

**Dagger**

of the

**Mind**

**Kenneth Fearing**

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DAGGER of the MIND

By KENNETH FEARING

The Hospital

DAGGER

of the

MIND

BY

KENNETH FEARING

“... art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?”

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## CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

The fierce glare of the electric light beating against my eyes dragged me back to consciousness. I reached for the lamp, to switch it off and fall again into a vague half dream. I couldn't quite place the woman who was in it, just that she had very black hair, black eyes, very pale skin, and the scent of Tabac Blonde was very heavy. But I couldn't reach the lamp and, after a while, I saw that this blaze of light going through my head like a dentist's drill was not from an electric globe but really a shaft of the sun pouring in through a window at the foot of the bed. It was too far to reach the shade. Then I must have stared at the clock on the end table for a long time, and when I had stared at it long enough, saw that the hands pointed to nine-thirty. Altogether too early. Finally, then, I got a connection.

This wasn't Rockville Center. I was at Demarest Hall, the art colony. Breakfast by ten o'clock or not at all, unless I wanted to drive into town. I didn't.

I looked around for the liquor that ought to be, had to be standing somewhere, and saw it on a table beside the easel in the middle of the studio. I made my way to it across a rug that made me feel as though I were wading, poured two inches into a glass and put it away. Then I had another one, and began to feel O.K.

The canvas mounted on the easel, the picture I was now working on, showed a mermaid sitting on a cliff waving good-bye to somebody on a steamship already far out at sea. I didn't know whether to call it "Farewell" or "Grief." It wasn't exactly a masterpiece, I had to admit, but the colors in it were quite good, the balance was correct, and it wasn't one of my best things, anyway. On the floor, leaning against the easel, stood another one, the picture of a Negro woman dancing in a flaming red gown against a background of band instruments. This one I called "The Dance." You could feel the movement in it, lots of movement, which, after all, was my strong point. I shouldn't go in for static effects like "Farewell." Or perhaps it would be better to call the picture "Grief."

I crossed the studio to the bathroom and stepped under the shower. That Tabac Blonde was no dream; it was real, though I couldn't place it. I had to scrub like hell before it went away. Trying to figure out what had happened the evening before was like fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing. The last clear picture I had showed me practically carrying the writer, Harley Hale, from a night club somewhere, name and location unknown, out to a taxicab and from there, presumably, bringing him back to the Hall. I could remember that Hale had a weeping jag and nothing would do but I must hear all about his six years in Joliet. Manslaughter, entirely accidental, according to him. Then what happened before the night club and after we left it brought in nothing but a jumble of static, and I tried to put it together from the other end of the evening. Dinner in the main dining room came through without any trouble. I remembered, in particular, a nuisance by the name of Connors, said to be a poet, who had made quite a play for Lucille, and after dinner most of us had taken a dip in the pool about a quarter of a mile from the Hall. Lucille Nichols. The name slowed me up. I saw smoldering black eyes, a white, haunted, almost desperate, subtly sensual and unbelievably beautiful face. And then I got the Tabac Blonde. Waves and waves of it. Of course. We had finally gotten rid of Connors and gone to a roadhouse called the Halfway House, a small group of us, where we'd danced and cooled off some more with a few drinks. But what happened between the time we left there and I helped Hale out of the other place was another blank.

Dressed, shaved, combed, my blond and rather pink face seemed, in the mirror of the studio bathroom, quite fresh. The Bourbon was doing its stuff, and I felt much better. Generally, though, I don't think it's such a good thing to drink before breakfast. Along toward three or four in the afternoon, I've noticed, you're apt to feel like a wreck if you do. But this was a special occasion, I felt. So I had another one, while I stuffed cigarettes into the pocket of the silk blazer Geraldine had given me. The day would be hot later on, but right now it was still cool.

My studio was one of four in a one-story building at the southern end of the quadrangle around which most of the buildings of Demarest Hall were arranged. The Hall itself was a big, rambling architectural accident housing the kitchen and dining room, the lounge, reading room and library, a game room, writing room, chapel, music room, two reception rooms, a canteen, and the director's office and private living quarters. To reach it, I followed the oval path skirting the drive that led up to the main entrance of the Hall. The other seven studio buildings around the quadrangle were about the same as the one in which I had been placed, and this accounted for most of Demarest Hall except for the five studios away off in outlying parts of the estate, allocated to musicians, so that the rest of us wouldn't be disturbed by the racket they constantly made.

When I stepped into the large lounge of the Hall the first person I saw was P. C. Cooke, the director of the estate. I should have said that he was around forty-five. There was a legend about Cooke to the effect that very little took place

in Demarest Hall without his knowing nearly everything there was to know about it. Clairvoyant, they called him. If so, he didn't look it. He was stout to the point of fatness, the face that he seemed to try to compose into an expression of geniality somehow displayed, instead, perpetual bewilderment and vague annoyance, while the robust good humor of his voice and manner had the effect, from time to time, of giving way to something perhaps more fundamental with him, cynicism and a sort of concentrated, though bottled-up fury.

P. C. Cooke said, with unctuous heartiness, "Good morning, Mr. Bartel. Just having breakfast?"

"Good morning," I said. "Yes. Join me?"

He showed me a sheaf of the yellow envelopes used for official purposes by Demarest Hall, and said, "Just as soon as I give these to the steward to distribute."

He disappeared into the office used as post office, bank, information bureau and general canteen. Ten yards in the other direction gave entrance to the main dining hall, over which, in Gothic letters a foot high, ran the inscription:

## WHILE WINE AND FRIENDSHIP CROWN THE BOARD WE'LL SING THE JOYS THAT BOTH AFFORD

It was a minute to ten when I crossed the threshold, probably the last to appear for breakfast except for P. C. Cooke. Some seven or eight other guests of the Hall were still there, although most had finished long ago, and gone, either back to their studios, or to town, or somewhere about the estate for tennis or a swim. Breakfast was buffet. I helped myself to orange juice, onion soup, bacon and eggs and coffee, and brought the tray to the only remaining table, one of the dining room's four, still set for service.

I said, "Good morning," to the table in general, but looking at Lucille Nichols, and sat down. She was as vivid now as she had been in the dream. Her smile was something personal between us, and things happened to me.

She said, "Chris, I want you to meet my husband. Walter, this is Christopher Bartel."

I nodded and said, "How do you do," to the only strange face at the table. The face, redder and fleshier than raw beef, appeared to nod at something in the remote distance and, although no sound issued from it, the eyes behind their shining glasses gave me a prolonged, unwavering stare. While he was still memorizing me I put away the orange juice and started on the soup.

Besides the Nicholises there were at the table Connors, Hale, two girls who would be unobtrusive in any surroundings anywhere, a ghost writer by the name of Harry Dunn, and a tall, thin, abstracted person, Karl Weiss, a painter considered of some note among a few critics, and intellectuals who made a religion of the pseudo-modern and esoteric. And we were favored, presently, by the appearance of P. C. Cooke, who emerged from his office to join us at the table with a breakfast comprising one graham cracker and a glass of cold water. Cooke, reminding me of a frustrated undertaker, smiled forcefully but unhappily about the group, then addressed himself to Nichols, whom he evidently knew.

"Pleasant journey, Mr. Nichols?"

The red face slowly lifted itself and spoke, after a while, with hoarse deliberation. "Rather pleasant," he said. "Yes."

"Find your studio comfortable?"

"Very comfortable, thank you," Nichols, finished with the trout he had been eating, reached for and ostentatiously removed a bone from his teeth, forgot to lay it down on the plate as he spoke. "Always a pleasure to return to the Hall."

"It's a pleasure to have you."

"I like the atmosphere," said Nichols, ignoring Cooke. He waved the fishbone for emphasis. "It's fascinating, to say the least, to find myself again among so many fakers." The fishbone, raised like a conductor's baton, halted P. C. Cooke's conciliatory smile. "Morons, lotus eaters, drug addicts," Nichols' words grew slower, the pauses between them longer, but the lifted baton commanded attention, "drunkards," I gave the guy a hard look and forgot to swallow, "gangsters and their intimate consorts," the ghost writer, Dunn, had known and written for a dozen of them, "traitors and renegades," it came to me that a couple of evenings before, in a heated political discussion, some such language had been applied to William Glass, a political journalist present this season, "and murdering jailbirds." Nichols' fishbone fell to his plate and the tiny sound was like a rolling crash of thunder. I looked at Harley Hale. Rather pale in the face, he stared at Nichols, who ignored him and now, still devoting his entire attention to P. C. Cooke, allowed an ecstatic smile to spread over his face and gently added, "Yes. It suits me perfectly."

Miss Gregg, a musician, sounded an innocent, melancholy giggle and the poetess at our table, Miss Attelio, shyly but firmly climbed upon the stage and spoke her lines.

"You make us all sound so interesting, Mr. Nichols," she said. "If only it were true, I think it would be simply wonderful."

Nichols' snort of laughter was a Gargantuan shout.

"True? Wonderful? God bless you, that's not the half of it. I forgot to add the thieving and conniving citizens of the township, who'd rather lose a crooked dollar than earn an honest one, and who hated the Demarests when they were living, and who hate the Hall and everyone in it now." He stopped laughing and shouting long enough to blow his



nose and draw a deep, gurgling breath. “Yes, and I forgot to mention our perennial plagiarists. Some of them in the past have been truly fabulous. Any plagiarists this season, Mr. Cooke?” Mr. Cooke attempted to take refuge behind a meaningless shrug. In the pause that lengthened, Nichols turned his attention to him, ponderously, once more. “And I somehow omitted to speak of escaped lunatics,” he pointedly added. “Yes, there’s nothing like a maniac at large to give that final touch to an art colony. Is there, Mr. Cooke?”

P. C. Cooke stared at the other half of his graham cracker as though he had already dined far beyond his capacity. When he spoke, his smile radiated benevolence, his eyes were a study in rage.

“Mr. Nichols, you’re a pessimist and a scholar,” he announced, and the conversation lapsed as the steward brought round the mail.

Albert Page, formerly of Highgate, moved quickly and quietly with the distribution. When he reached me he put down four letters, one of them, I noticed, in the yellow envelope of Demarest Hall.

I stopped him and said, “Albert, if you’re going to be in town this morning . . .”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’d like to get something through the canteen, if it’s not inconvenient.”

“Be glad to do it, Mr. Bartel.”

“Well, you can bring back two quarts of Old Granddad . . .”

“Yes, sir.”

“ . . . two bottles of Teachers . . .”

“Yes, sir.”

“ . . . a bottle each of any good gin and dry Vermont and a bottle of skin bracer. Got that?”

“Yes, sir, thank you. What was that last, sir?”

“Skin bracer. Any good brand. Mennen’s will do,” I said.

“Does that come in quarts, sir, or fifths?”

“It comes in small bottles and you get it at any drug store. Think you can remember?”

“Right, sir, I’m no bargain, sir, but your order will be there at the canteen by twelve o’clock noon, or would you prefer to have it delivered to your studio?”

“Better have it delivered.”

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

Albert moved away and I finished the last of my bacon and eggs. One of the letters was from Geraldine, I saw, another was from Blanche, and one was from Joan. And there was, finally, the note from P. C. Cooke. I couldn’t imagine what it would be about, unless the Hall were already billing me for extras I’d ordered, and that would be odd, since I’d been here for only four days. While I ran over the first two letters, P. C. Cooke ate the last half of his graham cracker and excused himself, followed by the Misses Gregg and Attelio, then Weiss and Harry Dunn. I realized, after a while, that I’d been the object of Mr. Nichols’ attention for some minutes past. I looked over at him. He said, in that deep, hoarse voice of his, “I beg your pardon. Your name is Christopher Bartel?”

I said, “Yes.”

“I hadn’t realized, at first,” he said. “Not *the* Bartel?”

I smiled and said, “Yes.”

He gestured with his forefinger as he had before with the fishbone, and his booming voice rose, “Not *the* Christopher Bartel who does those truly remarkable magazine covers, those luscious likenesses of Hollywood stars, those marvelous night club murals and delightful hosiery ads?”

I didn’t like the way this was shaping up. I said coldly, “This summer I’m doing something a little different. No commissions at all. My own things.”

Nichols appeared, by now, to be addressing himself to some vast, invisible audience.

“What sort of things of your own? Like that justly famous mural of yours in the cocktail lounge of the Traveller’s Club, ‘Tropical Sub-sea Life’? What gorgeous colors, Mr. Bartel, what rhythms. . . . Let me compliment you. And that marvelous mermaid in the background.” He shouted once, then his voice sank to a hoarse, half-whisper. “Any mermaids this summer, Mr. Bartel?”

My reaction was without any thought at all, it was purely reflex. When it was all over, and it was over in a brief moment, I was standing on my feet holding Nichols’ glasses in one hand, the hand with which I’d swept them off, and watching him struggle to rise from the floor where I’d knocked him with the other.

Lucille said, “Chris. Don’t be a fool.” Somebody else, I think it was Connors the poet, said, “Don’t be a fool, jump on the guy while he’s still down.” Hale said, rapidly, “What goes on? I didn’t even see it happen.”

Nichols, laughing and shouting, got up from the floor, methodically straightened his chair, took the glasses I mechanically extended.

“You see?” he said. “The congeniality. There’s nothing like it anywhere else. Now, if you’ll excuse us, Mr. Bartel? And Mr. Connors? And Mr. Harley Hale? I’m sure you want to get on with your interesting memoirs, Mr. Hale.”

Lucille gave me a long, helpless, resigned glance as she rose, and left the room with him. I simply watched them go. It had been stupid of me, but there was nothing I could do about that now. I sat down again.

Hale babbled, nervous and not entirely coherent, "You hear that? Hear what he said? What's he got against me, anyway?" I lit a cigarette with elaborate indifference. "What a heel. Somebody ought to kill that guy."

Connors got up from the table.

"That's an idea," he said, tossing his napkin down and turning to go. "Why don't you?"

"Me? Say, listen, what's the idea of a crack like that?" But Connors was already out of hearing, and Hale gave his distressed concern to me. We were alone at the table. "Think Connors meant anything by that? Anything special, I mean?" I shrugged and tried to look as bored as possible. "By God, Bartel, I want to say . . . I want to say I met some queer people when I did time in Joliet, plenty queer. But they weren't half as loony as some of these people around this place."

I didn't say anything. I remembered the note in the Hall envelope, and opened it. It ran:

Dear Mr. Bartel,

Conditions being such as they are at the Hall, what with not being too well staffed entirely due to economic reasons, I would take it as a personal favor if you would, in the future, not make such heavy personal shopping requests of the steward, regarding large orders for liquor, etc. etc., as these things take his time and much space in the station wagon, let alone to be delivered at your studio.

Yours most respectfully,

P. C. Cooke

I had to read it twice before I could make out exactly what Cooke was driving at, then I read it a third time with an odd sinking sensation. There was something wrong there, about that note. I passed it over to Hale.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Read it."

While he did so, I checked over the sequence of events. By the time Hale had finished the note, handed it back and said, "Well?" I had it figured out. But it was impossible.

"P. C. Cooke brought those into the post office before he came into the dining room," I explained. "A whole batch of letters, and this was one of them. But I hadn't even ordered anything from Albert at that time. You heard me do the ordering, yourself, right here at the table. And Cooke himself was here all the while."

"It's peculiar," said Hale.

"Peculiar? It's not possible."

"They say," he said, "that fellow Cooke is a mind reader."

I stood up. The Bourbon was wearing off, and I needed another couple of drinks to think this out.

"How the hell could he read my mind," I asked, "when I didn't know what was in it, myself, until I saw Albert?"



Murder is easy, and the majority of murderers, by far, are never brought to justice.

Most people know and understand one or the other of these two propositions, but few are able to believe both. That is why the homicide rate, high as it is, is not still higher. It is easy to kill. And, according to police statistics, most killings remain on the books as unsolved. Simple enough.

A few clouds, white and heavy, slipped with immense silence and slowness across the sky that is always bluer than one can ever remember it. From the balcony on the fifth and topmost floor of Demarest Hall, overlooking the quadrangle of studios that from here seemed small, one could look into the floor of the valley beyond them, where the city of Endor, built by Demarests and still dominated by them, seemed yet more small and remote and unreal. Then beyond the valley rose the hills, to form a bright green crest, and back of them, darker and immeasurably distant, stood another range of higher and more slowly rolling hills.

In such a scene, always, the mind finds it hard to clutch at the things of its own concern, tending to relax and let go, to fall and drown in this impersonal sea. Murder. Something about murder. Back in the seventies and eighties there were plenty of people in that little anthill called Endor who would not have hesitated to do away with Clark Demarest, had they dreamed it was his resolve that the main line of the railroad should pass, not through this valley, but through the one beyond. But they had not guessed it, and by the time they knew, it was too late. Still, there were plenty of people down there today who would not stop at anything to break the hold that, even in death, the Demarests had upon their lives. “. . . provided the executors of this estate, hereinbefore mentioned,” ran the critical clause of the will, “and the trustees of Demarest Hall, designated in (I), shall at all times maintain and conduct the affairs of said Demarest Hall in a manner consonant with public laws, customs and morals . . .” Then followed a lengthy but exact definition of these, as a rule, rather intangible affairs, concluding with: “. . . failing which, said holdings designated for this purpose (II) (III) and (IV) shall become the common property of the city of Endor, to be administered for the public welfare by the council, trustees, alderman or otherwise duly elected officers of said city of Endor.”

Public officials of Endor, like the majority of its citizens, would have liked nothing better than to discredit Demarest Hall, through just that clause concerning laws, customs, and morals, to the end that the political power of the Hall's trustees, exercised through its huge holdings, would be broken, and these holdings would revert to the city. If they could prove in court of law that Demarest Hall was being conducted contrary to public custom, the politicians of Endor would vacate the power of the trustees, and open a combined gambling house and house of prostitution on every street in Endor, the week after said power had been vacated. There would be millions in it for a few, and thousands for many. Murder? Murder has been committed for less than a dollar and sixty-five cents.

From directly beneath me, but sounding flat and faint, came the slam of the Hall's main door, steps descending the five stone stairs to the walk and the drive. Presently, the foreshortened figure of Christopher Bartel came into view, walking rhythmically and steadily away from the Hall, presumably toward his own studio.

The eye where his fist had landed still smarted somewhat, and no doubt would soon be a trifle blue, if not quite black. His was a completely disorganized personality, if a first impression could be trusted, and in this case there was no reason to think it could not be. The mind of a child in the body of a man. Nothing very interesting, there are millions like him in every walk of life.

The expensively costumed figure of Christopher Bartel glanced back once, but without looking up—people never look up—then disappeared into Vishnu Lodge, the studio building at the southern end of the quadrangle. The name itself showed the touch of the last Demarest widow, now long deceased, who had served on the board of trustees—as did many other appurtenances about the estate. All of the lodges were similarly named—Veda, Agni, Vach, Uma, and so on, though no one but the unfortunate Mr. Cooke, who was obliged to do so, gave formal recognition of the fact. The structure that housed Mr. Bartel was known, naturally, as the End Building. Brahma Lodge, at the southeastern corner of the square, where there had been persistent trouble with the plumbing and lighting, had long since been known as the Doghouse. To it, because of these defects, were assigned the lesser celebrities among the guests, and thus its nickname had become doubly justified.

There reached me, again, the subdued slam of the Hall's front door. Presently, their steps crunching on the gravel, Miss Claribelle Zorn, novelist of Omaha City, appeared in the company of Harley Hale, residence and ultimate destination unknown. It was evident from their attire and the tennis rackets they carried, however, that Mr. Hale had no intention of forwarding, at least immediately, his magnum opus, a study of prison life, a piece of rubbish which I believe

he already alluded to as “Four Gray Walls.” And speaking of murder, Hale had very nearly gotten away with that killing of his, a variation of the Wanderer, or ragged stranger case. The scheme had been basically simple—Hale had “accidentally” killed his business partner and a bandit in frustrating a robbery that he himself had framed. Why he had been let off with manslaughter, is one of those mysteries at least as profound as the mystery of life.

There are certain basic murder methods that can never be proven by direct, but must always rely upon circumstantial, and therefore shaky, evidence before murder can be proven. The drowned sweetheart method is one, and no matter how old or well known it is, the technique is still good and will be good until the end of time. A professional killing, by hired killers is still another—the familiar gangster method, in which neither victim nor murderer is personally known to each other, with consequent lack of direct motive. And still another method is that of simply pushing the victim off of a high cliff, into the path of a subway, or out of a high window, balcony, or other inaccessible place. And there are many more.

And so the subject is again murder. Because it is necessary, or at any rate desirable, that this murder now quite certainly about to take place shall be limited in the final result, as closely as possible, to those parties deserving, justly, to be involved. Naturally, I do not like to think that my fundamental plans shall miscarry. And then, of course, I have always loathed loose, illogical thinking, and the utterly meaningless, irresponsible action that cannot help issuing from it. Knowing this, I also realize, and must accept the fact that I am hampered—even in murder—by an alert and hyper-sensitive conscience. I do not like to think that anyone shall die, through any act of mine, who does not richly merit death.

But I refuse to hesitate, to hesitate and shrink, as no doubt the blooming Miss Zorn might, or as even Mr. Hale under most circumstances would shrink, from passing judgment upon my fellow members of the human race. If my conscience sits in judgment upon me, then I do not stop in allowing it to sit in similar judgment upon others. My New England conscience is not, in short, entirely a liability when it comes to a matter of murder. It works both ways.

Well, I am old-fashioned, and why deny it? However I may have derided, in private, the mentality and the purposes of the Demarests, their unspeakable romanticisms and incredible tastes, they were the builders and the masters of the only society for which I have ever cared. I know their world was ridiculous. I know that they pursued the phantom of gentility on the grand scale as a politician organizes parades and buys votes. I know that even their philanthropy resembled a bargain-day rush in a department store—but it was still gentility, and philanthropy, ideas if nothing more,—civilization, in short, a civilization that is today dead. And the slight risk I shall run in engineering at least one death, and possibly more, seems a ridiculous trifle in the face of that larger doom, which my act will, after all, though in a small way, avenge. It will be not only a personal, but a symbolic retribution as well.

All of which may not promote, though it may underlie, the motives of murder. Surely, no architect in death has ever been as plentifully supplied as we are today, at Demarest Hall, with deserving victims, glaring motives, and likely suspects. Among the victims, for example, who would hesitate to remove that blight and blot Harley Hale? Or Mr. Christopher Bartel? And why would anyone boggle at Mr. Cooke? Why shouldn't the ubiquitous hoodlums of whom Mr. Dunn writes so copiously turn on him, suddenly, and make away with him before he wittingly or unwittingly blunders into print with some ghost-written truth that might prove dangerous to them?

As for suspects, the list would be an embarrassment of riches. Half the guests of the Hall this season deserve jail or worse for the simple fact of having been born. As the trustee who was more closely in touch than any other with the invitations issued, I can be sure of that.

I do not know what day or night, nor by what means precisely, the murder will be committed. But it cannot be long. And I only hope a method can be devised that is mercifully swift. The accomplice and dupe is all but ready-made. Perhaps he may even be induced to contribute one or two practical suggestions towards his own undoing.



## CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

It was about noon when I decided to quit work, for the time being, on the new canvas. I'd set the easel near the window that overlooked Endor, and was doing a view of the valley and the town. I decided to call it "Cloud Shadows," "Peaceful Valley," or possibly "Eldorado." Then I noticed the sound of the typewriter in the adjacent studio, occupied by Nathan Biernbaum, had stopped some time ago. Biernbaum, of course, was the historical novelist, probably the most successful of the whole school. When I yelled "Come in," in response to a knock at the door, I was not surprised to find it was he. He seemed to stop working at about the same hours I did.

He said, "I beg your pardon for interrupting you, but I've run out of matches. Got any?"

I handed him a card of them and said, "I was through for the morning anyway. Sit down and have a drink?"

"Thanks."

He sat down in one of the indestructible Maplewood armchairs with which most of the Hall's studios were furnished. Biernbaum, in the neighborhood of forty, did not much resemble what one would think a famous novelist of his type of work would look like. He was about five feet one, to begin with, and gave the impression of being a particularly attentive but not very bright waiter in some obscure businessman's lunchroom on 50th Street. The perfect symmetry of his small but unmistakable bald-spot belonged to a man who has at least five children, though Biernbaum had none, and his clothing might have been the castoffs of some generous but misguided servant.

He said, while I mixed a highball with the last of the Bourbon:

"Did you hear about the massacre in the dining room this morning?"

"No."

"Seems that some dope—I'm sorry I had an early breakfast and missed it—seems that some dumbbell hauled off and slugged Nichols, that poisonous bastard, smack in the puss." When I handed him the highball he said, again, "Thanks. You didn't see it, by any chance?"

I said, "I was the dope that socked him."

"Really? The maid told me about it, but she didn't say who did it." He sipped his highball. "She simply said Nichols had been razzing some guy, and he didn't seem to want to take it."

"What else does the grapevine have to say about it?"

"Oh, just that Nichols was criticizing this man's work—yours, evidently. I admire your courage, Bartel, but I must say, I damn your judgment. Nichols, you know, is a very influential person, and he can make himself most unpleasant."

I said, "It's a pleasure to smack a heel anywhere, any time, under any circumstances I happen to run across one, and I don't give a damn if he has a drag with God in person, I'll do it anyway."

Biernbaum, sipping his drink, stared absently across the studio. He said, presently, "What've you got there, Bartel? What do you call that thing?"

I followed his gaze, and said, "It's called 'Farewell'."

"My God. Is that a mermaid, sitting on those over-grown dornicks?"

I walked across the studio to the picture, lifted it up, looked at it carefully, and said, "It was done by a former student of mine. He gave it to me, and I had to accept it, of course. Not bad composition."

"Frightful," said Biernbaum. "Unless you love geometry."

I put the picture down, this time with the face to the wall, and said, "I don't think I agree with you." Biernbaum sighed and sipped his highball. "I have to look at quantities of stuff by younger artists, of course. Everything from etchings to murals."

Biernbaum set his drink down, lit another cigarette with the card of matches I had given him.

"Speaking of Nichols," he said. "When do you plan to lay his wife?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He gestured tolerantly.

"It's none of my business, of course. But everyone does. It's a tradition at the Hall." He exhaled, sampled the drink again. "I might say, one of the best traditions."

I could see that getting homey with Biernbaum was not going to pan out. Small as he was, and well-meaning though dumb, as he might be, I had a strong urge to pick him up and heave him out of the door. Or simply to sock him one. But I had already smacked one phony this morning, and to take a poke at another one seemed, somehow, to be overdoing it. I said, instead, "Are you trying to tell me, in your subtle fashion, that you have—what shall I say?—observed the

traditions of Demarest Hall?"

He gave me the look of a waiter who has brought in a perfectly done sirloin steak when filet halibut had been ordered.

"No," he said. "Unfortunately, no. But to tell you the truth, I've been thinking of doing so. Confidentially, Bartel, what do you think of this current crop of females that our major-domo, Peter Carlyle Cooke has brought in? I mean, I've been here during three other seasons, and I realize this is your first visit, but what do you think of the women?"

"The women?"

"The women who are guests. What do you think of them?"

I stopped and thought about them. I went over those whom I had met and already knew, those whom I had met but knew only slightly. I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, not so hot. Most of them."

Biembaum slammed his empty glass down upon the arm of his chair.

"You said it. About five good-looking women among the whole damned lot." He crushed out his cigarette and lighted another one, from an entirely different card of matches, I noticed, than the one I had given him. "I wonder where the committee finds them. Somebody ought to talk to Cooke about it; you'd think he was trying to run a monastery. Somebody ought to do something about Cooke, just on general principles. He's got an entertainment schedule twice as heavy, this year, as it was last."

I said, "I read the announcement, but I didn't pay much attention to it."

Biembaum sighed and stood up.

"You will, though. Some hot June afternoon when you find yourself listening to a violin recital in the music room. Or some hot July night when you're watching a dance group in the open-air theater, and wondering why."

"What the hell," I said. "This is still a free country. I don't have to be there if I don't want to."

Biembaum turned on a look of superior knowledge.

"No, but Cooke thinks it's good for your soul to be there, and things have a way of happening to people who tangle with Cooke's sense of propriety. If you like to go for a swim before breakfast, you're apt to find that's just the hour they've chosen to drain the pool and repair the filter system. If Cooke asks you whether there's any special dish you'd like to request, and you're stupid enough to tell him you like crab-meat ravigotte, for instance, then that's the one thing we'll never have. If he knows you have certain favorite radio programs, at the hour they're on every electric gadget in the place is going to be working and you'll think your radio's been hit by lightning. Oh, yes, he has ways and means of winning his arguments." Biembaum moved to the door. "Fact is I think P. C. Cooke has a deep, secret grudge against writers and he's never so happy as he is when he's just thought up something especially unpleasant to happen to one of his best-hated novelists. Well, I think I'll have a walk before lunch. Thanks for the matches. Drop in and have a highball with me soon."

I said, "Thanks, I will," though I didn't think I would, and he went out. After he'd gone I sat down on the edge of the bed and began to think. I thought, for a moment, of packing up and leaving Demarest Hall. Then I decided not to. In the first place, I could keep pretty much away from Nichols and Connors in the future, and similar pests, and probably Biembaum was exaggerating about Cooke, if not lying. And in the second place, I could imagine what Geraldine would say and what she'd do if I left here and went someplace else for the spring and summer. After the fight we had about it, and she told me she didn't believe that I intended to work, actually to work on the things that I really wanted to do, no place but Demarest Hall was really safe. I knew, too, that if I did walk out now it would mean that she had been right. And I'd never again try to do the serious thing.

There was a knock at the door, this time the steward. He had the things I ordered, and after he'd put the packages down in the kitchenette I tried to give him a tip. Embarrassed, he refused it.

He said, "Thank you, sir, just the same. Mr. Cooke doesn't like that sort of thing, except at the end of the season. But I'll tell you what you might do, sir. Have you a drop to drink? I might have that."

I had an idea. I said, "Certainly, Albert. What would you like?"

"Bit of Scotch, if you have any, sir. And soda."

I went into the kitchenette and opened up the liquor, mixed two stiff highballs. If anybody had the lowdown on the people of the Hall, it ought to be Albert. I came back with them and said, "Sit down, Albert. You must be pretty hot, running around with the shopping and all."

"Thank you, sir. Terrible hot." He tried the high-ball. "Hits the spot, this does."

I said, "Mr. Cooke objects, does he, to your receiving tips?"

"Not objects, exactly. But he wants the guests to feel more as if they were at home, like."

"A very good idea, too. Still," I said, casually, "he wouldn't necessarily know about it. I mean, this is a large place, and Mr. Cooke must have his hands too full to check up on every little move the servants make. I don't mean you, I mean all of them."

"He certainly does have his hands full. It's a job, his."

"Yes, he has to be a combination of diplomat and magician, I imagine. Or a mind reader, I should say."



Albert winked perceptibly above his highball.

“He’s deep, he is.”

“But you don’t believe that nonsense about Mr. Cooke being able to read anybody’s mind, do you?” I asked.

“Certainly not, sir. But he’s a fine man, sir. A wonderful gentleman to work for. And deep. You wouldn’t believe it, if I told you how deep.”

I said, “Well, how deep?”

“Generous, too.” Albert nodded. “Always thinking of others. Puts himself out a great deal for the guests, sir. More than most people gives him credit for. If there’s anything you want, and it’s in reason, just ask him. Or you could ask me, for that matter. We like to see our guests happy and comfortable.” We finished our highballs in a dead heat. “If you’d like a few articles of furniture you haven’t got in the studio, I could speak to George, the carpenter, and he’d be glad to get it for you out of the storeroom.”

“No, I don’t want any more furniture, thanks.”

