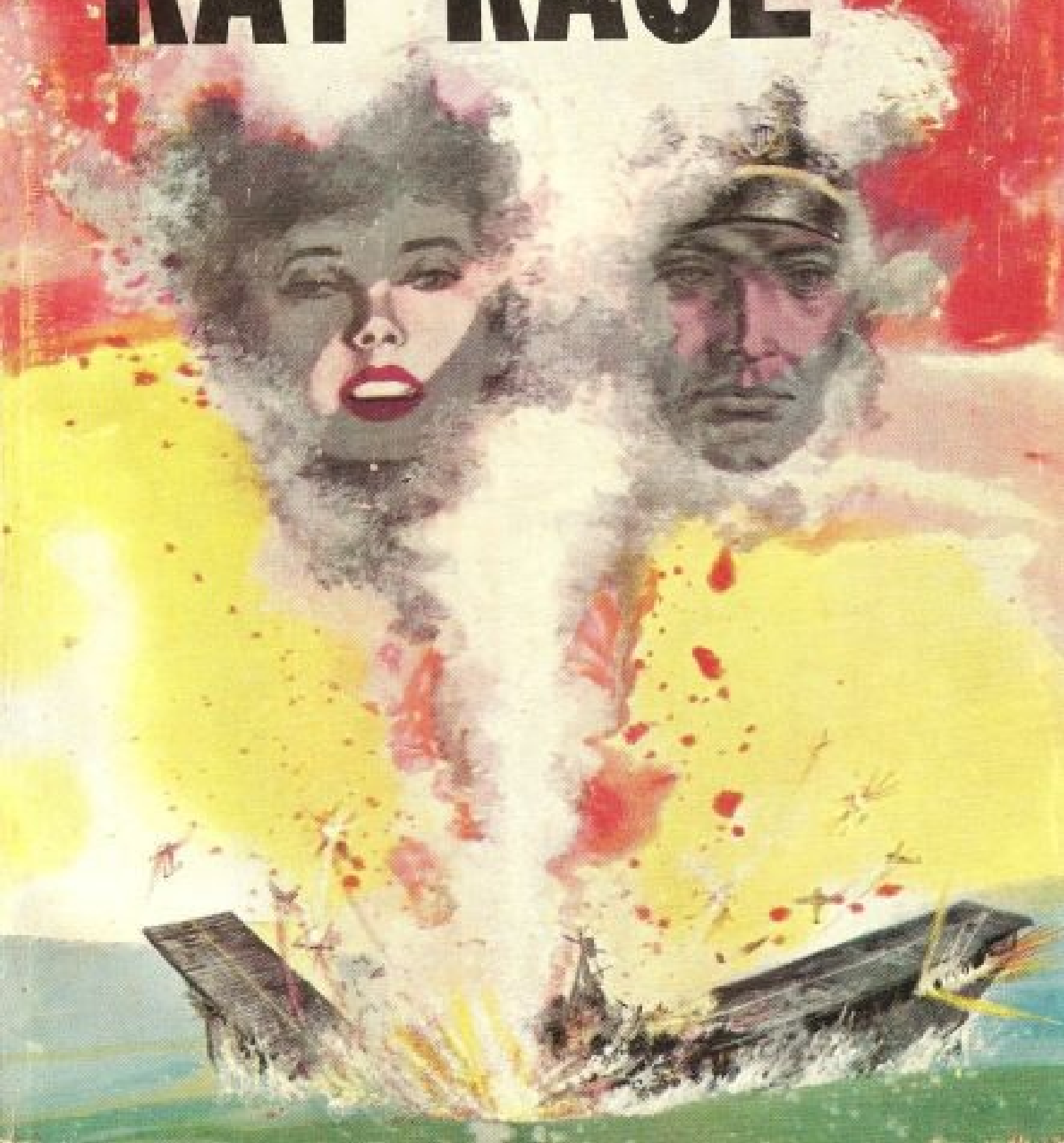


GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL NO. 10 COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

JAY FRANKLIN...

RAT RACE

35¢
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Publisher's Note:

A passage in chapter 32 seems to be incorrect as given by the Galaxy edition used as the base for our ebook:

No one must ever know; Arthurjean must never tell. If she doubted me, no one never tell.

We have substituted the text found as a separate paragraph in Collier's serialization, 5 April 1947:

No one must ever know; Arthurjean must never tell. If she doubted me, no one else could be blamed for concluding that I had lost my reason.

As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

"THE RAT RACE"

By Jay Franklin

When an atomic explosion destroys the battleship Alaska, Lt. Commander Frank Jacklin returns to consciousness in New York and is shocked to find himself in the body of Winnie Tomkins, a dissolute stockbroker. Unable to explain his real identity, Jacklin attempts to fit into Tomkins' way of life. Complications develop when Jacklin gets involved with Tomkins' wife, his red-haired mistress and his luscious secretary. Three too many women for Jacklin to

handle.

His foreknowledge of the Alaska sinking and other top secret matters plunges him into a mad world of intrigue and excitement in Washington—that place where anything can happen and does! Where is the real Tomkins is a mystery explained in the smashing climax.

Completely delightful, wholly provocative, the Rat Race is a striking novel of the American Scene.

THE RAT RACE

By

JAY FRANKLIN

The Astonishing Narrative of a Man Who Was Somebody
Else ... Mixed Up With Politics and Three Luscious Women!

A COMPLETE NOVEL

GALAXY PUBLISHING CORP.
421 HUDSON STREET
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GALAXY Science Fiction Novels, selected by the editors of
GALAXY Science Fiction Magazine, are the choice of science
fiction novels both published and original. This novel
has been slightly abridged for the sake of better pacing.

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CHAPTER 1

When the bomb exploded, U.S.S. Alaska was steaming westward, under complete radio silence, somewhere

near the international date-line on the Great Circle course south of the Aleutian Islands.

It was either the second, or the third of April, 1945, depending on whether the Alaska, the latest light carrier to be added to American naval forces in the Pacific, had passed the 180th meridian.

I was in the carrier, in fact: in the magazine, when the blast occurred and I am the only person who can tell how and why the Alaska disappeared without a trace in the Arctic waters west of Adak. I had been assigned by Navy Public Relations to observe and report on Operation Octopus—the plan to blow up the Jap naval base at Paramushiro in Kuriles with the Navy's recently developed thorium bomb.

My name, by the way, is Frank Jacklin, Lieutenant-Commander, U.S.N.R. I had been commissioned shortly after Pearl Harbor, as a result of my vigorous editorial crusade on the Hartford (Conn.) Courant to Aid America by Defending the Allies. I was a life-long Republican and a personal friend of Frank Knox, so I had no trouble with Navy Intelligence in getting a reserve commission in the summer of 1940. (I never told them that I had voted for Roosevelt twice, so I was never subjected to the usual double-check by which the Navy kept its officer-corps purged of subversive taints and doubtful loyalties.) So I had a first-rate assignment, by the usual combination of boot-licking and "yessing" which marks a good P.R.O.

It was on the first night in Jap waters, after we had cleared the radius of the Naval Air Station at Adak, that Professor Chalmis asked me to accompany him to the magazine. He said that his orders were to make effective disclosure of the mechanics of the thorium bomb as soon as we were clear of the Aleutians. Incidentally, he, I and Alaska's commander, Captain Horatio McAllister, U.S.N., were the only people aboard who knew the real nature of Operation Octopus. The others had been alerted, via latrine rumor, that we were engaged in a sneak-raid on Hokkaido.

The thorium bomb, Chalmis told me, had been developed by the Navy, parallel to other hitherto unsuccessful experiments conducted by the Army with uranium. The thorium bomb utilized atomic energy, on a rather low and inefficient basis by scientific standards, but was yet sufficiently explosive to destroy a whole city. He proposed to show me the bomb itself, so that I could describe its physical appearance, and to brief me on the mechanics of its detonation, leaving to the Navy scientists at Washington a fuller report on the whole subject of atomic weapons. He had passes, signed by Captain McAllister, to admit us to the magazine and proposed, after supper, that we go to examine his gadget.

It was cold as professional charity on the flight-deck, with sleet driving in from the northwest as the icy wind from Siberia hit the moist air of the Japanese Current. There was a nasty cross-sea and the Alaska was wallowing and pounding as she drove towards Paramushiro at a steady 30 knots.

"You know, Jacklin," said Chalmis, as the Marine sentry took our passes and admitted us to the magazine, "I don't like this kind of thing."

"You mean this war?" I asked, noticing irrelevantly the way the electric light gleamed on his bald head.

"I mean this thorium bomb," he replied. "I had most to do with developing it and now in a couple of days one of these nice tanned naval aviators at the mess will take off with it and drop it on Paramushiro from an altitude of 30,000 feet. The timer is set to work at an altitude of 500 feet and then two or three thousand human beings will cease to exist."

"The Japs aren't human," I observed, quoting the Navy.

Chalmis looked at me in a strange, staring way.

"Thank you, Commander," he said. "You have settled my problem. I was in doubt as to whether to complete this operation in the name of scientific inquiry, but now I see I have no choice. See this!" he continued.

"This" was a spherical, finned object of aluminum about the size of a watermelon, resting on a gleaming chromium-steel cradle.

"If I take this ring, Jacklin," Chalmis remarked, "and pull it out, the bomb will explode within five seconds or at

500 feet altitude whichever takes longer. The five seconds is to give the pilot a margin of safety in case of accidental release at low altitude. However, dropping it from 30,000 feet means that the five seconds elapse before the bomb reaches the level at which it automatically explodes."

"You make me nervous, Professor," I objected. "Can't you explain without touching it?"

"If it exploded now, approximately twenty-four feet below the waterline," Chalmis continued, "it would create an earthquake wave which could cause damage at Honolulu and would register on the seismograph at Fordham University."

"I'll take your word for it," I said.

"So," concluded Chalmis, "if the bomb were to go off now, no one could know what had happened to the Alaska and the Navy—as I know the Navy—would decide that thorium bombs were impractical, too dangerous to use. And so the human race might be spared a few more years of life."

"Stop it!" I ordered, lunging forward and grabbing for his arm.

But it was too late. Chalmis gave a strong pull on the ring. It came free and a slight buzzing sound was heard above the whine of the turbines and the thud of the seas against Alaska's bow.

"You—" I began. Then I started counting: "Three—four—fi—"

* * * *

There was a hand on my shoulder and a voice that kept saying, "Snap out of it!" I opened bleary eyes to see a familiar figure in uniform bending over me. My head ached, my mouth tasted dry and metallic, and I felt strangely heavy around the middle.

"Hully, Ranty," I said. "Haven't seen you since Kwajalein. What's the word? What happened to the Alaska?"

Commander Tolan, U.S.N.R., who had been in my group in Quonset, straightened up with a laugh. "When were you ever at Kwajalein, Winnie?" he asked. "And what's the drip about the Alaska?"

"You remember," I said. "That time we went into the Marshalls with the Sara in forty-three. But what happened to my ship? There was a bomb ... Say, where am I and what day is it anyway?"

There was a burst of laughter from across the room and I turned my head. I seemed to be sitting in a deep, leather arm-chair in a small, nicely furnished bar, with sporting-prints on the wall and a group of three clean-shaven, only slightly paunchy middle-aged men, who looked like brokers, standing by the rail staring at me. Tolan was the only man in uniform. These couldn't be doctors and what were civilians doing in mess....

"We blew up!" I insisted. "Chalmis said..."

"You've been dreaming, Winnie," drawled one of the brokerish trio. "You were making horrible noises in your sleep so Ranty went over and woke you up."

"If you want to know where you are," remarked another, "you're in the bar of the Pond Club on West 54th Street, as sure as your name is Winfred S. Tompkins and this is April 2nd, 1945."

"Winnie Tompkins!" I exclaimed. "Why I once knew him quite well. He and I were at St. Mark's together, then he went to Harvard and Wall Street while I went to Yale and broke, so we didn't see much of each other after the depression."

"It's a good gag, Winnie," Tolan laughed, "but now you've had your fun, how about another drink?"

I shook my head. "Listen, Ranty," I begged. "Tell me what happened. I can take it. Are you dead? Are we all dead? Is this supposed to be heaven? What's the word?"

"That joke's played out," said Tolan. "Here, Tammy, another Scotch and soda for Mr. Tompkins. A double one."

Tompkins! My head ached. I stood up and walked across the room to study my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Instead of my painfully familiar freckled face and skinny frame, I saw a red, full jowled face with bags beneath the watery blue eyes, set on a distinctly portly body which was cleverly camouflaged as burliness by impeccable tweeds of the kind specially made up in London for the American broker's trade.

"I look like hell!" I muttered. "Well, tell me this, Ranty. What happened to Frank Jacklin? Or is that part of the gag?"

Tolan turned and stared at me with an official glitter in his Navy (Reserve) eye. "Jacklin? He *was* at Kwajalein with me, now that I think of it. A skinny sort of s.o.b., wasn't he?"

"I wouldn't say that," I hotly rejoined. "I thought he was a pretty decent sort of guy. Where is he?"

"Jacklin? Oh, he got another half-stripe last January and was given some screw-ball assignment which took him out of touch. He'll turn up sooner or later, without a scratch; those New Dealers always do."

"Say," Tolan added. "You always did have a Jacklin fixation but you never had a good word to say for the louse. What did he ever do to you, anyhow? Ever since I've known you, you've always been griping about him, specially since he got into uniform. Lay off, will you, and give us honest hard-drinking guys a chance to get a breath. Period."

I took my drink and sipped it attentively. Whatever had happened to me since the thorium bomb burst off Adak, this was Scotch and it was cold, so I doubted that this place was Hell. Probably it was all a dream in the last split-second of disintegration.

"Thanks, Ranty, that feels better. Now I've got to be going."

"Winnie," drawled one of the brokers, "tell us who she is this time. You ought to stop chasing at your age and blood-pressure or let your friends in on the secret."

"This time," I said, "I'm going home."

The steward came around from the bar and helped me into a fine fur-lined overcoat which I assumed was the lawful property of Winnie Tompkins.

"There were two telephone messages fer you, sir, while you were dozing," he said.

"Who were they from, Tammy?"

"The first one, sir, was from the vet's to say that Ponto—that would be your dog, sir—would recover after all. He was the one that had distemper so bad, wasn't it, sir? I remember you told me that he was expected to die any minute. Well, now, the vet says he will recover. The second call, sir, was from Mrs. Tompkins. She asked if you had left for your home."

"What did you tell her, Tammy?" I asked.

"Why, what you told me, sir, of course, when you came in, sir. I said that you hadn't been in all day, but that I would deliver any messages."

Wait a minute, Jacklin, I said to myself. Let's figure this one out. We were blown up on the Alaska, off the westernmost Aleutians, and now we find ourselves at the Pond Club, in New York City, masquerading in the flabby body of Winnie Tompkins. This must be Purgatory, since nobody who has ever been there would call the Pond—or, as the initiates prefer, the Puddle—either Heaven or Hell. This is one of those damned puzzles designed to test our intelligence. My cue is to turn in the best and most convincing performance as Winnie Tompkins, who has undoubtedly been sent to Hell. If we pass, we'll be like the rats the scientists send racing through mazes: we'll get the

cheese and move on up. If we flunk, we'll be sent down, as the English say. Ingenious deity, the Manager!

"Tammy," I said, "will you get me the latest Social Register?"

"Certainly, sir."

I sat down by the door and thumbed through the testament of social acceptability as measured in Manhattan. There I was: Winfred S. (Sturgis) Tompkins. Born, New York City, April 27, 1898. St. Mark's School, Southboro, Mass., 1916. Harvard, A.B. 1920. Married: Miss Germaine Lewis Schuyler, of New York City, 1936. Clubs: Porcellian, Pond, Racquet, Harvard, Westchester Country. Residence: "Pock's Hill," Bedford Hills, N.Y. Office; No. 1 Wall Street, N.Y.C.

"Thanks, Tammy," I said and returned the register to him.

Then I reached inside my coat and pulled out the well-stuffed pocketbook I found inside the suave tweeds. It was of ostrich-hide with W.S.T. in gold letters on it, and contained—in addition to some junk which I didn't bother to examine—sixty-one dollars in small bills and a new commutation-ticket between New York City and Bedford Hills, N.Y.

So far, so good. My sense of identity was building up rapidly. I felt in my trouser's pocket and found a bunch of keys and about a dollar and a half in silver. I peeled a five-dollar bill from the roll in the pocket-book and handed it to the club steward.

"This is for you, Tammy, and a happy Easter Monday to you. If anyone calls, you haven't seen me all day."

"Thank you very much, sir, I'm sure," he said, pocketing the five spot with the effortless ease of a prestidigitator or head-waiter.

I strolled out to the street—dusk was beginning to darken the city and already there were lights burning in the office windows—and walked across to the corner of Park Avenue. To my surprise, remembering New York, there were few taxis and those were already occupied. After about five minutes of vain waiting, I remembered reading somewhere of the cab shortage in the United States, and walked south to Grand Central. As I turned down Vanderbilt Avenue, I noticed something fairly bulky in the pocket of my overcoat. I stopped and dragged out two expensively tidy packages, with the Tiffany label on them. One was inscribed "For Jimmie" and the other "For Virginia."

This represented a new puzzle—perhaps a trap—so I paid a dime for the use of one of the pay-toilets in the Terminal and unwrapped my find. The one marked for "Jimmie"—who might be, I guessed, my wife Germaine—was a neat little solid gold bracelet, the sort of thing you give your eldest niece on graduation day. The one marked "Virginia" contained a diamond-brooch of the kind all too rarely given to a girl for any good reason.

"Uh-uh!" I shook my head. Whoever "Virginia" might be, she was obviously not my wife and the Social Register had not mentioned any children, ex-wives or such appertaining to Winnie Tompkins. And you don't give diamonds to your aged aunt or your mother-in-law. We can't have Winnie start off his new life by palming off mere gold on his wedded wife and diamonds on the Other Woman, I decided. So I switched the labels on the packages and returned to circulation in time to catch the 4:45 Westchester Express.

Here, I resorted to a low subterfuge. Instead of the broker's bible, "The New York Sun," with its dim view of all that had happened to the commuting public since 1932, I was coward enough to disguise myself by buying a copy of "P.M." in order to lessen the risk of being recognized by fellow-passengers whom I certainly would not know by sight. I buried my face in that spirited journal, with its dim view of all that had ever happened outside the Soviet Union, as I slunk past the Club Car, and did not fully emerge from its gallant defense of the Negro and the Jew until I was in the smoker, directly behind the baggage compartment. The train was fairly crowded but I was able to find a seat far forward where few passengers could see my face. I decided that my strategy had been sound when the conductor, on punching my ticket, remarked: "See you're not using the Club Car today, Mr. Tompkins. Shall I tell Mr. Snyder not to wait for you for gin rummy?"

"Don't tell him a thing, please," I begged. "I'm feeling done in—a friend of mine was just killed in the Pacific—"

and I don't want to be bothered."

He clucked consolingly and passed on. I was lucky enough to reach Bedford Hills without other encounters and walked along the darkened platform until I spied a taxicab.

"Can you drive me out to my place?" I asked the driver.

"Sure, Mr. Tompkins. Glad to," he replied. "Goin' to leave your coop down here?"

I nodded. "Yep. I'm too damned tired to drive home. Got any other passengers?"

"Only a couple of maids from the Milgrim place," he said, "but we can drop you first and let them off afterwards if you're feelin' low."

"Hell, no!" I insisted. "This is a free country—first come first served. You can drive me on to Pook's Hill after you've left them at the Milgrim's. Perhaps they'd get in trouble if they were delayed."

The driver looked surprised and rather relieved.

"Haven't heard of any employers firin' maids in these parts since Wilkie was a candidate," he said.

I climbed into the cab, across the rather shapely legs and domestic laps of two attractive-looking girls who murmured vaguely at me and then resumed a discussion of the awful cost of hair-do's. I felt rather pleased with myself. I seemed to have won at least one man's approval in the opening stages of my celestial rat-race. Now for my first meeting with the woman whom I had married nearly ten years ago, according to the Social Register. Surely she would recognize that there was something radically wrong with her husband before I had been five minutes at Pook's Hill. Why! I wouldn't know where the lavatory was, let alone her bed-room, and what should I call the maid who answered the door, assuming we had a maid?

CHAPTER 2

A pretty, dark-haired maid opened the door of "Pook's Hill" with a twitch of the hip that was wasted on Bedford Hills.

"Oh, it's you!" she remarked conversationally. "Shall I tell Mrs. Tompkins you are here?"

"And why not?" I asked.

She looked at me slant-eyed. "Why not, sir? She must have forgotten to eat an apple this morning. That's why."

"Where shall I dump my hat and coat, Mary?" I asked guessing wildly at her name. Suburban maids were named Mary as often as not.

"The name is Myrtle, Mr. Tompkins," she replied, and did not bother to add the "as well you know" she implied.

"From now on, Myrtle, you shall be Mary so far as I am concerned. And where, Mary, shall I leave my hat and coat?"

"In the den, sir, of course. Come, I'll lend a hand. You've been drinking again."

The girl moved quite close to me, in helping me off with my things and it was only by a distinct effort of will that I refrained from giving that provocative hip the tweak it so openly invited.

"This way, Mr. Tompkins," she said sarcastically, so I rewarded her with a half-hearted smack which brought the requisite "Oh!"—you never can tell when you will need a friend below stairs and it was obvious that Winnie, the dog! had been trifling with her young buttocks if not her affections. That sort of thing must stop, if I was going to get anywhere in my run through the maze. Too abrupt a change in the manners and morals of Winfred Tompkins, however, might arouse suspicion.

"Any news today, Mary?" I asked.

"Nothing, sir. The kennels telephoned to say that Ponto had made a miraculous recovery and could come home tomorrow. I had them send word to the Club to tell you. And Mrs. Tompkins, as I said, forgot to eat her apple."

I looked at her. This was a cue. I mustn't miss it.

"And the doctor didn't keep away?" I asked.

"Him? I should say not! Mrs. Tompkins felt quite unsettled right after lunch and phoned Dr. Rutherford to come over. He's with her now, upstairs, giving her an examination." She rolled her eyes significantly in the direction of the second story.

"Wait a few minutes till I catch my breath and get my bearings, Mary," I said, "and then tell Mrs. Tompkins most discreetly, if you know what I mean, that I have returned and am waiting in my—" I waved vaguely at the room.

"In your den, sir," she agreed. "The name is Myrtle."

The den was one of those things I have never attained, perhaps because I never wanted to. There was a field-stone fireplace, over which the antlered head of a small stag presided with four upturned feet—like a calf in a butcher shop—that held two well dusted shotguns. The walls were lined with books up to a dado—books in sets, with red morocco and gilt bindings: Dickens, Thackeray, Suttees, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dumas, Balzac and similar standard authors—all highly respectable and mostly unread. On the table, beside a humidior and cigarette cases, was a formidable array of unused pipes. Above the shelves, the walls were adorned with etchings of ducks: ducks sitting, ducks swimming, ducks nesting, ducks flying and ducks hanging dead. It was as though Winnie's conscience or attorney had advised him: "You can't go wrong on ducks, old boy!" Instead, he had gone wild.

In one corner of the den my unregenerate Navy eye discerned a small portable bar, with gleaming glasses, decanters and syphons. Further investigation was rewarded by the makings of a very fair Scotch-and-soda. To my annoyance, the cigarette box contained only de luxe Benson & Hedges—it would!—while I am a sucker for Tareytons. Still, any cigarette is better than no cigarette. A little mooching around the fireplace revealed the switch which turned on an electric fire, ingeniously contrived to represent an expensive Manhattan architect's idea of smouldering peat. The whole effect was very cosy in the "Town and Country" sense—a gentleman's gun-room—and I had settled down most comfortably on the broad leather divan in front of this synthetic blaze when I was interrupted by an angry, tenor voice.

"I say, Tompkins," soared the voice. "I thought we had agreed to be civilized about this thing."

I raised my head to see a lean, dark-haired, dapper little-man, with a dinky little British Raj mustache and a faint odor of antiseptics, glaring at me from the doorway.

"Dr. Rutherford, I presume!" I remarked.

"Yes, Winnie," came a pleasant but irritated womanly voice from somewhere behind the doctor "and I too would like to know what this means."

"Is that you, Jimmie?" I guessed.

"Of course it's me! Who else did you expect? One of those flashy blondes from your office?"

"Sh!" shushed the doctor reprovingly. "What about Virginia? What have you done with her?"

This required serious thought. The glass of Scotch was a good alibi for amnesia. "To whom do you refer?" I asked, putting a slight thickness into my voice.

"To Virginia, my wife!" he snapped. "We agreed—it was understood between the four of us—"

I shook my head virtuously. "I haven't set eyes on her all day," I said. "I don't know where she is and I refuse to be held responsible for her in any particular. She's your look-out, not mine."

"Why, you!—" The doctor started forward, menacing me with his surgical little fists.

"Wait a minute, Jerry," the contralto voice ordered. "Let me handle this!"

Germaine Tompkins stepped forward into the room and stood in the flickering light of the electric peat. "Tell me, Winnie," she asked, "has anything gone wrong?"

My wife was a tall, slim girl, with dark eyes, dark hair parted sleekly in the 1860 style, and a cool, slender neck. She was wearing something low-cut in black velvet, with a white cameo brooch at the "V" of a bodice which suggested a potentially undemure Quakeress. I noticed that she had angry eyes, a sulky mouth and a puzzled expression.

"I'm sorry, Jimmie," I replied, after a good look at her, "but I have decided that I simply couldn't go through with it."

"Do you mean to say—" Dr. Rutherford began, only to be hushed by Germaine. "Let me handle him, Jerry," she whispered. "You'd better go. He's tight. I'll phone you in the morning."

"All right, if you say so, dear," the doctor obeyed.

"And be sure to send me a bill for this call," I added. "Professional services and what-not. And don't come back to my house without my personal invitation."

Dr. Rutherford emitted a muttered comment and disappeared into the gloom of the hall. My wife followed him and I could hear a series of confused and comforting whispers sending him on his way. I had finished my Scotch and poured myself another before my wife rejoined me.

"Have a drink?" I asked.

"No thank you!" she snapped.

"Mad at me?"

"What do you think?" Her tone was cool enough to freeze lava.

"You have every right to be!" That answer, I had found by experience, was unanswerable.

"What do you mean?" she asked in some bewilderment. "Yes, thanks, I will have a drink after all. You see, Winnie, after we had talked it all over the other night after the Bond Rally Dance and realized how we felt about it all, the four of us decided to be—well—civilized about things. And now—"

"I don't feel civilized about my wife," I said, pouring her a stiff one.

Her eyes glittered and her cheek was tinged with color. In spite of her anger, she responded to the idea of male brutes contesting for her favor.

"I didn't think you cared a damn," she said at last, "and it's pretty late in the day to make a change now. After all, there is Virginia."

That was the cue to clinch the situation. "To hell with Virginia!" I announced. "I'd rather live with you as your friend than sleep with la Rutherford in ten thousand beds. I can't help it," I added boyishly.

She leaned forward and sniffed. "You *have* been drinking, haven't you?" she remarked.

"Of course I have! Today, in town, I suddenly realized what a damn fool I'd been to throw away something really fine for something very second-rate. So I drank. Too much. And the more I drank the more I knew that I was right and that it was here where I belong, with you. If you don't want me to stay, I'll go over to the Country Club for the night. I'll even phone Jerry Rutherford for you—him and his moustache—but I'm damned if I'll go running back to Virginia. She's not pukka!" ("How'm I doing?" I added silently for the benefit of the Master of Ceremonies.)

"Well—" she said, after a long pause. "Perhaps—It's so mixed up—Perhaps you'd better go to bed here and we can talk it over in the morning. All of us."

I shook my head. "I don't want to hold any more mass-meetings on the state of our mutual affections. If you want that tenor tonsil-snatcher, you're welcome to him but I'm damned if I'll be a good sport about it. If you insist, I'll buy you a divorce, but I won't marry Virginia—that's final!"

Germaine's face relaxed. She smiled. "We'll see how things look to you in the morning," she said.

Now was the time to play the trump card.

"Oh yes," I said. "I brought home a present for you."

I walked over to the hanger in the corner and pulled the Tiffany packages from my overcoat pocket.

"Here you are, Jimmie Tompkins," I said, "with all my alleged love."

"Alleged is right!" But she picked eagerly at the wrappings and swiftly ferreted out the diamond brooch. "Why, Winnie, it's lovely—" she began, then whirled on me, her eyes blazing. "Is this a joke?" she demanded.

"Of course not! What's the matter?"

Her laugh was wild. "Oh, nothing, Winnie. Nothing at all. It's just that you should have decided to give *me*—on *her* birthday—a brooch with her initials in diamonds. See them! V.M.R."

So that's the catch, I thought. I should have guessed there would be something wrong with the set-up and I kicked myself for not having bothered to trace out the monogram.

"Don't you see what I mean," I grated, "or must I spell it out for you? Some time back, when we were considering all this civilized swapping of husbands and wives, I put in the order at Tiffany's for Virginia's birthday present. Today, when I picked it up, the clerk smirked at me—he knows your initials don't begin with V—and I suddenly knew I couldn't go ahead with the whole business. So I brought the brooch back to you as a trophy, if you want it. You can do what you like about it. It's yours. You see, Jimmie," I added, "that's the way things are. I'm burning all my bridges."

"Oh!" she said. Then after a long pause, she added, "Ah!"

"I don't think," she remarked, after another pause, "that I'll want to keep this and I'm far too fond of Virginia Rutherford to humiliate her. I think I'll just take this back to Tiffany's and get something else."

So I had led trumps.

"Here's something else to be going on with," I told her. "I got this for you, anyhow, win, lose or draw"—and I produced the gold bracelet. "I thought it would go with that dress and your cameo and—if you still want to wear it—your wedding ring."

She cast quick glances from side to side, like a bird that suspects a snare.

"It's good," she sighed. "Winnie, it's so good. I guess..."

There was a knock at the door. It was Myrtle-Mary.

"Will the master be staying for dinner, Mrs. Tompkins?" she asked.

"Of course I will, Mary," I said. "Is there enough to eat?"

"I'll see, sir," she replied in a manner which was practically an insult to us both.

"And keep a civil tongue in your head," I added.

She handed it back to me. "And keep your hands to yourself, sir," she said as she closed the door.

"Winnie." It was Jimmie's hand restraining me, as I started up.

"Let her go!" I said at last. "It's my fault, I guess. I haven't been happy and I did make a few passes. From now on, I'll try to be a bit more decent and livable. God knows I have plenty to be ashamed of, but nothing disgraceful ... I hope."

"So do I," my wife began. "If you..."

The telephone rang.

She picked up the receiver and listened for a moment, frowning.

"Yes, he's here," she said, passing me the instrument.

"It's for you," she observed. "It's Virginia calling; from New York and she sounds *most* annoyed."

CHAPTER 3

"Winnie!" The voice that crackled at me over the wire had all the implacable tenderness of a woman who has you in the wrong.

"Yes, dear!" I answered automatically, with a passing thought for my own lost Dorothy, marooned in Washington with a job in the O.S.S.

"What *is* the matter?" the voice continued, in its litany of angry possessiveness. "What on *earth* happened to you? I've been waiting for you since three o'clock."

"Where have you been waiting?"

"*Here*—of course. In our place. In New York. *Winnie, what's wrong?*"

Not a pleasant spot to be in, even if it was only part of a trial-run in purgatory.

"It's a bit too hard to explain, Virginia," I said, "but something came up and I don't think I can go through with it. In fact, I know I can't go through with it."

There was one of those pauses which make a whole life-time seem like a split-second.

"Something came up!" The voice, now a pantherish contralto, purred dangerously. "Something went down, you mean. You see, Winnie, I've been talking to your friends. Johnny Walker, Black Label, that's what went down. At the Pond Club, Tommy Morgan told me all about it. You went to the Pond, had too much to drink, woke up about four o'clock—one whole hour after you had promised to meet me—and woke up talking wildly and then staggered

out. Now I find you're back in Bedford Hills, and it—it's my birthday—" The voice ended in a choke which might have been a sob or a paroxysm of feminine fury.

I summoned the old voice of authority, as inculcated at Quonset, into the well-tanned vocal chords of Winfred Tompkins. "Virginia," I commanded, "just stop making a fool of yourself. I'm sorry I stood you up but things have been happening. I just can't go through with it. I'll explain when I see you."

"You'd better!" And the slam of the receiver left my ears ringing.

When I turned around, my wife was smiling, with a glint in her eye which was far from sympathetic.

"Poor Winnie!" she observed. "You'd better stick to your office stenographers and not go picking up red-headed married women in Westchester. You haven't got a chance."

I refilled my glass and hers, in that order—a husbandly gesture which put me, I felt, on a solid married basis for the moment.

"Jimmie," I announced. "I don't need to tell you that I'm an awful heel. Now that we've got the wraps off I wish you'd tell me what you really think of me and Virginia."

Mrs. Tompkins' nostrils flickered slightly. "I never cared for bulging red-heads myself," she said. "When she was at Miss Spence's we called her Virgin for short, but not for long. There never was a thing in pants, up to and including scarecrows, that she wouldn't carry the torch for. When she married Jerry Rutherford it was a great relief to her relatives. She had no friends."

"A very succinct summary, for all that it should be written in letters of fire," I remarked. "And now what do you think of me?"

She took a long sip of her drink and leaned forward. "You're fat, soft and spoiled, Winnie, physically, mentally and morally," she began, "and you know it. If you weren't so stinking rich you'd—well, I don't know. There's something about you that's—Well, after you bought me from my parents, I wanted to kill myself and then I sized you up. There's no real harm in you, Winnie, it's not hard to like you, but you never were love's young dream."

"What you say is absolutely on the beam," I admitted. "But while we're on the subject I wouldn't call Jerry Rutherford the answer to a maiden's prayer. That Hollywood doctor type with the swank suburban practice and the soft bedroom manner gets me down. He has only three ideas in the world and all of them begin with T. After the first antiseptic raptures you'd have nothing in common but your appendix and he'd want to get away with that—for a consideration."

Jimmie giggled. "You forget that he already has it," she said. "That's how I was first attracted to him, under the ether cone. I was sick as a dog and he held my hand and told me I was being very brave."

"And sent the hell of a bill to me," I added.

"Well," she asked, after a pause. "What do you really think of me?"

"I think, Jimmie, that you're lonely, bored and unhappy. All three are my fault but they are driving you to make a fool of yourself. Nobody has tried to understand you"—which is catnip for any person of either sex, once you get them talking about themselves—"least of all your husband. You need what other women need—children, a home..."

"If this is a build-up for obstetrics, the answer is 'No!'" she snapped angrily.

"Skip it!" I urged. "I'm telling you the truth, not making a pass at you. We can talk some more about you in the morning. In the meantime, I think I'll turn in. I'm very tired, a little tight and I've had a lousy day."

She flashed me a curious look. "Go on up, Winnie," she said. "I'll put these things away. You'll need your strength for the morning, if I know Virginia Rutherford."

Guided by luck and the smell of pipe tobacco, I found what was obviously the Master's Room—with a weird amalgam of etchings of ducks and nude girls, including one Zorn, and all the gadgets for making sleep as complicated as driving an automobile.

I was awakened in the morning by a hand on my shoulder. It was Mary-Myrtle.

"You'd better get up and put on your pyjamas and dressing gown," she remarked conversationally. "Dr. Rutherford is downstairs and Mrs. Rutherford is talking with Mrs. Tompkins in her bedroom."

"Stormy weather?"

"I'll say so—and see here—" she began.

"Sit down, Mary!" I ordered.

She subsided on the edge of the bed and looked at me rebelliously.

"From now on, Mary," I announced, "things are going to be different around here. I won't refer to what is past, because you're old enough to know what you're doing and so am I. If you want to stay on and really help me through a hard time, I'll double your wages. If you'd rather go—and I wouldn't blame you—I'll pay you six months wages in advance and you can clear out. But I can't be worried about you and your feelings when I have a big problem to clean up here. Will you go or stay?"

The girl thought for a moment, then rose, straightened her apron and gave me the first friendly smile I had received, since my arrival from the Aleutians.

"I'll stay, Mr. Tompkins," she said. "And here's a pick-me-up I mixed for you. Better drink it before you see the Rutherfords."

"Okay!" And I drank it and it worked its beneficent will upon me. "Now I'll go and kill Dr. Rutherford, if you'll toss me my flit-gun and, thanks!"

Dr. Rutherford was pacing, with surgical precision, up and down my den. He looked slightly more self-possessed than the day before and seemed to be in excellent physical condition. I guessed at the contour beneath my wadded black silk dressing gown and re-considered my original plan to throw him bodily out of the house for having come without my invitation.

"See here, Tompkins," he said briskly. "We're both men of the world, I hope. Things can't go on like this. I was up all night with Virginia. You're not behaving at all well, you know, old man."

I sat down in the corner of the leather lounge and looked up at him—a move which gave me a slight advantage of position in dealing with the higher emotions.

"Let's not mince words, Jerry," I said. "Suppose you just state frankly what you think we should do."

"Germaine loves me and does not love you," Rutherford stated crisply. "You love Virginia and she loves you. None of us wish a divorce. Hang it all, Winnie, we're civilized. These things happen, you know, and we might just as well face them. We agreed that the four of us should do as we liked, and no hard feelings."

I sighed. "Jerry," I said. "What you say was true as of yesterday noon but if these things can happen, they can also un-happen. Whatever you and my wife decide to do is your own affair but I'm damned if I intend to allow her to use my home as a place of assignation and I'm damned if I'll let her become the subject of gossip. So far as Virginia is concerned, whether or not she is in love with me, I'm no longer in love with her and I'm damned if I'll play gigolo to spare the feelings of a bulging red-head who carries the torch for anything in trousers, up to and including scarecrows—myself included."

"I can't allow you to talk that way about my wife, Tompkins. It's rotten bad form and anyhow we both know that people are the way their glands make them and nothing can be done about it."

"Here, have a drink!" I suggested. "This is all under the seal of a confessional. I'm not quarreling with you. I'm consulting you. I don't love Virginia and I don't believe I ever did. If you wish to wriggle out of your marriage, that's your affair."

"And it's yours, too, ever since that night at the War Bond Ball," he said. "Don't forget that I caught you—"

"Rutherford," I replied. "As a medical man you have surely seen far worse than that. You can't sue me for alienation of affections, because all Bedford Hills is aware of Virginia's glands and because it wouldn't help your practice. For the rest, I'm willing to listen to anything as a way out of this mess."

He paused in his precise pacing. "The four of us will have to talk it over," he said, "as soon as I have that drink you offered me."

"Okay," I agreed. "The girls are in Jimmie's bedroom. Perhaps you know the way better than I do. I'll follow your lead."

Germaine was propped up in a frilly four-poster bed amid a wallow of small satin cushions. I barely had time to notice that she was wearing a rather filmy night gown, when I turned to reap the whirl-wind in the form of five foot six of red-haired determination and curves.

"Now, Winnie," she commanded. "What's all this *nonsense*?"

I caught a tell-tale glimpse of uncharitable diamonds at my wife's breast and hastily averted my eyes from the monogram.

"Virginia," I replied, "There's nothing wrong. Nothing at all. It was just that yesterday I realized that I couldn't go through with it. I don't pretend to be moral but I won't go in for mixed-doubles at my age. It's undignified."

"What!" Mrs. Rutherford's mouth hung open in amazement.

"Only this, Virginia. Whatever I have been in the past, I'm going to try to be different in the future. I know it's hard on you but—"

The red-head laughed like tumbrils rolling to the guillotine. "Nothing to what a breach of promise suit would be to you, Winnie dear. Don't forget I have your letters."

"Now we're getting somewhere," I remarked. "How much?"

"Winnie!" my wife gasped. "It's blackmail!"

"Of course it's blackmail," I agreed, "and there are times when it's wiser to pay than to fight. This is not one of them. Virginia, I'm not interested in buying back those letters. Save them for a rainy day. I'm going to settle with your husband. How about it, Jerry?"

"You swine!" Mrs. Rutherford was going definitely Grade-B in the pinches. "Do you think that you can drive a wedge between me and my husband?"

"No, my wife has already done that for me. He loves her and he tells me that she loves him. I've told him that they're welcome to a divorce but I won't have my house used for any hanky-panky and won't have people gossip about Germaine. They can make up their minds what they want to do about it."

"You were saying downstairs, Tompkins," the doctor hastily interrupted, "that you would listen to any reasonable offer."

"Check! What's your price?"

"I want out," said Dr. Rutherford. "Lend me the value of a year's practice—fifteen thousand would cover it—and I'll get in a substitute and take a crack at the Army Medical Corps. They've been after me for a couple of years."

"Done!" I said, "and if you like I'll have the bank dole it out to Virginia while you're gone, so she won't use it up too fast."

"What about me?" asked my wife. "I thought Jerry said he loved me."

"What's *your* price?" I asked.

Germaine yawned and the shoulder strap of her gown slipped indiscreetly. "Since nobody seems to want me," she declared, "I'm going to stick around and see the fun. I wouldn't miss the sight of Winnie Tompkins trying to lead a changed life for all the doctors in the Medical Corps."

"Me too!" spat out Mrs. Rutherford. "There's something pretty mysterious going on here and I'm going to stay until I learn all the answers."

There was a tap at the bedroom door and Myrtle appeared, pulling two neatly set breakfast trays on a rubber-tired mahogany tea-wagon.

"I thought you would rather have your breakfast upstairs with the Master, mam," she remarked primly, in a far too English country-house manner. "Breakfast is waiting for Dr. and Mrs. Rutherford in the dining-room," she added.

And as she bent over the table and began to straighten out the breakfast things, the girl had the impudence to slip me a wink.

CHAPTER 4

After a pleasant breakfast, in the course of which my wife read the social news in the New York Herald-Tribune and I the business news in the New York Times, I excused myself and returned to my bedroom. Winnie's bathroom was fitted with all the gadgets, too, and there was an abundant choice of razors, from the old-fashioned straight-edge suicide's favorite to the 1941 stream-lined electric Yankee clipper. I tried out the scales and found that my involuntary host weighed over 195 pounds—a good deal of it around the middle. Oh, well, a few weeks of setting up exercises would take care of that. A cold shower and a brisk rub made me feel a little more presentable and I climbed shamelessly into Winnie's most manly tweeds.

"Are you catching the ten o'clock, dear?" Germaine called from her bedroom.

"No such luck!" I warned her. "Phone the office, will you, and tell them I'm feeling under the weather and won't be in till sometime tomorrow."

This seemed like a good chance to do some exploring—since the Rutherfords had temporarily abandoned the field—though I needn't have bothered since I had seen photographs of suburban houses like Pook's Hill in a score of different slick-paper pre-war magazines. There was the inevitable colonial-type dining-room, with dark wainscoting below smooth oyster-white plaster, electric candle-sconces, and the necessary array of family silver on the antiqued mahogany sideboard. The windows gave a vista of brown lawn, with the grass still blasted by winter. There was the inevitable chintzy living-room, with a permanently unemployed grand-piano, two or three safely second-rate paintings by safely first-rate defunct foreigners. There was the usual array of sofas, easy chairs, small, middle-sized and biggish tables, with lots of china ash-trays, and a sizable wood-burning fireplace. Of course, you entered the living-room by two steps down from the front hall and there was a separate up-two-steps-entrance to my den. And sure as death and taxes, there was a veritable down-stairs lavatory.

I slipped on my coat and hat and stepped out through a French window which led from the living-room to the inevitable paved stone terrace. There were galvanized iron fittings for a summer awning and in the center was a cute little bronze sun-dial. This had an exclamation point and the inscription, "Over the Yard-Arm" at the place where

noon should be, and a bronze cocktail glass instead of the sign for four p.m. All the way around the rest of the circle was written in heavy embossed capitals, "The Hell With It!"

My meditations on this facet of the Tompkins character—and I wondered whether I oughtn't to spell 'facet' with a 'u'—were interrupted by Myrtle.

"Oh, Mr. Tompkins," she called from the kitchen window, in complete repudiation of her earlier appearance as Watson, third lady's maid at Barony Castle, "the man from the kennels is here with Ponto. Where shall I tell him to take the dog?"

I hurried back indoors—there was still a chill in the air and I really prefer my trees with their clothes on—and found a gnarled little man who reeked of saddlesoap and servility.

"Well, sir, Mr. Tompkins," he beamed the Old Retainer at me. "That dog of yours had a close call, a mighty close call. Thought he was a sure-enough goner. Tried everything: injections, oxygen, iron lung, enema. No dice. Then yesterday afternoon he just lay down and went to sleep and I thought, 'My! Won't Mr. Tompkins feel bad!' But he woke up, large as life and twice as natural, and began carrying on so that I guess he wanted to come home to his folks. He's a mite weak, Mr. Tompkins, very weak I might say, but he'll get well quicker here than at my place and I'll pop in every other day to keep track of him. Never did see anything like the recovery that dog made in all my born days. Now about his bowels—"

I waited until he had to draw a breath and made swift to congratulate him on his professional skill. "I wouldn't have lost Ponto for a thousand dollars," I said. "Let's get him out of your car and up in my bedroom," I added. "He's been like a member of the family and—"

A series of deep bass barks interrupted me, followed by ominous sounds of a heavy body hurling itself recklessly around inside a small enclosed space.

"There!" said the vet. "He recognized your voice. Come on, Ponto. I'll fetch you. He's pretty weak, Mr. Tompkins, but he'll get strong fast if you feed him right."

The vet twinkled out the front door and returned shortly, leading a perfectly enormous coal-black Great Dane on a plaited leather leash. Ponto did not look very weak to me, but I've always been fond of dogs and I figured that kindness to animals might count in my favor. "Good dog," I condescended. "Poor old fellow!"

The poor old fellow gave a low but hungry growl and lunged for me with bared teeth, dragging the vet behind him like a dory behind a fishing schooner. I jumped into the den and slammed the door, while Ponto sniffed, snapped and grumbled on the far side of my defenses.

"Tell you what, doctor," I called through the panels. "Take him upstairs and put him in my room. It's the one to the right at the head of the stairs. He's just excited. Shut him in and as soon as he's calmed down I'll make him comfortable."

While this rather cowardly solution was being put into effect, I sat down and thought it over. Apparently Winnie had been the kind of man whose pet dog tried to rip his throat out. That was puzzling, since from what I remembered of him at school, he had if anything been only too amiable. I waited out the vet's last-minute report and instructions, and then rang the bell for the maid.

"Mary," I said, "will you help the doctor with his hat and coat and then take Ponto a bowl of water. The poor old fellow's had a rough time."

The vet departed and I listened while the maid went upstairs. Then there was a scream, the crash of breaking china and the sound of a door being slammed. I bounded up the steps to find Mary, white-faced and trembling, looking stupidly at the broken remains of a white china bowl and a sizeable puddle of water on the hardwood floor outside my bedroom.

The door of my wife's room burst open and Jimmie appeared with a wild "What on earth!"

"It's that dog, sir," gasped Myrtle. "When I come—came—in with the bowl of water like you said, there he was lying on—on—your bed, like a Human, and—and—"

"And what?" I demanded.

"And he was wearing your pyjamas, sir," she sobbed. "It's—it's—"

"Uncanny," Germaine supplied the word.

I gave a hollow laugh. "He probably remembers that he isn't allowed to lie on the beds, Mary, and may have dragged my pyjamas up there to lie on. Whenever I let him up on the furniture I always make him lie on some of my clothes."

"Oh," Myrtle said, suddenly calm. "Is that it? It was just that it looked sort of queer to see his legs in the pyjama trousers."

"Well, don't worry about it now, Myrtle," my wife remarked firmly. "I'm not surprised it gave you a shock. He's such a big dog. I'll go in and see that he's comfortable. Come on, Winnie! Let's take a look at him. What's the matter?" she added, noticing a certain reluctance in my attitude.

