.

"More of that work, huh?" he murmured to himself rather than to Colt. "Let me have a good look at it."

He studied the head, with his own head cocked to one side. He lifted it nearer to the speckled bulb of the electric light on the table with the chessboard. We remained perfectly quiet for a few minutes during the expert's nervous examination of the specimen; his very breath was full of distaste as he turned it back and forth in his hands.

"An unpleasant business, Mr. Commissioner," he said at last, gravely setting the skull on a stack of old magazines. "It's been in the water a long time. It will be hard to establish the pigmentation—and the eyes! My stars, Mr. Colt, but those will be almost impossible."

"I think I can help you there," said Colt, as he asked me for Detective Sherman's envelope. "Take a look at these pearl ear-rings."

Again that bird-like chirp—and then still another, a third, a much louder chirp from Mr. Imro Acheson Fitch.

"A hair! A brown hair! Caught in the ear-ring. Did you see this, Mr. Colt?"

The Commissioner nodded delightedly.

"I was sure that would help you."

"Help! It does everything. There's no skin left on the bones—how could I ever guess at her eye-colours, her complexion—her pigmentation—now, of course, I may still go wrong—but I am not so completely in the dark——"

"You can use our department laboratories."

Mr. Fitch's pale, square face flushed a little; his smudge of a nose lifted in disdain.

"No, I thank you, sir. I will do anything for you personally, Mr. Colt. But nothing for the City of New York or its politicians. I prefer my own apparatus—and I work alone. Yes—this little lady and I shall be quite alone here."

He was kneeling at the suitcase, his hands prowling among the bones.

"This body," he remarked, "was cut up by a master."

"I shall remember that. How soon can you get to work?"

"At once, of course."

"And when will you begin the actual modelling?"

Mr. Fitch's chirp this time was a jape, a mockery.

"I see!" he exclaimed in his hollow voice. "You always said you wanted to watch."

"And you always said—no witnesses!"

"Well, maybe I shall relent this time, Mr. Colt. I won't be able to start before to-morrow afternoon, anyway. I will need to get a wig-maker started. And other things. But especially I will have to dream—to look at the little head there and dream. I will sit in front of it and dream for hours at a time. The lineaments sort of come to me that way. But first I shall have a lot of preliminaries——"

"When could we come and watch you, Mr. Fitch?"

The crime sculptor touched the top of his head with the long, smooth forefinger of an artist.

"Be here at two this afternoon, Mr. Colt?"

"Two o'clock—that's set!"

"Good-night, gentlemen! You can let yourselves out."

Mr. Fitch flounced unhappily into an old-fashioned chair upholstered in red felt. He fixed his disappointed eyes on the skull and stared at it dreamily. I went away with that memory and, sleeping in Colt's guest room that night, I dreamed about the dreamer before the skull.

### 3

It was hard to keep my mind on the routine work that morning. By ten o'clock the Commissioner and I were at our desks with plenty to do—so busy a programme, in fact, that Colt asked me to call off until the next day the talk he meant to have with Professor Gilman.

"But tell him to keep himself within call," he cautioned.

He was in a peppery mood, at first; something unusual for him. No doubt he had read the morning stories about the return of Florence Dunbar; she was registered at the Plaza, but had denied herself to all reporters. I thanked God the tales of cruelty and wife beating the papers carried that morning did not come from her. They were bad enough, as they were; undoubtedly they had kept Colt awake all night; between his old love and his new mystery, Thatcher Colt was a tormented soul. I felt sure, a dozen times that Saturday morning, he was on the point of telephoning her at the Plaza. But he resisted those first temptations by flinging himself into his daily work.

There was much to be done that Saturday—a conference with harbour police officers on new navigation laws; a reorganisation of the safe and loft squad; threat of a new gang war in Brooklyn; a pow-wow on revised traffic regulations. At noon Colt was to give a ju-jitsu demonstration at the Police Academy; later he was to lunch with a maiden aunt of his from Beacon Hill, a gay old harridan who belonged to the Daughters of the American Revolution but in secret smoked Uncle Willie cigars. The string of appointments already made for the afternoon Colt also wanted shifted to the morning; we must do a full day's work in half the time for the Chief was resolved to keep that appointment with Mr. Fitch; to get back to the weird *atelier* of the crime sculptor and watch his modelling from death to life.

Fortunately for Colt's plans, the Headquarters reporters had not learned as yet about the finding of the box or its contents. We still had learned very little; there was no report from the men set to trace the scarf, the dress, or the box. But a dressmaker had matched the goods of the dress, and had made up something like a replica; the duplicate frock had been sent, post-haste, to Mr. Fitch. We had not even received the report on the past records of the Reverend Washington

Irving Lynn and his wife. It looked to me as if we were making slow progress, but I changed my mind before the afternoon was over.

To begin with, we did get back to the mansion of Mr. Fitch on time. Cherry Hill on this Saturday afternoon was a cold, bright arena of charging trucks and snorting motors; noise, dust and bad smells. It was a wonder to me that Mr. Fitch ever heard his own doorbell, but he did and received us with that same air of thwarted politeness; nothing about him had changed in those intervening five hours; he was still in his bathrobe and fur moccasins, his thin black hair was no less and no more oil-soaked and greasy; his pallor, his haunted eyes, his limping gait, his distaste for us and the work we made him do, just as before.

"How far have you got along?" asked Colt, as we followed Mr. Fitch down the corridor.

"Not very far, I'm afraid. I found two other very small traces of hair—not much, but enough to be samples for a wig. I had to guess how much hair she had—and how she combed it, too, but sometimes I am fortunate in such matters," he finished drearily.

"How long will the whole job take?"

Mr. Fitch turned at the doorway and in the shadows spread out eloquent and quite clean hands.

"I don't know that. You must realise how much work there is to a thing like this. First I had to sterilise the skull in a solution of formaldehyde. Then I had to make a neck for her. I used a curtain pole for that——"

"A curtain pole? For a neck?" I repeated involuntarily.

"Yes. You'll see. I planed the curtain pole down to fit the *foramen magnum*——"

"What's that?" I interjected.

"It's your opening, sir, through which your spinal column joins your skull. Come right in and see."

I nodded, coughed, and for a little while I asked no more questions.

We entered the living room; I removed my coat and sat down on the nearest soapbox and glanced at our skull, grimly smiling from its latest perch on the top of a stack of magazines. Colt sat in the red felt chair while Mr. Fitch stood before the chimney piece and held up a curtain pole of imitation quartered golden oak; he managed it with the bravura air of a drum major.

"This curtain pole is to be our lady's support—I shall slip the skull over the curtain pole, with some of the pole projecting up inside. The part of the pole below the head will go into that old soapbox on which Mr. Abbot is sitting—I have used it for many such cases."

I stood up and nodded affably.

"Then comes the real work," rattled on Mr. Fitch, lifting the skull from the heap of magazines. "If you will feel behind your ears, Mr. Colt—and now I speak as an anatomist—you will touch some long prominences which anatomists call the mastoid processes. Here they are on the young lady's head. Here. Now right in there—and there—I am going to insert two radio tubes."

His pale face beamed at our astonishment.

"Yes, radio tubes!" he chirped. "Wedged against the curtain pole inside, these radio tubes help form a kind of T-stand on which the skull will hang in place—ready for the artist."

Mr. Fitch had been demonstrating as he talked. Now he had the pole in my soapbox. On the pole rested the skull, the lifeless radio tubes in the lifeless head, so that it swung easily, with a kind of gentle mocking at all three of us, daring us to repeat what its first Maker had done—to make it look human, even beautiful.

Meanwhile, Mr. Fitch turned his back on the swinging head and dipped his fingers in a wooden salad bowl.

"Vaseline!" he explained. "You need it when you work with clay putty like this——"

He shoved forward a tin pan full of the gray mess.

"Does she begin to look like anything in your own mind?" asked Thatcher Colt. "Did you dream over her—and get an image to start with?"

Mr. Fitch shook his head despondently.

"I'm doing very well, I suppose," was the melancholy reply. "It's going to be an interesting job, too. But I haven't had any sleep. Ever since you left here I have been working on that mental image and it's been awful slow going."

His hands came up from the tin pan, filled with the raw material of his modelling and he began to slop a little of the putty on the forehead and cheeks of the death's-head.

"You see, Mr. Colt, I have to spread it very sparingly—and then I smooth the thin coat with my fingertips to the very contour of the bone. The trick is that I have to bring out the curves. Now there's the problem—the curves, the indentations, the *tournure*. And very slowly, Mr. Colt, I add more and more, stopping every now and then—to—well, watch me now— You have in this sort of work to feel the flesh and muscles of your own face, like this, see? That's all the guide you've got. And that's all you need. Isn't it an incredible and lamentable way for an artist to have to make a living, Mr. Colt?"

Yet Mr. Imro Acheson Fitch loved his thaumaturgy. Pride was in every tremor of his voice.

"Is she beginning to look like anything?" Colt repeated.

"Well, it depends on what you call anything," Mr. Fitch answered, standing back. "See for yourself. I don't think a Hollywood director would pick her right now for the front row, but—"

"But already she looks human?"

"Exactly! The nose is what is bothering me. You see, Mr. Colt, noses are divided, according to the way I divide them anyways, into four different classes. There's the straight nose, the convex nose, the concave nose, and then there's the hook nose—the latter especially prevalent in New York.

"Now, speaking as an anatomist, the line of your nose bone as it shoots out from your forehead is what decides the kind of nose it's going to be. Mr. Colt, just try it for yourself. Put your fingers on your nose. Feel along the cartilage as it joins the bone and you will see how you can gauge the direction it is taking—on Mr. Colt's nose he would feel a straight direction, but you, Mr. Abbot, would feel—a sort of gradual slanting down and in because you have a convex nose—a sort of dish effect.

"To an expert like me that tells even more. It tells what the end of the nose will be like and even the tip. Take this young thing's nose, for instance. It has a tiny but thick end like a little knob."

Mr. Fitch's voice simpered a little; all this time he was working over the skull with hands of great tactile sensitiveness, his manner that of a hierophant intent upon heavenly mysteries.

"Yes," Colt said sceptically. "I see all that. But how will you know how long to make the nose?"

"Ah, Mr. Colt, that is a very special secret—but I don't mind telling you. Speaking as an anatomist, the length of the nose from the bridge to the base is fixed by the size of the roots of the teeth."

I whistled. Here I sat in a house near Brooklyn Bridge, in the midst of more than seven million people huddled on three sides of me, seven million human beings and not a wagonload of them knew that such things as these could be done. Most of the seven million still believed that life was commonplace and held no more mysteries, no more miracles, and yet Mr. Fitch had more to tell us—much more to show us:

"Now watch. I am going to discover something else about this lady. I stick a pencil against the eye socket slantwise right down to the cheek bone. Know why I did that? I did it to tell whether her eyes were bulging or deep-set—very important to make her look real. You try that on yourself. You put a pencil against the eye socket slantwise down to the cheekbone and you'll see that there's barely enough room for the eyelashes to brush against it. The pupils of the eyes are located by resting a pencil against the bridge of the nose. Placed there, it covers both pupils. Hold a pencil from the cheekbone

down to the jawbone; allowing a little more fullness and you have the curves of the face. Eyebrows begin on the inside corner of the eye socket. Run your fingers along the upper edge of the socket until they turn down at the end. I'm ready now to put on her eyebrows. But her lips—they are going to give me a little trouble. I shall have to work that out. You see, if the upper teeth protrude there will be a full upper lip. If the bottom teeth recede, the lower lip will recede considerably. Prominent teeth below mean a full lower lip. Anyhow——"

But we were destined never to hear the end of that remark. An old-fashioned wall telephone in the corridor outside set up a bronchial ringing. Headquarters calling Thatcher Colt.

The Commissioner must leave at once. As predicted, the war of gangdom had blazed up again. These were the days when criminals who had lost their liquor rackets were turning to policy and clearing-house numbers, fake lottery tickets and the crooked new shindig called bagatelle. To seize the mastery of these million dollar gyps, three gangs were at grips; only an hour before they had greased and loaded their machine guns; in Chinatown's Pell Street, the Mott Haven railroad yards in the Bronx, and in Flatbush bullets sped and gangsters fell. In Brownsville, of Brooklyn—Brownsville, largest of all Jewish cities in the world—a thug's woman lay on the steps of a synagogue, bleeding there from a slit throat. Suddenly all over town criminals fought among themselves as if the police did not exist. So we rushed away from Mr. Fitch and his half-human image.

For the rest of that afternoon, Colt, his dark eyes heated with rage, worked like a general in the field. More, as New York has not forgotten, he was wounded in the shoulder when we were fighting our way across a roof and finally cornered Dutch Durmont, leader of the Grand Concourse mob. It was the best marksman in Centre Street who shot him—Thatcher Colt deputised as a peace officer by his own subordinates; he put a bullet under Dutch Durmont's heart and the gangster who had killed four policemen toppled off the roof, seven stories to the back yard of a Fifty-fifth Street gin-mill. That was a rough day in New York's history. Colt's was a slight but nasty wound; throughout the rest of the foundling bones investigation he was to wear his arm in a sling.

Not until ten o'clock at night did we find ourselves again in that silent, over-lighted back street called Cherry Hill. Again Mr. Fitch peered at us, door on guard; we entered his hallway, with its odour of garlic and beer; we came to that amusement room of his; we stopped on its threshold, all of a sudden, startled and enlivened at the object we saw in the centre of the room.

Mr. Fitch's work was finished. The skull was no longer a skull but a face. Near it was a lamp illuminating the girlish countenance that now looked us straight in the eye. More alive than dead she seemed. A girl with a kind of high-forehead, oval-delicate prettiness. The blue eyes seemed startled, but the red lips were parted in what looked like a good-natured smile. She was wearing a dress that was also taken from the life—the duplicate of the frock found in the box. In a green dress she stood there, a wax-works image, but with something real to her that no wax-works image ever had; her bones were genuine. The sight of that half-alive image gave me a curious feeling. Perhaps it was because I was tired. Yet I did not think so. I think rather it was because this was the nearest thing to a resurrection I had ever seen. Here what was once a skeleton had now the appearance of young and buoyant vitality. The skull, under the patient hands of Mr. Fitch, had seemed for a while to hover between life and death—but now it had a running substitute for flesh and colour and even a kind of beauty. Yes—in that false image, that waxen face and wig and the glass eyes and pearl earrings—there was a rich and disturbing illusion of life; it was not the fake perfection of a shop window dummy that we saw, but health, youth, character, personality—a certain sauciness in the lips and in the perturbed gleam that seemed to come from under the long dark lashes. Colt looked at that palingenesis of girlhood, whistled softly to himself and said:

"She was beautiful. And she looks so excited. I wonder why?"

I could have believed it, if the head had spoken an answer.

"Mr. Fitch," went on Thatcher Colt, "in the annals of crime this job of yours will go down as a masterpiece. Here she is—much, I feel certain, as she was."

Fitch rubbed his hands, crackled his knuckles and giggled.

"Thanks, thanks, Mr. Commissioner. Tell Mr. Dougherty that, will you—and his pal, Mr. O'Toole, too. I'd like the two of them to know... I beg your pardon, Mr. Colt——"

The Commissioner's raised hand had silenced the crime sculptor. Colt was bending over, studying the waxen face

intently; his own face, now turned to Mr. Fitch, was puzzled.

"Mr. Fitch, would you mind telling me what this is?" He pointed to a round, dark spot to the right of one corner of the mouth.

Mr. Fitch leaned forward and considered his own handiwork thoughtfully.

"That? Oh—that mark! You mean the little spot here on the cheek?"

"Exactly. What is that? A blemish?"

"Oh, no. That is a crack in the material—a bubble. I see what you mean now—it's like a little wart."

"It is. It startled me, too."

"May I ask why, Mr. Colt?"

"Because it gave the most vivid, unexpected effect of reality to the whole face. It was the sort of thing you could not possibly have deduced—as an anatomist."

"Of course not."

"You're sure it was just a bubble?"

"Yes, I am."

"Did you ever leave this image in this room alone?"

"Never."

"Think now—sure?"

"Well, then, let me say for not more than ten minutes at a time."

"I see."

Colt gave the painted wax face a distrusting glance.

"Oh, I suppose it was nothing," he muttered half to himself, while Mr. Fitch repaired the cheek of the figure and rubbed the blemish quite away. "And yet—the thing that troubles me is that the face, the very blemish, even, seemed familiar.... Well, Tony—there's our job cut out for us. Who was she? We've got to find that out—and right away. Who was the last person to see her alive? And when? Vital questions—and we've got to get the answers quickly."

Mr. Fitch edged forward, wiping his hands on a towel.

"I wish you could find it in your heart to let me help you, Mr. Colt," he ventured, with a glance of simple daring at the Commissioner.

"How do you think you could help?"

"I don't know—lots of ways. I'm not as dumb as these politicians think. I would like to show them what I can do. I've always thought I would make a good detective—as an assistant to a man like yourself."

"You've already helped," said Colt heartily, as he reached for his overcoat.

"And I can help again. You're going to need it, too."

"What makes you say that?"

"You sat here last night and told me how all this happened—spirit mediums, messages——"

"Well?"

"Well, I know sleight-of-hand and magic, and that's what these mediums use. That's what you want to watch out for."

Colt smiled and they shook hands.

"First-rate suggestion, Mr. Fitch. When I get back to the ghostly side of this investigation, I shall certainly call on you. Good-night!"

"But, Mr. Colt——"

"Yes?"

"I have a suggestion to make right now."

"Yes?"

"Why not have a photograph made of my little job here—give it to all the newspapers—and then wait for an identification——"

Colt, who had been bent over again, examining carefully the slant of the girl's cheek, looked up quickly and shook his head.

"No!" he said decidedly. "I must caution you once more, Mr. Fitch—don't tell anybody about this girl—yet. I have most excellent reasons."

Whatever his excellent reasons were, Colt kept them to himself. Mr. Fitch nodded blankly. Perhaps he had counted on seeing his name in the papers as one of his solitary amusements.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Commissioner."

"Now I am taking this work of art of yours over to Police Headquarters. Cover it over with a sheet, first, will you? Thanks. Good-morning, Mr. Fitch—send your bill to Mr. Abbot. And I will send for you when I need you."

In spite of his bandaged shoulder, and arm in a sling, Colt insisted on helping me carry the restored dead girl down to the car. Here we had our difficulties. The figure was practically life size and could be introduced into the car only with the greatest caution; we had to put her in the rear seat and lay her, face up, against the upholstered back of the front seat. With his free hand Colt steadied her, and cautioned Neil to drive very slowly to Headquarters. Once we had her settled on the seat, I leaned back and closed my eyes. Crazy notions, mad questions, crawled in my head.

It was now midnight and colder, if possible, than the night before. What would Colt do next? Would they some day bury the dead girl in a grave in the condition to which Mr. Fitch had transformed her—or strip away the wax and just bury the bones? As I thought of these matters, I nodded and fell into a doze. For a jouncing moment I dreamed of Mr. Fitch—only now he was trying to cover a tarantula with clay putty—a large, venomous hairy spider that was weaving its own web of plasteline and pigments, and in the centre of the web was a human heart that would not be made to beat.

A hand touched my arm, and Thatcher Colt was speaking to me:

"Tony, wake up. We can't sleep to-night. Telephone Betty you won't be home. We've got work to do."

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## *Chapter Four*

### SHE LOOKED SO STARTLED

Back in Centre Street, Thatcher Colt called for reports.

Half a dozen detectives were waiting on call in the reception room of our suite; the octagonal-shaped waiting-hall with its stained-glass windows and white-spooled woodwork was a-buzz with discreet murmurings, the low chatter of operatives who had worked on the box of bones mystery and now waited to report personally to the Commissioner, if he called for them.

Assistant Chief Inspector Flynn, honest, loyal, a product of the old strong-arm school, was summoned first.

"What did you get on the box, Flynn?"

"Nothing we can do about the box. Too far gone."

"I was afraid of that. No chance of finding any bloodstains on the wood?"

"They all say no."

"Well, that ought to be good enough for me—I've never yet found the boys over at the municipal laboratories much out of the way—and yet—tell you what you do, Flynn! Get hold of that government expert on wood and ask him to go over what's left of that box."

"Will do, chief——"

"How about the scarf?"

"No luck there yet, either. It's an imported article——"

"That ought to make it simpler to trace."

The grizzled old detective gave Thatcher Colt an injured glance.

"Anyway, it hasn't so far. But we're after it."

"And the dress?"

Flynn's head went backward, his chin thrust out with pride.

"Now there we're getting somewhere. But it needed awful careful handling. The stuff would fall to pieces right in your fingers. We stiffened it up over at the laboratories with some kind of fixing stuff—I forget what they call it—and we divided the remains of that dress up among twenty men. I shot them out after the manufacturers as you asked me to and one of them—a Polack named Blasky on Lower Broadway—he spotted it. 'That's mine!' he tells Stevens, our man. 'That's mine,' he says, 'and what has anybody been doing to it?' So now we had the manufacturer and we called off all the others from that part of it and told them to stand by for orders. I went down and saw Blasky myself. I went over his books with him. He sells direct to the trade, no jobber, so we got the names of all the shops in the metropolitan area that had bought Blasky dresses identical with the weave and material of the dead girl's dress."

"Good work! You're still on that angle?"

"Sure, since three o'clock this afternoon. It's bound to take time, Mr. Commissioner. You see, there's not only all the five boroughs, but also New Jersey and Westchester——"

"I understand. Keep right on going the way you are. And what have you got on the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn  
——"

"And Little Eva?" chortled Flynn with a gleam in his eye; he had the hate of the whole force for fortune tellers. "Sellers is working on the medium angle—I haven't seen him or heard from him since yesterday morning—maybe he's turned up

something——"

"Let him be. But see that I get his report as soon as he is ready to make one."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"One thing, Flynn—and the most important." Rising from his chair, Thatcher Colt approached a draped object on a large table near the window—a lumpy, half-human shape covered with a white bath towel. With the flourish of a magician, Colt pulled away the towel and Inspector Flynn gasped.

"Was that her?" he asked hoarsely. "She must have been a nice girl."

"Right!" agreed Colt. "Now here's what I want, Inspector. Put this on display down in the line-up room and send out a general order—I want every man on the force to take a look at that face within the next forty-eight hours—call a special line-up for the morning, even though it's Sunday—and nobody's to tip the newspaper men."

"Okay, Chief, but we're going to make an identification through the dress shops anyway."

"I know that," answered Colt tersely.

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Nothing else. Good-night, Flynn."

"Good-night, Mr. Commissioner. Good-night, Mr. Abbot."

I nodded from the telephone; I was listening to Betty and did not wish to interrupt her; she had just heard from me that I would not be home and she was expressing her opinion of life in general and police work in particular.

## 2

Between five and seven that Sunday morning Colt and I slumbered on couches in the ante-room of his suite. After that, no more sleep; motor trucks in Centre and Broome streets were rumbling like big guns in bombardment. Soon the day was getting under way at Headquarters. From Brooklyn and Queens and the Bronx the patrol wagons rattled up with net-catches of the night; the prisoners who would be shown at the special morning line-up; since the men were to be called down to Headquarters, we would go through the whole programme usually omitted on Sunday. By eight o'clock, Colt and I had had a shower, changed (we always have an emergency supply of clothes in his dressing-room) and Colt was his usual resplendent self, the best-dressed man in public life; his suit was of Dickens blue, with two button single-breasted coat, and straight hanging trousers. That morning he chose daringly to wear dark brown shoes with his brown Homburg hat, and top-coat of tweed; in the notch lapel was a fresh gardenia.

He led our way to the line-up room—the gymnasium—on the fourth floor. Colt paused at the door and conferred briefly with Flynn; hundreds of policemen had already filed past what Flynn called "the foundling bones" and now he meant to show it to the whole group at once.

There was a big crowd assembled in the old gymnasium, with its skeleton iron beams, and balcony, and running track, all battleship gray. Hundreds of uniformed and plain-clothes men sat there, facing a platform about three feet above the floor. Arrested men would parade on the platform; answer rough questions through a microphone; stand against the height-lines, ranged like a music staff on the back wall, take off their hats and put them on again, show full face and profile, march up and down and be carried off to whatever justice they were to get. Colt was not too patient this morning, but he forced himself to wait for the show-up of kidnappers, shoplifters, degenerates, burglars, killers, dope passers, confidence women and gun molls who would play their little scene on that narrow stage with its nine powerful overhead lights. The Commissioner waited, too, while the deputy chief inspector lectured the men—"the successful detective is a good listener who seldom if ever discusses his work with any except those concerned in it; there is something about our work that creates braggarts, leave bragging to the crooks; every crook in the world is a sucker." When that long and painfully well-meant address was finished, Colt must still delay while he promoted seven patrolmen to second and third grade detectives. But at last those duties were done and Colt faced his audience.

"Men, I have something to show you to-day that I want you to keep to yourselves. Bring it along, Tony."

I carried the model of the dead girl's face to the platform. This was the first time I had ever stood up there; I could not see the audience of detectives at all, the bright lights in my eyes blinded me; that was why the detectives no longer wore masks at the show-up.

"Take a good look at this girl, everybody," the Commissioner went on intently. "We do not know who she is, or anything about her. But for reasons of our own, we want very much to know who she is. Does anybody here happen to recognise her?"

It was a long shot, one of many he meant to fire, and not at all the most hopeful; consequently we were both astonished when there was an immediate response. A hand went up in the rear of the gymnasium and a loud voice cried:

"I know her, Mr. Commissioner; I think I do. She's the girl that was so scared—she——"

But the sharp voice of Thatcher Colt cut him off. Colt knows practically every man in the department by name. He broke in briskly:

"Officer Fuller! Report to the Commissioner's office in five minutes."

There was a puzzled hush over the line-up assemblage as Colt strode from the room. I lumbered behind him totting in my arms the manufactured image of the luckless girl—what was it the patrolman had called her—oh, yes—the girl that was so scared. The painted putty of the cheeks lay cold against my face as I rode down the elevator with my queer burden. The girl that was so scared. Why did it sound so reminiscent? And then I remembered—the so-called ghost of Madeline, speaking through the wind-pipe of the medium Eva Allen Lynn. Three times it was said, as my notebooks later proved to me, three times it was chanted in the dark—"I was scared!"

### 3

Colt's office, which faces the north, was dim that winter morning, lit only by the green-shaded lamp on his desk. It was I who led Jake Fuller in—the whole six feet two of Jake Fuller, who used to slave with me as a reporter on the old *New York World* under the lash of Chapin, the city editor who killed his wife. Jake Fuller was a queer sort to be a policeman. It seemed to me a specially odd circumstance that we who had been newspaper men together should be walking into the Commissioner's office like this. Jake had given up newspaper work to be a pavement pounder and I was not the only one who wondered why. Tammany Hall thought it was to conduct an inside exposé of the department for the *Evening World*—as if Chapin were dumb enough to think that that was the way to do it. Anyway, his superior officers gave poor Jake Fuller the works; for his first two years on the force he had the toughest of beats—posts where negro women dropped bricks on his head from tenement windows; one woman nearly killed him with a razor wielded in his crotch; but still he stuck to his job. I know now, long afterward, why Jake went into the police department; he wanted Colt's job and he thought he had brains enough to work up to it in about twenty years! Strange idea—but Jake is still following it, and perhaps he will manage it some day. Jake carried himself with great and prideful height because he knew he was above his job; but he could never be a really great cop, either, for he knew he was handsome and in any scrimmage dreaded getting his face damaged.

The Commissioner knew all about Jake and smiled at him affably.

"Good-morning, Fuller. Take another look at that girl now—make sure——"

"I'm pretty sure, all right."

"Then tell me about her."

"She was scared, Mr. Commissioner."

"When?"

"I'm trying to fix the date in my mind. There ought to be a way to do that."

"About how long ago?"

"I'm beginning to remember now, all right. It happened around the first of May."

I glanced at Colt, but he did not return my look and his impassive face showed no sign of remembering that this date was the same as that brought to us from another world—or so Eva Allen Lynn would have us believe!

"I can fix the time," went on Jake, "because it was the day when the Reds have their parade and we were all on the watch for trouble. But I wasn't to get in it, if there was any, because I was in Dutch with my captain around that time on account of something unimportant. So he sent me to pounding the pavement on a beat over by First Avenue and Seventy-third Street, not much of a neighbourhood. I was walking west on Seventy-third Street when I saw this girl—and I'm certain it was this very one, Mr. Commissioner—I saw her get out of a taxicab and start running toward me. She looked frightened and pale and hysterical. She was a pretty little thing, too, and dressed stylishly. She came up to me and put her hands on my wrists. She looked so startled! And she gasped something like this: 'Officer, I am scared—I am being followed by another cab.' So I asked her what made her think that. And she said because somebody wanted to kill her and would never let up on her. And she had seen the same car coming behind her all the way from downtown. Where was it now, I asked. It was gone, she said. I began to wonder if she was tight. I told her to take it easy and I asked her what her name was. She got mad and started to cry and stamped her feet, and said what did her name matter; all she wanted me to do was to get into the cab with her and stick with her for a while and maybe we could elude her pursuer—if she just came out and accused them, she said, they would deny it and nobody would believe her. I asked who 'they' were, but she said it didn't matter till they were caught."

"You couldn't even get whether she was afraid of men or women?"

"No, sir."

"Go on."

"So I walked with her down to the curb and helped her back into the cab. Then I talked with the driver. He gave me the high-sign that he thought she was tight or deranged and said he would take her home. So off he shot with her and I never saw her again—until this morning's line-up."

"And that was all? Didn't you take the driver's name——"

"I did that, Mr. Colt, you can trust me for that. It must be here in my little book."

Out came Jake Fuller's little book—a legend among his brother officers as the greatest treasury of interesting telephone numbers ever owned by a policeman. He moistened the fat pads of finger and thumb and began turning the pages.

"Here it is, sir—Natale Pieranini, aged twenty-seven, cab number 07-4235, address 400 Doolan Avenue, the Bronx."

"Got that, Tony—get that started. Now. Fuller—remember how this girl was dressed?"

I was crossing the room as Jake answered:

"I think I do. She was wearing something green."

"Did she carry a purse?"

"Yes, sir. She held it up sort of while she talked to me—her chin came just over the edge of it."

"Thanks, Fuller. Keep this to yourself for a while."

"Thanks, Mr. Commissioner."

I went to the radio room and told one of the announcers to call the radio car which patrolled Doolan Avenue in the Bronx and also the car which patrolled the Warren Street district where the taxicab company's offices were. This was the quickest way to pick up Pieranini.

There are approximately eight hundred cars in New York's radio patrol system. They are constantly on duty and any point in the city can be reached by one of them within thirty seconds after receiving a call. Each radio patrol car has a

certain district to cover just as a foot patrolman patrols his post. I knew that if they failed to find the man either at Doolan Avenue or on Warren Street they would obtain his taxicab description, licence number and an idea of that part of the city where he generally cruised. Then all of the patrol cars would be told to look for him and tell him to report at Headquarters. Ordinarily he would be located within five to fifteen minutes. As a matter of fact the only reason he was not was because he had taken the morning off to get treatment at a hospital clinic. So we did not get him as quickly as we had a right to expect, yet lunch time was still an hour away when Captain Henry, the argus guardian of our suite, led him into the Commissioner's office. Colt looked at the young driver with a friendly air, noting the fear on his face; he was a stocky man, pale, with eyes that looked as if he had known hunger, a shock of uncombed black hair, and the whole unwashed man smelling like a bunch of old oiling rags.

"I ain't done anything to nobody, boss," he blurted out, the moment the Commissioner looked at him.

Colt saw that he was too frightened to question on serious matters immediately. So the chief began to extract the story of his little life—he was called Natale, because he was born on Christmas Day; he had a wife and three girls, and hacking was a hard, un lucrative life for a family man; he wished Mr. Colt would do something about the racketeers; meanwhile he, Natale, was saving pennies and dimes to take his wife and three kids back to Italy where he would feel safe from criminals; here in the United States, although he was a naturalised citizen, he did not feel safe any more. With a melancholy smile, but having calmed the hackman down a little, Colt went back to our case.

"Do you remember a cop you talked to last May Day?"

"I don't talk to no cops, boss; I mind my own business, I——"

"You were carrying a drunken girl——"

"I won't carry no drunks—I—now—wait a minute, boss. I do remember—a pretty girl was afraid of something and wanted a cop——"

"What do you remember about her?"

"Not much. She was a pretty girl. Awful scared. Sort of crying. She got in my cab. She come out of a house and I was cruising past down the street and she stopped me."

"Where?"

"Over in Brooklyn. Somewhere near St. Ann's Church."

"Livingston Street?"

"That's right. She told me to take her where she wanted to go. I just don't rightly remember where it was but it was somewhere uptown; Amsterdam Avenue, maybe. But after a while she got scared. She said she was afraid of somebody. Not me, boss—you see? She was afraid of somebody else. She said a car was following us. I didn't see any car following us but I drove some like hell, not too much, because I always obey the laws and don't want no ticket for fast driving, you see, boss—so pretty soon we are in Manhattan on our way uptown and she says stop and she runs out and talks to a cop. Then he talks to me and tells me to take her home. That's all!"

"Not quite. When you drove away from the officer, did you take her home?"

"No, sir, I didn't take her home."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't—she wouldn't let me—she cried—she was scared somebody was after her—and all at once she told me to stop again."

"About where was that?"

"I think that was about Amsterdam Avenue and One Hundred and Fifteenth Street—but I couldn't be sure. She gave me three dollars and she ran. And that's the last I ever saw of the girl——"

As he said this, Colt gave me a sign with his eyes and I yanked the towel away from the face of the dummy.

"Is that the girl?" barked Colt.

With a harsh sound in his throat, Natale Pieranini raised his two hands to his neck, glared at the dead face as if he were looking at one of hell's inhabitants and turned to run from the room. But the door would not open; Colt controlled it by a button under his desk.

"Let me out of here!" gasped the hackman. "I can't look at her! Please, boss. Open the door! I can't breathe!"

"Turn around!" snapped Colt. The miserable man leaned against the panels and looked over his shoulder.

"Yes, sir—I didn't do anything to nobody," he chattered.

"Is that the girl?"

"I say so—yes, sir."

"Do you know how she died?"

"No, sir."

"Who killed her?"

"I don't know!"

"Did you kill her?"

"No! No!"

"Could you recognise that house she came out of?"

"Yes, sir."

Colt dropped the ivory head of Homer with which he had been toying; he stood up.

"Come along, Pieranini," he said, firmly but not unkindly. "We'll ride downtown in your car—and you show me that house."

But it was not to be as simple as that. There was a moment of silence. The taxi man's brown eyes widened with a kind of drunken stare; he tipped forward, regained his balance, gave me a tipsy look and then choked out:

"I don't want to tell! I don't! I don't!"

I sprang up; both of us knew hysteria in its early symptoms; there was whisky in the lower left desk drawer; I got the bottle and I was pulling out the cork as I strode forward.

"Drink this!" I said crisply. "Swallow it down."

The huge, hairy hands with their soiled pale skin trembled as they lifted the bottle; we heard loud, gurgling sounds. The hackman coughed as he handed back the bottle.

"Now what was that address?"

"I don't remember any more."

"You're afraid!"

"No, boss. No, sir!"

"What are you afraid of?"

The taxi driver gave us a condemned look.

"She was scared. Look what happened to *her*. I don't want anything to happen to—nobody!"

Colt had a hand on his shoulder.

"You're right to be scared," he said.

"I am—huh, boss?"

"Yes—but not of us. We can protect you."

"How?"

"You leave that to me—but if you don't tell, I won't protect you."

The terrified eyes turned from Colt to me and then to the cadaver's head. Tears gathered in the corners of the man's eyes.

"Why does this have to happen to me?" he whispered. "I don't know what to say——"

"That street——"

But Natale Pieranini could not answer. He swayed, slavered, fell and writhed over the plum-coloured carpet. They carried him off to Bellevue, under a detaining warrant, but for the present he was of no use to us; we still did not know the house on Livingston Street from which the girl who was so scared had issued forth—or what it was that had frightened her.

#### 4

That Sunday, at noon, we had luncheon with District Attorney Dougherty at the Pipe Night Club across from the Booth statue in Gramercy Park. It is a club of actors and practitioners of other arts; Colt was prouder of his membership as a Pipe Nighter than of his military decorations. The three of us sat at a table near the dining-room fireplace; it had come on to snow; the room was filled with interesting people, the air lively with the droning buzz of friendly voices; a time to linger over good food and wine and to take pleasure in one's fellowman.

At luncheon, Dougherty, his huge bulk making his chair squeak, vigorously dominated the talk. He listened to Colt only long enough to get the progress of the bones investigation and order a second small steak with French fried potatoes and then he launched forth. Here in this box of bones was a golden, made-to-order opportunity and Colt, he conceded, had so far worked with admirable speed and precision. True, he couldn't endure that fellow, Mr. Fitch, but no doubt he had done an excellent job. But why, Dougherty wanted to know, why was Colt keeping the facts from the public? After all, the interest in such mysteries had to have time to grow. Frankly, he was thinking about a build-up for the great trial that was bound to come. Suspense, the day-to-day efforts of the police, helped always by the counsel and advice of the District Attorney's office, made good reading for the public. And here Colt was depriving all New York, indeed, the entire nation, of the thrills of a great mystery story from real life. Why not call in the reporters right after lunch? Colt grinned at the District Attorney's red-faced protest.

"I understand perfectly, Dougherty," he said. "And I wish I could oblige you. But I can't—one vital factor stands in the way."

Colt called the waiter and signed the check. He looked at the District Attorney and took him into his confidence.

"Listen, Dougherty. I keep pretty close tab on the reports of the Bureau of Missing Persons and I am very proud that last year our record was ninety-eight per cent—the New York police found ninety-eight out of every one hundred persons reported as missing. Now it's the remaining two per cent that I bother about. I follow up those unsolved cases personally as far as I can—and I know there was no report of any girl, remotely resembling that creature whose bones we took from the sea, missing during the last six months and still not found."

"Yes, but——"

"Well, doesn't that strike you as strange? She must have had a family—relatives—friends—somebody to inquire for her, worry about her—yet not one of them has reported her missing. They can't know where she is—or if they do, it is guilty knowledge. Why have they not told the police of her absence?"

"I see!" Dougherty winked owlishly and fiddled with the bronze cigar cutter dangling from his watch chain. "We don't want the relatives—or friends—to know that we know until——"

"Exactly."

"I think you're figuring it wrong——" Dougherty did not surrender so easily; the thought of all the publicity possibilities irked his publican soul.

"Aren't you taking a lot for granted?" he argued. "How do you know her disappearance was not reported—in some other town? Maybe she isn't a New Yorker. She might——"

But the District Attorney was never to state his hypothesis. A shadow fell across Colt's face and a uniformed messenger of the Pipe Night Club whispered discreetly. Headquarters on the telephone, calling the Police Commissioner. Colt went downstairs and talked in one of the booths beyond the poolroom and the bar.

"Hallo? Yes, Flynn?..."

For a few tense moments Colt listened to the report of the Assistant Chief Inspector. Dougherty and I waited near the switchboard; somehow all three of us felt the message would have to do with our foundling bones. Colt's face was still impassive when he replaced the receiver. His voice was almost Japanese in flatness.

"Tony," he said, "there was a call for me from the Plaza Hotel—Room 378. Will you get the hotel and see who it is?"

I looked away. So *she* had called *him*—of that I felt sure. I talked to the desk clerk at the Plaza. Yes—Room 378 was occupied by Señora Villafranca—and Villafranca was the married name of the one woman in Colt's life, Florence Dunbar. I asked the clerk if Señora Villafranca were in? He would find out. He came back; she had just left the hotel and would not be back until after dinner. All this I dutifully reported to Thatcher Colt. He nodded sombrely, with closed eyes; then he spoke briskly:

"Well—our bony young friend has been tentatively identified through a dress shop on Upper Broadway near One Hundred Third Street."

"Thank God," said Dougherty piously.

"Her name was Swift."

"Swift?"

"Yes—Madeline Swift!"