“Or if there’s some special kind of food you’re especially fond of, I could speak to the cook.”

“Well, in hot weather I always like . . .” I rattled the ice cubes in the glass, and thought.

“Yes, sir?”

“Nothing.”

“Something you’d care for in particular, sir?”

“No. I was simply going to say, in hot weather I always like to have hot-weather dishes.”

“That’s best, sir. Absolutely right.”

Albert stared reflectively into his empty glass. The score was zero so far, but it might be worth another try. Ordinarily, I don’t believe in hobnobbing with the help, but I was considerably puzzled, not to say uneasy, by some of the things I’d heard and seen at the Hall. Another drink or two might prompt Albert’s confessional instincts. I said,

“Another one, Albert?”

“If you’re sure it’s all right, sir. Mr. Cooke might not like it. He doesn’t like the staff to disturb the guests any more than we can help.”

“It’s all right with me, I’m sure. And as far as Mr. Cooke is concerned, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Will it?”

“That’s right, sir.”

I brought out the Scotch and soda and some ice cubes, and we mixed up another couple of stiff ones. Albert raised his and said, “Hoping you have a pleasant summer, Mr. Bartel.”

“Thank you, Albert. I’m sure I shall. There’s no reason why one shouldn’t, is there?”

“None, none at all.”

“I mean, does anyone ever, now and again, for one reason or another, fail to enjoy a season at Demarest Hall?”

“Not often, sir.”

“Sometimes, though?”

“I’d hardly say that. It’s as you might say, every summer is a different summer at the Hall. Some good. Some not the best, if you see what I mean.”

“No, I don’t see what you mean.”

“Like this, sir. Mr. Cooke, he’s tried everything. One whole season he had the muck-a-mucks that run the Hall invite only gentlemen. Another time, he tried ladies, exclusively.”

“Work out all right?”

“No, sir, it didn’t, either way. Mainly, though, he mixes them, like this year.”

“I suppose that’s better.”

“No, sir, that’s not exactly what you’d call better, either. It don’t seem to work out for the best, any way. Some years he has mainly writers, other years mostly artists, like yourself, sir. Once we had radicals, there must have been two dozen of them, you couldn’t hear yourself think, and another time Mr. Cooke and the directors invited a very high society type. They didn’t talk so much, but they broke an awful lot of furniture; we were sweeping up the pieces morning, noon and night.”

“Well, by and large, nothing really unpleasant ever happened, would you say?”

“Offhand, I can’t recall anything.” He gave me a significant look. “No, I can’t recall, offhand, any time before now when one of the gentlemen handed a trustee a black eye. No, that never did happen before.” He said it with a note suggesting regret. “The guests, yes. They’ve had it out between themselves. But a trustee, no.”

I wasn’t surprised that Albert knew all about the argument in the dining room this morning.

“Has Mr. Nichols got a shiner?”

“A beauty, too.”

“Well, that’s too bad. But I really think—never mind. Have another drink, Albert?”

“I wouldn’t mind, sir.”

We mixed another round. I said, "How would Mr. Cooke take that affair at breakfast this morning, do you suppose?"

Albert studied his drink.

"Hard to say," he finally decided. "Might not like it. On the other hand, he might see it your way. Mr. Cooke, he's really deep. Not like you or I would be, sir, but deep in his own way. He's a very generous and understanding man. But not worldly. He's more the innocent type, with his head in the clouds. He'd see things you and I wouldn't, but again, he wouldn't see things, plain as the nose on your face, that we would."

Albert tilted the glass, and the phone rang. Answering it, I said, "Yes?"

"Mr. Bartel?"

I said, "Yes." It was P. C. Cooke. "This is Mr. Bartel."

"This is Mr. Cooke, Mr. Bartel. I was wondering if perhaps Mr. Page was in your studio?"

"Yes, he's here."

"Well, I wonder if you'd mind seeing to it that he leaves for the kitchen on time to make the usual lunch basket distributions at the usual hour we have here of one o'clock? He's sometimes a little lax, under certain circumstances."

I said, "I'll tell him."

"I don't want to interrupt your conversation, Mr. Bartel. I know you must be very curious about some of the people and the various aspirations we have here at the Hall. But at the same time, it's most important that Albert delivers lunch to the guests at a punctual hour. And you can talk to him later, of course. You understand, I'm not criticizing you, Mr. Bartel, it's just that geniuses get hungry, like everyone else," he sounded a windy, humorless laugh to go with the banality, "and they hate it when the steward doesn't bring them their lunches on time."

Inwardly mystified but trying to sound hearty, I said, "Certainly, I'll tell him."

"He can start with the lunches," said Mr. Cooke, "as soon as he finishes his drink." I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see P. C. Cooke, but I saw, of course, only Albert. He was finishing his drink. "Thank you, Mr. Bartel, and may I say again I hated to call this way. It's only that the steward is sometimes not quite as punctual as he might be. Mr. Page has a cross of immoderate thirst to bear."

I hung up, and when I turned around Albert was on his feet.

"That was Mr. Cooke," he said. "He must have been phoning from the Valley Club. I drove him to the town and left him there. Was there a message for me?"

"Mr. Cooke was afraid you might be late with the lunches."

Albert somewhat unsteadily peered at his wrist watch.

"I'm no bargain," he declared. "I'm no bargain, I'll admit, but I do all right with the lunches. They're supposed to be delivered to the studios by one o'clock, and here it is, only a quarter after. Takes ten minutes to get up to the kitchen, five minutes to get the wagon ready, and twenty minutes to make all the deliveries. I might be a half hour late, or an hour, but what difference does that make to a bunch of loafers—I beg your pardon, sir, and present company excepted—who went back to sleep right after they had breakfast, and they'll go right back to sleep again the minute they've had lunch?"

I have never swallowed a whole ice cube at one gulp, but I could imagine how it would feel, and I felt as though I had. I said, "Did you say Mr. Cooke was in Endor?"

"That's right, sir. I drove him there when I did the shopping this morning. Left him at the Valley Club in town where he was having lunch with the mayor."

I stepped to the window where the easel had been set up and looked out. The valley dropped away sheerly, about a hundred feet from the window, and showed Endor in the very bottom of it, looking like a cluster of not very promising fly-specks. Most of the valley was bright with sunlight, as I'd painted it, but here and there one could see the shadow of a small cloud, swift and faint. I said, "You don't think Mr. Cooke has a telescope down there, and maybe he keeps it trained on the studios up here, when he's away?"

Albert looked blank.

"Of course not, sir. What makes you say that?" I shrugged, and Albert moved to go. "Thank you for the highballs, sir. Most pleasant. If there's anything I can do for you. Anything a little extra, Mr. Bartel, just say the word."

I waved him out and went back to the window. The city was easily fifteen miles away, in the hollow of the valley, and more likely twenty. I knew there must be some rational explanation for P. C. Cooke's unholy accuracy regarding Albert. The only trouble was, that rational explanation just escaped me. Of course, the studio might be wired. Just to make sure I went over the whole place rather carefully, looking behind the curtains, under the rugs, the mattress on my bed, the drawers of the dresser, the kitchenette and even the icebox. There was nothing, anywhere, to suggest that a microphone had been installed. By the time I'd finished, I saw Albert, through one of the studio windows, wheeling around the wagon that carried the lunch trays. He'd reached the Doghouse, by then, staggering a little, and my studio would be next. I poured a stiff drink for myself. There are times, I've noticed, when a fellow has to be sober and think like lightning, and if you happen to be drunk, or a little drunk, the only thing to do is take three or four more shots and, well, to put it simply, drink yourself sober. Then, after that one, I had another one, hoping I'd be still more clear-headed.

But I realized, after the last one began to take effect, that it would be a waste of time to try to rationalize this latest business. In fact, it would probably be a waste of time to try to explain any of it. I was sobering up, all right. The soberer I became, the more I realized I was over my depth. Perhaps, after all, it would be better simply to leave Demarest Hall.

Then I heard Albert's cart creak past the studio, the wheels crunching on the gravel of the drive, and I heard a thump as he delivered the basket at the door of my studio. I went to the door and opened it. As I did so, I saw Biernbaum in his own doorway, looking at his lunch with some surprise. He said, "Albert must be drunk again. I got Lucille Nichols' tray."

I looked down at mine. The card on it said "Claudia Attelio" and what food it contained I don't know, except that it seemed to consist mainly of lettuce and whole-wheat bread. Evidently, Miss Attelio was dieting. If I looked far enough, I didn't doubt, I'd have found ant-eggs and Swedish bread. I booted the basket across the drive and picked up the one in Biernbaum's door.

"I'll take this to Miss Nichols," I said.

"Don't put yourself out," he said. "I'll be glad to do it myself."

I didn't answer him. I was halfway across the quadrangle, to the Fountain house, before he'd finished speaking. What the hell, I felt, what I really needed was the feminine touch. There might be something, after all, in that feminine intuition stuff.



## PETER CARLYLE COOKE

After I'd telephoned to Mr. Bartel I returned to the dining room of the Valley Club and resumed my seat opposite Mr. Nichols. He presented, with multiple contusions and hemorrhages of the eye, an extraordinary spectacle. The eye was blue. Not the same color or shade of blue as Mr. Nichols' cornea, but a deeper blue. Not black, as people say, but blue. Really, they should say, to be accurate, "Where did you get that blue eye of yours?" and not black. Or possibly purple. Or sometimes brown.

Mr. Nichols said, "What are you staring at?"

"That was Mr. Bartel I just phoned," I said. "As I was afraid, Albert will be a little late with the lunch baskets."

"I didn't ask you who you phoned," said Mr. Nichols. He had finished his soup, and now put down his spoon and started to wad up bread crumbs into nasty gray little spitballs, another of his disgusting, or perhaps I should say, annoying habits, though mannerisms would perhaps be the better word. "And," he added, "I really don't care whether Albert never delivers the lunches. That aggregation of fakers and stuffed shirts we have this season—let them starve. I never saw a drearier collection, never in all my life."

"Many of them, Walter, received expressly and precisely your strongest, perhaps I should say your most urgent approval." I peered at Mr. Nichols, who never failed to surprise me, in some alarm. He seemed to be on the verge of a serious seizure. "Besides," I said, "there are several sides to every question, but in the main, I think perhaps on this occasion, at this particular time, we may have views somewhat in common."

Walter Nichols waited until the waiter had removed the soup, and then said, explosively, "For Christ's sake, Cooke, what are you talking about? Can't you use plain language? I didn't tell you to meet me here at the Valley Club just because I can't stand the lunches at the Hall. Nor because I love your company. There was a reason why I wanted to see you, and you aren't going to evade the issue by laying down a verbal smokescreen."

How right the Demarests were, when they proclaimed, or perhaps I should say exemplified, not only by word but by deed, that nothing counts in this world so much as a sympathetic spirit and a helping hand. And yet, how strange that they should have become preoccupied with the troublesome spirit of the creative artist, to the exclusion of equally needful, though perhaps less worthy, but more deserving, types of mankind. I said, "I know your eye must hurt, Walter." The waiter brought our lunches. I'd ordered a sirloin steak, despite the hot weather. A very light breakfast, then a substantial lunch, followed in turn by a frugal dinner, and then a substantial snack at eleven o'clock, was doing wonders for my excess weight. "And I'm sure I know how you must feel about Mr. Bartel."

"As it happens," he said, positively leering, "I like Mr. Bartel."

"Exactly. I was sure you did."

Walter Nichols appeared to withdraw into the vast reserve of a spirit that has known much trouble, but that has never been at a loss, and has never been found wanting in meeting it. He finished his chicken à la king without speaking. Then he said, casually,

"May I have your attention for a few minutes, Mr. Cooke?" I said, "Certainly," but he seemed not to hear. "Without interruption?" he added, emphatically. "And it's no use trying to act like a pixelated moonbeam with me, you old goldbricker. I know you're as sane as I am, probably saner, even if you did put in four years at Rockland State Hospital for the mentally deficient."

I looked around. Fortunately, no one was within earshot. I said, "Mr. Nichols, Walter I mean, no one realizes more than I do what a truly wonderful, wonderful helping hand you extended to me in an hour when I was sorely persecuted and misunderstood. Until the final vindication. But at the same time, don't you think it might be equally beneficial, if not more so, to use the better part of audacity? Valor, perhaps I should say. In short, to be discreet in public?"

Walter Nichols sighed, lit a cigarette, exhaled smoke.

"You've got brains, you old goat," he said, "no matter how hard you try to conceal the fact."

"The pleasure is all mine, Walter."

"But this is getting us nowhere. I asked you to lunch with me here so that we could be alone, and talk. I'm planning to commit a murder, and I shall need your help."

"You'll find me a most sympathetic spirit, Walter." The steak was just a little too well done, but good. "Anything in reason will find me willing and anxious to extend you all the help at my command. What was it you had been planning?"

"Murder."

"Yes, I thought I'd heard you correctly. But it's against the law, Walter, and I'm sorry, but under the circumstances, I

see no reason why I should commit myself to a course of action that can end only in disaster, illegal disaster. I'm truly sorry. Will you have strawberry shortcake, or ice cream for dessert?"

"It won't be a disaster if you're in on it."

"I'm sorry, Walter, but I'm afraid you're overwrought. I won't be, as you put it, in on it."

"Oh, yes, you will be. Yes, because you've got to be, whether you like it or not." I looked at him. He seemed perfectly, one might almost say uncomfortably, sure of himself. "You see, Mr. Cooke, I know some things about you that you think I don't. Things you think no one, aside from yourself, knows about. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly. But I don't believe you."

"You will believe me."

"Naturally. Of course. But I don't think so."

Mr. Nichols sighed, profoundly, and the waiter approached to remove our plates. Walter ordered the ice cream, and I decided to select the choice of strawberry shortcake. When the waiter had gone, Walter said,

"Just accept the fact that you will have to go along with me in this proposition, whether you like it or not. Will you assume that?"

"Certainly. But of course, I won't."

"I understand you, Peter. I know you better than you know yourself. And, I assure you, I'm not talking through my hat. I can oblige you to help me carry out my plans, whether you want to or not. Now, pending my proving to you that you have no choice in the matter—and I shall give you this proof—are you at any rate willing to discuss the subject of this murder I'm projecting?"

The waiter brought the dessert. The strawberry shortcake seemed a trifle on the frugal side. But then, the Valley Club, like every dining room and restaurant in Endor, could be very disappointing indeed on occasion.

"It's not only illegal," I said, "but dangerous. To society as a whole. Suppose every man took the law into his own hands, and decided to redress the supposed wrongs he fancies have been done to him? I will not participate, Walter, in your hare-brained though perhaps idealistic schemes."

He eyed me with what I could not help feeling was an expression of malevolence.

"But you'll talk it over with me?" he said.

"Oh, yes. Talk. Why not?" There was not enough sugar in the shortcake. Under the circumstances, perhaps it might be best to seem to humor him, and even to be willing to lend a helping hand and a sympathetic spirit. "Not in the best of taste, perhaps. Still, people do discuss murder. In fact, many of our guests at the Hall make a good living by writing about it. As a matter of fact, Walter, did you have so many of this season's guests selected from the criminal elements, simply to cover this proposed step of yours?"

"Certainly."

"Extraordinarily clever, Walter," I said. "I surmised as much. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be getting back to the Hall. I'm not at all sure about Albert."

Mr. Nichols smiled tolerantly. But when that great red face of his really smiled, somehow it was a most unpleasant, not to say disturbing, sight to see.

"When we've talked," he said. "Relax and sit back. Regard this as something in the realm of fiction. Now, what would be the best method of committing a murder at the Hall, and to escape detection?"

I ate the last of my shortcake and sipped my iced coffee.

"Naturally, Mr. Nichols, I wouldn't know," I said. "But a knife, suddenly applied when the killer and the person to be killed are remote from public observation, has always been partially successful."

"Just what I thought," said Mr. Nichols.

"But, naturally, circumstances alter the case. In this hypothetical situation you are designing, and in which I refuse to have any part, pending proof that I should or must have, exactly whom were you disposed to kill?"

"My wife, of course," said Nichols.

"Oh, surely not. That lovely creature?"

"Lovely to you," said Mr. Nichols. "But a cancerous excrescence to me. Now, how about it? What would be the best way for us to get rid of her?"

It was my turn to sigh. I was used to having trouble with the guests of the Hall, and from time to time, with the trustees. But this was just a little beyond the outermost limit of trouble ever, previously, experienced by me. I wadded up my napkin and laid it down and said, stubbornly, "Walter, I wish I could make it clear to you that if anyone is going to do away with your wife it won't be *us*, it will have to be *you*. Because I refuse to have any connection with this scatterbrained and, well, radical plan of yours. May I point out, first, that I disapprove of murder, and secondly I disapprove of the victim you have selected—"

"So do I," he said, and grinned in that sarcastic way of his. "That's why I selected her."

"Beside all that," I pointed out, "You're a brilliant man, Walter. You're a man with a future. And now, stupidly you want to jeopardize it." I saw by his smile, which had simply grown wider and more sardonic, that my argument was

having less than no effect. It seemed to me a different tack, all things considered, might be better. "Still," I said, "if you simply have to do it, I suppose the best way would be to get her to come alone and secretly to the balcony of the Hall some night, on the pretext of making a reconciliation, or some such nonsense, and then dispose of her. Always, of course, provided you are unobserved by the other guests. But our guests being what they are, and confound it, Walter, you are responsible in large part for their being what they are, I wouldn't put it past them to choose that very night to have a bridge party on the balcony of the Hall. So I wouldn't do it. In fact, I won't." I stood up. "I'm going back to the Hall, and I sincerely, indeed I devoutly, hope you give up this rash plan. Heaven knows, Walter, you have reasons enough for wishing Lucille were no longer part of your life. But you have not as yet hit upon a rational, I might even say a probable, or possible, method of getting her out of it. When you do," I said, perhaps a trifle carried away, "let me know."

Walter Nichols stood up, too.

"I certainly will," he said. "But I think, all things considered, I can't do without you. Driving back to the Hall?"

"Yes." We left together. Frankly, I could not imagine why Mr. Walter Nichols was so anxious to return with me to the Hall. However, we left the premises of the Valley Club, went out to our cars, got in them, and drove back to the Hall. We drove into the interior courtyard and got out at the main entrance. I said, "Well, I'll have to check the day's accounts."

"Yes," said Walter Nichols, "But first, I want you to accompany me on a trip downstairs."

"Downstairs?"

"Yes. To the crypt beneath the old wine cellar. You have no objection, have you?"

I stared. It was a moment before I gave any reply. "Of course not. But couldn't we postpone it to some other time?"

"No," said Nichols. "I found something very interesting down there. I think you'll be interested, too. What's the matter, P. C.? You don't look particularly happy."

"Why on earth should I be particularly happy?"

"Well, stop mopping the perspiration off your face." I hadn't been aware that I was doing so. "I think you know what I found down there, and you'd might as well face it."

"No," I said. I'd already undergone far too severe a strain. "Not at this time. I really, if you'll excuse me, have a great deal to attend to this afternoon." But he had already turned into the Hall, and I found myself talking to the back of his head as we made our way through the lounge, chapel and library toward the back of the building. An alcove seldom in use, except as a storeroom for tools used in winter time, gave entrance upon a flight of stairs leading down to the laundry and boiler-room. The large and furniture-laden vaults that had once been the wine cellar of the Hall were another flight of stairs beneath them, and beneath the cellar there was an empty crypt once used for storing ice. I followed Walter Nichols through this cool, underground maze, all of it dimly lit by electric lights that he switched on as he went along. I said, "I hope this won't take long."

"It won't," he said, turning to the narrow stairway leading to the crypt, and lighting the bulb that illuminated its length from the doorway at the bottom. "Cooke," he said, "you had a brother-in-law, didn't you, by the name of Fremont Bryan?"

"Yes, I believe I have. Why?"

"You believe so?" he asked, with heavy sarcasm. "Don't you know you had?"

"I haven't seen Fremont for years," I said.

"I'm sure you haven't. Not for seven years, to be exact. Not since he became suspicious as to the way you were administering your father-in-law's estate." We stepped into the crypt. "But I think you're going to see him now."

He pointed to a hole dug steeply into the dirt that was today the only flooring in the crypt. At the bottom of it there was, unmistakably, the figure of a human skeleton.

"Who found it?" I asked.

"I did," said Nichols. "It took a great deal of searching, and a lot more of deductive reasoning. But I got the answer last winter, on the West Coast. And when I returned last night, I found I'd been right. As you can see."

"Demarest Hall," I pointed out, "was built upon a site reputed to be an Indian burial ground."

"Did you ever see an Indian with a silver belt buckle on which were engraved the initials, F. B.?" Nichols sounded that buzz-saw laugh of his. "Flying Buffalo, maybe? But Flying Buffalo was shot through the back of the head with a .32 caliber bullet, which is still inside the skull."

"It's a very disturbing thing to happen. I don't pretend to understand what you meant by deductive reasoning and so on. No doubt you have your own reasons. But if you think that this involves anything irregular, I suppose we had better notify the authorities."

"Nice bluffing," said Nichols. "But, on the other hand, why bother to notify anyone at all? Why not simply shovel the dirt back and let the dead past bury the dead? Maybe you're right. Maybe you don't know anything about this. But on the other hand, my belief is that you do. And why should I start the troopers to make an investigation into your past, asking you all sorts of embarrassing questions?"

"It might lead to scandal that the Hall could not afford to have," I admitted. "It might upset the whole summer, and

have even more far-reaching, well, consequences than you or I could foresee.”

Nichols picked up a shovel, and handed me another one.

“Exactly what I thought,” he said. “So, I suggest that we just cover this up and forget about it. Only this time, for God’s sake, you might have the sense to put down a cement floor.”

“A new cement floor down here, a place no longer used, would certainly cause comment,” I pointed out.

Nichols laughed, and nodded.

“I knew you had sense. It takes a practical man to do a job of this sort. We writers are apt to be visionary, and overlook certain elementary factors.” We started to shovel the dirt back into the grave. “But, regarding that business we were discussing in the city—can I take it that you’ll co-operate?”

“I won’t have anything to do with the thing you have in mind, Mr. Nichols,” I said. “But on the other hand, I’m always glad to co-operate. I’m sure there must be a happy solution.”

“Well, that’s all I’m asking for. Think of one, and the quicker and safer, the happier.”

We shoveled in silence, in the airless crypt. Nichols, to my way of thinking, more closely resembled an animal than a human being. But it is only too true, and pity that it is, that some men are either made, or become that way. He said, grinning again in that maddening way of his,

“In case you thought of getting rid of me first, P. C.”

“Yes, Walter?”

“I have left a communication for the police that will certainly strap you into the electric chair.”

It was uncanny. Silent again, we went on digging.





## CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

I noticed that her face, framed by waves of jet-black hair, was nearly a perfect oval. Quite small across the high, white forehead, and quite round at the firm but narrow chin. Then the line between the breasts and the knees, the line that always goes like strong drink to a man's head, was a lazy, unbroken, inverted S.

"So that's how it is," she said. "We have separate studios while we're here. It's been years since we lived together as man and wife."

I tossed down the brush and came around to the back of the easel. I'd been touching up "Farewell," or "Grief." I'd changed the mermaid, and she was now Lucille. Instead of waving good-bye to the steamship, which I had turned around and now had coming in instead of going out, she was waving a welcome to it. The picture would be called "Joy." This might have seemed strange to the average person who does not know the infinity of corrections and revisions through which an artist must go before the completion of a creative work. A complete reversal of the original conception is nothing uncommon. Besides, Walter Nichols' statement about mermaids had a grain of truth in it. They were out. I would have known it, myself, except that I'd been absorbed for so many years in the commercial demand. With the people who are in a position to offer good commissions, mermaids, South Sea Islands, Harlem dancers, and accurate likenesses never seem to go out. Sailboats, too, and hunters with dogs.

I said, "Well, I'm really sorry I socked him this morning." I gave Lucille a dry smile. "But, as you see, he surmised the truth about this mermaid picture. And the truth hurt."

"Don't worry about it. Walter has been socked by experts. May I smoke?"

I said, "Yes. And let's have a drink. I don't think I'll do any more with this for a time. It's four o'clock."

She got down off the stand and took off her dressing-gown in which I'd draped her, to substitute for the actual overcoat in the portrait, a substitution I'd hit upon as the easiest way in which to remove the suggestion of a mermaid. The pose was the same, but the feet, of course, were different.

When I came back with a couple of highballs she said, "Honestly, Chris. You may think I'm joking. But there are times when I hardly understand that man."

"Here you are. What man?"

"Walter, you utter fool. There are times when he seems terribly strange and sinister. As long as I've known him, I still don't understand him. Chris." She hesitated, and I said, after a try at the highball, "Yes?" Then, very thoughtfully, she said, "I sometimes think—this may sound silly. But I sometimes think Walter would stop at nothing."

"What do you mean?"

She gave me a long look out of those jet-black eyes of hers.

"I don't think Walter would stop at anything to get rid of me. I mean, Chris, just this." She ground out the stub of her cigarette, considering her words. And looked at me, and seemed to be estimating me. "I mean, I don't think he'd stop at murdering me."

I snickered. "Why should he? Divorce is so much simpler, so much less dangerous and expensive, and just as effective. Besides, it's civilized."

She lit another cigarette, seated upon the studio lounge. She looked at me through the longest, darkest eyelashes I have ever seen. It was as though I had suddenly found myself at the bottom of a particularly high-powered microscope.

"How many people, today, have any interest in being civilized?" she asked. "Besides, there is the matter of alimony or a settlement he might have to make, if we were divorced. Then there is the matter of insurance. We have mutual benefit policies that amount to eighty thousand. But the real reason would be—well, revenge. Walter feels that I have somehow hurt him. Terribly. Through my relations with other men, of course. Although we both agreed when we married that we would live completely free and independent lives, as civilized people do. When they can. And if they have the courage to do so."

I found that I'd reached the end of my highball. I said, vaguely,

"Murder is a sucker's racket. Sooner or later they always get tripped up. Fact is, it just won't work. Another drink?"

"No, thanks. I haven't finished mine. Do you," she said, as I set about mixing another highball, "always drink so much?"

"I don't drink very much," I explained. "I'm practically a teetotaler today as a matter of fact."

"Seven or eight drinks this morning, unless I guess completely wrong," she said. "And you've had only five so far this afternoon. Is that what you call temperance?"

“Well, it’s not intemperance, either.” I mixed myself another one, and came back with it. “Anyway,” I said, “this is the last one for today. But tell me more about your husband. Are you serious, that you think he’d like to, well, as you said, kill you?”

She exhaled smoke, rattled the ice cubes in her drink, stared at the drink, and then at me.

“I’ve been mortally afraid of him for years,” she said. “He’s tried to do whatever damage to me that he could, over that period, in any way that he could do it. He has wrecked concert engagements of mine. He has turned my oldest friends against me. He has ruined some of my finest, most worth-while friendships—and the more that he has done against me, the more his hatred and his desire for revenge against imagined slights and insults rises. Frankly, Chris, it’s a situation the end of which I cannot see, and which I cannot cope with.”

Suddenly she was in my arms, and crying. I got an admixed aroma of Scotch, La Tabac Blonde, tobacco, and that indefinable but strong scent of the purely feminine. I said, “Don’t even think about it. You aren’t going to be murdered while you’re here at Demarest Hall, at least. There are plenty of us here who will see to that. Meaning myself, among others.”

She sighed, snuffled, placed her nose, which was small and kittenish, in the nook of my southwest elbow.

“You don’t understand Walter,” she said.

“Well, who wants to?” I leaned over and kissed her. It was just as I’d expected it would be, only better. I said, “God. People waste so much time talking, don’t they? And this is so much more fun. Why didn’t we do it before?”

She said, “But we did, last night, don’t you remember?”

“Last night,” I said, groping for some positive recollection, “was last night. Tonight, though, is something different. And for heaven’s sake, stop worrying about him. There are still some sane people left in this world.”

She said, idly, while I kissed her, “What would you think if you’d awakened twice, in a closed garage with the motor of your car running?”

“I’d think I’d been pretty damn careless.”

“No, I mean, not through your own carelessness. And it wasn’t any accident.”

“Are you trying to say that husband of yours . . .?”

She didn’t give an immediate reply. She said, finally, in a low, wondering, abstracted voice, “I don’t know. It doesn’t seem possible. And yet, there it was.”

I put down the last of the highball and went out to the kitchenette to mix another. I said, from there, “Well, if there’s any question about it at all, I should think you’d give the guy the air, and not waste any time about it.”

When I came back she said, disturbed and distraught, “But I’m not sure. And I’d want to be sure. Besides, there are reasons why I can’t leave him. Not just like that.”

“Then forget it,” I said, and pulled her into my lap. She might have looked like a Bellini Madonna, but she kissed like a Rubens. It was like having your arms around a flame. I said, as I experimented, “Darling, darling.”

She said, “No,” and sat up, tucking her hair into place. “I don’t want to bore you with my own troubles, Chris.”

I had a premonition that I was going to hear some more about Walter Nichols, but I said, “You aren’t.”

She gave me one of those long, probing glances. She seemed, somehow, both incredibly helpless and extremely brave.

“It’s just that I feel, oh, sort of, well, afraid. Not only for myself, but for Walter, too. For what he may do to us. All of us.”

“Forget the guy,” I said. “Don’t be such an idealist.”

Suddenly she was in my arms again, in a lightning change of mood.

“Chris,” she said, and there was an abyss of despair in her voice. “You will protect me, won’t you?”

“It will be a pleasure.”

“I mean.” She stopped. “I don’t know what I mean. I had no right to say that.”

I sampled the highball. Things were going around a little too fast for me, and I needed a certain amount of perspective to think them out. I compromised, finally, by simply kissing her. This time, it was like trying to take hold of a changing cloud. I’d never known anyone so variable in her moods as Lucille. It was like staring into a kaleidoscope, where the patterns are always, always different. I’d met such women in dreams, but long ago decided they didn’t exist in real life.

There was a knock at the door, and the instant I heard it, I realized Biernbaum’s typewriter had stopped chattering a moment or two before. Lucille crossed the studio to pick up her glass, and I said, “Come in.”

Biernbaum had a bottle in his hand and a look of apology on his face.

“Just say ‘scat’ if I’m intruding,” he said. I didn’t say anything, but made up my mind the next time I drove in to town I’d buy him a supply of matches that would last him forever. “Got some hundred-year-old brandy,” he went on, “and I thought perhaps . . .? Care for some?”

“That would be lovely,” said Lucille, and I said, “Santa Claus.”

While I was getting fresh glasses, Biernbaum and Lucille speculated on the weather outlook, and then presently

Biernbaum, who must have moved over to the easel, said, “This is odd. Oh, Bartel,” he called. “Didn’t I see this picture this morning, only it was a mermaid instead of Lucille?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve been retouching a variety of canvases more or less simultaneously.”

“Very odd.”

I came out of the kitchenette, feeling as though I were floating around in space. I poured us some brandy, which was very good, then Biernbaum and I had some more. While Biernbaum and Lucille went on with the one topic of conversation that never appeared to be exhausted here at Demarest Hall, namely, panning those of the guests who happened not to be present, I tried to figure out whether I was ahead or behind in my usual drinking schedule. My arms felt like a pair of feather dusters and my head felt like the Hayden Planetarium. The feeling was good, and I decided I was behind the schedule, merely tapering off, as I’d decided I ought to do.