"Nothing much," I martyzed. "It's only that he flew for my throat when he got inside the door."

"Nonsense!" she replied in the firm tone of a woman who knows better and who, in any case, expects her husband not to be afraid of a mere infuriated Great Dane. "You know Ponto always puts his paws on your shoulders and licks your face every morning, as you taught him."

My rollicking laughter was a work of art. "Of course, that was it," I agreed, "and he'd been away from us so long that he was over-eager. Come on, let's see if we can't make the poor beast comfortable."

But I let her lead the way.

The poor beast was lying panting on my still unmade bed. The flowered Chinese silk pyjamas which I had worn at breakfast were indeed strangely twisted around its gaunt body. The coat was across the animal's shoulders and both of its hind-legs were sticking through one of the trouser-legs.

"There! Ponto! Poor old fellow!" cooed Jimmie in a voice which would have charmed snails from their shells.

Ponto gave a self-pitying whine and his tail thumped the pillow like an overseer's whip across the back of Uncle Tom. My wife patted the animal's head and Ponto positively drooled at her. She gently disentangled him from among the pyjamas and hung them up in the closet. As she turned toward the bed, he jumped to the floor, reared up, put both paws on her shoulders and licked her face convulsively, giving little whines and shiverings.

"Poor old fellow, poor old Ponto!" she crooned. "Was he glad to get home from the nasty old kennel? There!" And she massaged his ears. "Come on now, Ponto," she remarked more authoritatively, "say good morning to your master."

The answer was a grand diapason of a growl and the baring of a thicket of gleaming white fangs in my direction.

"Ponto!" she ordered, as the beast positively cringed. "Say good morning to the master!"

He slumped to the floor with the grace of a pole-axed calf and approached me slowly, ears back, hair bristling and teeth in evidence.

"Ponto!" Germaine's cry was positively totalitarian but the dog lunged at me and I barely had time to close the door in its face.

A few minutes later, Germaine emerged looking bewildered. "I've never known him to behave like this," she

said. "I don't like it. It's always been you he was so fond of and he barely tolerated me. Now he seems all mixed-up. After you left, he calmed right down and came back and licked my face all over again. What do you suppose is wrong with him. Can it be fits?"

I shook my head. "He doesn't act like fits," I said. "He's had a bad go of distemper and is probably suffering from shock. Dogs do get shock, you know. I remember in Psychology at Harvard they told us about a very intelligent St. Bernard dog which was shocked into complete hysteria by the supernatural. That is, they pulled a lamb chop across the floor by a thread concealed in a crack between the boards. The dog nearly had heart-failure when he saw a chop moving by itself."

"But what can we do?" she asked. "Let's send him back to the kennels until he's cured."

"Nope! From what Dr. Whatsisname—"

"Dalrymple."

"From what Dalrymple said, he'd started acting up at the kennels and he—the vet, that is—thought Ponto would be better off at home."

"But we can't have him going for you every time you use your room."

"Then I won't use it. I'll sleep in the guest-room," I added swiftly, lest she leap to feminine conclusions. "You might take him another bowl of water—he's all right with you—and spread the New York Times on the floor—and a damned good use for it—and bring out my clothes and things. He seems to have quite a leech for you and we'll just leave him there to think things over by himself."

"How about his food?" she asked. "Shouldn't he have a special diet?"

"No. I'll let him go hungry for a day or so. So long as he has plenty of water it won't hurt him. Then when he's weak enough so as not to be dangerous I'll bring him some nice dog-biscuits and warm milk and he'll learn to love me the best way, by the alimentary canal."

She looked at me closely, "You *do* look rocky," she said. "You've had a shock, too. Hadn't I better call the doctor?"

I shook my head. "No more doctors, please. I'm out of condition, I guess, and all this dodging Great Danes is hard on the nerves. I'll go down and mix myself a brandy-and-soda. You might join me when you've moved my things upstairs. We've got to talk over a lot of things."

When I finally managed to settle down in my den with a stiff drink I felt besieged, bewildered and backed up against the wall. There could be no reasonable doubt about it—*the dog knew!* Ponto knew that I was an interloper, that the real Winnie Tompkins no longer existed, that a stranger was masquerading in his body and clothes. The uncanny instinct of a dog had led him to the truth when even Winnie's wife had been deceived.

This was a new twist in the maze. I couldn't imagine the Master of the Rat-Race watching with scientific detachment to see whether Frank Jacklin would make it or would be disqualified in the first round. Of one thing I was certain, unless I could establish some kind of personal understanding with Ponto, suspicion would gather around me. For the moment, Germaine did not doubt that I was her husband: my conduct had puzzled her but she had lived with Winnie so long that it was probable that she no longer specifically noticed him. Virginia Rutherford would be more dangerous—she was a woman scorned and she had been tricked out of an intrigue. She had every motive for digging out or even for inventing the truth, but I had given myself a good excuse to keep her at arm's length. She couldn't force her way into my clubs. I would tell my office staff to keep her away from me, and she couldn't be so ill-bred as to thrust herself into my home. If I could appease Ponto and avoid Virginia, I had a fair chance of getting away with it.

"Beg pardon, sir!" It was Myrtle.

"Yes, Mary?"

"Mrs. Rutherford is back, sir. She wants to see you."

"Tell her I am not at home," I replied in a clear carrying tone. "And that I never will be at home to her."

"Oh, yes, you will." It was the red-head. She was wearing a long mink coat and carrying a short automatic pistol. "Like it or not, Winnie, *we* are going to have a talk—now." She turned to the startled maid. "And don't you try phoning the police, Myrtle," she added, "or the first thing you will hear is this pistol going pop at Mr. Winfred Tompkins of New York City and Bedford Hills."

"That's all right, Mary," I added. "Don't call the police. Tell Mrs. Tompkins that I'm busy. Mrs. Rutherford and I wish to have a conversation."

CHAPTER 5

As the door to the room slammed convulsively behind Myrtle, Mrs. Rutherford relaxed, laid the automatic on the sofa between us, and flung back her mink coat. She was an appetizing little number, if you like 'em red-haired, well-developed and mad through and through.

Instinctively, I started to reach for the gun but was checked by her laugh.

"Take it, by all means," she said. "It's not loaded. I only needed it for the maid. Tell me, Winnie, have you got her on your string, too? The maid made or undone, as they used to say."

"Virginia," I said firmly, "I told you earlier this morning that we were through. There's nothing more to be said about it. It's finished, done, kaput! All's well that ends."

She laughed again, and looked at me closely. In spite of myself, I began pulling nervously at the lobe of my left ear, a habit of mine when confused which has always irritated my Dorothy.

"There!" Virginia said finally, "that's it!"

Her voice had a note of finality with a touch of total triumph that I found disturbing.

"Well, have you anything to say?" I asked.

"Have *you* anything to say?"

"I've already said it, Virginia. Nice as you are and beautiful as you are, we're washed up. It won't work and we both know it. So why not shake hands and quit friends?"

She took my proffered hand in hers but, instead of shaking it, examined it carefully.

"Very clever," she murmured. "You've even got that little mole at the base of your thumb."

"Of course I have. It's been there since birth."

"Very, *very*, clever, Winnie," she continued, "but it won't do, my Winnie, because you see you aren't my Winnie at all. You're a total stranger."

"I've changed," I admitted. "I'm trying to be half-way decent."

"Whoever wanted Winnie to be half-way decent?" she mused. "Nobody. He was much pleasanter as he was—a rich, friendly boob. As for you, whoever you are, I'm on to your game. You aren't Winfred Tompkins and you know it."

I put some heavy sarcasm into my reply. "How did you ever guess, Mrs. Rutherford?"

She laughed airily, helped herself to a cigarette and leaned forward while I lighted it so that I could not help seeing deep into the straining V of her blouse.

"Lots of things. In the first place, you call me 'Virginia' when we're alone instead of 'Bozo' as you always used to do."

"I stopped calling you 'Bozo' when I made up my mind—" I began.

"Nuts to you, Buddy," she rejoined. "Then you kept pulling at your ear as though you were milking a cow, while I was needling you. Winnie never did that. When he was in a spot, he always reached in his pocket and jingled his change or, as a desperate measure, twiddled his keys."

"Don't judge my habits by my hang-overs," I insisted. "I'm not feeling well and I've had a sort of psychic shock."

"Winnie never said 'psychic' in his life, poor lamb," she observed. "He didn't know what it meant. No, I don't know what your game is but I'm on to you and we're going to be real buddies from now on or—"

"Or what?"

"The police," she observed quietly, "take a dim view of murder in this state. Now I'm willing to be broad-minded. Winnie was a louse who had it coming to him, I guess. I was playing him for a quick divorce and marriage. Three million dollars is a lot of money, even in these days, and it would have been nice to have been married to it. But it's even nicer this way, I guess."

The decanter was within reach. I poured myself another drink. "Have some?" I asked.

"And why not? What's yours is mine, and we both need it."

"Why did you say it was nicer this way, Mrs. Rutherford?" I inquired.

"Virginia to you, Winnie. It's because now I don't have to marry you and I still have a pipe-line to the Tompkins millions."

"So you are going in for blackmail," I observed. "Suppose I threatened to divorce Jimmie and marry you. After all, I still could."

"A girl has her pride," she murmured. "Not that I'd mind having fun with you, Winnie—as I think I'd better call you. But a wife can't give testimony against her husband and I think I'd rather like to be able to give testimony if needed. Besides, a husband has too many opportunities to help the undertaker. There are accidents in bath-tubs and garages, medicines get mixed up in the bathroom cabinet and there is always the old-fashioned hatchet. No, since you've managed to get rid of the other Winnie, somehow, I think I'll keep a safe distance and my silence, as long as you make it worth my while."

"Suppose I won't play?" I suggested.

"Then I'll go to the police or the F.B.I.—they're supposed to catch kidnapers, aren't they?—and tell them what I know."

I stood up. This would be easier than I had expected.

"Okay, Virginia," I said, "go right ahead. There's the telephone. You can use it to call the Secret Service for all I care. See what luck you have with your story, when my wife is here to testify that I'm Winnie Tompkins."

Her face paled and her eyes narrowed angrily. "Jimmie too?" she asked. "Then you're both in it!"

"We're both in what?"

The door opened and Germaine Tompkins stood in the entrance.

Virginia Rutherford looked trapped and she instinctively pulled her mink back over her shoulders.

"Nothing, Jimmie," she said at last. "I was foolish enough to hope that if I came back and had a talk alone with Winnie, we could pick up where we left off. He's been acting so strangely that he doesn't seem like himself at all. And so are you. That's what I meant by saying that you were both in it."

"Virginia," my wife said firmly, "my husband told you to stay out of this house—and it's my home, too—and now I find you here. Please go or I'll call the police."

The two women exchanged appraising glances which suggested that they were both thoroughly enjoying the touch of melodrama that had come into their well-fed lives.

"No, it's my fault for letting her in," I said. "She sent in word by Mary—"

"You mean Myrtle."

"—that she would like to see me. I agreed to do so, so you can't blame her. We talked things over and decided that it's all off—a few moments of madness, but that's all, and not worth wrecking two marriages for. Isn't that so, Mrs. Rutherford?"

Virginia shook her head. "No, Winnie, it is not so. Jimmie, I came here with that gun. It wasn't loaded but the next time it will be. I made Myrtle or whatever her name is show me in and I told her I would shoot Winnie if she gave the alarm. Then I told him what I know about him."

"And what is that?" my wife asked.

"That he is not Winnie at all," Virginia declared. "That he is an imposter, that he and perhaps you had done away with poor old Winnie. I told him that I wouldn't tell his secret if he paid me to keep silent. And he told me to call the police."

My wife went over to her and took her hand. "Poor, darling Virginia," she murmured, "why don't you go away and have a good rest? You've got yourself all worked up for a nervous breakdown. Of course it's Winnie. I'm married to him and I ought to know my own husband, shouldn't I? You've simply got run down and all, with rationing and war-work. Why don't you let Jerry send you for a few weeks to the Hartford Sanctuary for psychoanalysis and a good rest?"

Virginia dashed my wife's hand away. "In other words, you think I'm crazy!" she snapped.

"No, but I do think you're hysterical. This is Winnie, I'm Jimmie and you're Virginia Rutherford. We've all been letting ourselves get over-emotional and this war is a strain on everybody. Don't worry. Jerry can fix it for you quite easily and I—we both will be glad to help pay for it, if you're worried about the money. After all," Germaine added wryly, "the whole thing is pretty much of a family affair, isn't it? Let's keep it that way."

Mrs. Rutherford reached over and grabbed the gun from the sofa.

"All right, Germaine Tompkins, murderess," she grated. "If that's the way you're going to play it, I'll play too. Don't worry about my mind. Start thinking about the electric chair. Remember, in this state they execute women who kill their husbands."

Jimmie waited until the door closed behind the doctor's wife. Then she turned to me with a curious expression of weariness.

"Poor man!" she remarked. "You have got yourself into a bad mess, haven't you?"

I nodded.

"It didn't seem like one while I was getting into it," I said. "It's only now when I'm trying to get things straightened out that it seems so awful."

"Let's see," she continued. "How many women is it you've been trying to keep away from each other? There's myself, of course, but wives don't count any more, do they? And there's Virginia Rutherford and Myrtle, and there was that blonde actress we met at Martha's Vineyard last summer, and is it one or two girls at the office?"

Here was where I could object with complete sincerity. "I swear that I've not been fooling with any of the office girls," I said.

"I know," Jimmie agreed wisely. "You always used to tell me that it was considered bad for business to play with the help but after I saw the way you went for Myrtle I decided that there were exceptions to every rule."

"Nobody in the office," I repeated. "I swear it."

"Then perhaps it was the office next door. Maybe you brokers have an exchange system for taking on each other's stenographers—charge it to business expenses for getting information about each other's dealings—but I know I've heard the name Briggs mentioned somehow in your connection."

"The name means absolutely nothing to me," I insisted. "If it will make you any happier I'll admit to a hundred women but I'm through with all that sex-stuff. From now on, I'm going to be a one-woman man."

Germaine faced me with an air of resolution. "Would you mind giving me a drink of brandy?" she asked. "I've something to say to you and I'm afraid you won't like it."

I went to the portable bar and poured her a pony of Courvoisier.

"Here you are. Down the hatch! And now what is it you want to tell me."

"Believe me, Winnie," she said, "it's not easy for me. But I'd better say it anyhow. I can't keep on suppressing it. Who *are* you?"

"What's that?"

"Who *are* you?" she repeated. "You look like my husband but you don't talk like him. His clothes fit you but Virginia Rutherford is *quite* right—you aren't Winnie Tompkins."

"How did you guess?"

"Don't think I'll give you away," she continued. "I won't because you must have had a terribly important reason for doing whatever you have done. You seem to be in deep trouble of some kind. I—I'd like to help you, if I can. Don't think I'm hard on my husband. It's been years since we—oh, you know. I married him for his money and I still don't know why he married me. Yes, I do, but I've never liked to admit it. He'd made a lot of money in the market and had built this house. He needed a wife the way he needed an automobile, a portable bar, a Capchart, a thoroughbred Great Dane and a membership in the Pond Club. I was available, at a price, which he met—but that's all there it to our story."

"Poor Jimmie!" I sympathized. "We're both lost, I guess. No, I'm not Winnie but I don't know who else I could possibly be. You see, less than twenty-four hours ago I was a lieutenant-commander on a light carrier in the North Pacific and—"

Germaine slowly withdrew her hand from mine.

"Oh!" she exclaimed softly. "Oh Winnie! Poor old idiot! I'll take care of you and see that you get over this. Wait, I'll call the doctor right away. The Hartford Sanctuary's a very nice place, and I can come over every week to —"

I shook my head. "You'll do nothing of the kind, my dear," I ordered. "No doctor can help me on this one. Besides," I added, "how do you know that I wasn't batty before and have just come to my senses."

Her eyes were frightened. "All right, dear," she agreed. "I like you better this way, anyhow."

CHAPTER 6

"Thanks, Jimmie," I replied. "I'm going to try to stay this way."

My wife sat down beside me and studied me closely. "You *look* different," she remarked. "To me, at any rate. You're sort of coming to a focus. If only—. You're so different and—strange."

Here was my chance to recover lost ground.

"As near as I can make out," I said, "I've had a kind of amnesia. I know you, of course, and my name, and that this is my house and that Ponto is my dog, even though he tried to bite me. I know the Pond Club and the Harvard Club, but that's about all I seem able to remember. I can't recall where I work or where I bank, or who my friends are or what kind of car I drive or what I was doing before yesterday afternoon."

She relaxed at the holy scientific word 'amnesia,' as though to name a mystery explained it.

"But you were saying something about being on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific," she objected.

I laughed. "That must have been part of a very vivid dream I was having in a chair in the bar at the Pond, when Ranty Tolan woke me up. It was one of those dreams which seemed so real that real life seemed like a dream. It still does a bit. That's where my alleged mind got stalled and I'm still floundering around. Help me, won't you?"

"You didn't seem to need much help remembering Virginia Rutherford," she remarked, "but I'll try to fill in some of the gaps for you. You have your own firm—Tompkins, Wasson and Cone—at No. 1 Wall Street. It's sort of combination brokerage office and investment counsel. You once told me that your specialty was finding nice rich old ladies and helping them re-invest their unearned millions. You bank at the National City Farmers and your car is a black '41 Packard coupe."

"That helps a lot," I thanked her. "Now how about my friends? If I go to town tomorrow, I ought to be on the lookout for them. Business isn't so good right now that I can afford to let myself be run in as an amnesiac while my partners look after the loot."

She frowned. "I don't know much about your friends in town, since so many of them are in the war," she admitted. "There's Merry Vail, of course, who roomed with you at Harvard, but he hasn't come out here much since Adela divorced him after that business in Bermuda. Sometimes you talk about the men you see at the Club but I've never been able to keep track of the Phils and Bills and Neds and Joes and Dicks and Harrys. You'll have to find your own way there. At the office, of course, there's Graham Wasson and Phil Cone, your partners, but you won't have much trouble once you're at your desk. Wasson is dark and plump and Cone is fair and plump and they're both about five years younger than you are."

"The office doesn't worry me," I agreed. "I can handle anything that develops there."

"You know, Winnie," Jimmie remarked, "if I were you I wouldn't try to go to town for a few days. The office will run itself and you need a rest. I don't know much about amnesia but I've always heard that rest and kind treatment—"

"Uh-uh!" I dissented emphatically. "Worst thing in the world for it. I've always heard that the thing to do is to go back over the ground until you come to the thing that gave you the original shock and then it all comes back to you. If I stick around Bedford Hills I'll just get panicky over not being sure whether I remember things or not. I'll go

to town in the morning and see if I can't find myself."

She laughed, as wives laugh. "You may be a changed man," she announced, "but you're still stubborn as a mule. Tell me, to change the subject, you say that you remember me. Tell me what I seem like to you, now that you've changed, as you say, aside from age, sex, scars and distinguishing marks, if any, and marital status."

I closed my eyes and thought of Dorothy as she had been that last night in Hartford before she walked out and I decided to join the Navy as a Reserve Officer.

"You are piano music on a summer night—something Scarlatti or Mozart—thin, cool, precise, gay. You are apple blossoms against a Berkshire hillside. You are the smoke of fallen leaves climbing into the cool October sky. You are surf on a sandy beach, with the gulls wheeling and the white-caps racing past the lighthouse on the point. You are bobsleds and hot coffee and dough-nuts by a roaring wood fire. And you're a lost child, with two pennies in your fist, looking in the window of a five-cent candy-shop."

Germaine relaxed. "Except for that last bit, Winnie, you made me sound like a year-round vacation resort or an ad for a new automobile. You've mentioned almost everything about me except the one thing I obviously am."

"Which is?"

"A simple, rather stupid woman, I guess," Germaine sighed, "who's had everything in life except what she wants."

"All women are simple," I pontificated, "since what they want is simple."

"You moron!" she blazed. "Don't you see that no woman knows what she wants until she is made to want it. You ... you never made me want anything simple, except to crack you over the head with something."

After she had left, I sat for a long time. There seemed to be nothing to do or say. Winnie's domestic life was still in too much of a snarl for me to do the obvious thing and follow Germaine upstairs, and into her bedroom, lock the door, and kiss her tear-stained face and tell her that I was sorry I had hurt her.... Before it would be safe to accept her gambits I must first explore my business connections. Hadn't my wife said something about girls in the office?

* * * *

My first stop in the morning, after I had been careful to take a late commuting train in to the city in order to avoid business men who were sure to know and greet Winnie Tompkins, was the Pond Club.

Tammy was behind the bar and as soon as I entered he turned and mixed me a powerful pick-me-up. I drained it with the usual convulsive effort and then pretended to relax.

"Thanks, Tammy," I said. "That's what I needed."

"Good morning, Mr. Tompkins," he remarked. "I'm glad to see you back. You were looking a trifle seedy—if you don't mind my saying so, sir—when you were in here Monday afternoon."

"I took a day off in the country and got rested up," I told him. "I feel fine now. Anybody in the Club?"

"Not just now, sir. A couple of gentlemen were asking for you yesterday afternoon—that would be Tuesday. That was Commander Tolan, sir, and a friend of his, a Mr. Harcourt his name was, who hasn't been here before. They asked me if you were at your home but I just laughed. 'Him gone home?' I said. 'Not while he has a girl and a flat on Park Avenue.' Begging your pardon, Mr. Tompkins, I knew you didn't want to be bothered wherever you were and so I said the first thing that came to my head."

"You're doing fine, Tammy," I assured him. "I don't want to see anybody for a couple of days. Now then, I'd like you to tell me what happened here Monday afternoon. It's the first time in my life I've ever drawn a complete blank."

"Well, sir," the Club steward recited. "You came in about two o'clock and sat down in your usual chair—that one in the corner. You said something about having had lunch at the Harvard Club, sir, and had a couple of Scotch and sodas here."

"Was I tight, Tammy?"

"Not to call tight. You didn't show it, and after a time you went to sleep, like you was tired out. You was still sleeping when Mr. Morgan, Mr. Davis and Commander Tolan came in. That would be a little after three o'clock, sir. They made some talk about how you were sleeping through the noise they made, that it would take a bomb to wake you. Then, sir, I guess you had some kind of a dream. You began talking like and thrashing with your arms and making noises. So Commander Tolan he said, 'Jesus we can't drink with that going on' and went and shook you by the shoulder until you woke up. You'd been dreaming all right, Mr. Tompkins, because you talked wild when you woke up, about Alaska and where were you. The others joked a bit about it after you left but I'd take my oath, sir, that you weren't really what might be called tight, Mr. Tompkins."

"Thanks a million, Tammy," I said. "That's a load off my mind. I drew a blank and didn't know where I'd been or what I'd been doing. Can you let me have some money? I'm a bit short of cash."

"Of course, sir. How much will you need?"

"A couple of hundred will do," I told him, "if you have that much."

"That will be easy, sir. If you'll just sign a check, like the house rules says, I'll get it from the safe."

He nearly caught me. Signing checks was something I simply could not do until I had learned to imitate Winnie Tompkins' signature. I had tried in the guest-room at Bedford Hills, the previous evening, and found that my original signature as Frank E. Jacklin was completely unchanged by my transmigration, and that my own copy-desk scrawl was the only handwriting I could commit. I had burned the note-paper on which I had made the crucial experiments and flushed the ashes down the toilet. One of my objects in coming to the Pond had been to see if I couldn't get money by simply initialing a chit.

I hastily looked in my bill-fold. There was still a fair amount of money left. It would last me until I found a way to draw on Winnie's bank-account.

"Never mind, after all," I told Tammy. "I guess I have enough to last me until I get down to the office. If anybody asks for me, you haven't seen me since Monday and don't know where I am."

"Very good, sir," he agreed. "I'll take any messages that come for you, sir, and not let on I've set eyes on you."

My next stop was at an old hangout of mine and Dorothy's from my early newspaper days: a place on East 53rd Street, where you can get a good meal if you have the money to pay for it and the time to wait for it—and I had both. I knew that none of Winnie's friends would be seen dead in the place and I didn't want to try lunch at the Harvard Club, where I'd have to sign the dining-room order or the bar-check. The place was reasonably uncrowded—it was not quite noon—and I had a pleasant lunch.

It was a little after one o'clock when I reached the Harvard Club. The door-man glanced at my face and automatically stuck a little ivory peg in the hole opposite the name of Tompkins on the list of members. I checked my hat and coat and strolled through the sitting-rooms into the large lounge-library beside the dining-room. A couple of men nodded and smiled as I passed them, so I nodded back and said, "Hi!" in a conversational tone. In the lounge I found a chair and a copy of the World-Telegram, so I decided to catch up with the war-news. The German Armies were beginning to crumble but there was still talk of a stand along the Elbe and Hitler was reported fortifying the mountain-districts of Southern Germany into a redoubt for a last Valhalla Battle. The Pacific news was good. The fighting on Okinawa was going our way and the clean-up in the Philippines was well in hand. The Navy Department discounted enemy reports of heavy damage to American warships by Jap suicide-pilots but, as an old Navy P.R.O., I could tell that it had been plenty. I'd heard about the Kamikazes from some of our pilots who had seen them off Leyte and I had no doubt that they were doing a job on the 7th Fleet. Roosevelt had gone South for a couple of weeks rest at Warm Springs, Georgia, and Ed Stettinius was in the final throes of organizing the United

Nations Conference at San Francisco—

"Hi, Winnie? Don't you speak to your old friends any more?"

I looked up to see a lean, wolfish-looking man, with a gray moustache, a slightly bald head and definitely Bond Street clothes.

"Oh, hullo!" I said and returned to reading the paper.

The newspaper was firmly taken out of my hands and the man sat down beside me.

"We've got to have a talk," he said.

"Why? What's happened?"

"There's been a lot of talk about you running around town in the last twenty-four hours, Winnie. None of the other alleged friends we know had the guts to tell you. But I thought your room-mate—"

"So you're Merry Vail," I said stupidly.

"You're in worse shape than I thought you were, Winnie," he replied. "Yes, I'm Merriwether Vail who started his life-long career of rescuing Winfred Tompkins from blondes and booze at Harvard in 1916. Now, if you'll just crawl out of your alcoholic coma and listen to me for five minutes before you take off for your next skirt, you'll learn something to your advantage."

"How about a drink, Merry?" I asked, to keep in character.

"Not before five, so help me, and you'd better lay off liquor till you hear this. Here it is. There's a story going the rounds that the F.B.I. is after you. At any rate, at least one obvious G-man has been reported in full cry on your foot-prints."

I sat up, startled. This was too much, even for purgatory. What *had* Winnie been up to?

"What am I supposed to have done, Merry?" I asked. "Trifled with the Mann Act? Told fibs on my income tax return? Failed to notify the local draft board that I was taking the train to New York? Bought black market nylons for my mistress? or what?"

Vail looked mysterious. "For all I know I may be letting myself in for Alcatraz, old man, but the dope is that you've been violating the Espionage Act, communicating with the enemy, or stealing official secrets."

I leaned back in my chair and shook with laughter. "Of all the pure, unadulterated b.s. I've ever heard! I give you my word of honor as a Porcellian that there's not a syllable of truth in it."

Vail looked increasingly distressed. "If you're really innocent, you'd better be careful. Ten-to-one you haven't an alibi, and you'll need a lawyer. Slip me a bill now and retain me as your counsel. No, this isn't a gag. Something's cooking, even if it's only mistaken identity, and I've seen enough of the law in war-time to know that you'll be better off with the old cry, 'I demand to see my attorney,' when they march you down to the F.B.I. headquarters to answer at few questions."

"Thanks, Merry," I said, "and here's twenty bucks to go on with. If the police are looking for me, I'd better go down to my office and see that things are apple-pie before they lock up the brains of our outfit. Besides," I added, "you've just given me an idea of how I can make a hell of a lot of money."

CHAPTER 7

Tompkins, Wasson & Cone maintained sincere-looking offices on one of the upper floors of No. 1 Wall Street. The rooms were carefully furnished in dark wood and turkey-red upholstery, in a style calculated to reassure elderly ladies of great wealth that the firm was careful and conservative.

The girl at the reception desk looked as though she had graduated with honor from Wellesley in the class of 1920 and still had it—pince-nez and condescension—but she was thoroughly up-to-date in her office-technique.

"Oh, Mr. Tompkins," she murmured in a clear, low voice, "there's a gentleman waiting to see you in the, customer's room, a Mr. Harcourt. He's been here since ten o'clock this morning."

"He's had no lunch?" I inquired.

She shook her head.

I clucked my tongue. "We can't have our customers starve to death, can we? Send out for a club sandwich and some hot coffee. Give me five minutes to take a look at my mail and then send him in. When the food arrives, send that in, too."

She blinked her hazel eyes behind her pince-nez to show that she understood, and I walked confidently down to the end of the corridor to where a "Mr. Tompkins" stared at me conservatively from a glazed door.

My office lived up to my fondest dream of Winnie. It was an ingenious blend of the 1870's and functional furniture—like a cocktail of port wine and vodka. There were electric clocks, a silenced stock-ticker in a glass-covered mahogany coffin, an elaborate Sheraton radio with short-wave reception, tuned in on WQXR, and desks and chairs and divans and a really good steel engraving showing General Grant receiving Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, with a chart underneath to explain who was who in the picture.

The desk I was glad to note, was bare except for an electric clock-calendar which told me that it was 3:12 p.m. of April 4, 1945, and a handsome combination humidior, cigarette case and automatic lighter in aluminum and synthetic tortoise-shell. A glance out the window gave me a reassuring glimpse of the spire of Trinity Church. There was a single typed memo on the glass top of the desk, which read: "Mr. Harcourt, 10:13 a.m. Would not state business. Will wait."

I pushed one of the array of buttons concealed underneath the edge of the desk and a door opened to admit a largish blonde in a tight-fitting sweater.

"Yes, Mr. Tompkins?"

"Please have Mr. Harcourt sent in," I said, "And when he comes, bring your note-book and take a stenographic record of our conversation and—er—what's your name?"

She raised her well-plucked eyebrows. "I'm Eleanor Roosevelt, my parents named me Arthurjean—after both of them—Arthurjean—Miss Briggs to you!"

"Very well, Miss Briggs, tell Mr. Harcourt I'll see him now."

A moment later, she reappeared holding a card in her fingers as though it was a live cockroach. "Sure you want to see this?" she asked.

The card read: "Mr. A. J. Harcourt, Special Agent. Federal Bureau of Investigation, U. S. Department of Justice, U. S. Court House, Foley Square, New York 23, N. Y."

"Of course," I replied, "I've been expecting him for some time."

A. J. Harcourt was neat but not gaudy: a clean-cut, Hart, Shaffner and Marx tailored man of about thirty-five, with that indefinable family resemblance to J. Edgar Hoover which always worries me about the F.B.I.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harcourt," I said pleasantly, "and what can I do for the F.B.I.?"

Harcourt shook my hand, took a seat, refused a cigarette and cast a doubtful glance over his shoulder at Arthurjean Briggs, who was working semi-silently away at a stenotype machine.

"Oh, that's my secretary," I explained. "I always have her take a record of important conversations in this office. I hope the machine doesn't disturb you, Mr. Harcourt."

"If it's all right with you it's all right with me," he said grudgingly. "I thought perhaps you'd rather have this private."

"Not in the least," I replied. "Miss Briggs is the soul of discretion and I can imagine nothing we could talk about that I wouldn't want her to hear."

The G-Man looked as though he was worrying over whether he ought to call Washington for permission. They hadn't taught him this one in the F.B.I. academy of finger-printing, marksmanship, shadowing and wire-tapping.

"By the way, Mr. Harcourt," I added, "I just learned as I came in that you've been waiting for me since ten this morning. It's after three now so I took the liberty of sending out for a sandwich and some coffee for you. I thought you might like a bite of lunch while you are talking with me."

The Special Agent looked as surprised as though he had found Hoover's finger-prints on the murder-gun, but he nodded gamely.

"Here it is now," I remarked, as there was a knock on the door and a knowing-looking boy placed an appealing tray-load of sandwiches, pickles and coffee in front of Mr. Harcourt.

"Now you go right ahead and eat your lunch," I urged. "Ask me for any information in my possession and you shall have it. And of course I'll have Miss Briggs send a complete transcript of our talk to you at F.B.I. headquarters by registered mail. First of all, if you don't mind, would you show me your official identification and let Miss Briggs take down the number and so on. It's always best to put these things in the record, isn't it?"

The G-Man gulped and produced a battered identity card, complete with finger-prints, number, Hoover's signature and a photograph which would have justified his immediate arrest on suspicion of bank-robbery.

"I imagine, Mr. Harcourt," I remarked, "that you've had plenty of time in the last five hours to question members of my staff about whatever it is you think they might know about my business."

He looked up, almost pathetically. "I asked a few questions," he admitted. "This is just an informal inquiry. Nothing for Grand Jury action—yet."

I didn't like that last word.

"Do you think I ought to call my lawyer in before I proceed with our talk?" I asked. "I resent your reference to Grand Jury action. So far, I don't even know what you wish to see me about and you have just made a libelous statement in front of a reliable witness. Is that the way J. Edgar Hoover trains his Gestapo?"

"Come on, Harcourt, let's get on with it!" I interrupted. "I'm a busy man and you've wasted five hours of the time my taxes help to pay for, just waiting to take more of my time."

He pulled a black leather notebook out of his pocket and consulted it.

"The Bureau was asked to interrogate you, Mr. Tompkins, on behalf of another government agency."

"Which? Internal Revenue? W.P.B.? The S.E.C.?"

"No sir, it was none of those. I'm not at liberty to tell you which one. I am simply instructed to ask you what you know about U.S.S. Alaska and naval dispositions in the North Pacific."

I leaned back and laughed. "Now I get it," I said. "That's O.N.I. and that triple-plated ass, Ranty Tolan, trying to

win the war in the bar-rooms of New York. It all goes back to a dream I had while I was dozing at the Pond Club Monday afternoon. Something about the U.S.S. Alaska being blown up off the Aleutians. Tolan was there when I woke up and I passed a few remarks about my dream before I was fully awake, if you know what I mean. That's all there is to it, Mr. Harcourt."

The Special Agent made a number of hen-tracks in his note-book.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Tompkins," he said. "No doubt you'll be able to explain things if my chief wants to call you in. I don't think my chief believes in dreams. Not that kind of dream. Not in war-time."

I laughed again. "I'm afraid I can't help that. So far as I am concerned, the F.B.I. can believe in my dream or stick it in the files."

Harcourt coughed. "It's not easy working with O.N.I. or other intelligence outfits," he said. "They never tell us anything. The trouble with your dream seems to be that the general public isn't supposed to know that the U.S.S. Alaska is in commission and that the Navy department has had no word from her since last Saturday."

"Don't let that worry you," I said. "If she was anywhere near the Kuriles, she'd keep radio silence, specially off Paramushiro."

"Oh!" Harcourt remarked. "O.N.I. didn't say anything about Paramushiro. Thank you, Mr. Tompkins. We'll be in touch with you, off and on."

He rose, very politely, shook hands again, thanked me for the food, nodded to Miss Briggs and made a definitely Grade A exit.

His steps died away down the corridor. Miss Briggs waited until he was out of earshot then turned to me. "You God damned fool!" she said fondly. "You had him bluffed until you talked about Paramushiro. Why did you admit anything?"

I looked up at her broad, pleasant face.

"So you've made a monkey out of me. I alibied you up and down. Listen, Winnie, the F.B.I. have been all over the joint since early yesterday. We were warned not to whisper a word to you. There was an agent waiting to grill me when I got home last night. I told him you'd been spending the week-end with me."

"You told him—" I was startled.

"Sure! Why not? He wasn't interested in my morals. I told him about our place up in the fifties and gave you a complete alibi from Friday close of business until Monday noon. And now you have to make like a Nazi with the ships in the Pacific. Say, what is it you've supposed to have done—kissed MacArthur?"

"Damned if I know, Miss Briggs. That's part of the trouble."

"Lay off that 'Miss Briggs' stuff. That was to punish you for giving me the fish-eye when you came in. I'm your Arthurjean and the market's closed so you'd better catch the subway uptown with me and I'll cook you a steak dinner at our place."

This was too deep water for hesitation, so I took the plunge. Taking my hat and coat I told the genteel receptionist that I'd be back in the morning. I waited for Arthurjean at the foot of the elevators and followed her lead, into the East Side subway and up to the 51st Street station, on to "our place."

It was very discreet—an old brown-stone front converted into small apartments. There was no doorman and an automatic elevator prevented any intrusive check on the comings and goings of the tenants. The third-floor front had been made into a pleasant little two-room suite—a "master's bedroom" (Why not 'mistress's?' I thought) with a double-bed, dresser and chairs, and an array of ducks which revealed the true Tompkins touch. There was a small sitting-dining room as well, and a kitchenette with a satisfactory array of bottles in the Frigidaire and a reasonable amount of groceries.

Arthurjean took off her hat and coat, fixed me a good stiff drink and then disappeared into the bath-room. After a good deal of splashing and gurgling, she reappeared clad in maroon satin pyjamas.

"There," she said, "now I feel better."

I smiled at her. "Here's to Arthurjean!" I said.

"Nuts to Arthurjean," she replied. "How about Winnie? You've always been swell to me, and you know it. I don't care if you're a louse or a souse. You can always come to me any time you're in trouble and I'll fix you up. Now you're in trouble with the cops, so how about me helping you? Huh?"

"You're a good kid," I said truthfully, for Arthurjean was indeed one of God's own sweet tarts. "The truth is I'm in all kinds of a jam. You see, I can't seem to remember what I've been doing before last Monday. It's sort of like loss of memory, only worse. This F.B.I. thing is only one of my headaches."

She looked at me questioningly. "So you don't remember where you were before Monday?" she asked. She slouched across the room, leaned down and gave me a hearty kiss. "Will that help you remember? It was like I told that detective. You and me were right here in this place over Easter and don't forget it."

I sighed. I liked Arthurjean, though she was as corned-beef and cabbage to Germaine's caviar and champagne. "Okay," I said. "I won't forget it."

"Attaboy!" she agreed. "Now that we've got that settled, suppose you tell me where the hell you really were over the week-end. You stood me up Friday night and today's the first time I've set eyes on you since you left the office Friday morning. Boy, you may have some explaining to do to the F.B.I. but it's nothing to what you got to explain to momma."

CHAPTER 8

"And so, Arthurjean," I concluded, "my guess is that for some crazy reason it's up to me to take up where Winnie left off and try to do a good job with the hand he's dealt himself."

She remained silent, hunched on the floor beside me, with her maroon pyjamas straining visibly and a pile of cigarette butts in the ash-tray at her side.

"Give me a break," I pleaded. "When I tried to tell my wife—Winnie's wife—Mrs. Tompkins, that is—all she could think of was to send me off to a plush-lined booby-hatch until I was sane again. The others—at least Virginia Rutherford—are beginning to suspect that something is wrong and that damned dog knows it. So be original and pretend that I might be telling the truth."

She didn't answer. Instead, she stood up, stretched, strolled over to the kitchenette and mixed us both two good stiff drinks.

"Mud in your eye!" she said.

"Glad to see you on board!"

"I don't see why not," she observed conversationally. "I don't pretend to be smart and I know that the other girls in the office think I'm nothing but a tramp because I don't pretend I don't like men, but I'm damned if I think that Winnie, who is one of God's sweetest dumb-bells, could have dreamed up anything as screwy as this."

"As I remember him, he wasn't any too bright," I said.

"Skip it! He wasn't dumb in business. He picked up a couple of million bucks and gave them a good home in his

safe-deposit box. He wasn't so hot on music and books and art—except for his damned ducks—but he was a lot of fun. He liked a good time and he liked a girl to have a good time. He should have been born in one of those Latin countries where the women do all the work and the men play guitars, drink and make love."

I drew a deep breath. I had won my first convert. I knew what Paul of Tarsus felt when he met up with Timothy. I thought of Mahomet and Fatima, Karl Marx and Bakunin, Hitler and Hess. Crazy though the whole world would consider me, here was one human being who could listen to my story without phoning for an ambulance.

"Tell me about this Frank Jacklin," Arthurjean remarked. "I don't get all the angles about him and this Dorothy. Seems to me you—Winnie, that is—told me he was the guy she'd had a sort of crush on at school. Winnie was still sort of sore about it twenty years later."

"It's hard for me to be fair," I admitted. "Jacklin was a big shot at school and may have had a swelled head. Winnie wasn't so hot then—nice but with too much money. Jacklin's people were poor, by comparison that is. He got through Yale, slid out into the newspaper game, held his job, married a girl, had a bust-up with his wife and joined the Navy as a reserve officer after she walked out on him. The Navy assigned him to P.R.O. work and sent him to the Pacific."

"He sounds like a heel," she observed, "leaving his wife like that. Tell me more about her. Is she pretty?"

I thought a long time. "I don't quite know," I said finally. "I never knew. She was necessary to me, long after I was necessary to her. She had a mole on her left hip and a gruff way of talking when she was really fond of me. I guess she got tired of living in Hartford and took it out on me."

"Any kids?"

I shook my head vigorously. "Cost too much on a newspaper salary. She said she didn't want any until we could afford them. I was fool enough to believe her. Then when we could afford them she didn't want them. Can't say I blame her."

"Did she make you happy?"

"Of course not! Who wants to be happy? She made me miserable, but it was exciting to be around her. I never knew what I'd find when I got home—a knockdown drag-out fight over nothing at all or hearts-and-flowers equally over nothing."

Arthurjean yawned. "That part's convincing," she agreed. "I'll play this one straight. You're Frank Jacklin *and* Winnie Tompkins rolled into one. The point is, where do we go from here? Let's see you sign Jacklin's name."

I pulled out Winnie's gold, life-time fountain pen and wrote "Frank E. Jacklin" over and over again on the back of an envelope. She studied it carefully.

"That's no phony," she agreed, "and it's nothing like Winnie's handwriting. Think I could get a check cashed on it?"

"Let's try," I suggested. "Tomorrow when I get to the office I'll pre-date a check on the Riggs Bank at Washington. You mail it in for collection and we'll see if it clears."

She shook her head. "No dice! If I tried that, first thing we know we'd have the A.B.A. dicks after you for forgery. Can you think of anything else?"

"Not unless you go to Washington and see Dorothy in O.S.S. and ask her to verify my handwriting. Or, wait. You can go and talk to her and notice whether she wriggles her nose to keep her spectacles up. You can find out whether she's still nuts about Prokofiev. You can ask if she still thinks that Ernest Hemingway is a worse writer than Charles Dickens, and whether she still uses Chanel's Gardenia perfume."

"That's enough," she interrupted. "But how'm I going to get to Washington and do all these things?"

"Next week," I said, "you and I can fly down on a business trip—war-contracts, cut-backs, something official—and while I'm being whip-sawed by the desk-heroes you can check on Dorothy. See if I'm not right."

She nodded. "That's one way. What can we cook up? The office is tied up in estate work and that leaves no chance for Uncle Sam. You get what he leaves the heirs and they tell me that the inheritance tax is here to stay."

I considered the problem. "Tell you what, Arthurjean," I replied. "I've been thinking this over. The war's going to end this summer. What I saw on the Alaska means that nobody can hold out against us. The Germans are on their last legs, but most of the wise guys are saying that it will take from eighteen months to two years to clean up Japan—a million casualties, billions of dollars. This thorium bomb will do the trick and the war will be over by Labor Day. There's a chance for Winnie Tompkins to make another two or three millions."

She laughed sardonically. "How?"

"There's uranium stocks," I suggested.

"All sewed up by the insiders. Last year you—or Winnie—got a query on uranium and found that there wasn't any to be had."

"There's wheat and sugar," I argued. "The world's going to be hungry. There's a famine coming sure as hell. Buy futures and we'll be set."

"Sure," she agreed, "if you want to buy Black and can get funds into Cuba or the Argentine. But there are inter-allied pools operating in sugar and wheat and you can't break into the game without connections at Washington."

"How about peace-babies?" I demanded. "We can sell our war bonds and invest in something solid for post-war reconstruction. Say General Motors or U.S. Steel."

Arthurjean crossed the room and rumbled my head affectionately. "Baby," she observed, "it's damn lucky for you and Winnie's dough I know my way around the Street. Lay off heavy industrials until the labor business gets straightened out. It's all set for a big strike-wave when the shooting stops and a lot of investors are going to be burned. You can sell short of course but you'll have to wait for that. If you must go in for gambling, try the race-track or the slot-machines. Uncle Sam has it fixed so that the only way you can make money out of the peace is to be a Swiss or a Swede."

"But that doesn't make sense," I objected. "In any place and at any time, advance knowledge on what is going to happen is worth a fortune. How about selling some of the war industries short?"

She shook her head. "You wait till you've been to Washington. Some of the smart guys down there may know the answers. Perhaps it will be real-estate, if they can only get rid of rent-control. Probably it will be surplus war-stocks but that's going to be a political racket. Anyhow the tax-collector will be waiting for you, so why worry?"

"Speaking of cashing checks," I reminded her, "how in hell am I going to get some dough? How does Winnie sign himself at the City Farmers anyhow?"

She laughed. "He has three or four separate accounts. The one he uses for purely personal hell-raising is just signed 'W. S. Tompkins.' Let's see you try to write that. Remember he loops all his letters and draws a little circle instead of a dot over the 'i'."

I tried that a few times until she shook her head.

"There isn't a bank-clerk in New York who wouldn't stop a check with that on it. Let's see, he signed his name to something around here. See if you can't copy it."

She fumbled under a pile of magazines and finally came up with a copy of "The Story of Philosophy" by Will Durant.

"Winnie thought this would be good for me," she explained. "Here it is: 'For Miss Arthurjean Briggs, with the

compliments of W. S. Tompkins.' He was like that—sort of formal—it gave him a kick. He bought that for me second-hand after we'd been drinking Atlantic City dry at an investment bankers convention. Try it."

I tried the signature again but the effort was even worse than my free-hand efforts. This time it looked like what it was—a clumsy forgery.

"Hell," I exclaimed, "I've simply got to do better than that. How about my tracing it?"

"You'd be surprised," she told me, "how easy it is to spot a signature that's been traced. It's something about the flow of the ink and the angle of the pen. No two signatures are exactly alike and that's why a tracing gives itself away. They got machines which spot it."

"Well, how'm I going to get some dough?" I demanded. "I can't draw on Jacklin's Washington account—and the chances are there isn't much there anyhow. And if I try to draw on Tompkins' account I'll find myself in the hoosegow."

She got up and mixed us another pair of drinks. "I got it," she announced. "It won't be too nice for you but it's better than starving."

"You mean you'll lend me some?"

"Hell, baby, I got no money—twenty-five or thirty in the account and a few hundreds in war-bonds. No, this is better. Just hold out your hand and shut your eyes."

It sounded like jewels. I leaned back in the chair, closed my eyes and extended my right hand in front of me, palm upward. I heard her pad into the bathroom. When she came back, her voice sounded strained as she whispered: "This is it, baby. Keep those eyes shut!"

There was a smooth, tingling sensation across the tips of my fingers, then my right hand was suddenly warm and wet. I opened my eyes to see Arthurjean holding a stained safety-razor blade in her hand and staring at me, white-faced, as the blood trickled from my finger-tips.

"Winnie—" she faltered, and slumped down in the divan.

I nastily grabbed the handkerchief from my breast-pocket and wrapped it around my throbbing fingers.

"Ouch! Damn you!" I exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, baby," she whispered. "I didn't want to hurt you. It seemed the only way—"

"You damned fool," I almost shouted at her. "Do you realize you flopped with that blade in your hand and might have cut an artery?"