"But, Thatch——"

"Yes, Dougherty——?"

"But, Tony!"

"Yes, Mr. Dougherty?"

"This first name is right—this Madeline—that was the name the spiritualists gave us—the ghost said *she* was Madeline——"

"Exactly!"

"But that's impossible, Thatch. It's a miracle—and there are no miracles!"

"Right again."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" demanded the District Attorney, who always got red-faced and began to snarl when anything puzzled him. We mounted the stairs and gave brass tags to the coat-room boy.

"Those mediums were the first persons ever to know about the bones, in the first place. They knew the location of the box. They knew all about the bones. They knew about the bullet in the head."

"Apparently they also knew the exact date of the murder," added Colt.

"Sure they did—and they knew the name of the girl, too.... Thatch, all that can't be coincidence."

"No."

Colt was helped into his coat, and now he received his walking stick.

"Well, what is it then?"

"Either a genuine message from the other world—or a most astonishing and baffling mystery."

"But you don't believe it's genuine, Thatch?"

"I never believe anything in a murder case."

"What have you done with those Lynns?"

"They are still under surveillance."

"Good. Such things just can't be, Thatch. Where do we go now?"

We had emerged from the vestibule into the snowy vista of beautiful Gramercy Park.

"Back to the office. I need a few special reports. Then—we're off in earnest."

"Where? For the mediums?"

"No, Dougherty. We know who she is now—our next step is to find out who killed her and why."

"So we start where?"

"Where murder, like charity, begins—at home—Madeline's home."

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## BOOK TWO

WE KNOW WHO SHE IS BUT WE DON'T  
KNOW WHO KILLED HER

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## *Chapter One*

### **MR. NICKERSON SWIFT LIES ABOUT HIS DAUGHTER**

Behind closed doors in the Commissioner's office, Colt, Dougherty and I listened to a plain tale from Inspector Flynn.

"We got the hot tip just after you left the office, Mr. Commissioner. Sherman and Parker, working together on the retail outlets for Blasky dresses, got to the Milady Dress Shop, at the address I gave you. It was Sunday, but they got the home address of the proprietors. The Milady store had sold six of the dresses of the kind found in the box—price \$29.95, though why it wouldn't be thirty dollars nobody knows. They opened up the shop and went over the sales slips and all of the addresses were around the upper west side. It didn't take long to check. Sherman and Parker just went to one address after the other. Having in mind what you told us about not getting anybody excited, Sherman and Parker pulled a fast one. It was a pretty punk idea, I think, but it happened to work. At each address they asked to see the dress. They were inspectors from the factory, they said, checking up on how the material was wearing. The third one they struck was the Swift place, an apartment. A woman came to the door and said it was her daughter Madeline that bought the dress, but she wasn't home now; she had moved away and had taken the dress with her. Sherman asks if her daughter wore imitation pearl ear-rings. She said she did and why did he want to know that. Sherman wants the address. Then the mother looks scared and shuts the door in his face. That looks suspicious to them but they keep right on going; they have three more addresses. One after the other they check up all okay—so it must be the Swifts."

"Sherman and Parker were actually shown five of the six dresses?" asked Colt thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir. And I'm positive it must be the Swift girl because of what they learned from some questions at the corner drugstore. The Swift family consists of two girls, Verna and Madeline; the mother and father and a grandfather who is an invalid and can't be moved from his chair. But the funny part about it all is that Madeline—that's the older sister—left home last spring and hasn't been back since, so far as any one knows."

Colt meditatively filled his pipe.

"Sort of checks up pretty well, doesn't it?" he muttered. "Yes! Almost too well."

"What business is the father in?" asked Dougherty.

"Music shop. Sells sheet music, phonographs, radios, records, and does repairs. It's a very small shop; a one-man show."

Colt struck a match.

"Tell you what you do, Flynn. Send two new men uptown to follow through; call off Sherman and Parker, they would be a little conspicuous on a second visit."

"That's right, sir," agreed Flynn. "How about Detective Walter Norris and Al Blume?"

"Norris and Blume are okay on any case. Have them look around the music shop and the apartment house—quietly—and see what they can turn up. Tell them not to talk to the family at all. Remember that any scrap of gossip may be valuable. Let them talk to the elevator operators, janitor, boiler man, any delivery boys going in and out, and if they can get the names of any former servants of the Swifts, so much the better. Clear?"

"Clear!" repeated Flynn. "They'll be starting in two minutes."

"And, Flynn!"

"Yes, sir?" From the office doorway, Flynn paused, looking over his shoulder.

"Tell Norris and Blume to report to me around three o'clock in the entrance of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. And have an officer on call in the apartment house."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Just the addresses—music shop and apartment."

I wrote down the address as the assistant chief inspector gave it to me—the apartment at 1141 St. Nicholas Avenue, and the shop on the ground floor of the same building; I remember that it was in this region of New York that young Ruth Cruger was murdered by a cobbler and buried in his cellar; that had been years ago when I was a *World* reporter.

"Thanks, Flynn. I shall be going up to the Swift apartment at once, with Mr. Dougherty and Mr. Abbot."

But Dougherty demurred.

"Sorry, Thatch—but I've got some official business calling me, too, this afternoon—I may see you later in the day."

"Hope so," answered Colt cheerfully. "I will see you, Flynn, when I get back?"

"Okay, Mr. Commissioner——" The old police chief's voice was husky; he wished the Commissioner would stay in his office and let him handle matters. But Colt was taking this case into his own hands; for some reason he craved activity.

## 2

St. Nicholas Avenue begins at that congeries of clatter and dissonance and height where the elevated railroad makes a mad wide swing high across Cathedral Parkway. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, St. Luke's Hospital, and the little Eglise de Notre Dame manage to stand serene and clean on the parked hill of Morningside beyond the teeming flat houses, the charging parade of taxis and trucks, the snorting of buses, the roar of overhead trains, and all the frantic clamour of an uptown cross-roads.

Here is where we came in the snowstorm to ask questions about Madeline Swift—the frontier between Jewish Broadway and the dark spillways of negro Harlem. The flat house to which we three drove about two-thirty o'clock that Sunday afternoon was one of a long block of grime-fronted stone buildings, five stories high, four flats to a stage—twenty families to a house. At the corner was the music shop with a tiny window in which were displayed some December record listings in a long, holly-bordered scroll, a combination radio and phonograph surrounded with tiny, imitation Christmas trees; and some sheet music and piano rolls arranged together in a design. The name, Nickerson Swift, appeared in gilt letters across the glass—an old-fashioned style—and hanging in the window was a card: "Radio and phonograph repair work of all kinds done at moderate prices."

We did not linger at the music shop, closed on Sunday, but hurried to the entrance of Number 1141, glanced at the catalogue of names and apartment numbers over the brass mail-boxes in the vestibule and then climbed up a straight, poorly lighted stairway; the air smelled of the cooking of all nations.

The apartment that we sought was at the front on the third floor and in a tiny frame was stuck an engraved card that read—most unexpectedly:

"Knoxwell Swift—the noted mascot maker."

There was just that phrase on the card and nothing more. Could Knoxwell Swift be the chair-bound grandfather? And if he were, or if he were not, what, anyhow, was a mascot maker? We paused in front of the door. Inside we heard voices. A woman was talking in a low persuasive voice as if she were apologising—a sympathetic voice that was cut off by the sharp interruption of a man speaking out of patience. Suddenly the door opened and directly across the threshold we saw the woman. She glanced at us surprised. The woman, who, rashly but correctly, I took to be the mother, was in her young forties. She must have been a young girl when she married Nickerson Swift. She was of medium height, dark, and her eyes, big and blue, were beaten and hopeless and dull. She was dressed in rather a stylish gray coat trimmed with a high collar of red fox.

"I beg your pardon," said Thatcher Colt. "I have come to see Mr. Nickerson Swift. Is he at home?"

"Who wants me?"

As this voice called from somewhere within the flat, the woman moved towards us, her dull eyes fixed on the deep well of the staircase. At the same moment, Colt raised a detaining hand.

"I am sorry, madam. Are you Mrs. Nickerson Swift?"

"I am."

"We are the police. I regret it—but I must ask you to remain."

She returned his gaze with a furtive stare, plainly intimidated and then glanced back at the doorway. At the same moment Nickerson Swift appeared there.

There was something definitely sinister and foreboding in this man. He looked as if he were the custodian of bad secrets. He was a calm, slight man, in his late fifties, sandy-haired, stooped, his hands dangling leagues out of his sleeves. His pouchy face was chap-fallen, his cheeks sagged, his eyes drooped, his mouth sank—everything seemed falling away from him. And he lifted his head to look up at Colt without raising his eyelids—a distasteful trick. "What is this about police?" he repeated. "What do you want?"

"My name is Thatcher Colt."

"The Police Commissioner?"

Nickerson Swift swung his over-large hands and linked them at his crotch. I noticed he was wearing a gold ring, set with a large, sea-green beryl, an aquamarine. He closed his eyes and smiled a Simple Simon smile.

"I have been expecting this. I confess I did keep my shop open a few Sundays to accommodate my trade. But I did not expect that the famous Police Commissioner himself would come to arrest me. Anyhow—why are you detaining my wife? She wants to go."

"I have come here to inquire about your daughter."

"Madeline?"

"Where is she?"

"What's Madeline been doing now?" countered the father. "It must be pretty serious this time. But we can stand the truth—at least I can. Better inside—step in, gentlemen. Come on too, Beulah——"

As she passed us, returning into her apartment, Beulah Swift fixed her eyes on the face of Thatcher Colt, walking without looking where she was going and asking in a deep voice:

"Has anything happened to Madeline? Is she all right?"

Her husband hushed her; he took her by the arm, a little crossly, as it seemed to me, and led her to an upholstered sofa against one of the long walls of the living-room. He motioned us to other chairs in his upholstered green velours set of furniture; I sat in the arm-chair, Colt sat on a piano bench, cane on his instep bone, hand on cane, chin on hand, eyes fixed on Nickerson Swift, who stood in the middle of the floor and returned his gaze firmly.

"Don't beat about the bush, Mr. Colt," he pleaded. "What is it about Madeline?"

Colt's face briefly remained impassive. His eyes had swept down the apartment—this living-room and as far as he could see through the open door that led to the other rooms. What kind of people were these music merchants and mascot makers; what did their living quarters betray? Not much, at first glance, anyway. To give the women of these rooms their due, no one could have done much with that box-like rectangle of a room, and yet there was some charm and good taste in conflict with old-fashioned fustiness reflected in its furnishings. Two windows at the front looked down upon the car-tracked highway of St. Nicholas. The walls were done in a fine patternless paper of smoke gray with a border of orange, and that colour scheme of flame and smoke was echoed in a good rug and dainty curtains. There was an upright piano against the rear wall and on the rack over its fall-board, I noticed an open sheet of music by Gershwin. On a library table huddled an over-sized family Bible, copies of *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire* and a bulletin of the latest erotic items on the Falstaff list for book collectors. On one wall there was a picture of Jesus standing with a lantern in hand, knocking at a closed gate.

Through a door to the left of the piano, we caught a glimpse of the rest of the apartment. Probably seven rooms, I figured

—kitchen, dining-room, living-room, a bedroom each for the daughters, a bedroom for the parents, one for the grandfather.

The grandfather—the helpless old man in the wheel chair—where was he?

All this summary of the apartment layout I made in one glance of an eye; there was only a momentary pause between the question, the appeal of Nickerson Swift and Thatcher Colt's reply which was a counter question:

"How long since you heard from your daughter?"

"Oh, quite a while."

"Six months?"

"A little longer, maybe."

Here, Mrs. Swift broke in, her tone a little hysterical:

"Is Madeline hurt?"

Again that long pause, while the sombre brown eyes of Thatcher Colt looked into the dull blue eyes of Beulah Swift, uttering a tragic message.

"She's dead!" gasped the mother. Her look from one to another of us was imploring, child-like; she began to cry violently when none denied her words. The father stared hard at his stricken wife and one long hand came up and flapped at her back comfortingly but with a useless, seal-like motion.

"Poor Madeline!" he muttered. "Never mind, Beulah. Now everything is settled and finished. It's better that way."

### 3

Ten minutes later, Thatcher Colt began to extract a straight story from the father. The old man leaned forward from a couch where he sat beside his weeping wife; his clasped hands hung between his parted legs, swinging like a clock pendulum and just clearing the floor. He answered all questions readily.

"When did you last see Madeline?"

"It was some time around the first of May—we had a family argument—nothing very serious but she took it so anyway—and so she cleared out."

"Tell me just what happened. Mind?"

"Sure I'll tell you. You will always find me frank, earnest, and honest. Too much so, at times, maybe. Well, let's see. It was early last spring. Madeline hadn't been working for some time—she was home and we all had breakfast together about eight o'clock—my wife and myself and Madeline and the other daughter, Verna. Everything was all right, then, except I had a cold and telephoned my bookkeeper that he would have to keep the shop going; he's dead now; times are bad; I ran the whole business myself. I wouldn't go out of the house that day, though. I remember that part very clearly. Now let's see—about eight-thirty Verna left to go to work; she had a job modelling in a millinery shop in East Fifty-seventh Street—and Mrs. Swift had to go out and do some little shopping and that left Madeline and me alone here together. Now there is no sense in my pretending that Madeline and I get along very well together. We don't. We have different ideas. I am a very religious man and so is my father. We hold to the old ways. And Madeline—well, Madeline is a little wild. I don't say she's ever done anything very wrong—no use crying like that, Beulah; no use carrying on like that and you know better than anybody else that every word I'm saying is true"—*flip-flap* he patted his wife's shoulder—"but she did go around with a bunch of people I didn't approve of and she did stay out all sorts of hours; she did smoke and she did drink—and I freely admit I took her to task about it, that last morning. We had a long argument. I don't remember just what was said—I know there were some harsh words—she got very angry and she went into her room. I went on treating my cold with some kind of steam and there was Madeline coming from her room with a bag in her hand \_\_\_\_\_"

"A bag?"

"Yes, Mr. Colt—an overnight bag. And she told me, very angry, that she was leaving home for ever. I tried to argue with her. I tried to plead with her. But she would not listen. She never would listen—to me, or anybody else. You've cried enough now, Beulah. Well, Mr. Colt—that's the last I've seen or heard of her again."

"That was May first of this year?"

"That's right."

"And in all that time you have made no effort to find her?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Colt, that is not right to say anything like that. In the first place, it was not the first time Madeline had run away from home. She was gone a year almost, four years ago. A little wild, you see. And in the second place, we did try everything, short of calling in the police. We wrote to the place in Pennsylvania where she went that other time, but she wasn't there. We didn't want to do that; we've never had any dealings with the police and we didn't consider it necessary. We wrote to all her friends, relatives, everybody. Her sister has gone around asking the people she knew in town regularly ever since she's been gone."

"None of them heard anything?"

"Not a word!"

"Did you feel she was sure to come back?" Colt asked suddenly of Beulah Swift. The weeping mother lifted a nose-reddened tear-streaked face.

"No—I wasn't sure. I kept telling Mr. Swift and Verna not to worry—that one day Madeline would come home—but all the time I was the one that was worrying."

"Did you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"No."

"And nothing she said as she was leaving——"

"I wasn't here then—she was here when I left to do my shopping and was gone when I came back—gone, for ever!"

And here Mrs. Swift collapsed again in a storm of sobbing.

The sound of her sobbing seemed to irritate some one else, an invisible listener. From beyond the doorway came a cracked, impatient voice:

"Stop that silly crying. And talk louder, all of you—I can hardly hear a word you say. Have they found her body—that's what I want to know."

"Yes, father—coming," called Nickerson Swift, unclasping the swinging pendulum of his hands, jumping up, abruptly dropping his wife's head from his shoulder and shambling hurriedly into the next room. Even in her grief Beulah Swift looked at us apologetically, as if to say she knew her husband should not behave that way; receiving that look, Colt ventured a question:

"Is Knoxwell Swift your husband's father?"

She nodded, and wiped away fresh tears.

"And what makes him call himself a mascot maker?"

"Oh, he used to be in that business—making good luck novelties and curiosities. He made a good thing out of it, too, until he was paralysed; he's been chair-bound now for years. But he supplied circuses, board-walk concessions, state fairs, things like that with love mascots, lodestones, Egyptian pebbles, Hindu philters—and he still insists on keeping the card over the front door; he likes to feel he is still in business."

"Did he make them himself?" asked Colt.

"Yes. He was an excellent wood carver—he had wonderful sharp tools and knives."

"Does he still own his tools?"

"He did until a few months ago, and then he sold them to a pedlar who came to the door—or rather I sold them for him. He asked me to."

"Do you know the pedlar's name?"

"No."

"I see.... You have another daughter, Mrs. Swift?"

"Verna, yes, sir."

"Is she here?"

Beulah Swift shook her head and looked a little vague.

"No. We will have to get word to her."

"Is she out of town?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"She is in a sanatorium in Pennsylvania."

"For what, Mrs. Swift?"

"For a nervous breakdown."

A rolling, squeaking sound was heard and through the portières in the back of the room Nickerson Swift pushed a wheel chair in which rode an old man; a most melodramatic appearing old man, too colourful for the ordinary realities of life, a garish touch to this fantastic case—and yet there he was in the wheel chair, a slight, bony, Santa Claus old man with red velvet robe, red velvet stocking hat with tassel dangling inelegantly over one ear; long white hair, long white beard—and a ouija board lying on his lap. He appeared to be grumbling incoherently in his beard—but what he was really doing was abusing his son out of the corner of his mouth. The chair was halted just within the room and the elderly Mr. Swift smiled at Thatcher Colt with the supreme detachment of great age that rises above family troubles:

"The Police Commissioner!" he exclaimed softly. "I have read so much about you. Isn't it terrible about my granddaughter? She was very angry when she left us. I was here and heard it all. My son has been frank and honest with you about the whole affair. Why would she kill herself?"

"She didn't," objected Thatcher Colt.

"You mean——" The younger Swift, the father of the murdered girl, did not finish the sentence.

"I mean," said Thatcher Colt, "that we believe Madeline Swift was murdered. Horribly, cruelly murdered."

A low moan came from the mother; then her weak lips, her eyes, seemed to become rigid, cataleptic as they slowly fell shut. The old man in the wheel chair leaned back and closed his eyes, too, and began talking softly, inaudibly to himself. Nickerson Swift repeated the one word:

"Murder!"

Briefly Colt told them what he knew.

"And I want to ask you, Mr. Swift—and you two as well—have you any idea who would want to kill her?"

"No!"—three voices answered strongly as one.

"Had she any known enemies?"

Nickerson Swift threw out his long, futile hands.

"I don't know. She went around with so many people. We never met any of them. But good God, Mr. Colt—murder! I can hardly realise it—and look—my wife has fainted."

4

There was a long wait, then, before Beulah Swift recovered and Thatcher Colt could get back to his questions. But he had to get back to them.

"Where, Mr. Swift, do you think your daughter might have meant to go?"

"Perhaps Bethlehem, in Pennsylvania."

"Why might she go there?"

"Because she had heard of an opportunity for a dancing teacher in a school there."

"Have you the address of that school?"

"I wrote it down in my book once ... 'tain't no use investigating though—we wrote but we never got an answer—here's the address, Orchard Street—400."

"Name of the school?"

"Duckworth Institute."

"Thanks. Have you any of her letters here?"

"No, I never keep letters—just waste paper, and who wants to keep waste paper?"

Colt nodded thoughtfully and began fumbling for his pipe.

"Did Madeline have any particular boy friend?"

"Dozens," groaned the grandfather.

"Did you quarrel about any one boy friend in particular on that last morning?" asked Colt shrewdly.

"You mean Keplinger?"

"Yes," assented Colt, although none of us had heard of Keplinger. "What's his first name and where does he live?"

"Not far from here—it's a furnished room house for college students up at One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street near Riverside Drive."

"What sort of person is he?"

"I don't know. Except Alfred's a rummy and a no-gooder. Studying medicine—but he is the kind of boy that goes in varsity shows and dresses up like a girl. Very clever as an actor—not so good at his studies. Nice, but broken-down family—that's all I know about him."

"Then why did you quarrel about him?"

"Because he was a rummy—and wanted to marry my daughter. I don't want any rummies in this family. We've had enough no-gooders as it is!"

And as he made this extraordinarily implicative remark, Nickerson Swift cast down upon his grieving wife a baleful look. There was just no explaining that and for the moment Colt did not appear to notice it.

"One more question, please. How was Madeline dressed when she left this room?"

"I don't remember. Wait a minute! Yes, I do too. She was wearing a suit of green serge and a green straw hat."

"Is there a photograph of Madeline anywhere in the apartment?"

Again that sullen glance under the eyelids of Nickerson Swift—eyelids that did not rise. Beulah was quiet now but she did not look up; unexpectedly there came that quavering high-pitched voice of the old man:

"Show it to him. Let him see it and give it to him if he wants it, then tell him to get out of here. There's a programme soon I want to listen to on the radio—Father Coughlin!"

The sound of his voice seemed to have a magic effect upon Nickerson Swift. He rose nervously and went into the next room, and returned presently, a framed portrait in his hand. My heart skipped a beat when I looked at that lovely face. I was astounded to find how skilfully Mr. Fitch, our crime sculptor, had done his work. The cunning magic of his hands had made that image life-like with almost clairvoyant accuracy. The two faces were much the same, the essentials were all there—the essentials of the face whose photograph now looked at us so winningly from under the glass of the silver-scrolled frame—a sweet, ungovernable young face with eyes that could not be overpowered—implacably her own, was this tameless girl. Such a girl would yield only to herself. There was something vaguely disturbing to Colt in this portrait; I saw by his eyes that he was deeply troubled.

I found myself looking up from the picture to the sag-jaw face of the father. I found a resemblance and a great difference—some sinister difference between father and daughter—something ugly and unnatural. What mystery was here? I began to grope mentally like a man in the dark, filled with the foreboding of unspeakable things.

"There she is," said Grandfather Swift ungraciously. "And we want her back when you are through with her."

"Naturally. But first there is one question I must ask you. What is this mark?"

"Mark?"

"Yes—here!"

Colt pointed at the right side of the mouth; a small, dark blotch was there.

"Oh, that—it was a tiny beauty mark; a very small brown growth. Madeline always was afraid to have it removed."

Colt's face was a slight shade paler; his eyes glittered as he continued to stare at that disfigurement.

"It is extraordinary!" he muttered. "It is almost impossible, and it must be a coincidence!"

"What, Mr. Colt?"

The Commissioner made no answer as he passed the picture to me.

"We will return it to you," he promised as I put the framed picture under my arm.

"I think that's all, Mr. Swift, for the present—except the last and most painful duty of all. It is necessary under the laws of the state of New York that a body be identified by the nearest relatives. In this case, of course, you are going to look at what is more an image—or a statue—but the identification must be made."

"Now?" asked Beulah Swift imploringly. "Surely—that can wait, Mr. Colt?"

"If Mr. Swift goes, that will be enough," decided the Commissioner soothingly. "You need not go—but he must go at once."

Beulah Swift stood up resolutely.

"I want to be there," she said clearly, and buttoned her coat with its fox fur collar around her.

"One more question," pursued Colt. "Does any one in this family ever go boating?"

"Of course we do," answered Nickerson Swift. "All except my father—and he used to."

"You own a boat?"

"No—we hire them by the day."

"Where?"

"Down on Staten Island."

"I see. And further, I must tell you that much as I regret to invade your privacy at such a time, I shall have to keep an officer in this house—and search it thoroughly."

Nickerson Swift swung around.

"That," he said, "is an outrage. I don't believe it's legal. I've got political friends, you know, Mr. Thatcher Colt."

"I can obtain a search warrant," the Commissioner snapped back. "Better do as I say—quietly."

The father glared, shrugged, closed his eyes in surrender as Colt told them how to get to Police Headquarters and to ask for Inspector Flynn, who was waiting to show them all that remained of the daughter. As he finished giving these directions, Colt stepped to the door, opened it and waved the waiting sergeant inside to take charge of the apartment. Colt picked up his hat and coat and left the officer with the old man in the wheel chair, who muttered sadly:

"I never thought I'd live to see a day like this."

## 5

There is a drug store at One Hundred and Ninth Street and Columbus Avenue—at the north-west corner of what is known as the "Cathedral Parkway Apartments." From a booth in the pharmacy Colt telephoned "Canal 2000," the private call of Headquarters—the public knows better the call of "Spring 3100"—and asked for Inspector Flynn. Hurriedly he gave him the substance of our interview with the Swifts:

"Get the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, police busy; find out if there is any record of Madeline Swift ever going to that town—perhaps as a dancing teacher at the Duckworth Institute, 400 Orchard Street."

"Right!"

"Release the full story to the newspapers and let Mr. Dougherty make all the statements he pleases."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Professor Gilman I want to talk with him without fail this evening in my office."

"Will do."

"When the Swifts leave Headquarters, put a tail on them. Shadow them until further orders."

"Three shifts, two men each."

"Good enough. Send two other good men up to the Swift apartment to wait for orders. What is the condition of that taxi driver?"

"He's calmed down now all right."

"Is he ready to show us the house where he picked up the girl?"

"Any time."

"Right now, then—send Morrison and Wood down there with him and get word to me as soon as you hear anything definite."

"Will do, sir."

"I am not sure where I shall be—but I will keep in touch. Good-bye, Flynn."

It was about half-past three as we left the warm chemist's shop and stepped out under the clattering elevated. People out for a holiday walk were hurrying home, for soon the shadows of winter dusk would lengthen and already the deeper cold of night stirred in the slow and bitter breeze. With purposeful steps Colt led the way up to the entrance of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Amsterdam Avenue above One Hundred and Tenth Street; it was at the door of the unfinished cathedral that he had instructed Detectives Norris and Blume to meet us.

The two detectives, young, keen men, were waiting in the shelter of the northern door.

"Well," began Colt crisply, "what did you men get?"

Detective Blume gave the report. Blume was a short, husky young man with gentle eyes; during his ten years in the department he had killed three desperadoes; he was a man to be counted on in an emergency. Said he:

"From all I can hear, Mr. Colt, the Swifts are a queer lot of people. First, there's the girl's father, Nickerson Swift. He's in the music business, but that's not all. He sells autographs, first editions, and expensive books, but he hasn't got any store for that. He just has some shelves and cabinets in the flat——"

"You've been there?" asked Colt.

"No, the grocery boy that delivers supplies told me about it. Nick is always buying job lots of other people's business papers; picks up the old files of mail of bankrupt and liquidating firms. Ever hear of that before, Mr. Colt? It's a kind of literary junk business—he's looking for valuable autographs. He'll buy collections of letters from anybody and always at Salvation Army prices. And Nick's very religious. He and his old man sing hymns together by the hour. Nick is afraid of his father. They say that old boy is pretty cranky. His name is Knoxwell Swift and he was a cabin boy on a whaler when he was a kid. Then he went home to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and for a few years he was a butcher. Then he got into the mascot business, Lord knows how, and then they say when he moved to New York, many years ago, he was well off. Now he's paralysed and can't move out of his chair without help. Old Knoxwell Swift is even worse than his son about religion. He's a fanatic and some people think he's crazy. Then there is Beulah Swift, Nickerson Swift's wife. I couldn't get much about Mrs. Beulah Swift. Nobody seemed to know much or wanted to talk. There was something queer about her. I got the impression, Mr. Colt, without quite knowing why, that there was some scandal. One thing I do know. The delivery boy I talked to said that every time he was in that house Mrs. Swift seemed unhappy. He had seen her crying more than once and both her husband and the grandfather talked to her like she was a servant. It's Beulah the daughters take after and not the old man. Both daughters are pretty, so they say."

"And what could you find out about Madeline?"

"Well, of course, she hasn't been around now for quite a while but Norris and I picked up a few bits of gossip. For instance, we found out that Madeline Swift is five years younger than her sister Verna—so that makes Madeline about twenty-one years old when she was killed. And here's a funny thing about it, Mr. Colt, Verna, the older sister, is the child of a second marriage and Madeline, the younger sister, is a child of the first marriage."

Colt blinked.

"But that sounds impossible."

"I know it, Mr. Colt, but it's a fact. I couldn't get all the details, but I got some. A long time ago Beulah, the mother, was married to Nickerson Swift. They had no children. One day she ran away and left old Nick; she got divorced, married the other man, whose name was Verne Adams, and they went to Japan together. There Beulah had a child. That child was Verna. Then something happened. She left Verne Adams and came back to America with her baby and to everybody's surprise Nickerson Swift took her back. She got a second divorce; she and Nick were married all over again and that was when Madeline came into the world. Queer, isn't it?"

"More than queer. What sort of girl was Madeline Swift?"

"Pretty wild, I guess—but nice. Always in some kind of hot water. She was fired out of at least one school. People say

she was very sentimental and sweet. Everybody says she was misunderstood. She would tell her troubles to strangers, anybody who would listen. It's pretty hard to piece together much from what neighbours say—especially New York neighbours who don't give a damn. But I got the impression something was not quite right."

"Why?"

"Well, she used to write poetry and she picked up with the wrong kind of people and she told every one what she wanted was a home of her own and a baby and she knew she would never get it. And she hated her father for the punishments he gave her."

"Boy friends?"

Norris grinned a little ruefully.

"If all they say is true, you couldn't begin to count them."

"Any of them serious?"

"I'm afraid not, chief. Nothing very wrong, anyway. It was hard to get much on that score. People were nice about it. They didn't want to talk—but I did hear there was one lad that she was very much in love with."

"Was the name Alfred Keplinger?"

"Yes, it was."

"Did you get his street address?"

"Yes, sir—1496 West One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street."

I jotted it down, as Colt proceeded:

"Next, about the servants in the Swift apartment?"

"They have a maid," reported Norris, taking up the tale. "She comes in by the day. She's off this afternoon because it's Sunday. She is a coloured girl and her name is Millie Newson. She lives in West Sixty-second Street, over in the San Juan Hill district. She's been with the Swifts for two months. They've had a string of girls over the last seven months. But before that they had one girl who had been with them for six or seven years."

"What was her name?"

"Nellie Schwartz."

"Was she fired?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"For interfering in an awful row between old Nick Swift, as the janitor calls him, and one of his daughters. She told the janitor she wouldn't stand for what was going on and so she was put right out of the house."

"Got her address?"

"Yes, sir—up in the Bronx."

"When was all this?"

"The janitor says he can fix the date exactly. It was May first of this year."

Colt's sombre brown eyes clouded. What had happened in that last interview between father and daughter? It must have been a violent scene, if an old family servant was cast out unceremoniously like that.

Colt's dark eyes flashed.

"There's a hot tip," he exclaimed. "I want you two men to get on that at once. Bring in Nellie Schwartz—I shall be back in Headquarters after dinner this evening."

The two detectives hurried out of the cathedral, and down the broad steps to the sidewalk where they hailed a street car and were carried northward and away. Meanwhile Colt and I followed them down the stairs, crossed the street to a tobacco shop and once more I called Headquarters. I found Inspector Flynn quite ruffled.

"Tell the Commissioner," he snarled, "that the District Attorney just telephoned. He's in quite a stew. He says he must see the Commissioner real quick. He says Madeline Swift had some powerful connection in Tammany Hall and he's got to talk to Mr. Colt as soon as possible; he said to keep it under your hat but to be thinking it over—she was a friend of \_\_\_\_\_"

And here Flynn lowered his voice as he finished:

"Daniel V. O'Toole, the most powerful political boss of Brooklyn and——"

"Never mind, Inspector," I snapped. "The Commissioner knows perfectly well who Mr. O'Toole is. So what?"

"All I know," mourned Flynn, "is that Mr. Dougherty seemed to think it made an awful difference."

"I'll tell the chief," I promised hotly. "But it won't make any difference at all. He wants to know if there is any report from the taxi driver yet."

"No, sir—not back yet. And the Swift family just this minute came in, while I'm here talking."

"Call you back later."

Colt's eyes gleamed when I told him about O'Toole.

"I remember," he remarked, "that Nick Swift—an anteater of a man, to my way of thinking, Tony—Nick said he had powerful friends politically. There was a wee bit of a threat in that remark. And now Dougherty—well, they all can wait. We've got other work cut out for us——"

He signalled to Neil McMahon and the car slid up to the curb.

"Back to the Nickerson Swift apartment," he told Neil. And with a smile to me he added:

"This reminds me of what Alice said in Wonderland—it gets curiousser and curiousser."

## 6

At the Swift apartment, there were two other detectives waiting for us, as Colt had requested during my first telephone talk with Flynn. These newcomers were Detectives Gray and Sherrill, tall, lean lads, partners for a long time and men you could count on to do a thorough job.

Colt rapidly sketched for them a digest of the situation. He had the grudging permission of the parents to search the house. There must be a good deal of material to be reviewed; when Madeline Swift left home, she had been carrying only an overnight bag—a bag that to this day has not been found—most of her clothing was left behind and she did not live to come back for them. There should be more revealing effects, too—letters, diary, memoranda, notebooks. Colt urged Gray and Sherrill to search the flat thoroughly and to report to him personally in the evening. Further, he instructed them to call down to Headquarters—to the Bureau of Criminal Identification—and ask for a fingerprint man; it would be an important precaution to get impressions of all the members of the family against later developments which no one could foresee but in which the case might be decided by a fingerprint; it had happened a hundred times before. Further, they were to find out what they could about the state of Swift's business; how much insurance was carried on Madeline's life, and to whom payable. Finally, they must get as much about her sister Verna as they could turn up.

"One thing more," added the Commissioner. "Down in my office there is a new machine, left there by its inventor, who would like to introduce it into the department. It is called an olfactory classifier."

Gray and Sherrill looked a little vague.

"That is the inventor's technical name for it," Colt went on. "The public probably would prefer to call it the bloodhound machine. It looks something like an old-fashioned sewing machine on wheels; what it does is to isolate a scent and classify it. I will have it sent up here with its inventor. Give him all the chance he needs to test it. You see, gentlemen, what I am after is a murderer who left us only bones. It may eventually be vital to know what Madeline Swift smelled like—hence the clothes, the machine——"

All these instructions were given behind closed doors in the spotless kitchen of the Swifts'. Two rooms beyond, the maunding old mascot maker sat in his own unlighted bed-chamber, playing with his beard and listening to a religious service over the radio. Now, at Colt's request, I called Flynn again; the Assistant Chief Inspector was not in much better humour than before and his voice was edged with sarcasm.

"Yes, Mr. Abbot, Pieranini, the taxi driver, is back. Yes, he pointed out the house. Yes, we got the name of the person who lives in the house. Yes, I can give you the name. Are you listening careful? Well, the name is Daniel V. O'Toole. That's all!"

"Daniel V. O'Toole?"

"No less, and him the political leader of——"

"Never mind, Flynn. I'll tell the Commissioner and call you back."

And, hanging up on Headquarters, I reported this curious development to Thatcher Colt.

The reflective light in Colt's eyes faded out; a colder gleam took the place of his usual pensiveness.

"I had a hunch it would come to something like that," he murmured. "So Madeline knew O'Toole and came out of his house afraid—scared was the word she used—a few hours before she was killed. O'Toole is heap big man in the party—one of Dougherty's chief political backers, his Tammany Hall buddy——"

"But you never could stomach O'Toole."

"As you delicately describe it, Tony, I never could stomach the O'Toole ... I wonder if there were any stories about O'Toole and this girl."

"You think——"

"I think nothing, Tony. We are just starting on this case—but I'm going to see it through to a finish—and I don't care who is hurt."

I nodded; that was bound to be his course. The telephone in the Swift apartment rang and Colt answered it:

"Hallo... Yes... yes... I see... I am sorry I cannot discuss a matter like this over the telephone... Yes, I shall be glad to talk with you in my office...after eight o'clock to-night, yes.... No, sorry, I can make no promises..."

Colt slung the receiver back on the hook.

"That," he announced glumly, "was Mr. O'Toole."

"How in hell did he know to call here?"

"He's a smart fellow. I suppose Dougherty told him. Don't forget that Dougherty owes his election to Tammany Hall, and more than anybody else to O'Toole. But don't forget also that party loyalty will never stop Dougherty in a crisis. Mark my words, if O'Toole had anything to do with killing that girl, he will go to the chair if Dougherty can send him there. No use to stand here talking about it, though—it's our job to give Dougherty his case for the jury—— Get Flynn back, will you?"

Presently Flynn's voice sounded once more in my ear. Colt talked to him:

"Call Detective Sadler. Tell him I want all that he can find on D. V. O'Toole. I know O'Toole is a lawyer who never

went to school but got through the state bar exams in the good old-fashioned way. But I want the complete facts on that transaction. I also want the details about his forming of that engineering and contracting firm that did all that work for the city before the last administration. That's only the start of it—tell Sadler I want it all."

"Okay, chief—and you'll get plenty."

Three minutes later we emerged into the cold twilight haze of St. Nicholas Avenue. It was nearly five o'clock and in the last few hours Colt had set many wheels whirling in the Madeline Swift investigation. Two detectives were up in the Bronx, even now, looking for the missing Nellie Schwartz. Other detectives were marching behind Nickerson Swift and his wife. Still others would delve into the past of O'Toole; our expert was at the wood of the box of bones; police in Bethlehem were asking questions at the Duckworth Institute—wide-flung efforts, far-reaching efficiency marshalled to break the mystery. Colt himself would shortly be talking to the mediums—those mysterious people who had known too much in advance for me to believe them entirely innocent. The chief would also demand of Professor Gilman an explanation of that advance knowledge. Meanwhile, where were we bound?

"Apartment house—One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street West—Number 1496," were the crisp instructions Colt gave to Neil McMahon. Glad to be in the warm limousine, I lounged back and lit a cigarette and began to long for a drink.

"Why do people have to kill people?" I groused. "I have a wife and home—but I never see my home—my wife is sore at me—"

Colt waved off my perfectly unjustifiable grouch with a soothing motion.

"Be glad you have a wife and a home," he snapped, and glanced at his watch. "As for your questions, all sorts of people kill all sorts of other people, for all sorts of reasons. Sons kill mothers and mothers kill sons and fathers kill daughters. Take the present case. We have just left a flat that held two abominable men—father and son. They have not done anything to justify that adjective—yet in their presence, I have the feeling they are abominable persons. One is paralysed and confined to his chair and should deserve sympathy—but I don't like him. Or the other either. The other has a kind of paralysed spirit. Something is wrong with the souls of Nickerson Swift and his father. Don't ask me what a soul is because I don't know."

As a recoil from the firm processes of common sense, the routine of police department work, Colt was taking refuge in his feelings, his emotions—a luxury he could indulge only when we were alone like this.

"I felt a subconscious reaction against old Nick myself," I admitted, "I suppose we have no reason to include him in any list of suspects we make up. But I would still feel he would force himself on such a list. I know it isn't a pretty thought, but could it be that Nickerson Swift had some unholy jealousy of his own daughter and got rid of her to keep her from the man she loved?"

"I like my murders a little more wholesome than that, Tony."

"But isn't there something definitely unwholesome about Nickerson Swift?" I argued.

"You've been reading Freud again," the Commissioner chided.

He put his hands deep into his overcoat pocket and closed his eyes. We were going up Broadway; the street was crowded with automobiles and street cars all honking and clanging viciously; a green bus marked *Special* and loaded with children lumbered by, its meshing gears groaning humbly. The sidewalks were crowded, too, with men and women and boys and girls, all of them walking hastily, all in a hurry to get somewhere, do something, see somebody.

"How many crimes are preparing in their hearts?" I wondered idly, and aloud. "Why can't we stop it? Why can't we tell criminals by their looks? I think Nickerson Swift looks like a criminal. So does Professor Gilman for that matter."

Colt laughed, but he was still rebuking me:

"You can't tell a criminal by the shape of his ears, as Lombroso believed, or by his words and actions, the way our

modern psychologists believe."

Colt stopped to light his pipe.