“That damned correspondence-course Balzac from Boston,” Biernbaum was saying. “He had the colossal nerve to come up to me in the library this afternoon, while I was looking through *Time*, and demand that I hand it over to him.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not. I told Owen to go jump in the lake. Then he had the gall to say that he needed it for some information he had to have for his current novel about the freight yards of Chicago. The freight yards of Chicago.” Biernbaum’s reiteration held towering contempt. “Intimating, mind you, that he was doing an important piece of work, and I, who didn’t amount to very much, was holding him up. The freight yards of Chicago. Do I have to listen to that flatulent moron, who drinks nothing but milk, eats nothing but bran, wears nothing but sweat shirts, speaks nothing but banalities, and sees nothing unless it’s right under his nose and he can’t help seeing it—do I have to listen all summer to him bragging about what a genius he is, and the freight yards of Chicago?” I realized they were discussing an earnest young novelist by the name of Frederick Owen who wrote, as many of them did, serious documentary accounts in fictional form of one or another phase of national life. Biernbaum said it again, “The freight yards of Chicago. I wouldn’t mind his writing about them, if only he wouldn’t tell me about the atrocious ideas he has for the job.”

I poured myself another brandy, feeling very good, and said, “Why, what’s wrong with the freight yards of Chicago? Seems to me it would be a very interesting subject.”

Biernbaum got really excited. He stood up.

“You’re right,” he said. “It is. But what does Owen know about freight yards? Did he ever work in them? In Chicago or anywhere else? He did not. He sold books in a bookstore, that’s all that young man ever did. But I happen to know a little about freight yards. I was a trackwalker for five years, in the Philadelphia yards. And he has the nerve to try to tell me.”

He sat down again. Lucille finished her drink, and rose. She said, “Guess I’ll powder my nose.” She gave me a significant look, which I didn’t get, as she moved toward the door. At the door, still looking at me, she slid something behind a large ash tray that stood on the tray of a floor lamp. “See you at supper,” she said. “That’s only twenty minutes.”

“Is that all?” said Biernbaum.

“Right,” I said, and stood up.

She smiled and went out. I poured myself another brandy. With the glass in my hand I wandered casually across the room. Biernbaum, settled morosely in his chair, resumed with his monologue.

“I don’t know why I put up with it. One of these days some pseudo-genius is going to start telling me all about art and literature, and I’m going to take a knife and stick it through his ribs. And plead self-defense.” I looked down in back of the ash tray. It was a key-ring, with “Agni Lodge, Studio 3” marked upon it. I closed my hand over the ring, and put the keys away. “And if it isn’t one of those quick-order geniuses who’s written one book, which is all that he ever will write,” Biernbaum went on, gloomily, “then it’s some bright book-reviewing critic just out of a girls’ finishing school, usually a convent, and no matter how hot she looks, she has to tell you all about the sociological weakness of Flaubert’s outlook.”

“Too bad,” I said. “Have some more brandy? After all, it’s yours.”

He finished his, and wordlessly held up the empty glass. The studio was going around with a smooth, soothing, reassuring movement, like that of a heavy and swiftly spinning top. There would be another ten minutes before supper was served in the dining room. I poured.



## CLAUDIA ATTELIO

I thought to myself, as I looked around the dining room with its complement of some thirty-five of America's most distinguished artists, writers, musicians and sculptors, that even in this field where only the finest talents win achievement, there were everywhere evident conspicuous differences in taste. It ranged from the most refined to that verging upon the vulgar.

I felt fortunate this evening, in that we had seated at our table that brilliant young novelist, Mr. Frederick Owen, he who had written so vividly of the teeming places of the world, and yet spoke so well the innermost thoughts of the heart. I should describe Mr. Owen, in appearance, as being rather muscular though not quite the athletic type, possessed of a warm, appealing disposition, yet under the warmth and simple sincerity of his speech there was a brooding somberness that belied the twinkle in his eye. Also at this table sat the famous illustrator, portrait painter and muralist, Mr. Christopher Bartel. Him I would describe as extraordinarily tall and blonde, an heroic statue of a man, gifted with piercing blue eyes and a charming smile, as well as the most charming manners. Not favored as a conversationalist, as had become evident, Mr. Bartel was this evening exceptionally uncommunicative. He sat, preoccupied and impeccable, before his empty cup of *consomme*, which shortly the waiter would remove.

Miss Gregg was not vis-a-vis across the table this evening, a fact that I must confess gave me a tiny feeling of relief. Her continued comradeship, after four days, sincere though she was, sparkling though she was, had come to seem a trifle oppressive. For one evening, at least, let her go unshepherded by me. But I did regret being deprived of the presence of that extraordinary humorist and conversationalist, Mr. Nichols. He sat at an adjoining table, however, witty as ever, a pair of sun glasses heavily shading his rubicund features. From time to time I could hear snatches of the discussion he had under way.

"Did you ever do the confessions of a blackmailer, Mr. Dunn?" I now heard him say. He was apparently speaking to a Mr. Harry Dunn who wrote memoirs for prominent, but less gifted personages who were unable to do so for themselves. I did not catch Mr. Dunn's reply, if indeed he replied at all, for Mr. Nichols' hearty voice swept through the room with scarcely a pause. "Blackmail in itself, you know, is really not an end. It's a means, I should say, to some other end. Would you agree with me, Mr. Cooke?" Mr. Nichols' voice shook with laughter. "To make it really profitable, wouldn't you say so?"

"Perhaps, like so many things under the sun, it's a means to a means."

"Exactly."

Miss Hartwig, the concert pianist, was seated at this table, also, a personality whose enigma I had not as yet solved. And then there was Mr. Connors, like myself, a poet. But I felt, without wishing to be invidious, that the turbulent, unrestrained verses which he composed were not of the type destined to be graven high upon the enduring granite of literature's immortal annals. In short, I gave this particular louse, as they say, about one year, and then he'd be forgotten. He had, besides, the most disturbing mannerisms.

While the waiter silently came and went, removing the *consomme* cups, then replacing them with the entree—this evening we had squab—Miss Hartwig nibbled olives, and Mr. Nathan Biernbaum, the well-known historical novelist, fifth of the other diners at our table, drummed with his fingers upon the table cloth. Presently, Mr. Owen said to the table at large, "Finished another chapter of 'Freight Yards' today."

After a long pause, in which no one else at our table seemed able to accept this challenge to the creative spirit, or perhaps it was the heat, or the fatigue at the end of the day's hard work, I said to Mr. Owen, "Are you using your customary, original technique, Mr. Owen?"

"A bull's-eye," said Mr. Biernbaum, for no reason.

Mr. Owen looked at him, seemingly annoyed, but said to me, "I'm trying something quite new. I don't think it's ever been tried before in literature. I've gone from the characters, the human characters, you understand, to a sort of oversoul that speaks the drama of the actual machines of this huge freight yard. Boxcars, with a running commentary on what they've carried and where they've been. Switch engines. And so on. I think it will be unique."

"One Third of a Nation," said Mr. Biernbaum, and loudly yawned.

"That was quite different," said Mr. Owen, stiffly.

"Would you please pass the radishes, toots," said Mr. Connors, and I saw that he was looking at me.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The radishes, please."

I shuddered inwardly, but smiled and passed them to him. I said,

“Attelio is the name. Or Claudia, if you prefer.”

“Thanks for telling me again,” he said. “I’m positive I’ll remember.”

There had been that about Demarest Hall, from the first day. Although most of the discussion was upon a high level, and heady discourse it was, I had been disturbed, not to say amazed, at certain unmistakable undertones that had become barely audible from time to time. Frankly, I could not fathom the meaning of them, some times. Something uncouth, vulgar. But more than that, even. All but brutal, really. Miss Pratt, for example, the sculptress at our table—she did exquisite work, I’d been told, now interrupted harshly, by saying,

“How about an armistice on shop talk?”

“Amen,” said Mr. Biernbaum. “What do you say, Mr. Bartel?”

“I’d say,” Mr. Bartel remarked, after a singularly long pause, and speaking in a voice that tended to blur, “the Napoleon is wearing off.”

To this cryptic remark no one gave reply, and Mr. Owen acidly stated, “Sorry I strained your powerful mentalities by asking you to try to think.”

At our table, the conversation flagged, which was most unfortunate. I blamed it on Miss Pratt. I, for one, had certainly been willing and even anxious to know more about the ideas, the creative thoughts that Mr. Owen was striving to bring to life and being in his new novel. It might easily have been an historic moment, in which Mr. Owen first made public the nexus of his dream-child, a book that perhaps would live as long as men were filled with unrequited longings and hopes but half defined. I decided then and there she, too, might be part of the chaff of our little world here at Demarest Hall.

“What did you do today, Alfred?” said Mr. Biernbaum.

Mr. Connor replied, abruptly, “Swatted flies. The damned things kept me awake half the day. Seems the screens don’t stop them from getting in, but once they’re in, they don’t know how to get out again. Cooke ought to take all the screens down, that’s the only solution.”

From everywhere about the spacious room with its comfortable furniture, modern and yet in the best of taste, arose the hum of talk that might, perhaps, have delighted the ears of the gods and which at times, nevertheless, displayed anew the truism that genius is also mortal, all too mortal. Who would have imagined those strident lines that came from the pen of Mr. Connors were those of a man interested, in reality, in such mundane a matter as flies? Elsewhere, about the dining room, one could hear equally revelatory phrases.

“... cannot find anywhere, in the eighteenth century, the concept of representative democracy like the concept we have of it today . . .”

“That harpsichord of mine must have traveled fifty thousand miles, at an average cost of ten cents a mile . . .”

“... well, who? Where can they get a real match for Louis? Nowhere, there isn’t any match . . .”

“... introduced the technique of painting into sculpture, precisely as Michelangelo introduced the technique of sculpture into painting . . .”

“... don’t have to hog all the olives, do you?”

“I’m no bargain, sir.” That was Albert, the steward. “But I can guarantee, sir, you won’t have any more trouble with that dripping faucet. We’ll have a plumber at Brahma Lodge the very first thing in the morning, sir.”

“... or did you, Mr. Dunn? Haven’t you found it difficult to refrain from becoming personally involved with the underworld, considering that you’ve made so many, and such confidential contacts with it?”

“Precisely what do you mean by that, Mr. Nichols?”

“Really?” This was the high-pitched voice of Miss Zom, the novelist. “Then it’s the first time since I’ve known you, Lucille, that your evenings weren’t occupied.”

“... the sort of a person who’d stick a knife in your back at the slightest opportunity . . .”

“Well, you find a strange automobile parked outside your house, and your wife won’t let you come in the door, what would you think?”

“... not a cent less than two hundred a lecture, and if it’s within airplane distance, plus expenses. There ought to be, really, a union . . .”

“Plato had it. Aristotle had it. Dante had it. Goethe had it. Tolstoi had it. But what American had it?”

“... not today, Mr. Weiss.” I was interested that the over-shy and possibly over-prim Miss Gregg, seated at the table under the portrait of Clark Demarest, as conceived by Sargent, had found an interested listener and perhaps interlocutor. “That sort of idealism is quite out of date. Unless one wishes to sell one’s idealism for money, or buy it with blood.”

The waiters had removed our plates everywhere throughout the dining room, and were now returning with dessert and demi-tasse. The human animal, replete with food, ought now to be both spiritually and physically content. I decided to address myself to the seventh and last diner at our table, a gentleman named Mr. Hale and, if I remembered correctly, a writer. I said,

“But we haven’t heard from you yet, Mr. Hale.” It was a fact that during the entire dinner he hadn’t uttered a word. An extremely bashful individual, he apparently needed encouragement to express his views. “What do you think of all this?”

He said hastily,

“I didn’t hear it. Not all of it. I had my mind on something else, and I couldn’t remember a thing that was said, not if my life depended on it. And that’s the truth, so help me God.”

“Preoccupied with your own work, Mr. Hale?” I prompted him.

“That’s right. Exactly. How did you guess? I was trying to sum up, in my own mind, the background of the philosophical implications of my book.”

“That’s very interesting.” I threw Miss Pratt a warning glance. Let her attempt to smother this interchange of ideas, and she would find herself confronted with more than her match. “What is the subject of your book, Mr. Hale, if I may ask?”

“Prison life,” he said.

“A tremendous field,” I said. “It must have taken much research.”

“Six years,” he said.

The waiter brought our dessert, canteloupe this evening. I debated with myself whether to join those in the music room, after dinner, or those who would engage in archery and other athletics on the lawn, in the lengthening shadows of the day, or those who would prefer bridge on the terrace outside the dining room. Both the bridge players and the music-lovers, I had found, were inclined to be acrimonious. In bridge, the matter involved either politics or bidding. In music, the issue lay between the popular dance-orchestra leaders of the day, on the one hand, and Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms on the other. Perhaps the archery would be conducted in a more harmonious spirit, though I knew little enough of the sport.

I said, to Mr. Hale, “I wonder why Mr. Nichols wears sun glasses to dinner? There isn’t any glare in here. None at all.”

Mr. Hale gave me a deep, almost passionate glance.

“For good reasons, and if you ask me, well-deserved reasons.”

“A brilliant conversationalist, isn’t he?” I said. “And a profound character, I’m sure.”

Mr. Hale appeared to swell and bristle and bum for a long moment of mysterious emotional and intellectual turmoil.

“That man,” he finally enunciated. “Do you know who he is?” I didn’t, but Mr. Hale didn’t wait for me to enquire. “He’s the fellow that headed the national committee to abolish parole.” I looked my surprise. “Yes,” said Mr. Hale. “The committee set up by Congress to investigate prison conditions, and then the only recommendation it brought back was that the parole system should be abolished. He was chairman of the committee.” He scooped out the last of his canteloupe, ate it, and stared at me. “Somebody,” he said, fiercely, “ought to kill that guy.”

Mr. Connors tossed down his napkin, pushed back his chair, and stood up. He smiled down at Mr. Hale with benevolent thoughtfulness.

“Second time today you said that,” he remarked. “But I still think it’s a good idea. Why don’t you?”

With that he turned, and was gone. Mr. Hale stared at his retreating figure with somber intensity. It almost seemed as though one could not utter a single word, however harmless and well-meant, without igniting obscure explosives. I decided that in future I would be more circumspect. To Mr. Bartel, still sitting silent and absorbed, I said, “Perhaps tomorrow I’ll wear sun glasses, myself.”

He said, with that same mysteriousness that seemed to enwrap the others, “Perhaps you will.”





## CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

After a long, long while, in which I tried to decide whether I'd had a dream while I was asleep, and in it Lucille Nichols had given me the keys to her studio, or whether I'd merely had an afternoon fantasy in which I hoped she would, or whether she actually had done so in fact, I heard Miss Attelio say to me, "Perhaps tomorrow I'll wear sun glasses myself."

It was none of her business that I'd accidentally popped Walter Nichols this morning, and I failed to see why she should attempt to bring up that matter again. I said, shortly, "Perhaps you will."

That ought to hold her, I thought, and went on trying to get to the bottom of the key business. Without much hope, I felt in my trouser pockets. By the time I found what I was looking for, but hadn't expected to find, all of the others had left the table. And then there it was. I brought it out and looked at it. The tag had engraved upon it, "Agni Lodge, Studio 3." At the same time, a voice murmured in my ear, "After eleven o'clock." I looked around, nodded slightly, and saw that it was Lucille Nichols, leaving the dining room.

Nearly everyone had left the dining room, and I was practically alone, except for the help. I wanted to leave, too, but a curious paralysis of the legs seemed to anchor me to the chair. Presently, another voice registered.

"Was everything all right, sir?"

It was Albert Page, the steward.

"Quite," I said.

"The skin bracer, sir? And the prophylactic?"

With an effort, I twisted my head around and looked at him.

"What prophylactic?"

"I merely thought you might be wanting some, sir."

What the hell? There was something here I couldn't quite fathom, but at the same time, common sense was common sense. I said carefully,

"Yes. I'm glad you brought some this noon with the rest of my order."

"I didn't, sir. I merely wondered if you might not wish some."

Finally, with a tremendous exercise of will power, I concentrated my gaze upon Albert. His face was just a face. It had nothing in it. Not a thought, not an emotion, not a single clue. I said, "Yes, I would. Leave it at the studio."

"Yes, sir. That will be two dollars, sir. Since I can't, naturally, charge it through the canteen."

I gave Albert the most expressive gaze of which I was capable, though I doubt that it had much effect upon him. It came to me that Albert must be an old hand, a very old hand, in this business. I said, "I could get it, you know, for fifty cents in the city."

"Right, sir. If you prefer to drive in to town, sir, I won't bother you."

"Wait." The little heel was already moving away when I stopped him and took two dollars from my billfold. I did not want to drive to Endor, not even to avoid a holdup. I said, "You will, well, I mean, remember that I want some recognized standard brand? No second-rate junk I've never heard about?"

Albert was as one who comes invisibly to attention and swears allegiance to a king's crown.

"I'm no bargain, sir," he said. He took the two dollars. "But this will be quite to your order, sir. What is your opinion, sir, of the standards set by the United States Navy?"

I threw down my napkin and, finally, stood up. I went out of the dining room, and through the deserted lounge. I was glad that it was empty, because I decided I'd take a quick walk back to the studio to reinforce myself with a drink before entering upon the colony's social life of the evening. I met no one during the two minutes it took to reach my studio. I had two quick ones there, both Bourbon, and then retraced my steps. On the way back to the main hall I happened to glance up, and there on the balcony, I thought I recognized the features of Harry Dunn. There was no reason why he should not be there, although it was remote from the Hall's gathering downstairs, and little frequented, and I did not give it further attention. I entered again through the main door, feeling considerably braced, passed through the empty lounge, and turned in to the music hall. Its French windows were open to the terrace; there was a breeze stirring, and the easy chairs, lounges, and wall seats, all of Maplewood, seemed inviting. About a dozen people were there, listening as Miss Gregg did a prelude, very well, too, it seemed to me. Though personally, I prefer Massenet and Herbert. When she finished there was considerable applause, and then a man by the name of Janiston, a literary critic I believe, announced he was going to put the *Evrica* on the phonograph. I had seated myself in a chair between

two wall seats at the middle of one end of the room. As Janiston filled the rack of the phonograph with the Beethoven records I heard, from one side of me, "If I had it to do over again, I think perhaps I would be a musician instead of a painter." It was the heavily accented voice of Weiss. "Too much physical appliances to bother with. The canvases to stretch. The brushes to take care of. The palettes to clean. The models to sit. The easels to drag everywhere around. With you, though, it's different. Simply you sit down and make notes, which are not physical, but intangible things."

"Well, I don't know about that." The other voice was that of John Lawrence. "You take that harpsichord of mine. It's gone wherever I've gone, and it must have traveled fifty thousand miles, at an average cost of ten cents a mile, to say nothing of the trouble of crating and uncrating it, which I have to superintend myself. And then I have to keep it tuned and in good repair. It's like having to take care of a temperamental elephant."

Janiston started the *Eroica*, and in the interval before the needle reached the recording said, loudly, "The mature Beethoven."

Then the symphony began. No one in the room spoke, but from the terrace one could hear, subduedly, the voices of those engaged in archery. Occasionally, the voices rose to an audible cry.

"... if you want to lose an eye, Miss Attelio, it's O.K. with me, but I can't see the target when you stand in front of it."

When the record-holder at the conclusion of the first side of the first movement began making the change, Janiston announced, gratuitously,

"Beethoven laughing, exultant. It's titanic."

Then the first movement was resumed. Albert entered the room and went unobtrusively about the job of emptying the ash trays. His face, as he emptied the tray on the stand beside me, was as vacant, as impersonal as ever. The first movement drew to an end, and at its conclusion I heard, from the wall seat on the other side of me,

"That's the effect I want to get in my 'Freight Yards'." The person Mr. Owen addressed was the red-headed, small, rather good-looking short-story writer, Edith Wright. "Something massive, you know? A solid impact of sheer power."

Nathan Biernbaum, alone in a love-seat opposite Mr. Owen, stubbed out a cigarette in his freshly emptied tray, rose, and tiredly trudged from the room. Miss Wright said, "That's the thing I've fought for all my life. But what did the critics say when I produced it? Actually produced it. One and all, they turned on me like a pack of wolves, as they turned on Katherine Mansfield, on Keats, and all the rest of them. You'll see. It's right there in the records, down in black and white, cold print."

The second movement began. From where I sat I could see both the archers on the terrace, and out into the main lounge, which afforded, also, a view of the door to Cooke's office. I saw him emerge from that door, now, and pass out of sight in the direction of the post office and canteen, another sheaf of yellow envelopes in his hand. Since he had already told me off for holding up Albert's delivery of the lunch trays, I began to lay bets with myself as to the likelihood, and the nature, of any further suggestions I might find from him in the morning mail. I speculated about this without any interest, until it suddenly occurred to me that Cooke might take an exception. God alone would know why, to one or another aspect of my eleven o'clock engagement. Maybe he objected to that particular hour. Perhaps that particular lodge was out of bounds. Possibly he would raise hell about my having ordered, again, through Albert. I experienced a variety of chills and qualms, until I pulled myself together and reminded myself that not even Albert, who ought to know after years of service here at the Hall, believed Cooke had psychic powers of any kind. Janiston announced, between records of the dirge, "The sublimity of Beethoven's grief. It is Hercules, weeping."

I stood up. It was only nine-thirty, but I didn't feel like any more music. Or perhaps it was Janiston. Or the thought of P. C. Cooke. Or maybe it was the sight of Claudia Attelio, on the terrace, struggling to string an arrow. I walked out to the lounge, where I heard Albert, standing in the door of the canteen, speak to Mr. Dunn.

"I'm no bargain, sir, but I can easily arrange it. If you'd prefer not to have the company of Mr. Nichols, it can be arranged for you to sit at a different table both in the morning, for breakfast, and in the evening, for supper." Luncheons, of course, were brought around to the studios by Albert, and we dined where we pleased, in whatever company we chose. "That can be easily arranged, sir. Just leave it to me."

"That's fine. Here's something for your trouble."

"I can't accept it, sir. Fact is, Mr. Cooke wouldn't like it."

"Well, what he doesn't know won't hurt him, will it?"

"We like the guests to feel, sir, as though they were in their own homes. But if you happened to have a bit of Scotch, sir, next time I came by your studio . . ."

Floating on air, I went on through the lounge, left it and passed through the main entrance. It was dusk when I stepped outside. I walked briskly down the quadrangle toward my studio. The cool evening air cleared my head. At least, I hoped it did. In my own studio, I poured myself a drink, and found that Albert had already made his delivery, in a package placed on the table. I unwrapped it, and the stuff was O.K.

I took my drink and went to one of the windows that looked upon Endor Valley, and the city of Endor. Its lights, far below, were a cluster of pin-points. There was a lot of life down there, but up here, all of it seemed remote. All of life, for

that matter, and all of its desires and aspirations seemed somehow remote. The wind from the valley flowed softly through the screen, like a benediction. Far to my right there was a single streak of orange across the gap between the ridges of the valley, the last vestige of the setting sun, and overhead the stars were emerging in force. I felt the key-ring in my pocket, and wondered, briefly, why I was observing this rendezvous, then shrugged, mentally and even physically. If the stars in their courses had their own mysterious destinies, then so, of course, did men, and who was I to argue the matter? Why dispute with the ages? Besides, she was a honey of a creature, one in a lifetime. Nor did that realization either, somehow, seem adequate. What right had I to suppose that there could be, in anyone's life, one real, one outstanding person? All experience seemed to demonstrate just the opposite.

I turned away from the window, dissatisfied and disturbed. It did not, this evening's program, quite fit with any experience I had ever known before. But then, no matter how familiar their patterns, these occasions never did. I thought of the times I had, under the same circumstances, shivered with desire, ached with tenderness, burned with a case of nerves, grown dizzy with ambition, cursed out of sheer boredom, or prayed that I knew how to pray for the thing that, not knowing what it was, I really wanted. This time, though, I knew it was exactly what I wanted. The right and perfect thing. And to hell with Geraldine. And Joan's predictions. And Marguerite's cynicisms. I turned away from the window and poured myself another drink, and glanced at my watch. Ten-thirty. It was always exciting, no matter how sophomoric the basic appeal, to enter the bedroom of a strange woman. From bath salts to cosmetics, the setup was always different. From extreme modesty to outrageous candor. And rather surprisingly one always found himself, in a different situation, to be a somewhat different person. From cigarettes and hairpins, to perfume.

La Tabac Blonde, in this case, I recollected. Yes. I looked at my watch. It was eleven o'clock. Right. I finished my drink, switched off the lights, stepped out. There, for a moment, it came to me in a burst of clarity that there was nothing obscure about what men wanted. The trouble lay in this, that the things we wanted were contradictory and mutually exclusive of each other. We must have, on the one hand, peace, stability, and everlasting life. But every man must have, also, danger, and hardship, and finally death.

Rounding the corner of the lodge, I saw Biernbaum standing in the doorway of his studio. He waved and said, "Wonderful day tomorrow."

"Certainly will be."

I had stopped beside him. There was some conversation, and I heard him say, "So you play tennis?"

"Certainly I do."

After awhile, then, in which there was more talk, he finished with, "All right, if I can borrow your eyeshade."

Then the lodge floated softly away behind me as I progressed across the quadrangle to the middle lodge on its eastern side. Although it had officially been named Agni, it was really, because of a small basin of running water and statuary in back of it, called Fountain Lodge. In architecture and detail it did not differ much from any of the other studio structures. I did not need the key for the outer door, nor did I need that to the door of Studio 3.

I don't know what I had expected. Subconsciously, I suppose, I had expected the undercurrent of strain that seems to go with a new situation. But, although the room was obviously arranged, and she herself was, indefinitely, as one gowned for a dramatic occasion, there was none of this subsurface tension at all. She set a carafe filled with ice cubes beside bottles that stood on a magazine table beside the studio lounge, then looked up from it.

"Hello," she said, "you're quite drunk, aren't you?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why, any law against it?"

"None. Which would you prefer, Scotch or rye?"

"Scotch."

I watched her fix up two highballs. When she handed me mine, she said,

"I wonder if you know why you drink so much, Chris? Do you?"

I said, "Yes, of course I do."

"I wonder if you do." She sat down on the lounge beside me, and the air was filled with the scent of her hair, her perfume, her gown. "I've known so many men who drank too much, Walter among others. And with every one of them there was a reason why. But not one of them knew the real reason."

"I do," I said. I was consciously being more self-assertive than I felt. With anyone else, I would have been annoyed. But now I wasn't, I didn't know why. I went on, nevertheless, "You're a darling, Lucille, and I love you. But I'd rather not hear any more about Walter, and couldn't we just sort of skip all the other men you've known?"

She laughed, sipped her highball, puffed at a cigarette.

"Do you know who I really am, Chris?"

"You're a lovely lady, and beyond that I don't care about anything at all."

She said, eyeing me out of those eyes blacker and deeper than buried coals, "Then you don't remember me?"

I decided this was a question I'd better not try to answer at all. From the moment I'd known her there had been something vaguely familiar about her. But that could have been attributed to some psychological affinity. I decided not to lie, either. I said, "Not clearly, no."

“You were the first man I ever slept with. When you were a senior at school, home in White Plains during the vacations. Now do you remember?” My mind plunged backward, groping. Twenty years is a fearful jump. I couldn’t make it. There were half-memories, but nothing positive. “God,” said Lucille, “what hell I lived through for loving you then. But I guess I’ve loved you ever since. And I won’t ever stop.”

I did not know why I felt as I did. Perhaps it had something to do with the enormous gap of frustration that looms between the dream of youth, and the realization of the adult. As though the dream and the realization, so totally different, had suddenly been revealed as one and the same.

But how can this be more clearly explained? How can I explain that I, forty-two years old, twice married and twice divorced, suddenly ceased to have age, civil condition and social standing, and the woman in my arms suddenly ceased being a minor riddle, but became, simply, a woman. Damn a woman who tries to be more than a woman. This one didn’t, never had, and never would. I experienced the feeling that I had forgotten long ago, but always in dreams remembered, the feeling of being thoroughly at home in a world where everything proceeded on an epic scale, and in which everyone’s life was directed as swiftly and clearly toward an inevitable goal as an arrow toward a target.

As I kissed her, and it was dynamite, she said, “It will seem strange, going to bed with you again. After all these years. Like reaching the point in a movie where one first came in.”

I said, hating myself for the banality, and yet saying it anyway, from sheer habit of saying the bright thing, “I hope you won’t be bored.”

“I won’t be. But will you, Chris?”

“No,” I said.

We weren’t.

I had an image, after a while, in which there were two highballs, which I was mixing, and then we talked. She talked about White Plains, that summer when we’d known each other before, and we got that partially straightened out. And then we talked for a while about Walter. And then it was dark again. And then, after another interval, I was leaving the studio.

Somewhere, in all of this, I had a dream that amounted, really, to a nightmare. All that I could see in it was a sort of a judge, mounted somewhere high up, and he was saying, “Three people will die.” I did not understand, as a spectator at this scene, what he was talking about, but the pronouncement had terrifying undertones. And then he hammered and hammered upon the bench with his gavel. The hammering eventually became unbearable. I opened my eyes. I was in my studio. I called out,

“Cut that out, and come in.”

I focused my eyes upon the surrounding scene and upon Nathan Biernbaum, who walked cheerfully through the door.

“Here I am,” he said. “I’m an hour late, but better late than never. Here I am.”

He was dressed in shorts, sneakers, and had a tennis racket in his hand. I said,

“So I see. But why?”

“Don’t you remember? You wanted to play tennis at five o’clock, before breakfast. It’s six, but we’ve still got lots of time.”

“Have we?”

“Come on, get out of bed. This was your idea, not mine. Remember how you insisted upon it last night?”

“I did?”

“Certainly. You wouldn’t let go of me until I promised to keep the date. And you promised to loan me your eyeshade. Where is it?”

I don’t know why I did it. Heaven knows, all I wanted to do was to crawl back between the covers and pretend to be dead. But I seemed to be acting under an inner compulsion. I edged my way out of bed, shakily, and said,

“For God’s sake, please stop shouting. The eyeshade is in the right-hand top drawer of the dresser. And the Scotch should be in the kitchenette. Please bring it, will you?”

He found both the eyeshade and the Scotch. After a couple of drinks, straight, I was able to take a shower, and then get into my clothes. Shorts and sneakers. And then I found my tennis racket, and a set of balls, and we started toward the courts. Outside, the early morning seemed to sparkle like something brand new. It was cool and fresh. The courts were only a quarter mile away, through the woods, and we were soon there.

We had no sooner reached them, than Biernbaum abruptly tossed my eyeshade high into the air and flung his racket savagely down upon the ground.

“Damn that Cooke,” he yelled. “What did I tell you? He’s got it in for us.” Peter, the gardener, was slowly laying down fresh lines with the marker. The nets sagged in the middle of the courts, and the marking was obviously unfinished. “Peter, how soon can we get a court? Whose idea is this, anyway, to mark the courts at this hour of the day?”

“They have to be marked sometime, Mr. Biernbaum,” said Peter, mildly. “I said as much to Mr. Cooke. So he said to

mark them early this morning before breakfast, like we always do when they have to be marked.”

“I suppose,” said Biernbaum, “it’s hopeless, to expect to use a court?”

“Hopeless,” admitted Peter, “until about ten-thirty. After breakfast you can play fine.”

“That’s just wonderful,” said Biernbaum. He retrieved the eyeshade and the racket. Personally, I didn’t mind. I hadn’t cared to play at this hour of the morning. It was just the feeling that I’d committed myself to doing so. “What did I tell you?” grumbled Biernbaum, as we retraced our steps. “Cooke won’t stop at anything, if he thinks you’ve crossed him in some way. In any way. No matter how fanciful the slight may be.”

“Well,” I said, “I haven’t done anything he might not approve of.” Then I amended the statement. “That is, nothing outrageous. Not that he knows of, at least. Nothing that I know that he knows of, I mean.”

We reached the lodge and went in to our separate studios. In mine, I had a drink, then decided to have another and a shower. After the shower, I would decide whether to get dressed, or to go back to bed.