"No, did I?" She scrambled up hastily and looked around. "Gee, I feel lousy. Does it hurt much?"

"Not yet. What's the big idea?"

"Now you sound like Winnie," she replied. "He never got ideas easy. Listen, you big slob, if you've cut your fingers you got to have a bandage and if you got a bandage on your right hand, your signature's going to be screwy. All you need do is fumble it and I or one of the girls will witness it and the bank will clear it and you'll get the dough."

I thought that one over. "You've got something in your head besides those big blue eyes," I admitted. "Now if you only have some iodine and bandages we'll see if I can stave off lock-jaw."

She giggled. "Lock-jaw's the last thing *you'll* get," she said. "There ought to be something in the medicine cabinet. Gee," she added. "I suppose I'll have to get you undressed and dress you in the morning just like a baby. Ain't that something?"

"How about some food?" I demanded. "You said something about a steak back at the office and all you've given me is Scotch and razor-blades. You get on with your cooking and let me try to fix my hand."

I went into the bathroom, located some mercurochrome and a box of band aids. Once the flow of blood had slacked, I managed to incapacitate myself sufficiently for the purpose of forging Winnie Tompkins' signature.

"Say, Winnie!" Arthurjean suddenly appeared at the bath-room door, with an aroma of steak behind her. "I've just figured out something. If you aren't Winnie but a ringer from the Aleutians, it's not decent for you to see me in my pyjamas. We're strangers!"

"Oh, keep 'em on till after dinner," I said. "I won't stand on ceremony. I'm hungry."

She laughed. "You sure can make like Winnie," she admired. "Jesus, the steak's burning!"

CHAPTER 9

"Say, old man, what happened to your hand?"

Graham Wasson, plump, dark and fortyish, but very clean-cut and with a Dewey dab on his upper lip, was my questioner. He sat across the glass-topped desk in my Wall Street Office, while Arthurjean Briggs typed demurely in the adjoining office.

"Changing razor-blades," I confessed. "The damn thing slipped and before I knew it I made a grab for it. Lucky it didn't go deep. Hence the surgical gauze and the lousy signature. Do you think you can get my check cleared through the bank or should I write Winnie 'X' Tompkins, his mark?"

Wasson chuckled like a well-fed broker. "We'll get enough witnesses to your John Hancock to make it legal," he promised. "Now what you've got to do is to ease old lady Fynch into the trustee's delight and take a gander at her former investments. I've brought the list with me. As you know, she insisted that you okay the deal."

I glanced at the typed list. "This stuff looks pretty good to me, Graham," I said. "Detroit Edison's safe as the Washington Monument, A.T.&T. is solid, and G.E. ought to do all right with this new electronic stuff."

"And how!" My partner agreed. "Boy! what a windfall! Stuff like that is scarcer than hen's teeth on the open market. With close to a million bucks to turn over, we ought to do pretty well on this. Here's what we're buying for her."

Wasson passed me a slip of paper. "The trustee's delight," he said. "G-Bonds. You buy 'em, we should worry. No money back for ten years. Morgenthau's dream-child."

The slip was attached to a printed Treasury form. "See here," I pointed out. "These damn bonds depreciate 2.2% a year for the first five years and then start climbing up the ladder again, and they're non-transferable."

"That's it, Winnie. The trustee's delight," Wasson agreed. "They pay 2.5% a year if you hold them but if you try to sell them within five years the discount means you only get about .03% on your money. Once a trustee has put you aboard this roller-coaster, he can't conscientiously advise you to get out."

"Who dreamed up that swindle?"

"Oh, a couple of dollar-a-year bankers we sent down to help the Treasury win the war. It's a natural. It's patriotic to invest in war-bonds. The yield's conservative as hell and you get it all back if you wait long enough."

"But what if the old girl dies within the next five years? Won't the estate be liquidated? How will the heirs feel when they have to take a loss of \$60,000?"

"That's their worry, Winnie," Wasson pointed out. "All we have to do is sign the papers and la Fynch gets about \$25,000 a year for the rest of her life."

"Instead of the \$40,000 a year she's getting out of her present investments now."

"Sure, Winnie. We're not in business for our health. Industrials are risky and Miss Fynch is awful set on beating Hitler. We take over her present portfolio and take our chances on the market. If values shift we're in a position to unload—but fast. She isn't. She only gets to town twice a year, once between Bar Harbor and Long Island, and then next time from Palm Beach to Long Island. Come on, Winnie, stick your fist on these papers and I'll handle the transfers."

I shook my head. "I'd like to think this over," I said. "If I was an old woman and expected only five or ten more years of life, I'd be hanged if I'd tie myself down to these financial mustard-plasters. It sounds okay to be patriotic, but I think I'd stick to the greater risks and higher yields and get a run for my money. Tell you what, Graham, phone and tell her I'd like to have a talk with her before she makes up her mind."

Wasson shoved back his chair and faced me, bristling. "I'll be damned if I will. This is a natural and, handled right, is worth \$100,000 to the firm. You talked her into it and now if you're getting cold feet you can talk her out of it. All I know is that you've gone nuts."

"We aren't so hard up that we have to swindle old ladies."

"Swindle my eye! What's wrong about \$25,000 a year guaranteed by your Uncle Sam?"

"Less income tax," I reminded him.

"Oh, sure—that—"

"Well, it's about \$15,000 a year less than she's getting now. If she sold out and invested in an annuity she could get about \$70,000 a year, tax-free. No, I don't want to rush her into this."

"Then you've forgotten how we made our pile in the first place," my partner growled. "Phil Cone and I will have to talk this over. This is a fine time to go soft on us."

I grinned at him. "Go on, talk it over. If you want out, you're welcome. I'd rather like you to stick around, as I'm on to something really big and I don't want the Street to say we fleeced our clients."

"I resent that, Winnie," Wasson snapped.

"What else would you call it? Reinvesting?"

"Listen," he exploded. "You built up this business. You invented the methods. I'm damned if I let you call me a swindler for following your lead!" And he stormed out, slamming the door. A moment later, he stuck his head in again. "Forget it, Winnie. If you're working on a big operation, count me in!"

I studied the list of the Fynch investments again and the more I saw it the more I wondered how anybody but a fool would fall for the proposition of putting money in the government bonds for ten years, when you could clean up outside government.

There was a tap on the edge of my desk. I looked up to see Arthurjean. "Mr. Harcourt is back to see you," she said. "I'll get set with the stenotype. And don't worry about that Fynch dame. I'll give you a fill-in later. She knows what she's doing."

"Fine!" I told her. "Now you show Mr. Harcourt in and make with the stenotype. Did you finish copying what we said yesterday?"

Her mouth dropped open and her sweater quivered eloquently. "Omgawd! baby! I clean forgot."

Mr. Harcourt seemed much more vital and self-possessed than on the previous afternoon—perhaps because he had obviously had a sleep, a shower and a hearty breakfast, presumably prefaced by ten minutes of vigorous push-ups and toe-touching in bathroom calisthenics. At any rate he looked fit.

"Morning, Harcourt," I said casually. "Sorry to tell you that Miss Briggs was home with a bad headache last night and wasn't able to make that copy of our talk yesterday."

G-Men on duty are not supposed to smile without written permission from their immediate superior but Harcourt must have had an extra helping of Wheaties for breakfast. "Call yourself a headache, Mr. Tompkins?" he asked. "That's who our man reported Miss Briggs had last night at 157 East 51st Street, third floor front. Can I get her some aspirin?"

"There are no secrets from the Gestapo," I observed, "and I have no comment to offer except to say next time come on up and have a drink with us instead of doing the G-Man in a cold and drafty doorway across the street."

The Special Agent gave an entirely unofficial wink at Arthurjean. "Oh, hell," he remarked. "What's the use of all this coy stuff? The Bureau isn't interested in your private life. What I wanted to say, Mr. Tompkins, is that I reported our talk to my chief and he teletyped my report down to Washington. We're not going to fool around with Church Street on this one. The Director's going to take it up direct with Admiral Ballister at the Navy Department. For my part, I told him I thought it was all a pipe-dream but like I said the F.B.I. doesn't believe in dreams that come true."

Arthurjean crossed the room and stood behind him, pressing a little unregenerately against the back of his chair, until Harcourt remarked conversationally to U. S. Grant in the engraving, "I'm a married man, baby, with a wife and kids in Brooklyn."

My secretary smiled and gave him a smart tap on the top of his head. "You're a good boy, junior," she told him, "and I'm all for you. But don't you go making trouble for this dumb boss of mine or I'll call on your wife, personal, and Tell All."

Harcourt murmured to the engraving that unconditional surrender was *his* name, too, but that Tompkins was making so much trouble for himself that he was damned if he could see how the F.B.I. could make it any worse. In any case, he added more directly, he would keep in touch with me and let me know whether I was wanted up at the Federal Court House.

"See here, Harcourt," I replied. "One good turn doesn't make a spring. This is the screwiest case you've ever been on. If you can drop in and visit Miss Briggs and myself on Saturday after lunch at our place, I'll give you a fill-in that will rock the F.B.I. from its gats to its toupees."

"That's mighty white of you—and Miss Briggs," the Special Agent allowed. "If the chief lets me, I'll meet you up there, say about 2:30."

"Swell!" I said. "And which do you prefer—Scotch or rye?"

"I don't drink on duty," he told me, "but I find Bourbon helps fight off colds this early spring weather."

After his departure, I locked myself in the office and with Arthurjean's help, brought myself up to date on Winnie's business operations. Tompkins, Wasson & Cone were not, as I had believed, a high-toned bucket-shop. The proposed Fynch swindle was only the result of a dopey old maid who practically insisted on helping beat the Axis by turning her money into Government bonds. There was plenty of honest graft and many a solid perquisite in straight commission work and supervision of estates. The firm was not, of course, very scrupulous but it always gave value for its transactions. It was, in fact, a pretty slick set-up.

There was a buzz on my inter-office telephone and the receptionist announced: "Mr. Axel Roscommon to see you, Mr. Tompkins."

"Oh, ask him to see one of the other partners, will you?"

"I told him that you were too busy, but he said he must see you and would wait."

"He too?" I asked. "Okay. Send him in. Do you know an Axel Roscommon, Arthurjean?"

"Uh-uh!" She shook her head. "The name's sorta familiar. Something in oil before Pearl Harbor. I can find out if you'll wait a bit."

"Never mind," I told her. "I'll see him. You stay in the next room and keep the door ajar so you can take a record."

She laughed. "I can do better than that, boss. I'll switch down the inter-office phones and keep the door shut. That way I'll hear every word you say. It's like a dictaphone."

Mr. Roscommon was an extremely well set up man in the middle fifties, about six-feet two, lean, with iron grey hair, a grey moustache, steel-blue eyes and a bear-trap grip. He looked prosperous but not worried by it. He spoke with a faint Irish lilt in his voice but his manner was most direct and unHibernian.

"Mr. Tompkins," he remarked. "You must excuse the lack of formality but you will understand when I tell you that I am chief of the German intelligence organization in the United States. Now don't think I'm crazy or indiscreet. The only reason I have come to you is because my agents in the F.B.I. tell me that you are involved in the sinking of U.S.S. Alaska off the Aleutians. Thorium bombs, wasn't it? Chalmis was a pretty smart chap and I warned our people that he was getting hot. Now I don't ask you why in Wotan's name the Fuehrer thinks it makes sense to have two intelligent services in this country. Probably Berlin didn't like my last reports. No, don't get excited. I've engaged in no subversive activities, I'm an Irish Free State citizen and if you go to Washington you'll find that they know all about me. Hitler may want the old Goetterdaemmerung spirit in our outfit but I can't see the point of too much zeal."

I offered him a cigarette. "What do you want to see me about, Mr. Roscommon?" I asked. "For all you know there may be dictaphones planted all over the place. My last visitor today was actually a special agent of the F.B.I."

Roscommon lighted his cigarette with a flick of a gold Dunhill lighter. "That would be Harcourt—A. J. Harcourt—wouldn't it? A fine chap and a conscientious agent. I'd heard he'd been assigned to your case. You'll find him completely reliable. As you know, in time of war there has to be some practical way of maintaining direct confidential communication between the enemies. Switzerland? Bah! All milk chocolate, profiteering and eyewash. I wouldn't trust a Swiss as far as I could throw the Sub-Treasury Building. I'm acting here for Berlin and you have at least three men in Berlin to keep in touch with the German Government over there. That's the only practical way modern wars can be fought, eh? As Edith Cavell said last time, 'Patriotism is not enough.' The fact is that even in war, two great countries like Germany and America must and do maintain direct contact."

I pushed the button for Arthurjean. "Miss Briggs," I asked, "have we any brandy in the office?"

Dead-pan and nonchalant, she crossed the room to a small safe, disguised as a Victorian low-boy, twiddled the dials and revealed a neat little Frigidaire. She prepared two brandies and soda, handed them to us and returned to her office.

"Prosit!" said I.

"Heil Roosevelt!" Roscommon answered.

"But what did you want to see me about?" I inquired. "*You* may be all right but *I'm* already under investigation by the F.B.I."

"Nonsense, old boy, nonsense," he reassured me. "If they get troublesome, let me know—I'm in the phone book and my girl will always know where to reach me, day or night—and I'll tell Washington to stop proceedings. No, Tompkins, what I wanted to tell you was that—when you report back to your superior and I'll lay ten-to-one he's that ass Ribbentrop—just tell him that the war's lost. Our game now is to salvage resources for the next war, which will be against Russia, unless I miss my guess. We've got to use these last few weeks and days to rush funds, patents, papers, brains and organization out of the Reich. Send them to Sweden, to Switzerland, to Italy. Fly them to Spain,

slip them in U-boats to Buenos Aires or Dublin. Tell Ribbentrop that New York understands our problem and will play the game right across the board, but there must be no shilly-shallying, no nonsense about 'last stands.' If Hitler wants a Siegfried finish, let him have it, but from now on our job is to save Germany as an asset for her Western Allies and as a people whom the world will need to fight the Soviets. Tell him that, will you, old man? Thanks most awfully."

Roscommon finished his drink with an expert swirl of the glass, smiled, shook hands and left the room as abruptly as he had arrived in it. I picked up the outside phone.

"Get me F.B.I. Headquarters," I said. "I wish to speak to Mr. A. J. Harcourt. Thanks, I'll wait."

CHAPTER 10

"Well, there it is, Harcourt," I ended my recitation. "Miss Briggs believes me, my wife doesn't, and I don't expect you to. But if you're interested, I can prove I'm Frank Jacklin any number of ways."

The G-Man finished his drink and stared absent-mindedly at the ceiling, while Arthurjean poured him a new shot of Bourbon and water—his fifth.

"Mr. Tompkins," he said at last. "I'm drinking your liquor in your house—or Miss Briggs' apartment, whichever it is—and it's not for me to call you a liar."

"Don't you dare!" Arthurjean warned him. "Not while I'm around, G-Man or no G-Man. Say, what do the initials A. J. stand for in your name? Abba Jabba?"

"What do you think? Andrew Jackson, of course. No, Mr. Tompkins, I won't call you a liar because, to tell the truth, I'm not sure that you are. Lots of funny things have happened in this war. This might have happened. But I can't do anything about it."

"Can't you at least check on the Jacklin angle?" I asked.

Harcourt shook his head. "Before I could do any checking, I'd have to report my reasons to the chief. If I was asked for a reason, I'd have to explain that I had grounds for thinking that Commander Jacklin's soul—and the F.B.I. has never established a policy on souls—had been blown from the Aleutians clear into Westchester County and is now running round in the body of Winfred S. Tompkins, stock broker. That report from me would go from my chief right up to J. Edgar Hoover, the Attorney-General, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Cabinet and President Roosevelt. Now, wouldn't that look nice on my record? Wouldn't that just put me right in line for promotion? Be reasonable, you two. I'm not saying I don't believe this yarn, but it would be worth my job to act like I believed it—and I got a wife and three kids in Brooklyn, no fooling."

Arthurjean remained silent for a few minutes, "Andrew Jackson Harcourt—" she began.

"You haven't said anything about this sinister guy Roscommon," I interrupted. "You could do something about him without worrying about me and my story."

"Roscommon?" Harcourt shrugged his shoulders. "Going after him would remind me of the time we hit the Governor of North Carolina with a Great Smoky barbecued bear. Roscommon is all he says he is and orders are out not to touch him. How do you think we ought to fight this war, anyhow? Blind-fold?"

"What about that Great Smoky bear?" Arthurjean demanded irrelevantly. "You-all from the South, honey-chile?"

"The Old North State, sugar! And you?"

"Tennessee, thank God! And the name's Arthurjean, Andy, and for the millionth time I'll explain that my dad's name was Arthur and my mother's name was Jean, so they ran 'em together, like Johns-Manville or Pierce-Arrow, but it's all one word. No hyphen. So, there!"

I urged them to get over their rebel yell and come back to the subject of the bear.

"Well, Mr. Tompkins," Harcourt explained. "It's this way. Up in the Smokies we have a special way of cooking bear. All you need is a bear, a bee-tree, a two-handed saw and a stick of dynamite. First, you kill your bear. That's mighty important. You skin him and you gut him and truss him up like a chicken. Then you ram him up as far as you can deep inside a bee-tree, just below the honey, and wedge him in so he won't slip. Then you start a slow fire underneath him inside the tree. The fire sort of slow-cooks the bear, like a Dutch oven, drives off the bees and melts the honey-comb. The honey just naturally drips down on the bear meat while she's cooking. Just about the time the tree's ready to fall—course, I should have explained you saw off the trunk just above the honey so the bees can get away from the smoke and the old tree will draw like a chimney—you set a fuse to a stick of dynamite, toss it in the fire and run like hell. Well, sir, the dynamite goes off and just naturally shoots the old roast bear out the tree like a projectile. Then you pick it up, lug it back to the picnic grounds, and I tell you, Mr. Tompkins, it's mighty sweet eating. Now this time we nigh hit the Governor of North Carolina, he was making a political speech over at the old fair grounds, and—"

"I think I get the picture, Harcourt," I said, cutting in on him rapidly. "We did pretty much the same thing with baby seals and popcorn in the Aleutians. When we were after Jap subs, the depth-charges killed no end of baby seals—concussion, I guess. So we'd pick 'em up in a life-boat, clean them, stuff them with unpopped popcorn, and stick them in the fourteen-inch guns. Then we'd touch off a reduced charge behind 'em. Seals are naturally oily so they went out the muzzle like a regular shell. The intense heat of the explosion not only cooked the seal but popped the popcorn. That puffed out, set up air resistance and reduced trajectory. Then we'd send a helicopter out to pick 'em up and have 'em in mess. Cold with chili sauce, they were delicious. One time when we were bombarding Attu, the crew of No. 3 turret forgot we had a seal in the center gun and fired it at a Jap redoubt. It hit—"

"I can see," Arthurjean remarked, "that I've been missing a lot of fun here in New York, though I'll never forget the time we pretended we found a dead mouse in a mince pie at the Waldorf—Now, who in hell can *that* be?"

The door-bell rang insistently.

Harcourt looked a little uneasy. "I thought it might save a lot of time and trouble," he said, "if I asked Mrs. Tompkins to meet us here. I told her that Miss Briggs was a friend of mine—sugar, you'd better go in the other room and put on red night-things—so you don't need something more *de trop* than those to worry, Mr. Tompkins."

"That's just dandy, Harcourt," I agreed. "Did you ever see a wife who couldn't spot a sex-situation at a hundred yards up-wind on a dark and rainy night?"

"Can't say I did," the Special Agent admitted, "but I've never had but one wife and she's busy with the kids."

There was a knock on the door and Harcourt opened it with a courtly manner.

"Come right in, Mrs. Tompkins," he said. "My friend, Miss Briggs, is in the other room and will be out in a moment. Mr. Tompkins and I—"

"This," said Germaine, "is Mrs. Rutherford. After Winnie didn't turn up for a couple of nights, we put our heads together and decided that two could worry as cheaply as one. So when I got your message, I just phoned Virginia and here we are. Hullo, Winnie, is this another of your homes away from home?"

Virginia Rutherford looked pretty much the way a roasting bear in a bee-tree might be expected to feel while waiting for the dynamite to explode: very sweet, red-hot and not giving a damn whether she hit the Governor of the Old North State.

"Hullo, Winnie," she remarked dangerously. "This another of your tousled blondes?"

"I resent that," Arthurjean said from the door-way. "This is *my* flat and I didn't invite you and I'll have you

know that I'm a very respectable—well, rather respectable—working girl."

The effect of virtue was only slightly marred by the fact that, as she spoke, a pair of silk panties slowly but inexorably slid below the hem of her skirt and settled in a shimmer at her feet. Arthurjean looked down.

"Oh, hell, girls," she said, "What's the use? Have a drink!"

"Thank you, Miss Briggs," Germaine replied. "I will. Make mine straight Scotch and the same for Mrs. Rutherford. Are you, by any chance, employed in my husband's office?"

"I'm his secretary," Arthurjean admitted.

"Winnie," Jimmie turned on me with a snap like those doors in Penn Station which open by an electric eye, "and you swore that you had nothing to do with the office-girls. I was fool enough to believe you."

"At the time, dear," I explained guiltily, "I didn't know it myself."

Harcourt came lumbering to my rescue. "Before you leap to any conclusions, Mrs. Tompkins," he urged, "I think I ought to explain that I represent the F.B.I. and that Mr. Tompkins came here today at my request. Your husband happens to be in very serious trouble under the Espionage Act. I personally am convinced that there's been a mistake and that he's innocent, but my opinion is of no value unless I can find evidence to support it."

"What's he done?" Virginia Rutherford asked eagerly. "Will he go to jail?"

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Rutherford," Harcourt replied, "I'm not allowed to discuss the nature of the charges against him. No formal indictment has been lodged and if you can help me, none will be made. The important thing is to know where he was and what he was doing from the twenty-fifth of March until the second of April."

"Why the twenty-fifth of March?" my wife demanded. "He was with me at Bedford Hills most of that time. I, and the maid at the house, Myrtle, can testify to that. I don't think he went to the office much that week. It was Holy Week. He and I went to church."

"Mrs. Tompkins," he said, "you are a true and noble lady. It's just too bad that one of our agents has already interviewed the Hubble girl, who testified that Mr. Tompkins didn't come home once all that week."

Germaine sank back in her chair and looked at me with an air of misplaced consecration. "Winnie," she urged, "go ahead and tell him where you were. I'm your wife and I don't care what silliness you were up to or what woman you were with, just so they don't send you to prison."

I smiled at her. "Jimmie," I replied, "I give you my word, I simply don't remember. I don't know where I was. As I told you the other day, I've drawn a blank as to what happened before last Monday afternoon."

Mrs. Rutherford took advantage of the moment of incredulous silence which followed this announcement.

"Don't try to be chivalrous, Winnie," she urged me. "We hadn't planned to advertise it, Jimmie, but Winnie spent that week with me. He rented a flat for me uptown, Mr. Harcourt, about six weeks ago, and we put in a whole week together. I daresay you think I'm a loose woman but—"

Harcourt looked quite painfully embarrassed. "I surely do not want to contradict a lady," he told her, "but the Bureau checked up on that apartment yesterday. The janitor and the cleaning woman both stated that, except for last Monday afternoon and evening when you were there by yourself, neither you nor Mr. Tompkins had been near the place for at least two weeks. The bed linen and the bath towels hadn't been used and the food in the ice-box was stale. There had been no garbage."

"Oh!" flared Virginia, "of all the low-down snoopers!"

"The country's at war, Mrs. Rutherford," the Special Agent replied. "And while I'm at it I might as well save Miss Briggs the trouble of telling me that Mr. Tompkins spent that week here with her. He did not. We've checked

this apartment house most thoroughly, as well as Mr. Tompkins' office."

"Why that particular week?" I asked.

Harcourt turned to me apologetically. "In view of your earlier statements to me," he declared, "I'm sure you will understand this explanation. A certain ship did not sail from a certain port until the 26th of March. A certain article was not delivered on board that ship until after she had sailed. Before then, the individual who brought the article to the ship had no knowledge which ship had been selected. Before then, nobody on that ship had any knowledge that any article would be brought on board and had no knowledge of the nature of its voyage. Whatever arrangements were made must have been made during the following few days. That, at any rate, is the working theory the Bureau has adopted. Have you no idea of where you might have been in that period, Mr. Tompkins?"

I placed my head in my hands and thought back to that misty morning ten days before, when the Alaska pulled out of Bremerton Navy Yard and headed north through Puget Sound for Victoria and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. I remembered how, as we returned recognition signals to the Canadian base at Esquimalt, a destroyer had put out, come alongside and put a civilian passenger aboard us. I remembered the fuss he raised on the bridge while we made a lee for the destroyer and hoisted a large packing-case on board, and how it was hurried below decks with a Marine guard. Then I thought of the run out west, past Dutch Harbor and Adak, our light carrier slipping through the drifting fogs of the Aleutians, while the slow Pacific swell pounded against our port beam and the turbines whined and ship shook and the icy wind whipped across the flight-deck. And I remembered that last night in the mess when Windy Smith—of Texas, naturally—boasted that he—

"No, Mr. Harcourt," I told him, "I'm afraid that the things I remember wouldn't help either of us. You go ahead and see what you can find out about me, and so will I."

"Winnie," Germaine said reproachfully. "Tell him where you were, dear. It's no use pretending that you don't remember. I know that you can explain. I know there's nothing *really* wrong."

Arthurjean walked across and put her hand on Jimmie's arm. "You'd better have another drink, Mrs. Tompkins," she remarked, "and so had I. This sort of thing is tough to take."

Virginia looked up brightly at Harcourt. "If Winnie won't help himself, I will," she said. "I'll find out what the big dope was doing and when I do—look out!"

"Come on, Jimmie," I told my wife. "Let's go home. I've had about as much of this as I can stand. Harcourt, you know where you can reach me, if you get the word from Washington. In the meantime, why don't you follow up that Roscommon angle? That's the best lead I've struck."

Harcourt finished his Bourbon. "Mr. Tompkins," he observed, "you're quite right but there isn't a single thing I can do about it. We've had top-level orders to lay off that guy and with the Bureau, orders is orders."

CHAPTER 11

When I entered my office on Monday morning, the genteel receptionist informed me with some austerity that Mr. Roscommon was waiting for me.

"Okay, send him in," I directed, bracing myself for what would probably be a stormy interview. If Roscommon was as well-informed as he claimed to be, he must know that I had already reported him to the F.B.I.

"Smart work, Tompkins!" he beamed, giving my hand a vise-like squeeze. "Working as I do with the highest echelons, I'm afraid I sometimes forget the value of naiveté. You couldn't have invented anything better calculated to slow down the Bureau than to report me as a Nazi agent. Even the Director was impressed, though he'll see through your ruse after a couple of days."

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?" I inquired, "because your visit will certainly arouse new suspicions. I assume I'm still under F.B.I. observation."

Axel Roscommon smiled. "Nothing to worry about, old boy, I assure you. Naturally you'll have to go to Washington sooner or later and explain things there. I suggest that you go next week, when the whole Administration will be in a state of maximum confusion."

I asked him whether that would be any change.

"Absolutely, old boy. The war's been managed quite impressively well up to now. After this week, with Roosevelt out of the way, things will begin to fall apart and there will be plenty of pickings but the war is already won, so that won't hurt."

Roosevelt, I observed, was down in Georgia, according to the papers, but that didn't mean he couldn't keep in touch with things in Washington.

Roscommon stood close against my desk and leaned forward on his hands, facing me. "Listen carefully, old boy," he said, "and keep this to yourself. Roosevelt will be dead before the week's out—on Friday the thirteenth if there's any symmetry to be expected in this crazy world. It's the same stuff they gave Woodrow Wilson over at Paris in the spring of 1919. You may remember that chap Yardley wrote a book, 'The American Black Chamber,' and told how the American Intelligence got word of a plot to poison Wilson by one of America's allies. Not long after, Wilson had a slight illness and a few months later had a stroke, as they called it. You see your American Constitution—marvelous document, that!—makes absolutely no bloody provision for the illness of a President, and Wilson's paralysis paralyzed your government for nearly two years, while America's allies cleaned up on the peace-arrangements.

"Roosevelt is tougher than Wilson was. They slipped him the first dose at Teheran early last year. When he came back that spring he had a slight illness—they called it influenza—and he was never quite the same. Except for a few trusted social associates, close friends and members of the family, he was kept in strict seclusion. Then, with his amazing vitality, he began to throw off the stuff and staged a magnificent political campaign last fall. So they had to try again at Yalta early this year. The second time they gave him too much. He had one bad attack on the cruiser coming back from the Mediterranean. When he addressed Congress, he had the same gaunt look and thick speech that Wilson had towards the end. The final stroke is due this week and has been held off only because he's taking things easy. No, old chap, Roosevelt's doomed and all I can tell you is that the Germans had no part in it. Only five men in America know about this, and F.D.R. is one of them."

"You're talking utter piffle," I replied. "I can see how Hitler or Tojo might want to get rid of Roosevelt but who else? Why don't you warn the authorities. Or I could."

Roscommon smiled rather sadly. "What good would it do? There's no antidote after the first twenty-four hours. If Roosevelt hasn't warned them, why should you? All that would happen would be to put yourself under the blackest kind of suspicion. Just fancy the reaction of the American Intelligence. You march in and say, 'See here, the President's been poisoned and will die before the end of the week.' They promptly call for an ambulance and an alienist and send you to St. Elizabeth's for observation. Then the President does die. 'By the Lord Harry!' they think, 'this chap we locked up said Roosevelt would die and now he has died. He probably had a hand in it himself. Let's fix him just to be safe!'"

I nodded. "Yes, I can see that," I agreed. "Look at what happened when Lincoln was assassinated. But if I'm not to pass word on to anybody, what's the point of telling me about it—assuming it to be true, which I doubt?"

"Naturally you doubt me, my boy, naturally. All you need do is to wait until Friday the thirteenth and if I'm right you'll know it and if I'm wrong you'll know it. But I assure you that I am not wrong. The war is over and Roosevelt is the only obstacle to certain long-range practical arrangements for organizing the peace. The Old World, mind you, doesn't like outsiders like Wilson and Roosevelt telling them what to do with victory. From now on, America is going to be immobilized. It's all rather simple, really, but I haven't time to explain how simple it is because the explanation is bloody complicated."

"You still haven't told me why you have passed on this fantastic story to me," I pointed out.

"Oh, that? It's just this, my boy. Sell the war short! Sell it short! You must use all the funds that Ribbentrop gave you to get a real nest-egg. With Germany defeated, our intelligence will need funds—decentralized funds—and this is your chance to do an important job. I don't care what the Foreign Minister told you to do with the money. Forget him—he's a dead duck, anyway. Just take the cash and sell the war short. Make a killing and then we'll be able to finance future operations."

After Roscommon had made another of his abrupt departures, I buzzed for Arthurjean and told her to ask my partners to come in.

Wasson was the same as he had been before—plump, dark-haired and energetic. Philip Cone was taller, fair-haired, blue-eyed, with a quiet manner and a sleepy expression.

"Morning, Graham. Morning, Phil," I greeted them. "The other day, Graham, you got peeved because I wanted to go slow on the Fynch portfolio. I only had a hunch then but I knew we'd better not rush into one of our regular reinvestment run-arounds. Now I've made a check and I see the new line. Boys, from now on, we've got to sell the war short."

"What do you mean 'sell the war short?'" Wasson demanded. "The Japs are good for another year and those Nazis are fighting pretty damn well, too. You don't mean to go America First, separate peace or any of that rot, do you?"

"You know me better than that," I reproved him. "No. My tip is that the Germans will surrender within a month and the Japs before Labor Day. What do we do to clean up?"

"Je-sus!" Cone drawled appreciatively. "The bottom will drop out of the market!"

"No, Phil it won't," Wasson objected. "They won't let it. That would be an admission that Wall Street is cashing in on the war."

"Well, aren't we cashing in?" asked Cone, "I haven't heard a single broker or banker committing suicide since Pearl Harbor."

"Nuts to that talk!" Wasson replied. "No, Winnie, my point is that Wall Street can't afford a peace-scare selling wave, and if stocks start to drop the big boys will move in and support the market."

"How about commodities, Graham?" I asked. "You know that end of the business. The whole world will be hungry and naked. Can't we move in there without risk?"

Wesson laughed bitterly. "There will be only about eighteen governments and government boards riding herd on you every time you move in with real money in that racket. Anyhow, they tell me that this guy Roosevelt has ordered the F.B.I. to move in on the Black Market."

"Well, boys," I observed, "the way you put it we can't do a damn thing to make money out of the same kind of tip-off that set the House of Rothschild up for a hundred years after the Battle of Waterloo. That doesn't make sense."

Phil Cone smiled sheepishly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Winnie. We can cash in but we'll have to step out of our field. We could shift a million dollars to Canada. You can get a Canadian dollar for ninety cents American. A year from now it will be back to par. That's better than ten percent on your money in less than a year."

"What about South America?" I asked.

"Lay off the Latins, Winnie," Wasson advised me. "Brazil's the only country in South America that's good for the long pull and just now is no time to monkey with Brazil. They've got some politics just now."

I considered things a bit. "Let's see if we can figure out a way to make a quick killing," I said. "Suppose, for

example, something drastic happened—like Roosevelt dying on one of his plane-trips—to mark the end of some of these controls. What would happen to the market?"

Wasson chuckled. "If that guy popped off, there'd be dancing in Wall Street and you'd have to shut down the Exchange because the ticker couldn't keep up with the buying orders. Prices would go higher than the Empire State Building. Hell! They'd hit the stratosphere."

"Is that your opinion, Phil?" I asked.

Cone shook his head. "Only a few suckers would feel like that, Winnie," he told me. "The big-time operators would be shivering in their boots. As long as F.D.R. is in the White House there's no limit to what they can make out of the war. If Roosevelt died now, you'd see the bottom drop out of the market and the damndest wave of labor strikes we've had since 1890."

"Damn it, Phil," I objected. "I wish you and Graham would get together on this one. I can't quite follow all your ideas. Business conditions and war-orders would continue, wouldn't they?"

Cone shook his head again. "No," he insisted. "The business community's got confidence in Roosevelt. Sure he's a tough baby, sure he's got a lot of dumb Harvard men sore at him, sure he's got the labor leaders *and* the G.I.'s rooting for him. But he's done a good job with the war, he's let people make money and some of his best friends are multi-millionaires, like Astor and Harriman. If he was to die, we'd have this Missouri guy—whatsisname? Truman?—and what can he offer?"

"Got any comment on that, Graham?" I asked.

"The way Phil puts it, it sounds reasonable," Wasson admitted, "but I still say that the first reaction to anything like that would be a buying wave which would send the market way up."

I considered for a couple of minutes. "I can't say I agree with you," I said at last. "The big boys wouldn't let that happen any more that they'd let a peace-scare knock the bottom out of the market. What would labor and the G.I.'s think and do if they read that the Stock Market quotations went over the top at a thing like that."

"Well, Winnie," Cone observed. "It isn't likely to happen."

"That's so," I agreed. "However, I think it would be a good idea to work out a representative list of industrials and go short on the market generally for the next thirty days. We can unload the Fynch portfolio as a starter. We ought to be able to pick up two or three hundred thousand if we work it right."

Cone nodded. "Graham and I will go to work on it now, and we'll have the list ready before start of business tomorrow morning. That will be the tenth, won't it?"

Wasson looked uneasy. "I don't like it so much, Winnie," he said, "but I've never seen you lose money on a hunch yet so I'll string along. Come on, Phil, this is a hell of a big war we're trying to sell short. Let's hope we don't fall flat on our face."

CHAPTER 12

The phone rang. "Mr. Tompkins?" A girl's voice inquired. "Just a moment, Mr. Willamer of the Securities and Exchange Commission will speak to you."

I didn't like that "will." "And who the hell, Arthurjean, is Mr. Willamer of the S.E.C.?" I asked in an aside.

"The woiks," she said.

"Hullo, Tompkins," a clear phonogenic baritone inquired. "This is Harry Willamer. I saw your list of selling-orders this morning and wondered if you would drop in and see me."

"Certainly," I said. "Shall I bring my books?"

"Not necessary. This is entirely informal. As a matter of fact, I have some gentlemen from Washington whom I think you will be interested in meeting. This is entirely unofficial, of course."

"How about meeting me at the Pond Club at one o'clock?"

"That will be grand," Mr. Willamer answered heartily. "The Pond Club at one o'clock it is."

I turned to Arthurjean. "What kind of go-round is this? I start selling and inside an hour the S.E.C. is on my tail. Isn't speculation legal any more?"

"Baby," she remarked, "anything's legal as long as you're in with the right guys. All I can tell you is that Willamer is hot stuff. His aunt is a cousin of Jesse Jones or maybe it's Henry Morgenthau. So you watch yourself and don't do any talking out of turn."

It was Tuesday, the 10th, and I had launched my plan of selling the war short in a determined campaign to unload G.M. and U.S. Steel. I was well covered in case of a rise, but there was already a million dollars of the firm's money in the operation, behind the Fynch million which I had used to break the ice.

The Pond Club was the same as ever. Tammy was polishing the glasses in his little bar and there were no fellow-members in evidence. After all, I decided, they weren't likely to show up much before three o'clock. However, I decided that privacy was called for, especially if Commander Tolan put in an appearance.

"Tammy," I explained, as he produced his usual pick-me-up and waited for me to down it. "I'm expecting some gentlemen to join me in a few minutes. Is there a room where we could have a private conversation and still get something to drink?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Tompkins," the steward said, "I think I could let you use the Minnow Room. That's private and there's a dumbwaiter to the bar. Just push the buzzer and say what you want in the phone and I'll send it right up to you."

"It sounds like perfection," I told him. "I'll go on up to the Minnow Room. The gentleman I'm expecting is named Willamer and he'll have some friends with him. Just send them up when they arrive. How do you get there?"

Tammy looked a trifle startled. "That's where you had your bachelor dinner, sir," he reproved me, "Up the stairs and first door to your left, sir. You'll remember it when you see it, I'm quite sure."

Tammy was right. No one who had ever seen the Pond Club's Minnow Room was likely to forget it. The wall on one side was lined solid with illuminated tanks containing gold-fish making fishy little zeros with their stupid mouths. The other walls were enlivened by frescoes of drunken fish in various hilarious attitudes. Indirect lighting gave a sort of Black Mass or Diabolical Fish-Fry effect to the whole. It was definitely not a room to stay sober in.

"Tompkins?" The door opened and an egg-smooth young man with a baldish head and pale eyebrows stood in the entrance. "I'm Harry Willamer. Meet the rest of the gang. Here's Winston Sales of the War Production Board, Lieutenant-Colonel George Finogan of the Army Quartermaster Corps and Commander Raymond Coonley of the Navy Bureau of Supplies."

Except for the uniforms, they might have been cousins—they were all fattish, baldish and blondish. They were all egg-like men, middle-aged, all hearty in manner and all seemed to have no particular reason for existing.

"Well, gentlemen," I asked, "what will you have to drink?"

"Scotch-and-soda," said Willamer. "Hell, let's make it Scotch for everyone and save trouble."

"I'd like a whiskey sour," objected Commander Coonley. "I've got butterflies in my stomach after working with those hot-shots from Detroit last night."

"Okay," Willamer accepted the amendment. "One whiskey sour. Any other changes?"

There were none, so I signaled to Tammy and our order was filled.

"Tompkins," Willamer remarked. "You'll excuse this short notice but when I spotted your selling-orders in the market this morning I knew we had to move fast. First of all, I'd like to know why you are selling, when everybody else is buying."

"Mr. Willamer," I explained, "it's none of the S.E.C.'s goddamned business what or why I sell so long as I follow the regulations."

Willamer laughed. "Who said anything about the S.E.C.?" he demanded. "Oh, I get it. You thought this was an informal investigation by the Commission. Right? My fault. Should have told you that this has nothing to do with your firm's market-position or the S.E.C."

I took a reflective swallow of Scotch. "Then what the hell is this?" I asked.

Harry Willamer drew himself up, "We," he explained, "are the Inter-Alia Trading Corporation. Your selling orders suggest that you don't expect the war to last much longer."

"I don't," I told him.

"Neither do we," Willamer continued. "That's why we've been busy organizing Inter-Alia. It's a neat set-up. Sales here, on the War Production Board, is in a position to advise us of all cut-backs in war-contracts and keep in touch with the whole contract-termination program. Colonel Finogan is in the Quartermaster Corps and is the only man in the Army—"

"In the world, Harry," Finogan corrected him.

"Right you are, George, in the world—who knows where all the surplus war-stocks are located. His office routes them to the depots. That in itself is worth a million dollars to the company. Anything from jeeps to nylons, Colonel Finogan knows where they are and what price will buy them. Commander Coonley is in the same position on Navy Supplies. Between him and Finogan there isn't an ounce of anything from parachute-silk to bull-dozers which we can't locate. As for me, I watch the way money and markets move here in Wall Street."

I finished my drink, "That sounds wonderful, Mr. Willamer, but what has it got to do with me? You have the makings of a ten million dollar corporation between the four of you."

Willamer raised a soft, white, well-manicured hand in a traffic-stopping gesture. "All but one thing, Tompkins," he said. "We haven't got working capital to exploit this set-up. That's where you come in. Tompkins, Wasson & Cone controls between three and five million dollars and are smart operators. So long as you stuck to conservative methods, no dice for Inter-Alia, but when I saw you gambling on the early end of the war, I said to myself, this is where we can do business with Tompkins."

"How much do you need?" I asked.

"Three hundred thousand would be enough to start with," Willamer reckoned.

"Half a million," Finogan amended.

"Say you need half a million to start with and I put it up, what do I get out of it?" I demanded.

Willamer looked a little secretive. "Well, Tompkins," he admitted. "You'll get good security for your money, of course, and a share in what we make. Say a fifth, since there are four of us in it already."

"That sounds reasonable," I agreed, "assuming you have a sure thing. What's your first operation, once you get the money in Inter-Alia to finance it?"

Willamer looked still more secretive. "That is a firm secret, Tompkins," he told me. "If you decide to come in with us, I'll let you in on our plans, but this thing is too big to talk about until we see the color of your money."

I stood up. "Well, then, gentlemen," I announced, "will you have one more round of drinks and then kindly get the hell out of here? I'm delighted to have met you personally but I don't see the point of wasting our time unless I know what I am putting my money into."

"Tell him, Harry," Sales urged. "We can trust Tompkins not to take advantage of our plans. The way we're set up we could block him easy if he tried to double-cross us."

"That's right," I said. "It's your plan and you have the inside track."

"Well, then," Willamer explained, "here's our first operation. The Army and Navy have huge stocks of atabrine and quinine left over from Africa and the South-west Pacific. As soon as the fighting stops, Colonel Finogan and Commander Coonley will declare these stocks surplus to be sold at spot-sales where they are. We will be the only bidders and we get a world-corner on malaria. The whole world needs that stuff and if we move fast, during the confusion after victory, we can sew it up and make the world pay our price. We ought to double our money in three months."

"Double!" snorted Sales. "We ought to quintuple it like Papa Dionne. South America is just lousy with dollars and here's a way to get 'em back home. Malaria's a big item down there. No quinine, no oil."

"Well, gentlemen," I told the Inter-Alia boys, "I'll have to think it over. As Mr. Willamer knows, I'm pretty heavily committed in the present market. Get in touch with me about the end of the month and I might be able to put—say, twenty thousand dollars—into your proposition."

Willamer smiled unpleasantly. "Come, Tompkins," he said, "you can do much better than that. Perhaps you don't realize that the S.E.C. might just decide to investigate your firm's market-position. You can afford to put in at least \$100,000 now and, when you get out of your present operation, make up the balance of that half million."

I went to the dumb-waiter and pushed the buzzer. "Tammy," I spoke into the phone, "will you come up here and show these gentlemen out of the club. We've finished our talk."

"Nothing doing," I said to the others. "I don't shake down well."

Willamer blinked his watery blue eyes at me. "That's libelous," he stated. "I'm a lawyer and I ought to know. You can't accuse me of blackmail in the presence of witnesses. By God, Tompkins, I'll have the examiners in your office at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. And I'll sue you for damages."

"Oh no, you won't," I informed him. "I didn't call you a blackmailer and I doubt that your friends will care to testify. You didn't know—perhaps I forgot to mention it—but this room is wired for dictaphones and a complete phonographic record of this conversation is already on wire. I'll send it over to the F.B.I. in the morning, unless you ___"

"Excuse me, Harry," said Commander Coonley with an air of decision. "I didn't hear any reference to blackmail by Mr. Tompkins. I'd better be getting back to my office."

"Me, too," chimed Lt. Col. George Finogan.

"Nice to have met you, Tompkins," Winston Sales observed as he strode briskly for the exit.

Harry Willamer turned to me, not without dignity. "You son of a bitch!" he remarked feelingly, and followed the others.

I waited until it was reasonably sure that the Inter-Alia group had left the building. Then I went downstairs to

the bar and found Tammy alone.

"Tammy," I said. "You overheard our conversation down the dummy, didn't you?"

"Oh no, sir. Not at all, Mr. Tompkins. I—"

"Of course you did, Tammy. You heard these gentlemen try to blackmail me and you heard me tell them to go to hell, didn't you?"

I languidly waved a twenty-dollar bill under his snubby nose.

"Now that you put it that way, sir," the little bar-steward admitted, "I do remember hearing that Mr. Willamer say that unless you gave him \$100,000 he'd start investigating your books."

"Splendid!" I congratulated him. "Just remember that, when the time comes. Now see if you can get me Mr. Merriwether Vail on the phone. He's in the Manhattan Directory—a lawyer."

"Merry?" I asked, after we had been connected. "I have a feeling I'm going to need your legal services ... No, it's not that one ... it's another kind of jam ... I'm being blackmailed ... No, you dope, it's not a woman, it's an official ... Yes, I'll stick here until you can get over ... What shall I order for you, a double Scotch? ... Right! At the Pond Club."

There was one more move to make. I called Bedford Hills, person-to-person call, and asked for my wife. After the usual duel between local and suburban operators, Jimmie's voice answered. "Winnie," she said. "Thank goodness you telephoned me. You'd better come out at once. The most dreadful things have been happening."

"It's not so wonderful here either," I told her. "Listen, Jimmie, you come on in—"

"It's Ponto," she said, paying absolutely no attention to what I was saying. "He's drunk—yes, drunk! He managed to upset that decanter of old brandy you keep on your night table and lapped it up. Now he's howling and hiccoughing like mad and I'm afraid to go near him."

"Oh, Jimmie, to hell with Ponto. Let him sleep it off. You come on in to town. We've got to do some fast thinking. I'll meet you in the Little Bar at the Ritz at five o'clock. Bring your night things, and mine, too. We may have to leave town in a hurry. I'll explain when I see you."

CHAPTER 13

Merry Vail listened to my account of the encounter with the Inter-Alia gang and then rolled his eyes toward heaven.

"Poor old Winnie!" he expostulated. "Why didn't you try something comparatively safe, like robbing a she bear of her whelps or yelling 'Hurray for Hitler' in Union Square? Harry Willamer is a vindictive guy and his aunt or his mother-in-law is related to Jesse Jones. At least that's what the Street believes."

"What can he do to me?" I asked. "I have him cold on a charge of blackmail."

"Like hell you do!" said Merry. "First thing he'll check with the F.B.I. to find out if there is a recording of your talk. And there isn't. So it's your word and Tammy's against that of four high-ranking government officials. You ask what they can do to you? You just call Phil Cone at your office and see if they haven't started doing it already."

The steward made the phone connection and in a few minutes Cone's languid voice was complaining over the wire.

"Say, Winnie, what the hell have you been up to?"

"Nothing, Phil. Why?" I asked.