"The trouble, Tony," he resumed, "is that most people do not realise that criminals are just like the rest of us. There isn't any great difference. Some people think criminals are exceptions to the human race. They are not. The human race has exceptions but very seldom are they criminals. Other people think criminals are feeble-minded. They are not. Some of them are very clever people. And in my opinion there is no compulsion either in environment or in heredity. Take the criminal who killed Madeline Swift. Here, seemingly, is some one smart enough to plan a dangerous crime in advance, anticipate what may happen, and have a perfect story prepared to meet all questions."

"I still think that Nick Swift answers all your specifications," I agreed, "and the way he talked just for one second about the Keplinger boy showed to me a definite and significant emotion."

"Hate?"

"Yes, and something even worse."

"I agree with you," said Thatcher Colt, "but perhaps that emotion was justified, Tony. That is why we ought to take a good long look at young Mr. Keplinger. Isn't this One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street?"

We got out hastily and told Neil to wait; then set off westward. These streets were familiar ground to me. I had worked with Colt in this neighbourhood on many an exciting case. Not far away in one of the apartment houses had lived Geraldine Foster and her room-mate, Betty Canfield, who I married. Near here also lived Professor Gminder who worked on the *Murder of the Circus Queen*. A dozen times we had been here on a dozen different mysteries, but never in our experience had we been more unsuspecting of the labyrinth of horror into which we were soon to be plunged.

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## *Chapter Two*

### **SISTER, SISTER, HELP ME OUT!**

The number given us as the street address of Alfred Keplinger—1496 West One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street—was worthless; there was no such number. But we did get a few breaks in the Madeline Swift case; and one of them was that we found it easier to locate Alfred Keplinger without the right address than we had a right to expect.

At a patrol box on the corner of One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street we found Officer Levinson making a routine call to his station house. In the glare of a street lamp we asked Levinson if he had ever heard of Alfred Keplinger, and the patrolman stammering in his eagerness to make an impression on the Commissioner, startled us with his reply:

"Sure, I know Alfred Keplinger. He's a medical student at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. He lives in that very apartment house across the street on the third floor. He is a nice boy; likes to fish and go out on boats. I got to know him through passing the time of night and chatting with him before he went in to bed. I can't believe that a nice fellow like that would be doing anything wrong, Mr. Commissioner, though, of course," added Levinson, with a confidential smile at Colt, "we police officers from the lowest to the highest know that you can never trust anybody."

"What else do you know about Alfred Keplinger?"

"Well, only what I've picked up talking with him now and then. One thing at a time. One night he was awful tight and I had to lock him up or put him to bed. So I put him to bed. That was the night he told me he was engaged to marry one girl and he was really in love with her sister, and he said he was going to do something about it. I know he expects to graduate next year. I know he's popular with the girls. I know he's crazy about scarves for the neck. He's got a great collection of 'em—all sorts of colours. He can play the guitar—he calls it a tipleys—and he's got a nice singing voice. And he can dance! In fact, he's a lot prouder of his dancing cup he won than gettin' good marks in his medical school. I don't think he wants to be a doctor at all."

"Well, why does he stick to it?"

"Oh, it's his sister. She's puttin' him through medical school and he don't want to disappoint her. She sort of rules his roost for him."

"I see. What do you suppose he would like to do if it weren't for his sister?"

Officer Levinson rolled his eyes and gave the Commissioner a naughty glance.

"Well, if you was to ask me, Mr. Commissioner, I think he'd like to go to Hollywood and be an actor."

"Can he act?"

"Well, as I said, he's been in the varsity show. They say he can dress up like a woman and fool anybody. I guess he can act. And he says there's a lot of money in it. And that's what he wants—money. Money to buy better clothes with, more scarves, have a big car. He's got fancy ideas, that boy. But he's nice. I like him."

"Father and mother living?"

"No, sir. Just his sister."

"Do you know if he owns a boat?"

"I don't think he does. But he has friends who let him use theirs when he goes fishing."

"What's his sister like?"

"I never saw her. She lives way out in the wild west somewhere—Indiana, I think—or maybe Ohio."

"Is Alfred home now?"

"Yes, sir. I saw him go in a few minutes ago."

"Thanks, Levinson. You have a retentive faculty. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Commissioner. But I've got a good record at my precinct just the same."

Alfred Keplinger was the last man in the world I would have picked as the Romeo for Madeline Swift's Juliet. Madeline must have been a lovely girl—beautiful, wild, and she could have taken her pick from most of the men she met. Yet she had picked this boy who, in answer to our knock, came to the door of his two-room flat on the third floor, rear, of the Embankment Apartments.

This boy—so we were asked to believe—this youth who peered at us through heavy double-lensed glasses, whose hair, yellow as the beard of Cain, was sleeked back with some oily salve, who was dressed in the over-styled shoulder and belt raiment of a Broadway actor, was the one Madeline wanted to marry. He was languidly smoking a cigarette in an ivory holder eight inches long and he looked at us resentfully, for all his drowsy, inert air.

The mention of Colt's name startled him. "You're looking for me?" he asked. His voice was very low.

"Yes," said Colt, "I want to talk about Madeline Swift."

"What about her? Is she in any trouble?"

"A lot."

"Come right in."

He led us into his sitting-room on the walls of which there were framed programmes of college shows, pennants, old automobile licences; a large portrait of Madeline Swift stood beside a bag of peanuts on a littered desk.

Alfred Keplinger turned his weak and troubled blue eyes towards the Commissioner as he sat on the edge of a daybed and drummed on the flowered coverlet with long white fingers.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Colt? Where is she?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, sir."

"Haven't you any idea?"

"No, sir. I haven't seen her for nearly a year."

"Haven't you tried to find her?"

"Sure."

"What did you do to try to find her?"

"Nobody will tell me where she is. We had a little quarrel and she went away. I didn't think it was as serious as all that, but her father wouldn't tell me where she went. But please don't keep me in suspense, Mr. Colt. Please tell me. What's wrong?"

Colt leaned forward in his chair, resting his chin on the ivory top of his walking-stick.

"I'll tell you everything in due time, Keplinger. I'll tell you right now that the situation is serious. I want you to be frank with me and answer all my questions."

"I'll let you have anything I know."

"When did you first meet Madeline Swift?"

"First, Mr. Colt—please, for the love of God—is she alive or dead?"

"She's dead!"

The boy stopped drumming with his fingers on the coverlet. He paled, his eyes moved from one part of nowhere to another; then his face seemed to crack and he uttered a little cry. He stood up and stood so that we could not see his face. His shoulders shook. We waited serenely while he cried. At last he turned back and faced us.

"All right," he said, "shoot your questions."

"I repeat—where did you first meet Madeline?"

"At a dance up at the University. I knew her sister Verna first. Verna introduced us. We liked each other from the start. We started going round together."

"Were you ever engaged?"

"Yes, sir. We were going to be married—until the quarrel."

"When was that?"

"Last spring—around the end of April, I believe."

"What did you quarrel about?"

"Oh, I don't know—it was too much for me ever to figure out. I know that she loved me, Mr. Colt. She thought we were going to be very happy together. But all of a sudden she told me she couldn't marry me and nothing I could say would change her mind."

"Did she tell you why?"

"No, sir. She said she was frightened, but she wouldn't tell me about what. The next thing I knew, she was gone. I wrote, I went to her apartment, but nobody would tell me anything. Her father told me she went off to get away from me—that she never wanted to see me again. Her mother told me the same thing and threatened to have me arrested if I came around the apartment any more. So then I wrote all her friends that I knew, but none of them could help me. Nobody knew where she was. I can't understand it, Mr. Colt. I can't!"

"What did her father have against you, Alfred?"

The weak blue eyes behind the double lenses narrowed in a glance of deep resentment.

"He says I am a rummy. But the real reason is he wanted her to marry money."

"And you haven't much money?"

"No, sir."

"Was there any one else in whom Madeline might be interested?"

"No, sir. Not after she met me. Don't think I'm boasting. It's just the way it was. You see, she was crazy about me."

"No other man in her life?"

"Not any more."

"Now, Alfred, I don't like to pry into the most intimate matters in your life but the situation is so serious I've got to ask you some very embarrassing questions."

"How long has Madeline been dead, Mr. Colt?"

"More than six months."

"Good God! But how? Where?"

Again the young man stood up, his whole body trembling. He clasped his hands together haplessly and his head shook from side to side. He began to sob like a child in its sleep. He slumped in the desk chair, laid his arms on the top, dropped his face and mourned.

Colt waited patiently for a few minutes. Then he got up and rested a hand on the shuddering shoulders.

"You want to help us, Alfred?"

The crying boy whirled, red faced and tearful, and caught the Commissioner at the elbows, shaking him violently.

"Who killed her, Mr. Colt? Let me know. I've got to know. I'll kill whoever it was."

"Steady. Sit down over here. Now listen to me. I want everything you can tell me. We want to work quickly. We want to find out who did this thing and you can help us more than any one. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you must be strong."

"Yes, sir."

"And you must not hold back anything. There must have been secrets in Madeline Swift's life that she told you and no one else. They may have a great bearing on our work."

The boy had taken off his glasses and was wiping away his tears with a highly-coloured Arabian handkerchief.

"You mean—was Madeline a good girl?"

Colt patted his knee.

"It's never been easy to say who's a good girl and who's a bad girl, Alfred," he said. "It depends on so many factors."

Alfred's face softened.

"Like being born into the wrong kind of family, the wrong environment. Isn't that right, Mr. Colt?"

"Exactly. You tell me about Madeline Swift as you saw her."

Nervously the young man took one of the Commissioner's cigarettes. Colt struck a match for him and for a few moments he puffed in silent nervousness. Then the words poured from him like a flood.

"Madeline was as decent a girl as ever was born into this world. But she never had a chance, Mr. Colt. Not until I came along. People didn't understand her, so some of them wouldn't have anything to do with her. And others wanted to have too much to do with her. Nobody was really her friend. Nobody in the whole world cared a damn about her until I came along. And I really cared a lot about her. I understood her. I did. And I was the only one. I was——"

Colt tapped him gently on the knee.

"What was there to understand about her?"

"You don't know the story of that family?"

"Not clearly."

"Well, then you don't understand anything. It all goes back to Old Nick Swift and his father. If you don't know that set-up, Mr. Colt, you'll be blind to the whole thing."

"You see, first of all you have the old paralysed grandfather who has got some kind of cockeyed, crazy feeling for his son. There's such a thing as parents loving their children too much. Well, that's the set-up there. The grandfather was jealous when Nickerson Swift married Madeline's mother."

"Now there was nothing wrong with Madeline's mother. She was a little milliner up in Boston. Her name was Beulah Edwards. Her mother was an English governess who worked in a place up in Nahant and when she died up there the

family raised Beulah and put her in a millinery shop. I think Madeline took after her mother in lots of ways. She told me her mother used to be happy, liked to sing and dance and go to parties.

"Then she met Old Nick Swift. He was Young Nick then. From the first he dominated Beulah. He bossed her around and she liked it. I think he bossed her around in the same way that his old father at home bossed him around. And about the only time in his life that Nickerson Swift ever defied his father was when he ran off one afternoon and married Beulah. For a while his father wouldn't speak to him. Then they patched it up and Nick and Beulah went to live with his father—and was she unhappy! She didn't know what she was getting in to. Old Nick Swift was a staunch, hard-working Presbyterian and that house was as gloomy as an undertaking establishment. Everything was a sin. They didn't have any children then. I think Old Nick Swift thought even that would be a sin. I guess they just sort of mourned through the days and gloomed, as Madeline described their life to me. It got so that Beulah was losing her mind.

"Then one day a customer came to the house to buy some books. His name was Verne Adams. He came often after seeing Beulah and bought a lot of books. One day she packed her bags and went out with him. She went off somewhere, got a divorce, and married Adams. They went to Japan where Verne Adams had some kind of mysterious brokerage business. That's where Verna was born. And they would be there yet—and fairly happy, I guess—if Beulah hadn't found out what Adam's business was. He was really financing opium smuggling into the United States. She wasn't the kind of woman who could take a thing like that. She packed up with her baby and came back to the United States.

"And because she needed food for herself and her little girl, she appealed to Nickerson Swift. He took her back and her child with her. Oh, yes, it sounds noble—but I don't think it was. He took her back for revenge. He took her back to torture her day after day. He made her a crushed human being and she will never be anything else. She's a slave and she doesn't dare call her soul her own. He took a slow pleasure in doing that to her.

"And it was in that atmosphere that he and Beulah brought poor Madeline into the world. Can you blame that child for anything she turned out to be, Mr. Colt? Can anybody point a finger of scorn at Madeline when they know that?

"And that's not the worst of it. Old Nick hated Madeline. He made her life miserable from the time she was born."

"But why, Keplinger?"

"He called her, more than once, the fruit of evil. It did not matter to him that she had a beautiful soul. She loved poetry and music. If she had been left alone, she could have found some happiness in life. But from the first time I knew her she was afraid to believe in it.

"That was why she did some foolhardy things. I knew she drank too much. She did some crazy things too—taking long swims by herself. She was always ashamed of her home life. Who wouldn't have an inferiority complex with all those humiliations? She tried to work. She was a telephone girl, a manicurist, a hat model—a dozen different things. But she never lasted at anything. And neither could I if I had been through what she had been through."

The rush of words was over. Alfred Keplinger sat on the side of the daybed, his white hands twitching on his knees; he stared at Thatcher Colt with tear-stained eyes.

The Commissioner offered him another cigarette, and then proceeded to fill his pipe. The cigarette dangled from the young man's loose lips.

"Tell me," said Colt, "about the last time you saw her."

The medical student straightened up.

"I remember perfectly all about that, even the date. It was May first of this year."

With quaking hands he tried to light his cigarette; Colt snapped his *briquet* and lit it for him.

"Take your time," he said encouragingly.

"I was attending one of my classes on that day, May first," he resumed nervously. "It is strictly against the rules for students to be disturbed during class time, unless it is a matter of life and death. Well, just around eleven o'clock Madeline telephoned me. Maybe I was a little brusque when I answered. I know I was all worried anyhow because my sister Josephine was in a hospital for an operation. At all events, Madeline flared up and said she knew I was getting

tired of her and I wouldn't have to wait long to get rid of her. But she said she had something important to tell me first and would have to see me at once. She was leaving the Waldorf-Astoria right then, on her way up to meet me at a restaurant we often go to, or used to, on Broadway near One Hundred and Fifteenth Street. She hung up, so I could not argue with her. So I went to the restaurant, called the *Pompadour*. I did not have to wait long. Madeline came in. She was pale, upset and almost hysterical. And yet, once she got as far as me, I could hardly get anything out of her. She was vague, indefinite, and scared. And she would not tell me what she was scared of. All that I could get out of her was that we would have to part for ever."

"Did she say she might kill herself?" asked Colt, opening his eyes for the first time since the young man's narrative began.

"No, sir. She vehemently denied that, because I asked her. She simply said she was going away where no one would ever hear of her again. Naturally, I asked her why. What had happened? She told me that several things had happened but that she could not talk about them. Well—what kind of things? All that I could get her to tell me was that she had found out one thing about my life and another thing about her own life—and both these things made our marriage, or our love, impossible. And then, before I could ask about those things, she rushed on to tell me that she had two enemies—that one was a very powerful man in New York and that a lot of money had been passed on account of her—and the other was a woman who would stop at nothing to keep us apart—she would kill, if necessary. Who was the woman? I begged her to tell me. But she only shook her head. She told me she felt horrified at finding out about that powerful man in New York and the passing of the money on account of her—it sounds a little mad when I repeat it now, Mr. Colt, but those are the words she used. And she told me she had found out about all this on that very morning."

"Did she say what time?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"Right after breakfast, I think she told me."

"When did she leave you?"

"Oh, I think we talked for about half an hour. I tried to keep her there in the restaurant, but she said she had somewhere else to go, something to do. I offered to go with her. She got very excited and threatened to make a public scene if I tried to follow her. So I did not. But I begged her to see me again and finally she agreed to meet me at three o'clock in an Armenian restaurant on Twenty-second Street where we often had tea together. She would not kiss me good-bye, but sort of stamped out of the restaurant while I was paying the check. When I got out to the sidewalk she was gone. I looked all around that neighbourhood but could not find her. And, Mr. Colt—I never, never saw her again."

"Well, you go down to Police Headquarters this evening and take a look at her," said Thatcher Colt, a little grimly. "Ask for Inspector Flynn. And see me afterwards. By the way—did you keep that appointment at the Armenian restaurant?"

"I did. I stayed there from three to four and she did not show up."

"Then what did you do?"

"I walked home."

"From Twenty-second to One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good long walk."

"Yes, sir."

"Meet anybody you knew on that walk?"

"No, sir—not that I remember."

"At what time did you get home?"

"About half-past five or six o'clock."

"I see."

Colt stood up and looked keenly around the little room.

"Have you any letters from Madeline?"

"No, sir."

"Why is that?"

"I never keep letters, sir. I always destroy them."

"Well, thanks, Keplinger; you've been very helpful. I shall want to talk to you again later to-night. Will you be sure to come to Headquarters?"

"Certainly, sir."

He saw us to the door. We shook hands silently and left him.

### 3

In the elevator going down, Colt lit his pipe. We started across the lobby floor when suddenly the Commissioner halted and looked at the night porter answering a telephone call on the house switchboard.

The coloured man had just plugged in a call and we heard him say:

"Yes, Mr. Keplinger. I'll put the call right through."

Colt walked over and stood behind the uniformed coloured man. The negro plugged up another cord and in his soft, drawling voice demanded:

"Long distance, please."

Then he turned down his key, took the ear piece from his head and went back to his nine o'clock edition of the *New York Daily Mirror*. Colt touched him on the shoulder.

"Police officers," he said.

"Yes, suh."

The coloured man stood up with alacrity.

"You are to say nothing about this."

"No, suh. Abou' what?"

"I want you to fix it so that my partner can listen on one phone and I can listen on another to this long distance call."

The porter took off his cap and scratched his woolly head.

"Is you *shuah* you police?"

"You want me to prove it by locking you up?"

Colt and I displayed our shields.

"No, suh!"

There was a little office at the far end of the lobby and Colt took a chair there, at a desk listening in. I put the headpiece over my ears and sat at the switchboard. My notebook was before me and I made the following transcription of what I heard:

"Long distance... You want to call Detroit... Miss Josephine Keplinger—DeSoto 7-7575...and reverse the charges?..."

Just a moment please.... Do you want to make that a person to person call?... Who's calling, please?... Mr. Alfred Keplinger.... Just a moment, Mr. Keplinger."

There was a wait of about two minutes, then:

"Hallo, Mr. Keplinger, on that call to Detroit, we're ready."

"Hallo, Al. What's the matter?"

"Hallo, Jo. How are you?"

"I'm all right, but what's the trouble?"

"Jo, I'm in a jam."

"What now?"

"Well, I hardly know what to tell you. You see, I was afraid to let you know. I know how you want me to keep my mind on my studies and everything, but I just got crazy about a girl, that's all. I thought for a while I loved her, Jo, you can understand that, can't you?"

There was a long pause.

"Did you hear me, Jo?"

"Yes, I heard. Go on. What is her name?"

"Madeline Swift. She's dead, Jo."

"An abortion?"

"God, no. Nothing like that. She disappeared last spring. Right after we had a big quarrel. Now the police have found her. Somebody murdered her. They've been up here talking to me. It's terrible, Jo."

"Did you do it?"

"Oh, Jo, I've got to talk to you. I don't know what to do."

"What did you tell the police?"

"I didn't tell them everything. I didn't..."

"Don't tell them anything. I'm catching the first plane out of here for New York. Don't say another word to the police until I get there."

"Thanks, Jo. I knew I could count on you. Good-bye, Jo."

"Good-bye, Al."

The two receivers clicked and I turned down the key.

Thatcher Colt and I met in the centre of the lobby.

"Get Macklin at Headquarters," said Thatcher Colt.

I put through the call and a moment later the Commissioner talked:

"Hallo, Macklin. Send two men up here from the nearest station house for the arrest of Alfred Keplinger held as a material witness in the murder of Madeline Swift. And make it snappy!"

We now commandeered the switchboard and the blank-faced operator.

"Call Inspector Grew of the Detroit Police," was Colt's instruction.

Inspector Grew was one of Colt's old friends. He was a protégé of Heinrich A. Pickert, Detroit's famous Commissioner of Police, who has been a leader in lifting the standards of admission and promotion in the service. It was Pickert who introduced the Army Alpha intelligence test in the Detroit Police Department examinations; successful candidates must make a score of at least 175 out of a possible 200. Inspector Grew was one of his ablest assistants; a detective on whom Colt knew he could rely. There was some delay in finding Inspector Grew, but eventually we reached him at a patriotic rally being held that night in the General Motors Building.

"Hallo, Grew," greeted Thatcher Colt. "I need a job done out there in a hurry. Can you help me?"

"Oh, we're pretty good out here sometimes, too," jested the Inspector.

"Ever hear of a girl named Josephine Keplinger?"

"Can't say as I have. Does she have a police record?"

"I think not. She's a Detroit business woman and quite respectable."

"Shouldn't be hard to locate then. What do you want on her?"

"Anything you can get, but work under cover. I understand she's taking the first plane out of Detroit to-night for New York. I'd like her tailed out to the air field—an account of everybody she sees before leaving—all the material possible. But you needn't send a man on the plane with her—I'll have her checked at all landings en route."

"All right, Colt. I'm supposed to go on the platform here in a few minutes and make a pep talk and I'm glad to have an excuse not to make a speech. Shall I wire the report?"

"Better telephone me at Headquarters."

"In about two hours."

"Thanks, Grew."

Colt had hardly hung up the receiver when detectives Batchelder and Merrick entered the lobby—two portentous heavy-faced men, relics of an earlier day in the department, men who could never pass the Army Alpha test, but reliable in spite of their story-book appearance. To the shame of our department, let me confess they did look like house detectives from any second-rate hotel.

They saluted Colt and he gave them the number of Keplinger's apartment.

"Arrest him now," ordered Colt.

We waited in the lobby while the two detectives rode up in the elevator to carry out their order.

"Tell me, Chief," I asked, "why did you think it was necessary to make such a thorough investigation of Josephine Keplinger? She was in the hospital when this thing happened—and the way Keplinger sprung it on her, you could tell she was out of it."

Colt smiled as he went back to his endless pastime of filling his pipe.

"I did it just to cover all points," he explained. "There are no surface indications that would make me expect to find a feminine hand in this murder. But Madeline Swift did fear a woman. So we have to check all the ladies in this case."

"Yes," I assented, "but it was a pretty brutal crime."

"Women commit brutal crimes," Colt reminded me reprovingly, "especially unmarried women. According to the latest French official figures, married people are much less likely to kill than unmarried people. So you can feel easy in your mind, Tony—I think the American statistics would confirm that trend. Furthermore, the French figures prove that more men than women commit suicide after committing murder. In other words, women feel less remorse than men. Last year only two women in France committed suicide after committing murder, but eighteen men committed suicide after committing murder. The figures also prove that women plan murders more cleverly than men—and don't forget Tony—this looks like a fiendishly clever murder."

A shrill, excited voice from up in the elevator shaft startled us. Above the grinding whirr of the elevator cables, we heard Alfred Keplinger protesting frantically.

"You have no right to do this. Let me go, I tell you."

Then the elevator came into view behind the scrolled ironwork of the first floor cage, and we saw the slender figure of the young man, his bowler hat askew, struggling in the unyielding grasp of our two department stalwarts. As the elevator door clanged back, Keplinger caught sight of Colt and screamed out:

"You dirty cheat. You think you're smart, don't you? Let me get my hands on you and I'll show you what I think you are. I'll strangle you!"

Alfred Keplinger was in such a passion that he might really have tried to kill Colt if he could have got to him. The muscles of his face were distorted in paroxysms of rage. Inevitably the thought came to me—had Madeline Swift ever seen him like that? I could not get the thought out of my mind as I watched them drag him, still struggling, out to the department car and take him downtown to Headquarters. There he would be held until Colt was ready to question him again. The Commissioner looked at his watch.

"It's five-forty-five o'clock," he announced. "We have a lot of appointments at Headquarters to-night—but we still have time to take a look around in Alfred Keplinger's rooms. Come on, Tony—who knows what we will find?"

#### 4

Under the circumstances we had no right to search Alfred Keplinger's room, nor did the Police Commissioner break the law. Instead he waited while I telephoned for Judge Hamilton who issued a search warrant for us. Then and not until then did we go ahead.

We counted seventeen various coloured scarves in the middle drawer of Alfred Keplinger's dresser. We examined all of the drawers of dresser, chifforobe, closet; without significant discovery we handled all his wardrobe, three suits and a Tuxedo, fifteen shirts, two pairs of shoes, sixty cravats, bachelor-mended hose, underwear, hats—nothing that cast suspicion upon the medical student, his habits or his character, was turned up until the search was practically ended. Then Colt found it—found the first piece of evidence that was to cause real excitement in the case; the revolver hidden in a shoe.

Not a very original place to hide a revolver. Rather incredible, in a suspect's apartment. Yet there it was! Tucked away in the left of a pair of black shoes; well-worn ones, they were, that had been half-soled a long time ago. Why a revolver in an old shoe? Why a revolver at all in a medical student's room? If he was guilty, why hadn't he got rid of it? If he was innocent why did he have it at all? He could hardly have any one to be afraid of. It was a serious matter, in any case, this finding of a revolver in Alfred Keplinger's room. If the young man did not have a police permit, not easy to obtain in any case, he was a violator of the drastic New York State Sullivan Act; we would hold Keplinger on the concealed weapons charge while we worked on the murder evidence.

"There is no use ignoring one very certain fact," remarked Thatcher Colt, as he carefully extracted the revolver from the shoe, using a handkerchief, not to obliterate possible fingerprint marks. "Our ballistics department reported that the bullet in Madeline's head was a .32 calibre Smith and Wesson special. This revolver may not have fired the shot that killed Madeline, but one thing is certain—this is a .32 calibre Smith and Wesson special."

He looked around him thoughtfully; we heard the long, deep-throated baying of a subway express train as it raced up from under the earth and flung itself up the trestle to the tall platform of One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street.

"Noisy neighbourhood," I muttered.

"Yes," agreed Colt. "The same thought was in my mind. If a pistol shot were fired in this room while one of those trains were passing, the one noise would kill the other. Wrap that gun up carefully and send it downtown for latent prints. Let's search the bathroom next."

"Just a moment, Chief. Our young friend has been writing poetry. I found this slip in the back of a book open on the desk

—one line reads 'the motionless sweet dead.'"

"That is a quotation from Dante. I wonder when Alfred wrote it. No date?"

"No, but it does sort of show a state of mind, doesn't it?"

"It does. Any more lying around?"

"There's another line that sounds like a quotation—"The sacred ship from Delos comes."'

"I recognise the reference—the boat for the body of Socrates, wasn't it——"

"Look, Chief!" I called, leaping back.

I interrupted the Commissioner thus excitedly to point out a new discovery. Just to be thorough, I had touched a knosp, a bud-like ornament on the side of Alfred Keplinger's desk, and this simple movement of mine had opened what the desk builder had naively considered a secret drawer. Papers bulged in that recess in the side of the desk, and as I drew them out into the lamp-light we saw that they were letters—evidently Keplinger did not destroy all his letters—these were in their slitted envelopes, all in the same handwriting and all postmarked Detroit. I made a package of the forty-seven letters—it was my duty to count them there and then—and later Colt would assign some one to read them, some one fully acquainted with the progress of our investigations to date.

Letters and a revolver—a good haul. But still not as much as was waiting for us to find. In the bathroom, Thatcher Colt made two discoveries, at least one of which was to prove of major importance.

The first discovery was of a leather case. It was a dissecting kit—a medical student's most prized possession, one that he would, of course, always have near him. It was filled with sharp and murderous-looking implements—a couple of scalpels, different sized mouse-tooth forceps, a pair of plain forceps, some retractors, two or three different sized scissors, a blunt dissector, a grooved director (a device for the knife to follow) and a couple of bone instruments—a saw and a heavy bone cutter.

The second discovery was of old stains on the floor—stains that might have been, and which Colt even then believed, were actually made by human blood.

Of course there was nothing remarkable in the fact that a medical student had sharp-bladed instruments on his premises. One of the things medical students must do perforce, if they ever hope to be doctors, is to cut up dead bodies. And the fact that Madeline Swift's body had been dismembered—and skilfully so—could be merely a coincidence. Many a good case has been spoiled by jumping to too obvious conclusions.

On the other hand, those stains could hardly be an accident. If they were blood, Alfred Keplinger would have a real problem to explain away. They were not the kind of stains one could dismiss with the story of a cut finger. Here were great dark blotches—under the tub and against the baseboard behind the tub. Colt found them with the pencil flashlamp always in his pocket. He lay flat on the bathroom floor, having first spread a crash bath towel, while he looked under the tub and studied those splotches. There is something idiocratic about blood and the way it leaves its dark stains. There is nothing quite so definitely and persistently itself as blood. Looking at those dark old patterns on the floor boards under the tub, Colt felt sure it was blood that he saw, human blood spilled there in the commission of the crime. I could almost read his mind as he added up the problem: motive, jealousy; weapon, revolver; opportunity, the noisy passage of subway express trains that here rise from the depths of the earth high into the sky; disposition of the body——

Aye, there was the rub, for the moment at least. Supposing that Alfred Keplinger had the force—which Colt resolutely doubted from the first—the audacity, to do that killing job in this apartment—then what? How did he get the body out? How did the body in the apartment become a box of bones at the bottom of the sea?

This was Thatcher Colt's natural train of thought; the next moment he was busy at the telephone, calling the night operator up to the apartment. The darky, whose eyes had bulged at the sight of Keplinger's arrest, stammered a greeting; he was ready to squeal and run. "How long have you been on this job?" began Colt, ordering the negro inside.

"Bout two yeahs."

"I want you to think clearly now—this is important."

"Yas, suh! I think it's cleahly impohtant."

"Did Mr. Keplinger ever keep a box in his apartment—a cedar chest?"

"Not that I knows of, suh. No, suh."

"Would you be likely to know about it, if he did?"

"Yas, suh."

"How?"

"All his fuhnituh belongs to tha company!"

"Furnished apartments."

"Yas, suh! And they's all fuhnsihed just the same. If one of them was diffuhent it would shuah stahtle me."

"I see. There are no apartments in this house furnished with cedar chests?"

"No, suh."

Colt turned to me with a look of perplexity.

"It might upset a pretty little theory—and then on the other hand it might not. Look here! What's your name?"

"Ma name's Richman—Joseph Gans Richman."

"Well, Joseph, you realise you're testifying in a murder case?"

"Yes, suh! No, suh. Who did what?"

"Never mind—you've got to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—do you realise that?"

"Yas, suh, I must, yas, suh."

"Was there any kind of box—or trunk—anything big enough to keep a body in——"

"No, suh!"

"Wait a minute. Did Mr. Keplinger ever have a box like that—and get rid of it?"

"No, suh."

"You're sure?"

"I think I'm suah! He neveh got rid of anything that I knows anything about—not except them suitcases."

"Suitcases. What suitcases?"

"Two suitcases he tol' me somebody stole out of his apartment."

"When was that? Get all this down in your notebook, Tony."

"About half a yeah ago, I think. I'm shuah the lady took 'em though. So was Mr. Keplingah. He said she could keep 'em and he neveh did nothing about it 'cause she was a friend of his."

"Know her name?"

"No, suh. But she come to see Mr. Keplingah two oh three, I don't know how many, times. She come heah one day and Mr. Keplingah was out. I took huh up in the elevatoh. I didn't see huh leave but that wasn't nothin' because she might walk down while I was runnin' the cah up—you see? Mr. Keplingah come down that night and said his suitcases was gone. I tol' him about the lady then and he tol' me to fohtet it and not to say anything to anybody."

Alfred Keplinger had spoken truly when he whispered to his sister that he had not told the police all he knew!

"You don't remember the date?"

"Not exactly. But it had to be the fuhst of the month because I remembah giving Mr. Keplingah his rent bill when we talked about the suitcases."

Colt nodded thoughtfully.

"I see. I see. Tony, telephone Flynn to send an officer up here to take charge of this apartment, rip up the floor of the bathroom and have those stains analysed in our laboratory."

"Is anothah thing I think I ought to tell yuh," interrupted the goggle-eyed Joseph Gans Richman. "Is a lady lived next door to Mr. Keplingah. That same day she tol' me she thought she heahed a shot fihed in the next apahtment."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know, suh. She died a month or two ago—I don't know whah she is 'cause huh daughteh come and got the body and buhned it up and let the wind blow the ashes away and I don't know."

But the dead lady had heard a shot. We would remember that. Meanwhile, I had Flynn on the telephone. He had one startling piece of news:

"Norris and Blume have just reported from the Bronx. Nellie Schwartz is missing. She got out of town this afternoon, bag and baggage, and left no forwarding address. A strange man was with her. And, Mr. Abbot—she told her next door neighbour she was scared at something that had happened—and she was running to save her life!"

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## *Chapter Three*

### **BRING IN VERA AND NELLIE**

Again we were back in Centre Street. It was snowing, a new wind out of the Adirondacks blew down on us a blow as cold as the Alpine mistral, and millions of tiny flakes were fluttering outside the broad window of Thatcher Colt's private office. Only the green-shaded desk lamp was lit in that high-ceilinged room.

Together we sat there, Colt, Flynn and I, checking on our various activities. Things were moving, but not fast enough to satisfy the Commissioner. He was especially anxious to talk with detectives Norris and Blume, who had telephoned in from the Bronx about the vanishing Nellie Schwartz. The two detectives had reported they were on their way to Centre Street for a personal report to the Commissioner. That telephone call had been around five-thirty; now it was after seven o'clock and we had still heard nothing from Norris and Blume.

Meanwhile in the ballistics department two experts were at work upon the gun found in the apartment of Alfred Keplinger. They would fire test bullets from that gun into bags of sand. Then the flattened piece of lead would be examined in what was called a comparison scope, a twin-lensed magnifier with an automatic focus through which the officers would regard their test bullet and one other—the one, of course, from the cranium of the murdered girl. If both bullets came from the Keplinger gun, we would already be on the way to making a case.

Flynn had a report from Bethlehem on the Duckworth Institute. No one there had ever heard of Madeline Swift. Last spring they had been considering applications for the position of dancing teacher at a projected summer school. But the idea of the school was dropped, all correspondence about it thrown away; the Duckworth people could not help us.

"By the way," continued Flynn, "Mr. Fitch called up a couple of times. He said you had promised him he could help in the investigation."

Colt smiled.

"What time is Professor Gilman coming in?"

"We had to put Gilman last, Chief—he and his friends, the Lynns, have a spiritualistic church service to-night in Rochambeau Hall. But he will get here right after the service. Just think of it—we arrested the Lynns, we found the gauze fakes—and now they are back at the same old stand—martyrs!"

And Flynn indignantly crossed himself as he laid before the Commissioner the special report on the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn and wife; Colt put it under the head of Homer, to be read before he left the office.

"That means we can look for Gilman around ten o'clock? Very well. One thing is positive—we will never complete the picture in this investigation until we explain how Professor Gilman and his pair of precious wonder workers knew so much about this murder before we did. There's something tricky there—and Mr. Fitch says he knows some of those tricks. Let him come down here a little before ten."

"Will do, Chief."

"The stained boards found under the tub are being analysed?"

"At the city Laboratories—they opened up special for it over at Bellevue—Sunday night, you know."

"One thing more, Flynn."

"Yes, sir?"

Colt hesitated, his boot on the radiator, as he looked down upon the snow-drifted gulch of Centre Street. Unaware that I was watching him, his hand went up to his wounded shoulder; it was beginning to throb.

"It's only a hunch—but there's one figure in this case I haven't done anything about. I will get the other daughter in here all right—but what about her father, Verne Adams? Where is he, I wonder? Verne Adams, a villain by all accounts, a dope racketeer—but romantic enough to run off to Japan with Beulah! A man capable of direct and dangerous action, you

see. He lost his wife and child. What has he been doing since?"

"We'll just find out," chuckled Flynn, with a sage look at the chief. "Leave it to me."

"Will do!" jested Colt, imitating Flynn and coming back from the window to his desk. "Now, Tony, where are those forty-seven letters we found in the desk of Keplinger—Oh, there they are. I glanced through them, Flynn, on our way down here. They are all from the boy's sister, Josephine. Turn those over for a very careful reading—let Detective Dorothy Lox do that. Give her a brief account of the case and then turn her loose."

"Dot's a whizz," agreed Flynn, proud, because he was the discoverer of this clever detective woman.

"Further," reported the Assistant Chief Inspector, "I have been working on the sister angle."

"Verna?"

"Yes, sir. I got hold of the home address of the owner of that millinery shop where she worked at and sent Charlton and Chase up to talk with her. Verna Adams is a queer sort of person; she's in a rest home now."

The telephone bell tinkled then; it was not the Detroit police, but the New York District Attorney asking for Colt. Dougherty's voice, booming at the other receiver, made it easy to hear both sides of the conversation:

"Hallo, Thatch?"

"Yes, Dougherty."

"What are you trying to pull off, Thatch?"

"I don't know—what?"

"You've got a regiment of witnesses down in your office right this minute on the Madeline Swift case."

"Only a corporal's guard, really, Dougherty."

"Why wouldn't you ask me over? You're not sore because I said a good word for O'Toole—there wasn't any harm in what I said, Thatch."

"I know that. By the way—I may have some news about your friend."

"O'Toole?"

"Better come over and have a sandwich with Tony and me," invited Colt and, without waiting for an answer, hung up the receiver. At the same time Captain Henry came in and saluted:

"Pardon, Mr. Commissioner—Mr. and Mrs. Swift are waiting outside. They said you told them to come back here about this time."

"That's right. Send them in."

Like pale shadows of themselves, Beulah and Nickerson Swift came into the private office; Beulah pale, red-nosed somnambulistic in her gray coat with the fox-fur collar and Nickerson drooping all over in his greatcoat of woollen plaid. Flynn and I got them out of their wraps and into chairs, although Colt told us before they entered that the present inquiry would be very brief.

"You have positively identified the remains?" was his first question addressed to the father.

"That's Madeline, all right."

Beulah's face quivered; her eyes seemed smoky from some volcanic inner combustion; her long thin hands played with a

brown purse of alligator skin.

"Now, Mrs. Swift—weren't you and your husband terribly worried when such a long time passed with no word from Madeline?"

"Of course."

"You discussed it often?"

"Well, after we wrote down to Bethlehem and then Verna inquired around of Madeline's friends—then we didn't know what to think. My husband said he guessed Madeline didn't go where she thought she was going, and that she just wanted to keep us guessing."

"Didn't her going away surprise you?"

"Yes and no. I told you she had done a thing like that once before."

"Yes, and I want to ask you where did she go, that other time she ran away?"

"Same town—Bethlehem. She worked in a shop there for some months. When she got tired she came home, that time."

"While she was missing that first time, did you ask the police to find her?"

"No, sir. You see—after the first few weeks, she wrote us—from Philadelphia, but never telling us what town she worked in."

"And you thought something of the same kind was going on this second time?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Even so, you worried?"

"There hasn't been a day since Madeline was born that I haven't been worried. I was always afraid she would get into some kind of terrible trouble."

"Now, Mr. Swift, I have information that on the morning of the last day your daughter is known to have been alive—that about eleven o'clock that morning Madeline Swift was at the Waldorf-Astoria."

"The Waldorf-Astoria," repeated Old Nick quietly.

"Yes. She telephoned Alfred Keplinger from there. Have you any idea what she was doing at the Waldorf?"

The father shook his head as if to get rid of an invisible fly. "I don't remember that."

"She didn't work there?"

"Oh, no!"

"Know anybody who lived there?"

"She might. But not that I know of. Wait a minute. I am beginning to remember something about that now—it all comes back to me. I was too angry to pay much attention to it at the time. You see, Madeline and I were having our little disagreement. You will find me frank and honest all the way. The telephone rang and the maid we had then answered it. It was some female voice—I could hear that much across the room—and it was for Madeline. I can't remember much of what was said; it seemed to me as if Madeline was purposely making her talk vague so I wouldn't catch on; she was always doing things like that to me; always, always——"

"What's the call got to do with the Waldorf?" cut in Thatcher Colt, acid in his tone.