While I was in the middle of the shower, though, there was a knock at the door. I yelled, “Come in,” but no one appeared, and the knock was repeated. I hastily dried myself, found a dressing-gown, went to the door. A uniformed state trooper, spic-and-span, stood there.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said. “But Captain Wessex would like to see you in the main hall.”

I said, vacantly, “Captain Wessex?”

“Yes, sir. It’s the state police.”

“So I gathered. What’s happened?”

“Captain Wessex will tell you when you get there.”

I shrugged and said, “O.K.”

I went back to put on my clothes, and I heard the trooper knocking at Biernbaum’s door. I caught overtones of much the same conversation I had had with him, then I heard the trooper repeat at the door of Karl Weiss. When I had dressed, I went on up to the Main Hall. There were a considerable number of people about, many of them on the lawn before Demarest Hall, most of them gazing upward. On the balcony of the fifth floor I discerned something, I didn’t know what, wrapped in a white cloth that was probably a sheet. I went on in to the Hall and asked another trooper for Captain Wessex. I was confronted, finally, by a solid piece of animated granite who said, “I’m Captain Wessex. What’s your name?”

“Christopher Bartel. What seems to be the trouble?”

“A man was murdered here in the early hours of this morning. We’re investigating it.”

I said, “Who?”

Captain Wessex looked me up and down and through and through.

“The dead man’s name is Walter Nichols,” he said. “The man whom you knocked down, I understand, in the dining room of the main hall yesterday morning at breakfast. Would you know anything about this?”

I shook my head. I said, “I knocked him down because he had it coming to him. But as to who shot the heel, I wouldn’t know.”

“What made you think he was shot?” said Captain Wessex. He gave me again that X-ray eye and I could only shrug. “As a matter of fact,” he relented, “he was stabbed in the back with a knife.” He paused for a moment, sighed, murmured almost as though to himself, “And it had to happen at a place like this. Tell me,” he said, more briskly, “was there any particular reason why Mr. Cooke, the director of Demarest Hall, should wish to kill this fellow Mr. Nichols? Any reason that you know of?”

Again I had to shake my head.

“None that I know of,” I said. “Why?”

“All right, Mr.—the name was Bartel, wasn’t it? How do you spell that?” I spelled it. “All right, Mr. Bartel, I’ll want to speak to all of you later. Naturally, I’m going to check on your movements during the early hours of the morning.” He looked at me. “What’s the matter? If you’ve got anything to say, say it now.”

I said, “I want some sleep, some breakfast, and a stiff drink. After that I’m your man.”

Captain Wessex sounded a faint sort of a laugh, although, somehow, I didn’t like its general overtones.

“O.K. for now,” he said. “But I’m going to go over the whole place with a fine tooth comb. I don’t suppose I have to tell you, but I’ll tell you anyhow—don’t try to leave these grounds. And you can’t think of any reason why your little director, Mr. Peter Cooke, should have killed Mr. Nichols?”

“No,” I said, turning away. “But it would be all right with me. No matter who did it.”



## CAPTAIN WESSEX

As soon as the note from the dead man exploded into thin air I saw that a quick pinch was out of the question. The note had been conspicuously displayed among Nichols' personal effects in an apartment allotted to him in a building called Vách. Its envelope had been labeled "For the Police," and its contents were:

To the Police,

"In the event of my death under circumstances that may seem obscure, or that suggest the possibility of violence . . ."

Had the victim seen the meat-skewer used to do the business, he would not have worried about that point. It had gone clear through. The note went on:

" . . . the murder will have been done by Mr. P. C. Cooke, a former inmate of Rockland State Hospital for the insane, and a gentleman of homicidal obsessions.

"Further evidence of Mr. Cooke's tendencies may be found buried in the crypt of Demarest Hall. There is a strong suspicion that the remains are those of Fremont Bryan, Cooke's brother-in-law."

Walter J. Nichols

Trooper Keams had found the note fifteen minutes after I reached the place of call. It had certainly seemed promising, if not conclusive. But now, after I'd wasted four hours following up that note, it was definitely out. I could have kicked myself in the pants, too, for limiting the preliminary investigation to the men living on the grounds, and that to a cursory, hit-or-miss questioning. Now all the guests had had breakfast in the main restaurant, and they'd talked the whole thing over until God himself would never get a straight, let alone an honest, answer out of the whole lot of them.

But the facts about P. C. Cooke were, the bones which we had no trouble finding in that basement were those of a person about fifteen years old, at the most; Cooke's brother-in-law was definitely alive; his name was not Fremont Bryan, but Ryan, and the bones seemed actually to be those of a young fellow killed about 1876 in a hunting accident and buried somewhere near the site on which Demarest Hall was subsequently erected. Records in Endor City gave the name of the young fellow who had been shot as Frank Peters. The belt-buckle in the grave was so corroded as to fit, offhand, almost any set of initials one wished to give them. There was something fishy in the way the case had been disposed of at that time, but this made no difference as far as P. C. Cooke was concerned. But, worst of all, it seems that Cooke had sat up most of the night in the third-floor lounge of the main building playing poker with a painter by the name of Karl Weiss, a musician by the name of John Lawrence, and some kind of a writer by the name of Harold Janiston. They all alibi'd each other; so far, at least, their stories hung together; and that was that. While I waited for my long-distance call to go through to Col. Herrick, I went over the main points again with Mr. Cooke. We sat in his office, next door to a room he said was used as a post office and canteen.

I asked him, "And Mr. Nichols showed you those bones downstairs, which you say he found?" Cooke nodded. "Why did he do that, did he say?"

"He was very much disturbed," said Cooke, looking at me intently through a couple of shoe-button eyes buried away back in a fleshy face. "He had the good of the Hall at heart, and I imagine discovering such a gruesome relic made him fear it would reflect upon all of us."

"And he told you he thought they were the bones of your brother-in-law?" Cooke nodded. "Who he thought you'd killed?" Another nod. "And what did you say to that?"

"Nothing. I knew they weren't, and in his disturbed condition, I thought it best to say nothing that might only excite him further."

"What did he expect you to do about your brother-in-law's skeleton, simply shovel it back? Just like that?"

"I offered to lay the matter before the authorities, if that would allay his over-anxiety and misapprehension under which he was laboring, as I tried to intimate to him that he was. But he preferred that we simply re-inter the remains which he still inferred were those of my brother-in-law."

"Why?"

Cooke shrugged in vast bewilderment.



“Who knows what mysterious processes go on in an unbalanced mind?”

“Well, you might know, for one.”

“I can prove to you, Captain Wessex, that I was regularly discharged, paroled, and ultimately cleared of my Rockland County tragedy.”

“All right, I’ve already checked that. But what about yourself? Did you, also, simply decide it would be best to shovel that stuff back into a hole in the ground, and keep quiet about it?”

“Yes. As I told you, I’m most familiar with the history and background, not only of Demarest Hall, but with much of the past of Demarest County, and I was long familiar with this particular shooting tragedy. I surmised that this relic was related to the other.”

“Why? Why were you so familiar with this particular affair?”

He gave me a steady stare.

“Because it occurred on the Demarest estate, and the body was also buried here near a site said to be that of an Indian burying ground.”

“Well, after you and Nichols planted the stuff again, was he satisfied?”

“Thoroughly.”

“Still believing it was your brother-in-law, and that you’d bumped him off?”

“Perhaps he began to accept a more rational view.”

I didn’t know whether the fellow was lying or not. Everything checked, so far. But that way he had of talking had me continually guessing. Every statement was somehow foggy.

“Did you tell Nichols that your brother-in-law was still living, and that you could produce him?”

“Not exactly. I just let him talk. But I tried to intimate to him, without contradicting him, that he was alive.”

“Was there any secret around this what-do-you-call-it, this place or institution, about your brother-in-law, whether he was alive or dead?”

“None. Not that I know of.”

“What do you mean, that you know of? Was he ever discussed?”

“Not exactly, no.”

“Why not? Any reason why he should be discussed, or should not be discussed?”

Cooke plainly hesitated.

“Well. A man in my position might be oversensitive about such a complete trifle. But . . .”

“But what? We’ve already located him at the address you gave us, so that part of it’s all right. It was reported back that he’s an unemployed artist, with no police or any other known record. There’s nothing on him.”

“Well,” said Cooke, and almost blushed. “That’s just it.”

“What, that he has no police record?”

“No. That he’s an artist. A rather inferior one. And a man holding a position such as mine, at an important institution such as this, is not situated favorably to have a brother-in-law whose artistic talents are not commensurate with those of the artists more or less entrusted to my personal care here at Demarest Hall. Financially commensurate, I mean. And then, there have been other difficulties.” I waited, and Cooke displayed an air of peevishness, if not anger. “The fact is, Captain Wessex, my brother-in-law and I have quarreled on many occasions. Chiefly about that—the fact that he persisted in pursuing what is generally referred to as an artistic career.”

“You don’t approve?”

“It is not for me, in my position, either to approve, or disapprove. No one holds the artistic professions in higher esteem than I do. But for a member of my own family, no, I do not approve.”

“All right. And you played poker with these people you mentioned until about five o’clock in the morning?” Cooke nodded. I said, “Who won?”

“I won, consistently and steadily, from the time we started. At one time,” Cooke abundantly explained, “I was ahead as much as seventy-five dollars. At no time after the game had been under way more than an hour were my winnings less than fifty dollars. Until the last half hour. At that time, a change in fortune took place, and a series of inadequate hands, coupled with increasing fatigue, and finally an error in estimating the possibility that Mr. Janiston had somehow managed to acquire a full house on a three-card draw, wiped out my winnings and left me a trifle behind. Twenty-five dollars, or so.”

“In other words, you didn’t win. You lost.”

“By and large, no, but in the end, yes.”

“And you have no idea why Mr. Nichols should have singled you out as his potential murderer?”

“Perhaps it could be traced to his hallucination that I was responsible for the death of the unfortunate Frank Peters, whose pathetic mortal remains, once he had found them, unbalanced an otherwise sturdy mind.”

“All right,” I said. “We’ll go over this later. But that will be all for now.”

I asked Cooke if it would be all right for me to use his office as headquarters while I questioned the other persons

residing on the estate. He said, "I'm always glad to co-operate. I'm sure there must be a happy solution."

After he'd gone, I started to interview the people who were here, as I got it, as non-paying guests of Demarest Hall on the grounds that they were said to have unusual ability in their various lines of artistic activity. The first person I drew was a small red-headed female, not bad at all, who said her name was Edith Wright. She sat down in the chair vacated by Cooke.

I said, "Where are your quarters, Miss Wright?"

"The Doghouse."

"Where?"

"Brahma Lodge, although everybody knows it's the one they give to people who aren't popular and recognized and fashionable and best-sellers."

"All right."

"They put me there, all of them, simply because they like to kowtow to people like Harry Dunn, who hasn't got an ounce of the creative spirit in him. Not an ounce. Just because he's written a few flashy books a lot of morons like to read. And then forget. And people like Christopher Bartel."

"Well," I said. "We'll come to that later."

"Who's just a social climber and a souse. And people like Harold Janiston, a reactionary critic, really a literary snob. And Claribelle Zorn, because Nathan Biernbaum used to be her boy friend. You understand, I'm not saying this because I care in the least. Just that it's a fact. Cold fact."

"Yes, but that's not what I wanted to ask you, Miss Wright. I suppose you were in your apartment, or studio as they call it, all evening?"

"I was. From twelve o'clock until eight. Then I was awakened, after a very restless night, by a plumber hammering in one of the other studios. Something is always wrong with the pipes in the Doghouse. That's why they put us there. Not that I'm complaining, you understand. Just that it's a . . ."

"Yes. But have you any knowledge that might contribute to clearing up this murder of Mr. Nichols? Did you see anything or hear anything that would possibly bear on the murder? Do you know anything that might help us?"

"Just that Walter Nichols was a talented writer, truly a great spirit, and they were glad to see him, yes, they rejoiced to see him dead, actually rejoiced, because it cut short a brilliant career."

"Who rejoiced?"

"The same people that hounded Keats to his grave, and Katherine Mansfield and Stephen Crane. The critics."

"Well, what critics, for instance? You don't mean this Harold Janiston, do you?"

"Oh, boy," she said pointedly. "Will he rejoice! He'll be tickled to death."

"For any special reason?"

"You bet there's a special reason. Because Walter Nichols never lost a chance to point out to the world what a fraud Janiston was, what a hypocrite and a faker, and how stupid and snobbish and old-fashioned his whole critical attitude was. His whole approach to literature was pure snobbism, nothing else. And Walter Nichols was courageous enough to say so."

"Would you say that Mr. John Lawrence, too," I referred to my notes concerning Cooke's alibi, "and Karl Weiss, and Mr. Cooke, and Harold Janiston, all had a grudge against this Nichols fellow?"

"As to that," she said, losing interest, "I wouldn't know. They seem to be quite harmless, unimportant people. I have nothing against any of them. For that matter, I have nothing against Harold, you understand? Really, as a person, Harold Janiston is a friend of mine."

I asked her what her particular line of art was, and she said she wrote short stories. She gave me the titles of her books: *Blue Monday*, *Black Friday*, and *I Must Cross the Old River*. They were all in the main library and reading room, she said. I said that if I had time I'd be sure to look them up. When she went out, the open door disclosed a number of people congregated in the general store they called a canteen. I heard Cooke make an uneasy but firm reply to a mild-appearing fellow who had just then buttonholed him with equal firmness.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be in the best of taste, Mr. Biernbaum, to admit the reporters and photographers. Not at a time like this. Besides, the other guests might object to being disturbed."

"Well, I wouldn't object. I've got a book coming out in six weeks, and I could use the publicity."

"I understand, but . . ."

"If you could arrange it, too, that I became a sort of a suspect, that wouldn't be so bad either. Temporarily, I mean."

"I'm afraid that is up to the proper authorities, Mr. Biernbaum."

Trooper Kearns sent in a sort of average, nice, respectable-appearing girl who said her name was Claudia Attelio, then closed the door behind her. I asked her what studio she had.

"No. 2 in Brahma Lodge," she told me.

I smiled and said, "The Doghouse, as some of them call it?"

"I believe some of them do, but there's no reason why they should."

It quickly developed she'd spent the night in her quarters, hadn't heard or seen anything unusual during the early hours of the morning, and had no idea why anyone should wish to put the skids under Walter Nichols. When I reached the end of my questions, however, she hesitated for a moment or two before leaving.

"If there's anything else you'd care to say," I urged, "please do."

"It may be nothing," she said. "And yet, I'm sure I actually heard it, and it might be extremely important. It happened last evening in the dining room. During the entree, I heard some one, seated at a table elsewhere in the room, clearly and distinctly say, 'He's the type of man who'd be overjoyed to thrust a knife into one's back at the earliest opportunity.' Those may not be the exact words, but something like that."

I wrote the statement down, and tried to make her remember whose voice had said it, but she couldn't remember. She left the office and for a moment, then, I thought of turning the whole job over to Col. Herrick when I reached him by phone.

The door opened and Kearns said, in a hushed voice, "Go right in, Mrs. Nichols."

I stood up and went to the door. I said, "Mrs. Nichols? I'm Captain Wessex of the state police. I hate to trouble you at a time like this. But I'm sure you understand." She seemed perfectly calm as she sat down in the chair I held for her, but you never could tell for sure about a dame at a time like this. One minute they could be chatting away about the dead guy, as though they were talking about the weather, and the next minute they'd fold. "There are just a few questions I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind, and if you feel able to answer them. It would help both of us a great deal."

"Of course."

She had a low, clear, perfectly controlled voice. I decided to go straight to the most important points.

"Did your husband have any particular enemy, or enemies?" I asked.

"A great many people disliked Walter," she said, after thinking for a moment, and speaking with care. "Many others feared him. But no one, as far as I know, hated or feared him to the point of murder. I'm sure no one did."

I pointed out, no less carefully,

"And yet, Mrs. Nichols, some one most certainly did." She accepted this contradiction with the same detached and haunting thoughtfulness she seemed to give every word she said and every gesture she made. The general impression I got was very high class. The Wright woman I had marked as a nut, and the Attelio dame as run-of-the-mill. But this one was neither. With black hair, black eyes, fair complexion, height about five-four, weight one twenty-five or thirty, teeth perfect, white sport costume, no birthmarks or blemishes visible, she was not the most beautiful woman in the world, but what the reporters would soon start to call a striking brunette. I said, when she didn't reply, "When did you last see Mr. Nichols alive?"

"I would say at about half-past nine in the evening. We had played bridge in the game room for perhaps a little more than an hour. Then he said he didn't care to play any more, said good night, and left us sitting there."

"You didn't see him after that?"

"No. You know, I suppose, that we had separate studios?"

"So I understand." I hated to do this, no matter how many times I'd had to do it before. "As a matter of routine, Mrs. Nichols, what time did you return to your own studio?"

"At about ten."

"And you were there, of course, for the rest of the night?"

"Of course."

"Didn't hear anything, I suppose, or see anything out of the ordinary?"

"Nothing."

Another blank. My eyes went over the sketchy notes I'd taken, my mind went over the persons I'd met, the stories I'd heard. I said,

"Your husband seemed to have an especial, well, suspicion of Mr. Cooke. Can you think of any reason why he should?"

"Walter had as many unreasonable likes and dislikes as he stirred up, sometimes, in other people. But I'd always thought his feeling toward Mr. Cooke was rather warm."

"Your own relations with Mr. Nichols," I slipped in, casually as possible, "were happy, I suppose?"

"Not happy. But not unhappy."

I glanced at the notes again, and the name of Bartel stuck out. I said,

"Your husband had a fight in the dining room yesterday morning with Mr. Christopher Bartel. You were present, I understand. What was it all about?"

"Nothing. Just a trivial remark of Walter's that Mr. Bartel resented. Mr. Bartel regretted the incident, the moment it was over."

"You're sure this Bartel fellow had no grudge against your husband?"

She said, "Quite sure." She thought about it for a moment, in which she studied her fingernails, then looked straight at me and said, simply, "In any case, Mr. Bartel could not have killed Walter. You'd find out about this, anyway, so I may as well tell you now. You see, Mr. Bartel spent the evening with me."



CONSTANCE GREGG

We musicians invariably received our lunch baskets from twenty minutes to half an hour later than those who lived and worked in the studios of the quadrangle. Although we had rooms and slept in the main Hall itself, when it came to practice or composition we were exiled to the outer regions of the estate, remote from sensitive ears.

Today, it was twenty-five minutes past one when I saw, through the window of my cottage, my basket being borne down the slope by George, the carpenter and general handyman. He had already left a basket for Susan Hartwig, whose cottage was nearer the kitchen than mine on the winding path that led back to the Hall. Had I not known she had already been served, from the fact that George had but one remaining basket, mine, direct evidence would have clinched the circumstantial. For, no sooner had George rung my bell and put down my lunch on the cottage doorstep, than Susan, basket in hand, emerged from the woods at the top of the slope, and came hurrying toward me. I quickly washed, pinned back a few stray locks of hair, and hurried up the slope, with my own lunch on my arm, to meet her. Halfway down the slope she slowed, seeing me, then stopped and waited. She said, disappointedly, when I came up to her, "Oh, are you going to eat somewhere else? I wanted some one to talk to this noon."

"I imagine a lot of us do," I said. "Let's go to the Grotto."

She turned and picked her way with precise but fragile limbs up the path ahead of me.

"I wanted to talk about what happened last night," she said, over her shoulder. "And this morning."

"So do I."

"Have you been interviewed yet by that . . ." she started to say.

"Not yet. Have you?"

"Yes. But I didn't have anything to tell him. Not a thing. And I was so afraid I'd be visited again this noon by that dreadful John Lawrence. Really, Constance, if he fixes me just once more with those soulful, lecherous eyes, I'm going to shriek. What on earth did I do to attract him, and how on earth can I ever get rid of him?"

I'd like to know, myself, what she did to attract him. Not Lawrence, personally, but all of them. Any of them. What do they do, some of them like Susan, that wherever they go and whatever the circumstances, they are magnets attracting men? Five days ago we had, most of us, started at scratch. Few of the men and women had been better than slightly, if at all acquainted. But already, after five days, it was clear which women counted, and which did not. Nor were appearances the only factor. Susan was not at all what anyone would call ravishing. She was just as plain as I was, to be truthful about it, or even plainer. That Zorn female, when it came to looks, was a perfect fright. And yet they each had a coterie of males—none of them remarkable, of course, but the list of guests was small. How, indeed, had Susan done it? Then and there I determined that no matter how long it took, or what methods I used, I'd have a male following before this season was over. Not a large one; I knew my limitations. But not a small one, either. After all, I'd had this experience before. It sometimes took as much as a month to make a man notice I was there. But I'd done it. I said to Susan, impersonally, "I don't know what you did, and I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about it. Those things usually just work themselves out."

We reached the quadrangle, made our way around it past the kitchen of the Hall whence our lunch baskets had been brought thirty minutes before, and then proceeded on a path that ran in a northwestern direction from the opposite corner of the quadrangle toward the Grotto. The Grotto was on a little knoll, enclosed by maple, elm, and poplar trees, only slightly less high than the ground on which stood the Hall itself. In the clearing between the trees a bare wooden table had been placed, with wooden benches rather the worse for rain and wear, much as one sees in picnic sites.

Ordinarily, the place was deserted, except in the evening. At noon, one would not expect to see here more than two or three residents of the Hall, and these, usually, residents who had visitors from outside. Mr. Cooke had made it plain that visitors, while heartily welcome, would at best be no more than tolerated. Such, at any rate, had been his rather involved fiat. In consequence, friends who visited the artists in residence were promptly hustled from the central places of activity to nooks and crannies of the estate presumably invisible to Mr. Cooke's all-seeing eyes.

Today, however, all this was changed, as I'd imagined it would be. A babble of voices issuing from the clump of woods fell mysteriously silent as we approached. Then, where the path led between the crossed limbs of two maple trees, the unmistakable voice of Karl Weiss, somewhere in the foliage, could be heard. He hissed rather than said, "O.K. It's Susan and Miss Gregg."

We threaded our way between the hanging twigs and entered the clearing. I had known that on this particular noon

a number of the residents of Demarest Hall would, inevitably, congregate here to discuss the unusual events of the morning and the incredible event of the late hours of the night before. But I had not guessed that so many would be present. In fact, it seemed as though the whole roster of guests, anxious to be rid of once of the state troopers and of Mr. Cooke had, as though drawn by some primitive instinct, selected the Grotto for the scene of lunch. They were not all here, but the majority of them were. Indeed, as Susan and I made our way toward the picnic table, we saw that it was fully occupied, and that there would be little or no room for us. Mr. Nathan Biernbaum pushed his tray and then inched himself to one side as far as possible, and said, "Here's room for one of you." I saw that Mr. Frederick Owen was similarly making room for Susan, and wedged myself in between Mr. Biernbaum and Mr. Dunn. Mr. Biernbaum went on, "Have you had a talk, yet . . ."

"Not yet," I said. "But Susan has been interviewed by Captain What's-his-name. I have mine this afternoon."

"I haven't been able to speak to Captain Wessex yet," said Mr. Biernbaum. "I have some information regarding that tragedy last night, some information I have reason to believe may illuminate the whole affair. But for some reason or other, although I made several requests to speak to him about it, he has been putting me off. May not be able to hear my story until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, he says. In a murder case, can you imagine that? By then, of course, it may be too late."

I said, naturally curious, "Too late for what?"

"For what?" He seemed disconcerted. "Too late to supply helpful information, of course. The whole case may be broken and done with, by then. By tomorrow or the day after, the whole murder story may be a thing of the past. I should think this Captain Wessex would be interested in hearing the account of a person who, even though he might not be the most promising suspect at hand, is at least an important material witness."

"What did you witness?" I asked.

"I think I can safely say," said Mr. Biernbaum, "that I was the last person to see Mr. Nichols alive."

Lunch, today, had been a choice between chicken salad and lobster salad. I had not expressed preference for either, and had drawn the latter. It was good, but warm, I said. "Only the murderer, Mr. Biernbaum, can say he was the last person to see Mr. Nichols alive."

"What? Well, yes, of course. Naturally. For that matter, how does Captain Wessex know I'm not the murderer? Could he prove I wasn't? I doubt it. I think he'd have a hard time."

From the end of the table I heard Catherine Pratt say, loudly, to Mr. Connors the poet, "Of course they have to arrest somebody. But did you know that the sheriff of Demarest County was threatening to close up the Hall? And send us all home?"

"They can't do that," said Mr. Connors.

"I should say not. Not to me," Miss Pratt went on. "Not after I went to the trouble and expense of having a five-hundred-pound stone shipped here. I'm sorry about Mr. Nichols, but after all, granite is granite."

"Yes," said Mr. Connors, "but what I mean is, they can't let us leave. We have to stay here, don't you see, until they solve the case. All of us. In a way, we're all in on it. Get the point?"

Miss Wright, the short-story writer, dreamily queried, "We have to stay here until they find out who did it, no matter how long it takes?"

"Exactly."

"Even if they don't find out by the end of the season, and they still don't know next autumn? You mean we'd have to stay here after the season ended, all through the winter?"

"You get the idea," said Mr. Connor, "And somebody would have to feed us, too."

"Oh, boy. But I wouldn't like to spend the winter in the Doghouse. Maybe I could wangle my way into Walter's studio. Poor Walter," Miss Wright rhapsodized. "I feel so sorry for him. He had the south room in Vach, didn't he? Funny thing about that studio, it's cool in summer, and awfully warm, I imagine, in winter."

"Well," said Mr. Connors to Catherine Pratt, "that's the setup. Neither the sheriff nor anybody else can kick us out of here until they get a pretty good line on the case. No matter what happens. Not even if there's another murder, or two of them."

Practical, Miss Pratt pointed out, "More deaths would simply complicate the whole business, I think."

"Sure. The more the . . . But what I mean is, we ought to insist, as taxpayers, that the police get to the bottom of this Nichols affair. If they try to make us go home, we should simply point out that they haven't investigated all the possibilities of the case and, as friends of the dead man, we demand a thorough inquiry into the whole affair. No matter how much time or inconvenience it may mean to some of us. What the hell," Mr. Connors concluded, "I like the grub here, I don't have to pay any rent for the shambles I live in at Brahma Lodge, and so long as they send P. C. Cooke to the chair in the end, which is where he belongs, I'd just as soon stay here forever. What we ought to do, in other words, is just see to it that the case this Wessex guy has to break becomes more and more complicated every day. Get the point?"

Miss Pratt said she did, perfectly, and I reminded Mr. Biernbaum, "You said you were an important material witness?"

As one of the last, possibly, to see Mr. Nichols alive?"

"Oh, yes. The fact is, I sat there on the balcony talking to him from midnight until about one o'clock in the morning."

"Not very incriminating," I pointed out, "since it's believed the actual murder took place sometime between three and four. A lot of people could have stepped out on the balcony in the two or three hours after you left him."

"Well, it's not the time that's so important. What's more important is the things we talked about, and what Walter said to me. Most revealing, in the light of what was about to happen." Mr. Biernbaum, as the last known person to see Mr. Nichols alive, had captured the center of attention. "Nichols seemed rather moody at first and impatient at my intrusion. Then he muttered something like, 'Cooke was right about this confounded balcony and these confounded guests.' But after a while he began to loosen up and talk. As you know, he was a member of the invitations committee, responsible in large part for the guests present at the Hall this season. He confessed to me certain doubts he was beginning to entertain as to the wisdom of having issued invitations to some of those present this summer. I'd rather not mention names. But it seems he'd about decided he'd made several serious mistakes. In short, he was filled with the most ominous forebodings, evidently, regarding his fate on the balcony that night, misgivings which he freely confided to me."

"Strange," I said, murmuring absently at the remains of my lobster salad. "I'd never have guessed it, from the talk I had with him."

"Nothing strange about it, at all," said Mr. Biernbaum. "I think I knew Nichols better than any of the other guests. Why, when did you talk to him?"

"I found it terribly hard to get to sleep last night," I said, pushing aside the salad and trying my specially ordered non-fattening cup custard. "So I went out on the balcony for a breath of fresh air. I found Mr. Nichols there, smoking. We had quite a chat. About you, too, Mr. Biernbaum."

Mr. Biernbaum gave me his concentrated interest.

"About me?"

"Among others. But I gathered the impression that Mr. Nichols, although inclined to be cynical about some of us, was on the whole rather pleased with the selections made by the invitations committee this year."

"What time were you talking to him?" asked Mr. Biernbaum.

"It was a wonderful night," I said. "The moon was out, and it was almost as bright as day. You could see people coming and going all over the quadrangle, and recognize them by certain peculiarities of clothing, or gait, or by their voices."

"What time was this?" said Mr. Dunn.

"It seemed to me," I went on, "that Mr. Nichols was in a very exhilarated frame of mind. He particularly enjoyed a violent argument that took place downstairs in the smoking room. A sort of sadistic enjoyment, I suppose it could be called. It seems that Mr. Janiston had drawn a full house in a poker game, under circumstances that some of the other players, Mr. Cooke especially, bitterly resented and viewed with suspicion."

Mr. Janiston put down the cup of coffee he had been drinking, to survey me with truly superb condescension.

"Suspicion?" he said.

"Perhaps suspicion is not the best word. Downright disbelief, I should say."

"I remember that hand. But it was Cooke who held it, not me."

"What time did you say you were talking to the old pirate?" asked Mr. Connors.

"That's no way to talk about the dead," complained Mr. Hale, the advocate of prison reform. "No matter what you thought about him when he was alive, that's no way to talk."

"Who are you to complain?" Connors acidly asked. "As far as I know, you were the only person to threaten Nichols' life, and not just once, but twice. 'That guy ought to be killed,' you said. Twice in the same day."

Mr. Hale started to make an explosive reply, but I managed to get in ahead of him.

"The night was not only moonlit, but calm as well. Voices carried across the quadrangle as clearly as they carry across water."

Mr. Hale, hastily gulping the last of a lemon meringue pie, transferred his attention from Mr. Connors to me.

"I wonder if you heard the argument I had with Albert?" he asked. "It didn't amount to much. It was just that he sort of blew up and went into a blind rage when I asked him to do something, after hours. Raved and swore like a madman."

"Yes," I said. "Very interesting, too."

"What time was this, about?" asked Mr. Janiston. "I mean, when you heard the row in the smoking room? Were you up there on the balcony with Nichols for very long after that?"

"Much longer," I said.

"Personally," said Frederick Owen, "I went for a brief stroll at about two in the morning. Nothing like a last minute walk to rest the body and relax the nerves. I plotted the next chapter of 'Freight Yards.' I can think better if I take a walk



late at night.”

“Yes,” I said.

“You saw me?” he asked. “I believe I dropped in at Nichols’ studio, thinking we might have a chat before I went to bed. Naturally, though, he wasn’t there, poor chap. Wish he had been. I suppose he must have been up there on the balcony, unconsciously waiting his rendezvous with destiny.”

“Really?” I said. “He told me that he had expected you to be looking for him, and he seemed pleased at not being found. Do you consider yourself destiny, Mr. Owen?”

“Oh. He said something of that sort? Well, I had told him I might look him up later in the evening. But, unfortunately, I didn’t see him again. Not alive. What else did he say about me?”

“When were you talking to the old s.o.b.?” queried Mr. Connors.

“What time did you leave him?” asked Mr. Dunn.

“Tell me, Miss Gregg,” said Mr. Biernbaum, speaking with immense warmth and kindness, “just what did Mr. Nichols have to say about me? Simply to satisfy my personal curiosity.”

“Thank God I was in the smoking room all the time,” said Mr. John Lawrence. “Playing poker.”