"It's just that the word's been passed to lay off Tompkins, Wasson & Cone. The brokers don't want to handle our orders. You know Manny Oppenheimer of Auchincloss, Morton, Caton, Beauregard & Oppenheimer? You know how he used to lick your boots if you stood still long enough for him to kneel down and stick his tongue out? Well, Manny cut me. Yeah, that's right. Cut me! What's cooking? Even my best friends won't tell me whether it's B.O. or dishpan hands."

"Just keep on plugging, Phil," I urged. "They can't refuse to handle our orders if we insist. I'll put in some calls on this ... Yeah, I'm up at the Pond Club with my attorney ... I'll try to call you back. That guy Willamer is back of this because I wouldn't go along with his proposition."

"Oh-oh!" Phil observed dismally. "That's enough for me. Think I'd better join the Marines?"

"You keep away from the recruiting-sergeant until we finish this operation," I told him.

I turned to Vail. "Merry," I said, "this is one for you to handle. Brokers are trying to get out of handling our orders and tenth-raters like Manny Oppenheimer are high-hatting Phil Cone. You put in a call and find out what it's all about."

Vail meditated. "Okay," he said at last. "You understand I'm acting as your attorney now?"

"Sure," I agreed.

He dialed a number. "I'd like to speak to the U.S. Attorney's office," he told the switchboard operator. "Yes, I'll wait ... Yes ... Oh, Ned? ... This is Merry Vail. I've been retained by Winfred Tompkins. What I want to know is whether there are any charges against him ... Yeah, he's with me now ... No, he won't try to leave town. Suspicion of kidnapping? ... No fooling?—That's cockeyed ... Listen, counselor, my client is innocent and stands ready to answer all charges—"

He turned to me. "Hell, he hung up!"

"What was that about kidnapping?" I asked.

"Oh, something completely screwball," my attorney said. "It's only that his office has received an anonymous charge accusing you of having kidnapped Winnie Tompkins and masquerading in his place. Ned also told me you were in trouble with other governmental agencies and said he'd see me in court."

"Damn!" I objected. "That sounds like Virginia Rutherford's idea of a snappy way to find out where I was before Easter. It doesn't make sense. If I kidnapped Tompkins, who am I supposed to be? I'm ready to take a fingerprint test any time, even with these bandages on my right hand."

Vail clucked his tongue. "That attitude won't help," he said. "If you don't look out they'll say your prints prove that you're the man who kidnapped Charley Ross. No, Ned is full of prunes and he doesn't put much stock in this kidnapping angle, but the wolves are after you all right. Now I've passed the word, you can't leave the State, of course."

"Damn you, Merry," I objected. "I never told you—"

"You retained me, Winnie. That's enough. You'd be a damn fool to pull out now. Every G-man in America would be after you. My advice is to stick around. Today's the eleventh, Wednesday. Well, you have a weekend coming up, so you might just as well go on commuting between your office and Bedford Hills as be pulled off the fast freight at Oneonta."

"Damn that Rutherford woman!" I remarked. "She is the one who turned me in to the District Attorney. Up to now I've just had a few friendly passes from a nice guy from the F.B.I."

"I can't advise you on the subject of your sex life," Vail said. "But you have nothing to fear if you remember to cultivate a clean-cut manly expression and an air of amazed innocence as you tell the Judge, 'Not guilty, your Honor, and I reserve my defense.'"

"What shall I tell Phil Cone, though?" I asked.

"Wait a minute and I'll put in another call," Vail said. He dialed another number. "I want to speak to Joe," he said. "Yes. Joe. Tell him it's Merry Vail ... Joe, this is Merry ... Same to you. Say, what's all this b.s. about Winnie Tompkins ... Oh ... the hell you say! ... I don't believe ... No, that's definitely not true ... If it was anybody but you, Joe, I'd advise him to sue for libel ... Yeah, he's my client ... Of course he's innocent ... Lay you five-to-one in thousands he is ... Done!"

Vail turned back to me. "That was the chief fixer in New York," he told me. "His word is good. This kidnaping charge is a phony. Just a move to tie you up. What they think they have on you is a charge under the Espionage Act, communicating with the enemy. Joe was vague but it sounded plenty tough. The S.E.C.'s passed out word to be cagey in trading with you. They can't black-list you or freeze your funds without a hearing, but they sure can put on the heat. How much did Willamer want you to put into his racket?"

"Half a million," I told him. "One hundred thousand now and the rest in thirty days."

Merry Vail drew a wry face, sucked in his lips and signaled to Tammy for another drink. "As a member of the Bar and an officer of the court," he remarked, "I can't advise you to pay blackmail. On the other hand, if you could see your way to making a substantial investment in the Inter-Alia Corporation, it might make things much pleasanter all around."

I shook my head. "No, Merry," I told him, "and you are through as my attorney. I'll take my chances without a lawyer from now on, if that's the sort of advice I pay you for. I don't mind a gamble but these boys figure to use malaria to put a financial squeeze on the whole world. Ever see a man die of malignant malaria, Merry? It's not nice and it's not necessary, if you have atabrine or quinine. No, damn it, you go peddle your papers and I'll fight this out alone. Tammy," I added. "Get me the office, please. I want to talk to Mr. Cone again."

Vail grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. "Like hell you'll do without an attorney, you damn fool!" he said. "I'm sticking with you, with or without a fee. Say," he added, "what's come into you to make you act this way? You used to get the heebie-jeebies at the mere thought of legal complications."

"Phil," I said into the phone. "This is Winnie. Things are plenty bad for me personally. You and Graham can pull right out now if you wish. That louse Harry Willamer or somebody has put me on the spot and I'm trying to prove I'm not a Nazi agent ... No, neither are you, but you might have a hell of a time proving it. That's swell of you, Phil, but I don't want to get you or Graham in trouble. Now's the time to pull out of the firm if you like. Naturally I'm innocent but just now it's tough. Okay, you take it up with Graham, will you? I don't want to have to worry about either of you ... Sure I'm in a jam but it's not your fault and has nothing to do with the firm..."

When I put the telephone back in its cradle I looked up to see Merry Vail staring at me.

"Winnie," he said, "you're innocent for my money. Fun's fun but this thing is dangerous. Now I'm your attorney and you'll sure as hell need one so it's no use firing me. I don't know what sort of a frame they've figured for you or why the F.B.I.—"

I laughed. "Okay, Merry," I told him, "you're still my attorney. The F.B.I.'s been swell. The Special Agent assigned to check up on me, A. J. Harcourt, couldn't be nicer. I'd trust him not to pull a fast one."

Vail frowned. "The F.B.I. may be swell," he answered, "but their hand can be forced. They have to act on information received and superior orders. Your man Harcourt may be the nicest guy in the world but if he's told to bring you in he'll bring you in."

"Then what's your advice, counselor?"

"My advice to you, Winnie," he said, "is to try to forget about it. Just go right ahead with your plans, whatever

they are, just so you don't try to leave this jurisdiction or go into hiding. The best thing you could do is to go back to Bedford Hills and mind your own business and don't let these government so-and-so's push you around. Hell, this is a free country!"

"But I phoned Jimmie to meet me at the Ritz at five o'clock," I objected, "with our traveling things."

Vail glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's not three yet. If you phone her now the chances are she hasn't left. Tell her to stay put. Remember, the less you act guilty or scared the safer you are. The dog doesn't start to chase the rabbit until the rabbit starts to run."

I phoned back to Pook's Hill and was rewarded by catching Jimmie five minutes before the taxi was due to pick her up.

"Hold everything, dear," I told her. "Plans have changed. I'm coming out on the first train I can catch. How's Ponto?"

"Thank Heaven you called," Winnie's wife replied. "I couldn't find your dressing gown and your traveling case is in the room with Ponto and I didn't want to disturb him ... Oh he's snoring like mad. Passed out cold, I guess. He shakes the house. I never knew dogs got drunk, did you?"

When I first arrived at Pook's Hill I had a definite program in mind. First, I went to the kitchen, broke a raw egg into a tumbler and soused it in Worcester sauce. Then I added a good slug of brandy from the portable bar in my den. Armed with this Prairie Oyster, I went boldly to the second floor, opened the door to my bedroom and contemplated the debauched Great Dane.

Really, I could never have believed that a dog could look so completely blotto. Ponto was a bum in every sense of the word. He lay drooling and snoring on the bed, dead to the world.

"Ponto!" I ordered.

An ear pricked up, then dropped languidly back again. Then a bloodshot eye opened and shut. There was a half-whine, half snarl, interrupted by a violent hiccup.

"Here you are, Ponto!" I stated firmly, advancing on the bed, glass in hand.

The blood-shot eye opened again and the beast began to shake and shiver. I walked up, lifted his jowl in one hand, made a little funnel of his lip and poured in the Prairie Oyster. Then I clamped a firm control on the jaws, held Ponto's head back and let it slide gulping down his gullet.

Ponto heaved. He shuddered. He shook himself free, leaped from the bed and ran around the room, lurching, whining and shaking his head violently. He stopped and sideswiped his muzzle with a clumsy paw. He lay down on his back and rolled.

Then the dose took hold. A noble expression seemed to pour over his brow. His eyes opened wide and remained open, with a clear and friendly gleam. He stood up, shook himself, ran into the bathroom, gulped some water from his bowl very noisily, and then came bounding back.

"Wuff!" he said to me.

Then Ponto reared on his hind legs, placed two large paws on my shoulders and proceeded to lick my face thoroughly with a rough, wet tongue. I had made a friend, I decided. As Androcles had won the lion by removing the thorn from its paw, so had I tamed Ponto by administering first-aid.

There was a tap at the door. It was Jimmie. "Are you all right, Winnie?" she asked. "Is he still asleep?"

"Asleep!" I was contemptuous. "No, he's awake. Ponto and I are pals. We understand each other. He had a hang-over and I fixed him. We're buddies now, aren't we, old fellow?"

The answer was a low savage growl and I leaped through the door barely in time to escape his earnest but rather shaky attempt to remove a couple of pounds of meat from my exterior.

"Hell!" I explained, "that beast's not human. Let's send him back to the vet's and get something easier to live with—a Yorkshire or a poodle."

"I'd like a Chihuahua," said Germaine, "or one of those little Belgian Schipperke gadgets."

"How about a collie?" I asked.

Germaine raised piteous eyes to me. "Do you want to make me ill, with your talk of collies?" she asked. "Now come on down to the den and tell me what's been going on in town."

"Well, Jimmie," I began, "it's a long, long story—"

CHAPTER 14

"If it's going to be long," she said, "we'd both better have a drink. You always think better if you have a glass in your hand."

"Now, what is it you want to know?" I answered, after we were comfortably settled in front of the electric fire.

"It's—it's just that everything is so queer," Germaine began. "You've changed so that you almost seem like a different person. You even look better, not so flabby, as though you took regular exercise. At least I see a change, and then suddenly I find that you've been carrying on with that Briggs girl and I can't tell whether you've really changed or are just trying to fool me. She's a nice person, of course, and if you *must* have another girl, I'd rather have you pick someone—oh—safe and comfortable like her. But you said you hadn't been playing with the office girls. And then there's Ponto. He used to adore you and you swore by him. Now he tries to bite you and you want to get rid of him. And then there's all this talk about where you were during Holy Week and that F.B.I. man and Myrtle tells me they've been asking a lot of questions about you and Virginia. What *have* you been doing, dear, that you can't remember when our whole life may depend on it?"

"Jimmie," I told her. "I wish to God I knew. You must believe me when I tell you I can't remember things before Easter Monday. That was the second and today is the eleventh and I can remember everything that's happened since then. Before that it is all blank and all mixed-up in that dream I had."

She moved away from me, slightly. "You can't tell me that the F.B.I. would be interested in your dreams," she said sharply. "Not in time of war."

"They are in this dream," I told her. "You see I dreamed—if you want to call it that—that a certain American ship blew up in the North Pacific. The trouble is that the public hasn't been told that there is such a ship, like that 'Old Nameless' is the Solomons, and that the Navy Department doesn't know what happened to it. *I* believe that it did blow up. Harcourt believes my story, in the main, but from the F.B.I. angle they have to check up on whether I'm not part of an Axis spy-ring which could have caused the explosion. If I could only remember where I was and what I was doing the week before I could clear myself."

Her face lighted and she relaxed. "Oh, is *that* all?" she exclaimed. "*I know* you couldn't have done anything like that. All you've probably been doing is to go off with one of those silly girls of yours to some out-of-the-way place. That ought to be easy to check, even if you registered under a false name. For the first time, you know," she added, "I'm almost *glad* you've been chasing all those stupid blondes of yours. It will make it easy to establish your alias."

"Alibi," I corrected her. "Let me fix you another drink. From now on," I added, "there are going to be no more blondes or red-heads. I like Arthurjean Briggs—she's named Arthurjean for her father and mother. It's one word like Marylou or Honeychile—but she's more like a friend than a—oh—you know. You saw her. But I guess you're right. I must have been chasing around so much my mind got tangled up in itself and sort of blew a fuse. If I can't get my memory straightened out soon I'll look up a psychiatrist and see if he can't fix me."

"You know, Winnie—" Germaine began and then fell silent.

"Yes, Jimmie?"

She turned towards me and smiled rather wistfully. "You know, I was going to say that you and I—perhaps— Well, it's so long since we've been really—oh—*close* to each other. I wondered—"

"You mean that perhaps we ought to patch things up between us?"

"Isn't that what a wife's for?" she asked. "I mean—I mean when things get difficult it ought—there ought to be *one* person to whom you could turn."

I slipped my arm around her and drew her close to me on the lounge. She lowered her face against my coat and I could feel her shaking.

"You're crying!" I said. "You mustn't cry."

"Oh, Winnie, I've been so alone—so—"

I raised her face to mine and kissed her, tasting the wet, salt tears. Her lips were warm and soft against mine. Suddenly she pressed herself against me and responded to my kiss so fiercely that we were both startled. We sprang apart, almost guiltily.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh—you haven't kissed me like that—"

She raised her lips again and this time we held it.

What with one thing and another, I didn't get back to the office until the Market closed on Thursday afternoon. I found my two partners in pretty good control of our operations but frankly mystified as to the cause of the official mugging of Tompkins, Wasson & Cone. We had laid out two and a half millions in all, despite the attempt to scare us off. The market had continued steady.

Neither Graham nor Phil asked me any direct questions about the events on Wednesday. They talked straight business and kept their curiosity in check. It was close to half-past four when we finished our general discussion of the operation, so I decided that they were entitled to some kind of explanation in return for their loyalty.

"See here, boys," I told them. "You've both been perfectly swell about this rat-race the S.E.C. started. Harry Willamer tried to put the squeeze on me for half a million dollars to finance him and a bunch of official bastards in a shady deal. When I turned him down he threatened to tie us up with a Commission investigation. I bluffed him out of it at the time by pretending there was an F.B.I. dictaphone record of our talk, so he laid off the heavy heat and just started needling us a little. Any time now he'll make the check at the F.B.I. and when he finds there isn't any record he'll try to tie us up tighter than a drum. All we can do is wait it out. The market's going to start dropping any day now and we'll clean up."

"Oh!" Wasson said. "Was that it? Willamer's a bad actor. Thanks for telling us, Winnie. Phil and I knew that there must be something screwy when—"

The door flew open and Arthurjean appeared, her face white.

"God!" she said at last. "He was such a swell guy. He—"

"Who? What's the mat—"

"It's Roosevelt!" she choked. "He's dead. It just came in on the ticker."

"No!"

"He died at Warm Springs." And she hid her face in her hands and left the room, sobbing.

Phil Cone stood up, paper-white, crossed over and turned up the radio.

"Flash!" the announcer was saying. "Warm Springs, Georgia. President Roosevelt died this afternoon following his collapse from a severe cerebral hemorrhage. More in a moment. Keep tuned to this station."

"Well, I'll be eternally damned!" I said. "So he was right—"

Cone whirled on me. "You knew about this," he stated flatly. "When we were talking yesterday morning. You had more than a hunch. You knew he was going to die."

"Be your age, Phil," I told him. "How in hell *could* I know?"

"Je-sus Ke-rist!" Wasson growled. "This will knock holy hell out of the Market. Lucky trading's closed for the day. They can't open tomorrow. They'll have to shut down all the exchanges. They'll have to close the banks. God! What a mess!"

Cone still looked dazed. "No dancing in the streets?" he asked bitterly. "I thought this was going to send values sky-rocketing."

Wasson swung on him. "The hell with that talk, Phil," he snapped. "I was just shooting the bull. Roosevelt dead! Jesus H. Christ! You know, he wasn't a bad old buzzard after he got rid of all that New Deal nonsense and set to work winning this war."

Cone had recovered his poise. "Sure he did a swell job winning the war, but now we're going to lose the peace, sure as shooting!"

"Hell!" Graham's choice of expletives was strictly rationed. "This means that Truman will take over. What sort of a guy is he? You got any idea, Winnie? He's not up to Roosevelt, that's sure."

I shook my head. "I don't know from nothing," I began. "Sh!"

The radio announcer resumed his broadcast. "Warm Springs, Georgia. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt passed away at four thirty-five this afternoon, Eastern War Time, following a severe cerebral hemorrhage. The late President had been spending a few days at his Georgia retreat getting rested after his strenuous trip to the Yalta Conference. Earlier this afternoon he complained of a severe headache and almost immediately became unconscious. He died peacefully a little later. His death came at a moment when American troops in Germany and on Okinawa were driving ahead toward the victory he—"

Cone switched it down again. "*He* had a headache!" he muttered. "What do you think *we're* going to have?"

The telephone rang. I picked up the instrument. It was one of those automatic phonograph recordings. "The Stock Exchange will not be open tomorrow by order of the Governors, out of respect for the memory of the late President Roosevelt. That is all—The Stock Exchange will not be open—" the metallic feminine voice went on. I hung up.

"You're right about one thing, Graham," I said. "That was an automatic message to say the Exchange will be closed tomorrow. It's probably on the ticker, too."

It was.

Cone sat down suddenly, as though his legs had turned to rubber.

"Now it will all start again," he said. "Sell out and pack up, pack up and clear out."

I crossed the office and put my hand on his shoulder. "Cheer up, Phil," I told him. "It won't be as bad as that. Graham and I will stick with you and that's true of Americans generally."

Cone shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "Thanks, Winnie," he remarked. "You're a good fellow and a good friend. I've got something to say to you. You won't like it. I got worried yesterday when you started talking about Roosevelt maybe dying and I tipped the F.B.I. on what you said."

I laughed. "If the F.B.I. arrested every man in Wall Street who had ever talked about Roosevelt dying the jails wouldn't hold them. Don't worry, Phil. In your shoes I'd have done the same thing."

The phone rang again. It was the receptionist. "Mr. Harcourt is here to see you, Mr. Tompkins," she informed me. "Shall I ask him to wait?"

"Tell him I'll see him in a couple of minutes," I replied.

"This is it, boys," I told my partners. "It's the F.B.I. Now, the Market's going to drop. It will be a bear market in a big way, dignified as hell, and we're in ahead of the others. You two just carry on. Try to get a line on this guy Truman. Some of our Kansas City correspondents may have the dope. Phil, no hard feelings about this F.B.I. angle. They've been riding me for days on some crazy story Ranty Tolan started about me last week."

Wasson looked at me coldly. "If I thought that you had anything to do with this—" he began.

"Oh skip it!" I begged him. "You know me better."

I picked up the phone and told the receptionist to send Harcourt in.

"Mr. Tompkins," he said. "I've been ordered to ask you to come up to the Bureau's headquarters right away."

"Am I under arrest?" I asked.

"Well," Harcourt admitted, "I haven't got a warrant but I think maybe you better come with me."

"What's the charge?"

"My chief will tell you what it's all about," he said. "My orders were to bring you in for questioning."

"Okay," I agreed. "I'll come along quietly. Phil, will you tell Miss Briggs to ring up my wife and say I won't be home tonight and not to worry. I'll be all right."

Harcourt came and laid his hand on my arm. "Come along then," he ordered gruffly.

"How about my lawyer?" I inquired. "Graham, will you phone Merry Vail and tell him I've been taken up to the F.B.I. for questioning?"

Harcourt looked up at me. "Is Merriwether Vail your lawyer?" he asked. "I wouldn't bother to call him. We've picked him up too. All your associates, outside of business and—er—pleasure, are being rounded up. The President's dead, Mr. Tompkins, and you're going to do some talking to my chief."

CHAPTER 15

The events which brought me into the office of Edward Lamb, Deputy Director of the F.B.I., on Friday the thirteenth, had developed so rapidly that I could scarcely believe that less than twenty-four hours had passed since Harcourt had taken me into custody.

We had gone to the Federal Court House in a taxi-cab (paid for by me) where I was placed alone in a room for fifteen minutes. At the end of that period I was informed that Washington had asked that I be sent down for direct interrogation at the Bureau. I was told that if I preferred I could demand a formal warrant of arrest but that Mr. Vail, who had been released with an apology, advised me to go, and that I could confirm it by telephone—which I did. I was told that there was still no formal charge against me but they asked if I would let myself be finger-printed. To this I agreed and then sat back while arrangements were completed to fly me down to Washington from the LaGuardia Airport. Harcourt was to accompany me. That had been all. They allowed me to phone Germaine and tell her I was going to Washington and invite her to join me there as soon as I could get hotel accommodations. The F.B.I. put me up for the night in one of their Manhattan hide-outs—an old house on East 80th Street—and in the morning Harcourt and I had taken the plane. The clock had barely touched noon when I was told that Mr. Lamb was ready to see me.

Lamb was a pleasant, youngish man—with that inevitable faint Hoover chubbiness—whose roomy office with its deep leather easy chairs spelled power in the F.B.I. I was amused to note that he followed Rule 1 of whistle-stop detection, by seating me in a deep chair, facing the light, while he sat at his desk on a definitely higher level and with the light behind him.

"Well, Mr. Tompkins," he began, "we've had disturbing reports about you from at least three different sources. Frankly, we still don't know what to make of them and the Director thought it would be better if you came here and talked to us."

"Always glad to help," I assured him. "If you'll tell me what the reports are, I'll try to explain."

Lamb glanced at a file of papers on his desk. "The first one is an allegation that you aren't Winfred S. Tompkins, but an imposter who has kidnapped Tompkins and taken his place. That report was anonymous and we don't attach any particular importance to it, although if necessary we could use it to detain you for questioning under the Lindbergh Law."

I stretched out my hands toward him. "My finger-prints were taken last night," I said. "They ought to settle that question."

Lamb laughed. "Unfortunately," he admitted, "it takes a little time to establish identity by finger-prints. The first tentative identification suggested by yours was a man named Jonas Lee. He is a Negro currently employed in the Charleston Navy Yard. However, I think we can assume that the final identification will bear you out. They're working on it now."

There was a buzz and he picked up the desk-telephone. "Oh, they do," he remarked. "Good!"

He turned back to me. "That was the Finger-Print Division. They're your prints, all right, so we'll cancel the kidnapping charge."

"What's the second strike on me?"

"That's a report phoned in by one of your partners, that you seemed to expect President Roosevelt's death two or three days before it happened."

"I did," I explained. "A man named Axel Roscommon came to my office, said that he was the chief Nazi agent in the United States, and told me that Roosevelt had been poisoned at Yalta. I had already reported Roscommon to the Bureau and was told to let him alone. Roscommon said that only a few people, including Roosevelt, knew about the poisoning. I wanted to pass on the warning but was told that it was too late, that I would simply expose myself to suspicion. So what I did was to make normal business preparations to take advantage of its effect on the Stock

Market."

Lamb looked up at the ceiling and remained silent for a few minutes. "So that's the way it was," he said. "For your personal information, Mr. Tompkins, Roscommon told the Director the same thing a month ago but when Mr. Hoover tried to warn the Secret Service he had his ears slapped back. If I'd known about the Roscommon angle in your case I would have told the New York office not to worry. I thought perhaps that this was another angle on the same story."

"Do you believe that President Roosevelt was assassinated, Mr. Lamb?" I asked, point-blank.

He shrugged his shoulders. "No, I do not," he replied. "Not officially, that is. It is not inconceivable and the Secret Service is so set in its ideas and methods that—well, frankly I'd rather not believe it. I have no evidence, aside from a verbal warning which might have been coincidence. Some of our toxicologists say that it could be done, others deny that there is a virus which can produce the symptoms of a paralytic stroke. In any case, it's outside of our jurisdiction."

I heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God I'm clear of that one," I said. "I shouldn't like to be mixed up, even by accident, in anything like that. I remember what happened to Dr. Mudd."

Lamb nodded. "The doctor who bandaged Booth's leg after the murder of Lincoln? Yes, I can see your point."

"How about the third charge?" I asked.

Lamb looked serious. "That's not going to be so easy, Mr. Tompkins," he announced. "Harcourt reports that he doesn't think there's anything to it, but Naval Intelligence has the jitters about this Alaska business. It seems to be pretty well established that on the afternoon of April second you stated that the U.S.S. Alaska had been sunk in an explosion off the western Aleutians. That was over ten days ago and there is still no word from the carrier. The last report came from Adak which had picked the ship up by radar on the first. The report given us was that you represented that it was all a dream. What worries the Navy about this explanation is that no public announcement had ever been made of the Alaska's launching or commission. She's a sneak-carrier built under stringent security regulations and until you came into the picture the Navy was pretty sure that there'd been no leak."

I nodded dismally. "Knowing the Navy," I replied, "I can guess how they feel. All that I can suggest, Mr. Lamb, is that this is a case of mental telepathy. There have been plenty of other instances of it on record. Often they call it intuition or second sight. I can only say that if you investigate and can find any other explanation I'll be delighted."

"I don't think that Admiral Ballister—he's the present head of O.N.I., though they change so fast we almost lose count—will be satisfied with the theory that it is a case of E.S.P. That's 'extra-sensory perception' and there have been plenty of scientific experiments in that field but the Navy doesn't know about them. And then, of course, there was the bomb—"

I nodded. "The thorium bomb—" I began, and stopped as I noticed an official change in Lamb's attitude.

"Exactly, Mr. Tompkins," he observed. "The thorium bomb. Nobody—at least outside of the President, the Secretary of the Navy and Professor Chalmis—was supposed to know that there was such a thing as a thorium bomb. The security arrangements on the thorium project were so drastic—"

"Roscommon knew all about it," I said. "He also mentioned Chalmis to me."

The Deputy Director looked slightly ill. "He did, did he?" he growled. "*That* will teach the Navy not to let the Bureau handle domestic security. Hell, this thing gets bigger and bigger every minute. If Roscommon knew about it, then anybody could have known. Why, it's been an offense against the Espionage Act, even to print the word 'thorium' outside of chemical textbooks, and Chalmis is supposed to be in the T.B. sanitarium at Saranac. Wonder what happened to him?"

I leaned forward. "He's dead, Mr. Lamb," I assured him. "Everybody on the Alaska is dead. The bomb went off and there's nobody left to tell the tale."

"How do you do it, Tompkins?" Lamb demanded. "If you will give us the details and the names of your accomplices I think I can promise you a life sentence instead of the electric chair."

"Mr. Lamb," I replied, "You can promise till the cows come home. I—W. S. Tompkins—had no connection with it at all and you can't prove that I had. I know about it only because of—well, call it mental telepathy. I could sit down and tell you exactly what happened on the Alaska before Chalmis deliberately touched off the bomb, but I couldn't prove it and there isn't a living soul who could support or disprove my story. And if you place me under arrest I'll be in a position to sue for heavy damages. False arrest on a charge of treason is no joke and I'll fight."

Lamb looked slightly uncomfortable. "Well?" he asked. "What would you do if you were me? Let you go, with the Navy howling for action?"

"There are two things I'd do," I told him. "First of all, I'd assign a flock of agents to see if they can find out where I was and what I was doing between the 25th of March and the second of April. Harcourt tells me that was the critical period. I don't remember. It's a case of amnesia, I guess. At any rate, I've drawn a blank. You have my fingerprints and photograph. You ought to be able to locate something."

Lamb shook his head. "That's not necessary now," he replied. "If Roscommon knew about Chalmis and the bomb, the question of where you were the week before last isn't important any more. We'd have to check back for at least two years."

"The other thing I'd do," I continued, "would be to let me go under some sort of open arrest. Fix me up so I can see the intelligence people here and give me a chance to convince them that—" I paused.

"Convince them of what?" he asked tartly.

"See here, Mr. Lamb," I said. "I'm in a hell of a personal jam. For personal reasons I'm trying to clear things up. Believe it or not, this business about the sinking of the Alaska and the thorium bomb is the least of my troubles. I've got the damndest case of loss of memory I've ever heard of. As Winfred S. Tompkins I can only remember as far back as April second, but I can remember years before that as somebody else. That's how I happen to know about the loss of the Alaska."

"How?" he asked. "According to your theory, everybody aboard her is dead."

I nodded. "Just the same, I was on the ship when she blew up—in my dream, I mean. If you give me a chance to talk to the intelligence heads, I think I can prove to their satisfaction not only that I know what I'm talking about but that my knowledge is perfectly legitimate."

Lamb grinned. "The Bureau is in enough fights as it is without being accused of sending a screwball around to bother the heads of G-2 and O.N.I."

I leaned forward. "I can see your point," I admitted. "I know that in the Navy everybody is out to cut everybody else's throat. It must be worse when two different Government Bureaus are involved."

The Deputy Director looked at me. "You seem to know a hell of a lot about the Navy for a stock-broker," he observed. "At any rate, that idea's out. I won't give you introductions and—"

"Okay!" I agreed. "Then let me try to do it my own way. I have some friends in the O.S.S. I'll see if they can't get me in to see General Donovan. If I have a talk with him, perhaps he'll agree to pass me on to the others."

Lamb laughed again. "You don't know Washington, Mr. Tompkins. General Donovan's blessing won't help you," he declared. "They hate his guts for trying to make them combine. However, if you think you can get to see him on your own, go right ahead but for God's sake don't say the Bureau sent you over."

"All right," I agreed. "Then I take it I'm under open arrest. I won't try to leave town without telling you. Any suggestions of where I can find a hotel room for the next few days?"

Lamb leaned back in his chair and grinned boyishly. "The Bureau has a lot of authority," he declared, "but it's

not God. There won't be a hotel room to be had for love or money for the next two weeks. Roosevelt's death is bringing everybody back to Washington. President Truman is taking over and most officials are too busy to be bothered. Usually, it's not hard to get a hotel room over the week-end but not this time. If you can't get accommodations, phone back here and we'll fix you up with a cot somewhere in the F.B.I. barracks."

"Then I'm in the clear, so far as you are concerned," I suggested.

Lamb smiled cryptically. "I didn't say that," he remarked, "and it isn't so. We have nothing specific to hold you on, but the Alaska is missing and, if you insist, the President is dead, and you're caught in the middle."

"What will it take to get myself cleared?" I asked.

Lamb considered. "If you can get O.N.I. off our necks, with a clean bill of health, we'll relax," he admitted. "But I give you twenty-four hours to do it. Admiral Ballister's pretty worked up on this Alaska business, and he wants action."

I nodded. "Okay, I'll give it to him," I said.

"Okay, Tompkins," he remarked. "It's your funeral. But remember, if you're not cleared in twenty-four hours, we'll be calling you in again and this time we'll give you the works."

Luck was with me. I left the F.B.I. and walked up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Willard. As I followed the queue to the registration clerk at the desk I heard the man just ahead of me start to say: "I want to cancel—"

"Just a moment, sir," the clerk said, as he picked up the telephone. "Yes, madam? No, I'm sorry—"

I plucked at the man's sleeve.

"Don't cancel, if it's for tonight," I said, "Here's a hundred," and I held out two fifty dollar bills.

The man nodded. "Okay, buddy," he agreed, pocketing the money. "The name's R. L. Grant of Detroit."

"Name, please," the clerk asked.

"R. L. Grant of Detroit," I answered. "I have a reservation."

"Right," he said. "Lucky for you you wired a week ago. Here you are, Mr. Grant. Please register."

CHAPTER 16

After lunch—which was poor, slow and expensive—I screwed up my courage and telephoned the Office of Strategic Services.

"May I speak to Mrs. Jacklin?" I asked the switch-board girl. She promptly referred me to Information, who told me that Mrs. Dorothy Jacklin was on Extension 3046, shall-I-connect you?

A moment later a pleasant voice said, "Yes? This is Mrs. Jacklin."

"Mrs. Jacklin," I told my wife, "my name is Tompkins, W. S. Tompkins. I have a message for you from Commander Jacklin."

"Oh," she said. It was not a question. "Are you a friend of Frank's? Is he all right?"

"He asked me to see you when I got to Washington and gave me some special messages for you. I'm staying at

the Willard. Are you free for cocktails or dinner this evening?"

Something of the urgency in my voice communicated itself to her and I could feel her reverse her original impulse to refuse the invitation.

"Why yes, Mr. Tompkins," she agreed. "I'd be glad to join you, for cocktails, that is. Shall we say about half past five?"

"Splendid! I'll meet you in the south lobby. I'm sure to recognize you, Frank gave me such a good description of you. If there's any slip-up, have one of the bellboys page me."

"Thank you," she said. "I'll be there."

As I laid down the telephone, my pulse was racing and my throat was dry. How in God's name should I act with her?

Half-past five crawled around. I filled in some of the time by phoning the F.B.I. and telling Lamb's secretary I was registered at the Willard under the name of R. L. Grant. I phoned Bedford Hills and told Jimmie that I was in Washington and wanted her to join me at the Willard. She was a little slow about getting the R. L. Grant angle but allowed that she could register as Mrs. Grant or Mrs. John Doe if necessary and when was all this nonsense going to stop?

In spite of my assurance, I almost failed to recognize Dorothy. She looked younger, smarter and infinitely more self-possessed, and the tanned and muscular young man in uniform who accompanied her was obviously not animated by brotherly sentiments toward her.

"Mrs. Jacklin?" I asked. "I'm Tompkins. And—" I turned eloquently to her escort.

"Oh, this is Major Demarest," she said. "Thanks, Tony, for escorting me. I'll see you later?"

"Half-past sixish?" Demarest asked.

"Say seven," Dorothy told him. "I'll meet you here, by the desk."

So I was neatly bracketed. While Dorothy and I were talking, her escort would be waiting—impatiently. There was no chance of a prolonged operation. I must keep things moving.

I took her to the rather garish cocktail lounge on the east side of the hotel and ordered her a Bourbon old-fashioned and a Scotch-and-soda for myself.

"Frank told me that's what you like," I remarked, before she could raise her eyebrows after I told the waiter to bring a sliver of lemon peel to go with the old-fashioned.

"Where did you know him?" she asked.

I leaned confidently across the table. "Mrs. Jacklin," I told her, "I'm in intelligence. Tompkins is my name but I don't use it much. I've seen quite a bit of your husband during the past few years—here at Washington and out in the Pacific. In fact," I added, "I might say that I'm his closest friend. We were at school together, many years ago. I'm surprised he never mentioned me."

"How *is* he?" she asked. "I know too much to ask *where* he is."

I looked gravely at her. "We don't know where he is," I replied. "His ship hasn't been reported for nearly two weeks. He was on a special mission. That's why I've looked you up. Frank made me promise that I would if—I mean—he thought—"

Dorothy drained her glass and gave me a long, strange look. "Are you trying to tell me that he's dead?" she asked.

"It's not official," I said. "It may never be confirmed, but I personally am sure, as sure as I'm sitting here, that you'll never see him again."

She looked down at the table and nervously tapped an unlighted cigarette against her lacquered thumb-nail. "I'll have another drink, if you don't mind," she said. "It's not that—well, our marriage was over long ago—but, he—I—"

I signaled our waitress and duplicated our order.

"This is one of the times when my father told me to remember the giants," she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"My father was professor of philosophy at Wesleyan," she explained. "He always said that it was impossible to imagine anything so big that there wasn't something else bigger. He said that it stood to reason that somewhere in the universe there was a race of giants so big that it took them a million years to draw a breath. He said when things seemed difficult just to think about that."

"Sounds like the Navy Department," I observed. "Was he the one who argued that there might be several sexes? Frank told me something—"

She smiled. "Yes. That was when I was adolescent and having crushes about boys. He said that somewhere there must be a place where, instead of two, there were six or seven sexes. He suggested that falling in love under those conditions was really complicated. He was a nice man," she added. "He's dead."

"Your father sounds like a right guy," I remarked. "Frank said—"

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" she suddenly interrupted. "What proof have you?"

Here I was on home-ground. "Frank thought of that. He told me to remind you that you have a mole on your left hip, that you're nuts about Prokofiev, that you don't think much of Ernest Hemingway as an author and—"

"The louse!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I know I oughtn't to talk about him this way if he's dead but I didn't dream men told each other—"

I pulled out my fountain pen and wrote my Jacklin signature rapidly across the back of the drink-card. I pushed it at her across the table.

"There!" I told her. "Recognize that, Mrs. Jacklin?"

"Why!" Dorothy exclaimed. "It's his writing! Who *are* you, Mr. Tompkins? Only I could say that it's a forgery."

"Listen, Dorothy," I began conspiratorially. "And if I call you Dorothy it is only because your husband always spoke of you as Dorothy. I must see General Donovan. This is much more than a matter of your husband and yourself. It's a matter of top-echelon intelligence."

She looked downcast. "The General's out of town," she said. "He's trying to get back for the Roosevelt funeral but the man who's running the show in his absence is Colonel McIntosh. Ivor McIntosh."

There was a curl to her lips as she pronounced the name that told me all I needed to know about the colonel. Still, beggars can't be choosers and Colonel McIntosh was ever so much better than nothing at all.

"Very well," I told her. "Will you arrange to have me see Colonel McIntosh tomorrow morning? Tell—" here I took a leap—"Tell him that I'm from the White House."

"You aren't, are you?"

"Of course not, but I gather that's the kind of bait your Colonel needs."

"He's a very clever man," Dorothy belatedly defended him. "They say he did brilliant staff-intelligence work

under Stillwell in the first Burma campaign."

"That's the one we lost, isn't it?" I asked dryly. "No, Dorothy. Let me see this Colonel. You know how to fix it—there's always one special girl in an office that has the ear of a man like that. Frank swore to me that there was nothing you couldn't do if you decided it was worth while."

She looked at me across the little round, black table. "Mr. Tompkins," she said, "I have no way of telling whether you are telling the truth or not. Frankly, if General Donovan was in town I wouldn't bother him, but Colonel McIntosh is—you know—one of *the* Chicago McIntoshes. You never heard of him? Nobody else did either but here he is with a British accent and if you can make the grade with him it won't worry me."

I ordered another round of drinks.

"Tell me, Dorothy," I said, "not that it's any of my business, except that I was a friend of your husband's, don't you feel any special regret that he's probably gone west?"

She took a man-sized swallow of her old-fashioned. "Not particularly," she admitted. "In a general, normal sort of way, I'm sorry, of course. He was nice even if we didn't get on very well. But we had almost no interests in common and when we broke up it was for keeps. He was kind, and on the whole, decent, but God! so stuffy and boring to live with. Day after day, Hartford, Connecticut, writing and yessing, living by minutes and dying by inches. He rather liked it. I couldn't understand it. So you can see why I can't pretend to be prostrated. And perhaps he isn't dead at all."

I nodded. "He's dead if that's the way you feel about him," I said. "He told me that his wife was a lovely girl with a mole on her hip and the hell of a temper. He said it was like being married to a circus acrobat or an opera singer—exciting but not happy. He said you had a habit of—" I stopped in the nick of time.

"Oh, he did, did he?" she snapped. "Well, Mr. Tompkins, I don't suppose he ever told you that he snored or that —"

"Skip it, please," I calmed her. "It's your marriage, not mine. I told you these things so you'd know I was really sent to you by Frank. Now you fix it so I can talk to McIntosh."

"I will," she replied.

It was the epitaph on ten years of marriage. I knew when I was licked. Dorothy was what she had been when I had picked her out of Middletown—as inaccessible as the root of a Greek aorist or as a book of *curiosa* in a Carnegie library. She had not shown a trace of recognizing Frank Jacklin inside the body of Winnie Tompkins, even though my morning calisthenics were reducing my circumference. I was licked. I was no Faustus to woo this Marguerite, especially when she obviously had someone else on the string. The Master of the Rat Race obviously meant me to play the hand he had dealt me, and no Joker. By Godfrey, it would go hard with Dorothy's boss when I came to grips with him. All the Navy men who had been hitched by Washington would applaud me—Marty Donnell who had been sent out against the "Nagato" with the wrong size shells for his guns; Abie Roseman, who had been cashiered because he had refused to okay a travel order for the Admiral's sweetie; Julius Winterbottom, who had died on the "Lexington"—and all the gobs who had died. Well, win or lose, I'd give the F.B.I. a run for its money and what could they do to me? Damn it! I was a civilian—one of the guys that paid their salaries!

Colonel Ivor McIntosh of the Chicago McIntoshes was one of those who had been born with a platinum spoon and a broad "A" in his mouth. His face bore the marks of years of application to the more expensive tables, cellars and bedrooms. His uniform was in the U.S. Army but definitely not of it—having a Savile Row touch that suggested the Guards. He was, he told me, in charge of the O.S.S. "until Bill gets back," and what could he do for me?

"Colonel," I said. "I came to you in the face of strong opposition from the F.B.I. I have first-hand information concerning the sinking of the Alaska."

"Nonsense!" McIntosh replied cheerily. "It was on the map five minutes ago. I'm sure it's still there."

I smiled. "The U.S.S. Alaska, sir," I explained. Colonels love to be called "Sir," especially by a civilian. "I have

the inside story of the sinking of the carrier. The F.B.I. told me it was useless to try to see you or Admiral Ballister. In fact, they ordered me under no circumstances to mention the F.B.I. in connection with my mission."

McIntosh toyed with a crystal elephant on his desk. "Exactly what *is* your mission?" he asked.

I drew myself up, not without dignity. "I am with Z-2, Colonel," I told him, "and as you know the Z Bureau reports only to the President." I had heard of G-2, A-2, even X-2. Why not Z-2—to end all 2's.

"Of course," he agreed without bending an eyelash. "But why have you come to see me, Mr. Tompkins?"

"Call me Grant, Colonel," I replied with a knowing smile. "That's the name I'm registered under at the Willard. The reason I've come to you, is that my orders, which were given to me personally last February by President Roosevelt, were to consult the head of the O.S.S. if anything went wrong. As you undoubtedly know, Roosevelt had a very warm feeling for the O.S.S. and my instructions have been to work with your men whenever possible. F.D.R. told me that, if I needed prompt action at any time to come to this office and skip the other intelligence services."

Colonel McIntosh was only human, if from the Chicago McIntoshes. He relaxed. He almost smiled.

"I got back to this country less than two weeks ago, Colonel," I told him. "I was working on the other end of the Alaska case—and it's a tough one—when word came of the President's death. My report was due to him at Warm Springs next Monday. Now I'll have to take it up direct with Admiral Ballister. The F.B.I.'s trying to block me."

"Why?" he asked, but he knew why.

I shrugged my shoulders. "You know Washington, Colonel," I said. "The F.B.I. tried to get control of Z-2 and was stopped by the other services. Since then, they've refused all cooperation. And I must get to see Admiral Ballister before he goes away for the week-end. Since Roosevelt's death the whole town has changed and Truman is too busy and bothered to see Z-2 reports."

Colonel McIntosh put in some earnest home-work on the telephone.

"Ballister," he said at last. "McIntosh speaking, O.S.S. A Mr. R. L. Grant—that's not his name, but he's from Z-2—Yes, of course you do. That's the special—Yes," that's right, Admiral. He has an urgent report for you. He's been trying to reach you since Thursday but our good friend J. Edgar has been blocking him—Sure, you remember—That was a couple of years ago, when Edgar tried to grab Z-2 and we all helped block it. Grant has some hot stuff for you, on the Alaska sinking—Fine! Yes, he'll be over as fast as my car can take him. Oh, not at all. Always glad to help—As you know, orders are to help Z-2 at all times—no questions asked, nothing on paper—Righto!"

McIntosh hung up and turned to me with an air of authority. "That was Admiral Ballister, Mr.—er—Grant," he said. "He'll see you right away. I'll have my chauffeur drive you over to the Navy Department. You can talk freely to the Admiral. He's a sound man."

I smiled wanly. I had won the first round of my match with the F.B.I. Ballister meant nothing to me but I had to convince him that I was on the level or Mr. Lamb would close in on me. In any case, I owed it to my Navy friends to take a fall out of the Department. After all, I couldn't be worse off than I already was, with the G-Men breathing down my neck and me out on open arrest, on a charge of treason. The electric chair doesn't look funny when there's even the faintest chance of your sitting in it yourself.

CHAPTER 17

"Name please!" asked the snippy young thing at the Navy Department Reception Desk.

"R. L. Grant," I told her. "To see Admiral Ballister. By appointment," I added.

"Have you any identification, Mr. Grant?" she inquired.

"Of course not. Tell the Admiral that Z-2 has no identification. He will understand."

She looked at me very dubiously but dialed a telephone and muttered into it. Suddenly she cackled, "You don't say? Sure! I'll send him right up."

She beamed at me. "The Admiral is expecting you, sir," she said. "Here's your badge. Will you please sign this form?"

She thrust a blue-and-white celluloid saucer at me, with a number on it, and passed a mimeographed form, which I duly signed "Robert E. Lee, C.S.A.," and which she duly accepted and filed. A Marine sergeant appeared out of the shadows and led me up a flight of stairs and along several unevenly paved concrete floors to an office where a battery of Waves and Junior Lieutenants promptly took me in charge.

Admiral Ballister was a civilian's dream of a Navy Officer—"every other inch a sailor," as we used to say in the Pacific—with a ruddy face tanned by ocean winds or rye whisky, grizzled hair, incipient jowls, a "gruff old sea-dog" manner and a hearty hand-clasp.

"Glad to see you, Grant," he told me. "I've been checking up on Z-2 since McIntosh called. You boys have been doing one hell of a swell job on your security. There's not a word about you in our files."

"Z-2, Admiral," I replied modestly, "is forbidden by the terms of the Executive Order setting us up to put itself on record. We have no identification, we get no glory, but a Z-2 agent was in the Jap squadron that attacked Pearl Harbor and one of our men was military secretary to Rommel in North Africa. At least two of our agents hold the rank of General in the Red Army. As you know, sir, we report directly to the President, and always verbally. Nothing on paper."

"I know, I know," the Admiral agreed wistfully, "McIntosh is usually all wet"—he paused for me to register a flash of strictly subordinate glee at his meteorological witticism—"but he gave me a fill-in on the fine job you did on the Alaska case."

"I'm afraid I worried your O.N.I. group in New York, sir!"—in addressing an Admiral, the "sir!" should not be slurred but should come out with a touch of whip-crack, if you wish promotion in the U.S. Navy—"They almost penetrated my cover as W. S. Tompkins, a Bedford Hills stockbroker with offices in Wall Street, and reported me to the F.B.I."

"Oh!" Ballister seemed relieved. "So *you* are Tompkins. No wonder Church Street was worried. Of course, they didn't know you were Z-2."

"Naturally I couldn't tell them, sir!" I confided. "I was due to report to President Roosevelt at Warm Springs next Monday but since his death, I have to report to you, according to previous White House instructions. The new President hasn't had time to get orientated on Z-2 operations and this Alaska business can't wait, sir!"

Ballister did some dialing, asked a few terse questions—gruff, old sea-dog style—over the telephone and then turned to me.

"It's lucky for you, Grant, you didn't try to report to the White House. The Secret Service might have nabbed you," he said. "The Naval Aide tells me that all Roosevelt's papers and records have been impounded for the Roosevelt Estate under the law and that it may be weeks before they are untangled. Now, tell me about the Alaska. We've had no report on her since early on the second, when she cleared Adak."