"Everything. I don't remember much of what was said. But I do remember that Madeline agreed she would meet whoever was calling at the Waldorf at eleven o'clock. And soon after that she left the house——"

"While you were steaming your cold?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Swift! Haven't you—or your wife—any idea who that woman was, or might have been—the woman who called on the telephone?"

Nickerson Swift shook his head. Mrs. Nickerson Swift shook *her* head. They looked at the floor and with set jaws declared they had no idea who the woman could be.

"Now, about your daughter Verna," pursued Thatcher Colt. "Just how serious is the illness that put her in a sanatorium?"

Beulah Swift looked up hastily.

"Not serious. Verna is a perfectly normal person, if that is what you mean. But of late she has been suffering from insomnia and so she is taking a cure."

"How long has she been away?"

"About a month."

"And where is this sanatorium?"

"Waynesville, New York."

Colt nodded; he knew the place, one of the most famous in the East.

"I won't have to trouble you much longer," he promised. "But please tell me—have you ever suspected that Verna's illness might be due to a secret love affair?"

"Nonsense!" declared Swift, and his wife nodded confirmation.

"I am sure there is no man in Verna's life," declared Beulah. "She is not that type at all."

Colt preferred to judge that for himself. In fact, as soon as Captain Henry had led mother and father out of the office, Colt sent me for Dorothy Lox. The young detective woman had gone a long way in the department since the murder of Lola Carewe, on which she had worked with Colt and me; now Dorothy was one of the most trusted operatives on Colt's personal staff. As rapidly and succinctly as possible, he told Dorothy what had happened, and with Josephine Keplinger's letters in her brief case, the girl detective was rushed off in a department car, through the Holland tube and up to Hoboken where she caught a train then and there for Waynesville. Her one instruction was to "Bring in Verna Swift."

### 3

When I returned, I found Dougherty had arrived and Flynn had gone; the Commissioner had ordered a choice dinner for three served in the office, and now the obese, red-faced District Attorney was harkening like a child as Colt, delighted with such an audience, recounted our day's adventures.

"You've made marvellous progress," boomed the District Attorney. "If it isn't in the bag to-night, it will be before morning. I predict it."

"I don't agree," said Colt simply.

"But why, Thatch——"

"Because with all the suspects before us, I haven't seen a good case forming against any one of them so far. And there are discords—mysteries—nothing fits yet!"

Dougherty grunted and shook his head.

"Thatch," he said, waggling a red forefinger before his nose, "you're just being cagey. I know you. You've already got a theory."

"Not a theory, really——"

"The beginning of one, then. And this time, Thatch, you've got to let me in on it. You can't freeze me out."

"You mustn't freeze yourself out."

"All right. I won't freeze myself out—not this time. Who was it? Who killed Madeline Swift—in your mind, up to this point?"

"I have no one in mind. I only eliminate suspects, so far—Like a sculptor, I cut away so much marble and hope that a statue remains."

"Was it the boy, Thatch?"

"He's certainly not eliminated."

"Where is young Keplinger now?"

"Downstairs. Three detectives are working on him."

"I see. How about the girl's father?"

"I can't say he's out of it either."

"You mean that—on the level?"

"Yes. I hope he didn't—but I've got to follow him through."

"But, Thatch—why? He had no motive——"

"He could have several."

"Yes. I suppose he could at that. What about the mother?"

"I have not eliminated her either."

"You think she could have had a motive? Such as——?"

"To release her daughter from persecution."

"But—she could send the girl away. She didn't have to kill her."

"Madeline perhaps wouldn't go away again. Probably the only reason she ever stayed on in that household or returned to it was to stand by her mother."

"But why the box—the water——?"

"When women kill they don't always follow the prevailing mode—fashion seems to matter to them in everything else except murder. Why don't you ask me about some others?"

"Who, for instance?"

"Well—there's your Tammany friend——"

"O'Toole? He's no murderer!"

"Who ever is—until he is?"

"You can't pin this thing on O'Toole, Thatch. It's ridiculous."

"Nevertheless, I shall want to talk with O'Toole, too."

"He will be glad to talk to you."

"I've asked him to see me to-night."

"Where?"

"Right here."

"Listen, Thatch—will you do me a favour? Will you let me be here when you talk to O'Toole?"

"Why not?"

"Well—I know you don't especially admire O'Toole, or men of his stamp. And I realise if you landed him on a charge that you could make stick, it would be a big feather in your cap—you could even be Mayor."

"Not interested!"

"I know. I'm sorry. But the fact is, Thatch—O'Toole has never been in any trouble in his life—police trouble, I mean. What I am trying to say is that in spite of his being a politician, he's a regular guy."

Colt grinned.

"Probably good to his mother," he japed. "You talk as if you were protecting a schoolgirl instead of a contract-grabbing Tammany politician."

"But they are the most sentimental fellows in the world," argued Dougherty innocently. "Look at me."

Colt was looking at him and laughing.

"Very well," he promised. "Stay with us and watch the fun."

"Thanks, Thatch!"

A waiter from Pearl Street arrived then, and for a little while we tried to forget Madeline Swift. I called up my home and asked in vain for Betty; the maid informed me my wife had left with some friends for a dance; I knew who the friends were—Sandy Radcliffe would be the extra man; I hate young bond salesmen with curls and a sweep-you-off-your-feet air; I felt suddenly very gloomy as I returned for my share of the toasted chicken sandwiches and Jake Ruppert's beer. Colt was talking about the case of Dr. Laget, the poisoner, recently sent to the guillotine by the bitter testimony of his aged mother. It was another example of the hate that can grow in families. On this subject, Colt quoted extensively from the theories of his old friend, who died quite recently but was then alive, Sir E. R. Henry, Grand Commander of the Victorian Order, Knight Commander of the Bath, Civil Service in India, and who, while serving at Scotland Yard, founded the modern system of fingerprint detection.

"Sir Ernest has always argued," said Colt, "that the greatest mistake any of us can make is to close our eyes to any fact, just to bolster a pet theory. Every fact must be reckoned with—even the fact that a spirit medium finds out about murders. And that's one fact that still won't fit into our picture."

After that we discussed the approaching New Year's game in the Rose Bowl at Pasadena, and the prospects for the hockey games in Madison Square Garden. From this the talk went to burlesque shows and we argued the merits of the current spectacles on Fourteenth and Forty-second streets and agreed the two highways were not much different any more. Waxing sentimental, and shaking their heads over youth, Colt and Dougherty began to rhapsodise the burlesque stars of yesterday. They were all stars that I had never heard of and they seemed to run heavily to Watsons—the very mention of the two Watson sisters brought tears to Colt's eyes and a break to Dougherty's voice; and then there was a Watson called "Sliding Billy" and a favourite who called his chorus the beef trust. Too far back for me; I had never heard of Butch Cooper, Snuffy the Cabman, Al Reeves—the reminiscences of jokes, gags and bits of business flowed on and on, broken only by the ringing of the telephone.

Detroit was calling.

Detroit police:

"Josephine Keplinger is a department store sales executive here in Detroit. Works for the Blivin Jordan store and earns a salary of about \$150 a week. Every one who knows her says that her one great interest in life is to make something out of her brother and everybody who knows him says it can't be done. She doesn't want him to get married and about a year ago told some one in the store that she had heard her brother was engaged to marry some girl and she would stop at nothing to break it up.

"Josephine is not bad looking, but the consensus of opinion is that she was born without sex appeal and has never been able to imitate it. She's brisk, competent and bossy. One person I talked to described her as sort of starched-up all the time. She's what is known as a dirty blonde—sort of light brown hair, pale blue eyes, and wears steel-rimmed glasses with a black cord over her ear.

"They come from ordinary but decent people. Her father was a bricklayer and her mother was a Seventh-Day Adventist. They were both killed in the collapse of a grandstand at a picnic when Josephine was a child. For a while she and her brother were taken care of by neighbours. She went to work in the department store as a cash girl. But her promotion was rapid and she educated herself by attending night school. She kept her brother in public school and is now putting him through Columbia University Medical School.

"She's not remarkable in any other way that I can find. She has no men friends, lives at a Women's University Club here and is known as the most determined woman in Detroit. Once she sets out to do a thing, nothing can stop her. Employees in the Blivin Jordan store call her 'Ruthless Josephine.'"

"Great work, Grew, and thanks!" exclaimed Colt, taking the telephone for a moment. "Tell you one more detail I would like. Mind? On May first of this year Josephine Keplinger was supposed to be in a hospital. Would you just confirm that for me? Thanks, Grew—good-night."

Colt put down the telephone and looked from Dougherty to me with shining eyes.

"Well," he said, "that starts another ball spinning in the air—I begin to feel like a trained seal. Tony, I think we're ready now—send up Mr. Alfred Keplinger."

## 5

Alfred Keplinger came to us, fresh, or rather, wilted, from a three-hour third degree—a very short ordeal, as police practice goes. I know the third degree is a cruel institution. I cannot argue with its detractors on that point; I can only say that those in police work have not learned how to succeed without it in some cases. No one had struck Alfred Keplinger. Physical violence is used only on the lowest of criminals, creatures who respond to pain and to nothing else; sentimentalists to the contrary, there are such creatures in your work; we meet them every day. For men like Alfred Keplinger there is instead a mental third degree—long hours of questioning, without physical punishment of any kind. Keplinger was not denied food or water or attention to his bodily wants. Tales of such practices are generally lies. But all night long Keplinger would have to go on, listening to questions and giving answers. Often they would be questions that he had already answered, not once but several times. Everything he said would be taken down by stenographers, typed immediately and studied by relays of two or three detectives—fresh, vigorous, steamed-up men who would go after him with more questions when others had finished with him. Meanwhile every verifiable statement he made was being checked. Every contradiction, every variation in his testimony, was noticed and he was confronted with it, unsympathetically and sceptically. More, he was subjected to emotional attacks. Some of his inquisitors were bullies; others soft-spoken and friendly. All were there to trap him if they could. This I know and say was cruel—but it was necessary. Already Alfred Keplinger showed the strain of those last few hours, with their incessant barrage. The pale-faced, goggle-eyed young medical student stood before us, his hair tousled because he had run his hands through it so many times; he was tired out and listless and he looked at Thatcher Colt as a man might look at Death, after a long and painful illness.

"Sit down, Keplinger."

The student slumped into a chair.

"You've been telling my men lies."

The witness nodded listlessly.

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?"

"I want to see my sister."

"That's all right. So do I."

"She won't believe I did any murder."

"It doesn't matter whether she does, or whether she doesn't—if you are guilty."

"Is Josephine here?"

"No. She will be here to-morrow."

"Can I see her then?"

"Only if you tell the truth."

"Sure! I'll tell the truth."

"Well, did you see Madeline Swift a second time that day or didn't you?"

"I did not."

"But she did come to your apartment and took your suitcase."

"Yes—your men have been after me about that."

"You contradicted yourself on that, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't it a fact you're really in love with Verna?"

"Verna?"

"Don't quake. Nobody's going to hurt you. Why should the telephone operator up at your house make so many calls from you to Waynesville ... What's the matter?" Colt's voice was harsh. "Can't you explain all those expensive calls upstate?"

"I won't say anything."

"That's right. Mind your sister! That's what got you into all this, in the first place."

"It didn't!"

"Didn't you love Verna and not Madeline?"

"I won't answer you."

"Didn't you kill Madeline because you couldn't shake her off?"

"No—no—no, I didn't."

"Didn't you shoot her with a gun you hid in a shoe?"

"Gun in a shoe? Gun in a shoe? No!"

"Didn't you shoot her?"

"No!"

"In the head?"

"No—no!"

"Didn't you cut her body to pieces?"

"No—I did not."

"With your own dissecting tools didn't you cut up Madeline?"

"No—— Oh, God, let me alone! I want my sister! Josephine! Josephine!"

He started to cry. Colt looked at me and shrugged. We recognised the type. Keplinger the weakling was not breaking. He was simply escaping off into hysterics. It would be hours before he would be any good to us again. I led him away, while Colt arranged for another operative—Detective Gaxton—to meet the early morning plane from Detroit.

## 6

It was now well on its way to nine o'clock and still we had cleared away only the preliminaries of the night's work; Gray and Sherrill, the two detectives who had searched the Swift apartment, were waiting to report—and after that, as Thatcher Colt told Dougherty, the real work on the case would begin.

But before these detectives could be summoned, there were two other matters to which Thatcher Colt must attend. The first was a call over his private wire to the Plaza Hotel. It gave me a queer feeling to hear him ask for Florence Dunbar by her married name. And it gave me a feeling of sadness when I saw the disappointment drench his features, and to watch the hapless way in which he hung up. Clear across the office we had heard the clerk's reply; Madame Villafranca had telephoned the hotel to inform all callers she was spending the night in Long Island; she would return to the Plaza the next day around noon. But Colt seemed to put aside his feelings; he remained chipper enough while a department surgeon came and dressed his shoulder. When that was done, he sent for the waiting detectives.

Detectives Gray and Sherrill had not worked in vain, although their work had not turned up anything that could be called sensational. They had turned the Swift apartment upside-down in their efforts and had engaged in what was practically guerilla warfare with the bad-tempered grandfather, Knoxwell Swift. That old mascot maker had rolled himself after them, wherever they went; he had objected to every closet they unlocked, every drawer they pulled out, every box lid they lifted. Naturally they had to persevere, in spite of his choleric chaperonage; he told them he had his rights as the grandson of a voter and the grandfather of a voter. The coming of the olfactory classifier, the "bloodhound machine" as Colt had called it, had seemed to calm Grandfather Swift. He showed a child's interest in a new machine and as long as he could watch its operation he did not complain. He saw the clothes of his granddaughter Madeline laid against the mechanical nostrils of this singular invention, as much of a miracle to Gray and Sherrill as it was to their unwilling host. They heard the wheels in the box-head of the apparatus *whizz* and *whirr* as a record of that odour was tracked and tabulated; visibly before them was a mechanical approximation of a process alike in results, if not in method, to what happens in a bloodhound's nose when he first gets the scent.

Yet nothing was to come of all this mechanical hocus-pocus; perhaps nothing ever will; certainly the machine has not as yet been introduced into the New York Police Department. I record the facts here, not because this had any helpful results at all in solving the mystery of Madeline Swift, but to show how so many lines are put out, anything at all promising is tried, fire after fire lighted—which is the essence of true police detective work. Not all the channels Colt followed in this murder investigation led him where he wished to go; not even half of them proved to be worth the time spent upon them. But in contrast with the miraculous creatures of fiction, whose powers of observation are matched with uncanny psychic perceptions, which show them at least a part of the truth in advance of other men, the detectives of real life learn to try everything; to cover all angles, and, to quote Colt's only maxim, "to use patience, industry and perseverance"—they sometimes lead somewhere—sometimes not.

That is what Gray and Sherrill had been doing. They handled everything Madeline had owned; counted her skirts, frocks, stockings, all the wardrobe left behind. They picked up one fact about her after another, many quite useless, as it turned out. For instance, they learned of her idiosyncrasy of collecting withered gardenias from her friends; she put them in her

chiffrobe drawers to scent her underwear. Knowing that curious fact about Madeline Swift did not help us solve her mystery. But we could never foretell when such a small point might prove decisive. Colt's experience on the long trail of criminals, and Dougherty's courtroom history, both confirmed the wisdom of this old-fashioned practice. You get all the facts you can lay your hand on; and you keep on doing that until the case is broken. So Gray and Sherrill found some of Madeline's letters; they were from her friends and they got hold of some of those friends on the telephone, talked with them, established that two of them had letters written by Madeline to them on the morning of May first. Now there was a discovery! Good police work, too, Colt was quick to tell Gray and Sherrill, as he leaned forward, nursing his shoulder, his eyes gleaming.

"What did Madeline have to say in those letters?" he inquired.

"Oh, just chatter—gossip—and jokes—the sort of thing one girl will write another."

"No melancholia? Sadness? No heat of excitement?"

"No, Mr. Colt. We have copies of the letters here. You can see for yourself."

Colt read the transcripts hurriedly, then with a shake of his head, passed them to me for the records.

"Get anything else out of the apartment, boys?"

Detective Gray smiled.

"Yes, sir. Just wanted to clear away the unimportant first. We found this."

He held up a small, red leather notebook, its cover lettered with gold.

"That," said Detective Gray proudly, "is an address book."

"Madeline's?" blurted Dougherty, with a happy glance at Colt.

"Yes, Mr. Dougherty. It's Madeline's notebook, it is in her own handwriting and it has the names of most of her friends, anyway—if not all of them—and their telephone numbers."

Colt took the notebook, and Dougherty rose, waddled to the back of the Commissioner's chair and read with him the list of names.

"This will be very valuable," he said at length. "Tony, will you get them going on this upstairs, please?"

With Madeline Swift's address book in my hand, I went first for a checking up with Inspector Flynn, and then to the long room on the top floor of Headquarters; the floor under the rafters that is like the nerve centre of the entire police department. In all the hours since 1908, when the present building was opened, there has never been an hour when this long room has not been throbbing with activity. Its very atmosphere is charged with energy and excitement. This is the so-called "Telegraph Bureau," at that time under the command of Superintendent William Allan, a long-trained police Inspector, but the name of the bureau is a relic of bygone days and now out of date; the telegraph bureau is really the telephone exchange of the Police Department. Until recently all fifty operators were full-fledged patrolmen; now we have some women operators, the men relieved for patrol duty, as the force is now four thousand men short of its authorised strength—but formerly they were all practical cops assigned to switchboard duty; lads of experience, and plenty of it; they had pounded the sidewalks and knew what problems the men on patrol face in their tours of duty. At this hour, twelve operators were on duty before the plugs and lights and switch-keys; for the day tour, twenty others would take over the board at eight the next morning.

Supervising these twelve uniformed operators was Sergeant Keenan, to whom I took the list and explained what Colt wanted. Here was a column of names and addresses, and opposite them was the name of a detective, chosen by Flynn himself. Now I waited as Sergeant Keenan put through the first call:

"Hallo? Detective Sergeant Van Zant? This is Headquarters—Sergeant Keenan. Here is an assignment direct from the Commissioner's office. Find Faversham Cooke, of 49 East Forty-second Street, and get all he knows about a young girl called Madeline Swift."

He spelled out both names—"H for Harry" and so on, and then had them spelled back to him. While he was doing this, seven of the other twelve operators were putting through similar calls, all of which would end up with—"Report to Mr. Abbot at eight in the morning with all details you are able to get." Within twenty minutes a detective had been assigned to every man in Madeline Swift's address book.

When I returned to the Commissioner's suite, I sensed some kind of strain in the ether. Assistant Chief Inspector Flynn, whom I had seen only a few minutes before, was standing with Detective Sadler, assigned to the O'Toole angle of the case, in the centre of the office. Dougherty was slouched in the arm-chair to the right of Thatcher Colt's desk, in a posture of dejection. The Commissioner looked up at medium-sized, neutral-looking Sadler; a detective whose lack of any physical distinction made him invaluable; people never remembered him, once they had met him, or twice either; a human cypher with a cunning little brain.

"Sadler, you have been thorough but not quite thorough enough," observed Thatcher Colt. "You say here that O'Toole bought tickets for Europe—and then cancelled them. When?"

"Well, as I get it, Mr. Colt, it was like this. At four o'clock this afternoon, Mr. O'Toole called up a ticket office man at his home to make reservations for to sail to-night. Then he talked a lot on the telephone—once with you, Mr. Commissioner, as I get it, anyway and——"

"And several times with me—don't leave that part out," interposed Dougherty.

"Yes, sir. The furnace man who gave me all this dope did mention you, Mr. Dougherty."

"Go ahead, Sadler," urged Colt.

"Well, then, about six o'clock, Mr. O'Toole called back the shipping man and said never mind about the tickets, he wasn't going."

"Tickets? Has O'Toole a family?"

"He has a wife and daughter," supplied Dougherty. "Mrs. O'Toole was formerly Mrs. Harrigan of a team of singing comedians that used to be in the Follies—Harrigan and Cohen. Then Harrigan died, Mrs. Harrigan opened a restaurant, O'Toole accidentally took over the mortgage on her place, he stopped in and ate some roast beef, and now——"

"Now she's Mrs. O'Toole," snapped Colt. "Besides being one of the most sinister of all the fuglemen of Tammany Hall, what else does he do? Let's see!"

Colt perused the written report of Sadler with the deepest attention. It was quite a story; an Horatio Alger from peanuts to power companies sort of thing. O'Toole was not a criminal. He did not break laws; he got around them. He was in the politics business; the Mayor and the Governor, no matter how incorruptible, must do him his proper reverence. Men like O'Toole still flourish to-day in all American cities but they are gradually passing away. Their places are being taken by better educated men; Phi Beta capitalists, often enough; handsomer to see, much more scrupulous, but lacking in the picturesque. I have known many men like O'Toole; I could understand Dougherty's honest liking for his benefactor.

Colt was still reading Sadler's report; reading it as if to memorise its every detail, when Captain Henry came purposefully to Colt's side.

"Detectives Norris and Blume are outside," reported Henry. "They say they've got something awful hot, Mr. Commissioner."

"All right. Thanks, Sadler. You can go. Better stay, Flynn, and hear what's hot. Sit down, Tony—Dougherty, have another cigar. All right, Henry—send in Norris and Blume."

The story told by Norris and confirmed by Blume was strikingly odd. What they had told Flynn over the telephone, and which Flynn had relayed to us, was all true, but it was only the beginning of what had really happened. At five o'clock in the afternoon, so neighbours had told them, a man called at the two-family house on Nolan Avenue, the Bronx, asking for

Nellie Schwartz, the discharged serving maid of the Swift family. Nellie was alone in her furnished room, washing out her hair. The stranger had insisted on talking with Nellie in private; the landlady, who for Blume's two dollars disclosed all that she knew about it, had tried to listen but the fellow talked too low for her. Then he came out and waited in the lower hall; Nellie went into her room and five minutes later appeared, dressed and with a suitcase. It was then she told her landlady to go ahead and rent her room; she was leaving town; somebody might do something dreadful to her.

And here Detective Blume gave a short laugh and took up the report:

"But here was the funny thing, Mr. Commissioner. I asked the landlady what the man looked like—and did we get a break! We needed one, then, and we got one. The landlady said he had been there once before, about six or seven months ago. She described the man all right; he was heavy-set, bald-headed, with glasses, and, Mr. Colt, he had a cut over his right eye. I knew him by that—I was sure of it. That was Ziegler, a private detective in the Acme Investigation Agency; he used to work with me on the force out in Flatbush. You see, Ziegler is an amateur heavy-weight and I was there when he got hurt the other night at the New York Athletic Club. The rest of the description fitted him perfectly."

"Sounds like good work," said Colt, and Dougherty and Flynn exchanged nods.

"Oh, it was Ziegler all right. We proved it, later. The way Norris and I figured it out, somebody had an object in getting Nellie Schwartz out of town. So they got hold of the Acme Agency and they worked quick."

"So what did we do?" asked Norris, enthusiastically taking up the trail. "We put our heads together. Where were they likely to go? They were working fast, so we decided they would get to the nearest railroad station—One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street. So we spent some department expense money on a cab and beat it down there. And what do we see but a train pulling out, and a woman waving good-bye to a man on the platform—and the man was Ziegler!"

"Excellent!" said Colt. "Where was the train going to?"

"New Haven—with a dozen stops in between."

"So then?"

"So then," pursued Norris, "we kept out of Ziegler's sight and tailed him. He went down to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, entered the Naomi Hotel and sat down at a writing desk and began to write a report. We let him write it—then, Mr. Commissioner, we did something desperate. We walked up to Ziegler—at least I did, and began to talk with him. I got his attention, Blume snatched his reports from the desk and ran like hell; Ziegler after him; Blume got to the Lexington Avenue subway first and Ziegler lost him; I came down in a cab and here we are."

"Hmm!" said Colt. "We will be hearing from the Acme Agency—— Where are the reports?"

With a grin Blume passed them over; we all read them together. The confidential reports of the Acme Investigation Agency were typical of hundreds of special reports prepared daily by private operatives throughout the country. The first was a carbon of a report previously rendered:

### ***Special Report Number One***

New York Operating #40127 New York City Operator #0-1 reports:

In connection with above numbered matter, Manager H.A.D. introduced me to the principal who gave me a full account of the various transactions in connection therewith. After noting that Nellie Schwartz lived at 4819 Nolan Avenue, the Bronx, I was instructed to investigate the subject along lines suggested by Manager H.A.D. I am now leaving the office to investigate this matter.

### ***Special Report Number Two***

Continuing my investigation, I arrived at Nolan Avenue. I found that Nellie Schwartz was temporarily out of a job and at home. She stated that she had been discharged from the Swift household on the first of May last year after she had witnessed a violent quarrel between Nickerson Swift and his daughter Madeline. They had quarrelled over the subject of the principal. Nellie Schwartz had interfered in defence of Madeline Swift and had then been promptly

discharged. I gave Schwartz five dollars and instructed her to say nothing to any one; perhaps I would see her again some day. I discontinued at eleven o'clock.

Expenses:

Taxi-cab to Nolan Avenue	\$3.70
Cigars for janitor (three)	.15
Tip to chauffeur	.15
Ice cream for N. Schwartz	.30
Soda water for N. Schwartz	.40
Magazines for N. Schwartz ( <i>True Story, Ballyhoo</i> )	.40
Box of candy for N. Schwartz (Loft's Week-end Special)	.39
Retainer for N. Schwartz	5.00
Subway to office	.05
<hr/>	
Total	\$10.54

Then followed the report Ziegler had written only a few hours before:

***Special Report Number Three***

Resuming this investigation to-day after a conference with Manager H.A.D. and a telephone conversation with the principal, I returned to the address on Nolan Avenue and talked again with Nellie Schwartz. I suggested to her that she go on a little trip to which she willingly coincided. I gave her the expense money, took her to the railroad station, and sent her on her way.

Expenses:

Subway to Nolan Avenue	\$ .05
Flowers for N. Schwartz	1.10
Candy for N. Schwartz (Jumbo-sized gum drops)	.59
Taxi to 125th St. Station	1.80
Trip money	25.00
Tip to chauffeur	.20
Tip to Porter	.20
Newspaper and Pop-Eye book of comics for N. Schwartz	.28
Telephone to vacation place to be sure she got there safely (after 8.30 when cheaper rate is in)	.45
<hr/>	
Total	\$29.67

I discontinued at four p.m.

Colt pushed the papers back on his desk:

"Your orders still stand, Norris and Blume. Bring in Nellie Schwartz. I'll keep these papers."

The two men saluted and left the room.

"Who," asked Dougherty heavily, "do you suppose is the principal?"

Colt grinned wickedly.

"It is always a mistake to jump at conclusions," he returned lightly. "By the way, Flynn—here is an important assignment in this case. Send some one up to Columbia to get everything you can on the personal life of Alfred Keplinger. Talk to his friends, his professors, his enemies. I would like a report on that by to-morrow night."

"Will do. How about putting Butler on that?"

"One of the best men we've got—go right ahead."

"I think I can get him right now," and Inspector Flynn left the room. By so doing, he lost an experience which he regrets to this day—for on the way out he passed Daniel V. O'Toole coming in—and the interview that followed was to make history in the Police Department.

## 8

Dougherty had just lifted a red forefinger pontifically.

"It's beginning to clear up, this case is. Mark my words," he said, "the crime lies between the young one and the old one—Alfred Keplinger and Nickerson Swift."

"Good-evening, gentlemen."

A new voice—a husky, reassuring, confident voice; the tone of a man so accustomed to power that he seldom had to emphasise any word at all; the voice of Daniel V. O'Toole; of that same Daniel V. O'Toole who, so the newspapers politely said, "was high in the counsels of his party," the lawyer, the engineer, the baby-kisser, the cornerstone layer, the politician who gave winter shoes and summer ice cream cones to poor children, who had never held public office, whose pals were the tin-box men of the Seabury investigation, but who never was found with a tin-box of his own, or even a bank account that could not be explained away; suspected of everything but on whom nothing was ever pinned; the O'Toole called "Dan" by four presidents of the United States and by all the presidents of all the power-holding companies; the tall, pale man, pale with heart-trouble pallor, the silver-curled Irishman whose clothes were still cut in the fashion of the nineties; the O'Toole who, had we not been watching, could have entered the room without our hearing him, keeping noiseless by habit the turning of a knob, the hinge-swing of the door and the putting down of his own feet. It was a long, strong old hand that he held out and Colt shook it, vigorously. O'Toole laid his cane, with its gold head effigy of Cleveland, across Colt's wastebasket; he took off his long floppy overcoat of checked green woollen and laid that out like a snow-dampened corpse on Colt's long worktable, placed his brown derby hat beside it and sat down, pleasant and ready. He smiled and showed expensive imitation teeth.

"I appreciate more than I can say, my dear Colt, your letting me come here this evening. It showed the right spirit."

"What kind of spirit is that?" asked Colt calmly.

"Loyalty to our party, of course," explained O'Toole. "Let us look at this situation. Frankly. Man to man. A girl has been foully and wretchedly murdered—a most dreadful and shocking affair, really. Her killer must be found, of course. It happens, my dear Colt, and I am sorry to be obliged by the danger, the very real danger of the situation to speak frankly, man to man—it happens that I knew her father slightly. However incidentally, however innocently, nevertheless, so far as the public is concerned, should even that fact ever become public, then the public may say that of course the girl and I were linked together. Now, for myself, I don't care. My life has been an open book for people who know how to read it. Isn't that a fact, Dougherty? It is a fact, as you say, and all New York knows it. I can match my private life with that of any man about town—this town or any other town. If I were the only person to be considered, I would of course not be here this evening. I would not lift a finger to interfere—not a finger, my dear Colt, not a thumb. But I am not alone in this matter."

"It does not affect the investigation, of course, but there is my wife—an invalid, the victim of seventeen operations in Roosevelt Hospital. Then there is my girl, editor of her class paper in Smith College. Think of her—and my mother, too, my good old Irish mother, from the County Sligo, she is, and after a lifetime of hard work facing the other world very soon now, and proud that she has raised her boy to be the likes of Daniel V. O'Toole. Do you want to bring horror to that old angel's last days? My dear Colt, I don't mention our party—the spring elections coming on, all that hangs on those

elections, the necessity for a campaign where no more mud can be thrown—I don't press that point, of course; instead I appeal not to the faithful party supporter, not to the pride of the Mayor's appointments, I appeal not to the Police Commissioner, but to the human being behind all that, to the soul of old Thatch Colt, with a heart as big as St. Patrick's Cathedral. And I know I'm not appealing in vain."

With a sigh of distaste, Colt got to his feet. He wanted to get physically away from Daniel V. O'Toole, from the strong, white-haired O'Toole hands planted on the Commissioner's knees, and ruining the perfect creases in the Commissioner's trousers; away from the O'Toole breath blowing in his face, and the O'Toole superabundance of vitality.

"I am always sorry for wives, daughters and mothers," Colt said crisply. "But in all cases I have to follow the evidence, wherever it leads."

"But you have no evidence against me."

Colt turned, his left hand on his wounded right shoulder.

"Madeline Swift was killed on May first. Around noon on May first she was seen coming out of your house. You will have to explain that."

"I can't. I wasn't there. I was away fishing."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Then you have nothing to worry about?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I just don't want my name dragged into it. I thought I made that point clear."

Colt nodded thoughtfully and picked up some papers.

"I see. You're not worried at all. By the way. You are entitled, at the rates you are paying the Acme Agency, to get your reports on time. I am sorry you have not been frank with me."

"What do you mean, frank?"

"I mean that you're still concealing something. You have tried to interfere with the work of the police."

"I have not."

"Sorry, O'Toole, sorry I have to use the word—that's a lie!"

O'Toole's fist clenched.

"You call me a liar?"

"Of course I do. And you are. You found out from Dougherty that Madeline Swift was murdered. He did not mention you to me when I named the victim to him; he was discretion itself—he played dumb beautifully. You did not come to me first and tell me what you knew. You bought tickets for Europe and then cancelled your passage. That was fear. You engaged the services of the Acme Detective Agency, didn't you, before any one ever talked to you from the police department. Isn't that interference?"

"No. It is not interference. A man has a right to protect himself."

"You sent a vital witness out of town."

And Colt tossed the Ziegler papers down in front of O'Toole. At the mention of the agency name, the pale old man had turned paler. Now he looked with fright into Dougherty's bulging and startled blue eyes.

"You don't mean, Thatch——" began Dougherty, and then fell back, breathing heavily but saying no more; the District Attorney apparently had not been willing to believe until now that O'Toole was "the principal." O'Toole read the reports through; his hands trembled slightly. He crushed the papers between his palms and glared up at Colt.

"So you got this much, did you? Well, now, you've got to help me—more than ever."

"What are you asking me to do?" Colt asked crisply, as he began to pack his pipe, without looking at O'Toole or Dougherty or me.

"Again—the same thing—keep my name out of it."

"I can't promise it. You've got to tell me everything you know."

"Now, my dear Colt, do we have to go into all that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you lied—and this is a murder investigation."

"Suppose I don't answer."

"Then you won't, that's all."

"And what will you do?"

"Now, my dear O'Toole, do we have to go into all *that*?"

"You mean you'll try to force me in court——?"

"Why make that necessary? If you have nothing to hide——?"

"But, God damn it, I *have* something to hide," snarled O'Toole furiously.

"I think you can trust Mr. Colt," put in Dougherty with a despondent roll of his eyes.

"But why should I?"

"That's up to you," said Colt, curtly. "But if you have nothing further to say——"

He leaned over the desk, as he added:

"I have promised to meet the reporters and give them a statement."

With an energetic old man's awkwardness O'Toole scrambled to his feet.

"Don't bully me like that. You've got to listen to me—wait—wait, please, my dear Colt. You and I don't want any trouble with each other—and we can give each other plenty of trouble, can't we?"

Colt made no answer.

"Won't you sit down, old man—and listen to a straightforward story?"

Colt glanced disapprovingly at his wrist-watch, then even more disapprovingly at O'Toole.

"All right. I'll listen—for ten minutes."

The Commissioner sat down. O'Toole remained standing and launched into his story:

"The simple fact of the matter is, Mr. Colt, that I'm a victim of circumstances. I'm a home-loving man. I'm a family man. I don't chase around after any cuties. It's out of my line; it's bad business; it's bad politics; it's bad for the party. I repeat that my life is an open book, except for this one chapter, and I repeat again, that the chapter is an unfortunate thing and I'm a victim of circumstances. I never did any wrong to that girl. I never laid the weight of my little finger on her. But to hear

her father talk you'd think I was a beast. Well, now this is the straight of it, and if that poor girl could come back from her grave, if she ever gets one, she would bear me out. It was like this:

"My daughter, who is just about the same age as Madeline, was going to high school. She was seventeen years old and Madeline was eighteen. They both went to high school together and they liked each other, and Mary used to bring Madeline home. Many's the night she's slept at our house. Well, one Saturday morning five or six years ago the two girls wanted to go for a drive. They were curious about Montauk Point at the end of Long Island. That's a long drive and I didn't want them to take it by themselves—they were only kids—so I said I would take the day off and drive them down there. So I did.

"We started out about ten o'clock in the morning. I'm not a fast driver, my dear Colt. I always try to obey the law, and even out on the open roads, I don't go more than forty miles an hour. I remember that we sang songs all the way down. We had a picnic lunch that my wife put up for us and we sat down there by the lighthouse and looked at the water and ate our sandwiches and drank our coffee out of a thermos bottle. And after that we did some fishing, and it was dinner time when we decided to come home. We stopped at a roadhouse and had a good dinner—an Italian place, I remember—and along about nine o'clock we started home.

"I took a short cut and got off the main road. We were going along a dark stretch in a forest when we went over a bump and something happened to the car. After that it didn't go. I didn't know what the trouble was but really the crankshaft was broken. I tried to fix the car but couldn't. And I didn't know what to do. I waited a long time hoping another car would come along but not a car came by. I was afraid to walk to the next town for help and leave the girls there alone. And I wouldn't let either one of them go off by themselves. And Madeline said she was too tired to walk. So we were in what you may call a predicament. I think you will agree to that, my dear Colt.

"There we were, my daughter and Madeline and myself. Could anything be more trying?—or more respectable? I tried to make a joke of it and the girls were all for that. Except that Madeline was a little scared. She was a dreamy sort of girl. She had fancies, notions, the darkness terrified her. After a while she began to cry. And I tried to calm her down. Well, it's a hard story to tell, my dear Colt. When you come to tell it, it don't sound normal and yet it's the truth as God Almighty is my judge. I got her quieted down, and to be honest with you, I gave her a drink of whisky to quiet her. And I took one myself. My daughter, Mary, wouldn't take any.

"And finally I said—'We'll have to wait until morning and so let's try to go to sleep.' So I slumped there behind the wheel and I went to sleep, with the two girls in the back seat. It must have been a couple of hours later when I woke up and there were arms around my neck. They were Madeline's arms. And she was crying hysterically. And Mary was gone. Of course, I asked her where Mary was. Madeline said Mary got tired of waiting and decided to walk off by herself and wake up the first farmhouse she got to.

"I was furious at that and decided to walk after her and find her. Madeline screamed at that. She wouldn't be left alone and she wouldn't walk with me on the road. Then I found out something terrible. Madeline was tight. She had finished my whisky bottle while I was asleep. She was maudlin, hysterical drunk, ready to scream any minute. And she kept throwing her arms around me and begging me not to leave her. And I was worried sick about my daughter, Mary, walking alone along a dark road.

"Well, now, my dear Colt, that's all that happened. It was long after daybreak before I saw Mary again. She had lost her way, but a mail truck driver found her and brought her back just after sunrise. We rode to a garage and left word for them to fix our car and I hired another car to be driven home in.

"It was my idea to keep Madeline in bed at our house until she sobered up. But when I got back to our house, her father was already there. He saw the condition she was in and blamed me for it and when I told him what happened, he blamed me for something worse. Nothing would do for that old man than to take that poor girl to a doctor for an examination.

"I hate to say it, Mr. Colt—I wish I didn't have to say it—but maybe you think I killed that girl and so I will have to say it—and so I do say it—technically she wasn't a pure girl and the doctor told her father so. And her father blamed me for that. And Madeline had been drunk. She didn't remember what had happened. She couldn't remember anything of the whole night. And she wouldn't admit there had been anybody else before, though there had to be. And her father was ready to have me indicted for attacking his daughter. And that," cried O'Toole with a quaver in his voice, "that was why I signed that agreement."

"What agreement?" demanded Colt.

"I'll tell you what agreement. I signed an agreement. I paid Nickerson Swift money, so much every year until Madeline came of age, and that's the shadow that's been over me for the last three years."

"What did you pay Swift money for?"

"To keep him from having me arrested—from ruining me. Oh, it was all very legal. He put it up to me regardless of whether I was innocent, as I said, or not, although he pretended never to believe me for a moment, that, because of what happened, the known facts, and because the people at the garage had seen his daughter in that condition, her reputation would never be safe. He said he was a poor man and could not give her the advantages she needed and that it was up to me to pay for her education. And I paid—two thousand dollars a year, and the worst part of it was that Madeline herself never got a nickel of the money and never even knew until her last day alive that it was even being paid."

Colt sat up straighter.

"What makes you so sure of that?" he asked.

"Because Madeline told me."

"When?"

"The last day that any one saw her."

Colt flashed me a quick glance. So it was out. O'Toole was going to tell us of that last interview with Madeline Swift.

"Tell me about that last interview."

"Madeline came down to my house. She telephoned me first. She was crying over the telephone. She said she had to see me at once. She said she was horrified at what she had just found out. I was afraid to see her. I had had enough trouble over her. But she insisted that she would come anyway. It was very difficult for me. I was alone in the house. My wife had gone up to Northampton to visit our daughter at Smith College. I was getting ready to go off on a fishing trip. I decided not to be there when she came. But before I got my things together the doorbell rang. Madeline was in the vestibule. She had telephoned me from a drug store around the corner. She was so wild and so excited that she pushed right by as I opened the door and went into our parlour and she stood there in front of the mantelpiece. And she told me that all these years her father had been collecting money from me and she had not known it. But at last he had to tell her. You see, I made the last payment six months ago. I had a complete release from him. He agreed in that release never to trouble me again.