“So was I,” said Mr. Janiston.

“Oh, were you?” Mr. Lawrence seemed reflective and sceptical. “Seems to me, you were out of the room once or twice, for quite a while. Missed five or six hands, didn’t you?”

“One or two,” said Mr. Janiston. “Mr. Cooke missed several, though. Where was he, I wonder?”

“Did I understand you, Miss Gregg, that you heard the argument in the smoking room, about the cards?” It was Mr. Karl Weiss, emerged from his vantage point as sentry among the trees about the Grotto. “Is nobody coming,” he announced to the rest of the table. “Is all clear, the coast.” Upon me, he bestowed a benevolent smile. “If you heard, then you recognized my voice. I was there, all the time. Before the blow-up, and afterward. Both.”

“Look, Miss Gregg,” said Mr. Dunn, at my elbow. “I mean, Connie. You know I have the north studio in Fountain Lodge, don’t you? Well, did you see me, by any chance, with some friends of mine, sort of staggering in at about two in the morning? I put in a hectic evening at the Halfway House—and it certainly must have looked strange, to anyone who saw me, when I got back to the Hall.”

“Connie,” said Mr. Biernbaum, “I don’t suppose Walter told you anything I don’t already know, but go ahead and tell me—I won’t mind—what did he say about me? Did he mention any financial transactions we’ve had, either in the past or the present?”

I pushed back the synthetic cup custard and unscrewed the thermos bottle that was supposed to contain the iced tea I’d ordered. I couldn’t make out whether it had been delivered as hot, or merely lukewarm. Or, for that matter, whether it was tea, coffee, or cocoa.

“Come on, Connie,” urged Mr. Connors. “Just when did you have your tête-à-tête with that cultured mountebank? Two weeks ago?”

“Con. Oh, Con,” called Claudia Attelio, “He didn’t mention me, too, did he?”

“Come on, Con,” said Mr. Dunn, rather gruffly. “Give out. What did he say, and when did you see him, and what did you see, yourself?”

I made a face over the stirred-up mud that was supposed to pass for iced tea. Or warmed-over coffee. I said, “Mr. Nichols and I were having a conversation until about two o’clock this morning. Then I left him on the balcony, and tried for a while to sleep. But I couldn’t, and I returned to the writing room adjoining the balcony. For more than an hour I sat at the desk at the head of the stairs.” The entire table focused upon me eyes that displayed a curious mixture of awe, apprehension, disbelief, sympathy and hostility. “For a long time I was aware that Mr. Nichols must still be on the balcony, because from time to time I saw the flare of a match against the blackness of the sky. At one time I thought I even heard his voice, an involuntary exclamation over some idea that had occurred to him, I thought. Then after a while I didn’t see anything at all, or hear anything. Of course, there is no other way to leave the balcony, except through the writing room. And Mr. Nichols hadn’t gone past me. So I wondered. Before I went back to my room again, I decided I’d look out on the balcony again. I did so.”

“And what did you see, Con?” breathed Mr. Biernbaum.

“I saw you coming back from the bathing pool, Mr. Biernbaum. You were a tiny speck down in the quadrangle, but I saw you turn in at your studio door. And I saw Mr. Nichols. He’d been murdered. It was I who first found him. Didn’t you know? Yes, I found him there with that knife through his back. I called Mr. Cooke’s office, told him what I’d found, and then I called the police. I was the one who found the body, and notified the police.”



## CAPTAIN WESSEX

My interview with Constance Gregg, concert pianist, Nathan Biernbaum, novelist, and William Glass, a free-lance journalist who described himself as a philosopher, rounded out my general picture of the situation and the case, and completed the entire list of those on the estate during the night of the killing. I'd talked with all of them at least once, and with many of them, like the steward, P. C. Cooke, Janiston, Bartel, Hale, Dunn, I'd had discussions two or three times. There was nothing obscure about the immediate details. But I began to see that the general background of Demarest Hall, its guests and its staff, might be most important in breaking the case.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when I gathered together my notes and left Mr. Cooke's office, making my way to the library and reading room on the third floor of the Hall. I had no trouble in locating *New Olympus*, the official history of Demarest Hall, of which Mr. Cooke had told me. It had been written by Margaret Churchwood Ramsay, a name unknown to me, but of whom Cooke had said, "Famous in her day, the subject of international scandals that rocked at least one county to its foundation." And he had added, "The style is a trifle post-Victorian, but you'll find all the necessary data in the appendices, which she had someone else compile."

I took the volume down off the reference shelf where it stood with the dictionary, a Bible, and several *Who's Who's*. Dust covered it, and rose from it in a faint cloud when I opened the pages. The date of publication was given as 1912. The foreword began:

"Unto the earthborn spirit of man, seldom indeed is vouchsafed both Godlike vision and the heroic capacity for overcoming practical obstacles by which, alone, the dream may become a dazzling, irradiant reality. But seldom had Nature more lavishly endowed this two-fold perquisite upon any beings than she bestowed upon the brothers Clark, Lawrence and John Demarest . . . Theirs was a vision of a New Olympus in the New World . . . Through its austere halls, furnished even more by thoughtful dignity and that purposeful repose which marks the daily life of the truly great princes, philosophers, and poets, than by its decorous drapes, soothing panels, stimulating brooks and pathways leading to Sylvan cloisters such as Brahma Lodge (an exact replica in miniature of Prince Albrecht's hunting lodge high in the Austrian Alps), were to wander the younger, though perhaps equally gifted spirits of this New Athens some day to rise in the West . . . And lo, the vision slowly took shape in velvet and marble, in flesh and blood . . . Opened for the first season on a gala evening twenty long years ago, in 1892, an occasion attended by many notables of both continents, Demarest Hall has steadily grown, in traditions and physical appurtenances, until today, with three more Lodges added . . ."

I skipped the rest of the Foreword and quickly leafed through the history of the Demarests, the date and construction of the buildings, the fires that had destroyed some of the buildings, now rebuilt, statements and brief biographies of a few of the celebrated artists and writers who had lived as guests of Demarest Hall prior to 1912. I had never heard of any of the names, although according to the Ramsay woman, I should have. In the appendix I found, and studied, the provisions of the trust on which the Hall was founded and by which it was sustained. The facts were essentially as Cooke had given them to me.

I put the book away and turned, next, to the magazine racks. Nichols had been a contributing editor to *The New Age*, while Janiston and Glass wrote frequent articles, I had been told, for *The New Review*, both of them liberal magazines well thought of among serious minded people, but far above the heads of the general public. I had, myself, read both of them during my year at M.I.T., but not since then. I located recent copies of both magazines. They did not seem to have changed. I sat down for a few quick glances through these issues hoping, but not expecting, that I would find indirect suggestions, angles to put it simply, of the type of mentality and character possessed by the dead man, and possibly by the other people with whom he had been associated here at Demarest Hall. During the day I had learned that Lucille Nichols had been divorced from William Glass in 1932, marrying Walter Nichols in the year following. William Glass was married, for the present at least, to Harold Janiston's sister, Fanya, not currently a guest, while Harry Dunn had been briefly married to the second wife of the musician, John Lawrence. Although it had seemed complicated when I first became aware of this domestic shuffling and re-shuffling, by now I had the history fixed clearly and firmly in mind, and it seemed, though probably unimportant, best to keep it there.

Alfred Connors, the poet, came into the library, selected a magazine from the rack, then sat down opposite me at the table and gave me a look which said clearly something was eating him. I immediately looked away and started reading the magazines. My talk with Connors had been a headache, to put it mildly. He had put the finger on practically everyone in the place, and every lead had been phony. If I were to investigate every angle he had given me, I'd be busy

with this case from now on.

The first issue of *The New Review* had a long article by William Glass which ran: "Four years ago, in *Society at the Crossroads*, Harold Janiston posed socio-political questions so incisive and reached conclusions so logical that not one proponent of the status quo could advance valid answers or successfully challenge the accuracy of his summations. No one, indeed, but Harold Janiston could have done so, and in *Detour* he has done just that—successfully answered his own questions and capped them with fresh interrogations that lead, inexorably, to quite opposite conclusions . . ." I skipped the rest of that and turned to a book review by Harold Janiston: "*Slightly Courageous*, Harriet Momson's third novel in as many years, although its grain of truth may be liberally coated with sugar, is unquestionably the season's outstanding novel to deal with the difficult problem of the maladjusted middle-class young woman, alone in the business world, who finds too late that love is not enough . . ." There was nothing in this for me, and I tried another one by Janiston: "Five years ago Dirk Blanchard gave us an epochal novel of the Old South. Now, in *Course of Empire*, he has given us what will undoubtedly prove to be the most significant novel of the season dealing with the Old West as it really was, and done with super-abundant vitality it is, on a large canvas and with superb colors . . ." Very interesting, but it did not seem to have any bearing on things pertinent to my particular problem. I tried another one: "With *The Twelfth Hour*, his fourth novel, Millard Reilley has leaped, full-fledged, into the top-rank of novelists who choose to handle the difficult theme of the problem confronting men and women who are endeavoring to revive handicrafts and primitive arts in an industrial era. Myra, the central character, is unforgettable as wife, mother and sweetheart. It is she who, seeking to restore the lost art of hand-weaving in the New England village of Putnam, first discovers and then explores the teeming ant-life of peonized labor in the large factories by whom her very existence is at first ignored . . . A first-rate labor novel . . . Has shortcomings, it must be admitted, but . . . However . . . And nevertheless . . . Widespread of canvas is nothing less than heroic . . ."

I put down *The New Review*, lit a cigarette, and tried *The New Age*. In the three issues before me, only one contained an article by Walter Nichols. It was entitled "Toward a New Literature," and began: "How are we to account for the amazingly low standards, influence, and vitality of the creative literature with which the '40s have been ushered in? May the fact be attributed to the incredible but widespread acceptance of doctrines disseminated by Harold Janiston, Henry Ramsay-Downes, William Glass, Elizabeth Churchwood, and other apostles of the good, though disembodied and mentally disorganized life? Hardly, though the factors they have contributed should not be overlooked. The current discovery of Mr. Janiston, for instance, is one Millard Reilley. About the best that can be said for Mr. Reilley, and this may be advanced for Mr. Janiston as well, is to say that here mediocrity reaches a peak, vulgarity outdoes itself, and ignorance fairly dazzles . . ."

I could see what Miss Edith Wright meant when she said that no love had been lost between Janiston and Nichols. I set aside the magazines, and turned to a shelf labeled "Current Fiction." I was looking for one of Miss Wright's novels. I did not find any, but found, instead, *The Twelfth Hour* by Millard Reilley. It was interesting to note that its cover displayed an advertisement that ran: "About the best . . . reaches a peak . . . outdoes itself . . . fairly dazzles—Walter Nichols." And also: "With *The Twelfth Hour* . . . Millard Reilley has leaped, full-fledged, into the top-rank of novelists—Harold Janiston."

I put the volume back and went on to the other shelves. Behind me I heard a voice say, "Would you mind letting me have a look at that copy of *Fortune*, old man?"

"Why?" This was the voice of Alfred Connors. I cautiously glanced around, and saw that a fellow by the name of Frederick Owen had joined us. "You can have it when I'm through with it."

Mr. Owen patiently explained, "I happen to need it for some research I'm doing."

"So what?"

"I want it for only fifteen or twenty minutes. There's an article in there on transportation I simply must see before I finish the next chapter of my novel about the . . ."

"You told me what it's about."

"Well, be a good scout, will you, and loan the copy to me for just a few minutes?"

"Go to hell!"

"Why, you little louse." Mr. Owen seemed to have difficulty enunciating. "I've got a good idea to wring that neck of yours."

"More threats?" said Connors, loudly. "What did you tell Nichols you'd do to him? You can wring my neck but all I ask is that you don't stick a knife in my back."

I slammed a back copy of *The New Age in the Graphic Arts* and turned around. I pointed to a sign, conspicuously placed, which read: WILL GUESTS WHO ARE USING THE LIBRARY KINDLY OBSERVE ABSOLUTE SILENCE, PLEASE, WHILE DOING SO? I said,

"Can't you guys read?"

"O.K., Captain," said Connors. "I just thought, if I hadn't told you before, you might like to know about Owen now."

I felt that my face was growing red, and I knew that I was breathing fast.

"I know about Owen, and I know all I want to know about you," I said, which was the literal truth. "Why don't you let the guy have the magazine, for Christ's sake? You people up here at the Hall are supposed to be scholars and philosophers. Why can't you be gentlemen, too?"

Connors folded his arms across the magazine clutching it to his breast.

"Every hour, every minute I can delay Owen's next novel," he said, "is just so much gravy for civilization."

Owen, white in the face, gave me a bleak smile and a nod.

"I'm sorry I troubled you, Captain."

He turned and walked out. I glared hard at Connors, who beamed seraphically and tried, but failed, to toss the disputed copy of *Fortune* back into the magazine rack. He yawned and stretched loudly, rose, went to the regular book shelves. I saw him take down a volume from the section labeled "Music." Aware of my scrutiny, and evidently pleased by it, Connors held up the volume.

"A treatise on technique, by the brand-new widow of our recent friend," he announced. "See? *New Structures in Harmony*, by Lucille Nichols. You must read it sometime. When I'm through with it, of course."

I turned my back on him and found what I had been looking for. *Blue Monday*, a collection of short stories by Edith Wright. It had been published in 1932 and was dedicated to "Pongo," which must have been a nickname. I read the first story, which turned out to be about two pansies and one Lizzie, the second, about two Lizzies and one pansy, the third about three Lizzies taking a hitch-hiking trip through the South, and the fourth about three pansies on a holiday in prewar Paris. I liked the snappy gags that Wright had gotten off from time to time, but it did take a little time in each case to get the point of her story. While I was still reading them, Christopher Bartel, the artist, walked into the library. He went straight to the music shelf, glanced through the volumes there, and seemingly not finding what he wanted, started to search among the stray books left on the tables. When he came to Connors he looked casually at the book the poet sat reading, then looked again.

"Mind if I borrow this, guy?" he said.

Connors lifted his face and said, "Why? You can have it when I'm through with it."

Bartel said, "Thanks," took the book with one hand and shoved Connors with the other. The book, of course, went one way, and Connors, naturally, went the other. Striding from the room, Bartel, over his shoulder, glanced backward and said, "You can have the book this evening." With the volume under his arm he disappeared and Connors got up from the floor where the shove had tilted him and his chair. He said, accusingly, "Look, Captain, those books are for use in the library only. They can't be taken out of here, not out of the reading room. But you saw what he did. Practically stole the book."

It gave me a laugh. I said, "I'm concerned with a homicide, not petty larceny."

"Are you?" said Connors, again showing that something-is-eating-me face, but speaking in that try-and-guess-what voice. "Well, if you are, you might like to know where Bartel spent the evening, last night."

I couldn't resist the opportunity. I said, "I know where. About the same place where you had wanted to, I expect."

Connors sighed and stood up. He gave me a final look, half resigned and half denunciatory, then left the library. Alone, I replaced *Blue Monday* and selected *New Arts—A Handbook of Tomorrow*, by Walter Nichols. I cannot explain the slight shudder that ran through me at the simple adjective "new" in the title, but in reading it, I forgot all my misgivings."

"In an era of decay, demoralization, and disintegration . . . when all that was healthy and strong and decent . . . crumbles about our ears, as it seems inescapably destined to do . . . When, as today, the individual repudiates every personal responsibility, either through indifference or through cowardice . . . and there is no longer any thought of collective responsibility such as animated the issues of the nineteenth century . . . complete abandonment of the idea of salvation, either through works, sacrifice, prayer, or hedonism . . ."

I read on, and it seemed to present a picture of the other Walter Nichols, a quite different side than that I had gathered second-hand from those who knew him at all well here at the Hall. To most of them, he had been a bore when not a nuisance. Yet they had seemed to regard him as an erratic, self-centered nuisance, whereas his own work showed him to be anything but erratic and, though he was undoubtedly self-centered, he had been so in a far more sinister spirit than they had generally supposed—possessed, that is, by a fanatic's unshakable faith in his own strength and right.

I had finished Nichols' book, glanced through a volume of poetry by Alfred Connors, and checked the list of guests against the data supplied about several of them in the current *Who's Who*, when Col. Herrick arrived. It was about eighty-thirty. He sat down, chucking his panama across the table, and rattled off, with his usual machine-gun brusqueness,

"My God, it's hot. Made any progress? The director, or whatever they call him, said he would have us served in the library. I hope the grub is decent. Who did it? Have you seen the newspapers? My God, I hope we break this in the next couple of days. If we don't there's going to be all hell to pay. Political angles. Seems the mayor and the sheriff of Endor want to close up the place. Should we? Do you think that would help?"

I said, "No. Worst thing we could do."

"All right, we won't. When do they serve dinner here? I'm starved. My God, it's too hot to live. What kind of a farm is this, anyway? Never saw anything like it before. What do they raise? Why are there so many artists around the place? When are you going to make a pinch? I could hardly get what you were driving at, Steve, over the phone. What do you mean this is a difficult case? Since when have you started talking like a God damn high school English teacher? If you're behind the eight-ball, why in hell can't you say so? What's the matter? Come on, for God's sake, loosen up. Why did you ask me to come up to this Godforsaken farm to begin with? Must be, you can't make a pinch. Well, say something."

I said, "In the first place, Joe, I want you to get one thing straight. This is not a farm. It will save us lots of time and trouble if you can remember that one thing, just to begin with. Demarest Hall is certainly not a farm."

"O.K.," he said. "I know it's not a farm. It's some kind of an institution. I've heard about it. I get around, you know. It's a public institution that takes care of geniuses."

"And the next thing to remember," I said, "is that it's not a sanitarium, or a booby-hatch, and it does take care of geniuses, but not exactly in that way."

"Well, what way, then?"

"It simply feeds and houses them, and gives them ideal conditions under which they can carry on their work."

"What work? None of these artists ever did a lick of work in their whole lives. You know that as well as I do. What's gotten into you, Steve?"

I could hardly believe it was only two days ago that I'd arrived here and started the investigation in the Nichols case. I didn't know how to explain to the Colonel. I said, "Joe, you're my boss. Up till now you've never had any complaint about the way I handled a case, have you?"

"Never," he said, heartily, "and I've got every confidence in you now, Steve. I know you're going to crack this. Why?"

"Why? Well, there are some things you'll have to take my word for. At least for a while. Until I can prove it to you. See what I mean?"

"Sure. I'll back everything you do. I always did, didn't I? So what is it about these artistic ladies and gents of leisure that seems to be getting you down, Steve?"

I could see this would be tough to explain. Col. Herrick had always, all his life, been a cop.

"That's it, Colonel. You have to take my word for it that these cluckaroos are not ladies and gentlemen of leisure. They work, and hard. Damn hard. And you must take my word for it that, although they may be screwballs on the surface, underneath all of that, there's a real reason, a perfectly sensible reason, for every crazy move they make."

Albert Page appeared with a tray, and laid places for us on the library table. He put down a dish of hors d'oeuvres and two plates of cold borscht.

"For instance?" said Col. Herrick.

"Well, for instance," I said, knowing it was lame, "I could have a confession any time I wanted one."

Col. Herrick dropped his spoon into the borscht.

"Well, for God's sake, why don't you get it? Did you read the newspapers? Do you know what they'll do to us if we don't break this case right off the bat? They'll crucify us, like they did New Jersey in the Lindbergh kidnapping."

I said, quickly, "This particular confession wouldn't be any good, because the guy that would like to make it didn't slip the knife into Nichols' ribs." I went on, still more rapidly, "You see, he writes books, and he figures that a murder trial would make his books sell like hot-cakes. But, also, of course, he'd beat the rap, no matter what he confessed to, since, as I said, he didn't do the job."

"Well, who did?"

"Beg your pardon, sir. What would you like for your main course?"

We looked up at Albert Page, the steward.

"I'll take a steak," Col. Herrick said. "Unless I have to eat meatballs and spaghetti."

"Meatballs and spaghetti, sir?" said Albert, aghast. "We never serve that."

"Well, what have you got?"

"Cold squab, sir. Or iced lobster and salad. Or you could have pheasant baked in champagne, or just a snack of rattlesnake steak broiled over charcoal and a sip of burgundy. Or cold baked sailfish, tuna fish, or dolphin, if you wish. Or some barracuda, hot or cold, whichever you prefer."

Col. Herrick sighed.

"A champagne cocktail to begin with, I suppose?"

"Naturally, sir. If you wish."

"I do. But I'll still have a steak, if that's on the menu."

"Yes, sir."

Albert departed and Col. Herrick indicated him with a nod of the head.

“Who’s he?”

“Albert Page, the steward,” I explained. “Small-time blackmailer, pickpocket, swindler, and all-around chiseler. Did time in England, Easton, and Sing Sing, but nothing that amounts to much.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“I must say,” said Col. Herrick, finishing his borscht, “they feed you well here.”

“The place grows on you,” I guardedly offered.

“Does it? I expect, the next thing, you’ll be painting pictures and composing music, yourself?”

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “I’m going to start to learn how to paint pictures tomorrow. A Mr. Christopher Bartel, very famous as an illustrator and muralist, has . . .”

“Now what?” said Col. Herrick.

“Well, he’s invited me to watch him paint, and he says, he’ll give me a few tips on the business.”

Col. Herrick sat back, as Albert reappeared with the Colonel’s champagne cocktail and our meat dishes. I could feel his amazed stare as I felt with my knife and fork very deliberately for the joints of the roast pork I had ordered. I cut and ate, and finally Albert departed. Col. Herrick lifted his champagne cocktail. Set it down.

“Very good,” he said. “Now, Steve, let’s come to cases. I hope you aren’t going to take to cutting out paper dolls, too?”

“Not a chance, Joe,” I said, and laughed. “I know what I’m doing. And I hope to God you know I know what I’m doing.”

“I’d like to think so,” he said. “About Nichols. The guy that got a knife in his heart. What sort of a person was he?”

“I can tell you this,” I said carefully, “he was a completely misunderstood person. If he hadn’t been, he’d be alive today. He had a real humanitarian approach to social, economic and literary problems. Pessimistic, but truly humanitarian. That was the one thing his contemporaries could not understand. And, not understanding, the one thing they could not forgive.”

Col. Herrick laid down his knife and fork and this time really stared. He said, “Have you gone nuts, Steve?”

“I don’t think so. No, Joe, I think not. But that kind of an approach is the only kind that can be made in a case like this case.”

“To hell with your riddles,” said Col. Herrick. He picked up his knife and fork, resumed eating. “Who killed the guy, that’s all I want to know. Find the guy, that’s your job. And after that you can take up painting, philosophy, or basket-weaving. Who did it, that’s all we want to know.”

I said, “I know who did it, Colonel.”

“You do?” he bellowed.

“Of course. I’ve known ever since I phoned you.”

“Well, why don’t you pinch the guy, and call the case off?”

I shrugged.

“That would be a waste of time. First place, I have no evidence against him, either direct or circumstantial. The whole murder was carried out in the smartest way possible, with no witnesses, and no substantial clues left, nothing that would stand up in a court of law. We have nothing to go on that would definitely convict.”

“Get the guy and stick him in the cooler,” said Col. Herrick, knifing his steak, “and we’ll sweat him, and he’ll confess.”

“Not this one,” I patiently explained. “As a matter of fact, this one has nothing to confess that would really help us. If we stick him in the jug now, and sweat him, we lose our case, that’s all. In fact, we have only one reliable witness against him.”

Col. Herrick laid down his knife and fork, wiped his lips, glared at me, and said, “Let’s have it. Who is the only reliable witness against the killer?”

“The killer himself,” I explained.

“I knew you were going to say that. By God, I knew it. It’s in the atmosphere of this place. Are you sure you’re able to see this through, Steve?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I can do it better than anyone else. I have found out a few things about this place that must be known before the case is broken.”

“And you’ll break this case,” he persisted, “but you can’t do it without the help of the murderer?”

I said, “I feel sure he will be glad to help.” Col. Herrick buttered a bun, glanced at me with a look he hoped was shrewd but which I knew was one of resignation. To reassure him, I said, “Yes, I know who killed Nichols, and my only problem is to get the co-operation, in solving the case, of the person who did it. Simple, isn’t it?”

Col. Herrick moved his head above a forkful of steak. Whether he was shaking or nodding his head, I couldn’t tell.





## CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

There is no feeling on earth like it—when the fresh white oblong of canvas is stretched and set up on the easel and then, well, then it is up to you. The feeling is not entirely pleasant. One always imagines that it will be, but at the last moment, before starting, there is apt to be a sort of sinking sensation, the feeling that perhaps the original idea was not so good after all, maybe one should stop and think for a moment and perhaps decide upon a better one, and finally, of course, the baffling realization that the whole affair is a struggle with intangibles in which the outcome, since there is so little one can grasp in a physical sense, will probably turn out badly. This time, though, I still thought my original idea, a self-portrait, was a good one. I readjusted the big three-quarters mirror I'd taken from the bathroom door, to get a better light, and then I shifted the easel to catch the new angle of the mirror. After that I went out to the kitchenette, mixed myself another Scotch highball, a stiff one this time, came back to the canvas and looked again into the mirror. The highlight on the glass in my hand might provide a focal point for the general composition, I thought, and then discarded the idea as too tricky. I started to sketch in the larger masses as they would look in the pose I wanted to use, and then there was a knock at the door. It was Captain Wessex.

He said, "Mind if I come in and talk, or will that disturb you?"

"Not at all. Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks."

I went ahead with the sketching and Wessex wandered bulkily around the studio. I heard him stop before a stack of my canvases in back of me.

"Getting anywhere with this murder stuff, Captain?" I asked.

"Yes. I think so."

"Who did it, or is that a state secret?"

"I think I know who did it, but we aren't quite certain enough to make an arrest and, naturally, I can't say much about it." I heard him moving some of the canvases. "Do you care if I look at some of these?"

I said, "That's what they're there for, to be looked at."

"By the way, Mr. Bartel," he said, presently, "I don't believe you ever did tell me just what was back of that row you had with Nichols."

"Something purely personal," I said. "It had nothing to do with anything even distantly connected with the case."

I heard Wessex sound a sort of croak meant to be a laugh.

"How do I know that? But, in fact, you poked him because he was ribbing you about your pictures, I understand."

"He got too damned smart for his own good, yes, and I socked him."

"I understand it was something about a picture of a mermaid you'd painted, that touched off the fight."

"Do you?"

"But I don't see it here."

"There never was any."

"That's strange," said the cop. "Mr. Biernbaum said there was, and he saw it."

"He did, did he?" But I realized there was no point in being childish about the business. I resigned myself to the fact that I'd never hear the last of it. "As a matter of fact, there was a picture of a mermaid, but I burned it."

"You did? That's funny, too. Because there's no place to burn it, except in the fireplace, which is absolutely clean, or one of the wire baskets back of the Hall, and in that case there'd be sure to be some traces of it, some fragments of unburned canvas. But we've gone through every bit of rubbish from one end of the Hall to the other, and nothing like that has ever turned up."

I drank off the rest of the highball.

"O.K., Captain, the picture just took wings and vanished. I used it to wipe the bloodstains off my hands, and then I ate it. Does that satisfy you?"

Captain Wessex chuckled.

"O.K.," he said. "And I must say, you did a wonderful picture here of Lucille Nichols. Her feet seem a little cockeyed, under that robe, but the face is a perfectly accurate resemblance, you couldn't mistake it."

I made another highball and went back to the easel. I'd put away about a pint so far this morning, but didn't feel it, perhaps because of the heat. Wessex had left off sitting in judgment on my pictures, and came around to the side of the easel. He declined another invitation to have a drink, and sat there in the large chair watching me outline the central

details of the self-portrait. The work started off easily enough, though of course this was nothing but groundwork, and my mind was already on the exact tone of the finished product. I felt that this time I might really go to town. I meant to give the picture a sort of autumnal quality, to suggest a person who has undoubtedly been successful in most of the things he has struggled for, but who is nevertheless disillusioned with the so-called rewards of life.

I heard Wessex reiterate, "Does it?"

"Does it what?"

"Does it bother you to have someone sit here and watch you paint?"

I said, "No. I wouldn't have invited you to, if it did. Pull your feet back, will you? They cut across the mirror."

"I wondered what you were painting," said Wessex, moving ponderously back. "But I'm damned if I see the point in painting a picture of a looking-glass."

It gave me a bigger lift than the highball. I explained the business with the mirror, and the cop seemed genuinely interested. From there, we got on to the subject of art in general.

"What do you think of a fellow like Henry Mallett?" asked Captain Wessex. "Confidentially?"

"Publicly or privately, I think he ought to be painting picture postcards."

"I think I see what you mean," said Captain Wessex. "Sort of sentimental, and not much to it, is that it?"

"Nothing to it at all, except cows, brooks, pastures, and occasionally a very wistful silo." I handed the cop my empty glass. "Mind doing the honors? Have one yourself, while you're at it."

"No, thanks," he said, and got heavily to his feet. From the kitchenette he called, "How much of this stuff does your prescription call for?"

"About an inch and a half."

I heard him getting the ice cubes, and presently he was back.

"Karl Weiss?" he asked. "What kind of work does he do?"

"Great stuff," I said, "if you happen to be a Swiss watchmaker. There are some, you know. But most of us don't know one end of a scrambled mainspring from the other, and don't care to. Jesus Christ, you forgot the soda."

"I'm sorry." He took the glass and went back to the kitchenette. When he returned he said, "You mean, he's super-impressionistic?"

"Your meaning is vague but I'd say your intention was clear, Captain, and perfectly correct." The drink was O.K. this time. "By the way, what's your first name? I'd might as well use it, if you're going to hang around the Hall for a while. Maybe I'll do a picture of you, if you'll pose."

"Steve's my name."

"All right, mine's Chris. But I forgot, you already know."

"Yes. Well, I wouldn't mind posing for a portrait. If I get the time, that is." He sat watching me for a while, then said, "How much, about, do you think you'll get for this self-portrait when you're finished with it?"

"Not a dime, Steve."

"Nothing?"

"Not for this one. It comes under the heading of personal satisfaction, and it's all for the sweet sake of art, which has the same reward as virtue."

"Holy smoke. You don't paint them all for nothing, do you? They told me you got big money for your work."

"Who's 'they'?" Steve's face showed reluctance. "All right, skip it. Weiss, and Mallett, and Cooke told you. Yes, it's true that I have gotten pretty good prices for most of my work. But most of it was what I'd consider commercial stuff, no matter what fancy name I gave it at the time. And after a while, when you know you can do better, but still you don't or don't even try to, it begins to get on your nerves. See what I mean, Steve? And then suddenly you realize it's too late. Or almost too late." I put down the rest of the highball, realizing from the way I talked that I must be slightly drunk, even though I didn't feel it. "From a thousand to ten thousand has been my usual commission, depending somewhat on the circumstances. But what the hell did I get out of it, personally? Once I got as much as twenty-five thousand for a single portrait. And so what?" I handed him the empty glass. "Fill her up, will you, Steve? When you come back I'll tell you all about that time."

I had the pleasant but heavy sensation of being in a slow motion picture, or as though I were moving under water. It was hot, but I didn't mind the heat. This afternoon, or tomorrow morning at the latest, I thought, I should be able to tackle the real body of the canvas.

"Here," said Steve, and handed me a highball. "What were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you?"

"About a picture you once sold for twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Oh, yes." A view slightly better than three-quarters, I decided, would offer the most possibilities. "It was a picture of Louis Schneider's daughter. You know who he is, of course."

"Sure. That crowd never operated up here, but naturally I've heard. You painted a picture of Schneider's daughter?"