"Before I report to you, sir!" I replied, "I'd rather you ask me a few questions about Alaska and Operations Octopus. In that way you can satisfy yourself that I know what I'm talking about."

"Good!" the Admiral grunted. "Wish O.N.I. had as much sense as Z-2. Save a lot of time. When was Alaska commissioned?"

"Late in February, sir! At Bremerton. Trial run in March to Pearl Harbor, back to San Diego for fueling and up the coast to Bremerton again. Latest U.S. light carrier in the Pacific. A sneak-job. 38 knots at full speed, 8,000 mile cruising radius. Twenty-four planes—eight light bombers, sixteen fighters. Anti-aircraft and radar out of this world."

Ballister studied the map of the Pacific across the room from his desk. "Who is her commander and what's his nickname?"

"Captain Horatio McAllister, U.S.N., sir! Commonly known as Stinky McAllister. No reason assigned for 'Stinky,' at least so far as reserve officers knew."

"Stinky? That's because he once used perfumed soap before going to the Midshipmen's Ball in Washington," the Director of Naval Intelligence informed me. "It was his second year at Annapolis. Who was Stinky's exec?"

"Commander B. S. Moody, sir!" I answered. "His nickname is suggested by his initials—a roly-poly sort of guy and hipped on boat-drills and all that."

Ballister glanced at a list on his desk. "Her chaplain?" he asked.

"Father Eamon Devalera O'Flaherty, begob and begorra, savin' your riverence," was my reply. "A grand man and a good priest. God rest his soul."

Ballister wriggled in his chair with some discomfort, as though he felt he ought to stand at attention or order a volley fired over the ship's side.

"What about Commander Chalmis?" he inquired, with an air of baiting an elephant-trap for me. "What job did he do?"

"Chalmis was not a commander, sir!" I told him. "He was a civilian. He had some kind of a thorium bomb and the chief job he did was to use it to blow up the ship. The mission was to drop it on Paramushiro before the Army could get going with its uranium bomb. Chalmis got cold feet, sir! when he thought of the carrier instead. He argued that the Navy Department would conclude that thorium was unreliable and drop the atomic project until the end of the war."

Ballister leaned back in his chair and gave careful consideration to the design of his Annapolis Class pin. After a long pause, he swung around in his swivel-chair and faced me squarely.

"Grant," he barked, "I'm going to ask you an unofficial question. You don't have to answer it. I have no authority over Z-2 anyway, but this is mighty important to the Navy."

"Go ahead, sir!" I told the Admiral, "if I can't answer it I'll tell you why."

"Do you believe," the Chief of O.N.I. asked slowly, "that Chalmis could have been inspired by Another Government Agency to make a failure of—" he paused.

"Operation Octopus, sir?"

"Right! Could Chalmis have deliberately destroyed Alaska and sacrificed his life in the interest of General Groves and the Army's bomb?"

Groves was a new name to me but I took it in my stride. I looked the Admiral full in the eye—a thing which Admirals rate along with a snappy "Sir!" as proof of initiative, intelligence and subordination on the part of their inferiors.

"I am not at liberty to answer that question, Admiral," I replied. "My orders forbid me to discredit any of the armed forces of the United States. After all, sir!" I added, "we must not forget that Professor Chalmis paid for his loyalty with his life."

Ballister's face lighted up with nautical glee. "I knew it! I knew it!" he roared. "By God! I knew there was

something wrong the last time I consulted G-2, they were so smug and polite. I might have known that they were cooking up something to get even with the Navy for winning this war in the Pacific. My God! Grant, you have to respect the Army for their fanaticism, if for nothing else. Here is a civilian like Chalmis, a great scientist, proved 100% reliable by all of our tests. We checked him for twelve months before we even approached him on the thorium research. Yet the Army, the damned, stinking, two-timing, gold-bricking, double-crossing, medal-splashing, glory-grabbing, credit-claiming Army, gets next to him on the sly and persuades him to blow himself up rather than let the Navy get ahead with its atomic bomb."

I nodded admiringly at his flow of language. "Admiral," I told him, "when I came into this office I had a notion you were just another Washington desk-hero. No man who can express himself with such eloquence can have shirked his sea-duty. Mind you, sir!" I continued, "I do not state that the Army had a hand in this outrage. All I ask is that you give me clearance to the head of Army Intelligence, whoever he is now. They keep shipping them into quote war-zones unquote, so they can qualify for active service pay and allowances, campaign ribbons and citations, to back up a special act of congress for their permanent promotion to the rank of Major-General."

"West Point—" Ballister began and emerged panting five minutes later after a personally conducted tour of the United States Military Academy.

"Yes, Mr. Grant—" Ballister was all but chanting as he concluded—"I'll send you over to see that prince of double-crossers, Major-General Ray L. Wakely, director of Army Counter-intelligence, so-called. Mind you, he probably won't admit you to the Pentagon, coming from me, or if he does he'll try to frame you—"

"Z-2, Admiral," I answered him, "is entirely familiar with General Wakely's methods and reputation. I can take care of myself, if you can get me into the Pentagon. I have some reports, entirely apart from the Alaska business, which belong to the Army and I should deliver them to Wakely in person. As you know, Z-2 is not allowed to take part in interdepartmental feuds."

"That's all very well," Ballister barked at me, "but right is right and wrong is wrong. You're not supposed to be blind to that, are you?"

"You ought to know where our sympathies lie, sir!" I snapped back. "But my orders are to see Wakely, if he's in charge of counter-intelligence."

This was sheer bravado. As a matter of fact, I knew I ought to call it a day now that Ballister was in my camp but the best way to keep him on my side was to move against his Army opponents. I felt rather like a slug in a slot-machine as it starts to hit the jack-pot. I would teach the F.B.I. not to monkey with Winnie Tompkins. Z-2 had been a happy thought. So far nobody had gagged on it and with Roosevelt's papers tied up, the war would be over before any of the topside officials guessed I had invented it.

Ballister calmed down enough to buzz his secretary and tell her to get General Wakely on the line, but fast. A moment later the gruff old sea-dog was talking to the double-crossing Army Counter-intelligence Director.

"Hullo, Ray? This is Ballister. How's your golf? Too bad! Neither can I ... Well, there's a civilian here you ought to see ... Grant, R. L. Not his real name, of course ... from Z-2 ... Yes, Z as in zebra, two as in two ... He's just cleaned up one of our worst headaches and says he has some special reports for you ... No idea, Ray, he didn't tell me and I didn't ask him ... Z-2 doesn't talk. No, not in the least like our Edgar or Wild Bill. Can you see him today?"

I shook my head. "Sorry sir!" I interrupted the Admiral. "I can't see him until tomorrow morning at seven-thirty."

The Admiral winced as though a cobra had suddenly appeared on his blotter. Then he grinned maliciously. "Hold on a minute, Ray," he said. "You can have your golf this afternoon, after all. Grant says he can't see you until tomorrow at seven-thirty ... Yes, seven-thirty ... No, ten o'clock will be too late, he says ... At your office at seven-thirty, then."

He hung up and turned back to me. "You know, Grant," he remarked, "I wouldn't mind belonging to Z-2 for a few days myself if I could make that scoundrel Wakely rise at an ungodly hour on Sunday morning."

"His little Wac won't like it?" I insinuated.

"Little Wac!" Ballister exploded. "She weighs a good hundred and sixty pounds and stands five feet eight in her bedroom slippers. Naturally she's working for the Navy. We have to establish some liaison with G-2. Poor old Wakely will catch holy hell from her for this. Have you any other appointments I could help you with, Grant?"

"No, sir! I did this to General Wakely because the last time one of our Z-2 agents had to report to G-2, General Strong—you remember that old hellion—kept our man waiting for two hours. That's as bad as though you kept the President of the United States waiting."

Ballister appeared slightly worried. "You know, Grant," he told me, "I see your point. I sympathize with your attitude, but these inter-service feuds can lead to trouble. The thing to do is to be pleasant and friendly as hell and not get him sore over trifles, but wait for a chance to stab him in the back. I think you would have been wiser not to annoy General Wakely. When G-2 is annoyed, there is absolutely nothing of which they are not capable. They are the most unconscionable, unscrupulous, pravaricating, meretricious double-dyed sons of bachelors on the face of the globe. Hitler," the Admiral continued, "fights a clean war compared to G-2. You may be in Z-2 and you may represent the Commander-in-Chief, Grant, but Roosevelt is dead. Roosevelt is dead, sir. This guy Truman was in the Army—in the last war and the Army is going to take him right over and run him and the White House inside of six weeks. Hell, I wouldn't put it past them to try to have the Army swallow up the Navy. So don't annoy Wakely if you can help it, Grant."

I shook my head. "If it's the last thing Z-2 ever does, Admiral," I told him, "I still want to make a Major-General get up early in the morning in order to see me."

Ballister grinned. "Grant," he said. "How come you never thought of joining the Navy. We could use men like you. Get in touch with me if anything happens to Z-2. This here war may be just about won but then there's no armistice in the battle of Washington."

CHAPTER 18

There is no point in describing the various problems of logistics involved in my reaching General Wakely's office in the Pentagon early on Sunday morning. All the Pentagon stories have been invented and told, including my favorite yarn of the German spy who was told to bomb the building but decided to disobey his orders because there was no point in robbing the Third Reich of its greatest asset.

Wakely was a bluff, hearty type of soldier, with more bluff than heart, who greeted me without emotion, waved me to a chair and proceeded to get down to cases.

"I've decided, Grant, and the Chief of Staff agrees," he informed me, "that the time has come to liquidate Z-2. All of these irregular agencies have been nothing but a nuisance since before Pearl Harbor. Z-2 has been in the Army's hair for years. We've heard nothing good of your outfit."

"You are fully entitled to your point of view, General,"—I have observed that Generals do not go for "Sir!" as eagerly as Admirals—"but the decision rests with the White House. All I do is to follow my orders."

General Wakely exhumed a ghastly smile. "The White House ain't what it used to be, Grant," he continued. "While Roosevelt was President we couldn't do much about it, but now, by gad! the time has come to coordinate the White House. This Z-2 business is played out anyhow."

I started to say something soothing but the Chief of Military Intelligence refused to yield the floor.

"I've been checking on you, Grant," he told me, "since Ballister phoned me yesterday. We have a pretty good counter-intelligence corps in this country and I'm told that your name isn't Grant at all, but Tompkins—W. S."

Tompkins. You're linked to a fellow in the Navy named Jacklin. No use pretending, Grant. Z-2 may be smart but our information is that Jacklin is probably a double-spy for the Nazis. In fact, we believe that Jacklin is really the notorious Von Bieberstein. We were on his trail long before Pearl Harbor. He's a slick article, Von Bieberstein is. We think that when things began to get hot he joined the Navy, knowing that the Army couldn't touch him there. Then he seems to have planted his common-law wife or mistress—an American born girl, mind you,—in O.S.S. to keep him informed of Army operations. No, Tompkins, we have him now. We have rounded up all his contacts and accomplices."

"General," I assured him, "somebody's eaten a bad clam. I can vouch for Jacklin's loyalty as I would my own. Why, he was editor of a Republican newspaper and went to Yale. He was at school with me. I've know him for over thirty years. He's as patriotic as I am."

This was not going as well as I had hoped. If it hadn't been for the F.B.I. waiting to snap me up, I would have backed out of Wakely's office on some excuse, however lame.

Wakely snorted. "It just shows how far-sighted the Germans are. They plant their agents here twenty—thirty—fifty years—yes, generations before they are needed. Gad! this country's been asleep. Here M.I.D.'s been hunting Von Bieberstein for the last ten years and what do we find? We find that he's lived in this country all his life and holds a reserve commission in the United States Navy! No wonder we had Pearl Harbor! This time, Grant, we're sure of our facts and we're going to take them to the White House."

"You may be sure of your facts, General," I agreed, "but do you happen to know a man named Axel Roscommon?"

Wakely nodded. "Of course, a thorough gentleman. See him every week or so at the Army-Navy Club. Well-informed, too."

"Did he ever tell you that he's head of Nazi intelligence in this country?"

"Rubbish!" The head of G-2 detonated impressively. "He's nothing of the kind. That's nothing but a smear put out against him by the F.B.I."

"Well, General," I admitted, "I'm wasting your time. I have some reports—"

"Just a minute, Grant. I'm not done with you. We're going to finish this Z-2 business right now." He pushed a button and uttered into his desk-phone: "Sergeant! Bring those women in here."

A moment later the door opened and Dorothy, Germaine and Virginia appeared, each looking as bedraggled as any woman who has been awakened too early.

"Winnie!" Germaine's face lighted up like a traffic go-sign. She crossed the room and kissed me. "I thought—"

General Wakely coughed, severely.

"Mrs. Tompkins," he announced, "I'm Major-General Wakely. This is G-2. The C.I.C. has rounded up your husband's chief associates for this interview. We're about to close in on the most dangerous Nazi spy-ring in existence. You know Mrs. Rutherford, of course, and this other woman goes under the name of Mrs. Jacklin."

"My name *is* Mrs. Jacklin," Dorothy replied with feeling, "and the O.S.S. will want to know by what authority ___"

Wakely waved her and the O.S.S. aside. "Very clever, Mrs. Jacklin, or should I say Mrs. Von Bieberstein?" He turned back to Germaine. "Thanks in part to your husband, Mrs. Tompkins," he continued, "we have at last got on the track of Hitler's ace operative in the Western Hemisphere, Kurt Von Bieberstein, or should I say Frank Jacklin? We almost had him cornered five years ago but he took advantage of the confusion after Pearl—after the Navy let us—after the declaration of war, and went into hiding as a naval officer. It was only by accident, when Mr. Tompkins accidentally supplied the missing link, that we found the trail again."

"That's handsome of you, General," I said, "but I think that Counter-intelligence deserves full credit."

He beamed at me.

"And what am I doing here, General Wakely?" Virginia cooed at the specimen of military manhood.

Wakely smiled before he remembered that he was a pattern of military efficiency. "You are known to Counter-intelligence, Mrs. Rutherford, as one of the best agents in Z-2."

"But what is Z-2?" Virginia was frankly bemused. "Of course, I've heard of Intelligence. Isn't that something that belongs to the Army?"

The General oozed approval. "Gad! Tompkins, you train your agents well. She'd never admit a syllable without your permission. No, Mrs. Rutherford, Z-2 is to be liquidated and we're here to find this fellow Von Bieberstein."

Dorothy stood up. "I've heard all the drivel I propose to stand for," she announced. "Frank is a decent, loyal American and it's not his fault that we couldn't get along together. I've never heard of Von Bieberstein in my life. Mr. Tompkins," she added, turning to me, "if you had anything to do with this high-handed foolishness—you say you knew Frank—"

"Mrs. Jacklin," I told her. "I don't think that your husband, and I knew him well, was disloyal for one moment of his life. In any case, military intelligence can't lay a finger on your husband."

"And why not?" Wakely demanded.

"Because he's dead, General," I said.

"Suicide, eh?"

"No, sir. He went down with—"

"Winnie!" Jimmie interrupted me as though descending from a fiery cloud. "Now I see why you've been acting so strangely. You're in *intelligence*. Of course you couldn't tell *anybody*. Darling!"

Even the General looked embarrassed.

Dorothy did not relax. "I am going to leave this room and this building," she announced. "And if anybody interferes with me, you are all witnesses that I am being detained illegally. Just call the O.S.S. and tell them that Army agents under General Wakely's orders broke into my bedroom at six this morning and kidnapped me."

She turned and left the room. Nobody stopped her. Wakely pressed the buzzer again. "Sergeant!" he commanded, "see that Mrs. Jacklin is escorted out of the building and that our people keep an eye on her."

"Now, Tompkins," the General resumed, "what's this word about Von Bieberstein being dead?"

"If you'll have the ladies leave the room, General," I told him, "I'll give you my report."

Jimmie and Virginia withdrew, with visible reluctance.

"Jacklin is dead," I told him. "I think that your agents are mistaken in linking him to Von Bieberstein. In fact, I know it, because I think I know who Von Bieberstein really is. But I can't tell you without direct verbal authority from the President. I can tell you how Jacklin died."

Major-General Wakely became once more the man of action. "Good, let's have it!"

"The Navy Department," I began, "has been trying to beat the Army with the development of an atomic bomb ___"

"The dastards!" Wakely all but screamed. "The dirty, treacherous, sneaking dastards! You can't trust the Navy

as far as you could throw a battleship. By Gad! Tompkins, *this* is going straight to the White House."

"They had a man named Chalmis who did something with thorium, General," I continued. "I'm not a scientist so I can't tell you about the process. It was simpler and less expensive than what General Groves is trying to do with uranium."

"Groves!" Wakely spoke with soldierly pride. "Now there's a West Pointer for you! Four years and two billion dollars and he hasn't got it yet, but by Gad! the old West Point spirit never accepts defeat. He'll get a bomb if it takes fifty years and a hundred billion dollars. The Navy can't match that kind of guts, Tompkins. They're all yellow, the Annapolis crowd!"

"Of course this thing wasn't anything like so good as the Army's bomb, General," I assured him. "It was something whipped up in eighteen months and cost less than fifty millions."

"Pikers!"

"Well, the Navy rushed through this sneak-bomb of theirs and sent Chalmis with it on a surprise raid against the Kuriles, on the latest light carrier, the Alaska."

Wakely took a few portentous notes on a memo pad.

"Jacklin was assigned to the Alaska and our information is that he was with Chalmis in the ship's magazine when the bomb—er—accidentally—er—went off. The ship was a total loss and everyone aboard died in the explosion."

Wakely got to his feet and stood rigid for a moment.

"He was a brave man, Tompkins," he observed with soldierly emotion, "a damned brave man. By Gad, I'm almost sorry we're going to liquidate Z-2. We'd like to take you all over into M.I.D. but red tape won't let us, eh? Have to be in uniform, under West Pointers or it isn't regular. So Jacklin was one of your men and he died for the Army. He sank the Alaska and killed himself and the inventor of the thorium bomb, rather than let the Navy get away with this outrage. By Gad, Tompkins, General Groves will have a laugh over that one. I'll go and apologize to Mrs. Jacklin in person for our mistake. Von Bieberstein would never have done that job. As you know, it's the Nazis who are backing the Navy against the Army. If it wasn't for the Japs backing us against the Navy we'd have a rough time of it in this man's war. Now Tompkins, this thing is too big for us to handle. It's got to go up to the highest echelons."

I raised my eyebrows.

He nodded. "Yes, this has got to be laid before President Truman himself. By Gad, Tompkins, I'll see that you get to report to the President tomorrow morning if I have to take you there myself."

"As to Von Bieberstein, General," I said, "he can wait until tomorrow. When you know who he is and where he is placed—with the President's permission—you will probably decide to go away. After all, even you would hesitate to arrest on a treason charge the—" I stopped.

Wakely leaned across his desk. "Tompkins," he assured me, "I'll get Von Bieberstein if it's the last thing I ever do. By Gad! If you help me, I'll see that you get the Order of Merit, a Presidential citation and the Orange Heart."

"Don't you mean the Purple Heart?" I asked.

Wakely snorted. "That's merely for combat duty. The Orange Heart is a confidential decoration given to those who serve intelligence well on the home front, even including civilians. It's like the Army E-Award but is personal and worn on the *inside* of the coat-lapel. It is conferred on the recommendation of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-2."

He buzzed again. "Sergeant!" he barked. "Get me the office of the Military Aide, the White House, and if they don't answer, wake up Harry Vaughan at Blair House, even if he's still in bed, which he probably is—the lucky stiff! Tell him this is top-priority."

I sighed. The water was already far over my head, but it was too late to draw back. I had to swim for the farther shore.

CHAPTER 19

"The President will see you now, Mr. Tompkins," said the White House usher, as he beckoned me to follow him.

A pleasant, rangy, mild-mannered man rose from behind the great desk and shook my hand.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Tompkins," he said. "General Vaughan has been telling me great things about your work. What can I do for you?"

As I looked at the guileless, friendly face, my heart sank. Here was one man who should not be deceived. It would be as easy as stuffing a ballot box.

"Mr. President," I told him, "when I left the Pentagon Building yesterday, I had an elaborate report to submit to you. But I decided that the President of the United States was entitled to the simple truth."

"That's right!" snapped the Chief Executive.

"So if you'll listen to me for five minutes," I continued, "I'll tell you the strangest story you ever heard."

President Truman coughed. "General Vaughan has told me of the fine work you've been doing for Z-2," he observed. "As you can imagine, I'm terribly busy taking on this job."

"Mr. President," I began, "to begin with, there's no such organization as Z-2. If you'll listen for a few minutes I'll tell you the whole story."

I did.

At the end of it, he smiled at me.

"Mr. Tompkins," he said, "you're a married man, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Then you tell Mrs. Tompkins for me that I want her to take you home and take good care of you for the next few weeks. You've been overdoing it. This Z-2 work has taken it out of you. You need a rest. Now don't you worry about Z-2," he continued. "What you need to do is to take things easy. The work will go right ahead. I'm putting Z-2 under General Wakely. This country needs better intelligence services and they ought to be concentrated under one responsible head, if you ask me."

"But I tell you, Mr. President," I insisted, "there never was such an organization as Z-2. I invented it in order to clear myself with the F.B.I."

He flashed a boyish grin at me. "But there's no doubt that the Alaska went down like a stone?"

"She went up like a sky-rocket, sir."

"Then this thorium bomb doesn't sound as though it was practical, sinking one of our ships like that."

"Mr. President," I argued, "any bomb will explode if it is deliberately detonated. This bomb was deliberately touched off by Professor Chalmis. He wanted to prevent its use in warfare."

The President nodded. "Yes, yes, Mr. Tompkins. You explained that to me before. Now you be sure to tell your wife to take good care of you. When you're rested up, you come on down and see me again and we'll talk some more about this Z-2 work of yours. We can use men like you in the State Department. I'm sorry I don't know more about it, but all of President Roosevelt's papers have been removed from the White House and I don't even know what he told Stalin at Yalta. Perhaps you'd better talk to the State Department before you take that rest. That's what they're for. Thank you for seeing me."

Two beefy Secret Service men appeared in the doorway.

"Is there any particular man I should see at the Department, sir?" I asked. "I want to get this whole business cleared up."

The President stood up and shook my hand in dismissal. "Just go across the street and tell them I sent you," he said. "Good day to you, sir."

The two body-guards closed in on me, so I bowed slightly and withdrew from the President's office.

In the anteroom, I found General Wakely pacing up and down like the father of triplets.

"How did it go, Tompkins?" he asked. "You had five extra minutes. Did you get a chance to give him a fill-in about the Navy and you-know-what?"

I shook my head. "My orders are not to discuss that matter any further, General," I told him.

"But what about Von Bieberstein?" the chief of M.I.D. demanded. "Can you give me a lead?"

"My instructions, General," I said, "are to discuss matters with the State Department."

"The State Department!" Wakely was outraged. "Why, they're nothing but a bunch of Reds! They tell me there are men over there who have spent years in Russia."

"If I am ever allowed to tell you who Von Bieberstein really is," I told the General, "you will understand why I am not allowed to discuss it with you now. This is a matter for the Big Three. It is out of my hands entirely."

At the gate of the White House drive I was suddenly halted by a piercing "Hi!" It was Virginia Rutherford. She dodged her way between two stalwart sentries and took my arm.

"Winnie!" she cooed, as soon as we were across Pennsylvania Avenue, "you utter devil!"

It seemed safest to say nothing.

"Winnie," she continued. "Do you realize that the Army of the United States dragged me out of bed yesterday morning and flew me down here just to discover that you are a bigger liar than I thought you were?"

"Please don't blame me for General Wakely," I told her. "He's an Eagle Scout in high places. I was getting on fine until you showed up, and please don't raise your voice at me. If I know the Army, you and I are being tailed right now by the counter-intelligence."

Virginia snuggled closer to me, as we dodged through the crowd in LaFayette Park watching the White House.

"To think," she said dreamily, "that all this time you have been an American secret service agent. Ain't that something?"

Again it seemed safest to say nothing.

"Yes, Winnie Tompkins, super-sleuth!" she, continued with an edge on her voice you could have shaved with. "All last winter, when I was under the impression that we were canoodling from bar to bar, you were working for Uncle Sam! It's one of the best stories of the war, Winnie. Sleep with Tompkins and lick the Axis!"

This was getting under my hide. "Virginia," I told her, "I have just spent the last twenty minutes trying to convince President Truman that I'm not a secret agent. He will have none of it. He says I've been working too hard and need a rest."

"You devil!" Virginia chuckled dangerously. "You absolute, utter demon! Here is civilization at the crossroads and what does Winfred S. Tompkins do to amuse himself. He strolls down to Washington and persuades the Generals and the Admirals and the President that he has been winning the war for them instead of winning the wife of his family physician. That's what I call funny."

"Have it your own way," I agreed. "If you can persuade General Wakely that I'm a fake, more power to you. He believes that you are one of my best operatives and nothing can shake him."

"So that's what you call them? Your operatives? That's wonderful. If I'm ever asked, 'Grandma, what did *you* do in the second Great War?' I'll say, Johnnie I was an operative under W. S. Tompkins, the ace American Agent."

"Would you mind not talking quite so loud," I again begged her. "Those two men following us might misunderstand."

She glanced over her shoulder. "You mean those five men following us, don't you, Winnie?"

I looked behind us. She was right. A group of five, if not six, people were trailing along behind us. Lamb and the F.B.I., Ballister and the Navy, as well as the Army's counter-intelligence and the O.S.S., were probably represented.

"Five is right," I agreed. "You see, Virginia, I'm a pretty important person. You noticed, I hope, that President Truman, took time out to chat with me."

"What's he like?" she asked irrelevantly. "Of course, Roosevelt was all wrong but he had something on the ball. Who's this little guy from Montana, anyhow?"

"Missouri," I corrected her. "He's from Missouri and don't you ever forget it. That's what he is, Virginia, a little guy from Missouri."

We were at the Willard.

"Here, Virginia, I must leave you," I told her. "You can't follow me up to my bedroom and anyhow I have a message for Jimmie from the President of the United States."

"Nuts!" she answered brightly. "You're not fooling me for one little minute. You've just lied yourself into a bigger jam than you've lied yourself out of. Well, I'm on to your game."

When I reached the room, there was no sign of Jimmie. This statement should be qualified. She herself was not to be seen but various articles of clothing were scattered around the room and there was a rush and gurgle of water from the bathroom which suggested that my wife was taking a bath. She was.

"Winnie?" she called through the half-open door.

"Theesa tha floor-waiter," I grunted. "You wanta me? I busy."

"Waiter," she commanded, "please leave the room at once."

"What'sa alla so secret, hey?" I asked, still speaking in subject-race style. "Letta me see!"

I took the handle of the door, wrenched it open and pushed. There was an angry screech from inside, followed by an indignant, "Winnie, you beast! Get out of here!"

I didn't, so Jimmie dropped the bath towel she had draped defensively across her shoulders and subsided laughing into a warm, soapy bath.

"You are the absolute limit!" she declared. "I'll never forgive you for this. Tell me what the President was like?"

"Very nice," I said. "He reminds me of one time I saw a little fresh-water college football team play Notre Dame. You sort of wanted the little guys to make at least one first down, but you knew that if they did, it would just be an accident. No, Truman's one hell of a nice guy but that doesn't mean he could lick Joe Louis. Anyhow, he was complimentary about my work and he sent a message to you. Pity he couldn't deliver it in person, like the floor-waiter."

"For me?"

I nodded. "He said that I needed a good long rest and that you must take very good care of me."

She looked up at me, large-eyed, through a haze of steam.

"Oh, Winnie," she declared. "I *am* so proud of you. To think that all the time you've been doing secret intelligence! And I believed you were just chasing around after those silly girls. Don't you think you could have trusted your wife?" she asked.

I shook my head emphatically. "That was part of my cover," I replied. "If you hadn't been worried about me it wouldn't have looked natural. If I'd told you, you wouldn't have worried and the Axis agents—" I left the thought trailing.

Germaine sucked reflectively on the corner of her wash-cloth. "Yes," she agreed at last, "I can see that, but I don't see how I can ever trust you again."

I laughed. "Then don't trust me," I told her. "We'll still have a good time. Suppose you get dressed now and come downstairs and we'll have champagne cocktails to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" she asked, loosing the stopper with her toes.

"Celebrate the liquidation of Z-2," I said. "It's being taken over by the Army. My work is done anyhow. And tomorrow I have to see the State Department. Mr. Truman tells me they need men like me—God help them!"

"The State Department!" She jumped out of the tub, scattering water lavishly on the floor and on me. "Are they going to make you an Ambassador or something?"

"Come down to earth, Jimmie," I urged her. "I'm a Republican from New York; not a Democrat. I may have done an even better job than they think I've done, but I know one thing I didn't do to qualify for a diplomatic job."

"What's that?" she asked, towelling herself vigorously.

"I never contributed a dime to the Democratic National Committee," I confessed.

CHAPTER 20

There was a brisk knock on the bedroom door. I walked over and opened it, to see F.B.I. Special Agent A. J. Harcourt. He gave me a reproachful glance and pushed his way into the room.

"I can only stop a minute, Mr. Tompkins," he said, "but I have orders from the Director to call on you in person and present the apologies of the Bureau for having inconvenienced you. If you had only told us you were connected with Z-2 there would have been no trouble."

"Sit down, Harcourt," I urged him. Then I crossed to the bathroom door. "Don't come out until you're decent, dear," I called to Germaine. "The F.B.I. is here."

Some muffled instructions answered, so I went around the room and picked up the various scattered wisps of silk and rayon, and thrust them through to my wife.

"That's all I was to say, Mr. Tompkins," Harcourt repeated, still standing, "that the Bureau is mighty sorry about the whole business."

"Sit down!" I told him again. "Now get this Z-2 thing straight. There isn't any Z-2. I just invented it, trying to get myself out of this jam. I never was a Z-2 agent. What I told these people was all moonshine."

Harcourt nodded. "We know, of course, that you're not allowed to admit you're in Z-2 to anybody but the top guys, but we know that Z-2 does exist. If it didn't how could the President abolish it?"

"How's that again?" I asked, sinking into the one easy chair.

"Yeah, special confidential Executive Order No. 1734, signed today, abolishing Z-2 and transferring its duties to the War Department. There was something else, too, about giving you the Order of Merit for *quote* special services which contributed usefully to the conduct of the war. *Unquote*."

"Listen here, Harcourt," I insisted. "I can't help it if the President pulled a boner. I *told* him there wasn't any such thing as Z-2 and all he said was that I ought to take a good long rest. I simply got so damned tired of trying to prove that I couldn't remember what Winnie Tompkins had been doing before April 2, that I invented my own alibi—Z-2."

Harcourt scratched his head.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," I assured him.

For the first time since he had delivered his wooden official apology, the Special Agent relaxed. "That's one for the book," he said with deep feeling. "Mrs. Harcourt's little boy isn't going to let it go any farther. So far, only the President of the United States, the Army, the Navy; O.S.S. and the F.B.I. believe you were in Z-2. I'm not sticking my neck out to tell them it's all a lot of malarkey. That leaves only the State Department and the Secret Service. How come you've skipped them? You must be slipping, Mr. Tompkins."

"I'm seeing the State Department tomorrow morning," I explained. "I think I'll let the Secret Service alone. Incidentally, Mrs. Tompkins also believes all this Z-2 business. It will do as a stall until I learn what I was really doing before I drew a blank."

"Not for me!"

We both looked up. In the doorway—which I must have forgotten to latch—stood Virginia Rutherford.

"No Winnie"—she began. "Oh, hullo, Mr. Harcourt—You haven't fooled me. I know there's something behind all this business. Imagine the nerve of that silly General, practically jerking me out of bed to come down and listen to him babble about Von Bieberstein to that pretty Mrs. Jacklin. Who is this Von Bieberstein anyhow? He sounds like a brewer."

"Kurt Von Bieberstein," explained A. J. Harcourt, "is supposed to be the ace Nazi operative in the U.S.A. The Bureau has been trying to locate him for the last ten years. We don't know what he looks like, nothing about him, except his name. All we ever got on him was one fragment of a short-wave message in 1935 and a letter in a code we couldn't break, just before Pearl Harbor."

The bathroom door opened and Germaine entered the room. "Well, Virginia," she observed, "you seem to be making yourself at home. Mr. Harcourt, have I no legal right to privacy in my hotel room?"

Harcourt rose and bowed. "Certainly, ma'am," he told her. "If you object to her presence you are entitled to order her out. If she refuses to go, you can throw her out or call the house detective."

Jimmie laughed. "Good! Virginia Rutherford, you get out of my bedroom or I'll throw you out."

Virginia relaxed back against the pillow. "Act your age, dearest," she said. "You don't want any public scandal about your husband, do you?"

"Oh!" Germaine paused. "Of course not!"

There was another knock on the door.

"Come in!" we chorused.

This time it was Dorothy Jacklin.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, none too brightly. "So we're all here."

"This is Mr. Harcourt of the F.B.I., Mrs. Jacklin," I said. "He's an old friend of mine."

Dorothy turned to me. "There's one thing I'd like cleared up, Mr. Tompkins," she said.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I certified to O.S.S. that you were with Z-2. I've checked over our confidential files and I can't find any record of Z-2. Things like that go on my efficiency rating and I might get into trouble. After all, you were admitted to the Administration Building without the usual references and identification. General Donovan is very strict about such things."

"There is no such thing as Z-2, Mrs. Jacklin," I assured her.

"Aha!" Virginia chortled, "here it comes."

"Winnie!" Germaine was hurt.

"President Truman just today signed a special order abolishing Z-2 and transferring its duties to the War Department. If you need the references for the O.S.S. record that dear little colonel of yours can get it from General Wakely at G-2. That's right, isn't it, Harcourt?"

"That's right, Mr. Tompkins. All government intelligence agencies have been notified. When you get back to your office, Mrs. Jacklin, you'll find that O.S.S. has a copy of the order."

Dorothy turned to me. "Isn't that lousy!" she exclaimed. "After all the splendid work Z-2 did, to have the Army take it over and grab the credit!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's what we expect in this government game," I said. "A passion for anonymity is not only expected of us, it's rammed down our throats. Only Admirals and Generals are good at intelligence. Period. However, I'm just as glad it's over. The President told me to take a rest and I think it's a good idea."

"Well!" said Germaine. "Of all ingratitude!"

"I think the best idea is for us all to go downstairs and have some champagne cocktails," I suggested. "Things often seem better that way."

Harcourt looked grave. "I'm not allowed to drink on duty, Mr. Tompkins," he observed, "but I'm not on duty now. Come on, Mrs. Jacklin," he continued, "let's go on and show them."

Dorothy looked startled. "Show them what," she asked.

"Show them that we intelligence services can take it, ma'm," the Special Agent observed. "You're O.S.S. and I'm F.B.I. and these others have just been consolidated out of the game."

Dorothy flashed him a smile.

"Well—" she began doubtfully.

"Go ahead, Harcourt," I urged with malice aforethought. "Show her a photo of your wife and three children in Brooklyn."

He grinned. "That gag was strictly for Miss Briggs," he said, "but down here I'm an unmarried man."

"Pooh!" said Dorothy. "I never saw an administrator down here yet who let himself worry about a wife and family somewhere else. The F.B.I. must be weakening."

Harcourt smiled. "Well, anyhow, Mrs. Jacklin, ma'm, the first round of drinks is on me—just to celebrate Mr. Tompkins' happy release."

I didn't care so much for that one. "Expense account, you spy-catcher?" I asked.

The Special Agent nodded. "Yep," he agreed. "My own expense. I was ordered to apologize handsome to you, sir, for the Bureau, and by gum we Harcourts do it right. What'll it be? Root beer or Moxie?"

The next morning, early if not bright, found me fumbling my way around the corridors of the State-War-Navy building in search of the proper official to handle secret intelligence reports. I finally unearthed him in the form of six-foot of languid Bond Street tailored perfection—a red-headed diplomat lily by the name of Dennis Tyler, Chief of the Liaison Section. To him I addressed myself.

"Oh, yes, so you're Tompkins—of Z-2," he observed. "Yes, yes. Quite too tragic for you."

"Tell me, Mr. Tyler," I inquired, "did you ever hear of Axel Roscommon?"

Tyler leaned back in his chair and contemplated me soulfully. "Now don't tell me that poor old Axel is a Nazi agent, Mr. Timkins—"

"Tompkins, Mr. Wiley."

"The name is Tyler, Mr. Tompkins," he grinned. "No, dear old boy—to quote Axel—we do not *think* that Mr. Roscommon is a Nazi Agent. We know it. I had the devil of a time fixing it up with the F.B.I. so they wouldn't arrest him. We can't let the Swiss—God bless their cuckoo-clocks—represent Hitler over here. We need a man of the world who realizes that milk chocolate has no place in diplomacy, to maintain contact with the Third Reich. No, Axel's a fine fellow. He's on a strict allowance. One military secret a month—usually a little one and every now and then a phoney—so as to keep his job. He sees that our people in Berlin get the same allowance. All very cozy and no harm done."

I nodded agreement. "Yes, Mr. Tyler," I told him, "I know the picture. It's just that I have a hunch that Roscommon may be Kurt Von Bieberstein."

Tyler exploded. "Absolute, obscene rot, Tompkins! Not a word of truth in it. Roscommon is foxy, if you like, but he hasn't got von Bieberstein's ruthlessness. No, we made a thorough check on our Axel, before we let the Gestapo accredit him to this government. He's just a good contact-man and a first-rate field operative—plays a dashing game of backgammon and a sound hand of poker, holds his liquor well, and, with an unlimited expense account, stands unlimited rounds of drinks. No, we can't get on without Axel Roscommon. He's taken half the sting out of my income-tax, he's so lavish with his friends.

"What on earth made you confuse him with Von Bieberstein?" he concluded. "Kurt's a devil. He's slipped through the fingers of every Allied intelligence service. Even the Gestapo doesn't know much about him. He's never been photographed or fingerprinted and he reports directly to Hitler. Even Himmler has no file on him."

"It was only this, Mr. Tyler," I told him. "It was Roscommon who warned me two days before Roosevelt's death

that the President would die within the week. That isn't easy to laugh off."

Tyler became deadly calm. "Don't ever repeat that story outside of this room," he warned me. "We know who did it and why. We'll settle that score some day. In the meantime, just forget it, unless you don't mind diving into the East River in a concrete life-belt."

"Then Roscommon wasn't guessing," I observed.

"Of course he wasn't guessing. As a matter of fact, it was I who told him. Just as it was I who told F.D.R. God! He was a good sport. He listened to what I had to say and then do you know what he did? He laughed. He said that so many Americans had died in this war that one more made no difference and he ordered me to hold off until after the peace treaty before getting the group responsible."

This was getting too deep for me, but I owed it to Germaine to make a grab for the brass ring.

"President Truman was very complimentary about my work for Z-2," I told him. "He wants me to take a rest now that the War Department has taken over our work. After that, I wondered whether there mightn't be something in the diplomatic service. The President thought I would be useful here. I've plenty of money and—"

Dennis Tyler groaned convulsively, hunched forward over his desk and clutched his flaming red head in his hands.

"—and you have a beautiful wife who would make a charming American Ambassadors, no doubt. Yes, Mr. Tompkins, I see it all. You went to a good school, no doubt you even attended Harvard. You just missed combat service in the last war and, were unfortunately too old for this one. You know how to make money in Wall Street, if it wasn't for those damned Roosevelt taxes. You do not speak French—except for the purpose of 'La Vie Parisienne'—nor German nor Italian nor Spanish nor Russian, not to mention Arabic and Chinese. You know nothing of economics, sociology, natural science or political geography. You have been to Canada, the West Indies and no doubt to 'Gay Paree,' and to cap the list of your qualifications, you are a Republican and this is a Democratic Administration."

"Then there isn't a chance," I mumbled, my cheeks flaming with embarrassment.

"Did I say that you had no chance?" demanded Dennis Tyler. "On the contrary, you seem to be fully qualified for any diplomatic post within the gift of this Administration, at least as much as any of a dozen of our well-named envoys extraordinary. But, Tompkins, you're a decent sort of chap. Don't do it! For your wife's sake, if not mine, let the poor old State Department go to hell in its own quiet way without speeding the process—Oh, well, I suppose I shall never learn. Doubtless you will be our next Ambassador to Portugal and I shall have one more black mark against me."

I held out my hand. "If the popular demand becomes too great for me to resist, Mr. Tyler," I assured him, "I may be forced to accept a diplomatic appointment, but even then you would be safe from me. I don't like double-talk."

Dennis Tyler looked up, shook my hand and winked broadly at me. "Just between us, Tompkins," he whispered, "who put you up to that Z-2 line of yours? You have the whole town fooled. No, don't look virtuous, dear old boy—again to quote the immortal Axel—I happen to know that you can't possibly be connected with Z-2, because until yesterday, when the Army grabbed it, I was head of Z-2 myself!"

CHAPTER 21

"You were what?" I demanded.

"I am—or was—the head of Z-2," Tyler replied. "You know, Mr. Tompkins," he continued, "I find it most intensely interesting that you should have picked on that particular combination—Z-2—for your higher echelonics. In fact, I should like to have you psychoanalyzed, in order to learn why you, of all people, should have selected the super-secret insignia of the super-secret Roosevelt intelligence outfit. Not that it matters now, of course," he added. "With this new growth across the street I'd be lucky if the White House knew the difference between Z-2 and B-29."

I studied Tyler's face. Who he was, I had only a remote idea, so many had been the different offices that had shunted me around. But in spite of his airy-fairy persiflage and la-di-da manner, I felt that he was straight.

"Okay, chief," I said. "I confess. I robbed the bank but I didn't shoot the cashier. That was Muggsy. You see, chief, it was this way—"

Tyler sat back and heard me out from A to Z-2, in the history of my last two weeks.

"I can't expect you to believe me, Mr. Tyler," I concluded, "but I'd like to have it on record somewhere in this town that I had told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and all I get for it is an Order of Merit citation."

"Few escape it!" he cried. "My poor old bewildered Tompkins. Of course I believe you. Stranger tales than yours have passed across my desk. I have served under one President who *thought* he was Jesus Christ, one who *knew* he was Jesus Christ and two who were afraid the voters would realize that they were *not* Jesus Christ. I have seen five successive Secretaries of State who had no doubt that they were God's Vice-Regent on earth. As for drawing a blank, Mr. Tompkins, that is no news to this Department. What we diplomatic underlings fear is when our superiors fail to draw blanks. Why I remember—but no matter."

"Then what would you do if you were me, Mr. Tyler?" I asked him. "I'm the innocent victim of the damndest set of circumstances ever dreamed up."

The red-headed young diplomat looked at me warily. "The Department, sir," he said, "does not answer hypodermic—I mean hypothetical—questions. What is good enough for the Department is good enough for me."

"But here I find myself," I reminded him, "in high favor with the intelligence forces and with the reputation of a Don Juan in the bosoms of my family, and no idea how I got there."

Tyler chuckled. "I always knew they were plural," he said. "Think nothing of it. Stupider men than you have stood in far higher repute in this town and the reputation of Don Juan is easily acquired. For all you know, you may be a perfectly sterling family man and quite devoid of political intelligence."

"How's that again?"

"Just a figure of speech," Tyler answered airily. "Just the same, Mr. Tompkins, it would be interesting to know why you picked on Z-2 and where you got your undoubted talent for brass-knuckled duplicity. So far as I can see, you've sold yourself as Z-2 to all the brass hats, including the Kansas City lad who woke up to find himself President."

"Again in my own defense," I said, "I did it only because the F.B.I. had a gun at my back and were going to give me the works if I didn't clear myself inside of twenty-four hours. I always thought," I added, "that in this country you were assumed innocent until proved guilty."

Tyler winked wickedly. "There's a war on," he announced, "and doesn't the F.B.I. know it!"

I bade the diplomat good-bye and left the State Department with a sense of personal uneasiness. Who would have dreamed that there was a Z-2 organization before I imagined it! If this kind of thing kept on happening it mightn't be a bad idea to take a fling at the Hartford Sanctuary and have myself psyched by experts.

"Beg pardon, sir, but are you Mr. Tompkins?"

The Hart, Shaffner & Marxed youngster who accosted me on the State Department steps had a definite bulge

under his left shoulder that warned me he was armed.

"Yes, and who are you, sir?" I inquired.

"I'm Monaghan from the Secret Service," he told me. "The Chief wants to see you."

"And who is the Chief?" I asked.

"Chief Flynn, of course," he said. "It's only a few steps over at the the Treasury Building."

"All right, Mr. Monaghan," I agreed. "I'll come along quietly. Am I under arrest? Should I send for my lawyer?"

"The Service don't go much for lawyers," he said. "This way, sir."

With Monaghan at my elbow, I turned right on Pennsylvania Avenue and walked in front of the White House and turned down East Executive Avenue to the side-entrance of the Treasury. A few baffling twists and turns in the corridors of Morgenthau, and I found myself in a large, sparsely furnished room, facing a white haired Irishman.

"This is Tompkins, Chief," Monaghan reported and left me with the gimlet-eyed Secret Service executive.

"You W. S. Tompkins?" he asked me.

"Yes. And who are you?"

"My name's Flynn."

Neither of us said anything for a couple of minutes. He was obviously waiting for me to ask him why I had been brought to him—so I deliberately kept silent, pulled out a cigarette and lighted it. Seeing no ash-tray, I flicked the burnt match on the official green carpet and waited for him to open the conversation.

"So you don't need to be told why you're here, Tompkins," he purred.

"I came here, Mr. Flynn," I told him, "because one of your men practically put a gun at my ribs in front of the State Department. What do you want? A ticket to a prize fight? A good write-up in the papers? Tell me what it will cost me and I'll pay within reason. I didn't know that the Irish had got control of the Secret Service or I would have mailed the money ahead—in cash, of course, no checks, all small bills not consecutively numbered."

Flynn scowled out the window in the general direction of the White House. I dropped some more cigarette ash on the carpet.

Suddenly he whirled me. "We're here to protect the President," he snapped, "and we don't propose to take any lip from you."

I said nothing. Then I noticed the flag over the White House at half-mast.

"Why's that flag at half-mast, Mr. Flynn," I asked.

"Because the President's dead."

"Was he murdered?" I asked.

"He was not! He died of natural causes, but we don't go for people plotting to kill any President, even if he's dead. Our job depends on it."

I rubbed out the stub of my cigarette on the corner of his mahogany desk and lighted another one.

"Since Roosevelt wasn't murdered, what am I here for?" I asked. "I'm a perfectly respectable New York business man. I'm registered at the Willard and my wife can identify me. I have plenty of other references, if you need them. The F.B.I., say, or General Wakely in Counter Intelligence. If you have anything to ask me, I'll be glad to

try to answer questions, but I'm damned if I propose to sit here and let myself be accused of something I never dreamed of doing."

"And what are you going to do about it?" he asked. "Sue?"

"Oh, I have no doubt that you can beat me up and send me to the hospital, but as soon as I'm out I'll tell my story and then I guess a man named Flynn will be looking for another job."

Flynn smiled. "And why do you think the hospital will be letting you go, Mr. Tompkins? Of course, if it was only for a broken leg or a fractured skull, it would be easy, but what about St. Elizabeth's?"

I raised my eyebrows.

"Never heard of it," I said.

"St. Elizabeth's," he explained, "is where we send people in Washington who aren't right in the head. We have a lot of alienists and psychiatrists there who can look you over, keep you under observation. They can hold you there as long as they like, because if there's any question about a man's sanity, they would be failing in their duty if they let him go."

"In other words, Mr. Flynn," I interrupted, "you threaten to send me to the local lunatic asylum if I raise any objection to your methods. Is that the game?"