"But he wasn't satisfied. He was urging his daughter to begin action against me in her own name now that she was of age. The threat, he told her, would be enough. He had sprung all this on her that morning and they had quarrelled. She couldn't stand for it. She was high-minded about that. She was startled, horrified at what had been going on. She was terribly nervous. She said she had lots of trouble that I didn't know about. She said somebody was after her and wanted to kill her. She even said she heard noises in my house; I had to assure her I was alone in the house. Her purpose in seeing me was to tell me I need never worry one minute about her again. Poor child, she little knew. I calmed her down. She was giving up the boy she loved; she was going to kill herself. I told her to forget the whole matter, to go back to the boy, make it up to him and marry him. I got her out of the house as quickly as I could. She called a taxicab, and that is the last I ever saw of her.

"Now, there, my dear Colt, is my story. Maybe you don't believe it. I know that you found out that she was at my place and maybe you think I killed her so that she would never trouble me again. Maybe you think these old hands of mine held the gun that put a bullet through that girl's head, but whether you think it or not, you can't prove it. You've got no evidence. And until you do have that evidence I ask you to keep my name out of this for the sake of my wife and my child and my old Irish mother and my party. My party and yours. You may think I'm pulling sentimental stuff, but those things mean something to me. Well, my dear Colt, what do you say?"

The Commissioner leaned forward toward the wastebasket and carefully emptied the ashes and the dottle from his pipe. He put the pipe back in his pocket and stood up. He looked O'Toole squarely in the eyes. There was no indication whether he believed the story or not.

"I am glad to have your version of this ugly business," he said, his voice non-committal. "And I am sorry that you have found it necessary to send the Schwartz woman away. I will send for you when I need you. Good-evening, O'Toole."

Glaring straight ahead of him, without a glance even toward Dougherty, his political protégé, the party leader stalked out of the room. At a nod from Colt, I called in Flynn.

"Continue the tail, night and day, on O'Toole."

"Yes, sir."

Colt's face was very serious as Flynn went away. Turning to Dougherty, the Commissioner said:

"I would like to defer a discussion about O'Toole for the present, Dougherty."

The District Attorney sighed.

"All right, Thatch—I'm with you, whatever you say. But I want to go on record as saying I think that old man told the truth. Are you going to do anything more to-night?"

"I am, Dougherty. The time has come for us to get at a crucial problem in this case: How did the spirit medium know? Gilman is waiting out there, Tony. Send him in."

## 9

Not only Professor Gilman had been kept waiting by our recent interview, but also that ineffable and frustrated artist, Mr. Imro Acheson Fitch. The crime sculptor had come at Colt's special request to help us, with his knowledge of legerdemain and the mechanics of illusions, to crack the riddle of the spirit voices. From the first Colt had regarded this plan of the investigation as of prime importance—yet he had delayed action upon it until he could get it to himself.

The two men came into the private office together, although they did not know each other—the chemist, turned psychical research worker and the artist turned magician and assistant detective: the professor, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, tomato-skinned, and in much better command of himself; Mr. Fitch, limping, pale, with haunted, whimsical eyes, a shapeless old felt hat held lightly in his lean hands.

Colt promptly explained the situation to Professor Gilman:

"You realise that the police must proceed on the premise that there is nothing supernatural in this case. We have pinned those gauze fakes on the Lynns. That must show, even to you, that they are capable of fraud. I believe the spirit voices are fraud too—one kind or another. And Mr. Fitch is a magician—we look to him to aid us in explaining them."

Professor Gilman's lower lip protruded with a camel's disdain for all mundane things. He bowed shortly to Mr. Fitch, who nodded with elaborate politeness.

"There is no place in psychic research for a conjurer *as a conjurer*," declared Gilman in his high-pitched, nasal voice. "They have no experience or vision beyond their own narrow field. We, on the other hand, can learn all the tricks of their trade by reading a few books!"

Mr. Fitch laughed like an ill-mannered boy, but Professor Gilman did not look at him.

"Nevertheless, Colt, if you feel it is necessary to drag a professional sleight-of-hand artist into this affair, I can only say you have handled it your own way from the start and what can I do?"

"Exactly!" chortled Dougherty. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"Sit down, please—everybody," invited Thatcher Colt. "I wish to get a few facts straight with you, Professor, and then I want you to take us to the living quarters of the Lynns."

"All of you?" asked the startled Gilman. Colt nodded. Gilman shook his head and said:

"Very well, if you wish it that way. Now, please—what are the facts on which you want to be straightened out?"

"Do you happen to remember where you were on May first?"

"My wife was buried that day—I have forgotten the rest of it."

"Keep a diary?"

"Rough notes—yes."

"Will you refresh your memory, then——"

"I have. It did not do any good—the page for May first was blank."

Thatcher Colt did not pursue the point any further at that time. Instead, he went on to explain that he had asked two detectives to check on the career of Reverend Washington Irving Lynn and his wife.

"The reports reached me a little while ago; I haven't read them yet—I'll read them out loud now. Mind?"

Gilman declared that he would be delighted to hear the facts. Colt read:

"It is very hard to get much about these people. They have covered their tracks well. They have no close personal friends that we could find and they talk very little. We understand that he was formerly a song-leader for an evangelist. He found her praying on the sawdust trail. Later they were in vaudeville. They seem very devoted to each other. Can find no trace of their ever having been arrested before. Their fingerprints are not on file in Washington. But it is a fact that the woman has been a user of cocaine for some time."

Colt put down the report with a faint sigh and turned back to Gilman, who declared:

"It isn't true this woman is an addict—I am gradually tapering her off from the habit."

Colt picked up his inside telephone, called for Flynn and asked that the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn be brought to his office. Again he turned back to his old friend, Gilman, fixing him with a glance at once sombre and strong. Under that intense gaze, Gilman fidgeted and began to apologise:

"I would be terribly ashamed of not helping you," he pleaded. "I feel responsible for getting you into all this—and I wouldn't have bothered you, either, if I didn't feel it was a great test of our psychic researches. Mrs. Lynn has been promised another message in a dream she had. I talked to her only this morning. Another message about the murder of Madeline Swift."

Colt leaned forward. So did Dougherty, the smoke treacleing from his lips on both sides of his cigar. Colt's melancholy brown eyes, Dougherty's inflamed blue ones, seemed to eat into the flushing face of the scientist.

"Professor," demanded Colt, "how did you know her name?"

"How did I know the name of the murder victim?"

"Exactly," Colt's voice rasped. "There will not be a word published in the newspapers about this case until the morning editions. Who has talked to you?"

"Nobody."

"Then I am afraid, Gilman, you will have to give me a complete explanation."

"Thoroughly satisfying," echoed Dougherty, with a triumphant glance at me. Professor Gilman removed his double-lensed glasses and began to clean them with one of those pink little napkins given to customers by oculists; it was the first time I had ever seen one in actual use.

"But, Colt," protested Gilman in an injured tone, "I don't like your friend's attitude. I don't like your secretary's attitude. I don't like any of your attitudes."

"We can revise our attitudes later. Just now I want an answer to my question."

"But that is what I came here to give you."

"Before that question was ever asked?"

"Certainly."

"This is no time for metaphysics," declared Dougherty, giving me another glance.

"I am afraid you can't help yourself there," was the Professor's prim response. "This is a time for metaphysics, whether you like it or not."

"How did you know the name of Madeline Swift?" persisted Thatcher Colt.

And in return Professor Gilman answered:

"Madeline Swift herself told me her name—from the other side of the grave."

It was an awkward moment. An old-time policeman's impulse would be to shake up a sober witness who made such an answer. But Colt is a modern policeman, although he has a wholesome respect for some of the old-fashioned methods. Here was his friend, a boyhood chum, making an utterly fantastic statement; one too, that we knew he would stick to, for he was that kind of psychic researcher. Even a shaking-up in the back room of a police station, I felt convinced, would not have shaken Gilman's story. He believed it.

"Very well," said Colt, stifling the impatience in his voice, "tell me just how you met her—at another séance?"

"Yes. With Mrs. Lynn."

"When?"

"To-night. Not two hours ago I was talking, voice to voice, with the spirit of the murdered Madeline Swift."

"Where did this happen?"

"In Eva Lynn's apartment."

"Who else was there?"

"Just she, her husband and I."

"And what happened?"

"Well, the three of us sat around a table in their room—they only have one room in that house, a convertible living room and bedroom with folding bed—I have complete notes on everything for the Proceedings of the Boston Society for Psychic Research——"

"Later, Gilman. First I want to know just what happened at that séance."

"The three of us just sat and held hands and made a human circle—what they call the psychic chain——"

"Lights lowered?"

"Yes—but the room was not entirely dark."

"Go on."

"Eva began to breathe deeply as she always does just before she goes into a trance. Then she began to talk in a different voice. It was a sweet voice, but deeper, throatier, more like a contralto, do you see, instead of a soprano as Eva's is—she sings at the church services very beautifully—the same voice you heard here in this office——"

"The message?" snapped Colt.

"Yes. Well, I can give you its substance. I have my notes of course. I have not transcribed them: I use shorthand, of course, so they would be of no use to you——"

"Gilman," said Thatcher Colt, exasperated, "You don't seem to realise it but you are in danger of arrest this moment——"

"What for?"

"Accessory after the fact," groaned Colt. "You have information and are stalling——"

"No—forgive me."

"Then, for the last time, what was the message?"

Gilman swallowed audibly and complied:

"The contralto voice said: 'Thanks for finding my bones. Thanks for the man who made me over again. Thanks for what every one is doing. My name is Madeline Swift. I shall come again.' That was all, Mr. Colt."

"That was all!" boomed Dougherty. "That was plenty!"

Colt picked up his discarded pipe and lit it with lingering care. With a halo of fragrant smoke floating above him, he spoke at last, and a little crossly:

"Your spirit was damned well informed, Gilman—unless, as I believe, your medium knew it all along."

To my disbelief, the professor's solemn face was lighted up with a grin. "Why wouldn't the spirit know?" he countered. "After all, it's her own murder."

"Gilman," said Thatcher Colt, "it would be very easy to misunderstand your attitude. But knowing you as I do and not being entirely ignorant of the mental quirks of people who believe in the occult, I am trying my best to understand. I want to give you a break. For the present I am going to believe that something like this happened:

"In some undiscovered way and for some undiscovered purpose, some one who had guilty knowledge of this crime managed to get that information to Eva Allen Lynn. However that was done Eva Allen Lynn seems to have accepted it as from a miraculous or spiritual source. I think she got it all at once, but she has given it out piecemeal. Until to-day she held back the name of Swift although she must have known it all along. It is some kind of hide-and-seek game that her subconscious is playing with her belief in her own mediumistic powers—at least that is the most charitable view that I can take of it and I shall continue to accept that until my researches prove otherwise."

"But what about the dead girl's thanks for your own investigation?" countered Gilman.

"You knew about that," charged Colt, "didn't you?"

"Yes," Gilman had to admit. "I learned about it when I talked over the telephone with Inspector Flynn this afternoon."

"And you told Eva, didn't you?"

"Naturally."

"Naturally indeed. There is no miracle in the medium knowing what the police have done—except that Flynn should have been more discreet."

Dougherty blew his nose with a snort. He looked very uncomfortable. Plainly he felt that Colt's reasonings were too far-fetched, too metaphysical.

He struck the desk with a beet-red fist.

"Those mediums need attention this minute," he shouted. "And as for you, Professor Gilman——"

"Exactly," interceded Colt. "There is a great deal here to disturb the authorities, Professor."

"I should think," returned Gilman, not without dignity, "that the authorities would rejoice at the presence in New York of a medium whose power is so great that she can call back murder victims and get evidence."

"What evidence?" snapped Colt.

"Was not the location of the remains your first knowledge of all this?"

"You're damned tooting it was," cut in Dougherty.

"Well, isn't that evidence? And this name I just gave you——"

"That's just it!" Colt stood up fretfully, and puffed on his pipe until a cloud spurted from his mouth. "There were no spirit messages, Gilman."

"No spirit message! That's easy to say—but how do you explain——"

"I don't—yet. I only know there was no ghost. Behind this crazy story of yours is the truth."

"God's eternal truth," murmured the professor with a solemn jiggle of his watery eyes.

"God's and man's," amended Colt sternly. "No ghost—but a human being—and a clever one. Clever enough to control that séance—and not even be there."

"True!" mumbled Dougherty. "The Lynns may be only tools—but they are guilty tools——"

"They are not guilty, no matter what you say," cried Gilman, leaping to his feet.

"Too clever," went on Colt, as if he had not heard the squabble. He clenched his fist in his perplexity and stood there, this erect and slender man, with the tanned face and the dark hair and the sombre brown eyes.

"Such speculations are natural, I suppose," mourned Gilman. "One has to expect them from a materialist. But why do you have to act like this? Why do you have to be so blind? You are in the presence of a miracle! I say it reverently—it is the greatest miracle since Our Lord rose from the dead. Back from the grave came this spirit! Think of it!"

"Think of it!" roared Dougherty, also getting up, thrusting his hands in his pockets and stamping his enormous foot. "Why in hell didn't she describe who killed her—if she came back?"

"Why don't you ask her?" challenged Gilman, also rising energetically. "That is the trouble with all you people. You go off on your finite tangents when you are confronted with the infinite. Why don't you ask us to help you?"

"I'd ask you to step into a cell!" cried Dougherty, losing his temper in the face of something he could not fathom or frighten. "You know too damned much not to know more."

"Wait, Dougherty," said Colt. His voice soothed the District Attorney; his eyes placated the professor.

"We've waited plenty," grumbled Dougherty and frumped himself back into his chair.

"There is good sense in what Gilman says, maybe. We can't ignore this development."

"Then what do you want to do, Thatch?"

"Try to understand it, that's all."

"How?"

A rap came to the door. They had sent down to us the man with the ape-like walk that called himself the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn. He came in with a good deal of self-assurance, smiled at Gilman and looked, a little defiantly, at Thatcher Colt. The Commissioner went after him first on the cocaine matter:

"Who put that girl on dope? Who did it, Lynn?"

The medium rubbed his throat nervously and gurgled.

"I didn't. I swear I didn't. I swear to Jesus I didn't."

"Who did then?"

"I don't know. She was on it when I found her——"

"Where?"

"Los Angeles—she was dancing on Broadway in a honky-tonk before she got religion."

Colt towered over the man.

"I want straight answers from you, Lynn——"

"Okay—I'll talk. But I don't know anything."

"Your wife said that a murder had been committed."

"Yes, sir."

"She said bones would be found in the water."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Come on! Where did you get that tip?"

"It was on the level——"

"Don't stall——"

"So help me God, it was. The spirits gave us that. Nobody else. It came straight from the dead. Don't look at me like that—you've *got* to believe me—I wouldn't kid about a thing like that—my God, I'm not a damn fool—I know what it means—but that's the way it was—you can beat me to death and I can't tell you no different——"

"Don't shout at me. I'm not deaf."

"No, sir."

"When did you get the first message?"

"Eva got it—about three weeks ago."

"Don't you know the date?"

"Yes—it was Thanksgiving Day."

"How did she get it?"

"I don't know that."

"What do you mean you don't know——"

"I mean—she wouldn't tell me."

Either Lynn was a superb actor or he was telling the truth. And the truth seemed too ridiculous to believe—as, in police work, it very often does; we all know that only too well.

"Well, she told you something——"

"She told me about the message while we were having breakfast. She said this message had come to her in the night. I asked her how. She said it was too sacred to tell, even to me. But for what it was, she said, there it was and we could take it or leave it. So I took it to Professor Gilman and he tried to get out of Eva how she got the message and she wouldn't tell him, either. Well, we didn't know whether to take it seriously or not. I was afraid of it. But the professor was very excited about it—and wanted to get the police to make a search. But he was afraid they wouldn't take it

seriously."

"And that's all you know about it?"

"That's all—so help me God."

"Where does your wife get her dope?"

The monkey eyes of the medium looked up, abject and terrified.

"I don't know the man's name," he lied. "I just meet him at a subway station and he passes it to me on the sly."

"When?"

"Every Thursday at four p.m."

"Where?"

"Twenty-third Street, uptown side."

Colt went to the desk telephone. He sent a message to the Narcotic Bureau; then he turned back to Lynn, who had risen to his feet and was fumbling with his tie.

"Do you use the stuff, too?"

"Never."

"You just buy it for that little girl of yours?"

"Only because——"

"Never mind. Is she your legal wife?"

"She is—I swear to God."

"Where do you live in New York?"

"At 2177 West Eighty-sixth Street."

"I see. Well, Lynn—I wouldn't worry about that little raid on your spook séance."

"No?"

"No. That's the least of your troubles. You are ripe for the Federal narcotic men right now—don't squirm, I'll protect you on that, too, for a while—until we find out more about this murder. Then you'll be facing the chair. So don't you want to confess—who gave you that tip?"

"My wife is on the level about this—I swear to God——"

"All right," cut in Colt. "I'm going to give you a chance to prove it. Your wife is still up at your rooming house. We're going up there. I want to take a look at that room."

"That's all right with me," said the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn.

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## *Chapter Four*

### THE THING THAT TALKED IN THE DARK

The house at 2177 West Eighty-sixth Street was once the private home of a remarkable woman, beautiful and greatly gifted as a novelist and musician. Her husband, a polo player, had induced her to live in England, and so the house had gone to seed; its flower boxes at the broad windows and the green trim on the stone façade, all were fading and peeling now—a rooming house where lived Eva Allen Lynn, the sybil who could see bones at the bottom of the ocean; this was the place of her abode, and with her, of the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn. And I remembered, as I always do in that street, that we were not far from the house where Ellwell, the bridge expert, was mysteriously slain; this whole region, once the dwelling places of prosperous families, was now made up of a few private mansions; the rest were rooming houses, masseuse parlours, gangster hangouts and all within pistol shot of the baby carriages of Riverside Drive.

A slattern landlady let us in. No, she had no maid to send upstairs to tell Mrs. Lynn she had visitors; no place for us to talk with her, either, if she did come; she was too tired even to yell up; she just waved us on our way up the staircase. Colt knocked on the door of a back room on the third floor, and at the same time the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn called out:

"Are you there, Eva? It's all right—but the police are here with me."

"All right, darling."

We heard the sound of light feet moving toward the door. Well, I thought to myself, they may be ghost-fakers, but they certainly are not getting rich at it. Why do they keep on? I suppose if one asked them, they would say, "This medium thing gets in your blood"—like aviators, actors and hog-callers. The door opened; and Eva, wrapped in a faded green dressing gown, stood back to let us in—a strange procession to come straggling into one miserable back room on the third floor of a West Side rooming house; too many people, in fact, for such an uncommodious room—there was Colt and I, and Dougherty, Professor Gilman and Mr. Fitch—not to mention the spiritualist minister and his eye-dilated wife who had opened to us and now shut the door, staring at us with undisguised anxiety.

The husband took her hand and pressed it while he invited Colt to sit in the one easy chair; Dougherty squatted on a steamer trunk and so did I, Professor Gilman stood beside Eva Lynn and Mr. Fitch sat down in a far corner and almost succeeded in disappearing; a remarkable optical illusion.

It was Professor Gilman who explained to Mrs. Lynn what we were there for.

"You see, Mr. Colt and these other gentlemen are all concerned with finding the criminal. Actually that is no legal concern of ours. But they have their own way of looking at it—the way of the sceptic, of course, the materialist.

"You, as a medium, say that you got a message from the dead. The police say that's absurd. They don't believe the dead send tips to the police. If they can trace that message, they think it will lead us straight to the murderer."

Eva Allen Lynn smiled wanly.

"That may be the way they look at it, Professor, but I would go at it entirely differently."

Colt smiled.

"That's all right, Gilman. Perhaps we'll both have a chance to try out methods before this case is over. Meanwhile, I would like to ask Mrs. Lynn a few questions. Won't you please sit down—this may take some time, you know. Mind?"

"Not at all."

So Eva Allen Lynn sat down in her rocking chair, and clasped her thin, wraith-like hands together and looked at Thatcher Colt with her burning black eyes. And we all sat very still, waiting for Colt to speak, and these were the strange thoughts that were dancing in my head:

"There is no use trying to shut our eyes to the importance of Eva Allen Lynn. She knew something—almost everything—beforehand. Yet I cannot believe she got her knowledge supernormally. Her innocence, her stupidity, have got to be real

—otherwise she would be a great actress. How in hell did she get the message then? Normally, of course. I do get the feeling that little Eva thinks she is telling us the truth. Her husband too!"

"Now, Mrs. Lynn," Colt began easily, "I want to know just a few little facts."

"Yes, sir."

"You do give private readings, don't you?"

"Yes, as often as I can."

"Do you give them here?"

"Sometimes—the landlady doesn't like it, though."

"Where else?"

"At the homes of my clients."

"Did you ever go to the Swift family apartment?"

"Swift? No, sir, I never did."

"Did any of them ever come here?"

"Not to my knowledge, Mr. Colt."

"Will you take a look at these pictures—now don't be nervous, my dear—just take them in your hands and study them."

Where had Colt procured those snapshots? Five of them—Alfred Keplinger, Madeline Swift, Beulah Swift, Nickerson Swift and Knoxwell Swift, beard, tassel-hat and all. Colt told me later he had obtained them while we were at the apartment in the afternoon. Now Eva, the medium, looked at them carefully, one by one, and shook her head—until the last one, over which she hesitated.

"I have never seen any of these people, Mr. Colt," she stated positively. "But this one's face looks familiar—I have never seen that woman before, yet I remember having seen somebody like her—for she looks familiar!"

It was Beulah Swift! Colt made little of it. He put away the snapshots and resumed:

"Now tell me more about those voices. The voices that you hear and that give you your messages—like the voice of poor Madeline."

Eva Allen Lynn swallowed hard, and she looked down at the floor.

"It's no use our talking about that. I know you don't believe it. You think it's all a fake. Just on account of those gauze pieces that the cops found, you think everything I do is a fake. It ain't though. I only use those things when my power is gone. People have got to live, you know. I'm not lying——"

"I don't believe you are!"

"How far do you trust me, Mr. Colt?"

"From start to finish."

"Go on! The part about hearing the voices outside of my head, too?"

"Yes."

"I could hardly believe it myself."

"I don't think I quite understand what you mean by that."

"I mean—of course, I've heard these voices all my life. I'm a born medium, not a cultivated one. There're very few like

me. Professor Gilman will tell you all about that. It's like being the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, only I'm rarer than that, even, because I am not the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter and still I've got more power than a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter has—much more, do you see?"

Colt nodded with serious assurance, and was about to speak, but Eva rushed on:

"Ever since I was a little girl I have heard these voices talking to me. There are all kinds of the voices and sometimes they all talk at once and then my head feels like a telephone board and I'm going loony if they don't stop. But that don't happen often. Most of the time it's just one voice, male or female, as the case may be, high or low, good or bad—and I just give out the message. That's normal with me, Mr. Colt, two or three times a day like anything else we have to do, not meaning any offence of course, but both are the laws of nature. That's my work every day. I do it and think nothing of it. Now, Mr. Colt, you don't find it hard to believe that, do you?"

"Not at all."

"Of course you don't. Because you're a fair-minded man, that's why. But these other guys you got on your force, these Boy Scouts they're so tough they won't listen when you try to give them the God's honest truth. I tried to tell them but would they listen? No! Not for a minute."

"Tell me now! I'm listening. We all are!"

"All right. I will tell you the truth. The times that I got the messages about Madeline and her bones, I heard the voices *outside* of my own head. Do you understand that, Mr. Colt?"

"I am beginning to believe I do."

"It was one of the few times I ever heard voices with my real ears—instead of the ears of my soul. I guess I don't make sense to you. But I know what I mean myself all right. One is a dream voice that you could imagine you hear. But this was so plain—so clear—it was real. It was as real as your voice."

"Where were you when you heard this voice?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"Right here in this room. Sitting in this very chair."

"Could it have come from the next room—or from downstairs—from anywhere outside of the room?"

"Never! It was right here in the room with me," insisted the medium.

"Who was here with you?"

"All those times I was alone."

Colt looked round him sceptically. In this plainly furnished and now over-populated furnished room such a story seemed impossible.

"At what time," he asked, "did these demonstrations occur?"

"They all happened around midnight, after I was in bed."

"Did they happen after you went to sleep?"

"No, sir. I wasn't dreaming."

"I didn't mean to suggest that you were. I meant did you wake up and then hear the voices?"

The medium shook her black-curled head decidedly.

"No, sir—it was just the other way—just before I was falling asleep."

"Lights out, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. The landlady gets sore if you burn the lights very late."

"Do you think it could have been possible for any one to come through your door and not be seen by you—or perhaps through the window?"

Again the medium shook her head and stole a triumphant smile at her husband.

"No, Mr. Colt. I am glad you're asking all these questions because the more you ask and the more truthfully I answer the sooner you will be convinced of the reality of the spirits. You see, Mr. Colt, it had to be spirits—it couldn't be anything else—because the door was locked—bolted—look at that bolt—I'm scared when I'm left alone—not of the dead but of the living—you never know what's right next door in a rooming house—so Irving put that bolt on for me when he is away nights playing poker—there wasn't any prowler coming through *that* door."

"And besides," argued the husband, "why should a prowler want to sneak in a girl's room just to play a ghost. That ain't human nature. Not with a pretty woman like my wife. And how would he know about the murder anyhow?"

At this question, the Reverend Washington Irving Lynn looked at his wife and she at him with the proud look of comrades in the right. Colt nodded solemnly. The spiritualist had asked a proper question.

"What about those two windows?" he asked.

"Look at them for yourself, Mr. Colt. Just see."

Colt and I looked at them for ourselves. They opened on an area of back yards; a sheer drop of three stories. Apparently no one could come in or get out that way. Colt fingered a wire at one side of the window and asked what it was but Eva explained:

"That's for our radio. It's out being fixed now."

Colt's eyes half closed.

"Did the voice you heard possibly sound like a voice coming through a radio?"

"No, sir. I don't think so. Besides, we didn't have a radio then. We had just moved in here, about a month before."

There was a silence, then, broken by Professor Gilman:

"Now, Colt, be reasonable. Mrs. Lynn has answered all your questions, frankly and fearlessly. Is your scepticism still unshaken—really?"

Colt nodded sombrely.

"I am afraid it is, Professor Gilman."

"You don't believe Mrs. Lynn's story?"

Colt shrugged.

"I am forced to believe it. First, because the information was correct. Second, because her very manner of telling it shows how she herself believes it."

"Then why are you sceptical?"

"Because the whole thing is too good to be true. Mrs. Lynn admits she seldom heard voices like this one before. All the rest were in her head. You psychologists may explain phenomena like voices inside the head in the way that seems most reasonable. But this voice was different. It was outside the head. She heard it as she hears our actual, material voices."

"But, Colt—don't you realise—many mediums get the direct voice."

Colt shrugged.

"But not with such precise data on crimes. This phenomenon comes into the police field. I am forced to believe that Mrs. Lynn—who has not hesitated to play a fraud on the public when her powers failed her—has either been defrauded herself this time, or else she has guilty knowledge of this crime."

"But——"

"Permit me, Professor. I want you to follow with me a simple line of reasoning. Notice this window. Notice this wire. It leads to a radio aerial. Notice this old spider's web down here in the corner. Now, it just happens that I know a little about spiders and their webs. This was made by a type of spider that spins its web only in summer, or else indoors. The web covers the wire on the sill. Ergo, the wire was here last summer—was in here before the Lynns ever occupied this room—before, as Mrs. Lynn said, they had bought their radio."

Professor Gilman glared and looked quite unimpressed behind his gleaming spectacles.

"I don't see what that proves, Colt."

"It doesn't prove anything. It merely opens up a possibility. Here is a wire leading to the roof. These roofs all connect; a man could walk from one end of the block to the other on the house tops."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"That we look a little further. If you would all step into the corridor outside, I would like to examine the room."

His manner was unhurried as he set about his task. As always, he was clocking out mentally the area of the room into definite sections. Then he would attack and overhaul whatever was in those sections, one after another until he had gone methodically and completely over all the space in the room. He began with the corner near the western of the two windows that looked to the north; the bed was there and he began by taking it slowly to pieces. It was a remarkable exhibition of care and patience, over what many might have considered a trivial matter. But Colt, I knew, considered it vital, and by the grim expression around his mouth and the corners of his eyes I knew he was resolved to get at the bottom of this phase of the case before he slept to-night. So he took up the pillows and pulled off the cheap pillow cases; he drew off the white cotton crinkle bedspread; the scroll-stitched, cotton-filled, pink-bordered sateen-covered comforter; the plain grey cotton double blankets; the white bleached cotton sheet; the one hundred per cent. cotton mattress. He gave the most careful examination to the springs and the metal skeleton of the bed. I helped him as he performed these tasks; helped him dismember the bed into its several parts and waited in the unbroken silence while he handled the head and the foot-pieces, and the long metal rods which fitted in between.

Although he found nothing at first, no discouragement showed in his brown eyes. Thatcher Colt was pursuing his favourite technique; not with any brilliant *tour de force*, but soberly, intently, with patience and perseverance and with industry he continued his search. So it went with the rug on the floor, the bureau of quartered golden oak, the closet, book-case, the one picture on the wall, a coloured lithograph of a wolf on a snowy mountain on a dark night.

All during the talk between Thatcher Colt and the mediums Mr. Fitch had sat perfectly still. He allowed himself to be put out into the hall near the others but he claimed, like a small boy watching a parade, a place in the front line, with an unobstructed view into the room. Every move that Colt made he watched intently. No word passed, because there was no need; between them was a previous understanding. Colt was to turn the place inside out and I was to help him and Mr. Fitch was to watch for any indication of trickery, any slight spoor of the fake spiritualist and his paraphernalia.

As it turned out, Mr. Fitch was of no service to us whatever. It was Thatcher Colt who found the secret of the direct voice—found it when he had ransacked the room from top to bottom without result—found it because of his faithfulness to his own methods; because he industriously and patiently persevered.

The bed was set up again; the mattress, the sheets, the blankets, the comforter, the bedspread, the pillows—all primly back in position; the emptied dresser drawers refilled; the frocks hung in the closet again; and the room generally restored to order.

Colt looked at Mr. Fitch inquiringly.

"I have seen nothing at all so far, Mr. Commissioner," the crime sculptor had to confess. "At first I felt sure when you told me what had happened that they had used what illusionists call the 'inductive method.' That would have meant that a circle of bell cord wire ten feet in diameter would be under the carpet and concealed wires running to another room over which the voice would come. Our only problem then would have been to find a receiver hidden somewhere in this room. But that theory hardly seems correct, does it?" he finished plaintively.

Colt permitted himself the luxury of a grin.

"You remind me," he said, "of the often-quoted blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. Only in this case there is a black cat here somewhere. I am satisfied that some one gave those spirit messages, spoke them into some kind of transmitting apparatus so that Mrs. Lynn actually heard them and attributed them to some kind of psychic origin."

"But why, Thatch," called Dougherty from the door, "why should any one want to do that?"

Now Colt's smile was at its mocking best.

"I wonder," he countered. "It would almost seem as if some person who had guilty knowledge wanted to let the police know and took this extraordinarily fantastic and elaborate means of doing so."

Dougherty shook his red face glumly.

"I don't get it at all," he mourned, "and besides, even if what you imagine is true, don't you think that the apparatus would have been removed long ago? How do you expect to find it here now?"

Colt nodded agreement.

"I'm relying," he explained, "on my belief that a trail would be left anyhow."

"But you must be wrong, Thatch, because you haven't found it."

"I haven't finished."

And with that Thatcher Colt walked over to the eastern wall of the room, the one toward Amsterdam Avenue rather than West End Avenue, and reaching high above his head, began tapping the walls. I asked him not to do it, to let me do it for him because it was a strain on his injured shoulder, but he swept me aside impatiently. His brown eyes were set intently as he concentrated all of his attention on listening to the tap of his own knuckles against the painted plaster of the wall—the tapping was like a cobbler's hammer, or the noise of things housewives do in the kitchen, a busy sound. Not a square inch of the wall was left untapped and not a square inch of it yielded the faintest echo of hollowness within. It was all solid plaster as Colt's knuckles went up and down from ceiling to baseboard, up and down, working his way across until he came to the clothes closet jogged into the eastern wall and he went into that dark enclosure, tapping sedulously.

First the left wall, then the back wall, up and down, up and down. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, *top*. Colt paused. He tried again. Tap, tap, *top*. He moved his hand up and backward away from it—tap, tap, tap. He came back to that same tell-tale space, not more than three inches square, and again he heard it and we all heard it—tap, tap, *top*—a definite difference in the sound, a hollow sound.

Colt sighed deeply and with intense relief. The thing had bothered him but now he had found what he had sought.

"Tony," he said, "here is the explanation of that voice from the dead. A hole in the wall—that's all. Feel of it yourself. Come here. Dougherty, put your thumb there and tap lightly. The thickness of the walls between these houses cannot be more than two courses of bricks with lath and plaster added. A foot thickness at most. It is ingenious only because it is so simple. We were looking for wires, inductive coils, or radio apparatus. But what a curious person we are after, a person who stood in the room adjoining this in the house next door and talked through this hole in the wall and said he or she was Madeline. I think, gentlemen, we may leave Mrs. Lynn and her husband to a contemplation of the wonders that can be wrought with ordinary tools."

"I don't believe you!" gasped Eva Allen Lynn.

"Come here and try it yourself!"

"No! It isn't so anyhow."

She began to cry and her husband put his arms around her.

"Mrs. Lynn," said Colt soothingly, "we are all going away from here now. But I do not wish to leave you in any state of doubt about this. Just listen! Keep on listening! And judge for yourself!"

There was a dazed and dejected look in the eyes of Eva Allen Lynn as she bade us good-night; the husband did not pay us even that courtesy. He stood at one of the windows looking down into the darkness of the back yards, the clothes poles and lines, his arms folded, his head bent forward in a melancholy attitude.

Out in the cold, snow-drifted street once more we bade good-night to Mr. Fitch, who was anxious to go home and reflect upon the simplicity by which a strange magical effect had been accomplished. Professor Gilman was also anxious to depart. He had no stomach for any more investigating. But Colt detained him for a moment.

"You know, Professor Gilman, that in a murder investigation there are certain technicalities which the police must observe. Understand?"

"I am afraid I do not," said Gilman a little frigidly. The discovery of that hole in the wall had upset him.

"Well, what I mean is that any one even remotely connected with a crime is asked to give an account of his movements around the time the crime was committed."

"You mean you still suspect me?"

"I mean, Professor Gilman, that I would still like you to recall how you spent May first of this year. Mind?"

Gilman smiled a little bitterly.

"I believe I told you that was the day I buried my wife."

Colt closed his eyes.

"You did. At what time was the funeral?"

"At ten o'clock in the morning."

"And what did you do after that?"

"I have since been able to recall that I spent the time in my study working, and late in the afternoon I had a sitting with the Reverend and Mrs. Lynn."

"Trying to get in touch with the spirit of your wife?"

"Yes, Colt, I was doing exactly that."

"And after that, what?"

"That night I sat alone all night long in my study praying that I could get in touch with her."

"So the only persons that you saw following the funeral at ten o'clock in the morning were the Reverend and Mrs. Washington Irving Lynn?"

"That's practically correct."

Colt's face was non-committal. He inclined his head slightly and said:

"Good-night, Professor Gilman, I will let you know when I want to see you again."

Without a word the professor strode off in the direction of Broadway while I rang the doorbell of the house next door. It, too, was a rooming house and the man who answered the ring was sure we were thieves and meant to rob him. He objected violently to allowing us to come in at that hour and the fact that we assured him the Police Commissioner and the District Attorney were at his threshold impressed him not at all. Not even when Dougherty threatened to arrest him on a violation of the rooming house laws in leaving his waste can uncovered did he consent to trade with us. But Colt, who has a way with everybody, persuaded him finally and he allowed us to enter.

The house was a duplicate of the one we had just left. We awakened a chorus girl who lived in the room in which we were interested; she had rented the room for the last three weeks. She wrapped herself in a furry robe and followed Colt with eyes of doe-like softness.

The Commissioner went directly to the clothes closet and there he found what he sought—a strip of board on which clothes hooks were nailed had been fixed across the back wall. It was the matter of a moment to rip that board off and there the hole was before us.

Colt stepped to the opening, and put his mouth against it and in a hollow voice said:

"I am not Madeline. I am the Police Commissioner, talking through a hole in the wall, but I ask you, Mrs. Lynn, and you too, Mr. Lynn, if you hear me as clearly as you heard that other voice. Will you please rap three times on the wall?"

There was a moment's pause and then we heard it—three sad little taps on the wall. Eva Allen Lynn knew at last she had listened that night not to the dead but to the living.

But who could that living person have been?

We were not to find out that night. Colt at once questioned the landlord of this rooming house, but nothing came of it. The landlord, whose name was Sukas, had taken over the house only that week from a woman named Marshall, who had sold out and left for Canada, the day after the papers were signed. Of course we would try to trace Mrs. Marshall, but meanwhile it looked as if we had solved one mystery only to confront another.

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## ***Chapter Five***

### **THE WOMAN WHO FLEW IN**

That night I spent at home in Scarsdale. The next day, so Thatcher Colt had predicted, would largely tell the story. It started in as if it would tell, not one but half a dozen stories; each one a different version of what really happened in the murder of Madeline Swift.

There was first, for example, the rapidly accumulating reports from detectives, sent out to interview the men and women whose names appeared in Madeline's address book. They had searched out and talked with the friends of Madeline, a strange assortment in human nature. Men of all kinds—business men and the boys who ran the elevators in the business men's office buildings. One and all told the same story. Madeline was a friendly girl, but not promiscuous. She petted a little, but as a kind of bored concession to the proprieties of the time. She loved a good time, hot music, fast stepping and hard liquor, and she had grown fonder of these distractions in the last six months. She told all her friends that she was unhappy and that she feared her own father as she had never feared any other man in her life.

"It is apparent more and more," remarked Thatcher Colt, after reviewing the stack of these not very helpful reports, "that Madeline was at least on the way to being a psycho pathological case. But who—close to her—was in the same condition? It is very important for us to discover that—for the crime itself bears the mark of precision and imagination and fantasy as well—a combination that is so often linked with unsuspected, unrecognised symptoms of insanity."

"You don't mean you have decided a crazy man killed her?"

Colt spread out empty hands.

"I have decided nothing, Tony. I am ashamed of you for asking such a thing. We have got to keep our heads about us for I am hopeful that to-day we can really settle this whole case."

"But, chief, you just said——"

"I know, Tony. Insanity! Well, what is that? Is it a manic-depressive case? Is it schizophrenia? Is it dementia praecox? Not our best psychiatrists can do much more than give names to recurrent abnormalities—their causes, their nature, how to detect them before a crime has been committed, or after either—these are still empiric."

"Have we met the person you suspect, chief?"

Colt sighed hopelessly.

"I still suspect no one. And I still take into account, as in all cases of this kind, what I call the Panzram theory."

I looked up puzzled.

"Never heard of that, chief—is Panzram a new criminologist I haven't heard about?"

Colt shook his head, the ivory face of Homer under-going an idle moment's massage between his thumbs.