“No less. She was just back from a finishing school in Europe. Schneider wanted this portrait so much I was practically kidnapped. Money was no object he said, so I said twenty-five thousand. We agreed on the terms, half to start with and half on delivery, and I went ahead. Maybe you read about it at Schneider’s trial three or four years ago. The daughter, her name was Geraldine, came to the sitting with two bodyguards. I did some pretty interesting sketches of the bodyguards, too, while I was about it, but naturally they didn’t know that, and it’s beside the point anyway. I finally finished the picture, sent it around to Schneider, and he must have thought it was satisfactory because he didn’t send it back and I learned he’d had it hung in his library. But he wouldn’t come across with the second half of the payment, and he wouldn’t answer my letters. Finally, I managed to see him personally. He was pretty slick. He pointed out that our contract had not been made between us, which was the literal truth, it hadn’t, but between myself and a stooge of his whom he called his purchasing agent, from whom he’d agreed to buy the portrait for twelve and a half thousand, and if I didn’t like it, I could sue him.”

“You should’ve known that rat would chisel on the deal.”

“I did know he would try to. So I told him it would take too long to sue, and I went ahead and beat the ears off him then and there. I had to poke one of his gorillas, too. Oh, Jesus, it was a mess. That library looked like a junk dealers’ paradise when we got through. Then I took the picture down off the wall and told him he could have it any time he paid me twelve thousand five hundred dollars, and in case he didn’t pay me I was going to re-touch it into a nude and hang it over the biggest bar in New York. I had his check the next day. It turned out to be good, too.”

“You’re pretty handy with those mitts of yours, Mr. Bartel.”

“Call me, Chris, Steve, and mix up another drink, will you?”

“Too handy, if you ask me, Chris.”

“Maybe. I was damn near heavyweight champ of the coast guard, once. And I would have made the grade, except I happened to be in jail the week of the finals. By the time I got out, they decided to fire me out of the service and I wasn’t eligible.”

“What did they jug you up for, Chris?”

“Nothing serious. You know how it was in those days. If we nabbed a boatload of hooch, a little of the stuff was turned over for evidence, but most of it was sold back to the syndicate that was supposed to have gotten it in the first place, and the money went into a kitty divided between some of the officers and the crew. Well, to make a long story short, I drank up too much of the stuff we were supposed to sell, out of one pinch we made, and the chief petty officer who was in on our racket got sore and squawked that I’d stolen some of the evidence. But I didn’t much care. I was tired of the service, by then, and wanted to get busy and start painting. That chief was a heel, but actually, come right down to it, I guess he did me a favor.”

“Here you are, Chris.”

It was the cop, with a drink. I must have been talking to myself, while he’d been mixing it. Or maybe I’d only imagined I’d been talking. Or perhaps it was part of a dream I might be having. I took the drink and, in the dream, said, “Thanks, Steve.”

“One other point I’d like to clear up, Chris. It’s this.” The cop settled back into the chair. “What time was your appointment for tennis with Mr. Biernbaum?”

“What time?”

“Yes, what time? That morning Nichols got knifed.”

It hurt so much to concentrate, trying to remember, I decided it was no dream, but real. I said, “When he came in, he said he was a little late.”

“I know. He’s already taken pains to point that out to me. But what time was your appointment for, originally?”

“What time?”

“Yes, that night, or morning Nichols got stabbed, and you went out to play tennis. Before the police got here. Before it became generally known anyone had been killed.”

“Before it was when?”

“Jesus Christ, Chris, pull yourself together. You don’t look drunk, but you certainly sound like it. Think hard. What time did you and Biernbaum fix it up to play tennis that morning?”

“Quarter after six. A God damn headache. I can’t imagine why I ever agreed.”

“Chris, think hard, this is important. It was quarter after six when Biernbaum called for you. Is that right?”

“If you call that right, you’re crazy, but I’d say the idea was all wrong. Quarter after six, I’m sure that’s right.”

“How do you know it was a quarter after six? Did you look at a watch, or a clock, or did Biernbaum tell you it was a quarter after six?”

“I didn’t look,” I said, after thinking hard. “He said.”

“He said it was a quarter after six, and you simply took his word for it?”

“I said, that’s what he said.”

“But he said he was late?”

"He was late."

"Then what time was your appointment supposed to be for? What time was this tennis match supposed to take place? It must have been some time before a quarter past six. What time?"

"What time?"

"Look here, Mr. Bartel, a murder has been committed, I'm here to investigate it, and I don't intend to waste my time clowning around with anyone, drunk or sober." Steve was standing up. He looked sore. "And the better you co-operate with the state police, the better for yourself and all concerned."

I found I had put my hands on his shoulders and shoved him back into the chair.

"Don't get excited, Captain Wessex," I said. "Ask me any question you want, you'll find me co-operative in the extreme. Nichols had it coming to him, but that's beside the point, you've got a job to finish. Now, what can I do to help you? What you need, son of a gun, is a drink. Clear up your mind, help you to think."

Steve was grinning.

"I don't want a drink. All I want is a simple answer to my question. What time did you and Biernbaum fix it up between yourselves, the night before the murder, to meet and play tennis in the morning?"

"Well, why in hell didn't you ask me?" My mind went back to that meeting outside the door of his studio. *Certainly I play tennis*, I'd said. No, not quite that. *So you play tennis?* That was Biernbaum. *Certainly I do*, that was me. And then something about *Well, if I can borrow your eyeshade*. Out loud, I said, "Eyeshade."

"Eyeshade? What about it?"

"Don't bother me. I'm getting it." But that was that. Nothing more, not a thing. There were images and wisps of ideas, but they had might as well be trying to cross some Chinese Wall. The next thing I got was, *I wonder if you know why you drink so much, Chris?* That wasn't Biernbaum, that was Lucille. It had nothing to do with tennis. And after that a lot more of the same, but still nothing about tennis. And then I was saying to Constance Gregg, on the top floor of Demarest Hall, *No one seems to be able to sleep in this heat. It's an ideal time for writing letters*. And then I'd turned and gone from the writing room, leaving her there, to walk down the five flights of stairs. "Say, Captain," I said. "By the way."

"Yes?"

"I don't believe I told you before, but I happened to be on the top floor of Demarest Hall in the early hours of that morning."

"No, you didn't."

"Well, I was. I just remembered. Damned funny, I hadn't remembered it before."

"I know. Constance Gregg told me."

"Yes, we had a little talk. But I don't know what time it was."

"Never mind that now. She said you walked up to the writing room, talked to her, then went downstairs again, after writing a note. Who did you write to?"

"I don't know."

"Well, right now all I want to know is about that tennis engagement. What time did you and Biernbaum fix it up to play tennis?"

"I think I'm remembering it. Give me a little time." I put down the last of the highball, and handed the empty glass to Steve. "Get me another one, and I'll have the answer." He gave me a sour look, but took the glass and went out to the kitchenette. *I'm an hour late, but better late than never. Here I am*. That was Biernbaum, it was early in the morning, he had a tennis racket in his hand. *You wanted to play tennis at five o'clock, before breakfast. It's six, but we can have lots of time*, or words to that effect. When Steve came back with the highball I took it and said, "I can't remember what time we may have originally decided on, but when he came in that morning, he said our date was for five o'clock, and here he was, an hour late, but better late than never."

"You're sure of this?"

"Positive."

"It was Biernbaum who told you what hour you'd agreed to play at, five o'clock, and it was Biernbaum who told you what hour it actually was, six o'clock?"

"That's right."

"But you can't remember whether it was actually six o'clock then, or what hour you had decided to play at, yourself?"

"Beg your pardon, Steve, what hour was what?"

He looked and sounded exasperated.

"You don't know of your own knowledge either the time you had agreed to play, or the time Biernbaum arrived. In other words, all you can remember is what he told you, and you have no personal information on the subject aside from what he told you?"

"That's right. I couldn't swear to the actual time, in either case, but I could swear to the hour, in each case, that

Bierbaum mentioned on the morning when he came in and we were supposed to play. Does that answer all your questions?”

“It answers that question,” the cop admitted.

“Why? Has Bierbaum made the grade as a suspect, at last?”

Steve said, sourly, “So you know about that, do you?”

“About what? I only hope I’ve hung a rope around Bierbaum’s neck, is all, considering what a pest he turned out to be, blabbing God knows what about me and my personal affairs and my financial earnings. I merely point out, Steve, that when Bierbaum is hung . . .”

“We don’t hang in this state,” said Steve. “They get the chair.”

“I was speaking figuratively. When Bierbaum is hung, or broiled as you point out, the state will execute a man who is innocent of just one thing in the whole almanac of moral turpitude—murder. Fact is, Bierbaum isn’t strong enough to stick a knife as deeply as Nichols was spiked.”

“I’ve thought of that. But you never can tell.”

“Not that I give a damn one way or the other. Would you pour another one, Steve, while I put in the last touches of this morning’s work, before I knock off?”

Steve stood up.

“I was just going,” he said. “Thanks for answering my questions, and I hope I didn’t prevent you from working.”

“Not at all.”

“I want you to know I appreciate all you’ve said.”

“A pleasure.”

“Mind if I have a drink?”

“Certainly not. Help yourself.”

“Thanks. Fact is, I’ve been under a considerable strain.”

“Sure, we all have.”

“What I mean is, for reasons of publicity I thought it wouldn’t hurt if I were mentioned, sort of casually, in the newspapers, as a suspect. But one thing or another came to light, and I saw that it might turn out to be serious, so I decided against it. Thanks for telling the trooper I was innocent.”

I put down my charcoal and looked around. It was the damndest thing. I could have sworn I’d been talking to Steve Wessex. But no, it was Nathan Bierbaum. He was sitting in back of me, with a glass in his hand, and he looked like a person who has been there for several hours and plans to stay for several more. No question, it was a dream. In the dream I said, casually,

“Well, I honestly think you’re innocent.”

“I am innocent,” said Bierbaum, too urgently. I looked around for Wessex, but he’d simply vanished, as people do in dreams. Just as I’d begun to grow fond of the guy, too. But no doubt he’d crop up again in some other one. Bierbaum went on, earnestly, “You needn’t have laid it on so thick about that moral turpitude bologney, and I’m sorry if I said too much to Captain Wessex about your personal affairs. But he asked me, you know, and the law is the law.”

“That’s all right. And stupidity is stupidity. Would you mind mixing me a drink, old man?” What difference does it make how much you drink, if it’s just a dream? No difference, I’d might as well have twenty or thirty more. The craziest thing I ever did was when somebody, in a dream, handed me a certified check for thirty thousand dollars. I wanted to rent the biggest penthouse on the highest building in the city but instead of that I deposited the money—also in the dream—in a bank. And then the bank went broke. I’ve wondered, ever since, what the rest of the dream would have been if I’d had myself a penthouse instead of a nightmare. Bierbaum came back with a glass. I said, “Thanks. Seen Wessex this morning, yourself?”

He gave me a glassy look.

“Not since five minutes ago, right here in this room, as he was leaving. Why?”

“Oh, nothing.” I sighed, sipped the highball. What the hell, what the hell. It didn’t matter in the least. By the time you’ve found out, definitely and finally, whether or not you’re playing for keeps, it’s too late to do anything about it. And therefore why not refuse to worry about it in the first place? If it’s real, you’re too dumb to know it, and if it isn’t, it doesn’t matter. I said, “If it’s real, O.K., and if not, to hell with it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing.”

“I didn’t mean to interfere with your work.”

“Work? What work?”

Bierbaum tasted his highball and gave me a remote look.

“Why, the—well . . .”

“You mean my reconditioned mermaid? Or my view of the pastoral valley of Demarest County, County seat Endor? Or the great flop I am about to commit? Which?”

Bierbaum finished his highball and stood up. He said, "I think you're due for a nap."

"I happen to be waiting for my lunch, if it's all the same to you. Do you mind?"

"Thanks again for telling Captain Wessex what you thought about his suspicions. Of me, I mean."

"To hell with Captain Wessex."

"I really think you should take a nap, old man. You're a little drunk, you know, whether you know it or not."

"Did I ask you?"

"Well, O.K. I'll be seeing you."

I said, "I'm afraid so," and then saw that I was alone. I looked with great care at my wrist watch. It said: 12:48. I glanced out of the window toward the Hall, but there was no sign of Page. Until he arrived, it might not be such a bad idea at that, I decided, to take a brief nap.

I had scarcely lain down before Albert was asking me, in his polite voice, "What will it be, sir? Some cold squab, with potato salad and iced caviar? Or would you prefer something hot? We have bouillabaise, and capon, or schnitzel, or shaslik. There's cold borscht, too, of course, if you'd prefer that."

I said, rubbing my head, "Don't ask me riddles. I want some borscht, shaslik, and about two quarts of iced coffee."

"Yes, sir. The iced coffee will be two dollars extra."

"No, it won't. You get out of here and bring me some iced coffee before I break you into two extra pieces."

"I don't know, sir, but I'll try."

When I'd finished the luncheon I felt much better and decided to go visiting. I hadn't seen much of the other guests at the Hall, although God knows they had used my studio, dozens of them, for everything but a badminton court. On the way out, I met Connors, the poet. He said, "I've been looking for you everywhere, Bartel. I thought you might be at the Grotto, but you weren't there. I wonder if you'd do me another small favor."

"What is it?"

"Could you loan me ten bucks?"

"What the hell is this?" I said. "I loaned you ten dollars yesterday."

"I know, but I lost it."

"Well, go look for it."

"Oh, I know where it is, all right. It's in P. C. Cooke's billfold. What I mean is, I lost it in a game of poker. He won. See?"

I saw Feeling as though my mouth were full of pickled pigeon-droppings, I came across. I said, firmly, "All right, but listen. Either you improve your poker, or your alibis."

"Thanks, guy. If you're looking for Lucille, by the way, you'll find her in Nichols' studio. The one he had, I mean."

"She's there?"

"Yes. Looking through some of the guy's effects."

"Well, much obliged for telling me." I felt as though there might be some decency left in humanity, no matter how low. "I was looking for her, as a matter of fact. Thank you, Connors."

"By the way," he said, "about P. C. Cooke."

"What about him?"

"Well, if they grab the guy at last, and cook him in the chair, what's the legal status of I.O.U.s made out in his favor? Can his estate collect, or can I just tell them to go jump?"

"Tell them to go jump, of course. But you're a little ahead of yourself. He hasn't been convicted yet, nor even accused."

Connors shook his head, gave me a cigarette and a light, and disappeared. It was very strange. I went on to Walter Nichols' studio, that is, the one he had occupied in life. It was open, but instead of Lucille, I found Captain Wessex. He smiled cheerfully and said, "Hello Chris, come in and make yourself at home. I'm re-checking the personal possessions of Nichols. Nothing important. But I wanted to see you. A couple of questions I wanted to ask you."

"Shoot."

"I understand you took a poke at Nichols because he was ribbing you about a mermaid picture you were painting. Is that right?"

"You asked me that before, and I told you before, and yes, it's substantially right. Still right."

"Don't be so quick to get sore at these questions, Mr. Bartel, they're necessary. Would you like a drink?"

I said, "Yes. And I'm not sore."

"You were having Scotch, weren't you? Here you are." I found a drink in my hand. "But there's another thing I'd like to clear up, Chris. It's this. What time did you have an appointment to play tennis with Mr. Bierbaum, on the morning of the murder?"

"At five. But he was an hour late."

"He got there, at your studio, when?"

"At six. We were to play at five, but he arrived at six."

"I see. Anything else?"

"He wanted to borrow an eyeshade. So I loaned him one."

"Anything else?"

"My belt, too. I used it, I don't remember how, exactly, but I did."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Well, it was chilly. So I had to have another drink. Have you got one, by the way?"

"Certainly."

Almost at once Steve handed me another drink, smiling as he did so, and I took it. I said, "Where's Lucille? Someone, Connors, Alfred Connors, you know, the poet—he said she'd be here."

"You'll see her soon," said Wessex.

"Why isn't she here now?"

"Well, you know how it is. Nichols left her a few thousand in insurance and she has to sign a few papers, and observe a few regulations, and then the money is hers. You knew that, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. Except in a general way."

"But naturally you wouldn't care. Would you?"

"No."

"Quite sure?"

"Positive."

"And she never suggested to you, who were in love with her—or so they say around here at the Hall—that her husband was a menace to her life, and she believed he had already tried to kill her once or twice, and would try again?"

I was rubbing at my forehead and my throat. I said,

"Yes. She did say something about that. He had tried to kill her."

"And naturally, Mr. Bartel—do you mind if I don't call you Chris?—you were most sympathetic."

"What would you be, under the circumstances?"

"Human, I guess. There's nothing new under the sun, you know. Did you ever read a full account of the Ruth Snyder—Judd Gray case? What's that knocking? Why don't you answer the door?"

I woke up, soaked with perspiration. I was in my own studio, on the bed. Someone was knocking at the door. I got to my feet, feeling groggy, my head spinning with pieces of ideas. I went to the door. It was Captain Wessex again. Was it for the second time this morning, or the third time? He said, "Sorry to bother you again, but I believe I dropped my cigarette case in your studio." I said nothing, and he passed inside. On the step beside the door was my lunch basket. I picked it up and looked at the food. Cold consomme, cold cuts and potato salad. I'd thought I'd already had lunch, but evidently not. Either I'd dreamed I had, or I'd been thinking about yesterday's. I went back into the studio. "Here it is," said Wessex cheerfully. "Ordinarily, I wouldn't use one of these, but it's the wife's idea of a birthday present. What's the matter, Chris, not feeling well?"

"I feel all right."

"Better take it easy," he said. "You know, that tonic you've been using isn't made out of water." He moved toward the door, eyeing me uncertainly. "You aren't sick, are you? If there's anything I can get you, let me know."

I went over to the easel. There was the canvas, with the outlines of the self-portrait blocked in. I'd done quite a bit of work this morning, I saw. And this, at least, was real. Not bad, either. I said, "No thanks. I don't need anything, and there's nothing you can do."





"There you are, miss," I said. "I'm no bargain, but you won't have no more trouble with that window rod." I pulled the window shut, and then opened it again, and tightened the thumbscrew that locked it there. "See?"

Miss Wright said, "I hope I won't. But tomorrow it's bound to be something else. What do people think I am, anyway? A self-respecting hottentot wouldn't live in a studio like this."

God's own nobility, that's what she thinks she is, like all the rest of them. I said, "If there's anything else goes wrong, just let me know."

"I will, Albert." Not even a thank-you for fixing her bloody window for her. Not even a glass of good, cold beer. "Who does Mr. Cooke plan to give Mr. Nichols' studio to, do you know, Albert?"

"That I couldn't say, Miss."

"I wonder if it would do any good to speak to him about it. This is the worst studio in the entire Hall. Seems a pity somebody can't have the use of Mr. Nichols' studio."

"I couldn't say about that, Miss."

"Well, perhaps I'll speak to Mr. Cooke, myself, and see if I can arrange it."

"Yes, Miss." I packed up the oilcan, screwdriver and monkey-wrench. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.* Not half. Commandment ten smashed like billy-o. And him not cold in his grave. His ashes, I mean, not yet settled in his widow's urn. "If anything else goes wrong, just call on yours truly."

"Thank you, Albert."

I went out. If she'd be good for the usual, even that, at the end of the season, it would be a pleasant surprise. More likely P. C. C. would hand me an envelope from Miss Wright, after she'd left in September, and in it would be a dollar. God's own nobility, that's what they thought they were, but what were they in fact? Common clay. All the psychology in the outside world put together is not half as bad as the psychology to be found here, right here in this temple of fame surrounded by topless towers of ivory and bottomless moats of shame. Every commandment in the calendar I've seen broken right here in this Hall. And now this year, even the Sixth. *Thou shalt not kill.* The pay-off, I call it. As if all the rest weren't enough.

I went past Mr. Bartel's studio, since it was almost directly in the path back to the main hall, and he was probably late with his lunch basket. No sign of it outside the door. I knocked, and heard him say, "Come in."

He was standing before a big picture he was painting, squinting at the looking-glass he'd taken from his bathroom, which he was not supposed to do, and hung up there in front of him. He looked at me as though he'd never seen me before, and didn't know me from Adam. But I knew *him*, all right, all right. I said, "Beg your pardon, sir. But I thought perhaps you'd like to have me save you the trouble of returning your basket to the Hall."

He pointed with the brush in his hand.

"Fine. There it is."

"Sometimes the guests forget." He didn't say anything, and I picked up the basket. "Always like to be of service, if I can." He still didn't say anything. "Although Mr. Cooke, he's a great one for rules and regulations. He likes to have the guests bring back the baskets by three P. M. at the latest, so the kitchen won't have to bother with them while supper's being prepared. A lot of nonsense, if you ask me." All I got was a sour smile that would have frozen the blood of the devil himself. Usually, Mr. Bartel could be relied upon for something in the way of stimulation, if nothing more. But this afternoon he seemed to be in a touchy mood. "Well, thank you, sir. If I can be of service, glad to. Good afternoon, sir."

He didn't say anything at all, and I went on my way. There was a nobleman for you, I don't think. As though I couldn't see right through him and his deep ways like a window of glass. Broke the Seventh before he'd been a guest at the Hall hardly long enough to hang up his hat, and never drew a sober breath from the day he was born. A genius, oh, yes, they don't fool me. Not that one. Ahead of me I saw Mr. Connors, walking so slowly that I'd be sure to catch up with him if I went on at my usual m.p.h. I turned down a footpath that led, by a different route, to the kitchen of the Hall. Cost me two dollars in touches before I found out Mr. Connors didn't have a copper in the world. Which two dollars I hadn't seen yet, and wouldn't, if you ask me, not this side of Kingdom Come. No use throwing good money after bad.

Passing the next lodge, Fountain, it occurred to me that I hadn't as yet seriously offered my services to Mr. Dunn. There was a one for you, or I missed my guess by a mile. Always ordering through the canteen, always asking for

extras and offering to tip well, and always in a pleasant frame of mind. Many and many's the blood-and-thunder story I'd read by famous executioners and murderers, with the help of Mr. Dunn. When I'd dropped Mr. Bartel's basket at the kitchen, and no signs of P. C. C., who most likely was up in his own lodgings sleeping off a gluttonous lunch, I went back to Fountain Lodge and knocked at Mr. Dunn's door. I heard his typewriter stop, and then he opened the door.

"Yes, Albert?"

"Beg your pardon, sir, I hope I wasn't disturbing you."

I hesitated, but all he said was, "Yes?"

"I thought perhaps you'd forgotten to take your lunch basket back to the kitchen. Or perhaps it was too much trouble. If I could be of service, I'd be glad to do it for you."

"I took it back an hour ago," he said, and started to close the door.

I like that for you. Not even a thank-you. Altogether too high and mighty, if you ask me. And looking, all the time, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. I said, "Then that's all right, sir. I merely thought perhaps I could do you a small favor. But what I wanted to ask you, Mr. Dunn, was about that arrangement we made concerning seating you. At breakfast and for supper."

"Seating me?" He was the wise one, acting so surprised and all that. As if he didn't know—plenty. "What do you mean?"

I dropped my voice to a more confidential pitch. Never can tell, at the Hall, who might be listening. Old P. C. C., he's got ears stuck out all over him like sprouts on a potato.

"I mean, sir, I didn't mention to Captain Wessex that you especially requested me, on the night before he was murdered, sir, I was to see to it that you and he was never put together again at the same table. Peculiar, I thought at the time. But I didn't say nothing about it, sir. And won't, if you say the word. I just thought perhaps you ought to know."

If ever I saw homicide, it was in that face. I thought for a minute the gentleman might even be contemplating physical violence. But after a while, when he seemed to be thinking it over, he stepped aside and said, "Come in. Let's talk this over."

So help me, I was almost afraid to go through that door. Knowing what I knew about this particular one, for all his high-and-mighty airs and pleasant smiles and handsome offers and all, for a minute I thought I'd better think twice and think the better of it. But I'd seen them come and go at the Hall before, and I wasn't the one to back down, neither now nor ever. I came in. Mr. Dunn slammed the door after me, and said, "All right. What's your proposition?"

"Proposition, sir?"

"You wouldn't be here if you didn't know more than you've told me. What else do you know, or think you know, and how much do you want to keep your mouth shut?"

There was no use beating around the bush. Mr. Dunn looked as though he was a character that meant business. Just the same as I could have sworn he'd meant business with Mr. Nichols. And maybe I would, too, even if they'd acquit him afterwards, as might easily happen. Only, why should I? Why go to all that trouble for nothing? When he might, just for revenge, make a lot of trouble for me, considering it would only be my testimony against his. I think he'd be too smart for that, though. He'd see there was nothing in that for either of us. He'd look at it the same as I do. The way I feel, why go to the trouble of leading with my chin in the first place, duty or no duty? Let the law take care of itself, what I say. A man's got to look out for his own self. I said, "I've got no proposition to make, as you call it. I wanted it understood, strictly between us, sir, about that seating matter. I didn't mention it to Captain Wessex, and I have no intention of saying anything about it, if that's the way you want it. My attitude in such a case would be, if you were to tell him, yourself, about what you told me, where would that put me with Captain Wessex? In a fine fix, that's where I'd be." A wonderful thing, words. If a man's quick-witted, like, and puts enough of them together fast enough, and mixes them up a little, he's got the other fellow in the hollow of his hand. "Captain Wessex, he'd say to me, 'See here, Albert Page, why didn't you tell me Mr. Dunn especially requested you never to seat him next to Mr. Nichols, not at the same table, even? Why didn't you speak up?' he'd say. 'Might not seem important to you, but you never can tell, might be you were holding back important evidence.' So that's why I'd better speak to you about it, I thought. Just to make sure our stories came out of the same cloth."

"I see," said Mr. Dunn, but looking down his nose to do it. "Is that all?"

I sort of studied him for a second. He didn't look the dangerous type. Not now, knowing who had the upper hand in this proposition, as he called it. I decided to lay my cards on the table.

"Then there's the matter of the knife."

"Yes, Albert?"

"I know you took it for perfectly harmless private reasons of your own, sir. But there it is. You did take it, and I saw you take it. That very night, when the kitchen was closed. Or really, that morning. At two o'clock."

"Well?"

"Well, that's it, Mr. Dunn. I didn't know what Captain Wessex might make of such a thing, if he knew. So I thought to myself, of course Mr. Dunn has some perfectly legitimate excuse why he wanted a carving knife out of the kitchen at

that particular hour, and I'd better speak to him first before I mentioned it to anyone else. I mean purely as a personal favor to you."

"And?"

"And, sir?"

A graven image, that was the way his face looked. And deep. Whatever went on in the mental steps he was taking, he was doing his best not to show it. But he knew it was no good trying that upstage stuff on your humble servant. He said, at last, quietly, "I want to show you something, Albert. Some photographs I was able to get through police records made in some of the cases I wrote up as articles and stories. Ever read any of them?"

"I have that. Made my hair stand on end, some of them. I like to read a bit of blood-and-thunder, when I read anything at all. Helps me to go to sleep."

"Does it?"

"*Murder Is a Business*, there's one of yours I liked." He had opened the drawer of a filing cabinet he'd brought with him to the Hall, and was going through a lot of papers in it, taking some of them out. "Then there was another one of yours, *Death Insurance*, I think you called it. I'll never forget that. Most entertaining, that was. I often wondered, sir, how you managed to meet so many famous criminals, and how you get them to tell you their stories, if they aren't mainly moonshine, as I expect they are."

He said, giving me a black look, "They aren't moonshine. Some of them I met because they were in jail and needed to raise money for their defense, and the only way they could do it was through syndicating the stories of their lives, and no one else wrote them as successfully as I did. Others I met because it was known I never betrayed a criminal's confidence in such a way that details about his actions could be used as courtroom evidence against him. Still others confided their peccadilloes to me, Albert, because they had to. That is, it was better to have me as a friend than as an enemy. Understand?"

"Not exactly, but I catch the drift, sir."

"Of the dozen or so killers whose lives I wrote up, those still living as well as those dead, all of them regarded themselves as friends of mine. This applies, too, to the hundreds of minor gunmen and gangsters, most of them still alive and at liberty, who figured in one way or another in these stories, but whose actual identities I concealed. They're all obligated to me, and none of them would hesitate to do a favor for me if I should ask for one."

"Not exactly a pleasant circle of friends, if you ask me, sir. But then, everyone to his taste, as the old lady said when she . . ."

"Exactly. Not pleasant, no. Do you remember the New York vice-probe, Albert?"

"In a way, yes. They got them, didn't they? Put them all away about ten years ago."

"Some of them, but not all of them. Want to see a picture of the state's principal witness against the ring? Here he is, six months after the trial."

I took the photo he handed me and looked at it, and then turned it sideways and upside down, but it didn't make sense. He turned it around the way I had it in the first place and said, "This way. Look at it carefully."

I looked at it close and what I saw was enough to turn a man's stomach. It was the back seat of an automobile that had caught on fire, most likely. The fellow that was lying there had part of a face, all right, but it was burned to a crisp and all shriveled like overdone bacon.

"Blimey, he certainly met with an accident, that one did."

"Look more closely, you'll see that he'd been bound with wire. See? I'm afraid that was no accident. Did you ever hear of a small-time gang leader in Buffalo named Vince Truri? You wouldn't have, I suppose. He got picked up and indicted during a minor reform wave, decided to talk, and gave evidence before the grand jury against some of the city's really bigshot racket guys. He made it so hot for them they had to go out of business for a year or two. Here's a photograph of Truri, the last time he made a public appearance."

It was a picture of a room somewhere with what looked like a grease-spot on the floor. But I saw the grease-spot had arms and a head.

"That's what a sawed-off shotgun does at close range," Mr. Dunn explained.

"Who did it?" I asked.

Mr. Dunn looked at me, and almost smiled.

"And here's another one," he went on, just as if I hadn't said anything. "A beauty. It's generally supposed he was a minor policy maker in New York who'd agreed to play ball with the D. A.'s office, in a drive against the bigger bankers. He testified—if this is him—in two trials, and then just disappeared. It isn't very often that they tum up again after they've been dropped into the bay, but this fellow was dredged up by accident." He showed me the thing. There wasn't much to the top of it except rags and meat. "That's cement around his feet," explained Mr. Dunn. "He must have been in the water about a month before they found him."

I put the photograph away.

"Didn't they ever catch the ones who did it, sir?"

Mr. Dunn almost laughed.

“No. I imagine that right now, at this minute, they’re having an argument about the Yanks or the Dodgers in the back room of a neighborhood saloon on Forty-eighth street. I could reach a couple of them by long-distance phone inside of five minutes, I imagine.” I didn’t say anything, and Mr. Dunn followed me to the door. “And I’ll tell you something else, Albert. As long as you already know so much about me, I’ll tell you something more.”

“Me, sir? I don’t know a thing about you.”

“It was I who shoved that knife through Mr. Nichols’ back. Perhaps you thought I wanted that knife to slice some sandwiches, or maybe do a little whittling in my spare time?”

“Yes, sir. I knew it was quite harmless.”

“Well, you’re wrong. I knocked him off. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

Sweat like ice broke out all over me. At the door, I gave him a perfectly friendly grin and said, “You’re joking, sir.”

“If I am, then I have the damndest sense of humor you ever saw.”

“What I mean, Mr. Dunn, it’s just another one of those blood-curdlers you’re always doing for the magazines.”

Standing there, he looked and sounded about as friendly as a butcher’s hacksaw going through a side of beef. He said, “I thought I explained I don’t write any blood-curdlers, as you call them. I write the truth.”

This fellow was so deep and blackhearted, even if he told the truth he’d still be lying. And what’s more, be able to prove it.

“Yes, sir, of course.” But I saw where that led to. “I mean, no, sir.”

“Well, which?”

“I mean, with me mum’s the word. Your business is nobody’s business but your own. If you want to joke, sir, that’s entirely your privilege. I never saw anything, and I never heard anything.”