Flynn was on familiar ground here. "Mr. Tompkins," he asked me. "How's your health? You don't look any too good to me. Don't you think you'd be better for a little special care?"

I laughed admiringly. "So that's how it's done, is it? Well, I never thought the Secret Service was reduced to blackmail. Okay, I'll pay."

"Who ever mentioned pay?" Flynn was indignant.

"Nuts!" I replied. "Cops are all the same. They jail Capone for income tax because they can't convict him of being a racketeer. You think you're being cute by sending people to the booby-hatch if you have no proof that they're dangerous. So, go ahead, send me to St. Elizabeth's but don't think for one minute that I'm not on to the Irish."

Flynn's face grew slowly and magnificently purple. "By God!" he shouted. "What's the matter with Ireland, anyhow?"

"Ireland?" Now he was on my ground. "Too proud to fight the war for freedom. Ireland? To hell with Ireland! This is the United States of America. What has Ireland to do with your duty to the United States?"

Flynn slumped back in his chair, muttering.

"Go!" he said hoarsely. "Get out of here, get out of this building, get out of this town. By God Almighty, if I catch you here within the next twenty-four hours, I—I—"

"Scratch a cop and find a four-flusher," I observed incautiously. "You're still looking for Booth in Ford's theatre and are figuring ways to guard Garfield in the Union Station. For all you know, Roosevelt may have been killed, but if he was, you know I had nothing to do with it. The record shows I'm one of the few people who tried to do anything about it. And you don't dare touch the man who told me."

"Who was that?" Flynn demanded sullenly.

"Axel Roscommon," I said, "another Irishman, so you don't dare lay a finger on him."

"Roscommon!" Flynn snorted. "A black Protestant from Ulster. He's no Irishman, but I can't touch him, as well you know. The bloody British in the State Department are protecting him."

"So you take it out on me, eh?" I suggested.

Flynn drew himself up. "See here, Mr. Tompkins," he said, "I've told you to get out of Washington and stay out of Washington. In a job like mine I have to follow my hunches and my hunch is that if you aren't out of here by noon tomorrow we'll send you over to St. Elizabeth's for observation. After all, we can't have people threatening the President."

"When did I ever threaten the President?"

"Sure and you did it just now," declared the Chief. "You used threatening and abusive language about the President of the United States, within the meaning of the Act, and the Secret Service is not going to stand for it."

"In other words, Mr. Flynn," I observed, "You can't win against the Cops. Anything to keep their job. Okay, I know when I'm licked. I'll leave town and I'll even beat you to the booby-hatch. If this is sanity, I *want* to be locked up."

Chief Flynn hunched his shoulders and scowled at me.

"Yes," I told him, "I'll check myself with the psychiatrists."

"Mr. Tompkins," Flynn remarked quietly, "the more I see of you the more I feel that you ought to have immediate medical attention."

He lifted his telephone and began dialing a number.

"And won't that look swell on your record," I said, "when President Truman gives me a citation for the Order of Merit the same day that Chief Flynn locks me up as a threat to the President."

"Oh!" Flynn laid down the receiver and looked at me with dawning respect.

"Oh! is right," I replied, and left the room.

Nobody tried to stop me as I walked out of the Treasury but I knew that I must take no more chances. From now on it was a race to the alienists, and the best hope for continued liberty lay with my getting there first.

I hailed a taxicab. "Drive me to the Phipps Clinic, Johns Hopkins Hospital," I told the driver.

"Jeeze, Chief! That's in Baltimore."

"You are absolutely right," I told him, "and it's fifty bucks for you if you get me there inside the hour."

I sank back on the cushions of the rear seat. I had come out of the Washington rat-race worse off than when I had entered it. Then it was merely a question of my liberty. After three days it had become a matter of my sanity.

CHAPTER 22

The white-coated medical man—he said that he was associate psychiatrist at the Phipps Clinic—beckoned me to follow him into a side-room. He waved me to be seated and closed the door.

"You see, Mr. Tompkins," he told me, "everybody's crazy."

There is no point in recounting the stages which had converted my panic flight from the wrath of the Secret Service into this interview with one of Johns Hopkins psychiatric staff, except that I had been amazed by the ease with which he had drawn me aside shortly after I had sat down in the waiting-room.

"Of course I realize, doctor," I replied, "that everyone must be abnormal since that is how you establish an average normality. My case is so peculiar, though, that I'd like to have you check on me."

"Here we can take you only on the recommendation of a registered physician or psychiatrist," he told me. "We're understaffed and overcrowded as it is. My advice to you would be to return to your home—you live near New York, you say—and put yourself in the hands of your regular family physician. There are plenty of institutions in your part of the country which are fully qualified to give the necessary treatment. Even if you were recommended to us now we could only put you on the waiting list."

I murmured something vague about war-conditions and neurotics, but he raised his hand like a traffic-cop and interrupted me.

"The war, at least so far as active service is concerned, has taken a load off us, Mr. Tompkins," he informed me. "You see, in normal times people live under any number of pressures which force them to restrain their natural impulses. War gives them outlets—including sex, a sense of gang solidarity, and permission to commit acts of violence and homicide—which would result in jail-sentences for them at other times. Of course, there are a good many psychos coming out of actual combat but the government takes care of them. No, the bulk of our current cases are essential civilians: generals, administrators, politicians, business executives—who find that the war simply redoubles the pressures on them. Some of them are really insane in the medical sense but their positions are so high that we dare not insist on their hospitalization. Instead, we have a simple prescription which most of them find no difficulty in taking. Perhaps it would help in your case."

"What's that?" Tasked.

"Oh, just go out and get drunk now and then, and find yourself a girl-friend. Blow off steam, in other words. Find an outlet for your natural impulses. If the White House had consulted me, Roosevelt might still—Oh, well, no use crying over spilt milk. Half the mental trouble in this country is due to people trying to be something they are not, and the other half is due to people trying not to be something that they naturally are. Primitive people are rarely troubled with neuroses."

"But you said that everybody's crazy, doctor," I objected. "How does that fit into the picture?"

"Mr. Tompkins," the psychiatrist remarked, "you must have noticed that the only sane people today are the alleged lunatics, who do what makes them happy. Take the man who thinks he is Napoleon. He *is* Napoleon and is much happier than those who try to tell him that he isn't. The real maniacs are now in control of the asylum. There's a theory among the psychiatrists that certain forms of paranoia are contagious. Every now and then a doctor or a nurse here and at other mental clinics goes what they call crazy and has to join the patients. My theory is that it is sanity which is contagious and that the only sane people are those who have sense enough to be crazy. They are locked up at once for fear that others will go sane, too. Now, take me, I'm—"

At that moment two husky young men came in and led him away. After a short interval one of them returned.

"I'm sorry this happened, sir," he apologized. "Dr. Murdoch is a tragic case. He was formerly employed here and every now and then he still manages to escape to one of our consultation rooms. He's quite harmless. What was he telling you?"

"That the only sane people in the world were the lunatics," I said.

The young man nodded. "Yes, that's his usual line. That's what got him committed in the first place. For my money, he's right but he oughtn't to go around saying it. And what can we do for you?"

I told him that the "associate psychiatrist" had advised me to put myself in the hands of my family doctor and had prescribed a dose of wine, women and song as a method of restoring my mental balance. I was troubled by serious loss of memory, I said, and needed treatment.

He nodded again. "Boy, when I finish my internship and start private practice, am I going to clean up in the upper brackets with that one! Murdoch's crazy to waste that on these people in Phipps. They can't follow his advice. This one is strictly for Park Avenue."

I left the clinic, phoned the hotel in Washington from a pay-booth in a corner drug-store, and told Germaine to join me at Pook's Hill. I said that I had had to leave Washington in a hurry and would explain when I saw her. I added that I'd just had a consultation at Johns Hopkins and had decided to take medical treatment.

"I know one thing you don't need treatment for—your nerve!" she replied and hung up on me.

When I reached the house in Bedford Hills, I was welcomed by Mary-Myrtle at the front door and by the loud barking of Ponto from my bedroom. Germaine had not yet returned.

"How's Ponto?" I asked the maid.

"Oh, he's fine," she told me, "just fine. He eats his food and sleeps regular and is just like he was."

"Good, I'll take a look at him."

I went upstairs and held my bedroom door ajar.

"Hullo, Ponto old boy," I said in the curious tone one uses towards dogs, children and public men. "Here I am back from Washington."

He lay on my bed, with ears pricked up, gazing at me intently.

"Yes, Ponto," I continued. "I got the Order of Merit from President Truman himself and met all the big shots, so if you take a bite at me now it will be sabotage."

Ponto put his ears back and let his tongue dangle from the side of his mouth, while his tail made a haze as it thumped delightedly on the pillow. If he hadn't been an animal, I would have said he was laughing.

"There, old fellow," I soothed him.

He wuffed affectionately, jumped to the floor, and stood beside me, panting and drooling.

"Thank God, you're well again, Ponto," I told him. "We can't have two loony people in this house. Now it's my turn to go to the vet's and be treated."

Ponto's answer was to lick my hand convulsively and wag his tail and otherwise give a splendid impersonation of an affectionate "Friend of Man" whose beloved master has returned. So I took him downstairs with me and turned him out for a run on the lawn while I sat in my den and tried to get my thoughts in order.

What worried me most was Virginia Rutherford's sudden change in manner. From having been definitely the woman scorned—angry, hurt and hell-bent for revenge—she had adopted an air of friendly complicity the moment I had left the White House. This made no sense to me. Germaine was unchanged but that was because she was a simple woman who was in the obvious process of falling in love with her own husband. Whatever I did would be all right with her, which was a great comfort but not much help. Then, too, I was beginning to get uneasy at the increasing glibness and complexity of the lies I was telling. It was almost as though I were playing a part for which at some time I had once rehearsed. As Tyler had told me in the State Department, it *would* be interesting to know how I happened to invent the legendary "Z-2."

There was the crunch of gravel as an automobile slowed to a stop outside, the click of a key in the lock and then Germaine was in the den and in my arms, with all the etchings of ducks staring at her.

"Winnie," she exclaimed. "You *are* the most unexpected person. I had the most awful time at the Willard after you phoned me. When I tried to pay the bill they wouldn't take my check because my name wasn't Grant. In fact, I had to telephone that nice Mrs. Jacklin before I could find a bank that would give me the money. Then that Mr. Harcourt from the F.B.I. came in and talked to me for the longest time. He seemed quite surprised when I told him you had gone to Johns Hopkins. Don't you feel well, dear?"

"I never felt better," I assured her. "No, Jimmy, that was because somebody in the Secret Service got the idea

that I ought to be put in an asylum. It's a nasty little trick of theirs, I gather, to send a man to the booby-bin for life if they don't like him but have no evidence against him. So I thought I'd play it smart and beat them to the punch. That's why I went to Baltimore, to get a mental check-up at the Phipps Clinic."

"Did they—Are you—Are you all right?" she faltered. "I couldn't bear it if—"

I laughed and gave her a good hug. "I'm all right," I told her. "They didn't have time to examine me but gave me two bits of advice. First, I was to get Jerry Rutherford to handle my case. I guess you need political influence now to get yourself locked up. And then, I was told that I ought to have more lick and wimmin in my life. It seems I'm getting in a rut."

"Winnie!"

"Uh-huh! They recommended it for curing highly inhibited cases like mine. I'm repressed or something."

"It must be something," Germaine observed fifteen minutes later. "Oh, dear, I didn't even think whether the door was locked. I'm a sight. You don't act repressed to me."

She turned her face towards me, her eyes laughing.

"In any case, I'll have to see a doctor," I said, "and it might as well be Rutherford. He knows so much about me that I won't have to do a lot of explaining."

"Winnie!"

Germaine swung her feet to the floor and straightened her clothes. "Winnie," she repeated, "*must* you go to a doctor? Can't we try the *other* prescription—I mean, give it a *good* try?"

I shook my head.

"No can do. I've got to get my memory straightened out. You and I—well, *we're* all right now. But there's my business and then there's the Secret Service. I *can't* seem to remember a thing before the second of April and I did so much lying in Washington, trying to cover up, that I may get into real trouble. That's what Virginia said, that I'd lied myself into a worse mess than I'd lied myself out of."

My wife pouted. "Don't these treatments take a long time?" she asked. "I remember when they sent Cousin Frederick to the asylum after that time when he put tear-gas in the air-conditioners in the Stock Exchange, it was three years before they let him out. Of course he *was* crazy, though we pretended it was only drink. That time he tried to tattoo the little Masters girl—But won't they keep you locked up and do things to you?"

"Hanged if I know," I said, "but they can't keep me there a day longer than you or I want. It isn't as though I was being committed to an asylum. It's just that there's a bad crack in my memory. They'll try to find out what's wrong and patch it up. Perhaps I won't have to stay after all."

"Do they let wives come and visit their husbands?" she asked dreamily. "I mean—"

"I've never heard that the medical profession encouraged that kind of therapy," I told her.

"Speaking of insanity," I continued, "Ponto, you will be glad to know, is back to normal."

She got up and made a face at me. "Of course," she remarked with deliberate provocation, "If you think more of Ponto than you do of me. I'm *so* glad, Winnie, to know that Ponto is better. He's your dog, isn't he? What was wrong with him? What medicine did you give him? What did the vet say—"

She ended in a startled squeak and ran for the door.

"You beast!" she exclaimed, turning on me, "it *was* locked, all the time. Oh, Winnie—"

A thousand years later she said once more, "Oh, Winnie!"

Then she laughed.

"Just the same," she said, "I'm glad about Ponto. I still think I don't like the way he's been acting."

She yawned.

"And now, sir," she added, "will you please let me go to my room. I'm *still* rather dirty from my trip and I ought to get a few things unpacked. And besides," she laughed again, "I'm ravenously hungry."

"So am I," I remarked truthfully, "but—"

"I *know* we're both crazy," she told me some time later, "and perhaps they'd better give us a double-room at the asylum. But I know that unless I eat something right away I'll be dead in the morning."

"Let's see if there's anything in the ice-box," I said. "Mary's probably given up dinner long ago."

"Her name is Myrtle," Germaine corrected me.

CHAPTER 23

Dr. Rutherford's office was tastefully furnished, in the suburban medical manner, to suggest a Tudor tap-room. There was, of course, a spotless chrome and porcelain laboratory connecting, as well as an equally sanitary lavatory.

"Good of you to squeeze me in, Jerry," I remarked to Rutherford. "Fact is I need your professional opinion."

Rutherford stroked his little dab of a moustache. "I've sent in my application to the Army Medical Corps," he told me. "I hoped you'd come to straighten out the money end."

"That will be taken care of any time you need it," I assured him. "Miss Briggs at my office will have full details. I'll phone her and my lawyer to fix it up as soon as I get back to the house."

"Well, what seems to be wrong with you, old man?" he inquired. "War getting too much for you? Got a hang-over? Need vitamins? Bowels regular? I must say you're got a better color and have lost weight since the last time I saw you."

"It's nothing wrong with my body, and I *have* lost weight," I explained. "It's my mind. I've had a complete loss of memory as to what happened before April second. In Washington, I was lucky to avoid the booby-hatch. They couldn't handle me at Hopkins, so they told me to consult my family physician. I guess that means that you are elected."

"Family physician is good," Rutherford remarked with a rather unprofessional grin. "But hell! I'm no psychiatrist. Of course, in practice around here I bump into few psychopathic cases but I must say you've never struck me as the type."

I assured him that I was in dead earnest about this matter, that I must somehow get myself certified as sane or I might be in trouble with the government.

"Rot, my dear fellow!" Rutherford assured me. "You've had some kind of psychic trauma or shock that's resulted in temporary amnesia. That could happen to anybody. You're as sane as I am."

I asked him whether he'd be willing to sign a medical certificate to that effect.

"Well," he replied slowly, "that's another story. I'm not a specialist along psychiatric lines. Up here I get mostly baby-cases, indigestion, some alcoholism and now and then, thank God, a real honest broken leg. My name on a certificate wouldn't mean much in sanity proceedings. I'd rather have you run over to Hartford and see Dr. Folsom at the Sanctuary. He has the stuff and the equipment to put you through the standard tests."

"That's okay by me, Jerry," I agreed, "but I'd still like you to put me through a few paces so that your records will show that this is on the level. If some bright boy in Washington decides to throw me in the asylum for making nasty faces at the Big Brass, I want to have a clean medical record for use in a counter-suit for false arrest."

Rutherford stood up and looked out the window. "I'm a hell of a poor choice for a man to look into your private life, after this business with Germaine and Virginia," he observed.

"That's why I want to keep it all in the family," I told him. "Listen, Jerry, until she came out to Pook's Hill the other day I have no recollection of ever setting eyes on Virginia. Under the circumstances, she's as superfluous as a bridegroom's pajamas. I faked as well as I could but the plain fact is that I have no memory of her, of you, of Jimmie or anybody around here before April 2nd. Now that's not normal, to put it mildly."

"You know, Winnie," the doctor remarked professionally, "I think that your quote loss of memory unquote is nothing but a defense mechanism. I know a bit about your affairs and they seem to have got so complicated—with three or four women on a string, business problems, liquor and so forth—that you simply decided subconsciously not to remember anything about them. Your mind's a blank as to everything you want to forget."

I shook my head. "The trouble is, Jerry, that my mind's not blank at all. I remember a hell of a lot but it's all about another man."

"How's that again?"

So I told him the whole story, from beginning to end, skipping only the bits about the thorium bomb and Z-2 for reasons of security, and omitting the name of the carrier. He took notes and studied them for a while. Then he looked up at me and smiled.

"This beats anything in Freud," he observed. "I still stick to my off-the-cuff diagnosis that you had something that gave you a shock—it needn't have been anything big, you know; just a straw that broke the camel's back—and then developed this loss of memory as a defense mechanism. And this transfer of personalities with Jacklin—metempsychosis is the fancy word for it—is not the usual type of schizophrenia, but it falls into a pattern of wish-fulfillment."

"You probably don't remember it but ever since I've known you, you've been grousing about this fellow Jacklin, whom none of us have ever met. It's been close to an obsession with you. I gather that you had some kind of a school-boy crush on him, which he ignored, and your feelings turned to hatred. You seem to have kept close track of him and his doings all these years. Subconsciously you must have identified yourself with him. I'm just guessing now—Folsom could make a scientific check—but I should say that you may have developed a split personality, based on envy and jealousy for this chap. Jacklin's had to make his own way, while you've always had plenty of money and good business connections, especially since you got over the depression. He was in uniform, serving his country, and you were a civilian, enriching yourself. He had separated from his wife while you were tangled up with a lot of women ..."

"But how did I know that Mrs. Jacklin had a mole on her left hip?" I asked.

"Nine women out of ten have at least one and often more moles on both their hips," he said, "as you should know. In any case, I take it that you didn't verify the statement. No, Winnie, at the Sanctuary they can deal with this sort of thing scientifically and tell you how to make the readjustment."

"My wife doesn't want me to readjust too much," I told him. "She'd rather have me crazy and stick around with her than sane but off chasing a bunch of skirts."

"Can't say that I blame her, old man," he agreed, controlling himself with a visible effort, "but that's her affair and nothing to do with your case."

"Quite!" I told him, "and let me say that you've been a hell of a good sport about this mess. Believe me, Jerry, I'm not trying to alibi myself so far as Virginia is involved, but I don't remember anything about her and me that couldn't be taught in a Methodist Sunday School. It's—it's almost as though I had been born again, given a last chance to relive my life. If that's what trauma does for you, we ought to have more of it."

"Listen, Winnie," the doctor remarked. "This is between us, of course, but the sanest thing you ever did was to get shed of Virginia. She's fun and all that, but after a few weeks it's boring to live with a one-track mind with red hair. Germaine is worth a dozen of her. Perhaps when I get back from the Army, Virginia will have settled down enough to be a doctor's wife. You'll see that she gets the money, won't you?"

"Sure," I agreed, "and I'll give you a tip I learned at Hopkins. The short-cut to medical riches. A loony psychiatrist there says he always advises middle-aged men to do a little heavy drinking and woman chasing, in order to get rid of their inhibitions. There ought to be a fortune in that kind of medical treatment, especially in Westchester."

Jerry Rutherford laughed. "Westchester's discovered the prescription all by itself," he said, "and they're just beginning to learn that when a middle-aged American sheds his inhibitions, there's damn little of him left. Now, you'd better run along and get packed for a stay in Hartford. I'll phone Folsom and tell him you're driving over this afternoon. He'll fix you up if anyone can."

"Swell!" I thanked him.

When I got back to Pook's Hill, I called the office and told Arthurjean that I was leaving for a rest-cure at the Hartford Sanctuary and to tell my partners that I didn't want to be disturbed by business affairs until further notice. I asked her to get hold of Merriwether Vail and meet me at the Sanctuary as soon as they could make it. They were to bring the necessary papers so that I could deed over \$15,000 to Dr. Jeremiah Rutherford of Bedford Hills, to be paid in monthly installments of \$1,000 to his wife. I added that there was nothing seriously wrong with me but that the best advice I could get recommended a rest-cure to head off a possible nervous breakdown. Then I said good-bye to Germaine, gave Ponto a farewell pat on the head and piled into my Packard for the drive to Hartford.

The Sanctuary proved to be a large, pleasant brick building—something about half-way between a country club and a summer hotel—in the better groomed suburbs of Hartford, with a fine view of the Connecticut River. The ample grounds were surrounded by a high spiked iron fence and the gates to the driveway were closed, until I had identified myself to the guard on duty. In fact, it reminded me of the routine of getting admitted to the White House grounds, except that this time I was not accompanied by General Wakely. At the front door, a uniformed attendant took charge of my bags and gave directions to have my car sent to the garage. Then I was ushered into one of those hospital waiting-rooms that defy all interior-decorating efforts to give them a respectable, homelike touch.

A few moments later, a pretty nurse in a white starched uniform directed me to follow her. We went through a door, which she was careful to lock behind her, along a corridor and up one flight of stairs to a pleasantly furnished bed-room, where my bags were already waiting for me. She told me to get undressed and go to bed—which I did, after she had carefully unpacked my belongings, removing my razor and my nail-file.

"Dr. Folsom will be by to see you in a few minutes, Mr. Tompkins," she informed me. "Just ring if you want anything."

After she left, I felt good and mad. How in blazes did they expect to minister to a mind diseased, if they began by the old routine of getting the patient stripped and bedded? Then I realized that this was just a simple matter of establishing the institution's moral superiority, at the very outset, and my anger evaporated. I lay back and dozed for a few minutes until the door opened and a burly man, with a glittering eye and strangler's hands, entered my room.

"I'm Dr. Folsom, Mr. Tompkins," he informed me. "Dr. Rutherford phoned that you were coming over for a check-up. Before we get down to business, there are a few routine questions I'd like to ask."

They were routine: Name, age, address, next of kin, annual income, banking connections, name of recommending physician, and whether patient had previously received mental treatment in an accredited psychiatric institution.

"Shall we mail the bills to Mrs. Tompkins?" he asked.

"Hell, no! Give them to me. I brought along my check-book."

Dr. Folsom nodded approval. "Here is the bill for the first week," he said. "We generally ask our patients to pay in advance."

He handed me a folded piece of fine bonded paper. On it, tastefully inscribed, was the information that I owed The Sanctuary, Hartford, Conn., \$290.00 for room, board and attendance for the period of April 20-25, inclusive. There was a space for my signature and the doctor thrust a fountain-pen into my hand. "Just sign there and we'll send it to your bank for collection," he said.

"What's all this fine print?" I suddenly demanded.

"Oh, that's just a matter of form," he explained.

"Wait a minute," I urged. "I was always taught that when in Hartford you ought always to read the small print at the bottom of the page."

I studied it out. "The above signature," it read, "constitutes an agreement not to leave or attempt to leave The Sanctuary without the prior approval of the Management."

I looked at Dr. Folsom. "If you don't mind, doctor," I told him, "I'd prefer to sign one of my own checks and have it cleared in the usual way. What's the idea of having me sign away my liberty like that?"

Folsom smiled disarmingly. "That's one of the ways we judge whether a patient is really sane. Only a crazy man would sign it," he explained. "More seriously, Mr. Tompkins, you must remember that a private asylum has quite a problem in controlling its patients. They are not generally committed to our care by court orders and usually come here only at the request of their families with their own reluctant consent. Without a signed agreement of that kind, we might be exposed to legal annoyances, suit for damages or even a kidnapping charge, if a patient changed his mind and decided to act nasty."

"I see your point, doctor," I told him. "I've asked my attorney and my private secretary to meet me here a little later today. I have some business I must clean up before I can settle down for treatment. I'll consult him about the kind of agreement to sign with the Sanctuary. So far as I'm concerned, I don't see the necessity for any agreement. I want to get a simple sanity test and see if you can recommend any course of treatment for dealing with a serious loss of memory."

"I'm not sure that it is the management's policy to accept a patient under such unusual conditions," he said. "I'll have to consult my associates."

"See here, doctor," I replied. "All I want now is to have one of the psychiatrists give me the works, tell me whether I'm sane or crazy, and then I'll pull out. I don't want to stay here under false pretenses and I don't intend to stay here a minute longer than I want to. I'll pay any fee you charge, within reason, but I'm damned if I'll sign my own freedom away, with Wall Street getting set to shoot the works."

Dr. Folsom laughed. "I can't say that I blame you, Mr. Tompkins. And you don't sound unbalanced to me."

"But I want a document signed to that effect," I declared. "You see, some of my business associates have been trying to have me adjudged incompetent so as to get control of my money. It's about three million dollars at present quotations. So I'm out to build up my defenses in advance of the show-down. *Now* do you understand?"

"Oh!" The Director of the Sanctuary was enormously relieved. "That's no trouble at all. I'll send up our business psychiatrist, Dr. Pendergast Potter—he studied under Jung in Vienna, you know—and he'll give you our standard businessman's sanity-test. We have quite a few cases like yours, you know. It's surprising how many business partners seize on insanity as a key to robbing their associates. It's done every day. And our fee for this service will be five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars it is!" I agreed.

"Good!" Dr. Folsom beamed. "I'll send Potter over right away."

CHAPTER 24

When Dr. Pendergast Potter arrived, he proved to be a short, square-built man, with a red spade beard and soft but shifty brown eyes—like an Airedale's. He had, he told me almost at once, studied with Jung in Vienna and I thought of that mischievous parody—

"Bliss was it in that Freud to be alive,
But to be Jung was very Heaven!"

"Dr. Folsom tells me, Mr. Tompkins," Potter continued in a sort of heel-clicking, stiff-bow-from-the-waist manner which was meant, I suppose, to reveal his Viennese training, "that you have reason to believe that your business partners are plotting against you, conspiring to throw you in the asylum? This sense of special persecution, sir, have you had it long? Perhaps when you were a child, you hated your father? It began then, not so? And, later at school, perhaps—"

I got out of bed and advanced on the psychiatrist.

"Dr. Potter," I informed him, "you are here for only one reason, to certify that I am sane in the legal sense. For this service I am paying the Sanctuary a fee of five thousand dollars. To which, of course, I will add a personal fee of one thousand dollars to you, Dr. Potter, assuming that you can sign a certificate of sanity with a clear scientific conscience."

Potter subsided in the arm-chair and cackled gleefully. "Boy, oh boy!" he exclaimed, "for one thousand smackers I'd certify that Hitler is the Messiah. Damn Folsom for sending me in blind! He didn't tell me it was one of those."

"Besides," I added, "I have a really serious loss of memory, which is worth your attention, though I haven't time to go into it now. So get ahead with your tests, please, and let's clean up this one."

"Cross your knees, either leg!" he ordered and gave me a few brisk taps just below the knee-cap with the edge of his flattened palm. My knee-jerks were all that could be desired.

"Good!" remarked Potter. "That's still the only physical test for sanity that's worth a damn. Hell! They have all sorts of gadgets but they all amount to the same thing: Is your nervous system functioning normally or is it not? What seems to be the trouble, Mr. Tompkins? Partners closing in on your assets or has your wife made book with your lawyer?"

"My only trouble," I informed him, "is that I'm damned if I can remember anything that happened before April second of this year. That's been getting me close to trouble and I'd like to clear it up. I remember all sorts of things before then, but it's about another man."

"Hm!" Potter suddenly looked formidably medical. "That's what I call schizophrenia with a pretzel twist. We could keep you here and give you sedatives and baths and exercises and analysis, but it would be just the same if we left you alone. You've had some kind of shock causing a temporary occlusion of personality, and the best thing you can do is wait. Sooner or later there will be another shock and everything will come straight again. What do you think you remember from the blank period?"

"Damned if I know," I replied. "I think I sank a battleship or killed a President, or something."

Potter laughed. "That's just a variation of the good old Napoleon complex—which is an inferiority complex

gone wild. You ought to take up a hobby, like expert book-binding or watch-repairing. That would give you a sense of power and you wouldn't feel the need for sinking ships. Ten to one, you can't even shoot a decent game of golf."

"I'm pretty good at poker," I defended myself.

"That's not power, Mr. Tompkins, that's just shrewdness. You have a profound sense of physical inadequacy. The record says you're married. Any children?"

I shook my head.

"That's it," Potter declared. "We had a case like that in Jung's clinic—a baker named Hermann Schultz, who insisted that he was the Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa. We were baffled for a while, since Schultz was married and had three children. Then we learned that his wife was the girl-friend of one of the Habsburg Archdukes and that poor Schultz was not the father of little Franz, Irma and Ernst. We solved it for him with his wife's help. She agreed to have another child. Of course, it was the Archduke's but Schultz never guessed. He ceased to believe that he was the Barbarossa and became a highly successful baker. What you ought to do, Mr. Tompkins, is to father a child and then you will forget all this nonsense about battleships and Presidents. Not so?"

I grinned at him knowingly. "There's much in what you say, Dr. Potter," I complimented him, "but what the hell can I do about it bottled up here in the Sanctuary? Just give me a clean mental bill of health—in case any of my partners try to pull a fast one—and I'll go home to my wife and give earnest consideration to your suggestion. After all, if that fails, I can always take up wood-carving. Or try another girl."

"There are one or two around here—" he began, then checked himself. "Well," he continued, "I can't say that I see anything really abnormal about you. Sitting here, talking with you, I would have noticed any psychopathic tendencies. We psychiatrists develop a sort of sixth sense for the abnormal. I couldn't prove it scientifically, but I am sure as Adam ate little green apples that there's nothing wrong with you that can't be cured by a drink, a kiss and a baby."

There was a brisk knock on the door and the nurse appeared.

"Sorry to disturb you, doctor," she said, "but there's a man named Vail downstairs with a writ of habeas corpus for Mr. Tompkins."

Potter looked at me accusingly, as though Jung had never foreseen this kind of complication.

"Merry Vail," I agreed. "Yes, he's my lawyer. I told him to come here but never dreamed—just send him up, nurse. In the meanwhile, doctor, if you could get that certificate ready—"

Potter again gave the effect of heel-clicking, and withdrew.

Three minutes later Meriwether Vail and Arthurjean Briggs came bursting into my room.

"Glory be, you're still safe, old man," my lawyer announced. "When Miss Briggs phoned me your curious message, we put two and two together."

"And made it twenty-two?" I suggested.

"No, we made it four. We weren't going to stand for any nonsense from the F.B.I. and I owe them something for pulling me in for questioning. And when you spoke of fifteen thousand dollars and a doctor, I had a brain-storm. So I flew up here and swore out a writ from the Federal Court. I got a deputy to help me serve it—cost me all of twenty bucks—and here we are."

I turned to Arthurjean. "Honeychile," I asked, "did you by any chance, think to bring me some of the office brandy? I've been moving so fast for the last three days that I'm out of training."

My secretary turned her back, gave sort of dip-dive-and-wiggle and produced from God knows where a half pint bottle of what proved to be excellent brandy, well-warmed above room temperature. I heartlessly refused to

notice Vail's pathetic signs of desperate thirst and passed the flask back to Arthurjean. "Thanks," I told her, "that just about saved my life."

"Mr. Vail was all set that the doctors had hijacked you and were holding you for ransom," she remarked, taking a short but deep drink herself, "Seems like there's been a mistake."

"Uh-uh!" I indicated strong disagreement. "I came here under my own power and am about to leave under the same and in my right mind."

"Whoever said you weren't?" Vail demanded. "God! we'll sue them for libel."

I shook my head. "It was the Secret Service and only God can sue them," I said. "They took a notion to have me thrown in the Washington asylum because they were sore at me on general principles. So I decided to beat them to the draw and produce a certificate of sanity."

Vail looked at me with amusement. "Worst thing you could possibly do, old man," he informed me. "If you start going around showing people proof that you're not crazy, first thing you know you'll be in Matteawan. Now if you want to prove to anybody that you're really in your light mind, you'll try to do the right thing by this little girl here."

In some bewilderment I looked at Arthurjean, whom nobody could accurately accuse of being little.

"What are you driving at, Merry?" I asked.

"I refer to my client, Miss Briggs," he replied with dignity. "We have strong written evidence of breach of promise."

"Sugar-puss?" I turned to my secretary, "Don't tell me that you've shown my letters to this legal lout?"

She nodded. "Sorry, angel, but a girl's got to take care of herself in this world. You remember where you wrote me, 'Be but mine and I shall buy you a porterhouse steak with mushrooms'."

"It was onions, darling," I insisted. "Onions aren't breach of promise. Damn it! they're cause for divorce."

"It was mushrooms," she repeated. "That was the same letter in which you promised me hearts of lettuce, and ice-cream and—" she broke down, sobbing with laughter.

I pulled her face down to me and gave her a kiss. "You big slob," I told her, "all you think about, with democracy at the crossroads, is food. Take that shyster downstairs and wait for me. I'll be down as soon as I collect my certificate. Even if I can't wear it on my coat like a campaign-ribbon it will be nice to hang in my den alongside my Harvard B.A. diploma and the moose I didn't kill—it was the Indian guide but they don't count—in New Brunswick."

Arthurjean laughed. "You sure do make your help sing for their supper, angel," she told me. "And just because I call you angel don't you start worrying about that nice wife of yours. From now on, I'll make like a sister."

So I smacked her on the porte-cochere and ordered her out of the room until I got dressed. As the door closed behind her and Vail, I rang for the nurse and asked to have my bags packed.

"Goodness, Mr. Tompkins," she exclaimed. "Don't you like it here? We understood that you wanted a rest-cure."

She stood just a fraction of an inch too close to me and I was aware of pretty brown hair under her starched nurse's cap, a whiff of something that smelled far more expensive than antiseptic, and a pleasingly rounded effect underneath the prim blouse of her uniform. So I put my arm around her, gave her a friendly kiss and said, "Name, please, and when do you get off duty?"

"Emily Post," she answered, "so help me, but don't let that stop you, and nine o'clock tonight."

"Good," I told her. "Will you join us for dinner and a drink at—what's the best hotel here now we've a war on?"

"The Governor Baldwin," she replied.

"Meet us at the Baldwin, then, at soon as you can get away. I'd like you to meet my friends socially and—"

She nodded brightly and hurried from the room, with a distinctly unmedical motion of her hips.

A moment later Dr. Folsom came lounging in, his strangler's hands dangling at his side.

"Sorry you feel you must leave, Mr. Tompkins," he told me. "Here's that certificate. It will stand up in any court east of the Mississippi if you have to use it. That will be five thousand, as agreed."

I sat down at the little writing-desk and laboriously made out three checks: one for five thousand to the order of the Sanctuary, one for one thousand to the order of Pendergast Potter, and another for one thousand to the order of—

"Any initials, Dr. Folsom?" I asked.

"A. J.," he replied, "but just make it to the Sanctuary."

"A. J. Folsom," I wrote on the final check and endorsed it with "W. S. Tompkins," as well as I could with my still bandaged fingers.

"What—" Folsom was startled. "Gosh! You're a white man, Mr. Tompkins. And Potter will be glad to have this, too. He is—"

"Think nothing of it!" I announced grandly. "The market's been working for me all week, and this won't even cost you income-tax; I'll put it down as a gift."

Folsom's face was positively transfigured with gratitude and a devotion that would not have been out of place in a stained glass window.

"By George!" he insisted. "You *are* a white man. I'd be proud to go before the Supreme Court of the United States and testify—" He stopped abruptly. "Are these checks good?" he inquired.

"Oh, come, doctor, who's loony now?" I demanded. "Why would I expose myself to a bad check charge just to keep out of a private asylum with my lawyer fully equipped with a writ?"

"That's so, that's so!" he beamed reassured. "Well, sir, it's been fine having you here and any time—day or night—if you want refuge from the stormy blast, just come out to the Sanctuary. We'll always be honored to put you up and give you the best we have for as long as you care to stay. Believe me, Mr. Tompkins, it may seem odd but you'll never find warmer hospitality or a more sincere welcome than right here in this little old asylum."

CHAPTER 25

The grill in the Governor Baldwin was not crowded and we had no trouble getting a pleasant table in the corner, while four colored men blew into metal objects, hit things and delivered themselves of various rhythmic noises. From time to time they paused, in order to allow the perspiring couples who jiggled and writhed on the dance-floor time to cool off. While waiting for Emily Post to appear, Arthurjean was very subordinate, calling me "Mr. Tompkins" and acting quite as the boss's secretary should act when out for dinner with the boss. Merry Vail was in high spirits and insisted on having the deputy who had helped serve the writ join us for a drink. But the deputy was a pallid young man with—he told us—a heart-murmur that kept him out of the armed forces and he never touched anything strong.

So we shed him ahead of the time when the nurse from "The Sanctuary" showed up in a slick dancing-dress that seemed painted on her torso and a make-up that was a tribute to the skill of the advertisers of cosmetics. Vail took one look at her and his face lit up like Broadway.

"Spring is in the air," he remarked to the world at large. "Will you dance, Miss Post?"

She flashed a smile that promised some and hinted at more, and said, "You bet!"

I watched them as they took the dance floor and the music took them. I turned back to my secretary.

"What gives, angel?" I asked.

She beamed at me. "Winnie," she observed, "you're *it*. Perhaps the most famous man in Wall Street, in a quiet way. You caught the market just right. Mr. Wasson and Mr. Cone pulled out just right, before the big operators decided they must be patriotic and support quotations before you made too much money. We've cleaned up nearly three million dollars and Mr. Cone's so happy about it he's got him a brand-new girl-friend."

"How about Wasson?" I asked. "Has success gone to his head?"

"Oh, he's just the same as ever. He didn't bat an eyelash except to say that you were one wise so-and-so to figure the break."

"And how about yourself, Arthurjean?"

She grinned at me. "I guess a girl can tell when she's washed up with a swell guy. But you're not Winnie—not the Winnie I knew—and there aren't going to be any fun and games from now on, I guess."

She took a hearty pull at her highball.

"So we're friends," she announced. "You've got a swell wife waiting for you. If you ever need me, I'll be around. If you don't, that's okay too. But Gawd, honeychile, we did have us some fun—Winnie and I. He had a theory that monogamy was a kind of hardwood that grows in the tropics, and that made him kind of nice to play with. What gives with you?"

I gave her a fill-in on the Washington trip and the events that had brought me to The Sanctuary, and she listened with a growing smile.

"Why—" she began, but the music stopped, and Vail and Miss Post returned to the table.

"Winnie," Vail announced, "spring hath come to Hartford, Conn., and I've decided to take a room at this hotel. This is a mighty fine little city, isn't it? Clean, vital, New England honesty and all that, not to mention insurance. And—" His eyes strayed fondly in the direction of the nurse who sat with eyes demurely downcast.

"Okay," I told him. "This is the official opening of spring. Just give me those papers I wanted to sign. The money for Dr. Rutherford, I mean."

He stared at me.

"You don't mean to say you were serious about that!" he exclaimed. "I thought it was a gag to tip me off that you were being railroaded to the asylum. Hell, I'll have the stuff drawn up and you can sign it on Monday. There's nothing doing in town over the week-end and Rutherford can wait. If you like, I'll try to beat him down. For my money, he'll settle for five thousand and to hell with his family honor."

I shook my head. "No dice, Merry. It's fifteen thousand—a gentleman's agreement."

"Hell! no gentleman has any business making agreements. That's what lawyers are for."

The music started up with a rather miscegenated attempt to marry Mendelssohn's Spring Song to "Pistol-

Packing Momma." He grabbed Emily Post by the arm. "Come on," he urged. "Got to dance. I'll show you some steps that aren't in the book of etiquette."

"Why, Mr. Vail!" she agreed, and they were off again.

I resumed my talk with Arthurjean. "You'd better stay here, too," I told her. "It's getting late and they lock up the trains on the New Haven road along with the cows."

She looked the question at me.

"Nope!" I replied sturdily. "I'm going to drive back and see whether spring has come to Bedford Hills. Even commuters have children now and then," I added. "They used to blame it on sunspots or Roosevelt but now I guess they'll have nobody to blame but themselves."

In return for a five-spot the hotel door-man told me how to find the nearest Black Market gas-station, so I tanked up the Packard and worked myself across country until I hit the Parkway.

The night was clear and cool but there was a hint of blossoms in the air.

Vail was right. Spring had come to the commuters and I thought sardonically of what could be expected at every country club the next night—Saturday. I missed the turn-off for Bedford Hills and wasted a couple of hours wandering amiss through the maze of Westchester roads, but finally I found myself on a familiar road and soon eased the Packard to a slow stop on the crackling gravel of the entrance of Pook's Hill.

I left my bags in the car and walked quietly along the grass until I let myself in at front door. A muffled woof from the kitchen showed that Ponto had drowsily recognized my tread as I tip-toed up the stairs and into my bedroom. It was three o'clock in the morning and the frogs were still jingling in the marshy meadows as I stood by the window and lasted the night air. Then I undressed rapidly and put on a dressing-gown and slippers. I turned off the lights and tiptoed across the hall to my wife's bedroom.

Her door was closed but, when I turned the handle, it proved not to be locked or bolted. I closed it softly behind me and approached the edge of the bed. Germaine was sleeping quietly, the faint glow of the starlight outlining her dark hair against the white pillow.

Suddenly she started.

"What? Who's that?" she cried.

I leaned over and brushed her hair with my lips.

"It's me," I told her truthfully. "Everything's all right."

"Hurry!" she murmured. "You'll catch cold."

A moment later, she remarked conversationally, "Heavens! You *are* cold."

Then she burrowed herself against me and wordlessly raised her lips to mine.

When I opened my eyes in the morning the bed felt strangely deserted. I reached over and found that I was alone.

"Jimmie!" I called. "Jimmie!"

She appeared at the bathroom door.

"Hullo," she remarked. "Where did you come from? And what are you doing there? Don't you know that all

respectable married couples sleep in separate rooms, according to 'House and Garden'?"

"I'm not respectable," I told her. "Please notify the editor."

"You certainly are not!" she observed. "You nearly gave me heart-failure, sneaking into my room like that when you were supposed to be in Hartford. It would have served you right if I'd called for the police."

"I'm just as good as the average policeman," I suggested. "Come over here and I'll show you how we Tompkinses—"

But she evaded me.

"No, sir. We must set a good example to the servants. It's way past breakfast time and I don't want Myrtle to guess that we're absolutely shameless."

Breakfast was waiting for us when we came downstairs and we gave a reasonably good impersonation of an elderly married couple at the breakfast table. I read the financial section of the "Times" and Germaine again busied herself with the social page of the "Herald-Tribune", now and then reading brief items about marriages, and divorces, while I grunted noncommittally about the state of the market. As a matter of fact, we both believed we had succeeded admirably when our attention was attracted by a meaning kind of cough.

It was Mary-Myrtle.

"What is it, Myrtle?" Germaine asked with a radiant smile.

"It's not my business to say so," the maid stammered, "but I wanted to know whether you would really keep me on. I—I like it here—and I'm so glad you're happy, Mrs. Tompkins."

"Of course, you're going to stay with us, Myrtle, but however did you guess?"

"You can see it in your face, Mrs. Tompkins," she said, "and Mr. Tompkins he was looking at the sporting page and talking about U.S. Steel and A.T.&T. And—oh, it's nice."

And she fled from the room.

Germaine looked at me like the angel at the Gates of Eden. "There!" she exclaimed. "That's what happens when I trust you. You can't even find the right page in the paper to fake from. Next time I'm going to marry a man who doesn't look so damned happy it's a give-away."

"It's spring," I explained stupidly.

"You know, Winnie," my wife said suddenly, "speaking of spring, I've been thinking about Ponto. You've had him for five years now and I think he's getting a little queer. Don't you think it would be a good idea to send him to the kennels and have him bred? Perhaps that's all that's been wrong with him."

"Spoken like a woman, Jimmie," I said, "but I agree that it wouldn't do any harm. I'll phone Dalrymple after breakfast and have him send over for Ponto's Sacre du Printemps. He's got championship blood and, unlike holy matrimony, there's money in it."

She shrugged her shoulders unspeakably.

"Poor Winnie!" she mocked. "You'd be worth millions if you'd been paid, like Ponto."

"It mightn't be a bad idea, at that," I remarked. "If you realize the years of apprenticeship and training, the high degree of professional skill required—"

"Come here, then," she ordered, "I'll pay you."

She did.

"You won't forget about Ponto," she added breathless after her kiss. "The poor darling oughtn't to be celibate in this household. I wouldn't want it to happen to a dog."

CHAPTER 26

On the morning of Monday, April 23rd (the date seemed unimportant at the time), I took the early morning train into New York. Spring had done its fell work and the club car was full of middle-aged business-men, with dark circles under their eyes, prepared to fight at the drop of a hat anyone who said they weren't as young as they felt. With Jimmie's perfume still in my nostrils, I hadn't the heart to deride them, so I did the next best thing and talked them into a poker-game.

By the time we pulled into Grand Central I was eighteen dollars and seventy cents ahead, thanks to a full-house just before we reached 125th Street.

Instead of joining my fellow-brokers in their Gadarene rush for the down-town subway express, I strolled north along Park Avenue to the Pond Club.

At the Pond Club I found Tammy engaged, as ever, in polishing the glasses behind his gleaming little bar.

"My! Mr. Tompkins," he exclaimed. "You look as though you'd just made a million dollars," he told me. "The usual, sir?"

"It was nearly three millions, Tammy, and accept no substitutes. What I need is concentrated protein. How about a couple of dozen Cotuits and some black coffee?"

The steward raised his eyebrows knowingly.

"I'll mix you one of my Second Day Specials, sir," he said. "Funny thing about that drink. One night, young Mr. Ferguson—he's a new member, sir—was feeling merry and felt a sudden sense of compassion for the statue of Civic Virtue in front of the City Hall. Of course, I've never seen it but they tell me that it's a very fine work of art, by a person named Mac Monnies, I believe. He wasn't a member of the club, of course, but that's what I understand the name to be. So Mr. Ferguson would have nothing for it but to take one of my Second Day Specials down to the Civic Virtue and give him a drink. It seemed that Mr. Ferguson felt quite sorry for the statue down there in front of LaGuardia without any company. So he took a cab downtown and poured the drink down the mouth of the statue for a joke, like. But here's the odd thing, sir. They had to throw a canvas over the statue and send for a man with a hacksaw before the Mayor decided it was proper to expose it to the citizens again."

"Then bring me a double Second Day Special, without cold chisels or hacksaws, if you please," I ordered.

He smirked knowingly but had the tact of good club servants to say nothing. I sipped his concoction, which tasted entirely unlike the egg-nog it outwardly resembled. A moment later, I tried another sip. It was not at all unpleasant, so I drained the glass. This, I decided, was exactly what I needed, so I drank the second one without drawing breath.

"Ah-h-h!" I beamed. "That is much better. Now if anybody phones me, say I'm not here, unless it's one of my friends."

"Would that be true of that Mrs. R., sir?" he inquired. "That lady with the red hair you told me about, Mr. Tompkins?"