"Panzram is the name of probably the worst criminal in American history. He was executed in Atlanta prison some years ago—killed a kitchen guard with a butcher knife, while he was serving a long sentence. There is a manuscript in the hands of one of the assistant wardens of the Federal prison in Atlanta—a horrible unprintable manuscript which Panzram left behind him when he died. He confessed in his own handwriting to more than twenty-seven murders, most of which were subsequently verified by the authorities. Why did Panzram, a wandering hobo, but not a moron; a fairishly intelligent person, a tramp who hardly ever worked, why did this man kill—and most horribly, torturingly, fiendishly kill—twenty-seven of his fellow creatures, most of whom had never done him any harm? The answer is that he killed because he liked the experience of taking life. He had a blood lust. Most of his murders were listed as unsolved cases until his confession cleared them up. In the light of that confession, it is rather fantastic to go back and read the current accounts of his crimes, from the discovery of the bodies through the investigations of the police. Relatives, old enemies, persons with reasonable motives were all suspected, in highly dramatic hypothetical solutions—rational theories for a wholly irrational deed. It was too simple to suppose that a vagabond stranger who liked to kill had just come along—and

killed! Yet that, I am satisfied, is the true explanation of many of our baffling mysteries. I think that is exactly what happened in the Hall-Mills case. It may explain the Starr Faithful mystery, too, and many others, including our present riddle of Madeline Swift."

"Somehow, I don't believe it, chief."

"I didn't say I believed it, either. But we have to take it into our calculations—and we have to check back on any such degenerates known to have been around New York at that time. I have given orders for that."

He had been busy on the case all morning, long before my early commuter's train rolled into Grand Central Station. I doubt if he got any sleep at all, probably thinking old thoughts of Florence Dunbar. I knew that he had breakfast with his cigar-smoking aunt from Beacon Hill. Yet here he was, immaculate in a new blue suit, shoulder wound dressed, gardenia in his Persian tear vase, shaved, bathed, manicured, pedicured and with a glow of rich health in brown eyes and browned cheeks. He called for a report on Nellie Schwartz.

For the moment, at least, we were in for a disappointment in the search for the discharged maid of the Swift family. Throughout the night, Detectives Norris and Blume had been working on the blanket orders Colt had given them to bring in Nellie Schwartz. To the lay reader such an assignment might seem full of difficulties and the lay reader would be right. All we knew of Nellie's hiding place was that she had left town by a train that stopped at One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street Station—a pauseway for the transcontinental trains of the New York Central lines, the New England trains of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad, and a stop for the commuting caravans of Westchester and neighbouring counties. So Nellie Schwartz might have gone almost anywhere—except for that one expense item on the private operative's cost accounting—a telephone call that had cost forty-five cents. That confined the radius of her possible hiding place within knowable boundaries, ascertainable from the telephone company. But as Detective Blume told me over the telephone at nine-thirty that morning:

"You have no idea how many places you can call for forty-five cents until you begin to look them up. It's remarkable. We haven't found her yet. So, Abbot, will you please ask the chief if we can turn the heat on the Acme Agency."

I put the query to Colt—and he nodded his head.

"Tell Blume that I thought he and Norris had brains enough to find that girl without strong-arm stuff but——"

He did not finish the sentence, except with a wink. Blume was spluttering when I relayed the message.

"We have got the brains to find her all right," he cried, for he had a pride in his work. "You tell the chief to forget we even thought of it. You, too, boy."

"Okay, you mole hillbilly," I told him, and off he and his partner went, on a renewed quest for the absent serving girl.

A new link in our chain was forged by the finding of another taxicab driver, named Joseph Rogers, who had been down in New Jersey on his honeymoon but showed up at his hack-stand at the Waldorf-Astoria on this Monday morning. His story practically confirmed Keplinger's account of Madeline's movements—that is, after her still unexplained visit to the Waldorf; Madeline got into Joseph Rogers' taxicab, in the underground esplanade of the hotel, and was driven uptown to the region of Columbia University, where she left the cab.

Flynn, who gave us this report, said that was all they could get out of Rogers and he was satisfied the man did not know any more. But since going over Keplinger's story, Flynn was "conducting a strong drive" as he put it in a phrase filched from the newspapers, among all the taxi drivers of the five boroughs. He did not have much hope for it, nor did we; already we had enjoyed great good fortune in finding two drivers who remembered Madeline after a lapse of seven months; still we would try everything; her movements on her last day alive, would, if possible, be accounted for, hour by hour.

Flynn also had a report for us on O'Toole. Two men had watched his house in Brooklyn all night; two others had taken their places after breakfast this morning; no further report on O'Toole's movements had come in, but the *dossier* on the life of Honest Dan lay on the desk at Colt's right hand; he would read it before the day was over.

It was not until ten-thirty o'clock that the really significant reports of the morning were received. Detective Butler had spent a profitable few hours talking with professors, janitors, instructors and students at Columbia University. His

report, dictated to me over the telephone, confirmed most of our findings of the previous day, but wound up with one new and highly significant detail.

"Professor Robertson told me," reported Butler, "that Alfred Keplinger has a dangerous temper. He has been up twice in the last three years for attacks on fellow students; once he sprang at a professor during a lecture, because the professor had raised a laugh at his expense. He doesn't fight with his fists; he reaches for the nearest weapon and throws it."

That was bad enough, but soon things began to look even worse for Alfred Keplinger. A report on the floor-boards taken from the medical student's bathroom was sent over from the municipal laboratories; the chemists declared unequivocally that the stains were human blood.

"Well," remarked Thatcher Colt, a little grimly, "there are only two factors missing in the slowly-forming case of the State versus Alfred Keplinger. One is to show how and where the paths of Keplinger and the spirit mediums came together."

"That's right," I agreed. "Unless you are willing to believe in the supernatural."

"Not in a case for the jury," he snapped. "The other link is the bullet found in the skull. The report from the ballistics department is due this morning; in fact, I've been waiting for it. And while I was waiting I've been keeping some one else waiting——"

"Keplinger?"

"Yes—Miss, not Mister."

"Has Josephine arrived in New York?"

"At six-ten, to be precise, she got out of the Night-Owl plane of the American Air Lines from Detroit. Detective Gaxton was there, and picked her up. She started right in to assert her sacred rights of American citizenship; a bit of a virago, from all I hear. But Gaxton persuaded her it might be better all around if she had a talk with the police."

"How?"

"I didn't inquire but I think he gave her a hint that the police would not hurt her little brother if she gave them a chance to talk with her. She loves that weakling, evidently. At all events, I have kept her waiting most unconscionably—suppose you have her come in now."

## 2

I liked Josephine Keplinger. I mean I liked her from the moment I first saw her. Perhaps I was less discerning than I should have been; certainly I had no premonition of what was to come.

I will not say that she was pretty. But I will say that I think Inspector Grew described her inaccurately. The newspapers have called her beautiful and I think I shall agree with them, instead. Yes, let me record it here. Josephine Keplinger was beautiful. She did not have that regularity of feature or doll-like prettiness which Hollywood has so long exploited and made a standard for American womanhood. Josephine did not look like any star of the screen or stage. I recall distinctly that she was wearing a black coat with a high collar of lamb's wool. And underneath this was a sensible woollen dress of some dark material with a ruffled collar and cuffs. Her hat was a tight-fitting turban made of black feathers.

Like her brother, she was a blonde, an un-retouched blonde, and in the loop of hair dressed beneath her hat, there was a premature silver patch that gave distinction and strangeness to the pale loveliness of her face. Her voice was a contralto and low, but her words were crisp and business-like.

Detective Gaxton brought Josephine Keplinger to the door and then waited outside. Colt received her graciously and led her to the chair in front of his desk. She removed one black glove from a shapely and capable hand, refused the cigarette which Colt offered her, and leaned forward, looking at him with intent green eyes.

"I want to know why you are holding my brother," she began icily.

Colt smiled a little sadly. "Because he has not told us all that he knows about a murder. I have asked you to come here to ask you some questions."

"I don't think I wish to answer them, Mr. Colt."

"What have you to hide?"

"It is not a question of having anything to hide. I think my brother, Alfred, has been mistreated by the police."

"That means by me?"

"I am sorry to say that I think it does. Alfred is only a boy. He doesn't know his own rights. He can very easily be browbeaten by older men—policemen. I am here to protect his rights and I don't think I want to talk at all until I have consulted an attorney."

Her green eyes were fixed on Colt with an expression of anger and disdain.

Colt nodded thoughtfully and said:

"Even so—if your brother killed Madeline Swift the best thing you could do is to help the police get the exact facts."

"The best thing! Why? Why do you say that?"

"Why?" repeated Colt, leaning forward suddenly and returning her intent gaze with a straight and candid glance. "It should be plain to a clever girl like you. If he *is* guilty, the case against him is already so tight that he won't wriggle out of it. His only chance is a confession. Now, Miss Keplinger, there's something mighty fine about that brother of yours. There must be, or you wouldn't be here, so ready to fight for him. If he did do that deed, then there must be something somewhere that would explain such a hideous thing. I mean there must be some extenuating circumstance. And if there is, now is the time to bring it out."

Josephine Keplinger began taking off her other glove.

"You mean that now is the time to make a deal with the District-Attorney?" she asked, in a matter-of-fact voice.

Colt turned his back, folded his arms, and stared down into Centre Street.

"I want the facts," he said clearly. "Can you get them?"

"No!"

"And why not?"

"Because Alfred didn't do it. I don't care what the facts are against him. I don't care what the circumstances are. My brother never killed anybody. And if you think you are going to prove anything on him, you're crazy. He is not going to be railroaded either. I can find all the money we'll need and I'm here to stay and there's no use talking to me about a confession because I know he is innocent and I know it without even talking to him."

Colt sat down on the edge of the desk, clasped his hands around his right knee and smiled.

"Your brother is a very fortunate lad in having such a sister for a friend. And don't make any mistake about it, Miss Keplinger, he is going to need all the friends he can get."

For the first time I saw apprehension in her eyes. She looked down at the floor and swallowed hard.

"You seem awfully sure of that, Mr. Colt."

"Surer than that."

"Then why don't you tell me what you've got against him?"

Colt shook his head haplessly.

"You still insist on putting me on the witness stand," he replied. "I don't think you need a lawyer."

His smile was gone, Thatcher Colt stood up, walked behind his desk and moodily lit a cigarette.

"I suppose that's all then. You're not willing to give me your confidence and without that I can't help you. I'm sorry."

For the first time Josephine Keplinger looked at me. It was, unexpectedly, a child's glance—a frightened look full of questions as if impulsively she were asking me if she dared to trust this man. I tried to make my face as encouraging as possible.

"I want you to help me, Mr. Colt. What do you want me to do?"

"Stop asking me questions and answer mine."

She sighed.

"Here's question number one: To whom did you telephone when you changed planes last night?"

She leaned back with a sudden movement of surprise and her green eyes flashed.

"Did you have detectives watching me?"

Colt struck a match and looked at her above the wavering flame.

"Won't you answer the question?"

"How did you know I was coming by plane?" she demanded.

Colt shook his head unhappily.

"We won't get anywhere this way. Will you or won't you tell me to whom you telephoned?"

"I tried to reach Mr. McIntyre, an attorney I once knew. But he wasn't at home."

"Thanks. He got home fifteen minutes after your plane took off from the ground."

"If you know so much, why do you have to ask me these questions?"

"Police question number two, Miss Keplinger: Were you in Detroit on May the first of last year?"

"No, I was not."

"Where were you then?"

"I was in the St. Regis hospital in Chicago."

"Why were you there?"

"An operation for appendicitis."

"Did you know that your brother was in love with a girl named Madeline Swift?"

"No."

"When did you first learn of it?"

"Last night. He called me on the long distance telephone."

"Did you know there was such a person as Madeline Swift in the world?"

"No, I had never heard of her."

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

"Yes."

"Would you have objected if you had known it?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, that's a question, not an answer."

"I don't know. I would have to know something about the young lady."

"But you feel you had the right to object, if you did not approve?"

"I have a sister's interest, naturally."

"Isn't it a very strong interest?"

"Of course."

"Well, is it of course, Miss Keplinger?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, this is what I mean; are you not the sole support of your brother?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"I want you please to answer my questions. Do you not give your brother all the money that he spends?"

"It isn't very much."

"But whatever it is, doesn't it come from your pocket-book?"

"I don't see what that has to do..."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Now, he is twenty-two years old, isn't he?"

"He will be twenty-three on the twenty-eighth of September."

"But even so, he is entirely dependent on you?"

"He could earn his living anywhere."

"No doubt. But is he doing it?"

"He doesn't have to!"

"But is he?"

"No."

"You are earning his living for him?"

"Why do you insist on pounding at me on that point?"

"Because I want to have it clearly understood between ourselves that you are more than just a sister to Alfred. You are in effect his economic source of supply—to all intents and purposes his guardian?"

"He is of age. He can do what he pleases."

"You understand what I mean. And isn't it true that it is your ambition for him to be a doctor?"

"Yes, that's true."

"And isn't it also true that you would regard a marriage at this time as an obstacle to his success?"

"Well, of course. Who wouldn't?"

"Then you might have objected to Madeline Swift even if you didn't know her or anything about her, Miss Keplinger?"

"Well, what of it? Why are you trying to trip me? What are you getting at?"

Colt slowly and deliberately tamped out his cigarette.

"It is quite plain, Miss Keplinger, that your brother is afraid of you. He got into a tangle with this girl. Might he not try to get rid of her, rather than face trouble with you?"

"Ridiculous! Absurd! You have no case against my brother and you know it."

Ironically, then, the door was opened by Captain Israel Henry, who laid a sheaf of papers on the desk—papers that I recognised as a report from our ballistics department. Colt gave them a hasty glance, then looked up squarely at Josephine Keplinger and said:

"Your brother, Alfred Keplinger, is being held as a material witness at present. The evidence against him comes down to the following points: On the day that Madeline Swift disappeared she had a quarrel with Alfred Keplinger.

"In the box in which her bones were found, there was a scarf. We have proved to our own satisfaction that that scarf belongs to your brother. We have definitely traced her to his apartment. After entering it, she was never seen alive, so far as we can discover. We have found blood on the bathroom floor. And we know that Madeline Swift was murdered by a man who shot her in the head with a .32 calibre Smith and Wesson revolver. The bullet was found in her skull. A .32 calibre Smith and Wesson revolver was found hidden in an old shoe belonging to your brother.

"Now, Miss Keplinger, have you ever heard of the police science of ballistics? Surely you know that every bullet fired through the barrel of a revolver is ear-marked by the riflings of that barrel. No two rifling marks are the same. So that every discharged bullet carries with it an identification of the pistol from which that bullet was discharged. The reliability of the ballistics test to-day is as sound as the fingerprint system. We had the bullet from the skull of Madeline Swift and we had the revolver found under your brother's bed. The next thing we did was fire a bullet from that revolver into a bag of sand. Then we took the two spent bullets, one from the bag of sand and one from a dead girl's head, and we set them up side by side in a little optical instrument called a comparisonscope.

"Our department here has just made that test and are holding the two bullets that some day will be shown a jury in a homicide court. They are from the same revolver—your brother's revolver."

"And you think that frightens me?"

Josephine Keplinger took a step forward. Her ungloved hands were on the glass-topped desk. She was leaning over, her face damp with sweat; her green eyes smouldering. "You think that frightens me?" she repeated. "Well, it doesn't."

"Then explain it—the bullet—the blood——"

"I can't explain it. How can you expect me to explain it? You won't let me talk to Alfred. You won't let any one talk to him except a lot of bulldozing cops who are scaring the life out of him and probably beating him. I don't care what evidence you have, my brother never harmed that girl. It isn't in him to do it. I know him. I love him. And I want to tell you something more, Mr. Colt, you are holding him as a material witness and I don't believe you have any right to do that. I think he has a right to be admitted to bail."

Colt shook his head.

"It is the duty of the police," she cried, "to arrest murderers, not witnesses. You have found out a lot, Mr. Colt. Well, find out the rest of it, if you can. I came here to take care of my brother and I'm going to do it. And, for your information, when the time comes, he will have an honest, complete, iron-clad alibi."

She looked around the room at the three doors, a little disdainfully.

"Which is the way one goes out of here?" she demanded.

Then, without warning, there came suddenly a bawling voice up from Centre Street:

"Extra! Extra! All about the murder of Madeline Swift. Boy friend to be indicted. Alfred Keplinger charged with the crime."

So Dougherty had acted without warning us! Why? The thing was done. The case was out of our hands. Dougherty must have got hold of the ballistics report, and the blood on the boards details and had gone ahead with his plans to send Alfred Keplinger to the electric chair. He had his juicy murder case at last—and his friend O'Toole was not even mentioned, either.

Hearing a sound, I turned to look at Josephine Keplinger. She had opened the door and walked out.

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## *Chapter Six*

### **OLD FRIENDS FALL OUT**

Thatcher Colt was incensed. I had never before seen such dark rage in his gentle brown eyes; when I returned from seeing that Josephine Keplinger was halted and her New York address taken, and a detective set to follow her, the Commissioner sat at his desk staring straight before him.

"Where is Captain Henry?" he grated. "He promised he would get me the indictment papers. What a thing for Dougherty to do! What is wrong with him? Is he trying to spare O'Toole? Or does he just want to land on the front page? Where is Captain Henry?"

Captain Henry was opening the door, even then; he came in and laid before Thatcher Colt a sealed envelope.

"The District Attorney had the ballistics report early this morning," he announced. "It was delayed getting up here through an oversight."

"Whose oversight?"

"Mine," confessed Captain Henry humbly. "It was like this——"

"Never mind," Colt cut in shortly. "If it was your fault, I know it was an accident, anyhow. And Dougherty acted without consulting me because he knew damn well I would have stopped him."

"You think Alfred Keplinger is innocent, then, chief?"

"I told you, Tony, I have formed no conclusions as yet. I merely state the case against Keplinger is not complete."

He ripped the edge of the envelope, took out a typewritten form and read the presentment—not an indictment, the Grand Jury had not voted as yet, but prepared, in form, under Dougherty's direction. It was all clear what had happened.

As soon as Dougherty had the ballistics report he had changed the charge against Keplinger, taken him before the Homicide Court, and had him held for the Grand Jury. Within fifteen minutes the presentment in all its old-fashioned phraseology had been prepared—an accusation of murder in the first degree, penal law 1044 and 1045:

The people of the State of New York against

Alfred Keplinger, October term.

The District Attorney of the County of New York by this presentment accuses Alfred Keplinger of the crime of murder in the first degree committed as follows:

The said Alfred Keplinger on the first day of May of this year at the town of New York in this county did on the day and at the place aforesaid, feloniously, wilfully, with malice aforethought and with the deliberate and premeditated design to effect the death of one Madeline Swift made an assault upon her, the said Madeline Swift then and there being, and the said Alfred Keplinger with a firearm or gun, commonly called a revolver or pistol, loaded with gunpowder and leaden bullets, feloniously, wilfully, with malice aforethought and with the deliberate and premeditated design to effect the death of her, the said Madeline Swift, the said Alfred Keplinger did then and there with the said firearm or gunshot, shoot, injure and mortally wound her, the said Madeline Swift, and inflict upon the body and person of her, the said Madeline Swift to wit:

In, upon, or through the face, jaw, temple, and skull of her, the said Madeline Swift, gunshot wounds and injuries from which gunshot wounds and injuries, she, the said Madeline Swift, died on the day aforesaid at the town and county aforesaid and that the death of her, the said Madeline Swift, was caused and produced by the aforesaid gunshot wounds and injuries inflicted as aforesaid and that the aforesaid gunshot wounds and injuries were inflicted as aforesaid by the said Alfred Keplinger with force and arms, feloniously, wilfully and of his force and arms feloniously, wilfully and of malice aforethought and with the deliberate and premeditated design of him to effect the death of her, the said Madeline Swift, the said Alfred Keplinger in manner and form aforesaid and by means aforesaid did kill and slay her, the said Madeline Swift, against the form of the statute of such case made and

provided and against the people of the state of New York and their dignity.

MERLE K. DOUGHERTY, District Attorney.

Dougherty had worked fast.

We learned from Captain Henry that the District Attorney had sent his detectives to bring Alfred Keplinger into the Homicide Court at the north-east corner of North Street and Second Avenue where Judge Duzenbury, the presiding magistrate, heard his story, and had then held Keplinger for the action of the Grand Jury.

So far as the public was concerned, the police investigation was ended. No one knew that Colt was still not satisfied with the evidence against the prisoner. Colt was plunged into melancholy silence. He sat grimly at his desk for a few moments. Then Josephine Keplinger was announced. She had returned, a paper in her hand. Crisply the Commissioner described to her what happened.

"I am sorry for you," he said, "I suggest that you obtain an attorney at once."

She gave him a long, half-dazed glance.

"I just wanted to take another look at you," she said. "I wish I could believe you were on the level. I might tell you something if I did. But I don't. I don't trust you. I think you're crooked as hell."

And with those words she left the office.

Thatcher Colt looked at his watch.

"It's just five minutes before noon. There is still time before Dougherty goes out to eat—still time for us to have it out with him. Let's go!"

## 2

The office of the District Attorney of New York County is on one of the upper floors of the new annexe at 137 Centre Street, which adjoins the Criminal Courts Building. It is a part of that warren of smoke-stained granite buildings looking like the bastioned and crenellated battlements of a fortress—the Court House, the Bridge of Sighs and the jail lugubriously called the Tombs. This is a queer region of Manhattan. Very few of its city-wise millions know much about it; know, for instance, of the museum of gruesome relics, court exhibits from sensational trials, that fill two Chamber of Horror rooms on the top floor of the Criminal Courts Building. The few visitors who ever get that far can see the revolver with which Harry Thaw killed Stanford White; a torso dummy of Caesar Young used ineffectually to convince the jury in the Nan Patterson case, and a score of other exhibits, including bottles of poisoned liquor, boxes of poisoned candy, axes, cleavers, revolvers. But there was one exhibit that was not there on the day that Thatcher Colt and I called on District Attorney Dougherty, nor is it there to-day—the effigy of the murdered Madeline Swift. To-day, if you wish to look at the thing, it stands on its own pedestal in the new Brooklyn Police Headquarters Building at Bergen Street and Sixth Avenue, in Brooklyn. All that is left of Madeline Swift remains there—the bones were extracted and burned when the case was over—a real masterpiece of the Crime Sculptor's art, surrounded by the Police Department's own prize exhibits—the poisoned whisky of Ruth Snyder and the tell-tale Pullman stub of Judd Gray; the axe of the abominable Mrs. Nack and a hundred other glass-cased, grisly souvenirs....

We presented ourselves at the entrance to the District Attorney's suite and were led at once into "the Presence" as Dougherty chucklingly called himself. The District Attorney's office was very different from our own. It received much light from half a dozen large, undraped windows; the room was very untidy with blue-jacketed foolscap papers littering the top and face of the old-style roll-top oak desk, pigeon-holes crammed, papers spilled on chair seats, and falling out of half-opened files; rummage everywhere. Half a dozen clerks were running in and out of the three doors, all with trays heaped with more papers, indictments, presentments, writs of certiorari, writs of replevin, summonses and complaints, and there were three telephones on lazy-gong extensions, each with a different sounding bell—noise, haste, excitement—any voter would have said at once that the District Attorney was one of the busiest, most active, and on-the-job public officials of the whole city of New York. Presiding over all the hubbub with the serious forehead and potent grin of a fat

Chinese joss was Merle K. Dougherty, red-faced, blue-eyed, fresh as a daisy is always said to be fresh, newly shaved, powdered, pomaded, kneaded, rubbed down, massaged and manicured. He looked in hilarious health, and unashamed of himself.

But at Colt's appearance, things happened as if by magic in Dougherty's office. Dougherty grinned broadly, stood up, and clapped his hands. At that gesture, the room instantly cleared. The door closed upon us, and the three of us were alone together.

Dougherty, his face slightly more florid than usual, tried to be jocose.

"Well, Thatch," he began, "this is an honour. Sit down!"

"Never mind the comedy," said Thatcher Colt. "You have asked for an indictment against Alfred Keplinger. Why?"

"Why not?"

"Because, as you know perfectly well, the case isn't ready. Because he can get a good lawyer, press for a quick trial, and unless you strengthen the case you've got, he can beat the rap. I don't have to remind you that you can't put a man in double jeopardy."

Dougherty clucked his tongue unhappily.

"Thatch," he said, "what have you got against this case? We have the motive. We have the gun. We have the blood on the bathroom floor. I say that's a case."

"And I say you know better than that," retorted Colt with a challenging glance. "Keplinger admits it's his gun, but he says he didn't hide it in the shoe. There are no fingerprints on the gun at all. He says he doesn't know anything about the blood on the floor. If the girl was killed in his apartment, then somebody, according to Keplinger, got in there, shot her with his gun, cut her up with his instruments, spilled the blood on his floor, and carried the body away in his suitcases. He stands on that. Who can disprove it? Even if his alibi doesn't stand up, it's nothing but circumstantial evidence and you know what juries think of circumstantial evidence. All Keplinger would need would be a clever criminal lawyer and he would be able to convince the jury that this was not a case beyond reasonable doubt. Even if the jury convicted him by your persuasive eloquence, Dougherty, I believe a judge would give a certificate of reasonable doubt."

"Ah, but, Thatch——"

"Don't 'but Thatch' me. The case is weak enough as it is. Any good defence lawyer will insist that we have no *corpus delicti*. He will try to demolish the entire identification based on the image made by Mr. Fitch. He will try to prove that another artist could take the same skull and make an entirely different kind of face. Fortunately we have those ear-rings. They were given to Madeline by her mother. The reason I haven't let any publicity get out about them is because I was saving it for you as a trump card in the trial. But honestly, Dougherty you get me so exasperated——"

Dougherty put up his hands placatingly.

"Now, Thatch! Sit down! Be reasonable! Don't get excited! What do you care?"

Colt sat down and leaned forward, his stick held midway, the curved handle thrust out at Dougherty like a lance.

"I care because I don't want this case to be a fizzle. You know you haven't got a case for the jury."

"Not yet. But I can stall until I do."

"But suppose you've got the wrong man?"

"Do you think I have?"

"I refuse to come to any conclusions. At this moment there is a better case against Keplinger than any one else. But it isn't complete. Why did you do it, Dougherty? To protect anybody?"

Dougherty looked at Colt, eye to eye.

"Protect?" repeated Dougherty coldly.

"O'Toole, perhaps?"

Dougherty had risen from his chair. Although it was a cold December day the big man was perspiring so profusely that there were wet stains from the arms down to the pockets of his coat. His old-fashioned wing collar was wilted and his popping blue eyes held an insulted glare. He flung himself up from the chair with such violence that the joints of the chair have never been the same since. He produced a purple-bordered handkerchief and mopped his throat, forehead, the back of his neck, and his wrists and he uttered a sound that was at once a moan and a curse.

"And that's what you think of me?" Dougherty demanded.

Colt shrugged.

"Where is O'Toole, then?" he asked shrewdly.

Dougherty's face changed; he looked apoplectic.

"Thatch," he confessed, "I don't know how to tell you, but I have to. I'm buffaloed."

"O'Toole has disappeared?"

"How did you guess?"

Colt grinned.

"Want to know where he is?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's in a Turkish bath. My man is right there with him. I just got a report on the telephone."

Dougherty whistled explosively.

"Well, thank God!" he exploded.

"You thought he had skipped?"

"No, I didn't!"

"Well, let's skip it anyway."

"Look here, Thatch, I am just as convinced as ever that O'Toole had nothing to do with this matter. And O'Toole had nothing whatever to do with my going after that indictment."

Colt returned no answer. Dougherty puffed excitedly on his cigar.

"What are you getting at, Thatch? Am I to understand that you accuse O'Toole of this crime?"

"No."

"Then, what am I to understand?"

"You are to understand that the police are still investigating every angle of this crime and that they consider no one—absolutely no one—thus far absolved from suspicion or exonerated in their calculations. And that is my statement to the press."

"My God! You'll prejudice my case!"

Dougherty switched his enormous bulk in a bodily movement expressive of great annoyance. It was a girlish movement in spite of the bulk and anger involved.

"My investigation continues."

"Now wait, Thatch—Please, for the love of God. What is your theory?"

"I have none whatever. I am perfectly willing to tell you everything I know and even everything I'm tempted to suspect. We haven't seen our way clear into this case yet. But as far as we have seen, O'Toole is still as much in it as Keplinger—with both feet right up to his neck. O'Toole had an excellent motive for killing Madeline Swift. He says that she came to him horrified at the blackmail she had just learned about. That's his story. Suppose it isn't true. Suppose, instead, that she was a blackmailer herself. Suppose she came there and threatened him and demanded money and he was tired of it and was no longer willing to be in her power for the rest of his life. You can't pass up a plausible set-up like that, Dougherty."

"You're ignoring the strongest possible kind of evidence that you've got right in your own hands."

"You mean Alfred Keplinger?"

"Of course I mean Alfred Keplinger. He was in love with that girl. She turned him down. He's a crazy kid. He had a gun. I believe he lied about his movements. He killed her and he's going to burn for it, Thatch. Mark my words."

Colt nodded gravely and reached for his pipe.

"I'll admit we've got a strong case against Alfred Keplinger. But there are other factors in the case that you haven't mentioned."

"Such as——?"

"Well, of course, there's always the father, the mother, and the sister. Each one of them has a motive to have killed that girl. Some of the motives I admit are unreasonable. That's the trouble with murders. People so often kill because of unreasonable motives."

Dougherty swished his thick red hands as if he was throwing water off his hands.

"Too metaphysical for me, Thatch. Next thing you'll be dragging those spirit mediums into it."

"Next thing, maybe I will. But not in a hurry, Dougherty. I want to know who talked through the wall. Don't you?"

"Well, Thatch, no, I don't. That only complicates the case—and I want to simplify it. And I am sorry to hurry you but there are a few things I would like to call to *your* attention. First of all, we're both bound to support the laws of the state of New York and the laws of New York say that when you have found a *corpus delicti*, there's got to be an inquest."

"An inquest? Why, we abolished all that in New York."

"Oh, no, we didn't, no, we didn't, Thatch. We just changed its name. We call it a magistrate's hearing. That's all. You called in a medical examiner, and I laid the facts before a homicide magistrate, that's all. Under the laws of the city of New York the police of New York are supposed to work with the homicide division of the District Attorney and present the evidence to a homicide magistrate and, by God, that's what I wanted done. There's nothing personal in this, Thatch."

"Not even personal to O'Toole?" barked Colt.

"Oh, leave O'Toole out of it. There was a gun found in Alfred Keplinger's room. That and the rest we've got on him is enough for me. What would we be waiting for?"

Colt stood up grimly.

"I don't know what we're waiting for, Dougherty," he said with an icy smile. "I think you have said all that you have to say."

Dougherty also stood up and held his purple-bordered handkerchief as if he didn't know which pocket to put it in.

"I don't want any hard feeling, Thatch; it would be too bad if after all these years..."

"That has nothing to do with it. We have simply reached a point in this investigation where our views differ. But we'll never get anywhere arguing about it."

"That's right! So long, old man."

"So long," said Thatcher Colt.

And that was how we left Dougherty.

3

Back in his office, Colt glanced at the memoranda on his desk. There were a number of reports stacked there by Chambliss, my assistant. Colt studied them carefully, a gleam coming into his eyes, as he said:

"Send in Detective Schlemmer—he was on the O'Toole angle and this note says he has something hot."

"I hope so," I answered, as I went for Schlemmer. The dapper little detective rushed into the office with a bundle under his arm, saluted and waited for Colt, who merely said:

"Let's see what you've got there."

What Detective Schlemmer had there was a bundle of ashes and partly consumed hand-knitted woollen material. The pattern and colour of the cloth were visible—a red fabric striped through with small herringbone lines. It was the sort of material that might have been a sweater.

Colt fingered the few unburnt pieces carefully.

"What's the story on this?"

"Well, O'Toole isn't as smart as he thinks he is. He went home and burned a sweater last night after talking with you. There's a wop who tends to the furnaces for all the residents on that block—a dago by the name of Dominic Bessio—he's worked on that block and kept the furnaces going and the ice scraped off the pavements and the front steps washed down for more than fifteen years and all the residents know him."

"It wasn't easy to make him talk either. He's loyal but it just happened, Mr. Commissioner, that Dominic had a record. I got to work on him first and I found out that he was smuggled into this country without a landing permit, an unnaturalised alien who had no business in this country and he was in trouble in Naples where he came from, and that I could send him back to Naples on the next boat—'deported' is the word—and that when he got there, he would go to prison for the rest of his life. So there was one canary that sung and sung pretty."

Colt's voice crackled.

"I'm not interested in how you get your information right now. I want the story."

"Yes, sir. Well, I didn't know what I was going to get, of course, I just told Dominic I wanted anything he had on Mr. O'Toole. At first he thought he didn't have anything, but I kept pressing him and pressing him and talked about Mussolini and finally he came out with it."

"There was an old sweater that belonged to Mr. O'Toole and that Mr. O'Toole kept down in the cellar. Once in cleaning up down there, Dominic had seen it. He said it had stains on it and when I mentioned Mr. Mussolini again, he remembered that they looked like bloodstains. The sweater had been there for a long time now. He wasn't sure about the time, but it must have been about last May. And that was all he knew."

"So I told him—I said to him: 'you ups and you ask Mr. O'Toole if he would help you out. You asks him,' I says, 'if he would mind if you took that sweater because you need a sweater and you can't afford to buy one. And when he gives it to you,' I says, 'you bring it to me and I'll pay you for it by not sending you to Italy.'

"So Dominic does just like I told him. Only it don't work out the way I figured it would. Instead of that, Mr. O'Toole flies into a rage, chases Dominic out of the house, burns the sweater in the furnace, and all we could rescue from it is the few pieces you've got there in your hand. And unfortunately, Mr. Commissioner, for all my hard work, the pieces we've got haven't any stains on them at all. You can see for yourself."

Thatcher Colt's eyelids rolled straight up and he glared at the detective.

"Schlemmer," he said, "I want your badge."

"My badge, Mr. Commissioner? You don't mean you're breaking me?"

"Schlemmer," said Colt. "I'd like to break your neck. Lay your badge down. Collect your money."

"But, Mr. Commissioner, for God's sake——"

"For God's sake get out of here. You should have reported about that sweater and acted under instructions. You may have ruined this case."

Schlemmer drew his badge from his pocket and laid it on the desk.

"On your way," said Thatcher Colt.

"But, Mr. Commissioner. I've got a wife and kids. I'm their father——"

"That's tough on them. Clear out of here."

"I'm fired?"

"You're through as a detective. You're going back in uniform and pound the sidewalks."

The man's face changed from ashen gray to a flush of relief—at least he still had a job.

"Thanks, Mr. Commissioner," he said, and stumbled out of the office. Before the door closed two telephones began ringing at once. Dougherty was on the other end of the wire, nervously anxious to talk to Colt.

But Colt was answering the other phone, his private one, the number of which he had left with the clerk at the Plaza. I could not mistake the eagerness with which he picked up the receiver, nor the haste in which his closing lids concealed the forlorn gleam in his disappointed eyes. She was still not there. Without a word I passed him the second telephone.

"Hallo!"

"I could hear Dougherty's voice clearly as he answered:

"Hallo, Thatch? I wanted to talk to you about O'Toole."

"What, again?"

"Now, listen, Thatch, I know you've had men tailing him. He's very upset about it. For instance, that business about the sweater——"

"Oh, he already knows that I know about that, does he?"

"Of course he does. He got the whole story out of that wop. He knows that you've got the charred cinders of that old sweater on your desk right this minute."

Colt grinned faintly.

"That's right, Dougherty. But I haven't got the pieces I wanted. You might congratulate O'Toole for me."

"On what?"

"On being able to get out of the way things he doesn't like to have around."

"Now wait a minute, Thatch. Don't be that way, will you?"

"Well, tell O'Toole not to worry and use your own head for a minute, Dougherty. Suppose that your friend O'Toole did kill Madeline Swift."

"Yes?"

"And suppose he got her blood on the sweater he was wearing."

"Yes?"

"Well, Dougherty, do you think I think he would likely keep that bloodstained sweater in his basement for six months waiting for us to find it?"

Dougherty chuckled.

"Thatch, Thatch, I have always said you were the smartest Commissioner the police department ever had."

"Well, if you still feel that Keplinger is guilty, I think you'd better come over here."

"When?"

"Right away."

I could even hear Dougherty's asthmatic wheeze at the other end of the wire.

"But I'm supposed to be in court in fifteen minutes—that racketeering case over in Yorkville."

"Postpone it."

"Is it that important, Thatch?"

"Yes. And have O'Toole here with you."

"But he doesn't want to come."

"Better bring him just the same."

"All right then, Thatch, you can expect us—both of us—in from five minutes to half an hour."

#### 4

Colt went on checking the dossier account of the life of Honest Dan and the reports of various detectives working on the case. It had been definitely established that Verne Adams, the drug broker of Shanghai, the second husband of Beulah and the father of Verna Swift, was utterly, finally and completely dead. The records on this case were cabled by the British police from Hong-Kong; Adams had died in prison while serving out a sentence for opium trading.

Flynn's investigation among the taxi drivers was also bearing more fruit. Two drivers had been found who had pertinent stories to tell. One was Sam Furness, a veteran of Belleau Wood, and a smart lad, who remembered having driven a girl whom he identified through a picture as Madeline Swift on May first. From upper Broadway, where she had talked with Alfred Keplinger, Furness had driven Madeline downtown across the Brooklyn Bridge, and to the corner near the house of Daniel V. O'Toole. That was when she had telephoned. Thus, certain blank phases of her movements on her last day alive were beginning to be filled in. We had the taxi driver who had driven her from the Waldorf to the University district, another who brought her to the O'Toole neighbourhood—and a third who took her back. Flynn had turned up a fourth also—and his story was the strangest of all.

This hackman was named Hoffmann and he had a regular stand on Clinton Street, not far from the O'Toole house. The stenographic statement of Hoffmann, lying on Colt's desk, read as follows:

I saw a girl that I think was certainly this murdered girl called Miss Swift and I saw her come out of Mr. O'Toole's house and put up her finger to stop a taxi coming down the street, a cruiser. So all right, I says to myself, I sit here and wait for them and he comes by, going home from another fare I bet, and still he gets it when I'm entitled to it. That's swell, I says to myself, that's swell that is. So the girl gets in the cruising cab and just then a guy runs up to my cab—up to me. I forget now what he looked like. I don't recall it, see. All I do recollect is how he was wearing a red sweater. I remember that much. He hops in my cab and tells me to follow that other cab, the cruising one, with the girl in it. So I did—all the way uptown, until she started to look back like she was scared and then I thought she

was on to us and I told the man in the red sweater and he said for us to fall behind a little. And I did what he told me to and so I lost the cab ahead. I crossed over town and stopped somewhere near Grant's tomb and that's all I know about it.

(Signed) FREDERIC HOFFMAN.

Here was a valuable new facet to the case. It tied up perfectly with the testimony of Jake Fuller, the journalist-patrolman who had first told us how Madeline had run up to him, fearful that she was being followed. Who, then, was the mysterious stranger in his red sweater? Hoffmann, the hackman, could not remember whether his passenger was young or old, well or ill-favoured; the face was a blank, only that red sweater remained. There were so many red sweaters in the world and none of them might have any meaning for our case. No wonder that Colt looked a little discouraged, as he drank of his noon mug of beer, munched his sandwich and read on through the routine of the reports. Only one of them did he pass to me as important enough for comment:

"Detective Moore, working at the apartment house where Keplinger lives, has turned up the following information. He has questioned all families living in that building and none of them has any recollection of seeing a stranger on May first except one widow lady, a Mrs. Tapp, who had just moved in the day before. She remembers a man in a red sweater going up the staircase as she was going down. She remembers also that the man looked very pale and nervous and excited. But she cannot describe him; Detective Moore could not get her to make any further statement beyond what I quoted above."

This memorandum was directed to Colt by Assistant Chief Inspector Flynn. Colt read it with a great deal of satisfaction.

"Now," said he, "we are approaching a point where a rational theory of what happened is beginning to emerge. Things don't look so dark."

"In spite of Dougherty, chief?"

Colt smiled blandly.

"I am beginning to think we owe Dougherty an apology and a vote of thanks for keeping Alfred Keplinger in jail," he replied, with one of his enigmatic smiles. "At least, a pattern is beginning to appear."

"You mean, then——"

But I got no further. The door opened and Captain Israel Henry stood back, as District Attorney Merle K. Dougherty and Honest Dan O'Toole entered the office.