“Oh, but you have heard something, and you have seen something.”

It was a nightmare.

“Yes, sir. But, well . . .”

“Yes?”

“I mean, sir, what are you going to do?”

“Do? I plan to work for the rest of the afternoon. Then I expect to make a few long-distance phone calls. And after that I’ll go to dinner.”



It is strange, a little frightening, but still more sad, how clearly I have been hearing Walter's voice in these last few days since he died. Not cynically rasping, or bellowing with that contemptuous laugh of his, but as he was years ago. He had been human once, something I had completely forgotten. And now the memory keeps coming back, again and again, always more vividly. There can certainly be happier relationships, even closer ones than those between a husband and a wife, but not many that remain so stubbornly alive in spite of all reason. In life, Walter would have said, *Disembodied and disorganized sentiment is the cheapest luxury on earth*. Now, however, he said, *My God, I loved you, Lucille*, and I gave an involuntary jump.

It was that idiot Albert, dropping and shattering another glass on the kitchenette floor. I went out there. He was hastily sweeping up the fragments, this time of a shattered cocktail glass.

He said, rather pathetically, "I'm sorry, ma'm."

"What's gotten into you, Albert? I never saw you so clumsy before. You aren't drunk, are you?"

"No, ma'm, not a drop all day. It must be my nerves, that's all. A touch of the willies."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't take it out on my glassware. It was nice of you to offer to give the kitchenette a thorough going over, but perhaps you'd better do it some other time."

He deposited the last of the pieces in the garbage pail, and put down the brush and the dustpan, but showed no sign that he intended to leave. He'd turned up at the studio at six o'clock, looking rather like a lost dog, and practically pleaded to be allowed to do a few odd jobs. The maids habitually skimped on the kitchenette so badly that I'd set him to work there.

"Perhaps," he said, "you'd like your icebox thorough-cleaned?"

"It doesn't need it. You'll have to be serving at the Hall in another hour or so, why don't you just go and rest until then? I should think your day is long enough as it is, without extra work."

"It's no trouble, Mrs. Nichols. I like to keep my thoughts occupied."

Albert was a hard worker, but I'd never known him to be quite so zealously tireless.

"Is anything the matter, Albert? If there is, and I can help you, I'll be glad to do what I can."

"I know that, ma'm. You're regular, Mrs. Nichols, if I might say so. No one else here I'd really trust. Not but what they'd be all right. What I mean is, I've had you and your husband here at the Hall for so many seasons, now, I couldn't recall how many. And it was always O.K."

"I—we always felt the same way, Albert. What's worrying you?"

He looked thoroughly miserable as he appeared to be considering the question.

"It's this," he said, at last. "I'm thinking about my last will and testimony."

"Why, Albert, you shouldn't even think about that. You're too young to be worrying about a last will and testament."

"Last will, ma'm, *and* last testimony," he said, with that odd cockney obliqueness. "Two different things, altogether. Yes, I'm young, but not too young to be cut down in my prime." He lowered his voice. "It's about the tragedy, Mrs. Nichols. They say that death comes in threes. Then why not murder in threes?"

"Come now, Albert," I said, sharply, "you really do know better than that, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'm. But not if you're unlucky enough to know what I happen to know." He hesitated, looking at me, caution and intolerable wisdom written all over his face. "I mean, if you happen to know who did it. What I want to say, Mrs. Nichols, if I should tum up missing one of these days, or what-have-you, look for a ghost."

"What on earth are you talking about? If you have any definite information about the murder of my husband, Albert, you'll have to speak up."

"No, ma'm. That wouldn't do."

"You could tell me."

"It's nothing I could prove, ma'm."

"Then you ought to tell Captain Wessex."

"Worse. In fact, out of the question. No, I've thought and thought, and that's the best I can do. If I should happen to cop it, just remember what I said, look for the ghost."

"Look for the ghost? I don't understand."

"No, ma'm, but there are those who will. Otherwise, if nothing should happen, just forget it, and greatly oblige

yours truly.”

He eyed me stubbornly, and I realized Albert had, temporarily at least, resolved to his own satisfaction whatever was troubling him, and that nothing more could be gotten out of him. If, indeed, anything had, in his few cryptic remarks.

I said, “All right, Albert. I’ll remember.”

“And you’ll remember, also, to forget, in case I should turn out to be talking moonshine? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

“Good heavens, Albert, you aren’t threatening me, or something, are you?”

He was genuinely surprised.

“You, ma’m? Never, God strike me. I had reference to him who thinks he may be threatening me, because of a little knowledge I may have.”

“Well,” I said, and couldn’t help smiling, “now that we share a little of this dangerous and dubious knowledge, we’re partners, aren’t we, and we’ll have to look out for each other?”

“Yes, ma’m,” said Albert, missing the point. “I knew you’d be a sport and I could trust you.” He seemed, now, to have lost all interest in extra-curricular housecleaning. “I expect you’re right, I’d might as well have some rest before the evening crush.”

He went gloomily away, and I returned to my correspondence, comprised in the main of letters of condolence from mine and Walter’s friends. Fortunately, in the will Walter had specifically requested that there be no funeral ceremony, other than the minimum and meager rites connected with prompt cremation, which had duly taken place in Endor. Fortunately, I think, for I could not have endured the senseless hypocrisy of long drawn-out ceremonies and an elaborate funeral. Even the correspondence seemed, no matter how sincere, intolerably ironic, and my replies a pointlessly formal and empty gesture. The sober truth was that Walter, in spite of unusual accomplishments, a certain amount of intellectual brilliance and a charming personality when he chose to exercise it upon others—usually for an ulterior motive—had nevertheless turned a whole host of friends and opportunities into a literal waste. He could not have done more damage to his own life if he had taken a machine-gun in one hand and a torch in the other. And why? Simply because he could not face reality. The world had to match his sentimental dream of what the world should be—something conceived by Galsworthy, as nearly as I could understand it—or he would pull it all down and perish himself in the ruins. And the less the world matched this dream of his, the more bitter and finally the more vicious he became. And yet his presence, which seemed to come and go, obstinately showed other characteristics that also had been his. Here, I reread a letter from a friend of Walter’s since they had been in college together. I had met the man only once—he hadn’t seemed quite possible, to me, as only a person from the past can seem—and it must be years since Walter had last seen him. It was plain this man had the most extraordinary conception of Walter; one would think, from the letter, that neither of them had ever really graduated.

I tied my poor brain into a bowknot, undid the knot and cut a few paper-dolls out of it, trying to think of a suitable reply to make this man that would not spoil the picture he had of this boyish Walter who had never, really, existed. But it would have been beyond my powers. Instead, I dashed off something as stereotyped as a rent receipt. If it lacked the intimate touch, neither would it hurt the ghostly image this friend had of Walter. It occurred to me that Walter’s ghost would walk for quite some time in the minds of quite a number of people, and then I thought, perversely, of Albert’s ghost. He could not actually have meant Walter? He could not have meant that Walter, himself, had somehow contrived his own murder—for heaven alone could guess what motive? There was a certain amount of plausibility in this, I had to admit. But it was, of course, impossible. And, familiar as I was with a wide streak of daffiness in Albert—almost as wide as P. C. C.’s for that matter—I did not think it possible his imagination could be as vivid as all that, or his mind so weak. No, some other notion, not altogether lunatic but not very well balanced, either, must have been disturbing him. The ghost. A ghost. Any ghost? If there were really anything in it, and Albert actually became a casualty, I’d never forgive myself for having missed the clue.

I started to read another letter, this one from one of Walter’s co-editors on *The New Review*, when the doorbell rang. I’d been doing these floral wreaths all afternoon, and felt glad of the interruption. It was Chris. He said, very earnestly,

“I don’t know whether I should be here. But here I am.”

“Why shouldn’t you be, Chris?” Except for a few quick and strained exchanges of words, we hadn’t been alone together since that evening. “Come in.”

“Are you sure it will be all right?”

“Of course. Why not?”

“Oh, the conventions and all that.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ve wanted to see you so badly. Now, of all times. But this, of all times, is the time you decided to stay away.”

He came in, very tall and straight, somehow aloof, like something wild that has become, temporarily, completely

civilized. I closed the door. Rather tentatively, he bent and lowered himself to the lounge before my writing desk. Feeling like Act I out of Pinero, I took the other end of it.

"Letters?" he said, glancing at the desk.

"Yes. By the scores." He offered me a cigarette and I said, "No, thanks."

A second went by, marching slowly with fixed bayonets and even steps, followed by another, this one with flags and bugles and strewn flowers, and then another moment passed with muffled drums beating a dirge as the coffin came slowly into sight and then disappeared, followed by an interval when there was nothing. Chris looked at me.

"I didn't know," he said, "how you would feel."

"I feel the same."

I tried to look a question as I said it, but Chris, staring at me and reaching absently for matches, missed the cue.

"It must have been tough."

"Yes. In a way, it still is. I feel sorry for Walter. But I had made up my mind about ourselves long ago. And feeling sorry for him, or what I'd decided to do, can't do him any good now, and it can't do anything but harm to me."

Chris lit his cigarette.

"That's logical," he said, blowing out the match. He leaned forward, dropping the burned match in an ash tray on the desk. His face, in complete repose, had the tranquillity of moonlight on a tropical jungle—everything peaceful on the surface, but who could guess what raw hunger and sudden rape went on beneath that innocent canopy of cool moonlight and motionless trees? "It's logical for you to feel sorry for him, because he provided for you while he was alive, allowed you complete freedom, and took care of you when he died." I nodded. He was, really, almost as bad as Walter when it came to delivering learned lectures. Or any man, for that matter. "Naturally, though, you do have your own life to live." I smiled at him. "He had his own life to live, for that matter, and I don't imagine he ever let you interfere with it. Did he?"

"Walter?" I was genuinely amused at the question. "He was the most self-centered person I ever knew. I've never known him to give a thought to anyone but himself."

"Well, that's what I mean. It evens up, you see, and there is no reason why you should reproach yourself, is there?"

I said, still smiling, "I knew you'd understand, Chris. And that's exactly what I did feel, and just the way I did reason it out. I suppose most people would have thought and felt about as I did, but they'd never forgive it, in someone else. Thank you for understanding. I can't tell you, Chris, how much that really means." He smiled, and the next moment went by like a regiment of school children out for a picnic. "But I am sorry, really sorry, you got mixed up in a murder case through me. It must have been tough for you, too."

He blew a perfect smoke ring.

"I got mixed up," he grumbled, half to himself, "in my adolescent dreams."

"You mean that football dance at Schuyler Grove?" He looked at me with what appeared to be acquiescence. "No, but I am sorry, Chris, you came back into my life just now, when this had to happen. I never before," I said, and looked at him straight, "involved any lover of mine with the state police, in a murder case. It had to be you, evidently."

He said, "It doesn't matter. Nothing else does, right now, but this."

Love always seems so unimportant and overrated, until you actually have it again. When Chris held me in his arms, when I felt his lips, which I had almost forgotten, and his hands searched for me, the wave after wave that went through and over me was like something that happened in an altogether different life, a life that was always there in the background, asleep, but ready to wake and wrap the ordinary life in those tides of endless fire and burn it to nothingness.

"Chris, this will all be over some time."

"Some time, yes."

"I mean the investigation. All the talk, and trouble that put barriers between us. There's bound to be a tomorrow for us."

"Tomorrow?"

"I don't mean tomorrow morning, or the next morning. But some morning, some tomorrow."

"Yes."

"And then it will be altogether changed. Won't it?"

"Altogether."

"There will never have been two people as happy as that since the world began. Will there, Chris?"

"What people? There are no other people."

"That's right. No one has had this, before. Have they, Chris? My God, don't do that, someone might—and besides, supper."

"Tomorrow is a long way off."

"You barbarian."

"You fallen angel."



"Oh, Chris. Don't joke."

"All right. Everything's all right."

"Am I nice, Chris?"

"Oh, God."

"Chris, Chris, Chris, Chris."

"Sugar and spice, that's what they always said."

"Chris."

The waves that had been waves were not waves any more, but one continuous wave. The seconds that had gone so slowly were an avalanche. Somewhere, far out in space and far away in time, I had been sitting before a writing desk, answering the letters of strangers. It isn't what the world should be, but what it is, and can be. Can be, what it can be. Something to remember forever. Forever, and over and over. Chris said, "You'll be at the Hall tonight?"

I said, "I think so. I didn't want to have dinner there before, but tonight I believe I'd might as well."

"Fine. Then I'll see you there."

After I'd kissed him and he'd gone and, figuratively, I'd sunned myself on the wide beach where the tide had gone out and I was alone again, but not at all alone like before, and then the sun went down, slowly, and the stars came out, and a brisk wind blew up, after a while it was something like the other life once more, the ordinary one. I showered, and started to dress. I wanted, really, to wear something crimson red. But I felt too lazy. Instead, I chose a simple dark blue travel affair, so blue that in electric light it might be considered almost black. Chris, I suspected, had far more respect for customs and taboos than I did, and why offend his sensibilities?

It was exactly eight o'clock when I reached the Hall, and entered the dining room. Nearly everyone else had already arrived. Seeing all of them again, like this, as I hadn't since Walter's death, I wondered again as I had so many times before which of them, for it must surely be one of them, had committed the crime. It was a thing I wondered about with interest rather than passion. Those who had hated Walter had reason to do so. But to go beyond hate and translate the impulse into the act of murder, that could be done only by a person, one person among them, singularly bold, skillful, and brutal. It seemed that such a character would, inevitably, make itself somehow self-evident. And yet it wasn't self-evident. Not one among them outwardly fitted the description.

At my table were John Lawrence, Constance Gregg, Henry Mallett, Harry Dunn, Captain Wessex, Claudia Attelio and Harold Janiston. The men stood up, inarticulately respectful and sympathetic. Captain Wessex drew out my chair. Mr. Dunn moved it to the table as I sat down. Claudia Attelio said, "I think it's wonderful, Mrs. Nichols, the way you've born up under your ordeal."

"Thank you."

There was an embarrassed pause after the stupid remark, during which Albert brought my bouillon. I noticed that he served me, ineptly, which was not like him, from my right, over Captain Wessex' shoulder. From the table in back of me I heard Mr. Bierbaum say, wearily, "At any rate, Owen, I won't have to read your book when it's published. You've already told me so much about it I feel as though I'd written it myself."

"Still fighting the good old glamorous Civil War, aren't you?" That was Mr. Owen's voice. "But not doing much of anything about the wars of today. What's the matter, too hot for you?"

". . . the sort of a fellow, you ask me, who'd stick a knife in the back of his own mother if it would get him a good review."

Captain Wessex looked up and identified the last speaker, with something like lively interest that promptly died, when he ascertained the voice had been that of Mr. Connors.

"Well," said Mr. Lawrence, to Constance Gregg, "Susan is a most interesting type. But after all, not many men are interested in types as types. No matter how gorgeous, as she certainly is. See what I mean?"

"I wouldn't know much about that. Only very sophisticated people would, I imagine. And I suppose you are. You've certainly traveled, if that makes for sophistication."

"Well, of course it doesn't, Constance. But I have traveled, yes. With my European trips, the total must run above half a million miles. All told. In the States alone, I'd say a quarter of a million miles."

"Really? That much?"

"At least ten thousand miles with that harpsichord of mine. At a cost of ten cents a mile for the harpsichord alone."

"Oh, really?"

"And don't forget the cost of crating and uncrating it," said Captain Wessex, unexpectedly, with surprising acerbity.

"Beg your pardon?" said Mr. Lawrence, blankly.

"You forgot a phrase. I like your speech so well I hate to have you omit any of it."

"Speech?" said Mr. Lawrence. "I wasn't aware of making any speech."

"Don't mind Captain Wessex," said Miss Gregg. "He's decided he can be as temperamental as anyone else. You were saying? About your travels?"

Which of them, I wondered, as the conversation went on around me. John Lawrence? Of course not. Harold Janiston? Impossible. Mr. Connors, whose favorite metaphor was, apparently, something about a knife in somebody else's back? Out of the question. Nathan Biernbaum, who'd always had a lot of interest in me, and had always hated Walter? Not likely. Henry Mallett said, "I found an absolutely gorgeous spot. I don't think it has ever been visited, except by the family of farmers who've been there from before the revolutionary war, since the Indians who used to camp there. Marvelous maples, and a perfectly scrumptious brook. Absolutely primitive and virginal. I sketched there all afternoon, and I'm going back there tomorrow."

Harold Janiston said, "Yes, I know the place well. The crowd from Newport ran it into the ground, the Greenwich Villagers turned it into a Coney Island, and the left-wingers wrecked it completely. Johnson's Grove, you mean?"

"Well, yes."

"Used to be beautiful. Too bad."

"Don't you find that sort of work fascinating?" This was Claudia Attelio speaking to Mr. Dunn. "I mean, interviewing all those different types of people?"

"Yes, very. At first. Now, though, they rather bore me."

And then from the table in front of me, where Chris sat, I heard Miss Pratt, in a voice rather muted, for her, "Yes, it's fortunate he took care of her. The insurance will be considerable, I understand."

"... married him only for his money, in the first place." That was the vitriolic Edith Wright. "That, and the chance to steal his brilliant ideas. The same sort of people who killed Keats, and Katherine Mansfield, and Shelley . . ."

It didn't bother me. Much. Whenever there is an untimely death, there are fifty people with fifty axes to grind who will give you fifty different reasons why the deceased was the victim of fifty different enemies.

"But it must give you a sort of odd feeling, Mr. Dunn." That was Claudia Attelio. "After a while, I mean."

"How so?"

"Why, when you've ghost-written the biographies of so many other people, you must begin to wonder who you are, yourself. I should think a ghost-writer would begin to have a kind of a ghostly feeling that he was a ghost, more or less, himself."

Albert, removing plates that had held the entree, dropped one, and I laid down my salad fork.

"Oh, not at all, Miss Attelio. I assure you I feel perfectly normal, like anyone else. It's just rather dull, that's all." Mr. Dunn stood up, looked at me as I rose. "Not leaving without dessert are you, Mrs. Nichols?"

"Yes. I—yes. A headache."

"I'm sorry."

Somehow I was out of the dining room and out in the quadrangle. And then back in my studio. I switched on the radio and then I mixed myself a rye highball. It couldn't be, of course. But that was, after all, a logical answer to Albert's cryptic talk about a ghost. But why should it be Mr. Harry Dunn? No reason. He had absolutely no motive. Nothing against Walter, and nothing to gain by his death. It was crazy.

I made another highball, and decided I would have to compel Albert to speak to Captain Wessex tomorrow, in full. I should never have allowed him to leave this afternoon without divulging the rest of his half-truths, half-ideas, and half-hints. I should lay the whole matter before Captain Wessex myself, I thought. Or before Cooke.

Or before Chris. Deductive reasoning would not be his strong point in a situation like this, but he would never be at a loss for a course of action, his strongest point. Or speak to Harold Janiston about it. He and Walter had been no worse than friendly enemies. Or talk it over with Nathan Biernbaum who was, after all, intelligent. Or even go directly to Mr. Dunn himself.

I finished the second highball and felt much better and was debating whether to have another one or to go to bed when there was a knock at the door. I opened it. I said, rather breathlessly,

"You. I was just thinking about you."

"I don't doubt it."

"Come in. I want to talk about something that's just happened. It might be trivial. Or it might be important."

"I don't want to talk." He was already in, and the door was closed. "The time for talking has gone by, a long time ago."

I read my death in his eyes. As I looked into them I knew that this was the last thing I would ever see on this earth. I tried to scream, to protest, to explain, to postpone the moment that would be my last. But his hand over my mouth shut off all sound. I knew that he would get away with this one, as he had with the other one. But why? There was no reason. Bewildered, I watched the knife.



## CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

The canvas now showed both the self-portrait, and the canvas itself on which the artist worked, and within the image of the canvas there was, of course, a secondary image of the artist, the canvas, and again the mirror. One of those pictures that, theoretically, repeat to infinity. Not a bad idea, I thought, and it was working out rather well.

I'd gotten out of bed at six o'clock this morning and I felt fine. The light was very good. Breakfast had been a tumbler of bourbon. My head had never been clearer. In another three or four hours I should be finished with this, by the grace of fast work and intense concentration. Regulation breakfast at ten o'clock in the dining room. There wasn't much time left.

I was so absorbed in the work I was hardly aware of it when Steve Wessex came in. But at any rate, there he was, and I heard him saying, "I got up early, and I happened to hear you moving around when I went past the studio. So I thought I'd stop for a minute or two. If you don't mind." The real problem now was to get real balance between the first, or life image, and the second, or reflected image. I debated whether to have also a second life image, really a third portrait, on the image of the canvas, but abandoned the idea. A sound balance between the first and second images would be enough. Highlight or shadow would end the series of pictures-within-pictures at this point and suggest the rest. "Certainly seem to be getting ahead with it. I wouldn't recognize it for the same picture I saw before." A balance of color, mass, and general outline. "Reminds me of the ads you see for breakfast cereals and silver polish."

I looked around.

"Another gag like that, and I'll toss you out on your ear."

"I'm not trying to kid you, Chris."

"I'm not trying to kid you, either."

"I meant . . ."

"I know what you meant."

"I think it's great stuff. You got something there. Gives you a creepy feeling. Holy mackerel, the guy in the little picture is the same as the guy in the big picture, but it isn't the same guy at all. It's the same face all right, but he looks like a different guy."

"Yes?" This was more to the point. "Different in what way?"

"Well, the big guy there looks, well."

"Well?"

"You won't get sore?"

"I won't. Just this once."

"Well, I tell you this, Chris. He don't look very much like you. A little, but not much."

"Yes? How does he look?"

"Like one tough baby, see what I mean? In fact, a mean bastard, if I ever saw one. Boy, he could be booked for his looks alone."

"Yes? And the other one?"

"Well, the other one, the little guy in the mirror, that's different. But to tell you the truth, he doesn't look like you, either. He looks too good to be true."

"He is too good to be true."

"Well, I don't get it. What do those two guys represent, anyway? Who are they?"

"Hearts," I said, "and Flowers."

"All right, all right. But I thought you told me you were painting a self-portrait. If so, it seems to me they both ought to look alike, and they both ought to look like you."

"Why me? I'm painting a picture, that's all. Just a picture. And when this is stored away in an attic somewhere, or hung up in the library of a wealthy collector, or nailed over the ceiling in some one's bedroom to keep out the rain, or placed before the public in the Metropolitan, I'm not going to be there, standing around so that people can check up on whether or not this looks like me."

"I suppose not," said Steve. "All right, I'm dumb."

"Not at all. Without half trying you've already got a glimmering of the truth that most people never dream about—that a picture is a picture, and life is life."

"Sounds easy. But I think I'll stick to the cops. Unless they pass a law that we have to graduate from an art school."

He watched me at work for a while, and then said, "What's your honest-to-God opinion of Walter Nichols?"

I poured myself another glass of bourbon.

"As I told you, it was a pleasure to sock the guy."

"Yeah, I know you told me. But you didn't really know the guy, did you?"

"No."

"In fact, you never had more than about five minutes conversation with him, all told, did you?"

"I wouldn't say that. But it's true, I'd never known him before he showed up at breakfast, that morning. At the same time—it's curious you should ask—I've been thinking about it, since then, and I've reached the conclusion that my first impression of Nichols was probably wrong. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he should prove to have been not as big a heel as most people thought he was. Does that help you any?"

"No. But you think, if I get you, he was O.K.?"

"Yes, probably."

"It's the dammedest thing in the whole case. That fellow."

"Well, I had one idea about him to begin with. But that fight was just an accident, I realize now. And I've revised my opinion of him. Completely."

"I don't mean that. I mean, for instance, you were probably right in the first place. But he was a screw-ball, if there ever was one."

"What do you mean, I was probably right?"

"Well, we know, for instance, the guy made at least two attempts to rub out that wife of his. We've checked the facts, there. And we have a strong hunch he was getting ready to try again. He was simply waiting for the right time and place."

I drank off the rest of the bourbon and poured some more.

"Actually?"

"We think so. Holy mackerel, first you drank breakfast, what're you drinking now, lunch?"

"It's the light. Relaxes the certain amount of eye-strain that goes with this sort of work."

Steve watched me pick up the brush again, found a cigarette, lit it, exhaled, and said, rather reflectively,

"That's another thing I want to ask you about. How are your eyes?"

"They're fine. Why?"

"Your friends don't seem to think so." He waited for me to hook myself, but I passed up the bait. "In fact, the report we have from some of the magazines you used to do covers for is that they haven't taken any of your illustrations for nearly a year now. Bad drawing and coloring, they say. They think your eyes must have been injured in an automobile accident they say you had a couple of years ago." There was another long wait. Steve added, still fishing, "Must be tough to have trouble with your eyes, especially for a painter. Particularly if he was used to being in the chips, and then couldn't turn out the same grade of stuff any more, nobody would buy his illustrations, and all he could see ahead of him was peddling pencils in a tin cup." He exhaled slowly. "What d'you say?"

"I say I'm getting hungry. What time is it?"

"Nine o'clock. Going to breakfast?"

"Not yet."

Steve tamped out his cigarette and stood up.

"Don't think I'm butting into your business just for the fun of it. We have to know everything there is to know about everyone here. That's just routine, and it goes for everybody. You never can tell what might be important."

"Important to whom?"

"To me," he said, heavily. "And my job as a cop." He moved toward the door. "Well, I'll probably see you at breakfast."

"I'll be there at ten."

I had myself another glass of bourbon and went back to the canvas. There was another hour in which to work, a whole hour. Nothing remained to be done, of any importance, except a touch or two to the background, and then the highlight in which the picture vanished. Next door, as I worked, I heard the steady tapping of Biernbaum's typewriter. Through the open window came the sound of birds in the valley below and a near-by woodpecker also, I suppose, tapping out something of great importance.

And then, almost at once, the canvas was finished and the hour was gone. If I'd spent every hour of my life like that one, today I'd be—well, what? But, on the other hand, I'd never have known that I'd lived. I washed, finished the bourbon, and went on up to the Hall. After I'd helped myself to orange juice, broiled bass, toast and coffee I sat down next to P. C. Cooke, devouring, crumb at a time, his graham cracker. We all said good morning and I drank my orange juice. Nothing like it for a bracer, after a pint of bourbon. Constance Gregg brought over a poached egg on toast and sat down between Connors and Frederick Owen. Owen said,

"I went for an early walk this morning. There's something sublime about the hills and rivers at this hour, just at

dawn.”

“I know what you mean,” said Constance Gregg. “And I thought I was the only early riser in these parts.”

“Is that so,” said Owen. “Let me tell you, I’m the original inventor of early rising. Did you ever visit the Grotto, just at daybreak?”

“No, but it must be wonderful.”

“Wonderful? You innocent young thing, that’s pure libel—it’s sublime, it’s majestic, it’s magnificence in the flesh. You must let me show you.”

“I’d love it.”

Captain Wessex sat down in the chair to my left, and a moment later Biernbaum arrived at the table, bringing grape juice, onion soup, sausages with fried potatoes, strawberries and cream, toast and coffee. Claudia Attelio said, “Goodness, Mr. Biernbaum, your breakfast is the ordinary person’s Thanksgiving dinner.”

“I’m hungry,” said Biernbaum. “I’ve been working on my book for three solid hours.”

Frederick Owen loudly declaimed, “Nothing like purely physical exercise to give a man a good appetite.”

“I hate to disappoint you,” said Biernbaum, “but my typewriter happens to be electrically driven. No physical exercise is involved.”

Connors looked up from his oatmeal with interest.

“What do you mean, electrically driven?”

“Why, just that. It’s got an electric motor.” Connors laid down his spoon and stared, fascinated, at Biernbaum. “There are only a dozen or so writers using them, I understand, in this country.”

Connors said, “Well, what does it do?”

“Do? Why, it returns the carriage for you, drives the keys, and so forth. In short, it does everything for you.”

“Everything? You mean it even picks out the right words for you?”

“Well, hardly. Not that.”

“Hell,” said Connors. “For a minute I thought you had something. Pass the salt, will you please, Victoria?”

“If you are referring to me, the name is Miss Attelio. Or, Claudia, if you prefer.”

“Jeze,” said Connors, “that’s one thing I’ll never forget as long as I live.”

Albert Page went about the table distributing the morning mail, and with it the daily notes from P. C. Cooke. I was not surprised to see, when Albert reached me, that I was the recipient of another utterance from the Delphic Oracle. But this day, I had sworn, I would even my score with Cooke. I held the envelope, bearing the Hall’s lettering, practically under his nose, then without reading or otherwise opening the letter I tore it in half, tore the halves into quarters, the quarters into eighths. I dropped the pieces upon the empty plate that had borne Cooke’s graham cracker to the table, lit a cigarette and looked at him. He was a picture of frozen rage, but he said nothing. I picked up the only outside letter I had received, a note from Geraldine. Before I opened it, however, I saw the expression on Cooke’s face change to one of surprise. Among the letters Albert had placed beside him there was one of the Hall’s unmistakable envelopes. The inscription on it plainly read: *Mr. P. C. Cooke*.

Evidently mesmerized, Cooke singled out the letter and opened it, unfolded the enclosed note. After he had read it once, and I was glad that he was obliged to read it more than once, minute drops of sweat stood out all over his fat face, and his fingers palpably trembled. He must have read it three times before, silently, he folded the note again, and started to thrust it back into the envelope. I reached out and took it away from him. I said,

“One moment, Mr. Cooke. Don’t you think Captain Wessex should see this?” I turned to Steve Wessex on my left and unfolded the letter. Steve laid down his fork and turned. Cooke’s mouth was opening and closing, but he must have been talking goldfish language. “Seems rather important, if true, doesn’t it?”

Steve bent to read, as I held the note, and we silently went through the note together.

Dear Mr. Cooke,

I hope, in future, it would not be too much of me to ask, please, if you would kindly refrain from further murders while you are in residence at Demarest Hall. With the killing of Lucille Nichols last night between the hours of eleven and twelve, when most guests were at work, or more probably playing cards, it seems to me you needlessly interrupted regular work schedules, and in addition subjected the Hall to what may eventuate in a certain overwhelming amount of adverse scandal.

Yours truly,  
P. C. Cooke

Steve looked quickly around the dining room. He said, “Where is Mrs. Nichols?” Lucille was not there, and no one answered him. I didn’t feel so good, any more. “Has any one seen her this morning?” Still no answer. Steve turned to Cooke. “Did you?”

Cooke made fluffing sounds, and pointed at the signature, which was typewritten.

“How could I?” he finally enunciated. “When I wrote the note, but I didn’t, and it was sent to me, but it wasn’t?”

Steve said, savagely, "It wasn't sent to Santa Claus." He stood up. "And it wasn't signed by the Governor of the State. You come with me." Cooke hesitantly rose from the table. "We'll get the keys to her studio and find out about this." At the door he stopped and turned. "Has anyone," he asked, "seen Mrs. Nichols since dinner in the Hall last night?"

There was no answer. All the bourbon seemed to have been drained from me, and all the pleasure of that last hour of work. The others at the table were getting up. I stood up, too. Constance Gregg, I saw, looked at me with an expression of quick, instantly guarded sympathy.

Let her look. She was not real, this was not real, and not one of them had the faintest conception of what was real. Maybe there is nothing that is real. Either that, or I'd taken a wrong turn, somewhere, away back.





## CAPTAIN WESSEX

By the time we got to Mrs. Nichols' studio I knew what had happened. I'd been fooled again. And I was sore. A note about Cooke had thrown me off when Walter Nichols had been bumped off, and now I was supposed to be thrown off the right pinch again by another note implicating Cooke. To hell with that stuff. I took the keys away from P. C. Cooke, opened the door with one hand, and shoved him back with the other.