"If Mrs. Rutherford calls," I said, "let me know."

He smiled slyly. "Then I was to deliver a message to you from her, sir. She wants you to call her at the apartment, she said. Circle 8-7326, the number is. She said it was important."

I dialed the number. Virginia answered.

"Winnie?" Her voice was cool and amused. "You'd better come up here in a hurry. It's urgent."

"Where is here?" I asked.

"At our place, the apartment," she said.

"Better give me the address," I suggested. "I can't seem to remember."

"Winnie, that particular joke is getting tiresome. You know perfectly well it's 172 East 72nd Street and the third floor front. The name, naturally, is Smith."

"John Smith?" I inquired.

"Natch! And hurry, unless you want to be in worse trouble than you can imagine."

I signaled to Tammy. "One more Second Day Special, please."

He looked worried. "Are you quite sure, sir," he demurred. "Two is as much as I've ever seen a man take."

He returned to his mystery and produced the fatal brew. I drank it slowly. By Godfrey! this was more like it. I tossed him a five-dollar bill.

"Just remember that you haven't seen me," I told him.

"Quite, Mr. Tompkins."

I managed to snag an up-town taxi and rolled in comfort to 172 East 72nd Street.

I pressed the button marked Smith and was rewarded by a clicking of the latch. I climbed the stairs and on the third story tapped the little brass knocker. The door opened and Virginia appeared clad somewhat in a white silk dressing-gown and with her red hair sizzling out at me.

"Come in, stranger," she said.

She closed the door and settled herself comfortably, with a cigarette, on the suspiciously broad day-bed. I sat down in a very deep easy chair, facing her, and lighted a cigarette too.

"Well?" I inquired.

"Winnie," she began, "you know I never try to interfere with your private life or try to ask questions, but don't you think this farce has gone on long enough?"

I flicked some ash on the carpet and tried to look inscrutable.

"You know what you are doing, of course," she continued, "and your performance in Washington was magnificent, but just between ourselves, can't you relax?"

Although the windows were open, the room seemed oppressively warm. I threw back my coat and confronted her without speaking.

"Of course," Virginia continued, "I know we've got to be discreet. There can always be dictaphones and detectives and it seems that the F.B.I. knows all about this place, but can't you just—"

She jumped up and faced me. With an angry movement, she snatched off her dressing-gown and flung it on the floor.

"There!" she said. "Is there anything *wrong* with me? Am I repulsive? Or don't you care?"

It must have been the three specials that lifted me from the easy chair and whisked me across the room to the embattled red head, but it must have been my guardian angel that prompted my next move. I pulled out my fountain pen and wrote rapidly on the back of an envelope: "I suspect that we are watched."

Her eyes widened and she quickly grabbed her gown and draped it around her. I laid my finger to my lips.

"What I came to see you about, Virginia," I said, "is to tell you, once and for all, that all is over between us."

That was a mistake. She gave me a wink, dropped the gown and came and sat beside me on the arm of the chair.

"I too, Winfred," she said dramatically, "have become increasingly distressed by your apparent coldness."

She cuddled down and planted her lips on my ear while her tongue flicked like a little snake's.

"No," she continued, "the time has come, Winfred, when we must face the facts, unpleasant though they may be. I was never meant to be a part-time girl for any man."

Her sharp little teeth nipped my neck savagely.

"Virginia," I said, "what I had to say—what I mean is—"

I never said it. Her mouth was suddenly glued to mine and she melted into my arms.

"Damn you!" I told her. "There."

The apartment door-bell was buzzing like an accusation.

"Tell them to go away," she murmured. "Say we're not at home."

I disentangled myself, ran to the door and jiggled the button that released the downstairs catch. "Go and make yourself decent," I told her. "I'll stall them if you aren't too long."

I listened as the footsteps slowly mounted the stairs. It was a man's step. Then came a brisk tap on the brass knocker. I opened up. It was A. J. Harcourt of the F.B.I. He seemed rather surprised to see me.

"Good morning, Mr. Tompkins," he began. "I thought that—"

"Oh, come on in," I urged him. "Mrs. Rutherford will be out in a moment. I—we..."

He nodded. "You certainly do get around," he admitted. "Last the Bureau heard you were a patient up in Hartford, and here I find you in—"

"In a love-nest," I suggested. "A den of perfumed sin. A high-priced hell-hole. I got here about ten minutes ago. Mrs. Rutherford said that I might be in trouble but she didn't get around to explaining what trouble."

He grinned. "When a girl speaks of trouble, she means herself," he orated.

"Oh, is that so?"

Virginia appeared at the entrance to the bathroom, completely though revealingly clad, and advanced into the room brandishing her sex like an invisible shillelagh. "And what has the F.B.I. to do with me, Mr. Harcourt?" she demanded.

Poor Harcourt looked abashed but made a speedy recovery, getting out of the rough in one stroke.

"Now that Mr. Tompkins is here, Mrs. Rutherford, mam," he said, "I have nothing to see you about. We heard he had gone to a private asylum in New England and I was told to see you and ask if you knew any of the circumstances."

"Oh!" Virginia sat down on the rumpled day-bed. "That sounds rather like a lie, you know."

"That's not my fault, mam," Harcourt replied. "My chief gives me my orders and I follow them without being asked for my opinion. If the Bureau wants to check on Mr. Tompkins through his friends—"

Virginia beamed and dimpled. "You couldn't do better than come to me," she admitted.

"Well, here I am," I told him, "and Mrs. Rutherford needn't feel bothered. What is it now?"

"We just wanted to get the rights of your run-in with the Secret Service," he told me. "Our liaison there told the Director that you stood Chief Flynn on his ear and that Flynn threatened to swear out a lunacy warrant against you. How come?"

I gave him a full account of my encounter with the Secret Service and ended by producing the certificate of sanity signed by Dr. Folsom.

"There it is," I declaimed.

The Special Agent smiled. "You're nothing if not thorough, Mr. Tompkins. Have you had any luck filling in that blank period before Easter? The Bureau would feel much happier if you could remember. Now don't get me wrong. The case against you is closed. You're off our books. We believe that you're telling the truth, but just the same it seems funny you can't remember."

Virginia Rutherford turned on him, like a battleship bringing a battery of 16-inch guns to bear on a freighter. "Perhaps he has a good reason for not remembering," she remarked. "Perhaps he went somewhere, with some one—in skirts!"

"That's just what puzzles us," Harcourt admitted. "We've had fifty agents from the New York office alone making checks, as far north as Montreal, in Portland, Boston, Providence, and even Cincinnati and Richmond. We've checked trains, buses, airlines and the garages, as well as the hotels, boarding-houses and overnight cabins. There isn't anybody that can remember seeing Mr. Tompkins, with or without a woman, during that week."

"Then you're still investigating me?" I asked, while a chill went down my spine.

The Special Agent shook his head. "Not at all, Mr. Tompkins. Like I told you, the investigation was called off last week, when we established your Z-2 identity. This is just the result of the inquiries we started the week before last."

"And you can't find a trace?" I asked.

"Not a thing," he said.

Mrs. Rutherford turned to me, flung her arms around me and planted a far from sisterly kiss on my lips. "Winnie, old dear," she observed, "you are simply incredible."

And she left the apartment.

"Wonder what she meant by that?" Harcourt mused.

"We're probably happier in ignorance," I told him. "Come on, A. J., I'll buy a taxi down town. I've got to stop in at my office and gather some of my unearned income. They tell me we've made nearly three million dollars in the last ten days."

Harcourt consulted his note book. "The Bureau's figures put it at two million eight hundred seventy thousand and two hundred forty-six dollars and seventy-one cents, if you want to know," he said.

"So you *are* keeping me watched," I remarked.

"What do *you* think?" asked Special Agent Harcourt of the F.B.I.

CHAPTER 27

"What's the big idea?" I demanded. "I thought I was in the clear."

Harcourt looked somewhat embarrassed.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to tell you this, Mr. Tompkins," he explained, "but like you said, you're in the clear with the Bureau. We've checked and double-checked and any way we slice it, you're still okay. Maybe you're Tompkins with a lapse of memory, maybe this yarn of yours about Jacklin is on the level, but we're sure of *you*."

"Then why all this interest in me?" I asked. "You've been swell with me personally, but it's getting on my nerves having you pop up all the time. Though I must say I was relieved when you showed up today. Mrs. Rutherford—"

He grinned. "Red heads spell trouble anywhere, any time," he observed. "No, it's this Von Bieberstein we're gunning for. Mr. Lamb at the Bureau has a notion that Von Bieberstein may have some connection with you that you don't know about. He might be using your office as a post-box or be somebody that you know as someone else. It sounds screwy, I know, but this Von Bieberstein is a slick baby. For all I know, he might even be a woman."

I glanced inquiringly in the direction of Virginia's apartment.

"Not for my money," he said. "We've checked her, too. And it isn't that Tennessee secretary of yours, either. There's a girl for you. We've got her biog right back to the Knoxville doc that delivered her. But the Bureau doesn't think it's an accident that you turned up in the middle of this case, so I've been told off to check on all your contacts. Seems mighty funny, you a millionaire and me an average guy even if Arthurjean still thinks I got a wife in Brooklyn, but it's the war, I guess."

"Says every moron, There's a war on!" I quoted. I scratched my head. "If only I could remember that blank spot, I might be able to help you."

Harcourt studied his finger-nails attentively. "We're taking care of your office contacts, of course, and we have a couple of men working up in Bedford Hills. But New York's the hell of a big town and almost anything could happen to you outside of your office and your clubs. Got any ideas?"

"What sort?"

"Well, there's always women but I guess we've carried that line as far as it will take us. We've checked the doctors and the dentists and the bars and the nightclubs. How about astrologers, say? Hitler made use of them in Germany. He might use 'em over here, though we've screened 'em all since before Pearl Harbor."

I laughed. "I doubt that a man like Tompkins would use astrology," I told him.

Harcourt shook his head. "That's where you'd be wrong. You'd be surprised how many big Wall Street operators go for that guff."

"It doesn't register," I replied, "but I'll phone the office and see if Miss Briggs knows."

When I made the connection, Arthurjean informed me that the phone had been ringing all morning and when would I be in. Vail, she reported, was still in Hartford with a bad case of Emily Post. I asked her about astrologers and she said she didn't know but would find out. In a little while she reported that Phil Cone thought I'd once gone to see that Ernestina Clump that used to advise the Morgan partners.

"Okay," I told her. "I'll be in about four this afternoon and will handle any calls or visitors then."

I turned to Harcourt. "It doesn't sound like much but Phil Cone thinks I once consulted Ernestina Clump. Want me to make an appointment?"

He nodded, so I looked up her number and dialed the office in the Chrysler Building where Miss Clump kept track of the stars in their courses and the millionaires in their jitters.

Arranging for an immediate appointment through the very, very well-bred secretarial voice that stiff-armed me was not easy until I said that I would pay double-fees. Then she believed it might be arranged. "That will be two thousand dollars," she imparted, "and you must be here at one o'clock precisely."

As we taxied down-town together, Harcourt was uncommunicative, except for the remark that it was right handy to Grand Central and would be no trick to stop off before catching trains.

Miss Clump, as it turned out, was a motherly woman whose wrinkled cheeks and plump hands suggested greater familiarity with the cookstove than with the planets. Her office showed the most refined kind of charlatany—everything quite solid and in good taste, with no taint of the Zodiac. At a guess, about ten thousand dollars worth of furnishings was involved and I imagined that the annual rental might run as high as six thousand.

"Well, Mr. Tompkins," Miss Clump remarked in a pleasant, homey voice with a trace of Mid-Western flatness, "I wondered when you would be in to see me again. The stars being mean to you? Or is it another woman?"

"Let's see," I stalled, "when was the last time I consulted you?"

She cackled. "Young man, you've been comin' to see me, off and on, the last ten years. Last time was in March. That was about the red-head. Virgo in the House of Scorpio you called it."

I nodded. "That would be it, I guess. She's more scorpion than virgin."

She patted my hand comfortingly across the table. "They all are," she said, "unless they're really in love. Then even the stars can't stop 'em. What's the matter now?"

"Police," I said. "Loss of memory. Women and money are all right but I'm being followed and I've drawn sort of blank for the whole month of March. Can you take a look at my horoscope and tell me what the stars were doing to me then?"

She stared at me shrewdly. "Police," she remarked. "Land's sakes, I don't want trouble with the police. Young man, you—"

I hastened to interrupt her. "That's only a figure of speech. I'm in trouble with the government. Just tell me what I was doing in March and give me a hint of what lies ahead next month."

She examined the chart carefully and made a few pencilled notes on a scratch-pad. Then she looked up at me in bewilderment.

"This doesn't make much sense, Mr. Tompkins," she told me, "but here it is. So far as I can make out, in March you went on a long trip and had some kind of bad accident. There's Neptune and Saturn in conjunction under Aries and Venus in opposition. That could mean more trouble with that girl, I s'pose. Then early in April you came under a new sign—money it looks like, lots, of it, and Venus is right for you. It looks like happiness. Now for the future, there's something I don't understand. There's a sort of jumble—an accident mebbe—right ahead of you and then some kind of crisis. You're going to live quite happy with a woman for a while—and, well, that's all I can see, except—" she paused.

I raised my eyebrows. "Except what?" I asked. "I want the truth."

She lowered her head. "It *might* be a bad illness," she said, "but it's the combination I generally call a death—somebody else's death, that is. You aren't planning to murder anybody, are you?"

I leaned back in my chair and laughed heartily.

"Good Lord, no! Miss Clump. And even if I did I have money enough to hire somebody to do it for me—like the government. Here's a check for you," I added. "Two thousand, I think you said."

"Be careful," she told me in a low voice, almost in a whisper. "Be very, very careful. I don't like to see that combination in the stars. It might mean bad trouble."

I rejoined Harcourt in the downstairs bar of the Vanderbilt Hotel and gave him a quick account of Miss Clump's forecast.

"That looks pretty hot," he allowed, "except that it sounds like anybody. The usual line is money coming in, successful trouble, and just call again sometime. Anyhow, the Bureau doesn't handle murder and you don't look like a killer to me, even though you've got yourself back in good shape, physically, I mean."

"She sounded pretty much in earnest," I told him, "but I'm damned if I know where I'd begin if I went in for a career of killing."

"So you think she's on the level?" he asked. "It's all hooey to me."

I considered carefully before I answered him.

"The astrologers claim," I told him, "that they practice an exact science. They have won law-suits based on that claim and have won exemption from the old statutes against gypsies and fortune tellers. Miss Clump is a good showwoman. Her fees are high as the Chrysler Building and her office costs plenty. No stuffed owls or dried bats or any junk that would make a businessman think he was going slumming. When she talked to me she seemed honestly surprised at what she claimed she saw in the stars and she certainly sounded entirely in earnest when she warned me. My guess is that she's on the level and has nothing to do with Von Bieberstein, if there is such a person."

Harcourt sipped his Coca-Cola, being on duty and hence not drinking, in official silence.

"Yeah," he agreed at last. "Could be, though we'll have to check her and her secretary and her clients, right up to but *not* including Democratic Senators and Cabinet officers."

"How about barbershops?" I asked him. "Or drugstores? I've always thought they'd make the best intelligence centers in America. You can't keep track of everybody who buys a dime's worth of aspirin or a package of Kleenex. What's to prevent the cigar counter at any hotel or drug store being the place where two Nazi agents meet. The clerks wouldn't know them and in a town like this nobody would even notice them."

The Special Agent finished his drink and banged the glass down on the table. "That's just the trouble with this town," he announced. "There's so many services here that everybody uses you can't possibly check them. Well, you run on down to your office and see if you can't find out something else. Thanks for the lift on Miss Clump. Now I've got to call headquarters and get a special detail to go to work on her."

"You don't seriously think that she knows anything about Von Bieberstein, do you?" I asked.

He smiled ruefully. "No, I don't, but the way you describe her, she's a sort of nice, old-fashioned woman, and yet she drags down a thousand bucks for fifteen minutes of astral horse-feathers in this tough burg. There's something screwy about a set-up like that. Now I've seen the files on most of the big-time astrologers that operated here—Evangeline Adams and Myra Kingsley were tops in their time—and there's not one of them can touch this Clump woman for money. I don't forget that the first woman I ever arrested—it was before I joined the Bureau and I was on the homicide detail in Raleigh—was just as sweet and gentle as your Aunt Minnie. All she'd done was poison her husband and her two children so's to be free to sleep with her brother-in-law. So it's going to be plenty work for the Bureau to check this one, before we're sure she's okay."

I told him that I didn't enjoy being put in the position of an F.B.I. Typhoid Mary, who automatically exposed his acquaintances to immediate visitations of G-men.

"Shucks! Mr. Tompkins," he assured me, "they'll never know we're around. We got a pretty smooth outfit now and we have ways of checking you never dreamed of. When we go to work, we do a neat job and if we don't learn anything, well, that's that—but we don't bother folks while we're doing it."

"All right," I agreed. "I'll be down at the office until the morning."

CHAPTER 28

The highly respectable receptionist at the office of Tompkins, Wasson & Cone almost smiled at me.

"There are several gentlemen waiting for you, Mr. Tompkins," she announced. "Some of them have been here since before lunch. Do you plan to receive them or shall I ask them to return tomorrow?"

"No, I'll see them in a few minutes," I replied. "Miss Briggs will let you know."

No sooner had I settled down at my desk, however, than Graham Wasson and Phil Cone came dancing in, wreathed in tickertape.

"We're rich! We're rich!" they chanted.

"Where's the Marine Band and 'Hail to the Chief'?" I asked. "How rich are we, anyway?"

"We cleaned up," Wasson said. "Just a bit under three million in one week. It was as you said. We went short of the market and after Roosevelt's death, boy! did they liquidate! And thanks to Phil here, we got out before the big boys put the squeeze on the shorts."

"That reminds me, Winnie," Cone interrupted, "one of the mourners in the customers room who's waiting to see you is Jim Deforest from Morgan's. He's been waiting here since two o'clock. You'd better see him quick, huh? We don't want to keep 23 Wall waiting, do we?"

"Nuts, Phil," I told him. "I'll see them in the order of their arrival. That's what they do at Morgan's when you haven't got an appointment."

I pushed the button for Arthurjean.

"Who's been waiting the longest, Miss Briggs," I asked.

She consulted a little pack of memo forms. "There's this Mr. Sylvester," she said. "He was here when the office opened and has been waiting here all day. He wouldn't state his business."

"Okay," I replied. "Send him in or he'll faint from hunger."

Mr. Sylvester was florid in a quiet Latin way and looked as though he might be anything from an operatic tenor to the proprietor of a gambling ship. He waited until my partners had withdrawn.

"Mr. Tompkins," he said, speaking quietly, "I represent a syndicate that's reorganizing the free market in meat. We need a real smart guy, well-connected, like yourself, to head it up and keep track of the money. We'll pay a million dollars a year any way you like it—Swiss banks, Havana, Buenos Aires, Mexico City—and no tax."

"I'm always interested in a million dollars but I never did like Atlanta," I told him.

"Atlanta!" He shrugged his shoulders. "We got lawyers could talk Capone outa Alcatraz and we got a fix on the Courts, too. What would you be doin' in Atlanta?"

"I doubt that they'd make me librarian," I said, "and I don't think I'd make the ball-team, so I guess I'd have to work in the laundry. What's the trouble with the black market, anyhow? Seems to me you've got O.P.A. right in your corner."

"Too many amateurs and outsiders," he told me, "just like with Prohibition. Meat's bad and too many cops get a cut. We aim to do like the beer syndicates—organize it right, keep prices reasonable, have the pay-off stabilized, make it a good banking proposition. We've checked on you. You're smart. Would a million and a half do?"

I shook my head. "I've got a million and a half," I remarked.

"Okay." Mr. Sylvester straightened up, shook my hand and gave a little bow. "Think it over!" he urged. "If you change your mind put an ad in the Saturday Review personal column. 'Meet me anywhere, Winnie!' That's cute. 'Meet' and 'Meat,' see? Our representative will call on you."

I asked Arthurjean to send in the next visitor and to my surprise she announced DeForest.

"Hell!" I told her. "There must have been others ahead of him."

"There was," she said, "but they agreed to let him see you first. They said they'd be back tomorrow. They were from Goldman Sachs and Lehman Brothers so they wanted to give Morgan's first crack at you, I guess."

Jim DeForest proved to be one of the vaguely familiar figures I had noticed flitting around the Harvard Club.

"Winnie," he said, "I just dropped in to say that we have been pretty well impressed by the way your firm handled itself in this recent market. Mr. Whitney wanted to know whether it would be convenient for you to drop in and have a talk with him soon."

"Today?" I asked.

DeForest glanced at his Rollex. "Today's a little late," he remarked, "but give him a ring tomorrow. No, damn it! He's leaving for a short trip to Washington. Make it next week and he'll have plenty of time for you."

"What's it about, Jim?" I asked. "Don't tell me that I'm going to be offered a Morgan partnership?"

He looked as though I had burped in church.

"I hardly think so," he replied. "If that were the case, Mr. Lamont would have seen you somewhere uptown. You know the way they gossip in the Street. No, I rather fancy that Mr. Whitney wants you to be one of our brokers for floor operations. Or, he might, since you specialize in estate work, want you to help with some of the new issues we are planning to underwrite."

"Either way would suit me fine, Jim," I told him. "Do you know," I continued, "this is the second happiest day of my life. The first was when I got married."

DeForest seemed a bit relieved and permitted himself a worldly smile.

"And today," I continued, "I received the greatest honor that can come to an American in Wall Street. Believe me, Jim, this means more than having just cleaned up three million dollars in straight trading. After all, what is money worth if it can't buy what isn't for sale?"

This idea seemed to be taken under DeForest's advisement for future consideration but he let it pass. After all, a million dollars is dross compared to the approval of the employers of men like Jim DeForest, still limping along on twenty-five thousand a year twenty years after graduation.

"Grand to have seen you, Winnie," he said, indicating that the audience was at an end. "I'll tell Mr. Whitney that you'll see him next week. And of course, no talk about this. We don't like to encourage gossip about our operations."

I promised that I would be silent as the grave, not even telling my partners or my wife. "After all," I pointed out,

"it's not a good idea to arouse false hopes. Perhaps Mr. Whitney will change his mind."

"I hope not," DeForest said solemnly, as though I had mentioned the possibility of the Black Death. "I most certainly hope not. We don't do business on that basis, you know."

"Well, Miss Briggs, who's next?" I inquired, after DeForest had withdrawn with the affable air of royalty inspecting a clean but second-rate orphan asylum.

"Since those bankers left, there's only three waiting. One's a general but he comes after this other man, what's his name. Patrick Michael Shaughnessy, whoever he is."

"Send in the Irish," I told her.

Mr. Shaughnessy was an Irish-American counterpart of the Mr. Sylvester who wanted to reorganize the free market for meat. He was a natty dresser and he spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"Mr. Tompkins," he told me, "I'm from the Democratic National Committee. The Chairman—and gee! Bob's a wonder—wanted to ask whether you'd consider a diplomatic appointment."

"Of course, I would," I replied, thinking of Germaine's artless desire to be an Ambassadress, "but that depends on where I'm sent and that kind of thing. What have you in mind?"

"There's only one post open right now," he remarked. "That's Bolonia or Peruna or hell, no, it's Bolivia. That's somewhere in America, ain't it?"

I agreed that Bolivia was located in the Western Hemisphere. "That's where the tin and llamas come from, Mr. Shaughnessy," I educated him. "The capital city of La Paz is located about twelve thousand feet high in the Andes and the inhabitants are mainly Indians. I don't think that Mrs. Tompkins would care for it."

His face fell. "You'd be an Ambassador, of course," he informed me, "and that's always worth something. But the Boss said—that's Bob, of course, we all call Bob the Boss—that if you wouldn't fall for Bolivia to ask you what about Ottawa. That's the capital of Canada. It's right next to Montreal and those places and there's good train service to New York on the Central any time you want to run down for a show or a hair-cut. Bob said Canada was a real buy."

"Oh, a buy?" I remarked.

Shaughnessy looked at me shrewdly. "Uh-huh!" he replied.

"How much will it cost me to be Ambassador to Canada?"

Shaughnessy was faintly aggrieved. "The Boss don't like to talk about money and jobs that way, Mr. Tompkins. He always says think of the chance to serve the country. Say, you're a good Democrat or if you aren't a Democrat you're the next thing to it, a Republican that is, and you want to make a contribution to the Party. We always got a deficit, see. If there ain't one now there's one coming right up. Say you lay two or three hundred grand on the line. That goes a hundred grand to the Committee and another hundred grand divided among the State Committees. You see, we got to take care of the Senate so they'll vote to confirm you and there are some operators up there what won't vote for nothing 'cept they get taken care of first. Then the rest we put into a dignified publicity campaign, to build you up with the public and let the Canucks see they're getting something special with the President nominates you."

I considered this one carefully. "Do you let me pick the public relations firm that handles that end of the campaign, Mr. Shaughnessy?"

He grinned artlessly. "I should say not!" he chuckled. "How do you think we boys on the Committee make a living? No, we pick the firm that does the job and that's all you need worry about. We own 'em. So you see you're protected right across the board. Any time we sell an Ambassadorship, we deliver."

"Doesn't the State Department have something to say about it?"

Shaughnessy told me exactly what the State Department could do about it, so I told him to let me have a few days to think it over. After all, three hundred thousand dollars was quite a lot of money to pay for a diplomatic post. It wasn't as though I could make it pay off in Scotch whiskey or mining shares as in the past.

"That's what you think," the agent of the Democratic National Committee rapped out. "Listen, Mr. Tompkins, if you buy that job take me along as your private secretary and I'll show you how to make it pay like a bank and no ifs. What shall I tell the gang?"

"Tell them I'm definitely interested," I replied truthfully, "but I'd like a couple of weeks to think it over."

My next visitor was General Forbes Forbes-Dutton of the Army Service Forces.

"Remember me, Winnie?"

"Why sure!" I replied with great cordiality. "If it isn't—"

"That's right," the General interrupted. "Well, boy, after Pearl Harbor I got me—I was asked to go to Washington to help out, so the bank said it was my duty, that they'd hold my job for me, and I've been there ever since. I'm on Westervelt's staff, in charge of financial procurement policies. Neat, eh?"

"So you're still working for the bank?"

"Not *for* them, Winnie. *With* them. We're both working for the government. Financing war-contracts, you know. Now Westervelt's heard good things about you, Winnie. He was much impressed by the way you turned down that gang of chiselers who tried to horn in on the quinine deal. They're all out. He's got a big job in mind for you. How'd you like to be a Brigadier-General?"

"It's a little late for that," I told him. "The war's almost over."

He laughed very heartily. "It's a honey of a job, Winnie. Here's what gives. This war's almost over, as you say. Then the Army will have the job of selling off the stuff it doesn't need and boy! it has everything. We've just about cornered everything there is and the whole world's going to be crying for the stuff. We want a good trader in charge, who knows how to play ball with the boys, realistic that is. No star-gazer, eh? And that's where you come in. There's millions in it. Hell! there's billions. We got to go slow in selling it or we'd bust the market, wreck values and stall reconversion, so we had us a brain-storm when we heard how you cleaned up in the Funeral Market. How about it? Want to play ball and get next to the biggest break you ever heard of?"

I looked Forbes-Dutton squarely in the eye.

"Isn't it going to be a headache?" I asked. "I mean, won't there be a stink in Congress about it? I'm no fall-guy."

The General shook his head. "Congress is in on it, every man jack of them outside a few screwballs," he assured me. "We got a deal worked out in every District—all legal and clean, of course—so there isn't a Senator or Congressman that can't march right up to the trough and get his. Hell! there's so much of it—food, tractors, jeeps, clothes, ships, machine-tools, factories even—that we could buy every Congressman ten times over and still have plenty of glue. With you on top—"

"It still sounds as though you were looking for a fall-guy," I told him.

He again laughed merrily. "Anywhere you fall in this surplus game you'd still land soft and be in clover. What about it? Shall I phone the Pentagon?"

"Sorry to stall you," I said, "but I've got to think it over. I've got to talk to my lawyer. I'd still like to come down to Washington and study the angles."

"Angles? Hell! This hasn't any more angles than a big ripe watermelon. Brigadier-General's not a bad title for a post-war use. When these G.I.'s come back they'll want to find soldiers running things. Okay, Winnie, I see your point. I'll tell the General you'll be coming down to look the ground over. You'll get the Order of Merit, of course—"

"I've already got it," I informed him.

"The hell you say! That's wonderful. Well, then we'll fly you over to London or Brisbane and give you a couple of theatre citations to dress you up. After a couple of weeks on Ike's or Mac's staff you'll have a build-up like nobody's business. Then we make a killing. 'Bye!"

When the door closed behind General Forbes-Dutton I called for Arthurjean.

"Honey," I told her, "get me a snort of brandy and accept my personal apologies to the entire female sex for any time I have ever made use of the word 'whore'."

"What's eating you, Winnie?" she asked.

"I've just been propositioned by two gentlemen who would be complimented if you called them prostitutes," I told her. "The only honest man I've met today was that first little guy. All he wanted me to do was to help reorganize the Black Market. Who's left now?"

"There's only this one man who calls himself Charles G. Smith and has been waiting some time. He looks like a crank. Shall I give him a handout and tell him to go away?"

I shook my head. "I can't take much more of the current brand of patriotism."

Charles G. Smith was a small, wispy man, with a protruding Adam's apple, buck teeth and shabby clothes. He ignored my outstretched hand and advanced on me, with a glittering eye.

"Mr. Tompkins," he announced, in a curiously deep, velvety voice, "you have made millions of dollars that you must soon leave behind you. You have invested years of your life in collecting and keeping those dollars—little disks of metal, little slips of paper. What have you invested in the only thing you will be permitted to take with you when you leave?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean your immortal soul, Mr. Tompkins, your immortal soul," said Mr. Charles G. Smith.

"Oh Lord! A religious crank!" I exclaimed.

"Naturally," he agreed proudly. "I'd rather be crazy about God than nuts about money. Why not?"

I looked at him with growing respect. "Why not, indeed?" I thought.

"My case is out of your line, Mr. Smith," I told him.

"They all say that," he replied, "but God doesn't think so."

"My case *is* different," I repeated. "You see, I have not one but two immortal souls."

He nodded benignly. "I know," he said. "God told me that you were in trouble."

"That sounds as though you and I were buddies, Mr. Smith," I observed. "Where can I find Him? It will take God Himself to straighten out my case."

Smith shrugged his shoulders. "You can't find Him," he said. "You've got to wait until He finds you."

CHAPTER 29

"Nonsense!" Germaine said emphatically. Hers was the authoritative tone of a mother, assuring her child that the lightning cannot possibly hit the house in a thunderstorm.

"I don't see how you can call it nonsense," I told her. "There he stood in my office, a little man with a big Adam's apple, telling me that God was on my track. I'm used to being followed by the F.B.I., but now this!"

She stretched out in her chaise longue before the bedroom fire until I thought of the Apostle who stated that the Lord delighteth not in any man's legs. Obviously, he had never seen my wife's gams.

"He sounds like a religious maniac," she observed.

"He admitted it, Jimmie. He was even proud of it. When he was standing there he seemed to make more sense than most things that happen in Wall Street. He could be right."

Germaine giggled. "If God finds you, Winnie," she said, "I hope He doesn't arrive when—I mean, it might be rather embarrassing?"

"Again the one-track mind," I remarked. "You don't suppose that sex is any news to the Old Man, do you? He invented it, darling."

"You know, Winnie," she replied dreamily, "sometimes you are almost a poet. Just the same, if He came after me I'd like to have Him find me with a new hairdo."

"So far as I am concerned," I told her, "it's just as well the Old Man didn't catch up with me on some recent occasions. He might have received a false impression of my eligibility for the Club."

"Pooh!" Germaine remarked with great decision. "He'd better not try any nonsense with you if I'm around. You're my Winnie and you're going to Heaven right along with me if I have to cheat the Customs."

I yawned. "I hope Saint Peter will be suitably impressed and not like those tough guys at the Port of New York. What I'd really like to get at is all this business about Von Bieberstein. I'd never heard of him till last week and now it's got me jittery. Who he is God only knows and He hasn't tipped off the F.B.I."

"I'm not very religious, darling," my wife said, "but from what I remember from Sunday School, God wasn't supposed to be a tattle-tale. He'll take care of Von Bieberstein, if there is such a person."

I laughed. "If there isn't, the F.B.I.'s going to look awfully silly when they come to write the history books. J. Edgar Hoover would turn over in his job at the very thought."

"You know," she continued drowsily, "I think that Von Bieberstein is just a name they've given to all the things they can't solve. Like luck. You know the way people say, 'Bad Luck!' Well, the F.B.I. says 'Von Bieberstein' every time a ship sinks or a factory makes the wrong kind of shell. You wait and see, Winnie, and you'll find out I am right."

"Speaking of luck," I asked, "What's the news from the kennels? Has Ponto met his fiancée yet or haven't the banns been published?"

"Dalrymple seemed to think that it would be very easy to equip him with a suitable girl friend," she said demurely. "It appears that there's a war-time shortage of sires or something, so I gather that there's no particular problem in Ponto's love-life. Dalrymple said we could come and get him the end of the week—Friday or Saturday. Poor dear. I think we ought to put orange blossoms in his dog-biscuit when he gets home."

I laughed. "That's one load off my mind. I hope you're right and that it will steady him down. They say that the responsibilities of marriage do wonders for a young dog. It makes him respect property, maintain the social order, and vote the straight Republican ticket."

"Idiot!"

"Yes, I'm thinking of running Ponto in the next election. He'd make a mighty fine Governor and he'd be sure to leave his mark in the Senate. Who knows, we might even elect him President."

Germaine stretched again, with considerable candor. "Darling," she announced, "you're dithering. Let's go to bed."

"Not until we get this religious argument straightened out," I objected. "I think I owe it to Mr. Smith to make some kind of move. The politicians and the psychiatrists have failed me. There's only religion left. And besides, I still have half of my drink to finish."

I put another birch-log on the fire and watched as the flames brightened and cast a flickering glow on the canopy of my wife's bed.

"My idea's this," I told her. "It's very undignified to sit around waiting for the Old Man to look me up, if He's really trying to find me, as Smith says. I think I'd better start a search party of my own. There are no doubt a lot of things He'll want to ask me about, but there are some points on which, damn it! I'm entitled to an explanation."

"You talk such rot, darling," she murmured. "Wise gods never explain anything. It's take it or leave it. You just wait. You'll see."

"I'd like to know who Von Bieberstein is, just to get ahead of A. J. Harcourt. If the Old Man won't tell me that, at least I'm entitled to know who I am."

"You're my Winnie," she repeated half-asleep. "I'll see that you get past the immigration authorities. I'll smuggle you in under my skirts, like Helen of Troy. St. Peter's far too respectable a man to try to see what I've got there."

"Now *you're* maudlin," I told her. "From what I know of Greek costumes, Helen of Troy couldn't have smuggled a Chihuahua into Troy under what *she* wore. Anyhow, these saints have X-ray eyes that can spot a sin right through skirt, girdle and brassiere. Besides, I weigh too much. I'm much more like the unforgivable sin. Suppose I just pretend I lost my passport."

"It will be all right, darling," Germaine assured me. "And if they won't let us into Heaven, God knows they'd be delighted to put us up in Hell. It would raise the value of real estate overnight. I can just hear the Devil arguing with prospective tenants. 'We have such nice people in the next bed of coals. They're from Westchester and the name's Tompkins.'"

"Any time a real estate agent urges you to take a residence, that's Heaven," I told her. "You dither delightfully, especially when you're half asleep. But I don't want to get into Hell on false pretenses. It's not fair to the management. What I propose to do is to go out, and see if I can't find the Old Man before He finds me, and see if I can't fix up my passport right now. As you say, it could be embarrassing otherwise. Then I'll march straight up to Him, look Him in the eye and ask Him what the Hell He means—"

She sat up and held out her glass. "More brandy," she ordered.

I fixed her drink and my own and looked at the coals of the log-fire.

"How are you going to set out?" Germaine asked. "No, don't laugh, darling. It might be quite important. You see, if I—if we—Oh, if we should have a child, it would be good to know—" she paused, at a loss for words.

"It does sound crazy, doesn't it?" I said. "'Middle-aged Stock Broker Cleans up in Wall Street, Looks for God.' Well, I suppose the best thing to do is to consult the clergymen."

"Then you'd better not start in Westchester," she advised. "They're all bleating celibates like poor old Ponto or broad-clothed men of affairs who shoot a darn good game of golf and never offend the vestrymen. I'd try New York City, if I were you, Winnie. They have the best architects, the best food, the best doctors, the best actors, and the best redheads in the world. They might even have the best clergymen."

"That doesn't follow," I told her, "but I agree the chances are better there than up here."

"I'm going to approach this thing scientifically," I continued: "I'm going to pick a Protestant—probably a Presbyterian—"

"Yes," she agreed. "Do pick a Presbyterian. They build such lovely New England churches and they believe in infant damnation, or is that the Mormons?"

"Shush!" I rebuked her. "As I was saying when you so rudely interrupted me, a Presbyterian, and they believe in predestination with only occasional leanings to infant damnation. And then I'll try a Jewish Rabbi. I'm told that they are very highly educated men with a grasp of spiritual fundamentals as well as a remarkable fund of practical knowledge. And, of course, a Catholic priest."

"Not Father Aloysius Murphy!" Germaine besought me. "I couldn't bear it if you consulted him. I don't know why and of course I'm not a Catholic but every time I hear him on the radio I wish the Pope would send him as a missionary to Russia. Please don't pick any of these fashionable priests or rabbis, darling. Try to find simple, poor men who aren't trying to advertise themselves or raise money."

I finished my drink and picked her up in my arms. "It's long past bedtime," I told her. "Here, drink it down and I'll put you to bed. I didn't know you gave a damn about religion and here you are talking like a Joan of Arc or—"

She put her empty glass down on the bed-side table and slipped out of her dressing-gown.

"You don't know me very well," she said quietly. "To you, I'm just your wife, not a separate person at all, and it's rather nice, but—No, I'm not religious and Heaven knows the saints would have hysterics if they heard you call me Joan of Arc. It's just that—Well, I was brought up on church and Sunday School and the Catechism and forgot it all as soon as I graduated from Miss Spence's and had my coming-out party. But they are all so proud and grand, these clergymen. They are so sure of themselves. I once went to an Easter service in Washington, it was at St. Thomas's, when the sermon was entirely devoted to a passionate plea for money, money, money. I've never met a clergyman yet who didn't hint that while the Lord loved my soul, the Church would settle for cash."

"I suppose the churches need money like everybody else," I suggested. "At least they don't charge admission like the movies."

"Oh, I know they need money but they can't need money as much as people need goodness or God or whatever it is they do need. I'd like to find a single good simple man who wasn't too sure of himself. Well, I can't explain. Get undressed and come to bed, darling. The sheets are bitterly cold."

I chucked my clothes onto the chair by the fire.

"Hell!" I exclaimed. "That would be too awful!"

Germaine made a vague questioning noise.

"Suppose we are resurrected not as we'd like to be but as we are. You'd be safe. You have the build of an angel and you'd be a knockout with wings, but I'd look like a ringer even in the best of haloes and with this weight I'd need a terrific wing-spread to get off the ground. Even then, I'd have to have a run-way."

I fixed the fire so it would keep burning for a couple of hours and adjusted the fire-screen so that there was no chance of a stray spark landing on the carpet. Then I crossed to the window overlooking the lawn and opened it on the cool spring night. The moon, now suspiciously less virginal in figure but still shamelessly serene in silver, rode in the western sky and the scents of spring drifted in on the light breeze. There was no sound save the distant jingling of the peepers and the near-by-rustle of the dry vines outside the window-frame.

"I wish to God I knew who I am," I muttered.

CHAPTER 30

"No doubt you'll be asking me to reconcile predestination and free will," observed Dr. Angus McGregor, minister of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Manhattan.

"That wasn't quite my question, sir," I replied. "I asked you whether you could justify the Lord's putting my soul into another man's body. Am I to be responsible for the sins the other man committed?"

"Ah!" Dr. McGregor remarked, with relish, "It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. No doubt he kens what he's about. It will all be made known on the great Day of Judgment. Now about predestination and free will, you'll have marked that many grand philosophers and divines have debated the point. 'Tis a nice point. 'Tis the theological *pons asinorum*."

"Yes," I interrupted, "but do you consider that I am bound by this body or will I be returned to my own before I come to the Judgment? And is my soul involved in another man's sins?"

Dr. McGregor drew a deep puff on his pipe. "Oh aye!" he declared. "The principle of vicarious sacrifice has been observed ever since that ne'er-do-weel Cain asked, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Aye, Mr. Tompkins, surely you are involved in the sins of others. Take your own case now. I believe your tale. Fearful and wonderful things have happened in this weary world, before now, by the will of the Lord. It is written by the Roman historian Tacitus that the pagan emperor Vespasian—that grand benefactor to whom the world owes the fine invention of the public comfort station—performed miracles in Egypt, making the blind to see, and healing the cripples. These miracles are as well attested as any in Holy Scripture. If the Lord permitted to a heathen potentate these gifts of spiritual healing, can I deny that He might for His own good reasons permit your soul to inhabit another man's body?"

"But what is my moral responsibility in this predicament, Dr. McGregor? Where does my duty lie?"

"It is all related to yon matter of free will and predestination," he insisted. "Your duty, man, is to fear the Lord and praise Him. You will have taken this other man's wife, will you not? You will have taken his money and his home, his name and his business. Aye, if you take these likely you will take his sins as well. Dinna believe that the Lord has no a reason for all this.

"Now," he continued, "'tis no great difficulty to reconcile free will and predestination."

"I'm not a religious man, doctor," I cut him off, "but you have given me help. Will you accept a check for your church—say a thousand dollars?"

"Aye, Mr. Tompkins, I will that! I cannot help you but I can only tell you to put your trust in the mercy and the justice of the Lord. 'Tis all a man can do."

So I wrote out a check for a thousand dollars to the order of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Manhattan, and shook his hand.

He thanked me. "Now," he announced. "I must be on my way to comfort a poor body that's dying o' the cancer. 'Tis an old lady and she takes great comfort from her pain in the thought that she has been chosen by the Lord to suffer for the sins of others. 'Tis no a sound theology, mind you, but 'tis a mighty solace as her time comes nigh."

My next stop was at the office of Rabbi Benjamin Da Silva of the Temple Ben-David. Him I had located by consulting the classified telephone directory and had made an appointment to meet him in his study in the Synagogue. He was a slender, quietly dressed young man, with the eager face of a scholar and the air of repose of a mystic. The walls of his room were lined with books and as I noted Hebraic, Greek, Latin and Arabic titles, as well as German, French and English, I realized that I was dealing with a deeply cultured man. His voice was musical and

low, as he asked me to be seated.

"Rabbi Da Silva," I began, "before I begin I would like to ask you to accept on behalf of your congregation a gift of a thousand dollars as a token of my gratitude for consenting to hear my story. Perhaps you can help me, perhaps not. As you realize, I am not of your faith but I need your wisdom. I am trying to find my soul."

"So are we all, Mr. Tompkins," the Rabbi assured me. "What is your problem?"

I recited the events which made it imperative for me to recollect the events prior to April second; I told him of the reasons that convinced me that I, Frank Jacklin, was living in Winfred Tompkins' body; I outlined the moral and personal problems involved in this confusion of personalities; I indicated the psychiatric and other tests that had been made. Naturally, I did not mention the Alaska, the thorium bomb, Z-2 or Von Bieberstein.

When I had completed my account, Rabbi Da Silva gazed abstractedly at the small coal fire which smouldered in the grate of his study.

"Why did you come to me, Mr. Tompkins?" he asked.

"Because I hoped that in your studies of the human soul, you might have found knowledge that would help me."

He sat silent for some minutes.

"For many centuries," he began at last, "there has been a curious belief among you Christians that the Jewish rabbinate possesses mystic knowledge of the occult. No doubt that belief derives from the early Middle Ages when the Jews became in part the means by which the science and culture of the Saracen East was brought to the ignorant barbarous West. That service was turned against us by the superstitions and prejudices of Christendom and we were regarded as akin to sorcerers and witch-masters. Even today in Germany, we are paying for our crime of having brought enlightenment to Europe in the Dark Ages."

"Then you can't help me?" I asked.

"I did not say so, Mr. Tompkins," the Rabbi replied. "Certainly I cannot help you in any occult manner. I cannot pick a book from the shelves, mutter a few words in Hebrew and resolve your spiritual problems with a whiff of brimstone. The casting out of devils is not included in Judaism. Indeed, it has gone out of fashion in Christendom."

"What can you suggest?" I inquired. "Many important events, including the possible capture of a dangerous Nazi spy, depend on my recovering my memory."

"Even with that inducement," the Rabbi remarked with an ironic smile, "I am not in a position to urge any particular course on you. Assume, for the sake of argument, that you are the victim of what is called a demoniac possession, Mr. Tompkins. Are you sure that you would be benefited by casting out the soul of Frank Jacklin and resuming command of your own personality? Is not Winfred Tompkins a better and happier man under the influence of Jacklin than he was as himself? In other words, Mr. Tompkins, you may not be seeking to cast out a devil at all, but an angel of the Lord. Of course, I am speaking in moral metaphor and not as a scientist or a theologian. My advice to you would be to ignore your loss of memory and live out your life as best you can and be thankful that whatever it is that caused this change has been for your betterment and has brought happiness to others."

I shook my head. "I know that I am foolish to insist, Rabbi Da Silva," I said. "What you say is just about what the psychiatrists advised. Yet I must open that locked door and see what is hidden in the secret room."

Da Silva smiled gently. "Yes," he agreed, "I see that you must. Bluebeard's wife felt much the same and the charm and universal meaning of that great fable is that humanity must always open the closed doors, even at the risk of destruction. All Wisdom urges us to leave well enough alone, yet our instinct is wiser than wisdom itself. God bless you, Mr. Tompkins, and may you come to no harm if you find the key to this locked room."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "Now there remain only the Catholics. Perhaps a parish priest—"

"I shall be very much surprised if a priest advises you differently, Mr. Tompkins," the Rabbi observed. "Drop in

again some time and tell me, will you?"

I gave him his check for the Temple Ben-David and went on to the rectory of St. Patrick's-by-the-Gashouse, where I asked for the priest.

"Sure, Father Flanagan's celebrating Mass," the aged housekeeper rebuked me.

"I'll wait," I told her. "I have a contribution for the church. I must give it to him personally."

"Glory be!" she remarked, and withdrew, muttering.

Father Flanagan was a burly, well-built young Irish-American with a friendly smile and a crushing handshake.

"Mrs. Casey tells me you have something for the church, Mr.—"

"My name's Tompkins, Father. I have a check for a thousand dollars. I'll give it to you now. There are no strings to it but I'd like to ask you to help me.

"Well, I'll be—You know, Mr. Tompkins," Father Flanagan told me, "just this morning at breakfast Mrs. Casey said she was praying that we'd finish raising the money for the new altar before the Bishop's visit, and here it is. Isn't that wonderful, now?"

"There you are, Father," I told him, "and welcome to it."

"Thank you, Mr. Tompkins," the priest said simply. "I shall remember you in my prayers and so, no doubt, will Mrs. Casey. You're not a Catholic, of course?"

"No," I replied. "I don't seem to be anything that makes sense medically, legally or morally. I need help."

So I told him the whole story from beginning to end, and added the advice I had already received from Dr. McGregor and Rabbi Da Silva.

Father Flanagan heard me out and then considered carefully.

"I've heard some strange things in Confession," he stated at last, "but they never taught us at Notre Dame how to deal with a problem like yours. I'd rather like to consult the Bishop before I undertook to advise you. Do you mind?"