## 5

The District Attorney sat down in our most comfortable chair, and lighted a cigar. But the tall, grey-haired man in the collar and cravat and frock coat of the nineties, the grey-haired politician with a face like something carved from the native rock, and the water of heart trouble flowing in his eyes, he declined to sit down, but nervously drummed his fingers on Colt's desk.

"I hear you're building a case against me, in spite of all I told you—in spite of the Grand Jury——"

"Sit down, O'Toole. You know that the Grand Jury still hasn't done anything—it hasn't voted the indictment——"

"But it will, Colt, it will."

"And the story that you told me was strictly *ex parte* statement. I haven't talked to your daughter, even——"

"You wouldn't drag her into this?"

"Not unless we have to. But we do have to get at the facts, as you perfectly well know—that's why you are here again, Mr. O'Toole, about that sweater of yours—it was red, was it not?"

"It was, yes."

"What did you use it for?"

"Hunting, fishing—outdoor things like that."

"Why did you burn it?"

"Well, it had some stains on it."

"What kind?"

"Frankly blood."

"Whose?"

"Rabbits. Ducks. Things like that."

"Then why did you burn the sweater?"

"I got scared. I suppose I've been reading too many detective stories. I just got frightened—so I burned the only thing with blood on it I could find in my house. I know it was silly of me."

"You did not know, then, by any chance that the police were looking for a man who wore a red sweater?"

"No. Are they? In what connection, if you don't mind a question?"

"In connection with this same murder."

"How?"

"We'll come to that later. Now, Mr. O'Toole, you told me that you talked with Madeline that last time around noon on the day of May first—is that correct?"

"Right."

"And Madeline was excited—upset—nervous——"

"All of that. At one time she threatened to take her own life but I soon talked her out of that."

"But didn't you tell me something about her saying she had other troubles?"

"Yes."

"Did she mention any of them specifically——"

"Well——"

"Did she, or did she not?"

"She did, yes. She told me that she felt she had cut her sister Verna out—that Verna and Alfred had originally cared for each other—and that Alfred would never really love her."

"You are absolutely positive of that statement?"

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"And did not Madeline leave you with the understanding that she was to see Alfred Keplinger in the afternoon?"

"Yes," O'Toole answered. "She had a date with him at a restaurant. But she was also going up to his apartment to try to see him right away if he was still there. You see, I had convinced her that there was no reason for her to despair or think of suicide or running away. So she was going up to look for Alfred right away and try to make it up with him."

"That is what she promised you?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mr. O'Toole, didn't you also tell me that Madeline thought she heard a noise while she was talking to you?"

"Oh, yes, but that was just her nervousness."

"What makes you so sure?"

"There was nobody in the house."

"Nobody that you knew about."

"You mean a burglar?"

"Any intruder."

"I don't think it would be possible."

"Well, it is a fact that you were planning to go out for the rest of the day, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And were you late in starting?"

"Yes. And, by God, Mr. Colt, that gives me an idea. I felt all along that I had a secret enemy who was doing things to me. Of course a man in my position has to do things in politics that sometimes makes him an enemy or two. And everybody thought I was leaving that morning. Somebody might have gotten into the house thinking I was gone, trying to get at my papers."

"Well, perhaps," said Colt thoughtfully. "In any event, Mr. O'Toole, you don't know the man who followed Madeline from your house uptown, do you?"

"Of course I don't. I didn't know there was such a person."

"Well, there was, and he wore a red sweater."

"For the love of God! Somebody saw him?"

"Yes, O'Toole, I'm afraid some one did. Are you sure you didn't hear a noise in your house when Madeline thought she heard one?"

O'Toole's eyes were watering and his breath came in laboured gasps.

"You know, Colt," he said, "I didn't want to sound like a nervous person myself—but now that the facts are coming out, I'll say it. Yes, I did think I heard a noise in my house that noon and I always regretted that I didn't go and take a look."

Colt's smile was thin and cold. He did not speak, as a knock came at the door and Captain Henry's stern face looked in.

"Mr. Colt," he said, "you asked me to let you know as soon as Detective Lox got here with Verna Adams Swift. She's waiting outside now."

Colt stood up.

"I can get you whenever I want you, can't I, O'Toole?"

And the old man nodded his head in a kind of daze.

"I hope so," was his enigmatic reply and Dougherty, who had said nothing, nodded his head and took him away.

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## *Chapter Seven*

### A CRY FROM THE GRAVE

There were unusual women mixed up in the Madeline Swift case, but none stranger than the girl whose real name was Verna Adams but who called herself Verna Adams Swift. Fortunately for our interview, and even for the case itself, Dorothy Lox came in for a private talk with Thatcher Colt, before he interviewed the half-sister of the murdered girl. Our ace girl detective looked tired out from her journeying; her dark hair needed attention and her clothes looked seedy and unpressed—queer sight on one who prided herself on smartness, but Dorothy had actually not slept since Colt dispatched her on the assignment to bring Verna to Headquarters. And with good reason.

"You see, Mr. Colt, Verna still does not know about the finding of her sister's remains. She doesn't know anything about the case at all."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Because the doctor and nurses at the sanatorium kept everything away from her—and naturally I did too. Of course she knows *something* has happened—but she doesn't seem very anxious to know what, and I thought you would know best how to tell her."

"Good girl, Dorothy. What's wrong with Verna—why was she in that sanatorium?"

Dorothy's pretty eyes opened wider and she shrugged.

"Doctor Fosdick said it was some kind of emotional collapse. I couldn't get him to be very definite. At first, he felt it was none of my business; then, when he heard I was a detective, he became even more reticent. He did tell me, though, that she had had some kind of horrible shock—the kind of thing that causes amnesia, aphasia—she is frankly insane—but not incurable."

"But she had none of those symptoms?"

"No. She seems quite normal—but I gather when they took her to the sanatorium she was depressed, did not want to talk, or even eat—what they used to call acute melancholia."

"So you could not find out much from her?"

"Well, here are some facts that might help!"

As our girl detective saw her, Verna was an unusual combination, athlete and dreamer. She had been graduated from a New York high school and had played on the basketball team. She had won several medals as a swimmer. She was a good golfer and she rode horses well. Yet mentally Verna often lived in a kind of dream world. She wrote verse—a great deal of which was soon to be published in the newspapers without her permission—and she found a delight in reading erotic literature. She had discussed these at length with Dorothy, who was also well acquainted with them.

"She is a well-informed person," added Dorothy Lox, "who had decided views on lots of public questions and could be a very superior woman if she ever got started right. But I am certain she is hiding something. Of course it may not amount to anything."

"You think it is tied up with this case?"

"Positively! And I think there is one way to get at her."

"Yes?"

"Superstition. She's very superstitious. Believes in omens—always going to fortune tellers, astrologers, mediums——"

Colt lifted his head. A gleam came into his eyes.

"Thanks, Dorothy, for a good lead. You can go now—and send in Verna."

I have said that Verna Adams Swift was strange. I should have added that she had a strange and fearful beauty, a child-like loveliness with her thin, pale cheeks and slow-moving, pensive green eyes. She did not in the least resemble her sister. Her dark hair was parted tightly over her head and coiled and knobbed at the nape of the neck; she carried a brown coat and hat over her arm and she walked in with the grace of one who dances well.

Colt smiled at her encouragingly and drew up the chair for her. But she gave him no answering smile. Instead, she sat down, breathed deeply, and in a musical, contralto voice said:

"It has been very kind of everybody to try to keep things from me, Mr. Colt. I mean I like your woman detective. But it isn't necessary. I have known all along what has happened to Madeline—ever since you found the bones. They kept the papers from me at the sanatorium but the poor darlings forgot about the radio—Lowell Thomas told me all about it on the Sunoco programme. So please don't try to be too kind to me. I realise I've been mentally upset and in a sanatorium and all that but I've braced myself, I've got myself thoroughly in hand—I can answer all your questions. I know how suspicious the police are—I read the newspapers and the crime magazines, too. I can just see you thinking of me as a murder suspect—you do suspect every one, don't you? I can imagine your looking at me when I came in and saying to yourself, 'She's not as innocent as she seems. No, sir! *Elle fait l'Agnes*.' So I don't pretend to be wholly unsophisticated and ingenuous. I'm not. I know a lot of things that may be valuable to you. And merely for the sake of the record, let me say that I did not kill my sister."

"Do you know who did?"

"No, Mr. Colt, I cannot guess who would have hurt my sister, any more than I can guess who would not have hurt my sister."

"What do you mean by that, Verna?"

"Everybody hurt my sister. My step-father hurt her because they could never understand each other. My mother hurt her because she was afraid to stand up for her. I hurt her, too, I suppose."

"Did you wish to?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"Because she was so much cleverer than I—so much more popular than I. And she seemed to have something that I didn't have. I never found out what it was, but I wanted it just the same. I'm always wanting something, Mr. Colt. I want it more than anything else in the world, but it is some unknown something, some unnameable something, something that was left out of my recipe. I feel like a mince pie without raisins. I haven't a raisin in me. And I wanted to help Madeline and she didn't want my help. I don't know what's the matter with me. Mr. Colt, I wish I could find out. I wish I could understand myself." It was a little awkward. She wished to talk about the mystery of her own life rather than the mystery of her sister's death.

"Verna, you want to help me find your sister's murderer, don't you?"

"Not particularly."

"Now why do you give me an answer like that?"

"Because I believe in letting things be. We can't understand them, so why try? Whoever killed her must have had her reasons—or his reasons. They were wrong reasons but they were reasons just the same, and what good would it do to do anything about it? I don't believe in punishment. It couldn't bring Madeline back. And maybe Madeline wouldn't want to be brought back. I know I wouldn't. I wouldn't want to be brought back, either."

And for the first time, Verna began to cry. Queer tears, too—not a great human outburst of crying, but a little sob, a trickle of tears, a mean impoverished little cry as if she had very few tears to give and these she gave grudgingly, not for her sister, but for herself because she would not want to come back, either.

Colt scratched his head and gave me a rueful glance.

"Are you being entirely frank with me?"

"About everything essential I am."

"But are you? Wasn't there something else that made a rift between you and Madeline?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Colt?"

"I mean Alfred Keplinger!"

Verna's glance was quick, startled and then hidden by a quick look away from Colt, a quick closing down of the eyelids.

"I haven't the faintest notion what you mean," she coldly replied.

Colt leaned forward as if he would force her to look him in the eye.

"I have no wish to beat about the bush with you," he said flatly. "It is my understanding that you were the first to meet young Keplinger at a dance. You liked him. Your sister then met him and Alfred transferred his attentions to Madeline."

"Did he?" she returned with a false, almost painful and childish air of dignity.

"I am asking you—did he or did he not?"

"Some people might put that construction on what happened—but it would be wrong."

Colt frowned as he searched for his pipe.

"Do you mean by that," he asked abruptly, "that you ditched Alfred—and then Madeline took him up?"

"No!"

Her voice rang out in its throaty silver clarity.

"No!" Verna repeated, "I did not ditch Alfred as you call it. I could never desert him or let him down."

"Because you love him?"

"I don't believe you have to answer a question like that."

"Why do you object? Have you anything to hide?"

"Nothing. Nothing whatever. Of course I haven't."

"You do love Alfred, don't you?"

"Only as a sister might."

"Was your feeling for him always purely sisterly?"

"I suppose not."

"It underwent a change—from the kind of love a girl has for the man she would like to marry to this sisterly affection you feel now?"

"Yes"—faintly.

"What caused the change?"

"Madeline."

"And he cared for her more than for you?"

"No, he didn't—but he thought he did. She made him believe he did. She was clever like that. She trapped him."

Colt leaned back with an inaudible sigh of satisfaction. He was leading up to something that he considered vital. He rose from his desk, without a glance at either Verna or myself, and slipped into a small side room. I surmised he was talking

with Flynn; meanwhile I sat, running over the notes in my book and stealing a glance, now and then, at the pale and smart and lovely creature, so tense and nervous as she clasped her ungloved hands in her lap and stared resignedly at the door through which Colt had departed. When he came back, he took up the packing of his pipe bowl where he had left off; and also took up again the questioning of Verna.

"Now, Miss Swift—do you remember anything about the first day of May of this year?"

"Yes, Mr. Colt—perfectly."

"First—how do you have such a clear recollection of that particular day?"

"Because it was the day my sister left home. It was a day no one could ever forget."

"Naturally. Now tell me, in your own words, just what happened on that day?"

"What part of that day? It was a very long one."

"From the time you woke up in the morning."

"Yes, sir. I got up at my usual time—a little after seven-thirty. We all had breakfast together—mamma and father and grandfather and Madeline."

"Pardon me—did you notice any quarrel or disagreement at that breakfast?"

"Nothing unusual. We are not a very happy family, you know. No one really likes any one else in it. Besides that, none of us wakes up in a very good temper, either; I never begin to feel myself until after ten o'clock. And we always bicker at meal time especially anyway. But there was no unusual row—just cracks and remarks."

"I see. One more question—do you know why Nellie Schwartz was discharged that morning?"

"I wasn't there to hear any of it—but mamma said she forgot her place and father told her to go."

"Thanks. Go right ahead."

"I went to work as usual. But along about ten-thirty, it must have been, the forelady in our place came to me and said somebody wanted me on the telephone. It was mamma and I was so surprised, because mamma never calls anybody. So I asked her if there was any trouble, and she said no, but there was something she and my father wished I would do for them. I asked them what it was and then they told me that some woman, they had no idea who it was, had called Madeline on the telephone at the house and they had heard Madeline promise to meet her at the Waldorf-Astoria at twelve-thirty that same day. And what mamma and father wished me to do was to go down to the Waldorf-Astoria and play detective and find out who the unnamed caller could be. I did not like that. I don't like to be spied on myself. But mamma was almost in hysterics and I realised that she had something preying on her mind."

"So I promised and on my lunch hour at twelve o'clock I hurried over to Park Avenue and into the Waldorf. Luck, good or bad, I don't know which, was with me. I came in from the Park Avenue side, crossed through the main lobby and had reached the eastern elevators when I got a glimpse of my sister—almost the very last I will ever get in this old world. She was wearing a green dress. It was too late to follow her in that car, so I stood there, just watching the arrow on the dial of floor numbers above the entrance to the car. I watched what floors it stopped on—twelve, eighteen, and nineteen. So I got in another car and went up to the nineteenth floor. I described my sister to the woman clerk on the nineteenth floor and said I was looking for her and forgot what room I was to meet her in. No go. But on the eighteenth floor I got what I wanted. Madeline had telephoned up to room 1820 and the occupant, a Mrs. J. C. Brandon of Montreal, had told her to come right up. She asked me whether I wished to be announced. I said no, I would wait, and I did wait, in the corridor between the two lines of elevator doors."

"In about ten minutes Madeline came around the turn of one of the corridors. I could tell she was terribly excited. I knew the symptoms of old. I accosted her and at first she acted as if she barely knew me. I asked her what had happened, who Mrs. Brandon was, what it was all about. She told me angrily it was none of my affair. Then she accused me of knowing everything about it—she said I was the one who had put Mrs. Brandon up to threatening her. I demanded to be taken to Mrs. Brandon then—but the floor clerk asked us both to come back later. We rode downstairs without speaking; she went out of the Lexington Avenue door and I went to the Park Avenue and back to work without any lunch."

Colt nodded, stood up and held out his hand.

"You have been most helpful," he declared genially. "I am really obliged to you, Miss Swift. A little later on, I shall need to talk with you again. Will you sort of keep that in mind?"

"Of course. Good-day, Mr. Colt."

The door closed behind her, and Thatcher Colt gave his orders crisply: "Put a tail on her, Tony—don't let her out of our sight until this case is closed."

"Yes, chief."

"And get me Mr. Claxton at the Waldorf."

"Right."

"And on your way back—when I have finished talking with Claxton—bring in Eva Allen Lynn."

"The medium?"

"Yes, Tony—naturally."

"But I didn't know the medium was here——"

"Even so, Tony—send her in."

I put on Stewart and Wilson as tails for Verna Adams Swift. I connected Colt with Claxton, of the Waldorf, and heard Colt begin that phase of the investigation which was to prove so nearly final and conclusive:

"There was a Mrs. J. C. Brandon, of Montreal, registered at your hotel on May first. Try to get me at once the forwarding address she left, if any, and any other details you may have about her.... Thanks, Claxton."

And then I found Eva Allen Lynn. The curly, snap-eyed medium was not in our outer office at all; she was lurking—that is the only word to describe her behaviour—in the little side room off Colt's private office. And Eva was in tears.

"Why the dribbles?" I asked unfeelingly. "What's burning you up? And what right have you got in here?"

"Mr. Colt put me in here," she flared.

"Who did?"

"Mr. Colt himself."

"What for?"

"You ask him."

"Right now," I promised, taking her by the arm. She was crying again as I led her before Thatcher Colt, who was very busy transferring his gardenia from the Persian tear vase on his desk to the buttonhole of his lapel.

He looked at the weeping girl with sombrely inquiring eyes. She stood gracelessly before him—a foolish little handkerchief at her nose and our office reeked with its perfume. "Well?" asked Thatcher Colt.

She cried on for a moment. Then she dropped her hands and twisted the handkerchief between her wraith-like fingers. "It's right," she said.

"What's right?"

"She was one of my clients. She's the girl that I thought looked like the snapshot you showed me. I never knew her name. But she did used to come in and get readings."

"At your room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks! That's all!"

She went to the door; and then turned and looked at Thatcher Colt:

"I don't want to accuse anybody wrongly, but——"

"Well?"

"It's the same," she said. "I couldn't be mistaken."

"What?"

"That voice—the ghoul's voice?"

"Hers? Verna's?"

"Yes!"

"You would know it anywhere?"

"Yes, sir. I would know it anywhere. I have heard it ever since that first night. It haunts me so that I can't sleep. There's no doubt about it, whatsoever. The voice of that woman you had in here whose name I don't even know was the voice that I heard coming through that hole in the wall. She made it and nobody else."

Colt nodded.

"We will get back to that!" he said solemnly.

## 2

The Waldorf-Astoria is the largest hotel in the world. It occupies a double block from Park to Lexington Avenues between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets with two huge towers and four sections containing the twenty-two hundred guest rooms within its forty-seven stories. The *New York Times* once called it—"The unofficial palace of New York."

It was here that Thatcher Colt and I came after sending Eva Allen Lynn on her way. Colt sent the medium away smiling and happy for the first time since Professor Gilman had brought her to our offices for that singular séance. The Commissioner told Eva frankly that her identification of the voice that came in the dark was of the greatest consequence to the investigation. As far as he was concerned, so he assured her, she was no longer under suspicion. But he warned her that she must hold herself in readiness to testify and that if she tried to run away she would be caught and brought back and punished for exhibiting fake ghosts. I noticed, too, that before we left the office, Colt took an envelope from his desk drawer and put it in his pocket. It was then that we left Headquarters and Neil McMahon drove us over to Park Avenue and we went into the private office of Jabez Claxton, one of the officials of the hotel, a rubicund, Pickwickian man who greeted Colt heartily.

"Sit down, gentlemen. I think I have everything you asked for, Mr. Colt. As I telephoned you awhile ago, Mrs. J. C. Brandon arrived here very early in the morning of May the first. Actually I think she registered about four-thirty in the morning. She made only one telephone call, remained in her room, did not order any breakfast in the hotel, and received a visitor a little after twelve o'clock, after which she ordered tickets on a night plane for Detroit. I have her registration card here."

He passed the card over to Thatcher Colt, who studied it carefully. There was the name—Mrs. J. C. Brandon of Montreal, Quebec. The blank for the street address was not filled in.

The moment Colt saw the handwriting, a gleam came to his eyes. He took from his pocket an envelope and drew out a letter. He compared the handwriting on the letter with the script on the registration and gave a low sigh of satisfaction.

He looked over at me and smiled.

"It checks, Tony. I am not a handwriting expert; we will have one confirm this. But an expert is hardly needed. She didn't even bother to disguise her handwriting. It's palpably the same. This is a letter from Josephine Keplinger to her brother. The mysterious Mrs. Brandon was Josephine."

3

We had lunch at the Waldorf, the first full meal we had eaten in days and at first we did not discuss the case at all. Oscar, that legendary figure at the Waldorf, that bachelor of the art of hospitality, doctor of philosophy of eating well—Oscar, the king of restaurateurs, saw to it that his *johannes factotum*, the cook, and all the acolytes of waiters and serving boys surrounded us with attentions and then, with the wisdom that is Oscar's, he went away from us, leaving us to enjoy what he had prepared.

I saw that a critical time had come in the thinking of Thatcher Colt about the mystery of Madeline Swift. From long experience, having seen him come to this point many times before, I knew I must be cautious. One question too many and he might blow up in a sudden fury and send me back to Headquarters, back to routine secretarial duties, while he finished the case alone. On the other hand, if I did not show an eager interest, he was likely to say I was not stimulating enough—and with the same finality send me off. There is something of the prima donna in every great detective.

So very warily I sat with Colt in the Waldorf dining room, feeling like a tennis player waiting to know whether to reach right or left. Colt's eyes were looking at the table seeing nothing. He had the melancholy of an evangelist, praying before he entered a heathen town. I sympathised with him. We had learned such startling secrets this morning—the discovery that the voice through the wall was Verna's; the signature on the hotel registration card, Josephine's. How reconcile those singularly opposite facts?

With a word to Colt, while we waited for luncheon to be served, I left the table, telephoned Flynn and asked if there had been any more developments. There had, indeed. A new witness had been found; a former bootlegger from the Long Beach region of Long Island. He had had his own reasons for keeping quiet until now, but at last he had come out with it. On the night of May first he had been waiting in a cove near where the bones were found. He saw a man drive up to a boathouse, open the door with a key, carry a box into the boathouse, then come out of the boathouse in a motor boat with something dark—something that might have been a wooden box the size of a coffin—in the stern. No, the witness could not identify the man. The only thing he could identify was the boathouse where he saw the man with the box. He had done that. And Flynn had talked personally to the owner, a broker from Exchange Place named Hasker.

Inspector Flynn went on with more reports for Thatcher Colt. He had checked on the movements of Mr. O'Toole and the daughter, a student at Smith College. Everything seemed in order there; it was a fact that mother had visited daughter in Northampton on May first. Furthermore, Flynn had some witnesses come voluntarily to Headquarters to back up the alibi of Alfred Keplinger. He had, as demonstrated by these witnesses, taken the long and scatter-brained walk he had described. Now that his picture was in the paper, people he had accosted, borrowed matches from and talked with, came forward to back him up. The most conclusive of all, so it seemed to Flynn, was a private detective. He had been hired on May first to follow Alfred Keplinger. He reported to his office that he had followed him from apartment house to restaurant and then on his long walk uptown. Flynn had sent them all over to the District Attorney's office, where they got a stormy reception. Meanwhile, there had been another development. In spite of all the friendly efforts of the District Attorney's office, as well as the absence of any overt act in Police Headquarters, nevertheless there had been a leak on the O'Toole angle of the case. The Wall Street closing editions of the afternoon papers would carry the story. Some one with precise information had talked with the reporters; some one who knew, not only about the payments which O'Toole had made to Nickerson Swift, but also about Madeline's last visit to the home of Honest Dan.

Nor was this all the tale Flynn had to tell of Headquarters during our absence. Another taxicab driver had come forward, the fifth to play a part in completing the picture of Madeline's Swift's last day alive. He was the hackman who took Madeline directly from her front door down to the Waldorf. His name was DePuy, this taxi driver; he remembered the incident perfectly, and he was positive she did not stop once, or speak to any one on the way to the hotel.

"I tried to talk to her," DePuy revealed, "but she told me to shut up and drive. But I'm sorry she got what was coming to her!"

Colt listened sombrely as I retailed all the reports from Flynn. Gleams came and went in his fine brown eyes as he listened. When I had quite finished, he left the table abruptly in the direction of the telephone booths. When he returned he called again for Oscar; they conferred together with the melancholy proper only to gourmets of mutual respect and liking; the *maître d'hôtel* sighed with pleasure as Colt ordered a cocktail after an esoteric recipe—a debonair concoction of old Maryland rye, Cointreau, and a dash of Arak—a dizzy thing that the Commissioner calls a "formidable," giving it the French pronunciation.

With two of these formidables warming the lining of our stomachs, we went on in silence to partake of this never-to-be-forgotten luncheon of Maryland oysters on the half shell; bisque d'homard; lobster à la Foyot; then pressed duck done quite as delicately as one eats it at Lapérouse; a light dessert of pears stewed in champagne; and, as a fitting after-clap, a liqueur from Avignon, known by the unprepossessing title of "The Sweat of the Holy Virgin," but very soothing and tasty just the same.

During all this we were not completely silent. By fits and starts, Colt talked over a wide variety of subjects. The latest experiments in getting power from the tides, the insurance risks to be calculated on the Dionne quintuplets, whether Germany was making secret promises to Poland and whether she would try to reclaim Memel from the Russians, the tendency to emphasise breasts in the current female fashions—a reflection, he said, of a strumpet influence from Hollywood but nevertheless an outstanding improvement over the decadence of the boyish silhouette. Now that women were pretending to have breasts, he declared, there was hope they might some day begin to grow them naturally again.

Over our third formidable he agreed to take a vacation on the first homeward voyage of the new French liner and repeat the outing on the new English liner when launched. We were getting around to Epstein and Einstein when Colt looked at his watch; the deceptively idle mood of the Commissioner passed as we left the restaurant and found the car with Neil McMahon at the wheel.

"Headquarters," snapped Colt with a dour kind of chuckle, "and don't spare the horse power."

And though he chuckled, still there was something black and terrible underneath. His mind was back on the case, back in its tortuous labyrinth of conflicting possibilities, and he was unhappily upset over something.

"You know, Tony," he said as the car turned into Fourth Avenue, its siren howling through the barrier of red lights, "the more I think of this case, the more I realise that we may be building on a wholly false foundation."

"How so?"

"Suppose, for example, that Madeline Swift was not dead at all."

"But, chief——"

"None of us has ever seen her dead!"

"That's true," I admitted, "but we know what proof is required in a homicide case. We have to establish the death of the person alleged to have been killed and the fact of the killing by the defendant as alleged and we have to establish those as indisputable facts."

He hunched far back in his corner with his feet on the folding chair of the limousine, and groaned.

"Well, then, chief?"

"Well, then, just this, Tony. It's going to be up to a jury to decide whether the death of the person alleged to have been killed is established."

"But we've got her bones."

"Is that enough? We are depending on the efforts of Imro Acheson Fitch, our crime sculptor, who is now under suspicion!"

"But that's a hell of a lot to depend on."

"It seems to be. But suppose all Mr. Fitch's calculations were wrong. Suppose it was just a fantastic coincidence, the

fact that he made his image look like Madeline Swift and that Madeline Swift were really still alive—somewhere."

"That's a pretty wild theory, chief."

"I admit it, but there have been wilder facts in crime. The image made by Mr. Fitch was valuable only as a starting point for this investigation. The case will never be complete for a jury until many other things are cleared up."

"I don't like to agree with Dougherty, chief, in anything at all, but aren't you leaning over backward right now over a case that actually you built up?"

"Well, perhaps I am. Perhaps it's because——"

He hesitated so long that I prompted him.

"Yes, chief."

"Because I don't like to look the realities of this affair in the face. They're too horrible. I don't like to look at them. But I've got to. Right now."

The red light of the traffic lamp spilled a hellish glow over the face of Thatcher Colt. In the crimson glow his eyes gleamed demoniacally.

"Right now!" he repeated. "Here's the horrible part, Tony—I know who killed Madeline Swift now—but I can't prove it!"

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## BOOK THREE

### We Know Who Did It But We Can't Prove It

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## *Chapter One*

### **COLT KEEPS A SECRET FROM ME**

It was two-thirty o'clock when we reached Colt's office in Headquarters. Here we were in the afternoon of the fifth day of our investigation and I could feel Colt's discouragement. He had attacked the investigation from every angle he could think of; he had nothing to reproach himself for, and yet I saw that he felt at a stalemate. What his theory of the crime was I did not even guess. I confess that though I had been with him from the outset, had seen and heard all the essential evidence with him, I still did not discern what should have been, or so now it seems to me, the obvious and natural conclusion. Colt had seen it. I think he had seen it from the first. His problem was to prove it.

Meanwhile our regular work had been piling up at Headquarters. For several days we had eaten, drunk, slept and breathed with the mystery of Madeline Swift. Colt was so fascinated with the enigma that he had let everything else slide. That, so his critics will tell you, was his great weakness as Police Commissioner. He could not resist the urge to work on dramatic crime mysteries personally. The opposition newspapers clamoured that he should attend to his executive duties and leave crime to detectives. Perhaps they were right. But Colt's only price for giving his time and positive executive gifts to the city was that he could do just that. And certainly a dozen crime mysteries of New York would never have been solved without his personal activities.

His desk and mine were stacked with the routine of four days spent on one case. For the rest of Monday afternoon we had to get down to hard work on department detail. I could see that Colt welcomed the change. He had concentrated so long on that hapless lot of bones that it was a relief to go back to promotions, equipment, budget excesses, requests for appropriations and his *bête noire*, the traffic problem of Manhattan highways. The papers flew from one tray to another as the brightness of the short afternoon faded and the December twilight filled the room. With nightfall it came on to rain and a fine slanting spray played against the large window behind the Commissioner's desk. So absorbed were we that we had, for that concentrated interval, forgotten the Madeline Swift case, when we were suddenly recalled to it by a knock at the door.

Captain Israel Henry was reporting; Detective Blume was outside and with him was the woman he had been ordered to bring in, the missing housemaid of the Swift family, the girl called Nellie Schwartz.

A frightened creature, this Nellie Schwartz; once we were so eager to get her; now Colt no longer itched to question her, this stout, red-armed, red-necked, wart-cheeked Nellie with a blowsy glare of fear in her piggish eyes. A substantial woman, not under two hundred pounds; her hands showed hard work; and there was that about the stern lines of her mouth that bespoke a certain rectitude. A bit of a fool with a full portion of decency, I would have said of Nellie.

She flounced down in the chair before Thatcher Colt and Detective Blume stood behind her.

"I did what you told me, Mr. Commissioner," said Blume. "I didn't ask her any questions. I just told her you wanted to talk with her."

"Thank you, Blume. You may go now."

And as the detective left, Colt turned to Nellie:

"Now, Miss Schwartz, I don't want you to feel nervous or alarmed. Even though you went away, I know you did not mean to do anything wrong."

"As God is my witness——"

"Naturally. I understand that. And if you feel like having a good cry, go right ahead—we can talk afterwards."

She drew herself up proudly.

"I never cry in public," she announced, including me in her glance.

"All right then—are you ready for a few questions? Mind?"

"Who, me? No, indeed, I just guess I don't mind. Why should I? What have I got to mind about?"

"Exactly. The first question is—Do you know about Madeline Swift's death?"

"Sure! I read it. It's awful—*awful!*"

"Yes. Have you any idea who did it?"

"That's not for me to say."

"Yes, Miss Schwartz, it is for you to say anything that will help the police—who are your agents, you know——"

"My agents?"—blankly.

"Of course! The police work for the city—and the city is made up of its citizens and you are one of them. So you have a duty."

"I never thought of that! Think of that! Me!"

"Yes, Miss Schwartz, you! If you have the slightest suspicion——"

"Oh, I've got plenty of suspicions, all right."

"Of whom?"

"Who of? Who would it be—but Keplinger."

"You think that he did it, too, eh?"

"Of course he did it!"

"Of course. But why did he do it, do you suppose?"

"Because she wouldn't marry him."

"And why wouldn't she marry him?"

"I don't know, I declare I don't. All she ever said was that she wouldn't ruin anybody's life by marrying any one."

"But, Miss Schwartz—I don't want to seem stupid——"

"That's all right, sir!"

"But my information is different. I was told that Keplinger loved somebody else, not Madeline."

"Verna?"

"Yes."

"I don't know whether that was so or not. It was funny about that. But I know Mr. Keplinger wanted Miss Madeline to marry him for the last three or four weeks—but she wouldn't—not after she found out what her old man was up to."

"You heard that quarrel, didn't you?"

"Sure I did—until they chucked me out on my ear."

"What happened?"

"He wanted her to make demands on old man O'Toole, that's what happened. And it was the first time Miss Madeline knew anything about it. She certainly took it awful hard. That's when she looked at me and told me she was going to call off her marriage because she wasn't fit for a nice boy. So I figured that she went out and told him so and he got so mad he shot her."

"I see. Extraordinary deduction—but, then, of course, anything may happen."

Colt was thoughtful for a moment, then he asked suddenly:

"Do you remember a telephone call that came to Madeline that morning?"

"Sure I do." Nellie shifted her gum from one cheek to the other. "I took it myself and I called Miss Madeline to the telephone."

"Remember the voice?"

"Sure I do. It was like the alto in a choir."

"And do you remember what she said?"

"Oh, no, I don't, except it was just could she please talk to Madeline."

"You never heard that voice before?"

"No, sir."

"Madeline didn't say anything to indicate who it was?"

"No, sir. After she hung up, she never mentioned it again. She went back and finished telling her father what she thought of him."

"And why did they throw you out?"

"They didn't throw me out—it was just old Nick. Miss Madeline always liked me and I always liked her; and when she was going hot and heavy, Old Nick started to criticise her and her friends, and said she had the devil in her just like her mother—and the old grandfather in the wheel-chair joined in with his two cents' worth and said she drank and smoked and slept around; and the father said of course she did, and Madeline slapped his dirty old face for him and he struck her here——"

Nellie Schwartz touched her left breast and began to cry.

"That's when I barged in," she wailed. "I wouldn't stand for it. I told him I'd wring his dirty neck if he laid his finger on her again. He fired me, then—after all the dirty underwear I washed for him in the last ten years—he fired me—and Madeline went out of the room; she didn't even say good-bye to me."

Colt's sombre eyes looked out of his rain-washed window. What a last day Madeline Swift had on this earth!

"All right, Miss Schwartz. Cry a little longer, if you like, but——"

"I don't like!"

"Do you know anything else about this case that you think would help?"

"Not a thing."

"Do you know anybody in the family who believed in fortune telling?"

"Sure I do—Miss Verna."

"Did she consult mediums?"

"Sure she did—she was always running around after them—she believed in that stuff. And sometimes it's wonderful what they can tell."

"Do you recall any particular medium Miss Verna used to go to?"

"Sure I do!"

"Well, who were they?"

"I'm trying to remember the name. It had something to do with shoes."

"Shoes?" Colt thought a moment, then his face cleared and he smiled.

"Was it the name of a town where there are a lot of shoe factories?"

"Sure it was. My sister works there—Lynn. That was the name, sure as God. Lynn—Eva Allen Lynn."

I felt a cold quiver in the flesh down my sides. Here was confirmation of Eva Lynn's tale about Verna! Verna Swift would have a great deal to explain when Colt talked to her again.

"There is one thing more," added Nellie Schwartz. "I hate to seem a tattle-tale, but you've made me see my duty as a New York citizen and I know Miss Verna did not have anything to do with hurting her sister—I believe Alfred Keplinger did it—but I saw them together that afternoon."

"Keplinger—and Verna?" asked Colt, in an amazed voice.

"Yes, sir."

"What time?"

"About four-thirty."

"Where?"

"In Central Park."

"How did that happen?"

"Well, I sort of hoped I would get my job back."

"Yes."

"So I just hung around. I figured they would all of them hate to get their own supper—they're all lazy in that family, you know—so I decided to sit in the park and wait until they got good and hungry and then I would pretend I had left something behind and go back—you know?"

"Sure I do," answered Colt, in her own *patois*. "So you sat in the park."

"Yes, sir. And who should be coming along but Al and Verna. Verna was crying like her heart was broken. I figured maybe it was because of the rowing—oh, Mr. Colt, it was an awful family life them people had—and I just tried to keep out of sight. But they was too busy with themselves to look at me. I never seen Miss Verna like that before. Is it true she went crazy and had to be sent away?"

"Who told you that?"

"The janitor. He's a good friend of mine; we still see each other when we're in the mood."

"I see. Now, Miss Schwartz, you are certain that was on the same day?"

"Sure, I'm certain."

"May first?"

"The day I was fired!"

"And you are willing to swear to that in a court of law?"

"Sure!"

"Thank you. Now, one question more. When Mr. O'Toole sent a messenger to you to ask you to leave town——"

"Yes, sir."

"What did he ask you about?"

"He asked me what the quarrel was about that morning. So I told him. Then he said Miss Madeline had told Mr. O'Toole the same story the day she went away. And the nice gentleman who came to see me explained very much how Mr. O'Toole didn't want to be dragged into anything, so naturally——"

"Perfect," said Colt, rising, smiling, shaking hands. "Now, Miss Schwartz, you keep in touch with Detective Blume—until I need you again."

"Sure, I will!"

She pumped his hand, beamed on me, and marched out of the room, leaving a wake of reeking perfume. Poor Nellie Schwartz! She was killed in a building collapse three months later; perhaps her work in the world was done. Certainly she had helped Thatcher Colt when he was most discouraged; he was that much nearer getting to the bottom of the whole abominable mystery!

## 2

From that moment on, Thatcher Colt put aside all department routine. An idea of his course of action was already shaping itself in his mind as he rapidly checked over the latest reports on the case. They had recalled Verna Adams Swift and were bringing her to Headquarters for the questions which Colt had for her; she would reach Centre Street within the half-hour. That, obviously, would be the next important step in our murder hunt. Other detectives were still searching for Josephine; she, too, must face a second ordeal with Thatcher Colt. Meanwhile, there were other loose odds and ends dropping on the Commissioner's desk; the little matter, for example, of Professor Leslie Gilman's alibi; by patient effort our men had substantiated his story as far as the activities of such a solitary day could be confirmed. Presently Colt called Dougherty on the telephone:

"Hallo, Dougherty! Just thought I would check with you at the close of the day's occupations and see if we were going forward in the Madeline Swift case."

Dougherty merely cleared his throat.

"My guess is, the Grand Jury hasn't done anything about that indictment," Colt chided.

Dougherty was bound by his oath of office not to reveal such information; again he painfully cleared his throat.

"Well, I wouldn't worry about that. To tell you the truth, Dougherty, I've got a piece of evidence in my hands right now that would cinch your case against Keplinger—they would make you the detective laureate of New York, crown you with the laurel of Centre Street and——"

"But, Thatcher, what is it? Why don't you give it to me, for the love of God? I need it now!"

Colt's face was as impassive and detached as a Buddhist monk's.

"First I will tell you what it is. It smashes his alibi."

"But, good God Almighty, Thatcher, why didn't you——?"

"Wait, Dougherty. You can't use that evidence yet. Pardon my vehemence, but you've been running ramstam on this case, and we still have a job on our hands."

"I'm beginning to think you're right, Thatcher."

"Well, we've both made mistakes, Dougherty—but we still have time to go back to the right track."

"But the Grand Jury is the Grand Jury, Thatcher."

"First rate."

"What?"

"I mean that nothing could be better, for the job we've got to do. I want to have a talk with you."

"I'll be right there, Thatcher, old pal!"

3

The unfortunate part of it was that I had to leave the office for half an hour to carry some papers down to City Hall and go over them with the Mayor's secretary. By the time I got back, Police Commissioner Thatcher Colt and District Attorney Merle K. Dougherty had had their talk, but I did not know what they had said; like two good Tammany men, they had smoked their calumet, piped their peace together and laid their plan of campaign. But there was no time for me to be told what that plan was, for Verna Adams Swift was being questioned when I entered the private office.

The sister of the murdered girl was already hysterical and I could see very plainly that, although she had been asked only a few questions, the effect had been terrific.

"You can't torture me like that!" she wept. "I don't know anything. I don't have to tell you anything. And I won't! I won't! I never, never, never will!"

She was giggling and crying at the same time; a distressing sight.

Colt's face showed sympathy and determination.

"You won't admit knowing anything about that voice?"

"No!" she screamed.

"Or visiting the Lynn woman?"

"No! No! No! She was my sister! I loved her! I loved her so much I——!"

She paused.