There she was, all right, just as the note said she was. Another knife—there were a dozen just like them at the Hall—this time from the front instead of the back, but with the same force. No overturned chair, no broken crockery, no signs of a fight. I could imagine what the newspapers would do with this one, the second, and I didn't have to imagine what the Colonel would say—I already knew that one by heart. Unless a miracle happened and I got a detailed confession this very day. Fat chance, since the guy didn't even know that he'd done it, let alone how. I wondered what kind of an insurance salesman I'd make, and decided—lousy.

I put through a call for Col. Herrick and started to look around the studio. There might be fingerprints on the handle of the knife, but I doubted it. There hadn't been any on the other one, and there was no reason to suppose that slick, crazy bastard would have slipped this time. It was the damndest thing. She'd fallen right where she'd been knifed, within two feet of the door and not five feet from the window where, in the seam of a curtain, we'd slid the mike. This was one of a dozen studios we'd bugged on the first day we got here, but none of them had gotten us anything, nothing but a liberal education for Troopers Kearns and Koslo. Maybe Koslo had been listening in on this particular studio the moment it happened. If so, there had been no significant conversation and no sound, or he would have reported it last night when it happened.

I found a diary, which she had called a "Journal," kept in the small, square handwriting I knew to be Lucille Nichols'. I glanced through some of the recent entries, not expecting to find much. An entry on the day she'd arrived at Demarest Hall ran: *Where do Walter and P. C. Cooke find them? Two English instructors from somewhere in Dakota, one pop-eyed poet, Biernbaum again, and three pansies. My God, my God! Two possibles, however.* I wondered who the other possible had been. The instructors referred to must be Owens, on the staff of a small college in Ohio, and Glass, an instructor from a university on the West Coast. The poet would be Connors. The pansies, as I knew, would be Mallett, Weiss and Janiston. The next entry: *Why is it, inscrutable Fate, that a man never regards a woman as made out of flesh and blood, but either as something too ethereal for words, or as sawdust to be trampled underfoot? Hale just another bore.* Well, well. And another one: *It's a mistake to think that men are wholly irrational. Everything they say and do means something, no matter how obscure it might seem at first sight. Chris really very simple, much to my surprise. Always thought he was just the opposite.* Then another one: *P. C. C. crazier than ever; but nice. I expect in another five years he'll grow a nice green shell and talk only the language of turtles. Wonder why no one, not even Walter, knows he's an addict, and Albert keeps him supplied.* I wasn't so sure. Nichols must have known that was why he'd been put away, years ago. Only a fool would think he'd been cured and gone off the stuff permanently. Then the last entry, dated the day before Nichols was killed: *Why does Walter want to see me at that ungodly hour? Why all the secrecy? Chris laughs and says that murder is a sucker's racket. But I'm afraid.* They'd been a pair, the two Nicholsons. Hard to say which of them had it coming more than the other. So they'd both gotten it. But, tough as they were, that still left the guy who did it, a bad actor who made them seem tame by comparison. And likable, too.

I put the journal in my pocket and got Koslo on the wire and told him to keep on the bug in Bartel's studio, and then I went out and down the quadrangle. I knew exactly what had happened, and I thought I knew exactly why. She had been an accomplice, in the first kill, and then he'd become afraid she'd spill her guts, and that explained the second one. Simple. That would take the sting out of the newspaper stories, if I could make it stick. ACCOMPLICES FALL OUT AS STATE POLICE CLINCH EVIDENCE. PLOTTER SLAIN AT DEMAREST HALL. Something like that. Anything but the way things now stood. I could imagine something like ANOTHER MURDER UNDER NOSES OF THE STATE COPS. WHO'S NEXT? Or worse. COPS SLEEP THROUGH SECOND MURDER AT DEMAREST HALL. I'd be lucky if I could get a job selling encyclopedias. It gave me goose pimples. There was nothing left to do but force a quick show-down.

And it gave me the willies to see that guy again. How can you handle a guy like that? If I tried to sweat him, he'd forget the little he already knew. If I tried to use soft soap and strategy, as I had before, I'd get nowhere and most likely wind up with another corpse. The way I figured it, only a gypsy reading tea-leaves and palms could get the truth out of the guy.

I found him sitting in front of that picture of his, with a highball in his hand, as usual. I wondered whether it would

be a help or a hindrance, if he were tanked, but there was nothing I could do about that now. He said in the slow, deep, carefully spaced speech he used whenever he was high, “Well, Steve. Did you find Lucille?”

I swallowed some of the ripest adjectives in my vocabulary and said, instead, “Yes, I found her. She’s dead, knifed the same as Nichols. She was your girl friend. Would you know anything about it?”

He sighed, drank, waved me toward a chair, which I did not take.

“Yes, I would. It’s bad, Steve. Incredibly bad. You’ll never believe it’s possible anything as bad as that could happen to three people. Never. You wouldn’t believe it.”

“What wouldn’t I believe? What do you know?”

“I know who did it.”

“Who?”

“I did. Both of them.”

I breathed, not too loudly, feeling I’d passed a miracle.

“You’re in your right mind, and you know what you’re saying?”

“I know what I’m saying.”

“Do I understand that you’re willing to make a confession?” This was for the benefit of Koslo. If Bartel changed his mind and refused to sign a statement, I’d show him the mike. “Go ahead. From the beginning.”

Bartel shrugged, drank some more, stared at the canvas.

“Not so bad, is it?”

“What?”

“That.” He nodded toward the picture. “The self-portrait.”

“It’s fine, Chris,” I intoned. “Just fine. Now, you were going to tell me . . .?”

“First, I killed Nichols. I killed him when I was in a blank. This stuff,” he said, tapping his glass, and then finishing the drink. “When I sobered up I didn’t know anything about it. Do you believe that’s possible?”

I knew damn well it was possible. I said, “I’ll believe it, if you prove it.”

“I can’t prove it, Steve. But I know I did it.”

“How do you know?”

“I figured it out for myself. Bits of it came back to me, a flash here and a fragment there. I began to close in on it when I was trying to figure out the hour of my tennis date with Biambaum. I remembered I’d had a dream about Nichols and he said that three of us would die. But it wasn’t a dream. He’d said it just before I killed him. And then, what was I doing in the main hall at a little after three o’clock in the morning? Everyone else who was there had a good reason to be. But I didn’t. That’s what I still can’t figure out. Why was I there, in the first place?”

He poured himself another drink. Trying to sound casual, I said, “Perhaps Lucille told you he expected her to meet him there, on the top floor of the Hall, at three o’clock that morning. Perhaps she said she was afraid to go, and you went, instead.”

He stared at me across the top of his glass.

“I think that’s right. Yes. He’d already made a couple of attempts to kill her, and this time, if he got the chance, he meant to finish the job. You understand, this is purely guesswork on my part. But this is what happened, the way I put it together. I appeared instead of Lucille. I found him with the knife. I took it away from him and killed him.”

“Why? What was your motive, Chris?”

He paused for so long, studying me, I was afraid he’d gone into another blank. Finally, he said, “Because I was plenty mad, finding him with that knife. Is that enough? If it isn’t,” he shrugged again. “Well, you could say that I was simply doing a favor for a friend. And it was so easy.”

“All right, that’s that. But how does it happen the Gregg woman saw you up there in the writing room, and you never left it. That is, she saw you come upstairs to the fifth floor, she saw you write a note, then you talked to her and she saw you turn around and go downstairs again. And the poker players corroborate that.”

I almost added that if I’d had the answer to this one, I would have put the cuffs on him days ago. But I didn’t, and Bartel replied, “I’ve figured that out, too. Connie wasn’t there at all, when I went to keep the appointment with Nichols. I don’t know how long we talked before I discovered the knife—I presume—and killed him, but it must have been fifteen minutes or so. Then, when I turned to go inside, and escape, I saw Connie Gregg sitting before the writing desk at the head of the stairs. I was trapped. At that point a person can see the entire top floor of Demarest Hall, also clear to the bottom of the stairshaft, and even the fire-escape, if I had wanted to climb to the roof and cross over to it, passes within five feet of the window nearest the desk. And I must have realized, too, that a group of people were playing cards on the third floor, and that somebody else was in the office on the first floor. So I removed Nichols’ belt, and my own belt and buckled them together. I doubled this length, which would give me about four feet extra, looped it over the flagpole that projects from the balcony, and slid down it to the ledge of the fourth floor window that opens on the game room.”

I said, “Some slide. That ledge can’t be eight inches wide, and if you dropped there wouldn’t be enough left to

collect with a vacuum cleaner.”

“I couldn’t have done it, if I had been sober. But I was drunk.”

“All right. Then what?”

“I pulled in the belt, of course. Then I shuttled to the opposite side of the building and took the fire-escape down to the second floor, and then I doubled back into the building. But here I was stuck. The distance is too high to jump, there was nothing I could loop the belts over on this floor, and the stairs, as I said, are visible from top to bottom. Yet I had to use them; there was no other way. And there was only one way to do it. Simply, to appear on the second floor landing and walk up, instead of down, making it appear that I was just coming in, not going out. That is what I must have done. I stopped and talked to the card players on the third floor, walked on up and made myself evident to Connie on the fifth, and then after a few moments turned around and walked straight down again and back to my studio.”

“Smart. Too smart.”

“I’m pretty damned bright, Steve, when I’m drunk.”

“O.K., that’s that. Now about Lucille. I suppose you were in a blank that time, too?”

He said, soberly, in spite of the booze, “No. I remember the whole thing. I thought it over for several hours, went to her studio last night at about eleven-thirty, and killed her. I knew what I was doing. I could swear to it.”

“What did you do it for?”

“God knows,” he said, slowly. “I thought I had reasons.”

“In fact,” I said, not using kid gloves any more, “she planned Walter Nichols’ murder for her own reasons, played you for a sucker and got you to do the job, and then you got cold feet. You were afraid she’d turn you over unless you shut her mouth permanently.”

He poured himself another drink, and thought it over.

“No,” he said. “She had nothing to do with the death of Nichols.”

“The hell she didn’t. She planned it, instigated it, and then you realized you were simply a stooge.”

He gave me a thin smile.

“I have a different version.”

The conceited bastard. I gave it to him cold. “Don’t give me that stuff, who do you think you’re kidding? We’ve got your confession, and that’s all we want.” I stood up. “We’ll prove it later. O.K., Koslo. Bring Kearns with you.”

Bartel stared at his drink, tried a sizable sample of it.

“My story is, Lucille knew nothing of her husband’s murder.”

I said, with a rasp, “Boy, did she play you for a sap. Come on, guy, take your last drink, and let’s go. I’ve wasted enough time on this screwy case and listened to enough screwy talk to last me forever.”

Bartel grinned, put down the rest of his highball, and poured himself another one. He took his time about dropping in the ice cubes and shooting in the soda. I wondered what had become of Koslo and Kearns.

“No drinks in the pen, I suppose?”

I said, “Sure. I’ll send around a case of champagne every day. With arsenic in every bottle. You’ll love it, guy. Come on, stand up and take it.”

He looked at me as though I were some kind of a bug. He said, “I ought to bat your ears off for that, Steve. You cheap louse, you haven’t got any confession, you only think you have.” He reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and tossed something at me. Automatically, I caught it. It was a disconnected mike. “I found it the day you put it in. Waiting for your friends?”

I sat down again, and that maniac went on with his highball. I tried to bluff it through.

“We don’t need any confession; we’ve got all we want.”

“You have? Where’s the evidence? What did I do with Nichols’ belt? I know what I did with it, because a hazy recollection about it came back to me two or three days later, and I found it. But would you know? Who saw me enter or leave Lucille’s studio? You had a man on the wire in her studio, but what did he hear? You’ve got nothing. You’d better be nice, Steve, and let me have it the way I want it.”

It was tough to take, having it all sewed up one minute, and then as far away as ever the next. I spent thirty seconds thinking it over, most of the time uselessly damning those microphones, which had brought us nothing but trouble—not only our own, but everyone else’s besides. Dunn’s confession to the steward had thrown Kearns into an uproar, when it came over the wire, until I checked the story. It was true he’d taken that knife on the morning of the murder. But it was also true, just as he’d told the steward, he’d used it to slice up some sandwiches for himself and some out-of-town broads he wasn’t supposed to have on the premises. Their accounts all checked. And Bartel must have known about our wiring job from the first. I said, “O.K. What do you want?”

“Get a stenographer down here and I’ll dictate a full confession the way I’d prefer to have it.”

I went to the phone, put through a call to Koslo, and told him to pick up Kearns and bring P. C. Cooke’s secretary. I said to Bartel, and I meant it, “Damned if I don’t think you’ll beat the chair, on the grounds of insanity.” Then I remembered something else. “What about that note from P. C. Cooke, to P. C. Cooke? Where does that fit into this?”

Bartel looked up from the umpteenth highball he was mixing for himself, and sighed.

“You wouldn’t understand. I wrote it myself, to settle a grudge against a miracle that was too perfect.” He squirted soda. “I think it was a success.”

And that was about all. Kearns and Koslo arrived, and the secretary. She opened her notebook, Bartel helped himself to his highball and, speaking slowly, began: “I killed Walter Nichols because I was insanely jealous of him, and then I killed Lucille Nichols because she became frightened and suspicious of my actions and refused to consent to marry me, although previously I had led myself to believe that she would. No one aided me in either murder, and no one but myself had any knowledge of either. I am making this statement of my own free will, as I wish to clear my conscience, and also I realize that the excellent police work of Captain Steven Wessex has already enabled him to penetrate to the truth of the matter.” Bartel silently jeered at me when he came to this. Although, God knows, it was the gospel truth. “I learned that Walter Nichols had an appointment at three o’clock on the morning of June 15th with Mrs. Nichols and, under a pretext, I arranged that she would not keep it, but instead went myself to the balcony of Demarest Hall, with a knife I had procured, and when I met him, after some conversation, I took the knife from my pocket and . . .”



I have been in jams before, plenty of them, but never one as bad as this. Up to this time there has always been a way out. This time, though, I don't think so. It is a new feeling, and the feeling is so much worse than anything I have ever imagined, so strange and immense. It is all the more terrifying since I have rediscovered, in these last months, a world I had left behind twenty years ago and had completely forgotten existed—the strange, exciting, colorful world of the perfectly sober. Even here, when they brought us breakfast in the morning, or removed the supper dishes at night, even in this dull and horrible routine there was something fascinating in the sound of the rattling trays, the sharp smell of coffee, something exhilarating in the matter-of-fact scrape of feet upon the cement floor, something always new and mysterious in the small talk of the death house, no matter how humdrum, no matter how casual, no matter how often repeated.

But that is not what I wanted to get at. Something else, this jam. Why I confessed, I don't know. It doesn't matter, now. It's altogether too late now to recall and undo the fatalistic, tired, and confused spirit with which I helped the State speed me on my way to the chair. It was not as though this were the first time I had killed. The first, a hit-and-run accident when I was a kid, had given me a bad month, but that had blown over. It gave me a turn to think about it now, what a scatterbrained fool I'd been, but it was too late now to change that, and anyway I'd been lucky. In the service during probi days I'd machine-gunned a couple of runners who'd tried to cross up the insiders among the crew, but that was official, and I didn't give it a second thought. Why I had to start confessing at this late date is beyond me. But it's too late to worry about that. It's this jam, right now. And I'm afraid it's altogether too late to do anything about that, either.

It's too late to do anything but count the bars on the door, nine, and the steps across the floor, five, and the hours that are left, six. The PK went by, but he didn't even stop. That meant, nothing new as yet. Christ, what was that high-powered lawyer of mine doing? He was supposed to be seeing the governor, to get a stay. In the bag, he'd said. Maybe so, but he should have added it was a bag I was left holding.

At the gate of the cell-block I heard George get to his feet, his chair scraping the floor of the dance hall. Other steps, that would be Richman, came toward him.

"Eleven to six," he said. "End of the fifth."

George said, "Jeepers. Sounds like a football game."

John Williamson came to the door of his cell and asked, "Who's ahead?"

"The Yanks, fathead. Who d'you think?"

"What's the score?"

"Eleven to six," George patiently repeated. "Going into the sixth."

"Who they playing?"

"The Sox."

"Where at they playing today?"

"Yankee Stadium," said George, and loudly spat. "Jesus Christ, you got a radio, why don't you tune in on the game?"

"I can't find the station."

"Want me to get it for you, John?"

"Tell you the truth, George, I'm getting hungry. That's what I want."

"You got another hour to wait. You're always hungry."

Before Williamson, who had the mind of a four-year-old child and should not be here, there had been Jan Varka. He had done a lot of swearing before his execution, but most of it had been in Finnish, and even Williamson was an improvement. Besides Williamson and myself there was only one other man in the block, a farmer named Toby Birch. Toby never talked at all, ate little and seldom moved. He was a man already dead. Only the officials of this Godforsaken state would be ignorant of the fact that he was an imbecile. The voice of Richman dropped away to a whisper. Nevertheless, I could hear him, "Think the guy's going to crack?"

If George gave any vocal reply I could not hear it. A wink or a shrug. When I got out of this jam, I made up my mind, I'd tie Richman to a keg of powder, light a long fuse, and ask him if he thought he'd crack. But I'd forgotten, Richman was just a sadistic nobody in the ranks with a lot of other nobodies, doing nothing that amounted to anything, and would never be worth the powder of doing it. And I'd forgotten, also, I wasn't going to get out of this jam. Not this

one. Strange, how difficult it was to remember that. I would have thought it would be the other way around. But my mind, the moment I let it wander, instantly escaped.

I heard Richman go away, and then I heard George begin a slow pacing of the dance hall. What minutes, I wondered, what hours, days, what years were being dragged out of him again as they had been before, what scenes and what fears were awake again in every nerve and bone and fiber, every second of them alive and immense, that could be as alive and as immense as these odds-and-ends of the years now being dragged, moment by moment, from me? I waited for Geraldine, or my lawyer. For whom did George, a guard at eighty some dollars a month, for whom or for what did he wait? What the hell could the seconds mean to George, that they did not mean a thousand times as much to me? One of them, or both of them would be here. That much was certain. I could not die this way, with only a few indifferent guards and witnesses, a half-wit and a moron, to whom I would ever speak again. One of them or both of them would be here. I was a man with a future. The news they had to bring would be good. And even if it were not, which was incredible, I still had those visits to look forward to. I was a man with a future, still.

I thought of slugging or strangling George and getting out of my cell. This would not be difficult. But beyond that there was no way of escape even remotely feasible. I'd been over it and over it. God damn that confession. But it was a waste of time to think of that now. What, I wondered, did George have on his mind that seemed to be eating him alive? He was completely phlegmatic, as a rule. The only time I'd known him to pace the floor and show signs of nervousness, before, had been the afternoon and evening before Várka went. Whatever fire was eating up his mind, I could have told him it was kid stuff compared to the flame that was eating mine. If he were hoping and planning to make a financial killing, if he were dreaming about some big moment he expected to have, or if he were frantically scheming to avert some threatened disaster, or it was a woman whose image would not let go of him, or an enemy who blinded him with fury, I could have told him—well? What? I could have told him it was nothing to this. I could have told him those little fevers didn't amount to a damn, weren't really worth a second thought. I could have told him the enormous pleasure it would be, if he wanted and understood it, to cool off and forget, simply forget whatever it was that consumed him, and go and watch some clouds, or look at a clump of grass. It must be good advice, couldn't help but be good, since I'd never tried it, myself.

Why did I kill Nichols? For the same reason that Birch stuck a pitchfork through the farmer who had hired him, for the same reason Várka had shot a bus driver to death, and taken eight or nine dollars, for the same reason John Williamson had strangled his wife, pregnant with a child he became convinced was not his—for no reason that occurs to any of us now. Ask us, we don't know. For that matter, ask the State what good it will do anyone to put us to death. I killed Nichols because he seemed to me, at that particular moment, the most vicious bastard I had ever encountered, because I was drunk, and because it was so easy. *You're pretty handy with those mitts of yours, Mr. Bartel*, Steve said. *Too handy, if you ask me*. Did the thought of the insurance on his life influence me? I don't think so, though it may possibly have crossed my mind.

Why, though, did I kill Lucille? I have thought of a thousand answers to that question. And they all make sense. The only trouble is, they contradict each other. First I had developed fantastic illusions about her and then, when I came to understand it was I who had killed Nichols, I evolved a set of counter-illusions about her, in which I imagined she had adroitly rigged and suggested the first killing, regarding me as no more than an instrument toward that end. There is no doubt that Steve's rather elementary analysis, in this respect, was part of the truth. *She planned Walter Nichols' murder for her own reasons*, he'd said, *played you for a sucker and got you to do the job, and then you got cold feet. You were afraid she'd turn you over unless you shut her mouth permanently*. Yes, but it was only part of the truth. For it is also true that she bored me, from the very beginning, and I regarded her as an essentially simple person. To be deceived and tricked by a clever person is bad enough. But to become the dupe of an innocent, that is intolerable. Psychologically, then, I killed three people wrapped in one: The woman I loved, the woman I feared and the woman I hated.

But the facts, I cannot help admitting, do not square now, in point of logic, with my motives at the time. It is an established fact that Nichols had made two or three feeble attempts to kill Lucille; she could not have calculated with any assurance that in a fit of drunken rage I would, instead, take care of him myself; and although she may have guessed that I kept her appointment with him, she had remained silent about it either out of a childish faith in my innocence, or a blind loyalty toward me. And so I had murdered her. Through approximately the same unpredictable clash of circumstances that brought John Williamson, Várka and Toby Birch to the death house; or brought them, as far as that goes, into life. Not that any of this mattered now. The amazing thing is that one person, myself, could have guessed wrong so consistently. One learns everything too late.

I heard Richman's steps again, and I heard him say to George,  
"Visitor for Bartel."

A rocket burst somewhere inside my head. I heard the bolt of the cell-block door drawn open, and then both of them coming toward my cell. George said, "You got a visitor, Chris. How you doing?"

"O.K."

“You tell’m, guy.”

With one of them holding each arm we paraded across the dance hall, out of the cell-block, and into the small chamber for visitors that adjoined the death house. They sat me down on the chair that faced the intervening screen, and then moved away. Real close, I could see Geraldine’s face pretty plain. We kissed through the screen, and even if I hadn’t been able to see the tears, I could have felt and heard that she was crying. I could touch the tips of her fingers, where they came through the netting, with my own. I said, “Anything from Gorse?”

“Not yet.”

So that was that. I knew by the way she said it, and by the fact that she said nothing more, there was no use hoping Gorse could do anything. What the hell was he doing? Regaling the governor with a few anecdotes, after it was settled that my reprieve had been turned down? I said, “I guess he did the best that he could.”

“Chris, don’t talk like that. He’s still at the Capitol. They’re having another hearing at ten o’clock. You’ll hear from him. Don’t give up hope, Chris. Chris, say something.”

“I’m trying to look at you.”

“Oh, Chris, poor, blind Chris. Can’t you see me, darling?”

“I can see you all right.”

“Look hard, Chris. Look at me.”

“I can see you. But who else is in the room besides Richman and George, the guards that brought me in here?”

“Who else?”

“Yes. What other guards?”

“Why, there’s a man in the next room with a shotgun, and two men at the door—Chris.” I could tell by her silence I’d horrified her again, and it was no soap anyway. Too damned many of them, and certainly too many for a guy that was half blind. “You weren’t going to try to . . .? Oh, Chris, no. Don’t think of that. We’ll hear from Gorse. And I’ve got good news.” She talked rapidly and soothingly, as though she were distracting a child from some mild aberration. But she needn’t have. I knew a break was out of the picture. “Guess what. The gallery sold your picture to A. J. Keck, the president of Keck Steel, for how much do you think?”

“What picture?”

“The Self-Portrait, darling.”

“That’s fine.”

“And how much do you think he paid for it?”

“Who?”

“A. J. Keck, darling. He’s the president of a big steel company. He paid thirty thousand dollars for it. Thirty thousand, Chris.” Suddenly, I had to laugh. Loudly. “Isn’t it wonderful, Chris? That will pay for Gorse’s next appeal. Isn’t that the most you ever got for a single canvas?”

I said, “That’s the most, yes.”

“Well, what are you laughing at? We were so worried about money, and now we have enough. Haven’t we? Chris, why don’t you say something? Don’t look like that. You aren’t to give up hope, darling.” I had that bastard Wessex to thank for all the extra guards they’d posted at the prison, I felt certain. I could imagine him telling the Warden and the PK all about how tough and dangerous I was. “Will you, darling?”

“No.”

“Gorse was absolutely sure he could get another stay. Janiston’s testimony that he saw you walk out on the landing of the stairway on the second floor of the Hall is absolutely contrary to every previous statement he gave to the police, Gorse says. He says it’s just the same as perjury.”

Perjury is right. If Janiston really had seen me, he’d have had something to talk about. It had come back to me, during the trial, that I’d stopped for a split second on that landing to wipe a few drops of blood from my fingers.

“All right, Geraldine. Don’t worry about me.”

“I won’t, Chris, and you aren’t to, either.”

“You’ve had tough luck with your men, lady.” Her old man was out of prison now, but he was a wreck. “See if you can’t do better, in the future.”

“I wouldn’t change anything, Chris. In the past, I mean. And this will all be over, some time.”

I had the feeling, as one often does, that this was a scene I’d lived through before, perhaps in a dream or another life. Automatically, I said, “Some time, yes.”

“We aren’t through yet, Chris. There is a lot ahead of us.”

“Yes.”

I heard Richman and George approach, and George said, “Sorry. Time’s up.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Chris, or the day after that.”

“O.K., darling. Good-bye.”

“You’ll have a telegram from Gorse tonight. You aren’t to give up hope. Kiss me, darling.”



Then they took me back to my cell. For a while I lay on my cot staring at the patch of light gray, which was the light of the setting sun, streaking across and contrasting with the muddy darkness of the prison wall over my head. It was not too late. There must be a way out of this mess. But I couldn't think of the way, if there was one.

Then at seven o'clock they brought in my supper. George brought it in, while Richman and the PK stood outside. George said, "Something special. I wish I had this kind of grub waiting for me every night." Since they'd invited me to shoot the works, I'd decided to make it tough for them, and ordered grouse. George put the tray down on the table. Under his breath, he said, quickly, "And you've got a present from Steve." I looked at him, and he indicated a quart bottle of ginger ale, which I did not recall having asked for: I removed the cap, which had already been loosened, and smelled the stuff. It had the odor of Scotch whisky. "He said you could handle it, and not make any trouble."

I poured some and had a drink. It was the finest Scotch I'd ever tasted. I said, "O.K. Have some, George?"

He glanced at Richman and the PK and, without saying anything, held out his hand. When I looked at George close, I could have sworn his face was green. I poured a stiff one into my coffee cup and shoved it into his hand. He drank it off in a single quick gulp.

"Thanks. I needed that."

"What the hell are you worried about? I'm the guy that's starred for tonight, not you."

He gave me a glassy smile and went out. The PK, a man named Frank Gangelin, said, "How are you doing, Bartel?"

I tried some more of the Scotch, and then some grouse.

"Fine."

From the opposite side of the cell-block I heard John Williamson.

"They going to put you in the electric chair tonight, Mr. Bartel?"

"I guess so, John."

"They oughtn't to do that. You ain't doing anything to them."

The grouse, I should say, had been fresh about two years ago, and in cold storage since. Still, it was a miracle they'd gotten any at all. But there was nothing wrong with the Scotch. I had another slug from the ginger-ale bottle, a stiff one. If there were any way out of this, at all, it would take a brain like a razor to find it. With a couple more drinks, I felt, I'd have the solution. In the meantime, though, I felt sort of lazy and numb. There was a plate of grouse and a quart of Scotch. While it lasted, I was a man with a future. And by the time it was gone I'd have the answer to this present jam, an answer that would be perfectly simple. The only reason I didn't have the answer right now was that it was too glaringly simple, too obvious. One can never see the thing that lies directly under his nose, although he can see everything else. Escape would be equally easy.

And then after I'd decided that, I had another drink, and realized I'd been kidding myself. All the way along, not only today, but during the last months, and in fact, all of my life. The minute a person is born, any person, he is in the middle of a jam, and there is no way out of it except through death. That left me with a blatantly simple solution, and I shrank away from it. But there it was. Right there under my nose.

It was George again, and Chi-chi, the prison barber. Chi-chi shaved a part of my head. I offered him a drink, but he said, "I drink only wine. No ginger ale. Sometimes whisky, sometimes wine. Ginger ale, not so good."

I didn't press the point, and George, having another slug of Scotch, didn't either. What the hell is the difference, I wanted to ask him, between three hours, three years, and three decades? But I didn't. *I'll see you tomorrow, or the day after*, she'd said. And she would, too. But I wouldn't see her.

Then I was alone again, except for the prison chaplain, a well-meaning chap, but not for me. I wanted to offer him a drink, but I thought of Steve and George, and decided it would be better not to.

All the sunlight was gone by now, and the electric lights were on. They had been on for some time, how long I didn't know. I saw that there was still half a bottle of Scotch left, and had another steep drink, and when I'd had it, I felt more sober than I'd ever been in my whole life. I thought: *All right, I've made every mistake it's possible for a man to make. But what other life would I have liked to have had?* And I couldn't think of any other. I thought of my trial, of Bierbaum, Janiston, P. C. Cooke, Connors, Claudia Attelio, Constance Gregg, Albert Page, and all the others who had testified at the trial. Would I now trade the life I have had for the lives they have had, any of them? I don't think so. To me, most of those lives are, in fact, living death. And yet, that is not to say that I could not have done far better with this life of mine than I did do.

I poured another drink, knowing that the answer to all of my troubles and all of my questions was right there, within sight, within my reach, right there at the bottom of the glass. And when I had put it away I knew that I had been almost right. The answer was only a hairsbreadth away. For a moment, then, I was able to breathe in peace, and then I had a different picture. It was a picture of all the people who had believed in me, loved me, placed faith in me. This was intolerable, and I had another drink, this time a strong one.

There were a lot of people in my cell, so many the place seemed crowded. I was on my feet. It seemed a shame to leave nearly a third of a bottle of Scotch. Especially so, when I had been so close to a final answer. I tipped the ginger-ale bottle for the last time. A queer look came over the PK's face, but he said nothing. Maybe the heel was human, after

all. He said, "Any last requests, Bartel?"

"None."

Then time and space faded away and we were all somewhere else, in a room I'd never seen before, filled with a lot of people I didn't know. This, I realized, was the works. But the last three or four drinks were taking hold, and I didn't care very much. Maybe this was the best way out of this last nightmare I'd gotten myself into, after all. In any case, they hadn't strapped me into the chair as yet, there was still time to slug a couple of guards and try for an escape.

But I didn't, I don't know why. I couldn't. Perhaps I was slated to go on making mistakes right up until the moment I died. Before I knew what was happening, they'd strapped me down. Harry Dunn, who'd written up my original confession, and whose writings had helped to pay for the trial expenses, might have explained it. But he didn't seem to be here. Someone said, "Does that hurt?"

I looked down, and saw there was an electrode attached to my foot. I said, "No."

Terror filled me, and peace. I could never describe it. No answer could have been possible other than this, although at the same time I knew this was no answer, either. While they slid a mask over my face, I heard someone in front, among the witnesses, fall from his seat on a bench to the cement floor, in a dead faint. Amazing. It was an amazing thing to do, for him, whoever he was, because he was a man with a future, no matter what his situation might be. All around me there was, now, a complete and enormous silence. My lips, beneath the mask they had placed over my face, opened and started to speak. I said, "The truth is simple. The truth is . . ."

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation of names have been corrected.

Cover created for this ebook.

[The end of *Dagger of the Mind* by Kenneth Fearing]