"Yes, I do," I told the priest. "It's no disrespect for your bishop. It's just that I feel that this problem must be solved on a low level rather than by the higher echelons. In the Navy, we soon learned that the best way to get a problem loused up was to refer it to CINCPAC. What is your own reaction to my story?"

Father Flanagan pursed his lips and pondered for a moment. "Speaking as a man," he said, "and not as a priest, it looks to me as though you were sitting pretty, Mr. Tompkins. Naturally, I have no explanation for it and the psychiatrists seem to have given you a clean bill of health, so maybe you're not crazy. I have a vague idea that there's reference to something like your experience in the Patristic writings which I read when I was studying for the priesthood. It's all mixed up with the Gnostics and necromancy but it's hard to tell how much you can accept literally in that material. Pagan literature is full of it, such as Apuleius' 'The Golden Ass', in which a witch turns a man into a donkey, but that's admittedly fancy. As I say, you seem to be sitting pretty. By your own account, Commander Jacklin's life was pretty much of a failure and Tompkins was not exactly what you could call a huge moral success. Yet you, as Jacklin, seem to be doing a pretty good job with Tompkins' life. Why don't you let it go at that?"

"I can't, Father," I told him. "I've got to find out what Tompkins was doing just before Easter. Even if it's only for that one week, I've got to know."

"And you say that so far nobody has been able to help you?"

"Nobody," I replied. "The doctors call it trauma and say that my memory may come back to me at any time, but

I can't wait."

He smiled. "Can't is a big and human word. Have you tried hypnotism? Or scopolamine? They aren't exactly liturgical and my Bishop would have a fit if he heard me mention them—he considers them on a par with mediums and spiritualism—but they have some value in restoring memory."

I slapped my knee. "Thanks, Father!" I exclaimed. "You've given me an idea. I'll try a medium."

The priest looked grave. "I wouldn't do that, now, if I were you, Mr. Tompkins," he told me. "That kind of thing is too close to Black Magic and devil-worship for decent men to play with."

"I hope I don't shock you, Father Flanagan," I replied, "but if God can't help me, I'll have to go to the Devil."

"I shall pray for you, Mr. Tompkins," the priest said.

CHAPTER 31

After I left St. Patrick's-by-the-Gashouse I went to a corner saloon and telephoned the F.B.I. I asked for Harcourt but was told that he was out to lunch, which reminded me that I was hungry. A private treaty with the bartender brought me a steak sandwich, and no questions asked. Apple pie and coffee followed, and were not too horrible. I smoked a cigarette, drank a second cup of coffee, and called the F.B.I. again.

This time Harcourt had returned from lunch and he talked as though he had swallowed the Revised Statutes of the United States but that they gave him indigestion.

"See here, Andy," I told him at last. "I'm not looking for legal advice, I want to consult a medium. Any medium. If I picked one out of the phone-book you'd have the headache of checking on her, as I suppose you're checking on the clergymen I saw this morning. So this time just save yourself the trouble, and tell me who I should see."

"The Bureau doesn't endorse spiritualists," he informed me, but the old J. Edgar Hoover spirit was running thin and his heart wasn't in it.

"I'm not asking the Bureau to endorse anything, not even a candy laxative," I replied. "Just you tell me the name and address of one reasonably respectable medium and I'll take care of the rest. And don't pretend that the Bureau has no record of mediums in New York City."

"Mr. Tompkins," he said—and I could fairly hear the hum of the recording machine on the telephone—"The Bureau does not endorse any so-called spiritualist mediums. Naturally, under the leadership of our present Director, the New York office has made a close check on all self-styled spiritualistic mediums in this city. One of these who has established her bona fides for purposes of identification only is Madam Claire la Lune, 1187 Lenox Avenue."

"Eleven eighty-seven Lenox," I repeated after him. "That's in Harlem. Madam Claire la Lune sounds like the dark of the moon to me. Say, Andy, hasn't she a friend named Pierrot?"

There was a pause at the other end of the wire. "No, sir, Mr. Tompkins," came the F.B.I. official voice.

"Okay," I told him. "I suppose you'll have to check on her as on everybody else but I wanted you to start calling the shots so as to save trouble for all of us. I'm going to consult Madam Lune, so you can tell your agents to rendezvous at 1187 Lenox Avenue. I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

Eleven eighty-seven Lenox did not seem prepossessing from the spiritual angle. Madam la Lune's apartment was on the third floor, walk-up, and smelled of cabbage, diapers and African sweat. Madam la Lune herself was a light mulatto with a superb figure and a face so deeply scarred by smallpox that it looked like a map of Southern lynchings since 1921.

She seemed reluctant to deal with me on a professional basis, even after I had offered her a twenty-dollar bill, until I told her that the F.B.I. had recommended her and that I needed her help.

"Oh," she said. "Tha's differ'nt. Jest you wait till I turn down my stove."

She ushered me into a close and smelly little room, with black velvet curtains and a couch covered with black sateen. Madam la Lune lay down on the couch and directed me to turn off the electric light from the switch by the door. Although it was still early afternoon, the room was so dark that I could barely make out the form of the medium or find my way back to my chair.

For a time there was no sound except for the deep regular breathing of the medium. Then suddenly came the shrill voice of a pickaninny.

"I'se here," the voice cried. "It's Silver-Bell, mammy, I'se here."

I smiled to myself in the Harlem dusk. It was so obviously the usual racket. There was the medium in her ten cent trance—the voice of her "control" was coming through. I had only to ask and I would receive a vague and blotting paper reply to any question.

"I'se here, mammy," the child's voice repeated. "What you want, mammy? Silver-Bell's here."

Madam la Lune snorted and snored on the couch. My eyes had become more accustomed to the dim, light and I noticed how she had loosened her blouse so that her superb bust rose in twin-peaked Kilimanjaro against the wall.

"Silver-Bell's here, mammy," the child's voice said again. "What you want?"

"I want," I said, "to speak to Frank Jacklin. He died in the North Pacific about three weeks ago."

There was a pause, during which the snorting breaths of the medium were the only sound in the smelly little room. Then the child's voice rose, shrill and petulant.

"You funning, mammy, you funning. They ain't no Jacklin over here. Jacklin ain' dead. Jacklin sittin' right by yo' side, mammy. He police, mammy, be police."

Madam la Lune stirred and I sensed her sightless eyes turning, turning toward me in the dark.

"No, I'm not police, Silver-Bell," I said. "If you can't find Jacklin, I want to speak to Winnie Tompkins."

For several minutes there was a long silence.

Then came an impish giggle.

"Here's Mr. Tompkins, mammy, but my! he do look funny. He don' look like he used ter look."

Again silence.

"Here he is, mammy. Here he is. What do you want to know?"

"Ask him," I said, "whether he is well and happy."

The hair rose on the back of my neck and a slow shiver ran down my spine as the answer came. The answer was the familiar barking of a dog—deep, strong, savage.

"Is that you, Ponto?" I asked.

The answering bark came "Woof! Woof!"

"Where is Mr. Tompkins?"

More "woofs."

"Where is Commander Jacklin?"

Silence.

"Are you alive?"

"Woof! Woof!"

"Am I alive?"

Silence.

"Is your name Ponto?" I ventured again.

"Where is Von Bieberstein?" I demanded but my question was drowned in a storm of barking.

"It's tired, mammy," came the child's voice. "Silver-Bell's tired."

The voice trailed off, leaving me in the stifling little Harlem parlor with the mulatto woman snoring.

I sat, bemused, in the straight-back chair across the room from her. My eyes had now got used to the thin light that filtered around the heavy black curtain. I noticed a fleck of white about the corners of her mouth and I made silent note of the way her body heaved with its tortured breathing. After a while, she stirred.

"You theah, Mr. Tompkins?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"You fin' out what you wan'?" she inquired.

"I found out that you're a fraud," I told her. "You're welcome to my money but I'm damned if I think you've earned it."

She sat up and adjusted her clothing calmly. "What for you say that, Mr. Tompkins?" she demanded. "Spirits come, and spirits go. You ask questions. Maybe they give you the answers. I don't know."

"Very clever, Madam la Lune," I observed. "Harcourt phones you I'm on my way and tells you what to do. I'm supposed to come in and swallow it all. Well, I'm not interested in that game. All I want to know is how you managed to imitate my dog?"

Madam la Lune rose and peered at me in the dusk.

"White man," she said. "What dog you talkin' about? I ain't seen no dog."

The words I had planned to fling at her died in my throat. Fraud or not, she was superb. Her pock-marked face had a haughty dignity and her bearing was that of a great queen.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, without knowing why. "I'm in trouble. I hoped you could help me. All I got out of your trance was a child laughing and a dog barking."

Her eyes glowed in the twilight room.

"What this dog?" she demanded. "You know this dog?"

"Yes," I told her. "It's my dog. His name is Ponto. He's a Great Dane and he's at the kennels."

"You go, Mr. Tompkins," she ordered me. "You better go fast. That dog—wha's his color now?"

"Black," I said.

"Yes, black." She rolled her eyes until I saw the whites.

"That black dog don' mean no good to you or yours. You keep away fum that dog, Mr. Tompkins. No, suh, I don't want you' money. There's no luck with you, white man, with that black dog. I don' know how Ah knows, but Ah does know."

As I walked out into the bright cool air of Lenox Avenue, I felt relieved. Madame la Lune was an interesting enough type. She obviously had the primitive sense of second sight, intuition, whatever it is, that let her penetrate behind human appearances. The medium business was just a trade trick. In Africa or Haiti she could have been a witch-doctor with a pet snake. In New Orleans, even, she would be a voodoo priestess. Here in Harlem, she had become a medium. Of course, she was a fraud, but how had she imitated the barking of the Great Dane?

Then I laughed so loudly that a passing colored man sheered violently away from me. Of course, that was it. I had been right all the time. This was Harcourt's work. He had recommended Madame la Lune to me and then told her how to behave. Damn his insolence!

I stopped dead and only stirred when the violent and prolonged sounding of an automobile horn reminded me that I was standing in the middle of a cross-street. How did Harcourt know about Ponto when he had never seen him? And how could he tell the medium how to imitate Ponto's bark?

On the next corner was a dive—a saloon that advertised "Attractions" and from whose doors welled the jungle thumping of Harlem jazz.

I slipped in and sat down at a corner table. A tall, colored girl, whose scanty white silk blouse was not designed to conceal anything, came over and leaned down to take my order.

"Wha' yo' want, honey-man?" she asked sullenly.

The band on the platform let loose with a blast of traps and trombone.

"Let's dance," I said.

She nodded with a curious dignity and I found myself parading, dipping and swaying around a tiny dancefloor, while the black girl pressed her body against me despairingly.

I pulled off to the side and led her back to my table.

"Why do you do this?" I asked.

She said nothing.

"You need money?" I asked.

She still said nothing.

"Here!" I said.

I pulled out my check-book and wrote out a check for a thousand dollars payable to cash.

"This is for you," I told her. "Take it and do whatever you want to do. The check's good."

The girl looked at me, took the check, studied it. Then she rose, in complete silence, looked at me again and left me. She shrugged her way through the dancers and the waiters to the rear of the room and disappeared. I did not know her name and I never saw her again.

A high-ochre girl came over.

"Change yo' luck?" she asked, bending over so that I could see down the front of her scant-cut dress.

"My luck's done changed," I told her. "Give me a drink and here's a ten-spot for yourself. And I'll be on my way."

She tucked the bill down the front of her dress. "May you have good luck, man," she said gravely.

As she said it, her eyes widened and her mouth hung open. "Gawd!" she muttered. "The black dog's follering you!" and fled.

"I know," I said to the room at large, and left without waiting for my drink.

CHAPTER 32

I walked down Lenox Avenue to the first cigar-store and telephoned the office.

As soon as I was connected with Arthurjean I asked her to meet me at her apartment as soon as she could make it. Then I hailed a cab and was driven south through Central Park to the upper east Fifties' and my secretary's apartment. She was waiting.

"Gee, honey," she exclaimed. "I just got here. What's cooking?"

I followed her in and went straight to the kitchenette. I poured myself a stiff drink and downed it rapidly. I poured myself another and turned to see her staring at me.

"You look terrible," she told me. "What's happened to you?"

"I can't tell you," I replied. "You'd think I'm crazy and you'd turn me in."

"I will not!"

She came up close to me and looked me square in the eye. "I don't care if you're crazy as a bed-bug," she announced. "Go on and 'pit it out in momma's hand. I won't squeal."

"Sit down!" I ordered, "and get yourself a drink first. This is tough."

She sat and listened quietly as I outlined the latest developments.

"So you see," I concluded, "I *can't* tell anyone. They'd have me locked up for keeps."

She nodded. "Yeah," she agreed. "I can see that... Maybe your wife—"

"I couldn't tell *her*," I contradicted. "It would be too damn cruel just now when she's really happy."

Arthurjean sat and thought for a while. "Yep," she remarked, as though she had just concluded a long argument. "You're right. You can't tell nobody *that*. How about this nosey A. J. Harcourt? Won't he find out? He's still having you tailed."

"I don't see how he could," I told her, "unless that Madame la Lune is a complete phoney—which doesn't make sense. She and I were alone in the room. If it was a plant, there's nothing to tell. If she's on the level she won't remember what went on."

"That's no plant," Arthurjean Briggs announced. "It wouldn't make sense for the F.B.I. to pull it. Harcourt sent you there in the first place but he wouldn't put her up to a trick like that."

"He'll be hot on my trail then," I said. "All those clergymen I saw will have to be checked—when all the time —"

"Do you know what I'd do if I was you," she said abruptly. "I'd get rid of that damn dog—but fast."

"You mean sell it?" I asked.

"I mean kill it. It isn't natural, acting that way. It's been worrying you nigh crazy, that's what it's been doing. You just take it to the vet's and have it chloroformed. They do it all the time on account of the rabbis—"

"Rabies," I corrected.

"That's right, but they do it, don't they? You don't have to get permission. He's your property. You can tell the vet he bit you—"

I started up. "Hell!" I exclaimed. "I've got to get him away from the kennels fast. It's—it's—"

Arthurjean put her large, strong hand on my shoulder.

"There, honey," she soothed me. "It's all right. It's going to be all right."

I looked at her and realized that she hadn't believed a word of my story.

"See here—" I began, when the door-bell rang.

"Two-to-one it's Harcourt," I remarked.

"I hope so," said Arthurjean coloring faintly.

"Well, what's all this about?" I demanded, as a slow blush gathered in sunset fury upon her pleasant face. "Why, Arthurjean—"

"Lay off," she begged. "He's a nice guy and he hasn't got that family in Brooklyn he kept talking about. You and me are washed up—and—well, he's from the South, too, and he talks my language."

"Good luck," I told her. "But he's also on the doorstep, so take hold of yourself."

He was. She did.

"Evening, Miss Briggs," the Special Agent said politely. "Any luck, Mr. Tompkins?"

I shook my head.

He looked reproachful. "Oh, come now," he pleaded. "*Something* must have happened. You got out of Harlem like a bat out of hell and almost shook the agent who was tailing you. You don't look to me like nothing happened. Have you filled in that gap? Started to remember anything?"

"On my word of honor, Andy," I swore, "I haven't remembered a thing. The gap's still there."

He said nothing for a few minutes and exchanged a glance with Arthurjean.

"Something must have happened," he requested. "You've changed. Come clean, can't you? I'm only trying to help you."

"I can't tell you much of anything," I told him. "You wouldn't believe me if I did. There's been a sort of locked door inside my mind for the last three weeks. Now the door's unlocked and is beginning to swing open. I haven't looked inside, but I think I know what I'll find. I can't tell you more than that now."

"But you're going to look, aren't you?" he asked.

"I've got to look," I said.

He sighed. "Well, we'll just have to keep an eye on you so as to be around when you do. See here, Mr. Tompkins, you know your own business but this Von Bieberstein guy is nobody to monkey around with. He's plenty tough and he'd as soon kill as sneeze. Can't you give me a hint? I'm trained to take those risks and know how to take care of myself, and anyhow the Bureau is back of me."

I leaned back in my chair and laughed and laughed and laughed until I noticed that both Arthurjean and Harcourt were staring at me without smiling.

"Sorry," I apologized. "It's just that something struck me as rather funny. Well, Arthurjean, I'll be catching the train back to Westchester. You and Andy blow yourself to a dinner at my expense. I'll go down to the vet's first thing in the morning and follow your advice. Good night, Andy. I'll be seeing you."

That night I locked myself in my bedroom and slept alone. Germaine was worried but I put her aside with the explanation that I had a splitting headache—too much to drink, probably, was my explanation. The truth was that I didn't want to see or talk to my wife so that she could not guess the perfectly appalling knowledge that had come to me.

This was insane, I repeated to myself. Even Arthurjean Briggs, who had sworn never to turn me in, had not believed it. Yet no other explanation was open to me. The dog's whole conduct since that fatal afternoon of April second was consistent only with the utterly irrational theory that the body of the Great Dane had been possessed by the soul of Winnie Tompkins at the very moment when the latter's body—now mine—had been possessed by the soul of Frank Jacklin.

Everybody had a fairly nice set of words for the latter phenomenon—trauma, schizophrenia, neurasthenia, the Will of God—and the best advice was uniform: forget about it; it will wear off in time; take things easy, you've been working too hard; everybody's crazy.

Now just imagine trying to convince the F.B.I. or a psychiatrist that, in addition to this delusion, you know for a fact that a Great Dane is now inhabited by the soul that once resided in your own body. I could hear the clanging of the gong on the private ambulance as it raced me to the nearest asylum, I could feel my arms already in the strait-jacket.

No one must ever know; Arthurjean must never tell. If she doubted me, no one else could be blamed for concluding that I had lost my reason.

The way I figured it was this: Winnie had been asleep at the Pond Club. He had been worried about Ponto and Ponto was desperately ill—dying even—from distemper. Both of their—what was the word?—their *ids* or *psyches* were relaxed, weakened, off-guard. Then the atomic explosion in the Aleutians, by some freak, had hurled my soul half-way around the world into the sleeping body of Winnie Tompkins. His soul had then crowded into the body of Ponto. Ponto's soul—if dogs have them, which I don't doubt—was out of luck. Permanently withdrawn.

Crazy? I'll say! I was the only person alive who knew that it was true and nobody would ever believe me, if only for the reason that it would always be much simpler to lock me up.

Quite obviously, Ponto knew that he was Winnie and resented my presence in his home. He had shown the jealousy and ill-temper natural to a man, instead of the friendliness of a dog. He had been humanly jealous of Germaine.

Suddenly I chuckled. By George! this was rich. Winnie in turn undoubtedly believed that I was Ponto. The Jacklin angle was outside of his range. No wonder he was furious with me when he saw that his household pet—a Great Dane—masquerading in his human body, had usurped his place in the affections of his wife and in authority over his home. Only hunger, which brings all things to terms, had broken his rebellion against this monstrous confusion. It must be tough to find yourself reduced to dog-biscuits and runs on the lawn.

I knew what I must do. Arthurjean had been right. The only way I could make myself secure was to have Ponto killed. Would this be murder? I wondered what Father Flanagan would make of it. Probably he would say, "Yes, it is

murder if you believe that Winfred Tompkins is Ponto." Yet until Ponto was dead, there could be no security for me. At any moment, if the psychiatrists were right, the change might come, with a small shock, and Winnie Tompkins would resume lawful possession of his body, his home, his wife, his money, while I—Commander Frank Jacklin, U.S.N.R.—could count myself lucky to be allowed to sleep on a smelly old blanket on the floor in the corner and eat dog-biscuits and be offered as a thoroughbred sire.

There was still time to stop that nonsense. The strictly practical thing to do was to go to the kennels first thing in the morning. Then I'd take Ponto away from Dalrymple and drive down to White Plains and find a vet to give him chloroform. Thus I would be safe from the possibility of having Winnie reoccupy his body and drive me into Ponto's or, worse still, into the stratosphere to join the mild chemical mist that was all that remained of the body of Frank Jacklin.

All right, it was murder then. I would be murdering Winnie Tompkins, but I would be the only one who would know it—the Perfect Crime. I laughed to myself at the thought that now Harcourt would lose his last chance to learn what Winnie had done in that fatal week before Chalmis' thorium bomb had blown me and the Alaska into the Aurora Borealis.

Although it was a cool night, I was perspiring violently. My nerves were shot to pieces. After this, I would need a rest. Winnie's business was in good shape. I could afford to keep away from the office for a time, until I grew a new face, as it were, after this shattering discovery. Then Jimmie and I—perhaps we would have a child. I'd be damned if I'd let my son be a stock-broker with a Great Dane—I might even take the Ambassadorship to Canada. The Forbes-Dutton scheme sounded too raw even for Washington—it would backfire into another Teapot Dome.

I drew a deep breath and relaxed in my bed. My course was plain. First of all, I'd attend to Ponto—burn my canine bridges behind me. Then I'd take Dr. Folsom at his word and go to the Sanctuary for a couple of weeks. My nerves *were* shot to pieces and if I didn't tell him or Pendergast Potter about this latest wrinkle in transmigration they would have no reason for detaining me against my will. Oh, yes, I'd have to see that Rutherford got his money. Merry Vail was still in Hartford, damn him and his nurse! Well, the thing to do was to stop off at Rutherford's office on the way to the kennels and give him a check. Vail could fix up the papers later. Once Ponto was dead, I could relax.

Was it murder? Well, that depended on how you look at it. Certainly, I was doing a better job of managing Winnie's life than he had done or could do. Look how I straightened out his mess with women and had made Germaine happy for the first time in her life. Look at the killing I had made in Wall Street, three million smackers just by using my head. Look at the way I had sold myself to the authorities at Washington, except for the State Department. The happiness and welfare of too many people now depended on my staying in charge of operations instead of Winnie Tompkins. Here, at least, was one case where the end justified the means, and nobody could call it murder.

And anyhow, chloroform is an easy death. You choke and gag a bit at first but then it's all easy, like falling off a log. You just go to sleep and never wake up. It would be the kindest possible exit for a man who had done no good in the world. I drifted off to sleep.

I awakened with a start, as though a voice had summoned me. The moonlight was streaming through the bedroom window. I knew what I must do. I got out of bed, crossed the room to the clothes-closet, felt over in the corner until my fingers found the knot-hole in the smooth pine lining. I pressed and there was a click. I reached down and lifted the sloping shelf for shoes. There, underneath it, lay a small, neatly docketed file.

There were many papers and the record went back for years. I switched on the light and examined the contents of the envelope marked "Thorium." It was all there—the ship—the names—the ports—the mission. There was documentation on Jacklin. I ran through it. It was accurate and included a specimen of my signature. There was a cross-reference to Chalmis and a small file on someone named Kaplansky. Irrelevantly included was a folder which contained three cards labeled "Retreat—Holy Week," "St. Michael" and "Stations of X!"

I crossed to the fire-place and put the papers in the grate. For an hour I sat there feeding the flames with the record of betrayal and infamy. Names, places, dates—I glanced at them, forgot them and burned them with rising exaltation. Thank God! that load was off my conscience. I might have to answer for Winnie's sins but I was damned

if I'd be responsible for his crimes. And the killing of Ponto was no longer to be murder, it was an execution. For Ponto was Tompkins and Tompkins was Von Bieberstein.

Dawn was beginning to smudge the windows when the last paper had been burned and the ashes crushed to fragments beyond the power of reconstruction by forensic science. Without Winnie the organization of his gulls and dupes would fall apart and the thing that had been Von Bieberstein would cease to exist.

Another thing was clearer, too. Winnie Tompkins had had an obsession about Jacklin. Finally, through some combination of fatigue and mental shock, a Jacklin personality had taken control. Call it schizophrenia, Jekyll-and-Hyde, of whatever, there was a fair chance that I was still Winnie, but his better self. The dog had been another obsession. The dog was to blame? Well, if I believed it, it might be true, like the old scape-goat system. I was physically the same man who had been Von Bieberstein and had blown up the Alaska, planning evidence that would throw the blame on Jacklin. In my heart and spirit, it was as though I had been recreated. All the evidence had been destroyed.

I switched off the light and returned to bed. I fell asleep almost at once, for now I knew that I would be safe and that Germaine would be safe. There was no record left and soon Ponto, too, would be gone.

CHAPTER 33

Wednesday, the twenty-fifth, dawned bright and fair. My mind was fully made up and I was feeling fine. Germaine was still anxious about me at breakfast but I soon convinced her that there was nothing serious involved. I laughed secretly as I said it.

"You know," I told her, "I think I'll drive over to Hartford and have those people at the Sanctuary look me over again. I think I need some kind of rest—the reaction, you know."

My wife raised no objection. In fact, she seemed rather relieved as though my aloof conduct of the previous night had been a shock to her self-confidence.

"I'll stop off at the kennels on my way over," I added, "just to make sure that Ponto is all right."

My plan was to remove the dog and drive to White Plains. Then, if there was any issue raised as to my need for a rest-cure, it would appear that I had inexplicably ordered my favorite dog chloroformed. That would clinch it with Germaine as nothing else could.

She seemed rather subdued as she went up-stairs and helped me pack my things in a suitcase. She did not offer to kiss me goodbye as I drove the Packard out of the garage and tolled around the graveled drive toward my road to freedom.

First, of course, I stopped at Dr. Rutherford's office. It was early in the morning and he hadn't finished breakfast. The maid admitted me to the reception-room and while waiting for him, I made out a check for fifteen thousand dollars to the order of Jeremiah Rutherford, and marked across the back, "For Professional Services."

"Here you are, Jerry," I informed him when he finally appeared. "I would have got it to you sooner except that my lawyer went off the deep end with a girl in Hartford. He should have had the papers ready on Monday and here it is Wednesday."

"Thanks," he said briefly. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked. "You look a bit shaky."

I laughed. "Set it down to my liver," I told him. "I had a wet night last night and am a little rocky this morning. As a matter of fact, I think I'll run over to The Sanctuary and ask Folsom to put me up for a few days. My nerves are shot to hell."

"Good idea," he murmured absently. "I'll go down to the bank and put this in for collection. My Army papers came through yesterday and I'm all set."

I climbed into my car and toiled along the roads until, after inquiring at a couple of filling stations, I located Dalrymple's kennels.

"I've come for Ponto," I told the vet.

Dalrymple seemed rather embarrassed. "Are you sure you need him?" he asked. "He's just served Buglebell III—that's the prize-winning brindle bitch owned by one of the Fortune editors—and I was planning—"

"You can cancel your plans," I informed him. "And as for Buglebell's pups, I'll buy the litter. What *were* your other plans, anyhow?"

Dalrymple was quite abashed. "Not exactly anything, Mr. Tompkins, sir," he said. "It was only that—"

I nodded majestically. "Once is enough," I said, "and you can be thankful I don't report you to the Kennel Club for bootlegging thoroughbred puppies. Ponto comes with me—now."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Tompkins," the vet agreed humbly.

Dalrymple was a broken man but Ponto was not a broken dog. However, marriage coming so soon after distemper had curbed his spirit and he slouched into the Packard.

As soon as I was out on the main road again, I stepped on the accelerator, heading the car southward in the general direction of White Plains.

Ponto sat panting on the seat beside me, but in his weary eye I saw all the Westchester stock-brokers who had ever annoyed me. I also saw Winnie, and Winnie was to die.

I admit that I was day-dreaming a bit as I rounded the turn. In any case, I was driving fast and had not fully accustomed myself to handling the Packard. The other automobile backed violently out of the drive-way on the right, the dope of a driver not looking to see if there was any traffic coming. I slapped my foot down on the brake, missed and hit the accelerator. The Packard gave a wild leap ahead. The other car—a battered old Chevrolet—completely blocked the road. I jammed on the hand-brake and twisted the steering gear so that the Packard ran up the bank of an elderly apple-tree. My head snapped forward, there was a blinding flash and then complete blackness.

* * * *

Seconds or centuries later I opened my eyes. The old Chevy seemed to have pulled away and was now parked ahead of us along the righthand side of the road. My wind-shield had not shattered and, so far as I could see, no major damage had been done to my car though I hated to think of the fenders. I ached in every limb.

My neck itched intolerably so I scratched it with my left leg. I shook myself. "Well, I'll be damned!" I exclaimed, only to hear a deep growl that seemed to originate from within my hairy chest.

I glanced over my shoulder. There, in the seat beside me, hunched forward over the steering-wheel, sat a heavy-built man, a thin trickle of blood sliding down his cheek, his eyes closed and his lips open, while he snorted with concussion.

Instinctively, I called for help. My reward was a series of loud, angry barks. Again my ear itched and I scratched it again with my left leg. It seemed that I had become a dog. The man beside me stirred and moaned. Then he opened his eyes.

"Ponto," he said dreamily. "Good dog!"

The driver of the other car walked back and was standing by the window.

"You all right, mister?" he asked. "You was doing fifty easy. Lucky for you I see you coming."

The man in the driver's seat gave a feeble smile. "My fault," he admitted. "I was day-dreaming. Lucky this heap has good brakes. Are you all right? Any damage, I mean?"

The other man laughed. "Sure," he said. "I'll go on now, just so you're all right. Want a doc?"

"Uh-uh!" the man on the seat beside me shook his head. "My name's Tompkins and I live in Bedford Hills. If there's any damage, it's my fault and I'll pay for it. Sure you're okay?"

"Yep!" agreed the owner of the Chevrolet. "You got a cut or something. Reckon you'd ought to see a doc."

"I will," said the man beside me. "Don't worry. I'll be all right. Just bumped my head a bit."

We waited until the Chevrolet had rattled itself around the turn of the road. Then the man cautiously tried the gears and disinfiltred the Packard from the apple-tree. He got out and inspected the car carefully for damage and then climbed back behind the steering-wheel. I started to ask him a question. It was a whine.

"Why Ponto!" he exclaimed. "You old black devil. How are you, hound? Long time no see."

"Hot damn!" he exclaimed, after a pause. "Have I been on a drunk! You know, Ponto, I dreamed that I was you and if there's anything in dreams I bet I'm the only Republican in Westchester County that ever married a brindle bitch named Buglebell.

"Let's see," he continued. "Where were we? Earlier today I went to the Pond Club and had a couple of drinks. How in hell do I find myself here? I must have drawn one hell of a blank, Ponto, the damndest blank I've ever drawn in my life."

His eyes looked down on the seat beside us, where I had left a copy of the morning New York Times.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "That's funny. Here it is. Good Lord! the twenty-fifth of April! So I've been out for three weeks. That is a blank to end all blanks."

He whistled tunelessly between his teeth. Then he cast a glance toward the back seat, where my suit-case rested.

"What gives," he inquired. "I'm not leaving home, for God's sake? Ponto, old boy, you just stick by me and we'll go back to the house and see what this is all about."

"Yes," I barked at him.

"That's a good dog," he said affably. "That's a good Ponto."

He backed the Packard into the driveway that had been my nemesis and turned the car around.

As we approached the house he slowed the car to a dead stop.

"Ponto," he told me. "Here's where you and I go into a committee of the whole. What's been going on around here? There's been one hell of a mix-up if you ask me. I had a dream—"

The sooner I got his mind off this subject the safer I would be. I laid my ears back and woofed.

"Attaboy!" he agreed. "Now let's take a look at this paper ... What? Roosevelt's dead? Why doesn't anybody tell me these things? And Germany's about to flop? Whew! Who would have dreamed it? You know, hound, I feel like Rip Van Winkle coming back after twenty years sleep."

I tried to look ingratiating and let my tongue loll fetchingly out of the side of my mouth.

"Say!" he exclaimed harshly. "Now it's beginning to come back. You took my place while I was—God! have you ever been introduced to a great big dog and told she's your wife? Well, damn it! you and Jimmie—Oh, hell, this

is one godawful mess! What's been happening around here, anyhow? Am I going nuts?"

I pricked up my ears and gave a false, loving whine. I licked his stinking hands.

"Okay, okay," Winnie agreed. "It's not your fault. But what the hell happened is beyond me. I hate to think of those prime asses, Phil and Graham, in this market. And what happened to Virginia? That's one gal you didn't know about, Ponto. She's for me, and how!"

He took another look at the paper.

"Oh, the hell with it!" he growled. "If Jimmie doesn't like it, she knows what she can do about it. Let's go on home, Ponto, and just tell her man-to-man where she gets off."

I barked.

He put his foot on the accelerator and whirled up the drive to come to a stop in front of Pook's Hill.

Before he had switched off the engine, the front door opened and Germaine appeared.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed, "you're back early. Have you changed your mind again?"

"Yep," Winnie said. "I decided to come back home, after all."

She smiled. "I'm glad," she told him. "I couldn't make out why you were so keen to go back to Hartford so soon after you got out. You come on in, darling, and Myrtle and I will take care of you. Gracious! There's blood on your cheek. Did you hurt yourself?"

Her voice was warm and loving and made my hair rise slightly. If he tried any monkey-business with her, I'd rip his throat out. I growled.

"Oh, good!" she laughed. "You got Ponto. Did he have a nice honeymoon, poor darling? Is Dalrymple satisfied? Would you like to put in for one of the pups?"

I growled again.

She laughed. "Oh, Winnie, he looks so shattered. He—what *did* happen to your head, darling?"

He grinned. "We almost had an accident. I was headed towards the Parkway when a car backed out. We bumped into an apple-tree. No harm done but I was knocked out for a few minutes and I guess it must have shaken me up."

She lifted her face to his and kissed him until I could feel thick, hot rage mount inside my throat and force itself out in a deep rumbling growl.

"Look," she said, "he's jealous. Poor Ponto!"

And she kneeled beside me, put her arm around my neck and pressed my head affectionately.

"There!" she said briskly: "You're a good dog. You're my Ponto and I'll take care of you."

Tompkins glowered at me and her.

"Stop driveling over that damn dog," he said, "and come on into the house."

Germaine gave me a farewell pat on the head.

"He's such a good dog," she announced, "and now that he's been properly married he'll settle down, I hope. I've been quite worried over the way he's been acting. But it's all right now, Ponto, isn't it? Was your girl-friend nice, old boy? Huh? Are you happy?"

I tried to explain things but all that came to my lips was a series of whines and growls.

"Come along, Jimmie," Tompkins insisted. "I'm cold. Damn it all! I've had a shock and all you can think of doing is to slobber over a dog. Let him have a run."

So she got off her knees and followed him obediently into the house.

I sat for a moment, pondering my predicament.

This was Fate. Three seconds would have made all the difference but here I was, a dog. Conditions were reversed and I might as well be philosophical about it. Winnie never dreamed that conditions were not as they had been before the second of April, just as though Frank Jacklin had never existed. The chances were that he would continue to believe that it was all a dream, an hallucination. As for the F.B.I. and Von Bieberstein, putting first things first, that was no longer any of my business. Dogs were not expected to develop patriotism: that luxury was reserved for human beings. All I could do now was to wait my chance. Perhaps the time would come when I could repossess Winnie Tompkins' body. Then, by George! I would not waste one minute but would have him chloroformed at once. In the meantime, my cue was to be a good dog.

There was a shrill whistle from the house.

"Ponto!" Winnie's voice called. "Come here, Ponto. That's a good dog! Come on, Ponto! That's a good dog!"

I ran, wagging my tail, to the open door and on all fours entered the house I had left only two hours before as its proud master.

CHAPTER 34

I was lying down in the kitchen, near the stove, on an old rug which Mary-Myrtle had spread for me. She was really a nice girl. My educated nose informed me that she was kind, young and affectionate. When she entered the room I used to rear up and place my forepaws on her shoulders and lick her ears. She liked me. She used to put her arms around my neck and press against me and give me a smack on the back and a "Go on with you, can't you see I'm busy?"

I was lying by the stove when Winnie Tompkins entered the kitchen. Mary-Myrtle was bending over the stove, fussing with a saucepan of vegetables. I was quietly sniffing with interest the combination of cooking-smells and the scents from the warm spring afternoon. Winnie strolled across the kitchen, took his thumb and forefinger and gave her a hard pinch on her buttock.

"Oh! God!" she shrieked and turned to confront him. "Oh, you!" she observed. "I thought you'd got over all that!"

He whistled between his teeth, put one tweed-clad arm around her shoulders and pressed her to him.

"Go on!" she said, in a half-whisper. "I'll call Mrs. Tompkins."

Still whistling, with his free hand he tilted her chin up to his face, stooped over and kissed her. I could see her hands flutter and press against his chest for a moment, then relax, then clutch him fiercely, as her lips thrust against his mouth. I rose and growled.

"Hello!" Winnie exclaimed. "Why if it isn't Ponto? You jealous again, old boy? We can't have a moralist around here, can we, Myrtle?"

He turned and kissed her again.

I stalked over and stood, rumbling a bit, beside her, ready to attack if he carried his dalliance beyond decorum.

"Let me go, sir," Myrtle begged in a hoarse whisper.

"Tonight?" he asked, holding her close.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'll come down, sir. Tonight, when the dishes are done and the house asleep."

He snapped his fingers at me, with an air of assured authority. "Come on, Ponto," he commanded.

I followed him with murder in my heart, my toe-nails clicking on the parquet floor, my tail wagging with slow servility. He led the way upstairs to my wife's bedroom. He tapped on the door.

"Come in," Germaine called. "And here's Ponto!"

I padded across the room to the chaise longue and lay down beside her. I gave her silk-clad leg a poke with my nose. She smelled lovely.

"Thank you, Ponto," she said courteously.

I rested my head on my paws and looked at Winnie. He absentmindedly pulled a cigar out of his pocket, bit off the tip and lighted it, after spitting the shreds of tobacco in the general direction of the fire-place. I could feel Germaine go tense.

"I'm so glad you decided not to go to Hartford after all," she remarked quietly. "It's much nicer for you here. Myrtle and I can take care of you and see that you have a good rest. Poor darling, you must need one."

Winnie blew a heavy puff of smoke toward her bed-canopy. I could tell by the way he answered her that he was feeling his way.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I might as well get a sample of this far-famed suburban home-life you read about."

She jumped up and put her arms around his neck.

"It's not so bad, is it, Winnie?" she asked gently. "You know—I suppose it's silly to tell such things—but last night I dreamed we were going to have a baby."

"Good Lord, Jimmie!" he drawled. "I hope not. You know as well as I do that we aren't the kind of people who have kids. If you think there's any danger of it, there's a doctor I know in New York who'll put a good stop to it."

Germaine's hand fluttered helplessly at her breast and her face went white and peaked. A sharp whiff of the acrid sense of human anger and fear came from her body. I rose and eyed Winnie steadily. I was careful not to growl.

"Why, I thought—" she began, "The other night, I mean, it was all so—What's the matter? What has changed?"

He gave a sort of neighing laugh. "Oh nuts, Jimmie! We aren't the type. Say it's spring or what-have-you? Just for that are you going to go through hell just to have a little animal that will go 'Aah-Aah-Aah' at you?"

Germaine stood up. "Yes," she said. "I am. If that's the way these things happen, that's what I want. If it doesn't happen I never want to see you again so long as I live. But if it does, it will be my business, not yours. I want this baby. You loved me the other night. You needed me. We needed each other. I can't throw that away, like a—like a dead cigar butt."

He thrust his cigar into the corner of his mouth, a la Churchill. "So that's the way it is, is it?" he demanded. "Okay, but how am I expected to know that it wasn't Jerry Rutherford—"

"Oh!" Germaine looked at him in utter, white-lipped silence. "You know that can't be true."

After a minute she spoke to him quite gently.

"Winnie," she told him, "you know, I think you really ought to go to the Sanctuary, as you planned. You do need a rest, dear, and it would be better if you took it there where they have trained attendants and good doctors. I'll be waiting here till you come back. Do go, darling. It will do you a world of good. Everything will work out for us all right now."

"So you want to railroad me to an asylum, eh?" he snarled. "Well, nuts to that! As far as I'm concerned, we're back on the old basis. You go your way and I go mine. And no brats, mind you! or I'll call the whole thing off. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Winnie," Germaine replied, in a small, frightened voice. "You make yourself perfectly clear."

"Okay," he told her. "Come on, Ponto!"

He had the nerve to snap his fingers at me. Not even when I had him in the Packard, headed for White Plains and chloroform, had he stood nearer death, but Germaine's hand—cold and little—rested briefly on my ears and I mastered my rage.

I followed him into his bedroom and he slammed the door behind me.

"See here, you black son of a bitch," he truthfully addressed me. "You seem to have made one hell of a mess of my affairs. Oh, I don't suppose you can understand me now that you're a dog again, but just the same, for two cents I'd send you to the boneyard. I've still to find out how much hell you've been raising with my business, but damn it all!!! Couldn't you *tell* that it didn't suit my plans to be clubby with Jimmie?"

I padded loyally across the bedroom and laid my head on his lap. He milked my ears automatically and I rejoiced, because the more he thought of me as Ponto the less likely he was to discover my human personality. I had not yet decided when to kill him.

"Yes, damn it! hound," Winnie continued. "This is one thing the experts will never know about. It's out of this world. Three weeks as an involuntary Great Dane, ending up in a shot-gun marriage with a big brindle bitch named Buglebell III! If you want to know my idea of shooting ducks in a rain-barrel, that is it. No privacy at all. Just an old boy writing things down in the stud-book. Jimmie may think I'm mean but after that experience who wants off-spring, cannon-fodder or kennel-fodder? I don't. Neither would you, Ponto. I suppose," he added, "that legally speaking you are the putative father, not me. Gosh! what an experience!"

He reached over to the night-table and pulled the brandy-bottle out from the little cupboard, which was neatly fitted out with glasses, bottle-openers, a syphon and a decanter. He glared accusingly at the bottle.

"Damn you!" he exclaimed, "It's almost gone. My best brandy! Whoever told you you could touch my liquor? Oh, well, can't say that I blame you. Here, I'll let you smell the cork."

He held it out at me and I sniffed it dutifully. I jumped back, sneezing.

"Not so keen about it, eh?" he demanded gruffly. "Well, just to even up the score I'll make you drink some."

He grabbed my lower jaw with his free hand and forced my tender lips against my sharp teeth until I opened my mouth. Then he poured some of it down my throat. I choked, but got it down.

"Atta dog!" he praised me. "Now you just stick around and you'll see some fun."

He went out and closed the door, leaving me alone in the darkened room.

An hour or so later, the door reopened and Winnie swaggered in. He looked slightly more bloated than before and his eyes were glazed with liquor. He tossed off his clothes, went to the bathroom and took a hot shower. Then he lighted a cigar and lay on his bed, in his dressing gown, waiting—

After a while there was a quiet step in the hall and the click of the door-handle. It was Mary-Myrtle. She was wearing a red flannel dressing-gown and her hair was done up in a pigtail. She closed the door behind her and cast an anxious glance over her shoulder in the direction of the hall.

Tompkins guffawed. "Who? Jimmie?" he demanded. "Not her! She knows better than to interfere."

Myrtle cast strange little embarrassed glances to right and left and I noted that her hands were trembling as they fumbled at the buttons of her dressing-gown. I strolled across to her and sniffed the sharp perfume of desire on her limbs.

She gave a little squeak. "Oh, Ponto! You gave me such a start." She turned to Winnie. "Take him away," she said. "It doesn't seem decent with him watching."

He gave a loose lipped smile and rolled off the bed.

"Ponto," he ordered. "You're de trop. Get the hell out of here!"

He opened the door to the hall and I slunk out into the darkness of the landing. My toes clicked their way across to the door of my wife's bedroom. I lay down, on guard, my ear cocked to catch the desperate stifled sobs of the woman inside.

It was then that I decided that Tompkins must die.

CHAPTER 35

My opportunity to settle the account did not present itself for more than twenty-four hours. Early the following morning, Myrtle was kicked out and crept upstairs. Winnie slammed the door and snored like a hog until ten o'clock—at which time he stamped downstairs and roared for breakfast.

After he had eaten, he went to his room again, shutting me outside, and dressed himself carefully in the manly tweeds he had been wearing on that first day in the Pond Club. He drove to the station—I assumed—leaving me behind at Pook's Hill with two unhappy women. He did not return that evening at all and it wasn't until late the following morning—that would be Saturday I figured, although I was already losing my human preoccupation with time—that I recognized the crunch of the Packard's tires on the graveled drive. I was standing just inside the door as I heard his key fumbling in the lock.

It was Winnie and he was drunk.

"Oh, hullo, Ponto," he remarked thickly. "So you're the welcoming committee. Come on up with me, boy, and hear the dirt."

I followed his uncertain steps upstairs and into the bed-room. It would not be long now.

"Ponto!" he announced. "Good old Ponto, Ponto! I'm going to tell you a great secret. You won't tell anybody about it, will you? You can't."

I lay on the rug and panted at him.

"Yes, Ponto, if you're going to play ball with me you got to be one tough dog. Took a run into New York today and is that one mad-house? Saw Virginia. You know, red-head. She knows her stuff. Had me right back on my five-yard line before I rallied and scored that touchdown. It was terrific. Called my office. We're rich, boy, rich as hell."

"Thissa tough game, dog. That Briggs gal says the F.B.I.'s still worrying about me. Is that a laugh, hey, Ponto? Is that a laugh! She says they wanna know do I remember the week before Easter. Hell! could I forget it? Maybe it's

lucky for me I drew that blank. Might of had tough job ducking the G-men.

"Aw, they're nuts! I agree, Ponto, I must respectfully agree with you. Didja hear me contradict anybody? It's a lead-pipe cinch, fooling those babies. Where was I the week before Easter? And sure I was tucked away in a Catholic Retreat at the Seminary of the Sacred Heart, doing the Stations of the Cross in St. Michael's Church. Great institution—the Stations of the Cross. Wonderful institution. You can meet anyone and no questions asked. I gave the instructions that sent the Alaska to the bottom of the North Pacific and slipped the black spot to that sap Jacklin between the Scourging and the Crown of Thorns. Lucky thing I knew all about him. Helped. It was easy, Ponto, easy. Who's to question a man doing Stations of the Cross if somebody else does 'em at the same time?"

He paused and poured a brandy.

"Tha' red-head's a wonder, Ponto," he told me. "She deals 'em straight and plays 'em close to her chest. For three weeks she followed my lead without a peep. I was out like a light. Can't remember a thing but she never let on. I always said the way to *act* innocent was to *be* innocent. Not that she knows what it is all about. She thinks I'm playing the Black Market. She's a racketeer at heart, she is, the tramp. That North Pacific job was no cinch, Ponto. All I had to do was to kidnap that guy Chalmis and substitute a ringer. Old Chalmis? We dropped him in the High Rockies on the flight to Seattle. The Navy was a bunch of saps, letting my men take that plane. Sure, we dropped the Navy boys too, along with Chalmis."

I sat, ears pricked up, watching him. I could see the throb of the artery in his throat that marked the place for my teeth to meet.

"Virginia told me the G-men are looking for Von Bieberstein," Tompkins said. "Hell, Ponto, even she doesn't know what happened back in '35. Sure I was broke. Sure fifty thousand would bail me out. Sure Hitler put up the fifty thousand. He saved my hide. I made a killing all right. So I'm Von Bieberstein? So what, Ponto, so what! Want to make anything of it? Sure I lived up to my end of the bargain. Roosevelt had ruined me. What did I owe Roosevelt? Sure I took the job. And was *that* a laugh! The F.B.I. chasing all over the place for Kurt von Bieberstein, and all the time it's little old Winnie Tompkins, Harvard 1920 and good old one thousand per cent American stock. The poor boobs think they've licked Hitler, Ponto, but he's really licked them. You wait'n see. I'll still be Gauleiter of Westchester County, so help me!"

The moment had come. He was lolling back on his bed, his arms behind his head, his neck exposed. I gathered my muscles and leaped for his throat.

THE END

[End of *The Rat Race*, by Jay Franklin]