"You gave her the man you loved," prompted Colt quietly.

She stopped crying. She gave the Commissioner a look full of childish vexation.

"You think you're very smart and very clever, but you won't catch me," she said, giving her words a deadly emphasis.

"Wild horses won't drag anything out of me!"

And she began to scream like a banshee. She beat her heels on our rug. A slight dribble of froth came to her soft, distorted lips. She had to be carried off to a room where a policewoman looked after her. She did not know it, but Colt was not yet decided whether to arrest her on a charge definitely connected with the murder.

Police work is not a pretty business.

4

Things moved rapidly after that.

"Talking to that poor girl was a necessary gesture," Colt explained. "I am afraid we will have to get at the truth without her. But we will have to hold her!"

Dougherty threw up his red, ham-like hands and rolled his blue eyes.

"I hope and pray to God I never have to try that girl for murder," he said grimly. "It would ruin me."

Colt was not listening. The door was opening and Captain Henry was leading in the smartly-dressed Josephine Keplinger.

Josephine was thoroughly angry. One did not need to be a mind reader; her glittering green eyes and flaming cheeks, her clenched hands, were enough; her voice grated:

"I was taken away from a dinner table and brought down here. But this won't go on, Mr. Colt. My lawyer will——"

"Be needed, I am sure," interposed Colt suavely. "I know that you must have an active one, Miss Keplinger. Do be seated, won't you? I see that your lawyer decided that Mr. O'Toole was the guilty man, and so, thanks to your lawyer, that whole dirty mess is spilled in the papers this afternoon."

"I did not know you were interested in protecting a Tammany Hall politician," she blazed.

"And then I noticed a number of witnesses came forward voluntarily to testify to Alfred's alibi."

"Yes?"

"I cite it merely to show that I appreciate your new lawyer's activities."

"I am not interested in your appreciation."

"Quite so," said Colt, unperturbed. His manner was smooth, but deadly serious.

"But I must tell you one thing you do not know. You had a detective follow Alfred for some days before you came to New York on May first. He also followed him on May first. You rely on that testimony in Alfred's alibi. I heard about that at lunch to-day; I had Flynn check with your private detective; he was cheating you—he went to the ball game that day, and admits it, now, that he knows a murder is in the wind—so the alibi will have to be strengthened."

"It will be!" she cried, showing no fear.

"Now, Miss Keplinger, I want to tell you that all the attorneys in the world cannot help you unless you answer truthfully and completely the questions I am going to put to you."

"I will answer nothing."

"You will have to."

"Or else?"

"Yes."

"Well, or else what? You wouldn't beat a woman in a third degree, would you? And if you did, you don't think it would break me, do you? So what can you do to me?"

"I can arrest you. And by a very simple process I can keep you away from your attorney and your brother for the next forty-eight hours. I don't wish to do that."

She breathed heavily and closed her eyes. She could not look at defeat.

"I knew I was a fool to come here! Go on, then—ask your questions."

"You told me that you were in a hospital on May first."

"That's right," said Josephine Keplinger dully.

"For what?"

"I was operated on for appendicitis."

"Do you remember the date on which the operation was performed?"

"Yes. On April the fourth."

"You were almost ready to go home then on May first, weren't you?"

"I went home on the fourth of May."

"I see. Wasn't that an unusually long convalescence?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, it was. But I don't see what that has to do with it, Mr. Colt. Really, I don't understand why we are wasting time talking about such a matter."

A shrill note had come into her voice. I wondered if it were possible that this self-possessed, determined, competent woman could ever know a quaver of fear.

"Do you know a Miss Margy Keller?"

"Keller?"

"Yes."

The pale face of Josephine Keplinger seemed to grow a little paler.

"I don't know. I seem to have heard the name."

"Isn't she a nurse at the hospital where you were operated on?"

"Why, perhaps she is."

"Wasn't she *your* nurse there?"

"She may have been. I don't remember the names of people like that."

Colt's face was grim.

"She has not forgotten you," he said in a low voice.

"No?"

"No. She remembers the lovely step-ins you gave her for her birthday last month."

"Oh, of course. Now I remember. I remember writing the card. You see, Mr. Colt, my secretary takes care of things like that."

"Of course."

Colt rested his chin in the palm of his left hand and looked at her speculatively.

"Margy Keller remembers something else that you seem to have completely forgotten."

The mouth of Josephine Keplinger opened, but no words came, and Colt's voice went on, with brisk machine-gun-like syllables:

"She remembers that on the night before May first you left the hospital after receiving a letter from a detective agency that greatly agitated you. The doctor had advised that you stay in that hospital another week, but you left about five o'clock in the afternoon, and you did not return for nearly twenty-four hours."

Colt's voice dropped to a low whine-like whisper:

"Where were you during those twenty-four hours? I'd like you to tell me. Mind?"

The transformation that came over Josephine Keplinger at that question was astonishing. She stood up, a solid chunk of a woman, her hands in the pockets of her black sheep-trimmed coat, her face pale as a head cut in marble, her tone cold as a statue's might be if it found a voice. Unshaken, unquivering, suddenly she had become again complete mistress of all her feelings.

"It was on personal business, which I can prove in court, if necessary. It's none of your affair."

"Where were you?"

"You got the detectives to find out so much—why not get the rest where you got that?"

"Will you state where you were?" demanded Thatcher Colt.

"Oh, well—I was in Washington."

"Sorry, lady—you have told a lie," declared Colt firmly. "I can prove you were in the Hotel Waldorf-Astoria, by your own handwriting when you registered under a false name. I can prove, furthermore, that you telephoned Madeline Swift and had her come to your room. What did you tell her...? Answer me that."

Again she sprang back, poise all gone for the moment, looking around her like a trapped animal.

"I want to get out of here," she said, just as she had said it the other time she was there.

"No, Miss Keplinger!"

"But why? Why won't you let me out of here? Why won't you be man enough, decent enough to let me go?"

"Because there is still that question I want answered. What passed at eleven o'clock on the morning of May the first of this year between you and Madeline Swift?"

Josephine Keplinger put her hand to her mouth, glared at the ceiling, at the walls, at the floor, and then there was a kind of breaking of light in her eyes. She was deciding to tell the truth.

"Very well." She leaned over Colt's desk, and the story poured from her. "I'll tell you. I did get rumours from New York that Alfred was playing around with the wrong kind of girl. I hired a detective agency. They told me all about her—and that they were going to be married. I saw that would be a tragedy. So, at the risk of my life, I left the hospital and flew to New York. I did go to the Waldorf. I did send for that woman. I did tell her to get out of my brother's life. That's all!"

"And you did threaten her, didn't you?" pursued Colt. "You did say you would follow her to the ends of the earth and kill her—didn't you?"

"That was temper!"

"Of course, you did not mean it?"

"No—of course not. Now, may I go?"

"Sorry, Miss Keplinger, I must ask you to remain."

Hate blinked at him out of her green eyes.

"For how long, do you think?" she sneered. "I am not without help or advice. You've got nothing really strong—you can't hold me or him, either, at your sweet will. I demand my right to leave here now and consult my attorney."

But Colt shook his head.

"You would be very foolish. You have forgotten the most important thing I have said to you—that I am still not convinced of the guilt of your brother in this crime. I have never believed he had character enough to commit a murder!"

"You believe him innocent! Yes, you do! You believe him innocent! I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to use me—trying to use me to send my own brother to the electric chair. Trust you? Of course I don't trust you! I think you're crooked as hell. I think this is a frame-up. All you want to do is to make a splash in the newspapers; and if that means executing an innocent boy, what do you care? Well, you won't get away with it!"

"Miss Keplinger..."

"I don't want to listen to any more. I told you I want to get out of here."

"Well, you can't get out of here."

"I can't, can't I?"

"No."

Colt's patience was exhausted. He had pressed a button, and now Captain Henry appeared, leading in the pale-faced Alfred Keplinger. At the sight of his sister he broke free from Henry and ran to her; she threw her arms around him, but all traces of excitement were gone; this remarkable woman was all kindness and peace as she soothed the weakling boy.

"Alfred Keplinger," said Thatcher Colt, "did you kill Madeline Swift?"

"No, sir. For the ten thousandth time, no, sir."

"Would you like to find her murderer?"

He hesitated, started to speak, his voice faltered, and then he managed:

"Yes, of course!"

"Are you willing to help me find that murderer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then. You are a free man!"

"Free?"

"Yes—free. Entirely free."

"I don't believe it, Alfred—it's a police trick."

"It is not a trick, Miss Keplinger. It is a fact. Your brother is released from custody."

"But why?"

"Because so far, although we have tried very hard, we have not been able to prove a real case against him. Isn't that right, Mr. District Attorney?"

Dougherty nodded grumpily.

"Then we can leave here right now?"

"Alfred may."

"But not I?" demanded Josephine.

I looked at Colt in amazement. He had no legal authority to do this. Yet he was doing it. He must have excellent reason.

"Not you. You, Miss Keplinger, I am sorry to tell you, are being held as a material witness. You are in a curious situation; I am going to have some of my colleagues question you. Meanwhile——"

"No! You can't do that! No! Stop! Leave my sister out of this!"

In a frenzy Alfred Keplinger threw himself upon Thatcher Colt, clawing at his collar, shaking him until Colt gave him a push that spun him half across the office.

"Don't be a baby," snapped the Commissioner, roiled at the disarrangement of his attire. "That's the whole trouble with you."

"But, Mr. Colt——"

"Keep quiet, please. If your sister is innocent, you've got nothing to fear. Good-night, Miss Keplinger."

Unexpectedly, then, two detectives were at her, one at each elbow, and they marched her out, valiant, unbending, without a look behind her, even at Alfred.

"Now, my boy," began Thatcher Colt briskly; but at that moment he was interrupted by the ringing of his private telephone. I answered it for him:

"Hallo?"

The voice, I noticed, was far off, indistinct and yet familiar.

"This is Mr. O'Toole. Is the Commissioner there? Oh, he is, is he? Well, give him this message for me, will you? Tell him I know who killed Madeline Swift and so does he—but you tell him I can prove it. So tell him don't go home to dinner. Ask him to please stay right there. I am coming up to Headquarters and I've positively got the evidence. All right?"

"All right," I said, and hung up. I gave the message to the Commissioner and Dougherty, and they both looked solemn. Such a message had to be taken seriously—O'Toole was a fighter, he knew he was under suspicion, he had gone out on his own. But what had he found? I could hardly wait. Colt had said he knew, but could not prove his case. O'Toole said he was coming with the evidence!

## 5

No one talked to Alfred Keplinger after that. We put him out of the room, sent him out to get his dinner in a nearby restaurant. Of course, he was shadowed, I suppose. Anyway, in half an hour he was back. His beloved sister was behind the bars, and he insisted on waiting; perhaps, so he told me, O'Toole's evidence would result in Josephine's immediate release. So there he sat in the outer office, while Dougherty sucked his cigars, Colt his pipe and I my Chesterfields. The minutes seemed to drag—twenty minutes—thirty minutes—would O'Toole never come!

Then the telephone rang; an excited voice:

"Hallo! Mr. Colt's office. This is Churchill Hospital. Mr. O'Toole has been shot—no, I don't know by whom—in a taxicab not far from Headquarters—the assailant got away—just before he lost consciousness he said to notify Mr. Colt —yeah, he's on the operating table now——"

## 6

We went at once to the hospital—but not before Colt retired to his inside room with Flynn and made certain arrangements of which I was not aware. Colt had said nothing to me, but I knew with an intuitive feeling that the attack on O'Toole had forced his hand. In his eyes was the light of a hunter riding to the kill. He knew, and now he was on his way to prove what he knew. That meant, if his plans did not miscarry, in a little while we would know the guilty person. Who would it be?

I do not think it took more than fifteen minutes—Neil McMahon's wild drive up from Centre Street to the Churchill Hospital, but in less time than that I had clicked over in my mind the various possibilities. They seemed to arrange themselves in my mind in a brief numbered catalogue with a little blank space beside each name. In which blank space would I make a check mark as my nomination for the guilty one?

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1. Alfred Keplinger. Of course Dougherty was right. There was every reason to believe that Alfred was guilty. The girl had gone into his apartment. No one had seen her come out. She was cut up—and Alfred was a medical student with dissecting instruments. There was blood on his bathroom floor, and the gun with which she was killed was found in his rooms. A convincing case, except for the motive.

Why would Alfred Keplinger kill Madeline Swift? Suppose he did love Verna instead of Madeline—a theory which I doubted—why would he think it necessary to kill Madeline in order to get rid of her? That did not sound natural. All my experience in the police department told me that this theory of Dougherty's was incorrect.

2. Josephine Keplinger. She wanted to prevent her brother from making what she considered a mistaken marriage. She came secretly to New York and departed just as secretly, and, when questioned, pretended to have been in a hospital. She was a strong-willed and powerful personality capable of carrying through any design she had formed, however desperate.

But how could Josephine cut up a body and how could she transport it and drop it into the sea? The more I thought of Josephine, the less credible a murderer she seemed to me. And yet no one could dismiss her.

3. Nickerson Swift. The father of the murdered girl was a problem. I was certain Nickerson Swift was capable of murder. He did not have a sound motive, but he was the kind of man that did not need one. He had enough in his own ill nature and pious hypocrisy—pretending to hate sin, he had then pretended that some one had sinned with his daughter—assuming O'Toole's story to be true—and then had collected money for it. When Madeline had learned the truth and had refused to go on, what had happened?

Madeline had left the apartment unharmed. But who had followed her from O'Toole's place in Brooklyn up to Alfred's room? Could that have been Nickerson Swift in O'Toole's red sweater?

4. Could we drop his father, the chair-bound old mascot maker, Knoxwell Swift? At first glance one would have said he would have to be dropped. But was Grandfather Swift chair-bound? I wondered if Colt had not been lax in that particular. Was it not possible for him to get out of his chair? If he could do that, might he not have killed Madeline—the others of the family might be covering up for him? But why? What would be the motive for such a crime? Senile dementia? Misbegotten religious fervour? The theory did not sound natural to me, and yet many of the crimes the police department meets do not sound natural.

5. Beulah Swift. Did mother kill daughter? Unlikely as the question sounded, we had been forced to consider it before, and I realised that it had never been completely and satisfactorily settled. Her alibi was that she was out shopping on that morning and afternoon. But she had made only a few trifling purchases. No one in the shops could remember back that far and confirm her story.

But, again, why would Beulah Swift kill her daughter and bury her in the water so atrociously? The only reasons one could think of were far-fetched. There might be a smouldering religious mania in Beulah Swift—a contagion from her husband and his father—an infection contracted in the suffering and humiliation they had heaped upon her for so many years.

It was almost unthinkable that Beulah could have carried out such a resolute design unaided. But it was possible that she could do it with help. Who would help her and keep quiet about it? The image of Nickerson Swift's sunken countenance came again before my eyes.

6. Verna Adams Swift. What of her? Here I felt myself before the closed door of a dark mystery. It was a door that must be opened, for behind it were secrets that must be explained. Why was it that Verna, until then an apparently normal, self-possessed young woman, should suddenly become hysterical and grow increasingly so until at last she had to be sent to a sanatorium? What had caused her mental breakdown at such a significant time?

She had a powerful motive. She was in love with the man her sister meant to marry. She believed her sister had stolen that man from her. That was really motive enough for killing. And then there was the inescapable fact that of all the persons involved Verna alone believed in occult signs and tokens. She alone consulted astrologers, clairvoyants, and spirit mediums or had any truck with the supernatural. She alone knew the Lynns before Madeline Swift was killed. She had gone to their meetings and they had given her messages purporting to come from another world. Eva Allen Lynn had identified the voice of Verna as the voice she heard in the dark.

How, in the face of all this, could we eliminate Verna Adams Swift? And yet the conviction within me remained strong and unshaken. I did not believe Verna was a murderer.

7. Daniel V. O'Toole. Now here was a real mystery. O'Toole shot on the way to police headquarters ready to denounce the guilty man or woman—as if we did not have mystery enough on our hands. What secret had O'Toole discovered? And how was it the guilty person knew he had discovered the secret and could shoot at him through the window of a taxicab in a crowded New York street and escape?

Such a combination of circumstances struck me as extraordinary indeed. O'Toole had a motive. We could not be sure of the real reason for Madeline's visit to his home on her last day alive. We had to take his word for it. It was possible that she had gone there to blackmail him. It was possible that the old Irishman became exasperated, that he killed her before he was really aware of what he had done. How, then, did she walk out of his home unharmed?

It could not have been a crime of the moment if O'Toole were guilty. It must have been a crafty plan. Did he leave his house? Did he follow in his own red sweater on that last ride? Did he follow her into the Keplinger apartment? Kill her with Keplinger's gun—hide the gun in the shoe? With Keplinger's medical instruments did he carry off the dismembered pieces in a suitcase and take them down to the sea in a ship? Here was a theory that showed an appalling logicality; but, if it were so, who, then, shot O'Toole? And why?

8. Imro Acheson Fitch. At first it seemed preposterous to me to include the crime sculptor in any serious or sensible list of suspects. One or two circumstances had seemed to me odd to say the least. One was the extraordinary likeness which Fitch had been able to create practically out of nothing. He started with bones and made a portrait. I wondered at the time if his science of crime sculpture had really reached such heights of perfection that he could take a casual heap of bones and turn them into a semblance of an unknown reality.

These doubts of mine were aggravated by that extraordinary coincidence—the blemish on the left cheek of the statue. It occurred to me at the time that that was the sort of thing which could have happened if Fitch had secretly known what Madeline looked like and could not resist that artistic touch at the last.

But what motive could Imro Acheson Fitch have for such a deed? Well, I could think of one. Perhaps it was fantastic, and yet it hung together, somehow. In my theory the whole strategy of the crime was an inverted or involute method to accomplish the ruin of Honest Dan O'Toole. I looked at that thoughtfully for a moment.

Fitch hated O'Toole. O'Toole had caused his discharge and disgrace and now—filling in the holes with surmise—Fitch learns that O'Toole is going away on a fishing trip and the rest of the family is out of town. He burglarises the house and then discovers that his information was wrong. O'Toole has not gone away. He is right in the house, and he has a visitor, a girl, and they are having an excited conversation. Fitch listens. He hears the sordid story. He realises that O'Toole would profit by the murder of Madeline, so it is Fitch who follows Madeline in the second taxicab. It is Fitch who follows her into Keplinger's apartment. It is Fitch who kills her in cold blood and Fitch, finding a set of carving tools miraculously at hand, cuts her up. If this theory is true, then the noise which Madeline Swift heard while talking with O'Toole was not imagination—it was Fitch making a mis-step. And then Fitch sat back for his own greater glory and let the flesh of his victim decompose until only bones remained. He made the noise through the wall, changing his voice so that the medium was deceived. Let it not be forgotten that Fitch in his various activities had been an anatomist who would know how to cut up a body and a magician who would know how to send voices through the wall.

All this checked up rather neatly. There was but one flaw in the whole thing. Why did he leave the gun in Keplinger's room? That planted suspicion on Keplinger. Fitch wanted to send O'Toole to the chair for a murder of which he was innocent out of revenge, sheer, downright, absolute. Yet the fact that the gun was found in the shoe made the theory seem more plausible because it did not fit too neatly; and that is a way with crimes. Fantastic it might seem, but we should have to leave Mr. Fitch in the line-up of our possibilities.

9. Professor Wallace Gilman. Apparently the psychic investigator had a convincing alibi, but I had thought from the first that Colt had been too ready to drop his suspicions of Gilman. The man had one great outstanding motive.

Although he was a chemist, his heart was really in psychic research. He wanted to prove to his sceptical world that there was such a thing as a human soul—that life and consciousness and personal identity would persist beyond the grave. He had not been able to prove it scientifically, and going a little mad might have staged this entire ghastly business and himself sent that voice through the wall as a triumphant demonstration of his theories of the other world.

And why did he pick on Madeline Swift? Perhaps for no reason at all. Perhaps chance had brought those two together, and he had used her for his purposes as often he had used rats and mice and guinea pigs. I was beguiled by that theory, too. It sounded reasonable.

10. Reverend Washington Irving Lynn and Eva Allen Lynn. They might have had the same motives as Gilman. Perhaps there was no voice coming through the wall. Perhaps that hole we found there was only a coincidence. There are more shocking coincidences every day in police work. To solve a great murder case or even to find the *corpus delicti*, as they

undoubtedly had found, it would have made them famous the world over. The money of believers would have poured into their laps. They knew Verna Swift. It was a practice of fraudulent mediums to follow their clients and find out all about them. They might know more about Alfred Keplinger and Madeline Swift than we dreamed of.

I thought of all these things and I wondered, too, which one of these suspects knew enough to calculate the latitude and longitude of the place where the bones were dropped.

And my mind was still busy with that problem when we drove into the old-fashioned courtyard of the hospital and stopped at the open door.

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## **BOOK FOUR**

### **We Prove It**

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## *Chapter One*

### **THE STRANGEST OF ALL THIRD DEGREES**

Perhaps it would not have seemed so weird if I had had any warning of what was coming. As it was, I went into that hospital completely ignorant of the plan Colt had put into operation. He had done it with the rapidity and audacity of a field marshal re-forming his lines when the battle goes against him. Now I followed him through a dark under-corridor that seemed to me to run the length of the building. I went up a short flight of steps, turned on a landing and went through a door.

The room into which I entered was too brightly lit; its walls were white and its windows of ground glass covered with wire. All its casements were steel. It was a nightmare room, a nightmare of sterility of modernity, of prophylaxis—the preparation place, which is like the back-stage dressing-room of the operation chamber.

I looked from the red face and rolling blue eyes of Dougherty to the lean tanned countenance of Thatcher Colt. Both were inscrutable. They would not explain to me the reason for our presence behind the scenes of the surgical amphitheatre, nor the bustling of grim-faced women in swishing skirts of blue, white caps, collars and cuffs. What were these nurses making ready to do to us? And why?

In the utter silence of a bad dream we went through the most elaborate preparations. I had to roll up my sleeves, scrub my hands and arms with soap and water and then put them through chlorinated lime and bicarbonate of soda. As if that were not enough, then I had to wash my hands and arms up to the elbows in a solution of bichloride of mercury—then alcohol—then sterile powder—and then put on sterile gloves.

I felt like telling the black-eyed, beautiful but unfriendly girl who put on my gloves that *I* was not going to perform an operation. But other nurses, friendlier ones it seemed to me from where I stood, were performing the same services for the Commissioner and the District Attorney.

The black-eyed girl with the dour face warned me not to touch anything, and proceeded to tie on me a stiff white gown. She put on me a cap which covered all my hair, and a mask of gauze that covered my face all except the eyes. I even had to breathe through the gauze. Then I was ready. We were all ready.

By this time I was beyond guessing. My costume felt unreal. The smell of the place was like something sulphurous rising from some antiseptic hell. The uncommunicativeness, the silence, the whole grotesque unexpectedness of my situation left me baffled. It would not surprise me if presently they showed me Keplinger or his sister on the operating table, although both had seemed in perfect health less than half an hour ago.

Nothing, I decided, would surprise me any more. And then came the surprise of the whole case. They led me to a door and opened it and motioned me through it and I did walk through it into an incredible situation.

I gazed around me, unable to take it all in at once. I felt as if I were standing at the bottom of a huge and brightly-lighted dishpan. All around me were the sloping receding walls of that dishpan, but the walls were tiered with rows of chairs like seats in a coliseum. This was a miniature, a baby, a microcosmic coliseum with its round rows of seats all circling this spot where I stood in my stiff white gown and cap and sterile gloves—stood with the Police Commissioner of New York City and the District Attorney in their stiff gowns and their caps and their masks and their sterile gloves, while into the centre and the very heart of this place was wheeled a rubber-tyred table with men in white marching beside it, and behind them, like figures moving in a dream, the nurses and the assistants with their dressings and small wipes and large wipes and sponges, tab pads, combines, and no one speaking a word. And on that table, ready to be cut open, lay a long man with iron-gray hair, strong bony body, white hands, the man the newspapers called Honest Dan O'Toole.

I caught a glimpse of his face. He did not seem to be breathing. He looked as if he were dead already. And then suddenly when I turned my eyes away from that pitiful giant on the table and all the grisly preparations around him, as I turned away and looked up I beheld one final horror—for now I saw that the amphitheatre was not, as I had supposed, deserted. It was occupied, or inhabited—I mean to say there were human beings in the tiers of seats looking down as silent witnesses. They were like images in some horrible dream, because I saw only their heads; the railings were solid and came as high as their necks. They all leaned forward with their chins hanging over the top piece of the railing. They were huddled in a group together, and yet with empty spaces between them, as if they themselves did not wish to be too near to

each other.

They were pale and tormented, those faces as I counted them one after another—the Swifts, Nickerson Knoxwell, and Beulah and Verna; then there was Alfred Keplinger and his sister, Josephine; and Mr. Fitch and Professor Gilman and the Reverend and Mrs. Washington Irving Lynn. All the suspects that I had enumerated in my mind on the way to the hospital were jumbled together in this amphitheatre.

Some of the light from the dome above fell upon their faces, and behind them and on either side of them gleamed the steel buttons, the badges of office of police officers on guard. There had been murder and violence and mystery, and now here it all was concentrated in this extraordinary and frightful room with our white and masked company in the pit—with death nearer to us now than I dreamed—with something premonitory and awful in the air.

A man motioned to Thatcher Colt and arranged the three of us who were outsiders in a line behind the operating table. The one man in authority gave a signal. From that moment on he seemed no longer aware of our presence or of that ghoulish jury in the grandstand while he went to work.

There were mutterings back and forth among the several doctors at the table; the anæsthetists murmuring when to give oxygen and the doctor exposing the flesh, making the incision, cutting deeply and quickly. The ticking of a clock high up in the balcony, the pungent smell of unconsciousness in the air—how long would it last? It seemed endless. As a matter of fact, it was fully half an hour—thirty minutes of concentrated horror, until at last the doctor stood back, and through the gauze of his mask he murmured something to Thatcher Colt.

It was then that Colt spoke suddenly, startlingly. His crisp voice crackled through the silence of that horror-drenched room. Yet he was speaking quietly. The acoustics of that bowl-like place caught the slightest nuance.

"Doctor, you know this is a police matter, and I am forced to make an extraordinary request. This man was wounded in connection with a murder investigation. If he were to recover consciousness now he would be afraid to talk; but, as I understand it, there is a moment when a patient is just coming out of an anæsthetic and is not completely conscious when he is liable to tell anything. Is that correct?"

The internes were about to wheel away the still figure. They paused to look at the doctor. The doctor inclined his head and murmured that Mr. Colt was right.

The Commissioner went on, his tone terse and commanding:

"Then I must ask you, doctor, in the interests of justice, to do exactly what I ask you to do. There is a dictaphone, I think it is called an Ediphone, in the office. I would like to have it brought here. If this man recovers consciousness, I want him to come to life in the presence of these witnesses, and I want the tube of that Ediphone put to his mouth so that everything he says in those first minutes will be a matter of permanent record for use at the trial."

Except for the ticking of the clock in the balcony, there was absolute silence for a moment. The surgeon seemed to hesitate, then he shrugged, pointed a finger at one of the doctors and gave a brief order. The interne went through the door. Then we waited, a ghastly time it seemed, until we heard a creaking and a rumble and the door opened and a box-like machine on wheels came rolling in.

Colt stepped forward and from that moment on he was in charge of everything. He had the cord plugged into an electric connection. He held the tube in his hand and bent over the unmoving form of Daniel V. O'Toole. The surgeon was on the other side of the table. He, too, bent over and then gave Colt an eloquent glance. I heard him say:

"He's coming out of it."

Thatcher Colt bent lower still. He put the tube of the machine against the purple lips of O'Toole, his own ear was there to listen, while his sombre brown eyes ranged from one face to another of that row of living heads up there in the grandstand.

Breathless we all waited until we saw Colt give another signal and an interne twisted a knob on the machine and set it in operation. We heard the low whizzing drone of the mechanism. A moment passed and then Colt said:

"No—he's just talking about his wife, and his daughter, and—wait! He's talking—he's telling! We're getting it! He says

he knows who killed Madeline Swift! He says—— Good God——! He says that *you*——"

Colt turned and pointed a finger straight up at one person in that group of witnesses from on high.

A cry came from one of them. Two hands appeared beside the face hanging over the railing and the head rose in the air as the full body came up and the voice shrieked:

"I did it! But it wasn't murder! You've got to listen to me—I'll tell everything——"

I stared unbelievingly at the man who had at last confessed. It was Alfred Keplinger!

But there came another cry—the anguished cry of a woman:

"No—no! Don't blame him. Blame *me*."

That woman, of course, was Verna Swift.

"Get them," called Colt crisply.

Two officers sprang forward and the handcuffs were around the wrists of the young medical student, while one of the officers took a firm grip on the arm of Madeline Swift's half-sister.

They were leading them away when there came a sudden and dramatic interruption. The door beyond the operating table was thrown open and into the pit of the amphitheatre strode a tall man with a slight old-fashioned beard. I recognised him as Doctor Chandler, chief surgeon of the hospital. He marched angrily up to Thatcher Colt.

"I would like to know the meaning of this," he cried in a great rage. "This is a farce and all my people know it! You have been operating on a man who has been dead for the last two hours."

Colt was taking off his mask and now he nodded grimly.

"Yes, doctor," he said suavely. "We knew it—but *he* didn't."

And he pointed to Alfred Keplinger being led away by the police.

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## *Chapter Two*

### ECLAIRCISSEMENT

I felt dazed. The shock was so sudden it was confusing. O'Toole had never telephoned our office at all! He had discovered no evidence at all! Instead, he had dropped dead on the street of heart failure and had been taken to the hospital, where nothing could be done to save him. That word had been telephoned to Colt. He had confided in no one except Dougherty. That rankled with me a little, but Colt knows I'm a poor actor, and he was probably right. Colt and Dougherty conspired together, and all that happened after that was hocus-pocus—the fake call that I had taken and believed to be O'Toole's own voice; the second call with its false report that the political leader had been shot; and all the mumbo-jumbo of the operating room. Everything had been done with swift decision. It was a *tour de force* that might easily have failed but fortunately had turned into one of Colt's most brilliant triumphs.

One hour later I sat in the private office of Thatcher Colt taking notes in my shorthand book. The others in the room besides the Commissioner and Dougherty were Alfred Keplinger and Verna Swift.

Alfred Keplinger was dictating to me the following statement:

"My name is Alfred Keplinger. I am twenty-two years old, a student at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. I make this statement of my own free will. I have not been mistreated. I have not been made any promises of any kind. I am glad to make this statement to relieve my mind of a burden that I have carried too long.

"I was in love with Verna Adams Swift. I had not asked her to marry me, but I had intended to. Then I met her sister. For a little while I was infatuated with her. I dropped Verna and began going around with Madeline, and while thus infatuated with her I proposed marriage to her.

"Later I realised my mistake, but I did not have the nerve to tell her so. I made up my mind that the right thing for me to do was to marry her. I was fully prepared to do this until the morning of May the first, when she came to me and told me of her own free will and accord that she could never marry me.

"Even then I did not take advantage of this offer of release. I saw that she was labouring under some great mental strain, but she would not tell me what it was that troubled her. She left me.

"Instead of going back to school, as I formerly told the authorities, I got into a taxicab and followed her. I saw her go into the house of O'Toole in Brooklyn. I walked to the back of the house with the idea that perhaps I could watch through a window.

"At the back of the house I found a yard, and the gate was open. I went into the yard and found also the back door open. I do not justify my action in going into that house, except on the ground that I wanted to know what had put Madeline into such a turmoil. I heard the conversation that passed between Madeline and O'Toole. I made the noise which she heard in the kitchen at that time. I was so excited that I was seized with a chill. I saw a sweater in the kitchen, a red sweater, and almost mechanically I put it on. I went out of the house and tried to overtake Madeline, but she was in a cab, so I got another cab and followed her. I saw her get out and appeal to a policeman, and therefore I drove around the block not to attract attention. Then I picked up her trail again. She was on her way directly to my apartment.

"I got there after her and found her in my room. She was searching in the drawers of my dresser. I knew what she was searching for. She found it almost instantly—my revolver, which had belonged to my father in the war and which I keep for remembrance. She told me she was going to kill herself. I struggled with her and got the revolver away from her.

"We had bitter words. She was beside herself with excitement and declared she would kill herself in spite of me. When I tried to reason with her she threw a vase at me.

"I still had the revolver in my hand, and in trying to avoid the missile I discharged the revolver. The bullet struck her in the head.

"That is the truth, so help me, God. I was trying to save her life, not to take it. It was an accident, nothing more. But Madeline was dead...."

(Here Alfred Keplinger was completely overcome and we had to wait. Ten minutes passed before he could resume his story.)

"I can make no defence for what followed. There is no defence. I do not expect any one to forgive me except God and one other person. I can only tell you that I was overcome with panic. I was sure no one would believe my story. I was sure I would be electrocuted for her murder. I had no one to advise me. I acted alone.

"I ask the pardon of Madeline Swift and all her family and all the people—everybody, including God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, for what I did. And I am willing to undergo any punishment if I can only forget the awfulness of the thing I did. But I did it, and I must tell it.

"I was a medical student, and so I undressed her and dismembered her in the bathtub. I put the pieces into two suitcases, and not knowing what else to do, I also put her clothing in, too. I had never committed a crime before. Then I took the suitcases out of the building. I hid all evidences of my crime, or so I thought, before I left. I first went for a walk with Verna and told her what I had done. She ran from me in fear. I was alone.

"I have a friend at Columbia who has a car. We each have keys to it and he lets me use it whenever I wish. I knew he was not using the car that night. He was in the infirmary with measles. I took the car. I went home and carried down the suitcases. I drove the car down to Long Island. In a second-hand shop in Brooklyn I stopped and bought a box and tied this on the back of the car. I drove down to the boathouse of a friend. I put the pieces and the clothes, too, from the suitcases into the box and put the box in the boat. I bored some holes in the box, then I rowed out a little way and dropped the box overboard. I went back to O'Toole's and threw the sweater over the fence. And then I came home. And that is all there was to it. In the name of God, amen."

There was a silence when Alfred Keplinger finished his horrible story. Then Colt said:

"But why were you so silly as to hide your gun in your shoe?"

Keplinger's pale haggard face looked suddenly even paler.

"I didn't do that," he said.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know."

"He does," cried Verna Swift. "He won't tell, but I will. *I did.*"

"You?"

"Yes, I. Mr. Colt, don't spare me, for I am just as guilty as Alfred. He came to me that night and told me this whole story. I went home with him to his apartment. I felt so badly for him. I believed every word he said. I still believe it. I have no shame in saying that I loved him, and I loved Madeline, too, in a way. It was awful, but we can understand and we can forgive things in those we love—no matter how dreadful they really are. And I know Alfred meant no harm to Madeline.

"Once while we were talking in his apartment he became ill. He went into the bathroom. I was alone. I saw the gun. I thought it ought to be hidden. So I tucked it away in an old shoe because I thought no one would ever look there for it. But they did—they did."

Colt leaned forward, speaking quickly to arrest a flood of tears.

"And why did you rent a room next door to the Lynns, the spirit mediums, and talk through the wall?"

"Because I had to," said Verna. "I couldn't think of poor Madeline lying in the bottom of the water. She was my sister, and I couldn't tell anybody, because then I would betray Alfred. I had been to the Lynns. I had even visited their room, and so I was trying to get the information through so that they would find her and bring her up from the water and give her a Christian burial. I waited until that room next door was vacant. Then I rented it for a week and—Oh, it sounds wild now, I know, but it was the only way I could think of, and I did it."

"Thank you," said Thatcher Colt. "You need not tell us any more."

"No, sir. What will they do to Alfred?"

Colt lowered his eyes.

"I can't say that now, I am sorry. That is a matter that will have to be worked out. He will have to be punished, and his punishment will be within the discretion of the judge before whom he is tried. Alfred's sin is the sin of weakness. It is a strange thing, Alfred Keplinger, that a weak man like you has been able to stir the deep love that you have in the hearts of three women—Madeline, Josephine and Verna. I hope that whatever punishment comes to you that it will not wreck your life, but make you a man deserving of such love."

Keplinger did not answer, but Verna did.

"I believe it will, Mr. Colt. And when he is free, if he will have me, I will go to him."

Alfred Keplinger stood up. He straightened his shoulders, lifted his chin and looked into Verna's lovely face. He kissed her and said:

"Wait for me, Verna. I am coming back to you, if they will let me, a different human being. Will you believe that?"

She kissed him and then they were parted. They were taken away to different places—Verna released in the care of Alfred Keplinger's sister Josephine, who had really believed her brother innocent. Now those two women would fight together for the salvation of a soul that both loved.

The door closed and Thatcher Colt looked at Dougherty.

"So it wasn't a murder at all," boomed the District Attorney.

"Ah, but it was," objected Thatcher Colt. "It was nothing else. Think back over the life of Madeline Swift and you can name her real murderers—the people who throttled her spirit inch by inch, minute by minute, for the most of her life. Not all the murders are done with revolvers, knives and poison. The most tragic of them are done with words, glances and the petty tyrannies of daily life."

"Gentlemen, let's go out and get a drink."

We were climbing into our coats again. I was thinking how wrong it is to suspect our fellow humans—I had been so sure that harmless Mr. Fitch was a murderer! Then the telephone rang. I answered it. A woman's voice asked for Thatcher Colt. His voice was low as he answered in eager monosyllable. He hung up the receiver again.

"Sorry, gentlemen—you must have that drink without me. Good-night!"

He was gone, hurried and smiling—we both knew where. Back to Florence Dunbar. Romance again, I thought. And I was right——

Only, there was more than romance. There was mystery and murder—and a new case, in which Colt was to fight for two lives, a woman's and his own.

But that is a story that has nothing to do with the case of Madeline Swift.

**THE END**

#### **Transcriber's Note**

Punctuation errors have been corrected.

The following suspected printer's errors have been addressed.

Page 45,156. Doughterty changed to Dougherty.

Page 25. appealling changed to appealing

Page 28. Doughert's changed to Dougherty's.

Page 39. bottonless changed to bottomless. (in a bottomless pit)

Page 51. flesh changed to fresh. (a fresh bottle of cognac)

Page 57. enought changed to enough. (saved enough to realise)

Page 58. Chrisensen and Christensesen changed to Christensen. (Captain Christensen)

Page 61. chesboard changed to chessboard. (table with the chessboard)

Page 62. Duplicate word 'said' removed. (he said at last)

Page 108. broad-walk changed to board-walk. (board-walk concessions)

Page 124. know changed to known. (had known too much)

Page 142. one changed to on. (Go on)

Page 163. Pasedena changed to Pasadena. (the Rose Bowl at Pasadena)

Page 165. succed changed to succeed. (how to succeed)

Page 174. scupulous changed to scrupulous. (much more scrupulous)

Page 178. Swartz changed to Schwartz. (Nellie Schwartz)

Page 191. non-committal changed to non-committal. (his voice non-committal)

Page 194. Washignton changed to Washington. (on file in Washington)

Page 195. duplicate word 'to' removed. (came here to give you)

Page 199. dow changed to how. (but how do you)

Page 202. to changed to too. (only too well)

Page 205. suceeded changed to succeeded. (and almost succeeded)

Page 225. unequivocably changed to unequivocally. (declared unequivocally)

Page 239. everywhere changed to everywhere. (rummage everywhere)

Page 247. Toole changed to O'Toole. (on Mr. O'Toole)

Page 255. runing changed to running. (or running away)

Page 259. newpapers changed to newspapers. (read the newspapers)

Page 271. desert changed to dessert. (a light dessert of pears)

Page 281. nornig changed to morning. (that morning)

Page 283. a nawful changed to an awful. (it was an awful)

Page 292. duplicate word 'the' removed. (gone for the moment)

Page 310. Belah changed to Beulah. (and Beulah and Verna)

Page 312. duplicate word 'of' removed. (cry of a woman)

Page 316. tryng changed to trying. (and in trying to avoid)

[The end of *Murder of a Startled Lady* by Charles Fulton Oursler]